CHALLENGING THE MYTH OF 'ETHNIC' MUSIC: FIRST PERFORMANCES OF A NEW SONG IN AN AFRICAN ORAL TRADITION, 1961

by John Blacking

Although ethnomusicologists have reported evidence of individual composition in orally transmitted musical traditions (e.g. Rycroft 1961/62, Kubik 1974), the idea still persists that in the rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa, music was and is composed by some kind of 'folk collective'. This myth is enshrined in the obnoxious and derogatory term 'ethnic music', by which people often categorize music that was apparently not created by great or known composers. The rhetoric surrounding the term suggests that there is a belief that social groups can capture and understand the 'spirit' of their collective life through quasi-mystical acts of communal creativity.

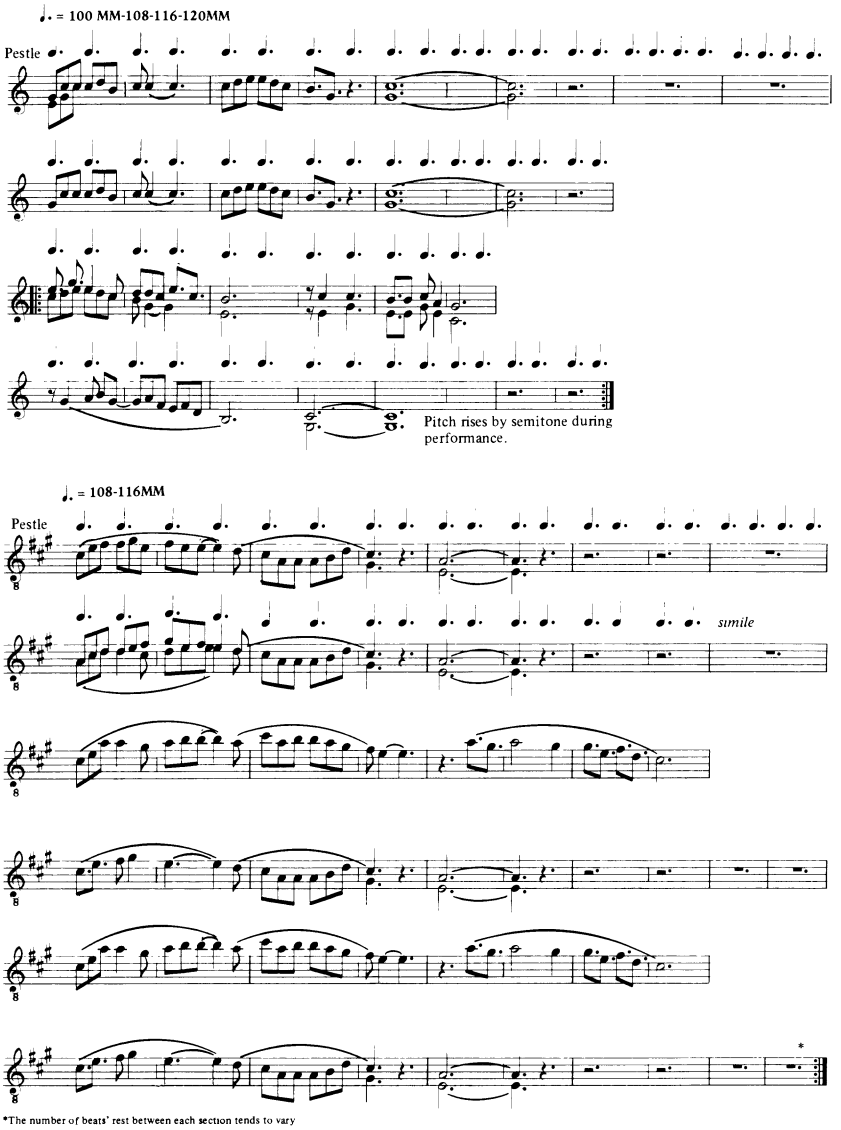
As socio-political concepts, the terms 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic groups' are valid, but they cannot be used to explain the different forms of human artistic creativity and appreciation, unless one adopts a naive cultural determinism. Shared ways of *talking about* artistic experiences can bring people together and even help to create new social groups, but they cannot describe adequately the subtleties of each individual's different responses, which is the core of the creative act.

There is, of course, a sense in which the works of Bach, Schubert, Debussy, Vaughan Williams, or any named composer, could be described as 'ethnic' music. The 'ethnicity' of Bach's music needs to be taken into account as much as the individuality of an African traditional composer such as the Chopi master, Gomukomu WeSimbi (Tracey 1948), whom I heard and recorded with Hugh Tracey in 1955. For neither composer it is a determining factor, but it is a limiting factor: the individual expression both of Bach and of Gomukomu was constrained, as well as stimulated, by the conditions of their societies, cultures, and historical epochs.

