

Tracing a Conceptual Sketch of African Music

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the multifaceted landscape of African music, tracing its evolution and diverse forms. The author, using mainly the tools of library research and literature reviews, grapples with the challenge of defining African music, highlighting the terminological and linguistic complexities. The study encompasses traditional, popular, and art forms, offering a comprehensive understanding of a rich musical heritage. The characteristics of African music, including timbre, texture, rhythm, and call-response patterns, are scrutinized, shedding light on the nuanced aspects of its performance. The essay also delves into the classification of African musical instruments, utilizing the Sachs-Hornbostel taxonomy. In conclusion, the importance of approaching African music holistically is given a particular emphasis while a strong advocacy is made for a deeper appreciation of its cultural significance in the global context.

Keywords: African music, traditional, popular, art forms, characteristics

INTRODUCTION

The question of African music is one that has generated an enormous interest, especially in the 20th century. This is especially because of the advent of the field of ethnomusicology which originated in Germany with people like Erich Moritz von Hornbostel (1877-1935) and Carl Stumpf (1841-1936) who are acclaimed as the fathers of the Berlin School of Comparative Musicology (Christensen 1991:201). As comparative musicology evolved into ethnomusicology, a number of researches have been and are still being conducted on African music by various scholars. The scholarly interest in African music had a corollary in the upsurge of popular interest in the performance of African music.

Contributing to the growing interest in African music is its migration to foreign lands. Citizens of African countries of the post-independent era, in an attempt

to escape the harsh economic realities of life in their countries, have sought to find greener pastures in foreign lands. As has always been the case, when people migrate, they migrate with their culture, music inclusive. By this very fact, the wave of African immigration that started from the later part of 20th century onwards brought about a situation in which the new emerging African diaspora in many parts of the world especially Europe and America become flooded with sounds and performances of African music. This is bound to have some implications.

DEFINITION OF AFRICAN MUSIC

To speak about African music is not as simple as it sounds. In fact, one can argue that the very concept of African music is problematic terminologically and linguistically. The English word ‘music’ does not easily translate into any known African vocabulary. According to Charles Keil, there is no word in any African language that is linguistically identical to the English word ‘music’:

...a word corresponding to our term "music" could not be found in one African language after another-Tiv, Yoruba, Igbo, Efik, Birom, Hausa, assorted Jarawa dialects, Idoma, Eggon, and a dozen other languages from the Nigeria-Cameroon area do not yield a word for "music" gracefully (Keil 1979:27).

Corroborating Keil’s position, Ruth Stone maintains that “it is ...difficult to find a word in any West African language that is equivalent to the Western idea of ‘music’ (Stone 2005:15). Similarly, Omojola, argues that a univocal or absolute concept equivalent to the western notion of music does not exist either in Igbo or Yoruba language (cf. Omojola 1989). The foregoing exposition of the problem inherent in applying the term ‘music’ to African performance, while not eliminating the need for a definition of African music, serves to prevent an unqualified juxtaposition of European and African music and musical concepts. The term ‘African music’ is a conceptualization that is certainly useful for understanding the phenomenon of African music/dance performance, but its linguistic value is only relative.

In defining the term ‘African music’ it is important to remember that African music is not a repertoire that can be easily circumscribed. African music is more of a potentiality than a finite or reducible collection of music (Agawu 2003:xiv). This is especially because of the place of improvisation and transformation in African music. Given that a good deal of African music is not committed to manuscript, and given that “idioms, which are known in the West as ‘folk,’ ‘popular,’ ‘religious,’ and ‘art’ are closely bound together” (Stone 2005:17) in some parts of Africa, any amount of change can happen to any African musical entity. For example, in composing the *Scenes from Traditional*

Life (1970), Akin Euba translated what is essentially a symphony of sound of African musical instruments into a musical score, to be played on the piano which is an instrument of Western origin.

