

A BRIEF SURVEY OF AFRICAN MUSIC

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The unabated curiosity Africa continues to arouse, since the discovery of African art early this century, can best be illustrated by the fact that in the last six years alone attempts have been made—each time on a larger scale or a wider perspective—to project the many facets of its culture and its seemingly inexhaustible wealth. Beginning from the exhibition in Paris “100 tribes, 100 masterpieces”, followed by the Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar in 1966, the Pan African Cultural Festival in Algiers in 1969, the African Art Exhibition in Washington in 1970 and currently the biggest exhibition being held in Zurich where some 1,200 works, judiciously selected only for their aesthetic qualities from no less than 160 different ethnic groups are on display, the sponsors have managed to put into perspective, not only the differing art forms from our continent, but also to provide a historical context, by exhibiting pieces going back to remote antiquity. The major achievements of these exhibitions have been to prove that Africa had a past and, “the age of darkness”, if ever, was not there until colonisation; and what is more, African art is at least as diverse as European art, or to put it in the words of the well known Senegalese artist, Iba N'Diaye, “There is as much difference between an Ivory Coast and a Gabonese sculpture as there is between a Holbein and a Poussin” and this is equally true of all creative arts in Africa.

Thus, in this background, it will be possible only to make some cursory observations and broad generalisations. The first that needs to be stressed is the African's philosophical attitude, for as with most people, religion has been the main stimulus to artistic expression.

Here it would not be far from the truth to stress that, unlike the asceticism in the Indian philosophical attitude, the African outlook is world-affirming rather than world-denying. The supreme value in African life thus is force; forceful living and vital force. "Be fruitful, and multiply and replenish the earth" is the great ideal, and the material world with all its products, is given for man's use. Health of the body and soul, the growth of the family, support for all its members, these provide religious and moral standards.

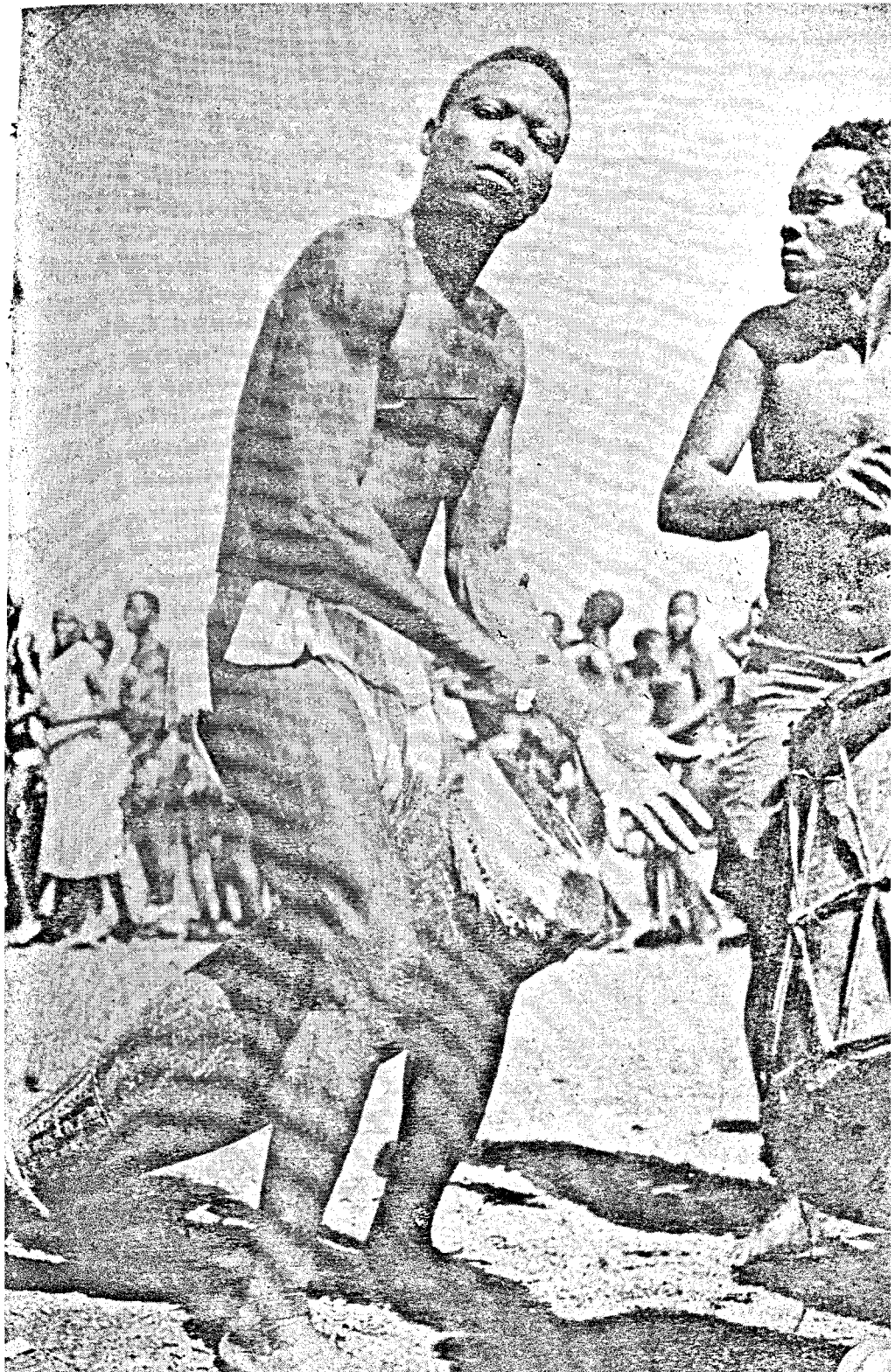
This is not to deny that God has a place in guiding man in his daily life. References to God the Creator, and Preserver of all things, abound in African proverbs and poems, which have been passed down orally from generation to generation. But generally God was considered to be too remote, and it is fetishes and masks, accompanied by music and dance, which play a significant role in the systems of supernatural belief and ritual, and the worship of nature and ancestors.