Ignorance of the names of the composers and performers of traditional African music does not justify the use of the term 'ethnic music', even if contemporary musicians such as the Nigerian composer Daniel Agu insist that the authorship of some of their works should be given as 'Anon' (anonymous) because they have 'received' them, as traditional musicians receive their inspiration from the spirits of departed ancestors. Musicologists have a duty to place compositions and performances of 'folk' and traditional music in the context of the history of music. In the performing arts at least, the anthropological convention of the anonymity of informants should not apply, as I was reminded by a Venda critic who objected to my failure to give people's names in the captions to the photographs for *How Musical is Man?*

This paper is a report on the social context and musical background of the first two performances of a new composition by Ida Sakala of the

FRAMEWORKS OF TWO NSENGA POUNDING SONGS



*The number of beats' rest between each section tends to vary

Ng'oma clan, which I heard and recorded in 1961 in the village of Ciluku, near Petauke, western Zambia. Ida was accompanied by her close friends, Annie Banda and Lekesina Banda, of the Mumba clan, whose mothers were sisters. The system of clanship and kinship among the Nsenga was at the time dominantly matrilineal, like those of their western and eastern neighbours, the Soli and the Ceŵa. Their song, *Soka-wee!*, appears on Ethnic Folkways Library Album No. FE4201, *Music from Petauke of Northern Rhodesia*, Volume 1, Side 1, Cut 8, together with excerpts from other songs which are discussed below.[1]

When I arrived in Ciluku on 27 July 1961, on a comparatively cool winter afternoon, Ida, Annie and Lekesina were at work pounding grain, together with some other friends and the older women Velenika Zulu (Lungu) and Belita Zulu (Phiri), whose fathers were brothers. They were not only neighbours and fellow-villagers, but also members of related families. As was common in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, pounding grain provided women with opportunities to sing and improvize comments on local affairs and their own worries.

Annie Banda took the lead in the first of the pounding songs *(nzimbo za muŵende)* that I recorded (Cut 4), and her words reflected some of the problems of women in a matrilineal society, whose traditional ways of life had been changed by the drift to urban areas such as Lusaka, where there were more opportunities for employment. While they sang, they declaimed their names and the name of the village, in between the following text:

I am suffering, alas! (repeated three times)
Because of loneliness.
I only have God.
I am suffering because I live alone. Oh dear, oh dear!
I am suffering, alas!
My husband is like a path: we only pass along it. (2×)
We only pass along it, alas!
Mother's brother,[2] become famous in this world!
Mother, I mourn because Ciluŵa has gone.
I am suffering because I live alone in this world.
Husbands who have many wives are as rotten as bad meat. (2×)
They are like carrion, alas, like carrion;
Alas, like carrion in this world.

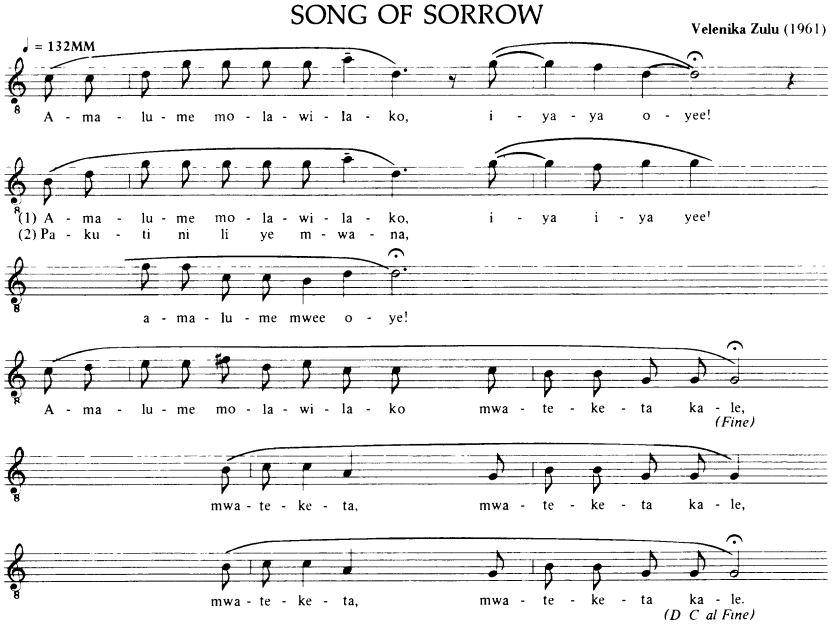
Lekesina Banda led the second song (Cut 5), with a different melody:

Who has not heard of Lekesina's troubles?
How did you tear off the patch for which I brewed beer?[3]
Who has not heard of Lekesina's troubles?
Who did not see my hardship? You must have heard about it.
I will thank my mother-in-law, I will love my mother-in-law;
I will always praise my mother-in-law, because she has produced a child, Canada[4]
My own mother died long ago; Cigoli remained alone.

