

**FUNCTION OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS
IN SURROGATE LANGUAGES IN AFRICA: A CLARIFICATION**

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The use of musical instruments for communicating over long distances is not unique to Africa. However, its practice and the accuracy with which information is transmitted from one region to another in this continent, continue to lend themselves to scientific investigation. Examination of the bulk of the existing literature on the matter dating from the days of the early travelers, reveals authors' concern geared toward linguistic consideration in trying to decipher the implied technic of transmission, morphological description of the musical instruments used in the process and their geographic distribution in a given African area. In Zaire, John Carrington's name is often associated with his 1949 contributions on the communication system among the Lokele people in the Upper regions of the Nation. J.S. Laurenty, on the other hand, focusses on the geographic distribution and physical description of slit drums in Zaire. A number of other pertinent descriptive contributions written by colonial administrators and missionaries have been appearing on the same topic since the turn of the century. Nevertheless, the role of the musical instruments involved in the communication system and the nature of their content are generally ignored. Musical instruments are often seen as mere tools or media for linguistic purposes.

Concluding her discussion of African oral literature in reference to drum language, Ruth Finnegan states: "... From this it follows that the content and style of drum communication can often be assessed as literature, and not primarily as music, signal codes, or incidental

accompaniment to dancing or ceremonies" (1976:499)¹. Statements of this nature are encountered in many sources. In a more recent publication, John Miller Chernoff sustains this interpretation by flatly asserting: "When the earliest European travelers described drum-signaling between villages, they assumed that the beating was a kind of code. In reality, the drums actually speak the language of the tribe" (1980:75)².

What the fosterers of this misconception do ignore is that, if the musical instrument involved in the surrogate languages really spoke the language of the ethnic group, then its message would be understood by every member of the respective group, and there wouldn't be any reason for special attention to be given to the training and preservation of its reproduction nor its reception. The practice would be commonplace to everyone and not reserved for a culturally selected few. It should be kept in mind, however, that communication on musical instruments is not comparable to a telephonic system, but is based on a complex of traditionally oriented principles which govern its organization.

Although this communication may be seen as playing the role of advocate for musical instruments in surrogate languages, it has as its task to point out that the success of the communication system under consideration, is based on the combination of linguistic and musical principles. While the latter may be viewed as servicing the objective of the former, it still maintains its integrity.

There is a variety of musical instruments used by Africans for transmission purpose. These instruments, differing in sizes and material of their make, range from a series of membranophones: *Atumpan* among the Ashanti in Ghana, *Iya Ilu* used by the Yoruba in Nigeria; to idiophones: slit drums *Tshiondo* among the Luba or *Lokole* among the Mongo in Zaire; chordophones such as Zeze of the Lokele, *Lunkomba* used by the Luba also in Zaire; and aerophones, including animal horns and whistles. Those belonging to the membranophones and idiophones families are often used for transmission over a long distance, such as from one village to another, within the same village, to recite praises to a chief, and to participate in social and musical events. Others are used for shorter distance communication and do not carry messages of communal importance. They are frequently used by individuals while reciting personal praises, or by parents to praise their children in family circles. For the purpose of this communication, attention will be focussed on the Luba system as applied on the *Tshiondo*.

1 See Kazadi wa Mukuna. "Structure of Bantu Praise Songs in Zaire," *Michigan Music Educator* (April 1980):7-8;18.

2 Carrington, J., 1949b.

Analysis of the principle of transmission by *Tshiondo* was probably initiated by Verbeken, whose 1920 observations are still valid today. Similar studies carried out recently by Nketia among the Ashanti in Ghana, also corroborate what was advanced by Verbeken. In summation of his study entitled "Le Tambour-Téléphone chez les Indigènes de l'Afrique Centrale," Verbeken writes: "In order to transmit a given sentence the drum player uses a standard paraphrase that the initiated will recognize with the played tune. He does not transmit words of the sentence, but only the main ideas which he has abstracted. This idea is contained in sentence derived from the traditional poetry of the tribe" (1920:256)³.

The "traditional poetry of the tribe" referred to by Verbeken belongs, for the most part, in the pool of proverbs unique to a culture.⁴ Among the Luba in Zaire, these constitute the body of the *Nyimbu ya Kwisansula* (Songs of Praises)⁵, whose poetic content is also used for recitation without musical accompaniment. This pool of proverbs used in surrogate languages among the Luba in Zaire is common knowledge to most young men growing up in a traditional setting. Although some of these poems and proverbs may be known to most people within the community, their musical aire (mode of transmission) may only be understood by the trained transmitters and receivers. To avoid confusion, individual drum name (in the case of those using drums) may be used by the transmitter to summon the intended receiver, before transmitting the core of the message. This aspect of the subject was thoroughly discussed by Carrington in his study of "Drum Language of the Lokele Tribe," published in *African Studies*⁶ (1944):75-88.