Nevertheless, in order to do justice to a proper understanding of African music, some definition is still necessary, at least at the provisional level. In my opinion, a definition of 'African music' must involve an understanding of the term in its widest and most inclusive sense, without a recourse to stereotypical notions about what African music should be or sound like (cf. Stone 2008:32). I find such wide understanding of African music in the definition proffered by Agawu. According to him, "African music designates those numerous repertoires of song and instrumental music that originate in specific African communities, are performed regularly as part of play, ritual, and worship and circulate most orally/aurally, within and across language, ethnic, and cultural boundaries" (Agawu 2003:xiv). For the purpose of this proposal, I will adopt Agawu's definition, but only as a practical working definition. I do not intend to project his as the only possible and final definition.

FORMS OF AFRICAN MUSIC

Agawu's definition of African music can be understood at three levels. These three levels give us insight into the three broad forms of African music together with their sub-species. At the first level, the definition embraces African traditional music, that body of music that was part of the African traditional heritage before the occurrence of cultural contact between Africa and the Western world. B. Aning sees traditional African music "as that music which is associated with traditional African institutions of the pre-colonial era. It is the music that has survived the impact of the forces of Western and other forms of acculturation" (Aning 1973:16). In this traditional sense, Agawu's definition would be applicable to African folk music, strictly speaking and this would include, among others, "funeral dirges, children's songs, recreational dances, music marking harvests, healing ceremonies, and court celebrations" (Agawu 2003:xiv). Also to be included in the category of traditional music are occupational music, music for the celebration of life cycles, religious ritual music, music of political institution (Aning 1973:17-19).

The next class of African music that fits into the definition would be the popular musical forms, "forms associated with urban life, such as highlife, jùjú, soukous, makossa, afrobeat, mbaqanga, taarab, and fújì, among others" (Agawu 2003:xiv). These contemporary popular forms, usually seen as "the modern counterpart of the traditional ...music," are products of acculturation, filled as they are by "an unusually heavy amount of Western musical

mannerisms, even though the composers may try to give their music an African rhythmic touch” (Aning 1973:22). In other words, they are characterized by cultural commingling of European and African musical values, especially as can be seen from their use of a medley of European and African musical instruments. Thus, in their performance, one finds such a combination like electric or acoustic guitars, trumpets, saxophone as well as other wind instruments, the electronic organ and a jazz percussion set, all mingled with such African instruments like the clapperless bell, the hourglass drum or the atumpan (Aning 1973:22). Their dissemination as artifacts of world music is facilitated by both the international and local music recording industries. Nevertheless, their origin must be traced back to the situation of urban life in many cities of Africa.

A complete picture of African music requires the acknowledgement of what has been described as African art music. According to Aning, African art music can be subdivided into three categories. The first sub-category embraces choral songs written for church choirs by amateur composers with simple rudimentary harmonies. This class also includes cantatas usually meant for secular and private semi-professional choirs. *Missa Kwango*, coming from the Republic of Zaire and the *Dagari Mass* of northwestern Ghana are good examples of the first group of African art music (Aning 1973:22). The second sub-category of African art music would include vocal works, produced by African composers with much training in Western music and meant “for solo voice with chiefly Western instrumental accompaniment as well as for all types of choruses - male, female, and mixed” (Aning 1973:23). Composers in this camp, while writing in local languages, seek to inject the African rhythmic character into their music, even as their composition reflect the use of Western classical, romantic, and modern styles of harmony. In the third and final sub-category of African art music are instrumental works written for solo or combinations of western instruments, although there could be addition of some African instruments. This category of African art music makes “use of African melodic themes and some characteristic rhythmic patterns” (Aning 1973:23). African composers of art music include people like Fela Sowande (1905-1987), T.K. Ekundayo Phillips (1884-1969), Ikoli Harcourt-Whyte (1905-1977), Akin Euba (1935-till date), Ayo Bankole (1935-1976), and Joshua Uzoigwe (1946-till date) (Agawu 2003:xiv). Others are Ghanaian composers, like Ephraim Amu, Walter Blege, George Dor (Dor 2005:441).