Edwin Smith, one of the greatest authorities on traditional African religion has compared it very picturesquely to a triangle. "At the apex is the Supreme Being; on either side are great spiritual powers—nature—at the base of the triangle are the magical charms and amulets which are believed to be vehicles of spiritual force."

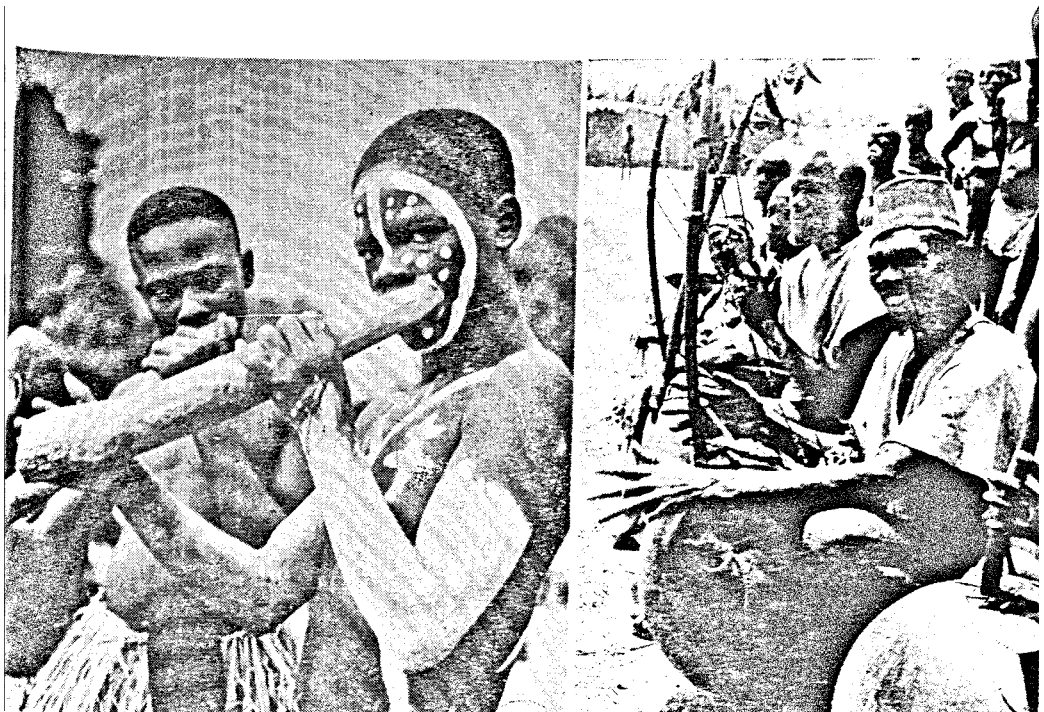
In Africa, art is thus inseparable from the existence of man, from his cult of the gods, from the relationship of man and nature. It enables the African more easily to understand himself, his society, his goals and the meaning of his earthly existence.

