

## YORUBA VOCAL MUSIC

by H. U. BEIER

Much more attention has so far been paid to the famous instrumental music of the Yorubas than to their vocal music. The fame of the "*Dundun*" drum, the famous talking instrument, has probably overshadowed Yoruba singing. Yet there is an immensely rich field of study even here. There is no occasion in Yoruba life that is not accompanied by songs. Birth, marriage and funeral are all occasions for lyrical songs of great beauty. Everyday life is also accompanied by a great deal of impromptu singing, a kind of musical thinking, in which the singer puts everything to a tune, which happens to pass through his head.

The Yorubas are indeed a poetic nation, because every person has his own praise songs, by which he will be greeted on all important occasions. Professional singers are able to recite these *oriki* (e.g. praise songs) of every important man in the town and those of his ancestors as well. In the case of a king, the praise singer must remember the *oriki* of all the kings from the beginning of the town; and the king owes him sixpence per ancestor!

The melodic line of Yoruba music must strictly follow the tone pattern of the African language. Many Yoruba words may have several meanings, according to whether their various syllables are spoken on a high, medium or low tone. The music cannot interfere with this basic pattern, because otherwise the text will be turned into complete nonsense. The singer has liberty, however, to increase or decrease the intervals between the various tones, and he may also change the pitch of the entire tone pattern from one phrase to another, all that is required is that the basic tone pattern shall be preserved.

Yoruba singing knows no harmony in the European sense. Yet the singers are never in perfect unison either. Very small intervals between the different voices seem to give a kind of "colour" or "texture" to the sound.

Variety is brought into Yoruba singing, because there is an immense number of different techniques of singing. It may in fact be said that each Yoruba cult group has a different kind of voice production. An *Ijala*, for example, cannot be produced in the same way as an *Odu* (the song of the Ifa worshippers). And again the *Esa* songs of the Egungun (masqueraders) can be easily recognised by their distinctive tone quality.

The more interesting Yoruba tunes cannot easily be written down with the European system of notation. Nobody has as yet invented a really satisfactory way of writing down Yoruba music. In this present article, therefore, we must content ourselves with discussing the poetry of the songs, hoping that the readers may get hold of the few recordings of Yoruba music that have already been published.

Let us start with marriage ceremonies. A great variety of songs is sung on such an occasion, and the bride herself takes an active part. For her the climax of the feast is reached when she leaves the house of her father and proceeds to the house of her husband:

"I loosen my head tie and prostrate  
I shall be going now.  
Let the new house suit me.  
Let me get twenty slaves,  
Let me have thirty *Iwofas*<sup>1</sup>.  
Let me bear sixty and seven times two hundred children!  
If I shall have many clothes

<sup>1</sup> An "*Iwofa*" is a man who offers his labour to a rich man in order to raise a loan for a poor relative or friend of his.

To fill the *Oke* box,  
 Let not thieves come and steal it,  
 So that I may trade and profit.  
 Let me be healthy to go and to come back.  
 Let me always have money.  
 Let me have children to eat out of the same dish with me,  
 Let me not die, let me not smell<sup>2</sup>.  
 Let the children's yam be well cooked for me to eat.  
 If I ask the *Egun*<sup>3</sup> of this compound to follow me to my husband's house  
 He will have to turn back at the arch.  
 If I ask Allah to accompany me to my husband's house  
 Allahwahaborul I would be asked "Since when are you a Moslem?"  
 If I ask the *Orisha*<sup>4</sup> to follow me to my husband's house  
 He will have to turn back at the arch.  
 Only one's head<sup>5</sup> follows one into one's husband's house.  
 Only one's head follows.  
 If one wears a costly crown,  
 Only one's Head follows.  
 If one holds a beaded sceptre  
 Only one's head follows.  
 The head of the dove has accompanied it before it could sell cloth.  
 Let my head follow."

The most elaborate of all family festivals are the funerals. These occasions also produce some of the most poetic Yoruba songs, often in the form of visions, whose meaning can only be guessed.

"I had three friends.  
 One asked me to sleep on the mat.  
 One asked me to sleep on the ground.  
 One asked me to sleep on his breast.  
 I decided to sleep on the breast.  
 I saw myself carried on a river.  
 I saw the king of the river and the king of the sun.  
 There in that country I saw palm trees so overloaded with fruit  
 That the trees bent under the fruit and the fruit killed it."

