

THE ARTS IN AFRICA

THE VISUAL AND THE AURAL

by

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PREFACE

For the purposes of this paper the title "The Arts in Africa" is interpreted as the Arts of indigenous Africans only.

Of all the people living south of the Sahara, over eighty per cent, four out of every five persons, still live in the country and not in towns or industrial areas. Consequently, about four-fifths of all African arts can still be classed as rural. As with folk arts the world over, African rural arts play an important part in creating public opinion and upholding social disciplines.

The arts of the urban minority cannot yet be considered to be the "norm" but rather the "abnorm", and should be treated separately. Unlike their rural relatives, African town dwellers enjoy a highly disorganised social and "family" life, regardless of the nature of local political control, either indigenous or expatriot. Sociologists have found for example that the various anti-social activities of both Negroes and Africans are equally high in places as diverse and as far apart as the island of Jamaica, Accra, Lagos, Kampala, and Johannesburg. Urban arts of the present day do not yet have the same integrating effect upon African social life as the rural.

In normal circumstances, Whites throughout Africa appear to prefer various aspects of the urban arts which are closest to them and which they find entertaining. They tend to encourage, almost exclusively, imitation of Western urban habits and recreations. They have not as a rule the slightest contact with African folk arts which are considered by them to be primitive and pre-civilised. This paper should therefore be read in this context.

1. Introduction to appreciation of African Arts

It is some measure of the actual state of the arts in Africa that the recognised authorities on almost any branch of this subject are not indigenous Africans themselves but those whose immediate origins are outside Africa. This argues that on this continent the arts are still largely in the folk stage, performed and undertaken by unsophisticated people, men, women and children, for the direct pleasure and satisfaction which they obtain from creating or taking part in them and not necessarily from any aesthetic assessment of the quality or the relative evaluation of what they do and how they do it in comparison with other national arts. To say this, does not suggest that the folk are not critical or conscious of the technical merits of their local arts; on the contrary, they are often keen judges of what arts they know, and of the crafts with which they are familiar, provided always that outside pressures, both secular and religious, have not warped their taste and clouded their judgement.

Their main artistic criterion is plain and forthright . . . how effective for them is the art object or activity in achieving its expected reaction — as simple a question, for example, as "How strong is the beer?" Thus a carving which effectively represents for the parents a dead twin child, or another which evokes the presence of a deity, or a praise song which increases respect for the head of the clan or community; — all these symbolic objects or activities can be said to be effective *within their proper sphere*. Outside

this sphere they may evoke nothing at all or even hostility. It is not only foreign arts which may mean little or nothing to them at all, — the arts of another African tribe may be equally meaningless — and consequently ineffectual.

So, speaking as one of the non-African observers of an African phenomenon, I have constantly to remind myself firstly of my own innate tendencies to judge by what may prove to be non-African standards, and secondly to limit my terms of reference to those boundaries within which African arts are intended to be effective and for which they are created. In both these directions the gravest errors of judgment have been made in the past, and, indeed, will continue to be made in the present to the great detriment of African artistic integrity, unless both we and they exercise adequate knowledge, sympathetic rapport and imagination.

I propose to touch briefly upon seven or eight aspects of present-day African arts, carving, murals, picture painting, verse, song, instrumental music, dancing and drama. But before launching out upon this all-too-embracing project, I would like to define my point of view with regard to the position which national arts occupy in relationship to world-wide or international arts. This, I find, is a most necessary preliminary nowadays, because the value of many of the words in general artistic currency a mere 20 years ago are no longer accepted in some quarters. Here C. G. Jung comes to our aid with his triple definitions of the "conscious", the "unconscious", and the "collective unconscious", which correspond, I think, to the three depths of creative artistic activity; *firstly*, the conscious awareness of the craft or techniques to be employed; *secondly*, the unconscious source of national or regional artistic symbols which are calculated to awake satisfactory response among the audiences for whom they are made or performed. National art styles, we know, are often strictly limited in their appeal, but are nonetheless valid in their right context, however arbitrary they may appear to outsiders; and *thirdly*, the greater depths of feeling and imagination, the archives of all human experience from which the true artist can bring to light for his own generation some molecule of truth, wrapped in the clothing of his indigenous culture, but which is recognisable by sensitive persons the world over as having ultimate human value.

This being so it would seem necessary for anyone who wishes fully to appreciate African arts that all three levels of awareness must be exercised . . . There must be an appreciation of the degree of mastery of their local craft, of the validity of symbolism used within the group, and of the grain of common humanity discernible in the inspiration which underlies their art. This is a tall order for any critic, and, strangely enough, it may sometimes be easier for a foreign observer who is not socially involved in a local community to assess the relative value of the art form he is studying, than for the local African critic whose social background, limited experience and emotional involvement may preclude his taking a wide enough perspective. On the other hand, where the mature local critic holds a great advantage over the foreign is in his intimate knowledge of the home scene, his familiarity with the artistic style and his appreciation of nuances of language.