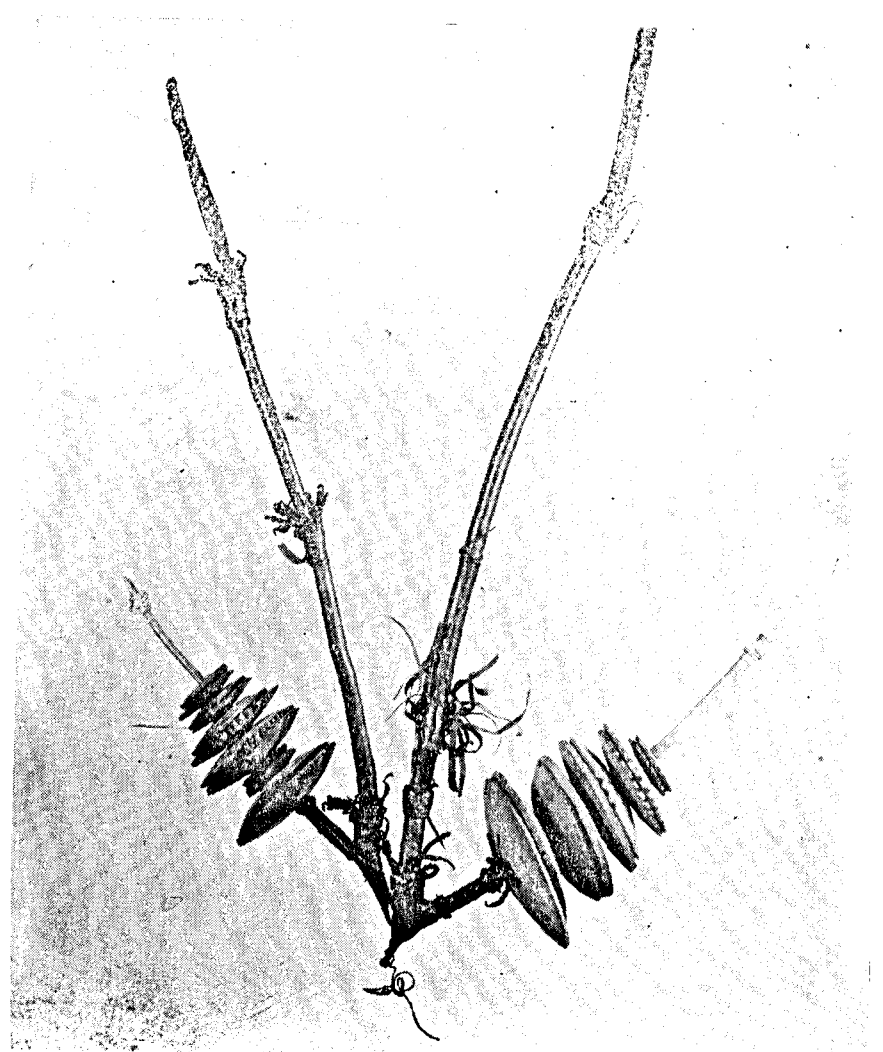
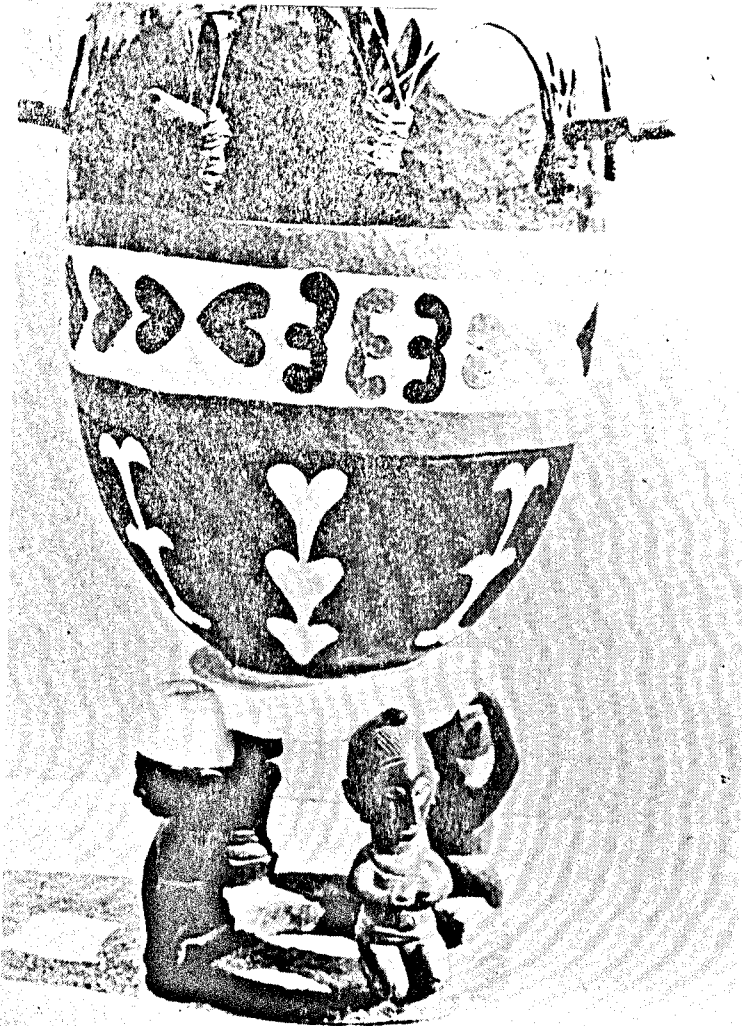
Collective Effort