Often, parents praising their child for his valiancy would say: *Tshilobo mwadi a nvita* to mean, strong man who does not run away from fight. He is a protector, or simply a persevering person. The child who thinks more of his family, would be referred to with a different proverb: *Tshipanda wa shindamena wa badia nshima ba mulaba*, to mean, a strong tree which provides refuge to people, but, after they finish eating, they wipe their hands on it.

The meaning of the latter proverb is very versatile, in that it can be used in reference to many closely related situations. However, the first, and most common meaning for which it is employed is in reference to a "provider". In spite of what others do to a provider, he does not cease to protect and provide for them. The lack of given name in the poem signifies the ambivalent nature of most of traditional poetry under discussion. Other case studies were made public by Carrington and Verbeken.

3 Verbeken, A., 1920.

Delving into the transmission technique of these sentences as rendered on the musical instrument, it is rather difficult to divorce the latter from its primary *raison d'être*. In order to understand the governing features of the pattern's structural organization, it is pertinent to review the basic principles in African vocal music. In the latter medium, the following is commonplace to those who have studied the subject: 1) the melodic line derives its contour (i.e., its shape) from the sequence of tonal inflection of its linguistic counterpart; 2) the rhythmic organization for both the sung part as well as some of the underlining instrumental rhythmic cycles are also derived from the poetic rhythm dictated by the syllabic structure; 3) tonal inflection has also certain influence upon the harmonic implication in vocal music which is primarily parallel. Certain sentences or a combination of non-sense syllables are used as a memory aid for teaching instrumental "time line" patterns (drums, bells, etc.).

With this in mind, it can be asserted that in vocal music of Africa, the relationship of music and words is not of submission, but rather of interdependency in that while one seems to derive its structure from the other, it continues to maintain its identity. Even though it is not considered music per se, the tonal sequence of African (Luba) language can be argued as containing a musical texture.

In one of his discussions on the origin of music, Herbert Spencer argued that the musical elements of speech become more pronounced under stress of emotion or in speaking at a distance. They approach a quality which ceases to be appropriate to speech as such, and thus, detached from speech, they become the nucleus of music. This is not only relevant to our discussion, but corroborates our statement in regard to dependency and integrity of music and words in surrogate language.

Regressing to the governing principle of melodic contour in a song and the latter's rhythmic structure, it is relevant to point out that music does not blindly follow speech tonal inflection, nor its rhythmic structure, but accepts the raw material with which to work. In other terms, regardless of the nature of the musical instrument upon which the surrogate language is transmitted, patterns heard are not direct imitations of the consultant words, although general patterns (tonal and rhythmic) may be derived. This is true even for pre-existing traditional proverbs and poetry, as well as the pre-existing formulae as referred to by some scholars.

In his study on "Speech-Melody and Primitive Music," George Herzog clearly demonstrates that the tone system of the language among the Jabo, merely imposes limitations on what might otherwise be free instrumental melody. In reference to the horn's four-tone signal melodies,

the same author concludes that the latter are not the reflections of speech-melody, but its abstractions. Similar concerns are dealt with by Nketia in his study of "Surrogate Languages of Africa," in which the author points out that in the drum language among the Akan people in Ghana, not all the linguistic tones are observed in their proper sequential order. According to Nketia, there are few variant tone patterns which are used in the drum language for purely stylistic reasons. The necessity for modifying speech tone, continues Nketia, appears to be a general problem, especially where the instrument used produces only limited pitch or tone contrast. Again, the message is not only summarized through traditional means, but also the abstracted text is obliged to bend itself to musical forces of the medium. As seen in vocal music, here is also a predominance of musical forces.

At this occasion, a series of questions can be raised in regard to the principle of transmission of messages, or the recitation of poetry or praises on musical instruments. If it is a fact that there exist musical forces which do override their linguistic counterpart in melodic contour (tonal sequence) and rhythm organization (as pointed out in vocal music and instrumental rendition in surrogate languages), then we must agree with the statement that the role of musical instruments in surrogate language is predominantly musical even though the basis for its structure may be derived from, or may carry, an extra-musical content.

A loose analogy can be drawn here between the principle of surrogate language in Africa with that of the nineteenth century European program musics. In both cases, the structure of the music is derived from a non-musical idea, though it does not cease to maintain its musical unity. A revision of the existing literature on this subject merits consideration upon concurrence with the arguments advanced in this communication.

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