For these reasons one can but look forward eagerly to the appearance of indigenous art critics who have sufficient knowledge, integrity and wisdom to make a real contribution to African artistic life in the future. Their almost total absence at the present time is lamentable, particularly in view of the several forms of militant nationalism which tend to overshadow or even eclipse the true values of distinctive African cultures. Without the foundation of a distinctive culture, political separatism and independence have little meaning, other than a tedious repetition of the unending scramble for administrative or economic power. I do not refer here to the growing band of critical African writers and intellectuals throughout the continent who, unfortunately (with the exception of the French speaking authors who are preoccupied with the concept of "Négritude"), are singularly uninformative, I find, on the subject of African arts. In the experience of the African Music Society, only one African contributor in the past fifteen years has measured up to the standards normally required of music connoisseurs

elsewhere. There are undoubtedly several African critics of literary style, but from what I have read of their work, they usually fight shy of art criticism, hiding behind a barrier of sophistry.

One further general observation, I think, should be made here before discussing the various forms of present-day African art in more detail, and that concerns the widening of the ranks and degrees of social status which has rapidly been taking place during the last generation. Whereas fifty years ago the difference in status between African notable and African commoner, African artist and African Philistine, was relatively insignificant in any one folk society, the present intellectual gulf between professional and labourer, ambitious politician and subordinate serf, literate and illiterate, is continually widening in the technological society we have introduced to this continent, with certain inevitable consequences. In place of the folk arts in which every member of the community took his accustomed part, specialisation has already begun to separate the professional artist from his non-professional audience. This is perhaps inevitable in any society of which a part is rapidly evolving from a rural subsistence economy towards an urban and industrial one.

Conservative rural arts may co-exist in Africa as elsewhere with imitative urban practices; the one must not be considered as a natural evolution or replacement of the other, though this is the popular fallacy today especially in educational circles. It can easily blind us to the function of African arts and stress imitation at the expense of originality, encourage exotic fads and fashions to the detriment of genuinely creative artistic vision without which anything worthy of the name of genuine African artistry will certainly perish.

The vin of "genuine African artistry . . ." that is our subject, and to discover what that means at this moment of time in Africa may entail quite a bit of digging down through the overburden of various forms of pseudo-artistic rubble, to which I shall have to refer constantly in endeavouring to distinguish the genuine from the spurious.

2. Visual Arts

In trying to assess the arts of Africa today, I think, we must differentiate clearly between the visual (graphic and plastic) arts on the one hand and the aural arts on the other; that is between such activities as carving, sculpture, the making of murals and the painting of pictures, the end result of which is static, contemplative and decorative; and the aural or sequence arts which entail movement and progression, such as vocal and instrumental music, dancing and drama. In many cases they are complementary to each other, such as the dance mask to the dance, or the costume to the actor. In fact, African dance masks, which strictly speaking belong to the plastic side, are only fully effective within the motion of the dance and are sad shadows of themselves on the walls of a museum. Suitable dress, as every African dancer knows, may enhance and magnify movement or evoke a sense of social or emotional status.

Sculpture

It is not surprising that to the outside world the words "African art" first spell the solid plastic arts, which can be collected and displayed in drawing rooms and museums, photographed from all angles, discussed endlessly with undisguised partiality, depending on whether you like your African art demoniac and mysterious or just primitive, perverse and Picassoesque. But to the inside world, African carvings have suffered incalculable harm from two external pressures, the one spiritual and the other economic, various forms of Christian proselytism and the insatiable curio trade. The old Judaic denunciation, "Thou shalt not bow down to graven images" has had its full share in helping to wither the undoubted talent of the African sculptor and has turned him today into the aimless imitator of mass produced trifles for decorating the mantelpieces of Western suburbia. Apart from the fact that curio manufacture provides a certain

amount of employment, culturally speaking I believe it to be a first class tragedy which is often further confounded by the introduction of the techniques of the overseas instructors with their "art school" outlook and their accent upon the popular, *avant-garde* fancy of the moment. As an American said to me recently in East Africa when we were discussing the myriads of little light brown statuettes that emanate from the Kamba carvers of Kenya and which can be bought today in every curio shop in Africa and even in New York . . . "You know" he said, "these chaps are getting out of date. They haven't learnt to make holes through them like Henry Moore. But they will . . . they will". How right he was. A short air trip away, I visited an African art school and there they were . . . "our students work" . . . horrific and holey . . . a new kind of Moorish invasion of Africa by way of Russell Square.

