

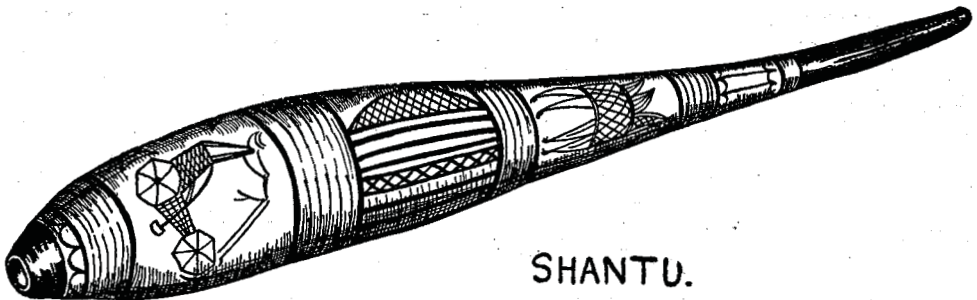
THE *SHANTU* MUSIC OF THE HARIMS OF NIGERIA

by

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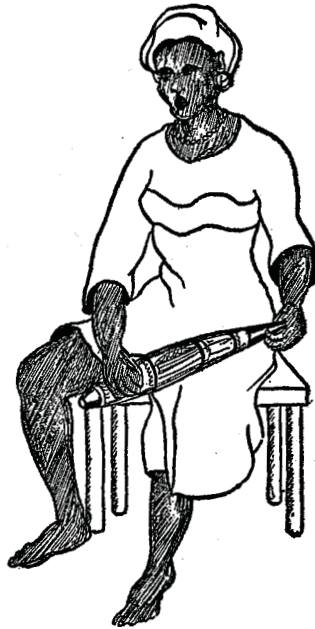
PERHAPS the most fascinating of all Nigerian music is the *Shantu* music and soft rhythmical singing which comes from the women's courtyards of the Muslim Harims. I do not know of any other music either in Africa or the world which can be compared to it. Recently I have been able to obtain a tape recording of this music, which is a very difficult thing to come by because the songs themselves are of a very private and intimate nature, and it is impossible for a man to gain access to the women's quarters. The wife of a student anthropologist managed this however, and I believe that this recording (not very good, alas) is unique.

The instrument is extremely simple and might be described as an advanced stamping tube. The difference, however, is that it is stamped not on the ground but on the inside of the bare thigh just above the knee. From this description alone it will be seen why the modest Hausa ladies would not play in mixed society. The instrument is a specially grown elongated gourd which plays a big part in Hausa feminine society. If the tapering stem is cut off the receptacle left can be filled with henna, and the whole thing put on over the woman's hand to the wrist. This dyes the hands the delicate colour which is considered an asset to beauty. When the gourd is to be used as an instrument, the long stem remains, and the seeds and pith are removed through a small hole at the broad end of the fruit. It is then dried and polished with oil, and afterwards beautifully designed with a hot skewer, or carved with a penknife. The *shantu* is then ready for sale, and appears on one of the market stalls. There it may be bought by an attendant or unmarried female relative, or even by an indulgent husband if a particular pattern takes his fancy. The patterns are influenced by fashion, and very modern shantus often depict bicycles and other symbols of Western civilization.



SHANTU.

To get music from the instruments must take a lot of practice, and the *shantu* soon becomes a treasured possession. It also assumes considerable mystic properties, and can often be a symbol of good luck, fertility and good health. The instrument is held in the left hand horizontally, with the finger tips underneath, and it is pushed sharply sideways against the thigh while the right hand cups the hole at the other end. An astonishing variety of notes can be accomplished by the force of the blows and the muting of the right hand. One instrument alone makes only the softest sound like a distant muffled bullfrog, but four or five together, with soft female voices, and perhaps the addition of a little metallic percussion can produce a very charming sound.



Woman playing Shantu.

The occasions for such music vary considerably, but these women's orchestras can usually be heard when a pregnancy is discovered, or after a successful birth, and the songs often have to do with such intimate details of the harim. There are also songs of derision about the marriages of other female relatives, the betrothals of the children, the sale of the cloth woven on the looms, or the wonderful dreams inspired by the scent of the musk from the civet cat. Deaths and funerals too have their special private laments in the Harim courtyards.

There are seldom less than four instruments going at once, for that is the number of wives allowed to a Moslem. The richer households have concubines as well and a number of servants, small boys and women, who can add to the music by beating on upturned calabash-bowls with ringed fingers, or simply beating two sticks together. The husband does not intrude on the scene when such music is being played, for it would not be seemly for him to hear the words of some of the ditties; but at least one husband I know will listen with pleasure from his own quarters when the band is playing, as will his men friends gathered with him for a gossip.

With the evening meal over, and the daily work finished, the husband will hear the soft sounds from the women's compound, and will switch off his rediffusion box which may be bringing a programme from the local station or the B.B.C. Then he will sit and listen to the music, without hearing the words.

Western influence is creeping gradually but surely even into the Hausa harims. It is most unlikely that the *shantu* will survive the inevitable end of the purdah of women, and it will be one of the first things that will be sacrificed on the altar of emancipation. What is more, it is too little known for the outside world to regret its passing. It is greatly to be hoped that some of the music can be preserved on records for the future. It would be interesting to discover if any other Muslim part of Africa has similar women's orchestras, and if the *shantu* is known in other parts of Africa and the world.