It is interesting to find that the symbol of the river is here employed to denote the passage from the world of the living to the world of the dead, as in European mythology. The consolation of death is, in this case, that the man was old and left many children behind, like the palm tree weighed down by its fruit. The Yorubas believe firmly in the continued existence of the dead. In fact the dead ancestors are believed to have more influence on the life of the tribe than the living. This idea is expressed in the following little verse sung at funerals:

"The eyeballs of the tiger are like fire.  
 The tail of the tiger is never at rest.  
 But most powerful are his claws—the invisible ones."

Difficult to interpret but fascinating, in a strange way, is the following:

"I cannot carry it  
 I cannot carry it.  
 If I could carry it  
 I would carry it.  
 For when the Elephant dies in the bush  
 Something is carried into the house.  
 When the buffalo dies in the forest,  
 Something is brought into the town.  
 But when the mouse dies in the house,  
 Something is thrown away into the bush."

<sup>2</sup> "Let me not smell"—let me not become ill.

<sup>3</sup> "*Egun*" or "*Egungun*"—masked dancer representing an ancestor.

<sup>4</sup> "*Orisha*"—Yoruba deity.

<sup>5</sup> "Only one's head follows"—The head is considered to be the symbol of a person's good fortune. People bring regular sacrifices to their own head.

The most common form of song is the praise song. The praise song or *oriki* is not a continuous narrative, but merely consists of a series of proverbial phrases that praise or characterise the respective person. They are not always sung in the same order. They may be played on the drum as well as sung. The most interesting and important praise songs are those of the kings and of the gods. Let me give some examples of each:

These are the *oriki* of the Ogoga of Ikerre, a Yoruba King in the Ekiti district:—

“However small the needle, the hen can swallow it.  
 The toad<sup>1</sup> jumps happily in the presence of the snake.  
 Two hundred needles do not equal a hoe, and two hundred stars do not make one moon.  
 The white hair of the albino cannot be dyed; a good rider will not be thrown off his horse.  
 If a woman has used the white hair of an albino<sup>2</sup> and still cannot conceive, there is no hope left for her.  
 The hunter thinks the monkey is not wise. The monkey is wise, but he has his own logic.  
 It is not the snake that is afraid, but the one who steps on it.  
 The toad walks proudly in the face of the cook.  
 Even the king’s horse has fat haunches.  
 A man can be annoyed. God cannot be annoyed.  
 God’s blessing cannot be forced.  
 The lizard cannot pretend to be a boa. Nobody can be a king while his father is alive<sup>3</sup>  
 Whether the moon shines or it is pitch dark, the mighty man will be recognised when he is met  
 He is the husband of the black wife and the yellow wife. He is the husband of the fat wife, selling  
 tobacco on the market.  
 The white ants are looking at the stone without hope.  
 You must not fight, you must not quarrel, if you want to be the father of many children.  
 He draws the red palm oil from the necks of men.  
 The Okin bird has only one white feather<sup>4</sup>.”

And these are some *oriki* of Sango, the great god of thunder, much feared for his power and much loved for his many human qualities. His *oriki* go into many hundreds, of which only a few can be given here:

“When the elephant wakes in the morning, he must pay his respects to his new wife.  
 When the guinea fowl wakes up in the morning it must prostrate itself to the lord of the forest.  
 If it fails to greet him thus, it will be killed by the hunter.  
 The *olorisha* (worshipper) will take it away, and after selling it will use the money to make medicine.  
 If the antelope wakes in the morning and does not bow down to the owner of the bush  
 Then the hunter will come and take its head, to eat with pounded yam.  
 O my lord, husband of Origeibo, I prostrate to you before I undertake to do anything.  
 The rain beats the *Egun* (masquerader) because he cannot find shelter.  
 He cries “Help me, dead people in heaven, help me!”  
 But the rain cannot beat Sango.  
 They say the fire is the one who kills the water.  
 Lightning—with what kind of cloth do you cover your body?  
 With the cloth of death.  
 The man who lies will die in his home.  
 Sango strikes the one who is stupid.  
 He wrinkles his nose and the liar runs off.  
 Even when he does not fight, we used to fear him,  
 Son of a leopard, who takes blood to bathe!  
 The man who died in the market and woke up in the house,  
 He is the one I will worship for the sake of my head.  
 He takes his neighbour’s roof to cover his own head.  
 He lends money and does not ask for it in return.  
 The king who knows today and tomorrow.  
 The one who knows what the white man speaks in secret.  
 The one who turns a bad head into a good one.  
 He who gives child to the white-haired woman.  
 I beg you, give me my own daughter too.”

<sup>1</sup> The toad is considered poisonous.