This may sound mildly amusing but what lies underneath is symptomatic of the malaise which is steadily creeping over African arts which are either neglected by indigenous artists or are subject to attack for either religious, or secular considerations. It is, I believe, no cultural improvement at all to substitute for indigenous craftsmanship, the artistic techniques of the West which have arisen out of altogether different surroundings and from distinctive and dissimilar points of view, unless they are accompanied by a profound spiritual depth which marks the true artist from the dilettante and pedant. You may have noticed, for example, that a piece of authentic African sculpture displayed in a museum or art gallery may appear flat or unconvincing. Take it out into its natural element, the bright sunlight, and the change is remarkable. The conventions adopted by generations of African carvers working with adze and chisel as they sat in the shade of a tree, with a strong top light above them, have resulted in a boldness and sureness of touch which the art schools of Europe with their overcast skies can only blur at the edges. If African carvers were devoted solely to carving for a European clientele it would not matter very much and might be good business. But, one may ask, what is the object of creative African art? Is it the production of trade goods for export to foreigners or is it an articulate gesture by the artist intended to increase the meaning of life to his compatriots? It may be argued, of course, that art is international, and not narrowly national; but the fallaciousness of this line of thought would be immediately apparent if one day we were to discover those African carvers who are now being encouraged to carve in Western or semi-Western styles suddenly insisting upon carving in imitation of the East, turning out oriental Buddhas and Chinese dragons.

African sculptors, I fear, will not regain their vitality and strength of purpose until they cease to be confused by extraneous techniques and find something to say to their own African peoples which is rather more subtle than the inanities of the pavement figurines, what I like to call "*manakins*" and "*faunakins!*" Incidentally, if you would like to see the macabre in life size funeral sculpture in either marble or concrete, I can recommend a visit to a Lagos cemetery.

There are, indeed, a few genuine attempts being made at the present time to reanimate the art of sculpture, and sometimes even to introduce it in territories where it has never existed before to any extent as a contemporary popular or folk craft. I am thinking especially of Father Carol's work in Nigeria and Professor Todd's of Makerere. Both are up against the primary problem of finding patrons who will purchase the work of their protégés and make practical use of it beyond the endless round of exhibitions, and thereby make a reasonable living for the sculptor. The tendency at the moment in Kampala and Lagos seems to lean towards statuary rather than the more modest sculptures which might be expected to find their way into African homes, and villages. Elsewhere, notably in Western Nigeria, the work has taken a more practical turn and one of their Yoruba sculptors has carved several doors for churches with Christian motifs and designed and carved decorative furniture for notables of the realm for use in administrative and public buildings. Kofi Zntubain of Ghana has followed the same line.

Painting

The painting of pictures at this stage of African evolution is also subject to many of the same reservations which apply to carving. The pavement artists of Leopoldville for example have flooded the curio markets with facile, puffball figures engaged in a curious dance of fantastic and static ballet. In this country and generation at least, they have sometimes succeeded in effectively replacing the "camels and pyramids" of 40 years ago, and the usual run of hotel prints — from "The Stag at Bay" series to "Purple sunset on the Hottentot Hollands". The art of painting (that is, the production of pictures as opposed to murals) is in much the same plight as African sculpture and for the same reasons, that it is too dependent upon foreign taught techniques and is almost exclusively directed towards a non-indigenous, a non-African clientele. The majority of African paintings which have found their way into exhibitions in the last fifteen years or so have come mostly from groups of subsidised painters or art students working under the guidance of a White protagonist who directly or indirectly provided the spiritual drive and "paternal" guidance; and, speaking as one who has staged two public exhibitions of such work, they have met with considerable success for their sheer originality, their use of bright colours and unusual pattern forms in what was, to the artists, a new medium. Perhaps the most effective works shown have been examples of what is called "haptic" design, that is the painting or representation of what you *know* rather than what you *see* without reference to conventional third dimension perspective in the drawing. What happens when they have progressed beyond this stage is usually the crux of the matter. The works of a number of African students which I have seen exhibited after completing their period of tuition in studies abroad, are often indistinguishable in style and content from the work of the foreign students amongst whom they studied, adopting the same or similar clichés current within that class and period. This may be art by an African but is far from being African art. Some like to call it "Neo-African".

