

THE SOCIOLOGY OF RECORDING IN AFRICA SOUTH OF THE SAHARA

by

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In recent years, at conferences on the welfare of folk music, much comment could be heard on the rapidity and thoroughness of the changes which affect society today. However, there was no witch-hunting; the mood was not to blame but to understand. Although there was a feeling that it was pointless to resist this kind of change, there was also some mental reservation that some good might be done if the disruption of continuity in folk music could be prevented, at least in some small measure, without interfering with its evolution.

Needless to say, that at these congresses the tension between those who wished to promote stability in tradition and those who wholeheartedly wanted a new era of a new kind of folk music, could only be felt as an undercurrent. But the division has led to the formation of strange alliances. Those intent on a positive attitude to rapid change, moved perhaps by a social gospel promising a new and happier world, found themselves shoulder to shoulder with those who simply realised that popular entertainment in the garb of folk tradition sold well. On the other side, the supporters of continuity and authenticity found themselves agreeing with African nationalists and the scholars, united in a deep concern for the achievements of a tradition which both believed to have deep roots. From this common platform they opposed the extravagant claims of the 'entertainment-first' school. The African Music Society reflects this view when it speaks of music offered by the gramophone companies in Africa, "with a strongly exotic flavour . . . featuring for the most part selections of popular American and European origin."

Perhaps the partisanship which accompanies these undercurrents of opinion is futile, because trends of development in the sphere of culture may after all be beyond human control. One is tempted to look to the theory of evolution for guidance. At the recent Darwin Centennial Conference at Edinburgh members discussed 'Darwinism and the Study of Society'. Extreme positions were taken up, opposing each others' views, and it seems that guidance for folklorists is not yet forthcoming from this quarter.

As to the more concrete issue of music in Africa, one often hears that the music there is intertwined even more inextricably with social custom than elsewhere, and as the old customs make room for a new way of life, musical tradition expires without fuss, like a season ticket when its time is up. Where this view is held, the music begins to appear in a different light altogether; its ephemeral nature is stressed at the expense of its dependence on tradition.

The African Music Society and the recording programme conducted by its director, Mr. Hugh Tracey, is not truly committed to either view. It sets out from the point that in any case today's heresy will be tomorrow's orthodoxy. There is thus a broadmindedness in the Society's approach which suits the part it wishes to play: namely to rescue the riches of folk music threatened by too rapid innovation and to encourage the innovation that testified to the living quality of African music.

Mr. Tracey sees the task as one which is first and foremost practical. A rescue action must be organised, and since the whole of Africa South of the Sahara is involved,

it must of necessity be on a colossal scale. This year some 70 L.P. records have been issued, and thus almost a thousand samples of music have been preserved for posterity, and been made available for export.

It is difficult to assess the musical quality of a sample because this requires local knowledge of a very high order. Does one have to apply the standards of the community to which the sample belongs, or is one to adjudicate on the basis of some universal or personal practice? Is it even possible for outsiders to adjudicate? Problems like the following may arise: a performer renders a piece in a style which is foreign to his own fellow-tribesmen, but has been made acceptable to them and can be explained to an outsider as a deliberate imitation and caricature of the style of another community, some hundreds of miles away from the site of the recording. The joke is appreciated by the audience because they know the other tribe as an employer during their seasonal labour migrations. Only knowledge of local circumstances will enable the listener to appreciate whether the singer has had opportunities of such far-flung contacts and what they meant to him. Or take another problem which even the most experienced field-workers may meet: a singer relinquishes the style announced by him, after a few seconds of song, and continues in another musical form, without further comment. The change goes by unnoted and as a result the wrong label is printed on the label of the disc. This sort of thing may well happen under the artificial set-up and the strain of a recording session. But perhaps it really does not matter and the problem of identification could perhaps wait.

Whether to identify or not is a practical issue. It can be argued that detailed documentation is of secondary importance in circumstances in which the need for quick collecting and recording is as urgent as it has become in many parts of Africa. Many a collector has persuaded himself that, once the sound-track is secure on disc or tape, there surely will be time later to study the material. At this curators of archives or recordings will remember the blank pages in their documentation files and bow their heads in silent distress.

The A.M.S. takes care to provide information, and efforts at detailed study have been made from time to time. In Dr. Blacking the Society had a competent helper who tried to extend its main task of preserving and propagating indigenous music to the study of the substance of the music which had been brought together in the collections of the A.M.S.

Apart from the supreme task of creating a permanent record and having, sooner or later, to secure the necessary documentation—for which there are no limits—collectors in the field are exposed to other more subtle dangers. In my experience, it sometimes happens that African folk singers take their cue from the Westerner who records their music. For instance, take the imaginary case of a recording engineer who will at the slightest rhythmical provocation jerk his limbs as if it was rock 'n' roll or nothing. Your African performer would not be human if he did not try to deliver the goods most wanted by his enquirer. When this has happened, the recording has acquired the alien slant.

This is an extreme example. Nevertheless it is possible for the first collector in the field to create a fixed image in the folk musicians' minds of what is expected of him in a recording session. I am afraid the *history of music in Africa* may well have to be written along these lines. It is a new variant of the old theme that 'he who pays the piper calls the tune'.