CHARACTERISTICS OF AFRICAN MUSIC

Many scholars have sought to define the features of African music. Often their definition is a result of their observation from the particular place in Africa

where they conducted their research. Thus, it would be difficult to say that any delineation of characteristics of music performance in Africa applies to every single instance of African music performance. Nevertheless, I would mention and briefly comment on four characteristics of African music that seem to recur in the analysis of many authors.

Timbre: African music is generally characterized by its percussive delivery. Both in singing and instrumentation, the percussive tendency is dominant. According to Stone, “many African musicians learn rhythmic patterns through phrases, known as mnemonic devices (memory aids) that convey timbre as well as timing” (Stone 2005:47). Varied timbres can be produced on a drum by way of open, closed and slap strokes (Reed 2003:136). Africans usually want to communicate emotion with their music. Often their music performance has a message to give, for which reason they “pay close attention to the shading of sound and the various colors embedded within a performance” (Stone 2005:47). In order to procure an additional timbre, many African instruments are often furnished with secondary rattles (as in the case of some African drums and lamellophones like the mbira) or gourd resonators covered with spider’s egg sac (as obtains in some African xylophones, like the balafon) that give to the instruments a buzzing quality. This is the case with many species of drums. The same buzzing quality is sought from human voice in some specialized music events like masked (i.e. masquerade) performances “to create sounds which are meant to be perceived as deriving from a nonhuman (e.g. spiritual) source” (Lifschitz 2004:1012).

Texture: Regarding the texture of African music, the tendency is towards heterophony, that is, the simultaneous sounding of two or more pitches. This happens when different pitches of the same song are sounded together. When the resultant sound is combined with African musical instruments having different sounds and pitches, then the heterophonic texture of the music becomes amplified. Without mentioning the word heterophony, Hornbostel made a reference “to the simultaneous sounding of more than one pitch by different singers and instrumentalists” as one of the characteristics of African music (Merriam 1959:17).

Rhythm: A most distinguishing character of African music is its rhythm. According to Karolyi (1998:14-15), African musicians see rhythm as “the main organizing force which not only holds together the music they play, but can be the music itself...” He went further to assert that the ability of Africans “to hear music not only in terms of common beats, but also in subdivisions... displays musical sophistication and an instinctive musical logic of a high order.” One way of manifesting this sophistication is through the use of polyrhythm. This occurs when a contrasting independence is created between two or more parts sounding simultaneously with contrasting rhythmic patterns

(Karolyi 1998:15). The sounding of two or more rhythms at the same time give rise to what is described as asymmetric rhythm (also known as additive and divisive rhythms) as well as to interlocking of patterns that present a Gestalt image of a single sound production (cf. Stone 2005:97). A polyrhythm may also have the aspect of hemiola whereby there is a successive combination of simple triple and compound duple pattern often occurring in the repetitive form of ostinato (Karolyi 1998:12, 16). A way of manifesting the rhythm in African music is through dancing. Rhythm is at the root of inseparability of music and dancing in many African cultures ((Karolyi 1998:14; Stone 2005:15).

Call-Response: Repetitive call-response is also a well-known feature of African music. Merriam gives a description of the call-response pattern:

In vocal music, it is fairly well agreed that the outstanding formal pattern is the antiphonal call and response in which a leader sings a phrase and is then answered by a phrase sung by the chorus. The leader's phrase is often improvised, while the chorus phrase tends to remain relatively steady, thus providing the identifying phrase of the song (Merriam 1959:16).