It is interesting and a little sinister to note that African art students seem to be most highly acclaimed when the development of their work shows a tendency towards a Western fashion or the "ism" of the moment. Today it must be the abstract line, provided always that in order to cater for the White man's romantic impression of what Africa is really like, the subject matter must be ferocious, fearful, lustful and bespattered with plenty of blood. We were presented for our amazement and approval several examples of this kind of pastiche at the recent Congress of African Art in Salisbury. This may of course be what a budding African painter really wants to portray, similar to those scenes conjured up so vividly and poetically by the Nigerian, Amos Tutuola, on his "Road to the Deads' Town" or in his "Bush of Ghosts." But apply the acid test of approval or disapproval by their own peers within their immediate African society and the general answer is still alkaline. (A word incidentally which I understand means "producing caustic or corrosive solutions"). My own experience of the subject-matter of African songs I must admit does not bear out the impression given by African art students that other peoples' blood and guts, witchcraft, ignorance and horror are among their major preoccupations when revealing their inmost souls to the public gaze. I have an uneasy feeling that glancing over their shoulders they too, the painters as well as the sculptors, consider that the customer is always White. It is equivalent to a remark made to me several years ago by another American, this time a film man operating in the Congo; when I asked him why American films of Africa had to be dolled up with so many imaginary "evil spirits" and so much romantic ferocity — "Well", he said, "we don't make motion pictures of Africa as it is, but as Kansas City *knows* Africa to be".

It is a worrying fact that in three of the five groups of African artists with whose work I am most familiar, where the original white mentor has either left or died, the standard of artistry has declined almost to vanishing point. Time alone will tell if painting will become a truly indigenous and national African art, beyond the confines of the curio

trade or the wiles of the “abstractionist”, or whoever happens to hold the popular stage of the moment.

Murals

The painting of murals on the other hand has a long history, quite independent of foreign influences. It is essentially a democratic art, in the sense that it is done by the people for the pleasure and satisfaction of the people living around them and therefore in order to be accepted as satisfactory must conform to the conventions which are locally agreeable. We can see many examples of simple murals widespread throughout South Africa, particularly in the work of the unknown and unrecognised Sotho and Tswana women artists who decorate their homes and their “*lapa*” yards with a maze of fine finger patterns, quite apart from the more dramatic and sometimes almost overwhelming murals of the Ndebele women who, like the others, devote hours of work to developing primary patterns in coloured clays in order to put a capital H in the word Home, or perhaps more correctly a capital K in *Kaya*.

Effective murals, in my experience, are few and far between once you leave South Africa but again come into their own in the Northern Congo with tribes such as the Yogo and Mangbele and proliferate in West Africa where the demands of religious mysticism and latterly of advertising provide the artistic drive for secondary representation. Motivation of this nature gives rise to the portrayal of human and animal figures and mystical symbols rather than the primary pleasure of semi-geometrical patterns. I often wish that architects who have to design buildings for the use of Africans would pay more attention to the surface texture of African murals as an inspiration to future techniques in this direction, though, no doubt, a certain school of thought would condemn them as being reactionary and primitive, especially by those who drive like Jehu through miles of African countryside with dozens of examples of excellent mural patterns on either hand and never notice one of them.

So much for the plastic arts, without even a mention of the classics you will notice, such as the magnificent sixteenth century bronzes of Ife and Benin, the carvings of the Yoruba and Ibo, the masks and figurines of the Southern Congo and the fine chip carvings of the Chokwe.

Why? — because very largely, these already belong to history and to numerous, well illustrated, expert and expensive publications, which underline the fact that if you want to see the best of African sculpture today you must go to the collections of New York, London and Brussels. A link in the chain has snapped, and for the time being we, in Africa, are left holding only the tag end which has become the snare of the souvenir hunter or is all knotted up in the mesh of art school curricula.

3. The Aural Arts

Verse and Lyrics

There is little doubt that the aural arts enjoy a specially warm place in African affections. Word of mouth, tone of voice, semantics and rhythmic, evolving into abstract music, dance motion and drama, all in their fashion exercise particular fascination for them as a people who never experienced the need of a notation until comparatively recent times.

Aural memory must have played a large part in moulding their African personality, all the keener for having no written records to rely on. No one who has had a modicum of experience of Africans can have failed to appreciate their undoubted talent for marathon conversations; and when you remember that the pundits claim that there are over a thousand different languages in Africa, the scope and variety of significant sounds which they are capable of producing is positively staggering. In a totally preliterate society the aural memory and the command of language of the most intellectually gifted

among them must have by far outstripped the simple phrases of the average man and woman — “the murmuring poor” as someone called them. How much more cultured than the general level must have been the speech of their most articulate men, the poets, story tellers and composers. It is a great mistake to lump together all the preliterate merely because they did not read or write. It is significant to note in this connection that the vocabulary, they say, of a normally well brought up Zulu woman of good family who can neither read nor write is about five to eight times as large as that of a European peasant of equal standing, partly on account of her *blonipa* synonyms.

The structure of Bantu languages does not lend itself to poetry as we know it with rhyme but rather to blank verse and alliteration which in many ways can be more attractive and less of a tyrant. Blank verse with considerable nobility of phrasing is found almost everywhere in Africa, and in some tribes among whom I have recorded it reaches almost epic proportions. One of my early experiences in Africa was listening to an old, white-bearded, Karanga chief called Chingombe, deliver a judgement in a case he was hearing connected with disputed ownership of cattle. At the end of each phrase his hearers, sitting around on the ground, interjected formal responses, which sounded almost liturgical in their precision. Justice was not only being done but done in beautifully measured terms which made an artistic virtue of a necessity.