<sup>2</sup> Albino’s hair is used as medicine. The meaning of this *oriki* is “if the king cannot help, nobody can”

<sup>3</sup> This is a law in Yoruba country; that a man cannot be elected king while his father is still alive. Because if he were, there would be somebody in the town to whom the king must prostrate himself.

<sup>4</sup> The Okin bird has a long single white tail feather, which is the symbol of royalty. It is worn on top of the beaded crown.

The man who married without paying a dowry.  
 I was the one who paid my own dowry before I married him.  
 The man who bought the vagina on credit and asked the chief to pay.  
 Anybody who waits for the elephant, waits for death.  
 Anybody who waits for the buffalo waits for a fight.  
 Anybody who waits for the railway, waits for trouble.  
 He says we must avoid the thing that will kill us.  
 He says we must avoid the trouble.  
 He is the one who has waited for the things we are running away from.  
 I will not regard anybody except you in my life.  
 Sango, I beg you, let my life be good.  
 I want what is in your hand.  
 I want a good thing from you.  
 Give me my own present today.  
 I will regard nobody more than you.  
 I beg, I beg, I have nobody except you.  
 Do not fight me.  
 Give me my own child."

The bard, who sings the praise songs of the kings, is usually also responsible for commenting on contemporary events. In times of war he composes spontaneous war and battle songs:

"My master is going to the field of the cruel, alas!  
 Where the parent of two, will be left with one;  
 Where the parent of one, will be left alone.  
 "My mother tells me not to go"—do not follow our leader!  
 "My father tells me not to go"—do not follow our leader,  
 The lion of the camp.  
 "My betrothed is of age to be wed"—do not follow our leader,  
 The lion of the camps.

These bards follow their lords, whether they are kings or chiefs, and their praise songs at the same time comment on the present position of their master in society, on his successes or ambitions:

"Be the king at once my lord,  
 Cease acting *like* a king."

This was the comment of a bard on one who was the pretender to the throne of Alafin. The reign of a king is usually compared with the reign of previous kings. Thus, for example:—

"In Onalu's reign we changed our dress frequently,  
 In Kurumi's time we used cloth of the finest material.  
 In Adelu's time our best dress becomes everyday apparel."

This is an interesting form of Yoruba sarcasm. The implication here is that Adelu's reign was a time of poverty. Because people were unable to buy new working clothes when the old ones were worn out, they were forced to use their best clothes for everyday.

In the following comment, the introduction of taxation is remembered as the most noteworthy event in the reign of a certain chief:—

"In Aburu's reign  
 A stream broke forth in the sacred grove;  
 In Layode's reign,  
 A long tailed star appeared in the sky;  
 In Oyewumi Alabi's time,  
 My room is rated  
 Five shillings in the king's coins."

There is, in fact, no event in the life of a Yoruba on which songs will not be composed spontaneously.

Of greater poetical interest, however, are the songs connected with religious cults.

As was said above, each Yoruba cult group has its own form of music. For example, the hunters are all worshippers of Ogun, the god of iron, war and the hunt. Hunters have a particular kind of song called *Ijala* which is sung either at home or in the field or

in the bush. *Ijalas* are chanted rather than sung in a peculiar voice. Usually at least two hunters sing these *Ijalas* together and the chant is broken up by little bits of song. The subject of the *Ijalas* varies a great deal. They may be hunting anecdotes or moral stories. Many are in praise of animals, for example this delightful one about the antelope:-

“Beautiful antelope with the slender neck  
Your thighs are worth twenty slaves.  
Your arms are more precious than thirty servants,  
Your neck is glorious like a sacred carving.  
I cannot be happy when I kill you,  
Until I have found your body in the bush.  
Your teeth are whiter than bone.  
The pregnant woman demands your skin.  
Lying on your beautiful skin, she will bear a beautiful child.

It is a popular belief that a pregnant woman lying on an antelope skin will bear a beautiful child.

