

A Mormon musicologist who spent a year in Nigeria describes the cultural blinders which American Mormons often bring to unfamiliar societies.

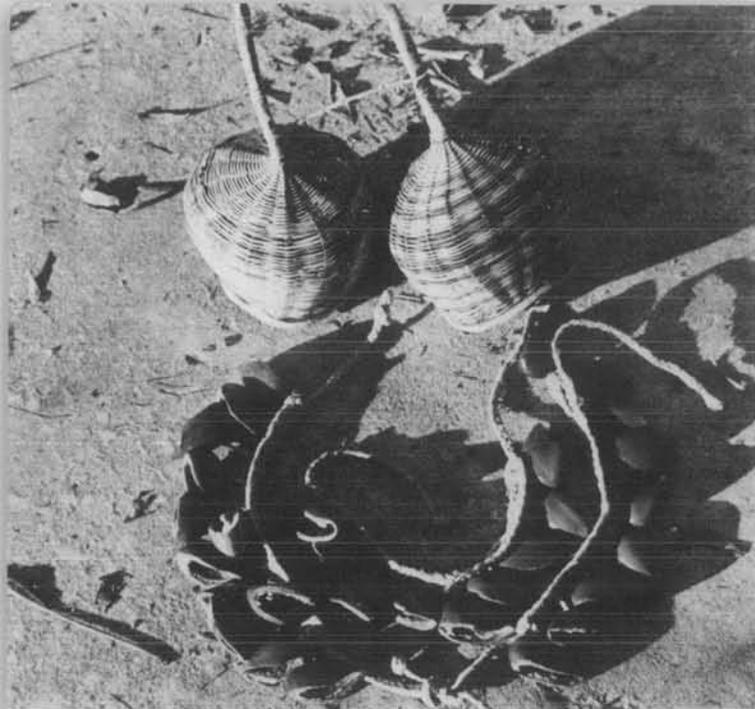
Murray Boren

Worship Through Music Nigerian Style



A missionary attending his first worship service in Nigeria is confronted with unfamiliar sights and sounds. He sees "dancing," he hears rhythmic accompaniment to a repetitive responsorial song, and he witnesses an almost tumultuous participation by the congregation. He feels uncomfortable. His first impulse is to replace the unfamiliar with music which seems more appropriate, more "reverent," more Mormon, more American.

Music is not, after all, a universal language. The concept of musical expression may well be global. But just as



the concept of verbal communication encompasses literally thousands of languages, so the concept of musical communication embraces numerous modes of sonic expression: musics, if you will. Just as no single language is understood by all people, no one musical mode exists to which all beings can equally relate. We hear what our culture has conditioned us to hear.

Mormons from the beginning have talked about carrying the gospel message to each nation in its native language. We have yet to make that commitment to musical languages. There is nothing sinister about this failure; but it is a bit foolish to think that an African will respond any more favorably to a Beesley hymn than to spoken English. Both are unknown modes of communication and only meaningless noise in his world.

But too often we play our favorite piece of music for the African and expect the spiritual feelings we experience to be shared by him. We insist on cultural as well as spiritual conversion. Confusing the gospel and the cultural setting of its restoration, we elevate our American heritage to some sanctified new sphere where the sounds of our Western music somehow seem sacred.

Such cultural single-mindedness cannot help but cause friction when American missionaries interact with new members from a differing background. Misunderstandings which have developed between missionaries and new members in Cross River State, Nigeria, over the music for worship services provide a graphic illustration of cultural misconceptions in application.

Underlying tensions began to build when some of the American missionaries sent to Nigeria for the Church mistakenly believed that the rhythmic and participatory services of the recent native converts were somehow Pentacostal (an erroneous conception caused by insisting everything be explained within the framework of their own Western culture). These missionaries set out to eradicate the false practices. Drums were banned from the worship service, clapping was banned, "dancing a jig" was banned, boisterousness was banned, responsorial singing was banned, and the missionaries were left with a "proper" service which made them feel comforta-

ble. Unfortunately the native members were decidedly uncomfortable and even baffled.