Beautiful phrases are too good to be wasted, and for lack of writing, many of the fine stanzas in African tongues find their way into song and by the marriage of melody with words become indelibly impressed upon the peasant mind and may be repeated and sung generation after generation. In fact, many of the legends I have recorded are recited only to the thrumming accompaniment of an instrument, a kind of endless carpet of repetitive design along which the verses roll grandly on and on.

With the single exception of the Swahili language on the east coast of Tanganyika and Kenya, I have found no rhymed poetry. The Swahili *Mashairi* rhymed verses are frequently the medium of enjoyable communication between familiar friends. Intellectuals will write letters to each other entirely in verse. I recorded several examples of them in Tabora, in central Tanganyika. With few exceptions (such as the famous Vilakazi), verse making apart from the lyrics of songs, I believe, is comparatively rare beyond the range of children's verses and *Ixibongo* type praises. But since African languages with their semantic tone demand a meticulous respect for the rise and fall of pitch, the step from spoken phrase to sung stanza is small and may well account for the readiness with which Africans are able to participate in folk songs as a natural extension of speech.

The crux of the matter lies in those words . . . *meticulous respect for the rise and fall of tone*. This basic premise has been so consistently transgressed by those who, in the nature of things, should have known better, that it is no exaggeration to say that African music in towns and institutions is in serious jeopardy of losing its artistic integrity altogether. To call the musical compositions of the bulk of those who have been exposed to this heresy “second rate” would be nothing short of blatant flattery. Ask almost any student at school or college to repeat in sensible, normal, spoken tones what he has just sung in deference to the pundits who composed the music for vernacular hymns and school songs and you will be astonished to find that whereas the spoken word makes sense, the sung equivalent is arrant nonsense with the normal flow of trochaic stress distorted into the straight-jacket of iambic “la-di-da-di-da”. Robert Graves, the poet, in a recent interview with Geoffrey Bridson of the B.B.C. (December, 1962) had good reason to state, regarding English poetry, that a study of folk songs is the finest training a poet can have and prevents what he called “his falling into the trap of the constant iambic ti-tum, ti-tum”. He could not have given better advice to any budding African poet or song writer. Look to your folk verse and folk songs if you are to get out of the common rut of moronic jingles which today pass for intelligent African compositions.

I would like to state out of my special experience of African song, that continued

disregard for the elementary rules of vernacular tone and stress in those types of songs which are normally taught and encouraged in schools and colleges, may well delay, if not destroy, any hope of international recognition for Bantu poets and song writers.

Not only is it the fault of bad teaching, lack of poetic sensitivity and musical ineptitude, but to make matters worse, in some circles it has now become socially important to ensure the incorrect use of African vernaculars in song in order to be considered "up to date", "modern" and "smart". This is contemptible by any artistic standards. One has only to apply similar criteria to verse in English or any other language to appreciate the ridiculousness of the situation.

Admittedly, African song is a most elusive medium. Until the comparatively recent invention of the gramophone and the tape recorder, trying to capture an African song was about as fruitless as trying to catch a fish by the tail. Having in my youth often tickled trout in small Devonshire streams, I know that songs like trout need to be caught by the gills. The secret lies in the throat of the folk singer and the normal rise and fall, stress and accent, of the vernacular dialect, which is transposed without distortion from the pattern of speech to the parallel pattern of melody. Anyone who is so rarely gifted that he can speak an African language entirely without a foreign accent should be able to participate equally well in its songs (with certain tonal reservations). The awareness of subtle dialect peculiarities, and consequently of the musical nuances with which they are linked, often form an important part of African humour. I have frequently recorded songs which deride the pronunciation used by a neighbouring district, and that naturally includes what we would call the musical settings that went with it. We, Westerners, are often tone deaf to these subtleties. We hear the bare outline only. In the case of drum music we usually remark upon the rhythm of the drums instead of the rhythmic melody of the drums, where for an African musician the accent is as much on tone as on the pattern of pulsation. This obtuseness on our part and gullibility on theirs have between them spawned as bonny a brood of pastiche songs throughout the whole of Africa as you will find anywhere. This is part of the overburden that I mentioned before which has to be dug down through before you can discover the genuine article.

What, one may ask, is likely to become the future classical music of Africa? No one can yet say — but since folk music, and folk songs in particular, are the basis of all the national classical musics of the world there is little reason to think that it will be otherwise in Africa. Luckily, the multiplicity of African languages and dialects has created an equally varied crop of songs, and, contrary to popular opinion which bases its assumption of the townee's point of view, African songs are not all dying a natural death, though admittedly, in industrial centres, they are being replaced by a plethora of items usually performed in one single repetitive key. (99 out of 100 guitars bought by Africans are not played as guitars at all, but as one key zithers). African town and school songs have now become the aural equivalent of the small carved curio figures with their vacant, vacuous features of no meaning. Even the jargon of the music trade has swifly overtaken the town African's attitude to song making. Only the other day a Shangaan singer wanted me to record him because, he said, he had "four good sides."