The second characteristic in the scheme of Africa life is that art is not the prerogative of an individual, but collectively invented and expressed. It is a kind of compulsory servitude which no one dreams of escaping. People do not confine themselves to a single plastic expression : they sculpt, they decorate and dance. Creative activity is never the expression of an individual anxious to deliver a message. There is no search for originality. On the contrary, there is a constant fidelity to previous works of art, which however are never stereotyped, for the artist always has ample scope for improvisation. Likewise,









music emanates from the group and not the emotion of a single individual. It is the whole clan that psalmodizes through the voice of the soloist.

It may be of interest here, to stress that to the African, for whom there is not a single and isolated African art, all being harmonised and the meaning of each being amplified by the others, the masks and statues exhibited in the museums of the world naturally appear as specimens of poor exiles, denatured and deprived of meaning. For they were made for movement in collective ceremonies, where music fills the dance with rhythm. It is thus in this ritual harmony that all creative elements are blended, and can be best appreciated.

It is not surprising then that Europeans have tended to regard the motivation of African music—and this includes dance and mime—as purely functional. To some extent this is true, for in most cases, it transcends simple entertainment and assumes a primordial collective function which is religious, ceremonial, dramatic and economic. Here also, however, there are exceptions; and, as in the international folk music repertoire, in Africa also, one can discover music played by non-professionals for their own amusement, without an audience and in an atmosphere of privacy, such as childrens' songs, lullabies, walking songs and songs of lament.

But as far as the communal life is concerned there is music for each occasion—songs which accompany work in the fields to the rhythmic beat of tom toms, chants for birth and puberty, war marches, wedding and farewell songs and funeral dirges which are invocations to ancestral spirits. There are themes which evoke the world of magic, the world beyond palpable reality which is animated by the invisible forces of primaeval nature, which made our people, like their pastoral counterparts elsewhere in the world, worship with awe these extraordinary images of nature, and one finds all these elements woven into song and dance, based on intricate patterns of rhythm.

