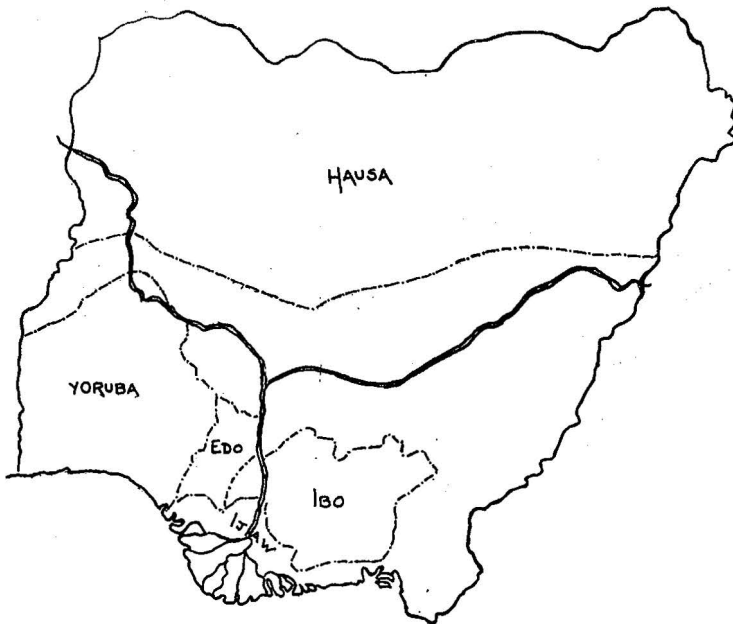


THE ORIGIN OF PRESENT DAY MUSICAL TASTE IN NIGERIA

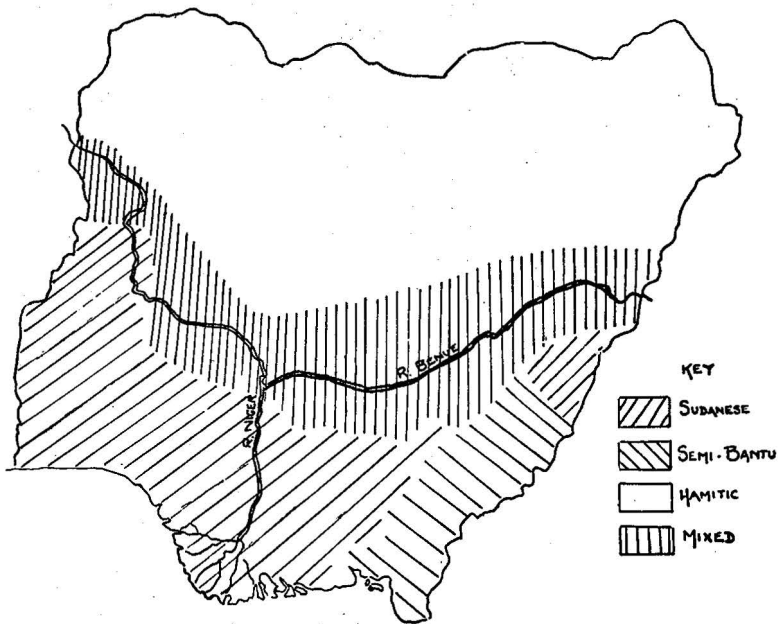
by
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In considering the music of Nigeria, its future and its past, it is essential that an appreciation of its cultural environment and evolution is taken into account, the present day trends and tastes being a direct reflection of traditional modes.

The African population of Nigeria is divided into numerous tribes, speaking different languages, worshipping various Gods and differing completely from one another in manners and customs. Of the origin of these people little is known. Wave after wave of invasion appears to have swept over the country, and the weaker of the original inhabitants have been scattered by successive conquerors, and as recently as the mid-nineteenth century constant warfare and slave raids flourished. Today the major tribal divisions are as shown below:—



As far as is known their origins are:—



Numerically the largest of these tribes is the Yoruba, which includes innumerable offshoots and clans. The country now occupied by the Yoruba lies between the Lagos lagoon on the south and the Niger on the North, between the Dahomey frontier to the west and the Bini country to the east. There is no definite proof of their origin, but early histories and certain carved stones found suggest that they came from upper Egypt, having been driven to Egypt from Arabia. They have so intermarried with their slaves, the original inhabitants, that few traces are left. This kingdom, however, started to decay by 1700 and by the early 1800's had been overrun as far south as Abeokuta by the Fulani. Of European influences, the earliest recordings of visits to West Africa were made by the Phoenicians around 600 B.C., but after that there is a gap in world records of many hundreds of years. The first negro slaves were brought to Portugal in 1441, but from then until the early nineteenth century all contact was at the ports and not inland.