Anyone, black or white, who wishes to be considered well versed in African culture can no longer ignore the growing body of evidence contained in the wealth, variety and range of African folk songs, just because his own private musical taste might not coincide with that of the African performers. Quite apart from the literal content of the songs, the implications which one can deduce from the choice of subject and the manner of performance are manifold . . . such as the social and spiritual outlook of the singers, their daily preoccupations, their attitudes to and interpretations of the world around them, all of which they find sufficiently important to be crystallised in song. These texts, properly digested, would act as a corrective to the over-pedantic, over-speculative interpretations which one commonly comes across in the writings of some of the specialists on African subjects whose enthusiasm may have led them to lose sight of

the broader human element in their microscopic study of the particular. How many of us have had to struggle through page after page of the smog of pseudo-scientific jargon about some aspect of African life that reduces sympathetic understanding to zero, where a touch of poetry and common humanity might well have brilliantly illuminated our understanding.

We are getting a little tired of the continuous outpouring of learned articles on the sex life and play of simple African communities and the dearth of intelligent work on the arts of this continent, free from the popular mystique about "primitives", or the emotional raptures of the *avant garde*. It reflects more upon the writers than on the written about.

Translate some of the songs which on first hearing may sound dull and repetitive and you may find a revelation in local perception. On the other hand, enthuse too readily over an apparently clever bit of melody that takes your foreign fancy and you may find yourself faced with a rather clumsy and adolescent comment on somebody's mother-in-law.

But, take seriously the lyrics behind scores of thousands of folk songs which are still current in Africa and the hundreds of "jitter" songs so apparently popular in dance halls, broadcasting studios and other emporiums of professional entertainment and you will find a social document and true commentary upon the actual state of life and mind in Africa just as reliable as most of the speculations of journalists who write for a cause or a motive. Anyone who knew the songs of Uganda, for example, could not possibly have gone wrong about the public attitude to government and to their monarchy on the part of the Ganda people during the March "Kabaka Yekka" elections. On the other hand, listen to the political, anti-white, songs of Nyasaland and you find them invariably set to European style hymn tunes. One is reminded of the Biblical injunction "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear".

I am making a plea, you will appreciate, for many more ears to begin to hear African songs and comprehend what they are hearing without wishing to convert them to drawing-room use, to jazz them up for sale to radio stations, or to sterilize them with European harmonies, but rather to appreciate them as an important, if not the most important, facet of the whole crystal which is African art.

Instrumental Music

Instrumental music which figures so largely in our present day Western culture occupies a rather less important place in African music largely because the manufacture of instruments depended entirely upon the local presence or absence of the essential raw materials from which to make them and an adequate number of craftsmen. The almost total absence of drums within South Africa for example is not necessarily the voluntary choice of the migrant tribes which settled here some centuries ago but rather arises from the fact that they came to a country devoid of trees of suitable dimensions for making drums, which no doubt they had originally used when living further north among the forests. Generations without trees and turned them into a singing people without drums.

Nevertheless, most of the varieties of musical instruments known to man (and perhaps some which one or two of us might consider were known only to devils) are to be found in Africa in varying degrees of development. Stringed instruments, wind instruments, membrane and percussion instruments are still found in abundance wherever African communities depend upon their own musical initiative for their recreation.

It is sufficient to say that from the simplest reed pipe or one-string musical bow upwards, the makers of African instruments have followed empirically, and possibly without knowing it, the universal science of musical instrument construction without relying upon outside instructors for their craft. I deprecate the popular tendency to ascribe the element of skill in African musical crafts to some external, remote foreign influence such as Egypt or Indonesia. Indeed, to some extent the reverse may be the

case where the migration of African slaves was involved. The proof of this may be found in the fact that, as far as I know, European influence has not yet improved a single African instrument (with possibly one modest exception) either in range or tone beyond that achieved by the original makers. Several instruments have been ousted by foreign factory-made articles such as concertinas, harmonicas or guitars, and the brass instruments of dance bands, but unlike South American musicians, Africans seem to have failed to bring their distinctive musical instruments into play in town dance or institutional bands, and Europeans have been slow to appreciate them. It is only of very recent years that religious music has been composed making use of local drums. This strange lack of imagination contrasts sharply with the ingenuity of the traditional music makers.