For rhythm is the essence of music all over Africa, and it is the beat of the drum that transforms music into a life force. It reveals the underlying vigour and vitality of the African artist, and no other instrument perhaps expresses more powerfully the African concept of the relation of Power to Life.

Photographs: Page 43, Above Tam Tam and dancers (Central Africa), Below left: Khorogo musicians (Ivory Coast), Horns (Central Africa) Page 44, left: Ceremonial Drum (Guinea); Right: Rattle (Mali), (Photographs Documentation Francaise)

But before we go into a more detailed reference to drumming, mention needs to be made of the bewilderingly wide variety of musical instruments, found in the Continent south of the Sahara. These may be classified as audiophones, or instruments of naturally resonant materials, which vibrate through percussion, such as clappers, gongs, pellet-bells, xylophones, jingles and rattles ; membranophones, which include all varieties of drums ; aerophones or wind instruments such as horns, pipes or flutes and chordophones or stringed instruments like the lute, musical bows, harps and violins. These instruments, generally speaking, are played alone or in combinations and are sometimes accompanied by singing or by recitations, half sung and half spoken. The most popular and commonly used instruments, however, are drums, flutes, horns, gongs, rattles, and more recently, the guitar.

Again just as music and dance as their symbolism, are linked with the system of the world, as conceived by the African people, and their purpose is the portrayal of their beliefs, the use of African instruments is also socially controlled and functional, some being reserved exclusively for ceremonial occasions or ritual. For example the bow-lute, the instrument usually used as accompaniment by the solitary male in the Congo in his laments, was in fact often the prerogative of the witch doctor in the past, and was therefore found among fetishes. In Ghana, which has had a long tradition of kingship and chieftaincy, there exist instruments, such as some special varieties of horns and drums, reserved exclusively for singing the praise of the head of the State.

Again in Nigeria, in the northern Hausa region and in Yorubaland, where the *donno* or hourglass drum is particularly popular, all the important chiefs have teams of drummers who play for them. But sometimes other instruments such as trumpets, flutes and reed pipes, are added to the drums, according to the rank of the Chief. In East Africa, where one comes across an equally large variety of drums, some similar to those in West Africa, the famous Uganda drum set, known as the *ntenga* drums, was reserved for the court of the Kabaka, the former ruler of Buganda. The grand spectacle this afforded, can be judged from the fact that the 15 drums forming the orchestra, were tuned in such a way as to create the impression of music emanating from xylophones.

“Talking” Instruments

But the subject of African music remains incomplete, without mentioning the instruments which “talk”, as they have become popularly known, and which have mystified the world. Peculiar to West Africa, and in particular, Ghana, parts of Nigeria, Togoland, and the Ivory

Coast, these instruments—mostly horns, flutes and drums—are utilised to convey messages, recount history, recite proverbs and wise sayings, or to sing praises. Here one must again revert to the drum which occupies the pride of place, not only among “talking” instruments, but all instruments in Africa. The drum is notable not only for the rhythm it provides, but for its historical associations, its social and ritual functions, and its symbolic meaning. Many traditional drums have histories of their own. Some owe their origin to famous chiefs, others were captured on the battlefields, and yet others were received as gifts from neighbouring chiefs or kings.

From my own country, Ghana, I would like to furnish examples to illustrate the ceremonial use and symbolism of drumming. Thus the *Mpitin* drums are used exclusively to mark the tempo, when the Akan Chief walks in State, and when the *Asubao* drum imitates the cry of a crocodile or the *Etwie* drum that of a leopard—both totem animals of the chiefs—the purpose is to underline that the rulers are as powerful as the animals whose cries are imitated; while the *Odada* drum has the unique role of announcing the prohibition of drumming three weeks prior to the Homowo and Odwira festivals.