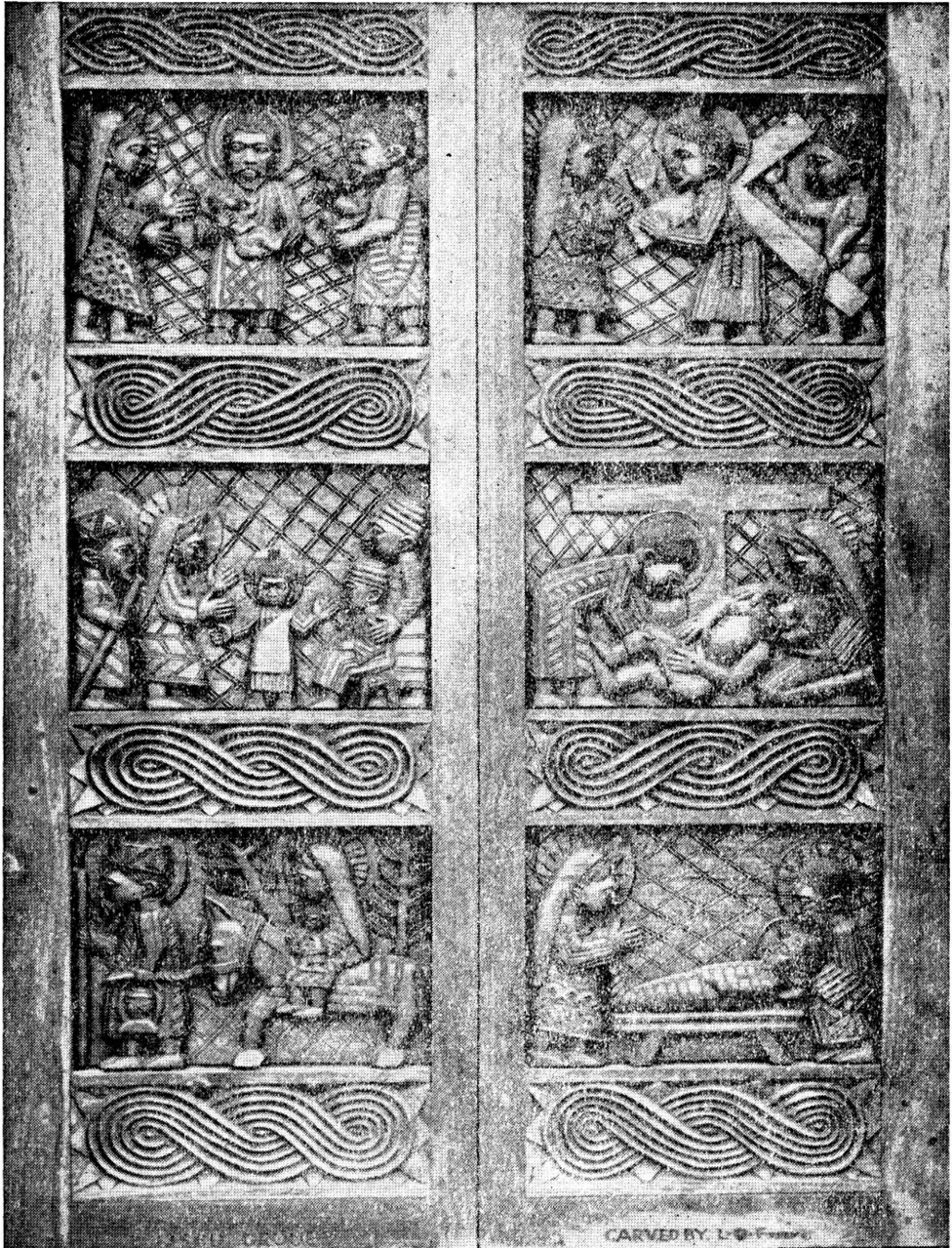
This sort of statement is beyond proof or disproof, yet it is an issue involving the A.M.S., because its procedure in the field will set a standard of approach to music

which will, one way or the other, affect others who follow with their own recording machines in the trail of the A.M.S. It has taken first place in point of time, in recording quality, and in scope. Dr. Blacking has already published some of his findings and when his work on the music of the Venda becomes available, it will be a happy day for the ethnomusicologists and folk musicians. Mr. Tracey, the founder, director and moving spirit of the rescue action, has himself published a monograph on the xylophones of the Chopi and it is a safe guess that the Chopi and Venda material of the A.M.S. will be amongst the most informed of its programmes.

Many years ago when the A.M.S. began in the field it was virtually alone. Today most African musicians have met the officials of the regional broadcasting stations. African musicians have been recorded and their repertoires have been submitted to programme managers for selection. A new kind of public has been called in, to have their acclaim or their indifference measured and used as the ultimate guide to popularity. The tastes and preferences of the recording personnel also play a part in the process. In Africa, as in other parts of the world, the broadcast programme gives the unspoken verdict on what is good and what is bad in our time.

Apart from broadcasting and gramophone interests, there are other, new, factors to reckon with. A few discs have been published in addition to those produced by the A.M.S. in recent years which in spite of their small number may yet exert a wide influence. The music they contain has been completely studied and it is presented to the public in well-documented form; this sort of enterprise appears to have been mainly the preserve of French musicologists. If commercial entertainment is the driving force in many recording studios in the field, then the French publications here referred to may be said to be stimulated by a desire to understand African music as it is and on its own terms.

Thus Africa South of the Sahara is now open to three influences, all of which depend on the medium of the recorded sound. Of these three the A.M.S. occupies the centre. Its opportunities are great.



The carved door of the Cathedral Church at Ibadan, Nigeria, which was carved by L. O. Fakeye, under the direction of Father Carroll. The bottom lefthand panel is featured on the cover of this edition of "African Music".