So much for the instruments themselves. The music they produce from their instruments is another matter. Most instrumental compositions in Africa that I have noted are based primarily upon the rise-and-fall and the rhythmic flow of the words of the songs they accompany, antiphonally or in unison. But here there comes into play a universal phenomenon regarding musical instruments, in that the instrument itself, by its own physical shape and peculiarities contributes something extra to the music which does not arise from the direct volition of the composer. The juxtaposition of strings, or the overtones in a flute, for example, give rise to certain cadences which can be made by coincidence. African music contains many examples of such devices becoming part of the normal techniques of the music. In this regard, the instruments themselves can be said to compose a part of the music, set new limitations and extend old techniques. The adoption of a foreign type of instrument does not necessarily extend their repertoire or techniques. Although most non-Africans are only aware of the existence of the noisier instruments, such as the drums and horns, the bulk of worthwhile African music is played on the quieter and lesser known instruments, often played for the delectation of the player himself and to no audience. Perhaps the most important of all African instruments — the Mbira, Likembe, Marimba group of so-called "hand pianos" are among the best examples of this class and lend themselves to considerable development of technique. They have the added distinction of being the only musical instrument in Africa unique to this continent.

Dances

Anyone without considerable first-hand experience of African dancing can have little idea of the intensity of their feeling for measured movement as an art form, the depth of their satisfaction at participating in a dance routine in unison with their fellows. Dance action in company with your friends is an abiding passion with most Africans, so much so that many of them consider that no better and more sincere act of devotion can be offered to their Deity than to dance as an outward sign of worship. One of the most moving examples of this is to be seen in Natal where religious dancing over the last fifty years has become the central rite of Christian worship amongst the members of an independent and devout Zulu Church.

As for secular dances, there must be at least a thousand different varieties of dance which are being actively performed year in, year out, in Africa. As with folk music, folk dances are not static or remain unchanged with years. In towns, popular styles fall in and out of fashion within a year or so. Country dances on the other hand, last longer, about five years or more is not uncommon, while dances which are associated with royalty, chieftainship and the central rituals of tribal loyalty may last unchanged for generations.

Here again we have to dig down through a formidable heap of nonsense spoken about African dances before we can perceive the real nature of this important African art. No art has been the subject of more prejudiced and violent denunciations, "in all lands and in every age", as Percy Scholes maintains. (*Oxford Companion to Music*). Africa has had its full share of ignorant condemnation. Take South Africa alone. Of

the twenty or more Folk dances which you can witness in this country the bulk of Europeans would naturally, inevitably, and with the best intentions call every one of them a "War Dance" and conjure up as pretty a set of blood-curdling epithets to titilate their romantic imagination as you could wish to find. Every young dancer is a "warrior", and the sound of their dance music, especially if accompanied by drums, is of course, nothing less than *sinister* (whatever they mean by that). The basest of sexual motives is seen in the simplest little country hop of cheerful boys and girls and some demoniac, occult interpretation is readily ascribed to almost any dance of which they disapprove. Only rarely do you find intelligent observers, either black or white, remarking knowledgeably upon the superb performance of these dancers, their precision and excellent techniques.

If you had seen as many African dances as I have under all sorts of conditions, you would, I expect, become as depressed as I am by the weight of sheer ignorance and moral prejudice against African country dances, by African and European "intelligentsia" alike who are prepared to tolerate and applaud as "civilised" such cheerful inanities as the "twist" and "strip tease".

Where, one may ask, are the authoritative writings on African dances, perhaps the most widespread and intricate of all African recreations? Writers on the sex life of tribal and urban Africans, real or imagined, come ten-a-penny nowadays. One worthwhile writer on the significance of African dances would be worth his weight in gold to the serious study and appreciation of indigenous personality and the spiritualities of this continent upon which the success of smooth relationships between the races must increasingly depend as politics continue to pull them apart.

In recently independent African countries we have lately had the significant opinion expressed by African political leaders that more attention should be paid to indigenous dances and music and less to imitating foreign styles. This may be just another aspect of inspired nationalism, but I would rather interpret it as a growing awareness of certain distinctive characteristics in themselves and their societies which must find their outlet in equally distinctive artistic channels evolved from generations of local preferences. The lack of keen outside recognition for the intrinsic qualities of their folk arts must have, in some degree, contributed to their political extravagances. It must become a little discouraging after a while always to be the object of conversion and never, or hardly ever, the subject of approval for inherent artistic merit. The inter-tribal dances on the gold mines play a far more important part than merely catering for public relations. The Whites are by no means only to blame for overlooking indigenous merit. The students of one African college I know, insist in college on dancing only English Morris and ballroom dances and refuse to take any interest at all in their own or any styles of African dancing which many of them could perform with great credit and skill, except at end-of-term concerts on the stage. . . . never off the stage. It is strange, but the evidence points to the fact that all over Africa those Africans who profess to be most anti-White are those who insist the loudest upon the desirability of performing and studying only White styles of arts, — dancing included.