When they finished pounding, Velenika Zulu was moved to sing a very short song of sorrow, lasting 34 seconds (Cut 7):

Uncle (mother's brother), you also talked! Pity me!
Pity me, uncle!
You have already gossiped. you have already gossiped enough.
Uncle, you should not have talked because I have no child.

SONG OF SORROW



Following this mood of reflection on life's difficulties, Belita Zulu led a beer song with a sad theme, which is not included on the Folkways record. In spite of the theme, they developed a lively performance, with handclaps and 'drum' accompaniment by a boy whom they called forward to play a basic rhythmic pattern with two sticks on the side of one of the wooden pestles. This form of 'drumming' was known as *kupilingila*, an onomatopoeic word which referred to the sound of the pattern.

The words which Velenika and Belita sang did not refer to their own situations, but rather to the kinds of misfortune that could afflict young women. They were both comfortably past such a period of anxiety, but as older women their responsibilities included care for the welfare of younger women in general, and of their grandchildren in particular.

Some of the words of the song were:

Brother, you have not given me clothes. Whom will you clothe, then?
A cow has cried out.
The cry of sorrow is 'I have died, mother'. I am tired of being alone.
A cow has cried out.
Mother, who is with you making all that noise? A cow has cried out.
I am suffering by being alone.

The cry of sorrow is 'I have died, mother'. I am tired of being alone.
A cow has cried out.
I have no clothes and I have no salt. I am suffering by being alone.

After the vigour and exuberance of this communal performance, the impact of Ida Sakala's quiet and very personal 'song of sorrow' (Cut 8) was overwhelming. The sentiments were similar to those expressed in the previous songs, but they were also *at that time* very real to Ida. Although she used some of the standard gestures of Nsenga laments, and the music was apparently not unlike that of a 'traditional' melody, she felt deeply about those sentiments in a way in which, for example, the two elderly ladies probably no longer felt about the words that they sang. So deeply did she feel that when she heard of my planned visit on the previous day, she felt the need to *compose* a new song, which she then rehearsed with her friends. After the first public performance, everyone present agreed that it was very beautiful, and unexpectedly new. It followed the long period and tonal sequence characteristic of many different types of Nsenga melody (for example, Cut 7) and epitomized in the way women improvized when pounding grain (Cuts 4 and 5); but it did so in a uniquely economic and original way.

The words sung can be translated as follows:

Misfortune, misfortune! I begin to cry.
Misfortune, misfortune! And the ground is hard too[5]
My mother, my father, I am poor. And you too, my friend.
This misfortune has dogged me since I was a child, Vele.
My mother, my father, I am poor. And you too, my friend.
This misfortune has dogged me since I was a child, Vele.
There is misfortune in our house.
Misfortune, misfortune, even at my age!
Misfortune! I am always crying.
My mother, my father, I am poor. And you too, my friend.
This misfortune has dogged me since I was a child, Vele.

Before repeating the song, Ida and Annie had a formal conversation:

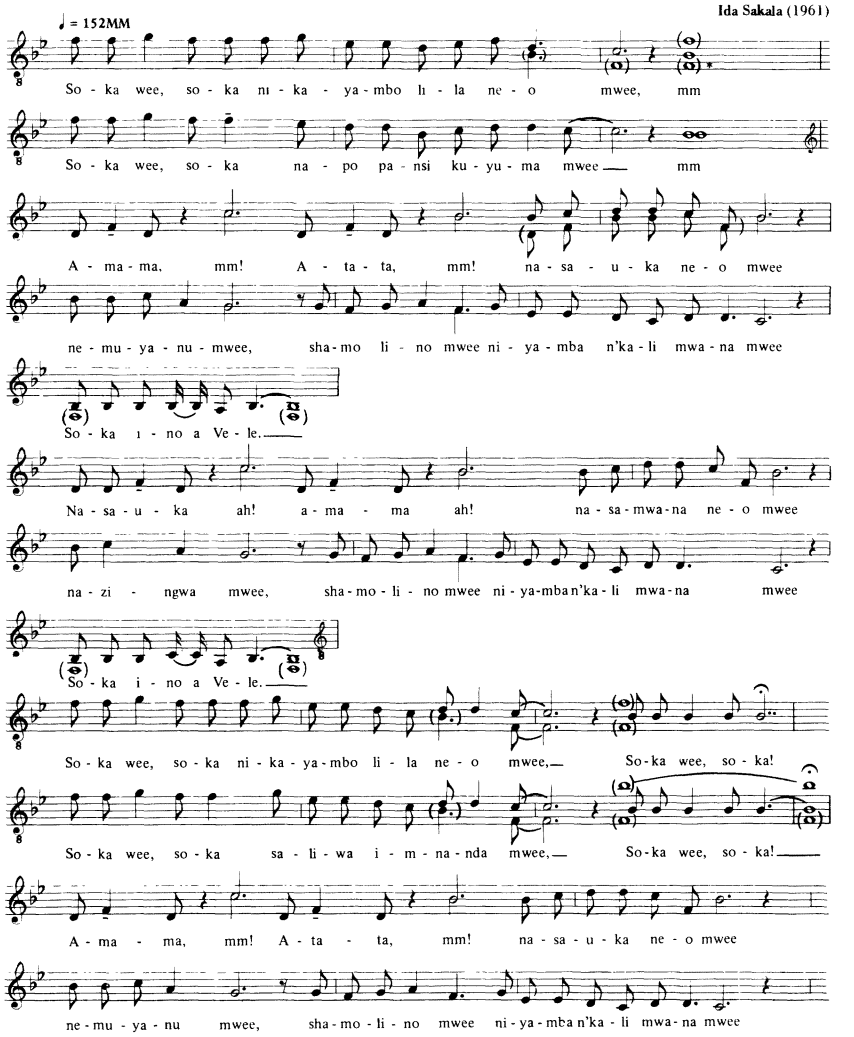
Annie: Don't cry, Ida.
Ida: I am full of sorrow, I who am your friend.
Annie: You make me want to cry too.
Ida: There's nothing that can be done: I have suffered, my friend.
Annie: Let us at least keep each other.
Ida: I must go away.