The *Atumpan* drum used by the Akans deserves also special mention, for it is perhaps the best known of the “talking” drums. To Akans in Ghana, drumming is inseparable from their long tradition of oral poetry, and the *Atumpan* drummer performs a dual role, providing not only the tempo to the dance but to reproduce speech texts, which enable him to communicate in a language as articulate as the spoken word. This he does by an intricate technique, similar to codes and signals, by imitating the sound of words spoken by a human voice on two drums—the male and female—by copying the accent of a particular syllable, by stress or emphasis on a particular word, by pauses, stops or punctuations, by the speed with which words or sentences are uttered and by gestures of the hands, arms, feet and head.

This imitation of speech, it may be pointed out, is facilitated by the fact that the Akan language is tonal. Thus, to take a simple example—Kofi, a word of two syllables, and a name for boys born on Friday—is pronounced in a low pitch followed by a high pitch Ko-FI. This the drummer reproduces by striking first the male and then the female drum. To ensure that the drummer is understood by his audience or his fellow drummers, he must adhere meticulously to a set piece, and on no condition deviate from the pattern laid down.

The varied repertoire of the *Atumpan* drum misses no aspect of

life and includes expressions of condolences, descriptions of the source of materials used for making the drums, reference to creation, recitation of random proverbs, maxims and appellations, and narrations of the history of the drummer's state. Such texts may be played alone, or incorporated into a dance piece.

Here is, by way of an example, a nature poem which drummers play on the talking drums :

“The path has crossed the river
The river has crossed the path
Which is the elder ?
We made the path and found the river.
The river is from long ago
From the Creator of the Universe.”

The honoured place the drum occupies is reflected in the fact that its carving is considered a sacred task, and condolences are offered to the tree from which it is made, because it is disturbed in order to obtain wood for the drum, while propitiatory offerings are made to prevent any harm coming to the drummer. There are special carvers, for it is taboo for the drummer to carve his own *Atumpan*, and the tender care it receives, makes it a work of art as sacred as a statuary. The head of the drum is made out of an elephant's ear, and special varieties of wood are selected for each part of the drum. The body of the drum is usually decorated with engravings, directly on the wood or on beaten brass, wrapped round the body. On ceremonial occasions, the area around the pegs, is swathed in a piece of white cloth, which is presented by the Chief for whom the drum is played.

To sum up then the African zest for life has found its highest and most satisfying expression in music, dance and rhythm. True, the arrival of Vasco da Gama and the subsequent conquest of the African continent by Europe, succeeded in largely destroying the indigenous systems, and annihilating the underlying civilisations. But still, if the natural development of the people was retarded, their vitality, and the great reserve of energy that they represent, formed an imposing barrage against the forces of destruction. This was apparent in the African's will to survive the barbaric cruelties of the Slave Trade, and the musical instruments, which were among the few belongings they were allowed to carry across the Atlantic, became, as it were, the umbilical cord, which kept them tied to their native continent. In course of time, it was Africa which was to rescue Western music and art from stagnation.

A brief survey of the influence of African music in the New World may therefore not be out of place.

Influence on Western Music

In Latin America and the West Indies, and particularly in Cuba, Haiti, Venezuela and Brazil—for example, the secret cult ceremonies, practised by slaves from Dohomey, Nigeria, Ghana, and the Congo and Angola, have lingered on and survived in the forms of Voodoo in Haiti, Santeria in Cuba, Nacumba in Rio de Janeiro, Candomble in Bahia, and, except for Voodoo which is linked with the African cult tradition, all the rest have been named after musical instruments. In Brazil, the Yoruba cult from Nigeria remained most faithful to ancestral patterns, and gave birth to the contemporary Brazilian dance forms—the Samba, the Coco and the Batuque. Indeed, to such an extent have African rhythms crept into Brazilian musical folklore, that the Afro-Brazilian orchestra has a repertory, composed exclusively of ritual themes of African origin.

In Venezuela, African tradition has been revived in their funeral vigils, and the origin of the Venezuelan *foropo* and *merenque*, is purely African, while in Haiti, the old woman who has lost her son, continues to implore the gods of Africa in her songs of lament,

“I am calling you” she wails, “my son is dead, he has left us, he is going to cross the sea, he is going to Guinea”.