Thus, the soloist sings the solo variations while the chorus enters at the end of the solo. The recurrence of the chorus becomes an opportunity for the soloist to create spontaneous variations. This is what improvisation in African music is all about. According to Ruth Stone, call-response can be both non-overlapping and overlapping. Non-overlapping call-response results in a situation “in which the call, once the song gets underway, is very extended – an entire verse” (Stone 2005: 66-67). But in a situation where “some call-response phrases between solo and chorus are constructed so that the soloist has a fixed length and the chorus always responds after an identical interval” then an overlapping of solo and chorus may occur, especially if the response is in the form of ostinato (Stone 2005: 67, cf. 68).

AFRICAN MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Although many Western instruments have become part and parcel of contemporary African music performance, one cannot overlook the reality of musical instruments that are strictly speaking of African origin. In speaking about classification of African musical instrument, it is important to remember that different cultures in Africa have different ways of classifying their musical instruments. In fact, as Kartomi reveals, “...cultures around the world have developed their own formal or informal ways of classifying instruments or ensembles” (Kartomi 1990:3). For example, the Kpelle people of Liberia classify their musical instruments into two categories: “either blown (*fee*) or struck (*yale*)” (Stone 2005:19). Ozah indicates that Igbo people of Nigeria

classify their musical instruments according to whether they are struck (i.e. percussive), blown or plucked (Ozah 2008:121-124). In the Hausa culture, instruments are classified in relation to their players. The players are thus classified in five categories: “‘drummers,’ ‘blowers,’ ‘singers,’ ‘acclaimers’ and ‘talkers’” (Ames and King 1971, 61 quoted in Kartomi 1990:251-252)

For the purpose of this essay, however, it is necessary to invoke the Sachs-Hornbostel classification scheme which, while clearly etic-oriented, nevertheless helps us to get a panoramic view of the array of instruments that are used for African music performance, since it would be difficult to get to state how each culture in Africa classifies its musical instruments. According to the Sachs-Hornbostel taxonomy then, the first group of instruments are aerophone and this refers to “musical instruments that produce sound by using the air tube as the primary element of vibration or as in the case of free aerophone... the air surrounding the instruments” (Kartomi 1990:318). This would include various kinds of flutes and horns used in Africa like the Igbo *oja*, Hausa *kakaki*, South African *vuvuzela*, Ethiopian *washint*, Malagasy *sodina*. Next is the chordophone category whose “sound originates from stretched strings” (Stone 2005:19). The Ghanaian *goje*, Malian *ngoni* and the Senegalese *kora* comes readily to mind here as good examples. But there is also the Igbo *une* and *uboakwara* as well as the Kenya *nyatiti*. Further, African musical instrumentation also includes the membranophones which refer to “musical instruments that produce sounds from tightly stretched membranes” (Kartomi 1990:319). As an example, one would readily remember the *jembe* from northern part of West Africa, the Yoruba *bata* drums, the Ghanaian *atumpan*, and several kinds of drums in use in Africa. Finally, there are also the idiophones. Here, the “sound originates from vibration of the material of an instrument that has not been altered, through stretching, for example” (Stone 2005:19). Examples of idiophones in African music performance are many: clapperless bell (*ogene* in Igbo), Shona *mbira* and similar lamellophones like the Burkinabe *kalimba*, the West African *balafon* or *gyl*, rattles (worn for dance performance or shaken), shekeres, etc.

CONCLUSION

In the above exposé, I have dealt with the question of the definition of African music. It is important to reiterate the need of conceptualizing African music from a holistic rather than from essentialist perspective. Such a holistic approach is precisely in reference to the integral ‘folk-popular-art’ triangular or triadic vision of African music. A grounded and thorough study of African music can be a very wonderful way of folklorists and ethnomusicologists creating a requisite knowledge database regarding the cultural values that are

inherent in the music of the African continent, especially given that the Black continent often seems to be conveniently disregarded as having nothing to contribute in the making of the civilization of the global village. Nevertheless, the rich cultural heritage of Africans which is rooted in and especially manifest in their solid religiosity and music traditions can perhaps become a humanizing factor in a world that is fast turning into a chaotic and confused mass of relative opinions and values.

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