The spread of industrialism throughout Africa forcing a change in the mode of living from rural and tribalism to urban and multi-tribal has also brought with it a whole new set of artistic and pseudo-artistic values and the fashions in dancing as in other art forms have changed with the new conditions.

Anyone who is concerned with the integrity of African arts will be anxious to discover whether the changes themselves which are normal and inevitable in the circumstances are likely to encourage or destroy the innate genius and talent for the arts which still exist throughout the continent. It seems to me that true understanding of Africa's unique artistic talents may yet gain for them the appreciation of the whole cultured world and not lose them their own soul. Such approval may well, in the long run, prove more valuable to Africans emerging as world citizens than many of their present-day activities which gain them the headlines but not much outside confidence.

In the case of the art of dancing one cannot assume that it is an indestructible talent which needs no fostering. Industrialism in Britain effectively destroyed the reputation that Englishmen had previously had of being "the dancing English". It might just as easily happen in Africa and this most useful and enjoyable art might yet vanish from the list of leading African recreations.

Drama

It is commonplace for people to remark upon the natural talent of African men and women, and even small children, to act. But acting in the familiar atmosphere of a village or small institutional community is very different from the highly specialised art of acting on a modern stage. To take the ability to act-a-part out of its context with the art of the playwright is to confuse the issue.

I have witnessed excellent acting by itinerant bands of African entertainers whose only props were a couple of drums, leg rattles and an inexhaustible supply of imagination, wit and mime. Here in the rural setting the whole art of drama is conceived, crystallised into form and sequence, and acted with such skill that with virtually no stage props at all as we know them, the attention of the audience is captured, clothed in imagination and carried away with the true enjoyment of make-believe.

We must not be misled by the fortunate success of the occasional production featuring African actors which may have proved a box-office winner. The production which was recently taken over to England with South African native artistes was not African drama. It was written, staged, dressed, produced and orchestrated by Whites. What it did succeed in doing was to show that with the right control and, most important, the right discipline, that there is yet an opening for African playwrights and actors to transplant the theatre from the village dust-bowl where it started to the bleak social centre and eventually to the professional theatre by virtue of their own dramatic ability. I still hope to see it happen as I know what is possible in the country, but have yet to see its peer in the towns. It is perhaps too soon to hope that African theatre will grow out of the patent juvenility of featuring a so-called "witch doctor" in nearly every production. Each time this character appears I register the appalling lack of insight on the part of all concerned which attempts to perpetuate a long outmoded attitude to African mentality.

As one who has had, perhaps, unequalled opportunity of witnessing in action the contemporary artists of this continent (in particular many of the musicians, singers, painters, dancers, story tellers, actors and mummies) I am fully aware that the genuine spark of true artistry is still an undeniable part of their African inheritance. At the same time, I am forced to remark that with only very rare exceptions the chill hand of European instruction and example has not on the whole tended to draw out innate artistic originality but rather to superimpose alien techniques which have been accepted by the victims with alacrity, for non-artistic motives. Incalculable damage has been done to the original musicality of this continent by the well meaning folly of attempting to transplant Victorian balladry, revivalist hymns, and American jazz, and by holding them up as the ideal to be followed by well-intentioned and socially ambitious pupils.

In most cases it is not artistry at all which is taught but a kind of suburban sophistication depending on the origin of the instructor, South African, English, Swiss, Swedish, American and so on — which may be genuinely suburban but has little to do with African intangibles. This is a hard dictum and is said in all humility. But there is no substitute for genuine knowledge and clear perception, unalloyed by either charity or disparagement on our part, and for the African artist and musician self knowledge, and true imagination coupled with authentic skill and originality which should be their hallmark.

Admittedly, a large proportion of African people are going through a period of adaptation to new disciplines when revolt from all discipline is the frequent response. This is not an easy time for composers, poets and painters when so much credit and

applause is wasted upon the charlatan and imitator whose talents are aimed at attracting a market rather than representing an authentic point of view through the arts.

The Whites of Africa can help best, I believe, through their analytical and mechanical skills, by acquiring knowledge and comprehension of the traditional techniques of African arts as they still exist today and by making them available to Africans for reference in universities, teacher training colleges, schools and art schools in the form of books and records.

African arts, as the arts elsewhere, whether we like it or not, will continue to indicate clearly to the rest of the world the actual and not the imagined or hoped for cultural status of the people of this continent. Their rise or decline is ultimately the sole responsibility of Africans themselves.

The immediate problem before them, as I see it, is whether or not the next few generations of Africans will be wise enough and sufficiently interested to be able to prevent the overburden of spurious and popular imitation from hiding, and possibly destroying altogether, the continuity of their hitherto distinctive and unique contribution to the Arts in Africa.