Again, the musical and choreographic tradition, originating in Africa, and transplanted in the Southern States of the U.S.A., has become celebrated today, under the name of Afro-American music. In Louisiana, African chants gave birth to spirituals, and the reputed musicologist, Mr. Kolonsky, in a comparative study of Negro spirituals and West African chants, has noted 50 spirituals almost identical to those of Nigerian, Dahomeyan and Ghanaian chants. Similarly, the New Orleans Blues, and Black dance rhythms—the Charleston, tap dancing, Big Apple, the swing, the jitter bug, boogie-woogie—are all modern forms of the sacred dances of Africa.

Finally, the African tom tom is acknowledged as the source of modern jazz, and the greatest drummers of jazz epoch, have been Afro-Americans in the ghettos of Watts, Harlem and Chicago's South Side; and in our own contemporary times African music, rhythm and dance forms have become symbols of liberation from the monotony of the somewhat stereotyped, industrialised civilisations in the West.

In the meanwhile, the rapid social, cultural and political changes that have taken place in Africa itself in the last few decades, have not left the traditional arts intact. As mentioned earlier the colonial era saw a temporary break in the practice of the arts, particularly among those who were severely exposed to the new forces of acculturation. It encouraged a disparaging and sometimes hostile attitude to the arts which has not been easy to eradicate. Yet the effect of this process has by no means been altogether negative. While it encouraged the adoption of foreign artistic idioms, it also stimulated the creation of new forms, which reflected the spirit and conditions of the new age.

An initial reaction of resurgent Africa, was naturally one of national reassertion and a pride in the "African Personality", as the Philosophy of Negritude was defined, and which tended to discard all alien values and norms. But with the advent of freedom in the 1960's to a majority of African states, African artists have been plunged into the swirling current of change. Their exposure to external influence is, however, marked by the difference that they are now members of the international community, and sovereign states. The disappearance of colonial barriers, and the creation of the Organisation of African unity with a membership of 42 independent African states, has also had a deep impact in encouraging cultural exchanges which cut across language, regional and tribal barriers. Accordingly, new forms of music, dance and drama, are beginning to emerge as creative additions to the traditional forms described earlier.

"High Life", which originated in Southern Ghana, but has now spread throughout West Africa, belongs to the category of popular music which had its source in Western band music, loved for its noisy splendour, by Africans, but today more and more composers derive inspiration from traditional music for their song motifs. Again, though North African music is quite different from music South of the Sahara, in the intermediary regions covering countries like Guinea, Mali, Senegal, Southern Mauritania, Niger and Chad, one finds that Arabic chants, which have crept in through Islam, have created new modes of expression, melody and rhythm. In Southern Africa which continues to be under colonial subjugation, artists and renowned singers like Miriam Makeba, symbolise the African voice protests. Traditional songs like *a capella* have been modernised by them, but western instruments are unfortunately replacing the indigenous xylophones and *mbira*, or the thumb piano of South Africa, which no doubt change the character of the songs. In the Christian churches in Africa, there is also a growing awareness for the need to study traditional music and recreate it,

so that in time, it might replace the Western hymn and serve the new musical needs which have arisen through the adoption of Western institutions. And finally, African music, modernised in America, is coming back to modernise traditional African music.

All this is a brief and rather fragmentary survey of the music of Africa, south of the Sahara, and the picture presented is—to a great extent—that of the past. Yet African music, far from being dead, is at the beginning of a new development. The tortuous path it is going to cover is still obscure. Yet it is evident that today's African artists are zealously aspiring to combine the highest achievements, and the best traditions of African and universal culture. But instead of being an expression of ancient and obscure magico-religious concepts, they are seeking to make it reflect the new life of a revived continent.

His Excellency P.K. Owusu Ansah, High Commissioner of the Republic of Ghana in India is a lawyer by profession. Deeply interested and knowledgeable about the arts in his country, His Excellency extended his patronage to an Exhibition of African Arts, "The African Visage" organised by the Indian Council for Africa in cooperation with the National School of Drama and the Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, in January 1971. The article reproduced here is the text of the inaugural speech by Mr. Owusu Ansah. Both the articles and the photographs are published through the courtesy of the Indian Council for Africa, New Delhi.