*Ijalas* are not always neatly composed poems like this one. Often the mind of the singer rambles from one subject to the other:

“Guinea fowl, we greet you, Guinea fowl, we call you,  
Your legs are slender like the ribs of palm leaves.  
Your body is heavy on the shoulder of the hunter.  
The hunter kills on the way to his house, on the farm and on the road to Owu.  
The antelope, whose name you mention lightly, you must not laugh at her.  
Because, I said I would shoot a guinea fowl  
And I shot a dead leaf,  
I said I would shoot an antelope and I shot an anthill.  
I said I would shoot pig, and I shot a dead palm tree.  
The pink pig lives in the river; it has a hoe in its mouth.  
All the words in me beat my mouth;  
One word hits the other and pushes it out.  
The ear that asks for words will hear them.  
When a mother commits adultery, her son will bind her with ropes  
Ogun, let not this happen to me!  
I saw a maize stalk that carried no children on its back.  
Ogun, let not this happen to me!  
Now I shall return to my father’s house,  
I, Asunne, owner of a bird,  
Of a lovely bird.  
I am the child of the leaves of the *ogan* tree that says ‘Kankan’ when they fall  
I am the child of the leaves of the *ogan* tree that say ‘Ganke ganke’ when they fall.  
I the son of Asipa  
I the one who shoots bullets.  
Now I finish my song.

A completely different type of song are the *Odu* of the Ifa worshippers. In these long ritual poems nothing must be improvised, all is laid down by tradition and learned by heart.

The Ifa worshippers are the keepers of the Yoruba oracle, which is supposed to have been handed down to them by one Orummila or Ifa. The priests of this cult use sixteen palm kernels, which they throw up into the air and try to catch. According to whether they catch an even or uneven number of these kernels they will draw two lines or one line respectively on a wooden board strewn with flour. This is repeated sixteen times and a pattern results, which has a name and which suggests a particular ritual poem, called an *Odu*. Each one of these *Odu* has many verses and from these the Ifa priest selects the one which he thinks applies to his client’s request. Thus a mother, anxious to know whether she will have a child, may be told the following *Odu*:

“I am blessing two, not one.  
This was prophesied to the sea-lily  
Which reaches down into the mud, the origin of creation.  
The time of creation has now come.”

These *Odu* are sung in a particular style. Very often the man who queried the oracle will be referred to a particular *orisha* or deity whom he will be told to worship. In the following the questioner is told that he must join the cult of *Obatala*, the god of creation:—

“The sky is immense, but grows no grass.  
This is what the oracle said to *Obatala*,  
To whom the great God gave the reins of the world.  
God of the *Igbo*, I stretch to thee my hands.  
Give the reins of the world to me.”

In the following, the questioner is foretold that no luck will come to him unless he becomes a worshipper of *Ifa*, the oracle god himself:

“The river is flowing, the river is going;  
It puts its neck under a root and draws it out.  
This was prophesied to a thousand novices  
Who thought that the *Ifa* nut was nothing but an ordinary palm kernel  
The thousand initiates, who regarded the *Ifa* nuts as mere palm kernels  
Will follow *Ifa*.”

Thus each cult group has got its own form of vocal music. But besides these forms of sacred song, there have developed in recent years many types of profane music. This is usually far less interesting both musically and as poetry than the sacred music. But as more and more people begin to live modern lives and turn away from the old cults this kind of superficial music becomes increasingly popular. *Orinijo* is the type of song that accompanies popular dance music. It is slight and usually humorous:

“A mother gave her girl sixpence worth of beans.  
She cooked these into twelve lovely *akara* cakes  
And sold the lot for twopence.  
Little girl, if you ply your trade like that,  
Your mother will have to sell you to a stranger,  
To pay her debts.”

Dance music popular in the larger towns is called *Juju* music. This type of orchestra consists usually of a set of drums, some African and some European, led by a guitar. *Juju* music has been influenced by South American dance music. It is charming and exquisitely suited to dancing. The words are mostly about topical events. A great deal of *Juju* music is available on gramophone records. Here is the text of the record “The Mayor of Lagos” which is one of the most successful *Juju* records ever made, and which gained great fame some years ago. It is in praise of *Olorun Nimbe*, one-time Mayor of Lagos:—

“I am greeting you, Mayor of Lagos.  
Mayor of Lagos, *Olorun Nimbe*,  
Look after Lagos carefully.  
As we pick up a yam pounder with care,  
As we pick up a grinding stone with care  
As we pick up a child with care,  
So may you handle Lagos with care.”

Yoruba vocal music is still developing and creating new forms. There are now a number of Yoruba composers writing Yoruba hymns for the church. There are also new Yoruba popular operas.<sup>1</sup>

None of these recent musical developments can be said to have the fascination of traditional vocal music. But it is, nevertheless, remarkable that in this age of transition in Africa, the vocal music of the Yoruba retains its vitality—though perhaps not its power—and finds new forms of expression.

<sup>1</sup>An article on these has already appeared in Vol. 1, No. 1, Page 32 of this Journal: “Yoruba Folk Operas” by Ulli Beier.