The major European influences in Nigeria were those of the Portuguese at Benin. This place was a powerful kingdom by the fifteenth century, but though the Portuguese missions at that time had little effect on the religion of the people their efforts in other directions have been more lasting. They taught the Benin people the art of working brass, carving in wood and ivory and many of their words have remained in the language. In the mid-sixteenth century the British commenced their trade in Benin.

In the north, spread over a large area, are the Hausa-speaking tribes, all more or less of negro origin, though it is generally accepted that there is no Hausa tribe today. Owing to the destruction of all records by the Fulani conquerors there is little evidence of their early history. Prior to the 13th century the people were pagans; the Muslim religion probably entered the country during the 13th century and made rapid progress, affecting profoundly the social as well as the religious life of the Hausas. This was somewhat disorganised by the Jukun conquest as far north as Kano, bringing with it its Sudanic influences. In the middle of the 18th century Mohammedanism was at its

lowest ebb, the Fulani tribe who had earlier peacefully emigrated into Nigeria from Egypt raised the banner and under one of their influential Sheikhs started a rule of the north lasting a hundred years. (In the north to the east of Bornu are the Shuwa Arabs, speaking a dialect mingled with words of negro origin.)

The first records of a British visit to the north are dated 1823.

So it will be noted that no single tribe fits a "box of influence". Sudanic border on Bantu and Hamitic, Hamitic border Bantu and Sudanic, and Bantu border Sudanic and Hamitic; it is a further complication that the geographic borders do not show the entire extent of the cultural influences, and since the late 19th century, when communications opened up, the extent of tribal infiltration has complicated our musical analysis. However, in tracing this history and applying the music regionalisation to it, we find we can divide each area broadly into groups of musical origins springing from Islam, Egypt and Europe as well as the indigenous Bantu music which formed a matrix upon which these other influences could work.

It may seem strange to couple the influences of Egypt and Europe together but the influence of the Sudan carried itself into tribal areas which were immediately accessible to the European merchants and the musical influences here are complex and difficult to unravel. The Egyptian harp was enharmonic and from this standpoint I approached the music of Yoruba-land attempting to apply the enharmonically understood scales and find enharmonically tuned instruments. Alas, apart from one small family near Abeokuta, I was unlucky, but as history still prompted me to believe that somewhere I must find a link, I persisted with constant disappointment and continual return to the music of Europe: to begin with it was difficult to get any member of a family who had any musical background to play anything but "the best"—and "the best" always showed the white man how European he, the player, had become, and how beautifully he played with the glissando and the pathos of America. Then, at last, Mr. Tom Chalmers, the Director of the Nigerian Broadcasting Service, asked me to help him with the balance for a programme that he was recording in the little studio at Abeokuta—and I heard just the link I searched for—the link with the Sudan. Funnily enough this tie was not immediately apparent, and first occurred to me by seeing an instrument and comparing it with a photograph of ancient Egyptian murals—by referring to my textbooks I discovered that this very instrument is tuned enharmonically, the scale actually approximates to A, F, E, C, B, and then I turned to Curt Sachs and found this passage in describing the ancient harpists and lyre players:—

"... the ear applies three innate standards; the intervals of the octave, the fifth and the fourth. Starting from a medium note that fitted the singer's voice the ancient players must have tuned another string to its fifth; a fourth backward from this provided the second above the starting tone. Or else the other way round; a fourth up and a fifth back would provide the second below the starting tone. This is not just a circle or cycle of fifths, as it is generally called, but a continual, indeed, cyclic rising and falling, as CGDA. The cyclic principle might be an appropriate short name for it, or, less formally, the "up-and-down principle."

Perhaps this was the beginning of my tie with the Sudan—and then I lost touch with the family and had to fall back on tracing the use of the guitar and voice in the traditional songs with those I have heard from the Sudan classical library. There are traces of this ancient civilisation, particularly in respect of the "hidden" voice, the percussive use of blocks, the solo singer's use of falling intervals, the application of a bass drum either as introduction accompaniment in solo and so on. But what of the European influence? The title of this article is "The Origins of Present-Day Musical Taste in Nigeria" and of course, in this coastal belt with European ships, European settlers, missionaries, visitors—even European dance bands bringing back a few West African rhythms, I could hear on records which were being sold in the market places, those very influences that I mentioned at the beginning of this article—the clearly defined bass—the use of that insidious third, the instrumentation and ensemble playing of the West, the vibrato

and the planned glissando and, plainly above the rest, struggling hard for Europeanisation, the falling third, that elusive and difficult little note that so often plays havoc with a perfect sophisticated performance, wavering back to its natural flattening, the note that makes "Colonel Bogey" on West African recordings become almost unrecognisable. Had we returned to Egypt?