For without the drum there can be no Nigerian music. The music of Cross River State is not drum-based or drum-dominated or drum-performed. The music *is* the drum, in a sense so literal it seems to defy Western comprehension. All of the instruments have drum functions; they are used percussively as rhythm instruments. Pitched instruments like the "thumb piano" and the xylophone are not exceptions. There is no instrument with a melodic function in African music. Each instrument has a specific rhythm which *is* that instrument and should not (cannot) be transferred to another instrument. The rhythm and its instrument are conceptually inseparable.

The concepts of meter and pulse as we know them are also non-existent in Nigerian tradition. There is "pulse" but no way it can be explained satisfactorily within our Western framework. To begin appreciating this difference we must first eliminate all our culturally-biased expectations generated by beat or meter. Such freedom from recurring accents may be quite unsettling to the Western ear but is fundamental to African music.

Nigerian music by definition includes body movement. The music *is* the movement, just as music *is* the instrument. If you make the sounds without the movements you no longer have music, just noise.

There is no separation of performer and audience in Cross River State, nor could there be. Each participant is both performer and audience. "Listening" to music, as we use that term, is an alien idea. It is simply impossible to perform music *for* someone.

Certain concepts about music which seem self-evident to an American Mormon, are likewise puzzling to Nigerians. Our concern with dynamic levels confuses Nigerians. Loud and soft, and the movement from one to the other, is unknown in their music. They do not associate emotions with decibel levels. We think of reverence in terms of "soft": remember of the almost synonymous words in the Primary song, "Reverently, Quietly." Nigerians cannot begin to understand this concern about "too loud" being wrong for church. When asked to lower the dynamic level of their music, the polite Nigerians concede, but the "why" escapes them. They do not feel any closer to deity because of the imposed loss of volume. In fact, they feel God is displeased because of the timid nature of their worship.

It is also impossible for a Nigerian to understand our highly refined prejudices about certain styles of music. Such prejudices are fostered by our almost casual accep-

tance of the notion that content and mode of expression are inextricably linked. Medium is in a sense the dictator of content. Admittedly certain modes are more likely to create spiritual responses in the majority of American members. If you tell an Ibibio tribesman that instrumental music "A" is OK for church while instrumental "B" is not, you will surely be confronted with the innocent question "why?" Does the sound itself have inherent qualities of good and evil?

One Mormon missionary in Nigeria seemed to answer affirmatively when he recently explained that the hymn book music is "scripture" and cannot be altered any more than the Book of Mormon. Perhaps this missionary was abnormally forthright in his bald assertion, but we, as a people, sometimes act as if we concurred. How else is a Nigerian tribesman to interpret the banning of his native instruments from the church service?

It may be correct to assume that drums in a church service do not inspire reverence in the average Utah Mormon. I do not expect a Mormon outside the Nigerian tradition to truly hear the spirituality in African drum music. But there is no reason to blame the drum itself or to assume that a Nigerian shares even a glimmer of that same prejudice. In fact, the Nigerian is more likely to associate the piano with the secular world (a bar, for example). It is social conditioning which fosters prejudicial categories of good and bad, appropriate and inappropriate music.

I do not wish to ridicule or question the music currently used in the Utah church. But we must face the implications of imposing that music on others and must ultimately accept the possibility that effective spiritual communication may be expressed by an infinite variety of sonic vehicles.

The failure to do this—our insistence on particular musical forms which make us feel comfortable—has led to what is in effect an underground Mormon church network in Cross River State, Nigeria. There are a series of meetings for the missionaries and a clandestine series of meetings where the native Saints worship in a spiritual

atmosphere that they can understand—with their own music.

It is not the sharing of traditions which causes this type of problem; it is the elimination of one tradition and the imposition of an alien one in its place. This is "cultural colonialism" in its most blatant form, a stumbling block we ourselves place in the gospel's path.

Our insistence upon only those vehicles of expression with which we are familiar and at ease may be understandable, but it can no longer be tolerated. As we cross cultural lines, we must be careful to concern ourselves with content as perceived and transmitted in each culture. Our concern should be with what they are experiencing, not with *how* those feelings are elicited within that culture. We should not demand that our own cultural conditioning be satisfied. We should, in fact, expect to feel out of place; we are, culturally.

The gospel *is* universal truth; its attendant cultural manifestations are not. We are just beginning to realize the implications of that distinction and the educational responsibilities it places on all of us. I hope the realization and the education will not come too late.

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