After singing the song again, they had a second conversation.

Ida: I am in great trouble.
Annie: Don't be upset.
Ida: I only live to suffer.
Annie: You mustn't worry.
Ida: There is no safe place to go.

FIRST PUBLIC PERFORMANCE OF *SOKA WEE!*

Ida Sakala (1961)



This is followed by a short speech interlude, and then a repeat of sections D, B and C, with some new words in D. The song concludes with a second speech interlude.

*Additional parts, sung by friends, are given in brackets and/or shown with double tails to notes

Annie: Why?
Ida: My husband deserted me long ago. I, Ida Sakala, have nothing else to say.

During the second performance of the song, Ida added:

Misfortune, misfortune! I shall be more careful another time.
Misfortune, misfortune! This comes of loving men from foreign parts.

Apart from these words, the only difference between the first and second performances was the addition of more conversation:

Ida: Annie, I went off somewhere on a visit.
Annie: Where did you go?
Ida: I went to Fort Jameson.
Annie: Was the visit good?
Ida: I was treated as though I were an animal without a skin, my friend.
Annie: Sure? [*sic*, in English]
Ida: Be careful of foreign men.

After repeating the song, they continued:

Ida: I have suffered greatly. I have no child, and yet I am a grown woman. What shall I do? And how shall I do it? I have suffered, my friends.
Annie: Take this child, Ida.
Ida: Bring Maxwell to me [one of the audience passes her a little boy]. I must nurse someone else's child, as I have no child of my own. My husband ran away; he is in Bulawayo. His name is JM, and he is having a nice time while I suffer.

She repeated the song, adding the following words:

Misfortune, misfortune! I married a traveller.
Misfortune, misfortune! I married a fish.
I have seen things, mother. I have suffered.

The intimate conversations which are added to each performance not only contrasted with the strident, public nature of complaints made by women when pounding grain and meant to be heard by the whole village: they also emphasized the very personal nature of the song and helped the audience to focus on the *musical originality* of the composition. One can understand very well how the first public performance emerged that afternoon in the context of the pounding songs, and how its composition was influenced both by general characteristics of Nsenga music (see Blacking 1961) and the corporate music-making of woman. But to refer to that lovely composition as 'ethnic music' would be an insult to the creativity and sensitivity of its composer, Ida Sakala.

Unfortunately, I have had no opportunitiy to follow up the work of this fine musician. With the money that she earned from its first performance, she went to Lusaka to look for a new husband.

NOTES

1. I am most grateful to Professor Raymond Apthorpe, who invited me to join him in the field and make a sample of recordings of music in the Petauke District between July 25th and August 3rd 1961. He had previously prepared a detailed list of the different types of music and their indigenous classification, so that I was able to work out a plan for recording before I arrived in Zambia. On my visit to Ciluku, I was accompanied by Mr. Morris Mazala, who kindly acted as interpreter and later assisted me with the translation of the song texts.
2. Since the system of descent is matrilineal, the mother's brother, rather than the father, is the figure of authority in the lineage.
3. She brewed beer to sell, so that she could afford the material to patch her husband's trousers. Now some other person (and she suspects a woman) has torn them again.
4. It was common for an exceptional person or thing to be known by a foreign name: hence the child Canada is a very good child.
5. She sleeps on the floor because she has no comfortable bedding.

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