The influence of Islam in the music of northern Nigeria is the easiest to recognise as this part is, of course, the least accessible from the sea, and most accessible from the desert from which comes its whole character. The dry heat that forces the throat to sing as if through a blanket of sand, the immense vastness which colours the stories, and the flies buzzing behind it all. This, then, with the heavy boom of low pitched drums and the busy buzzing of flageolets typifies the music of the north. An interesting mark of Islam is in the running three note phrases which jump out at the listener with alarming sweetness and the sudden return to a clearly defined five or sometimes six-note melody, clearly saying the halting jerk of an Arabic phrase being pronounced with dignity. Arabian music has rhythm that comes from poetic speech and the simplest approach to it through the long solo "readings" from the Koran, indeed Mohammed himself is supposed to have said "Allah has not sent a prophet except with a beautiful voice." Often in the north one can hear the sharp rising note of a drum struck as the drumhead is tightened and echoing the typical shake that is almost a vocal mordent. The Hausa tribes, unlike other Nigerians will sing while seated on the ground; the music becomes contemplative at times, and will die right down, suddenly flaring up to frenzies of slapped drum side; and rigid larynxes, and behind all this pipes from Arabia play in Nigeria as happily as they do at home.

Music in Nigeria is essentially modal, even today, and the complication of tonal language only occurs where a pure diatonic melody is given to such things as church choirs. The two modes I have recognised most are a type of Mixolydian and Dorian, and there is marked preference for tunes having Dorian intervals, even in American dance music. The tonal languages of Nigeria have natural modal inflections and suit the music, with none of the manifold complexities that face a composer trying to set Ibo words to an English hymn tune. The peculiar wait that often ensues when this practice is adopted is actually the result of the congregation subconsciously adjusting their notes modally with a glissando that is not always very beautiful to hear!

It is not always appreciated how micro-tonal a large amount of the traditional music is, because of the modal enharmonism, if there is such a phrase, many of these songs appear to the diatonically attuned mind as being akin to English melody and no further effort has been made to analyse and reconstruct. The words of songs so often give an insight into this form of "Nigerian Musical Enigma Variation." A Bantu song has the words:

"Na too seh ngama",

which is set as follows,



In the chorus the note marked ~ is actually a mordent on three very close micro tones, and the song telling of a young girl's visit to a neighbouring tribe against her father's wishes, takes on a pathos at this point that would be missed entirely if one were not consciously divorcing one's heritage of musical absorption and adopting micro-tonal perception, a perception that the Bantu has been brought up on since his childhood when his father and the village story-tellers talked in the night.

As in all Africa, a complete language of music is put into the rhythm that pervades dances and songs of labour. Rhythm in Nigeria is not as complicated as that of the Far East, or, from the little I have heard, of some of the Southern African countries. Traditional rhythm is rarely more complicated, consciously, than plain penta rhythms; syncopation, where consciously introduced, has generally been tempered after a few bars into one or other of the simple rhythms. Compound rhythms are found, however, where one or more drummers play on more than one type of drum, this cross-rhythmic pattern is the result of lack of co-ordination in ensemble in the more primitive tribes, but in the East and West has been used to very good effect.

Folk music is story telling. Nigerian folk music is no exception, and is the advice of the elders sprinkled liberally among the fairy tales of youth. Mood has no bounds, and it is precisely this latitude that allows so much freedom for musical growth, and, incidentally, that has allowed so much influence to be gained by imported culture. One quality that is continuous is that of "topicality" and tunes that come go just as quickly, nearly always retaining essential characteristics, but varying so frequently and with such subtlety that a never-ending belt of music publishers and recordists would have a full-time job to record even a hundredth part of the spontaneous output of the whole country.

Music in Nigeria has now become the biggest "safety valve" for a people immersed in the socio-political upheavels of the 1950's, and is without doubt one of the most important of all the integrating factors in their social life. Hugh Tracey has stressed this many times in his talks and articles. An approach to the musical choice must, of necessity, bear this in mind and realise, in its enquiry, the subtlety of personal expression that is found in individual interpretation both verbal and instrumental. The musical assessor has a double task—to appreciate the *lasting* importance of what he hears, and to *correct* the innate Western approach he has in himself.

Of the many small facets of musical appreciation in Nigeria, in dance and folk music, if there can be that differentiation, one of the most important that musicologists have found, applying equally to the imported as well as the indigenous is "moulding"—a subconscious adaptation to tradition and circumstance. A particular example of this is found in the coastal belts in the East and West. Here the imported influence has been the greatest, and here, too, the tonal languages have been strong; after a century of imported culture the modes have altered geographically, tapering down to the Lydian at the strongest field of influence. It is in these areas that rhythms, too, have accepted into their subconscious song the "syncopation" of America. Compare the old Ibo song-story man with samba singers and you will see what I mean.

Nigeria is going through a decisive stage in its history, and tradition is receiving a "delayed" departure: now this country needs, more than at any other time in its life, a cultural outlet for its political thought.

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