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VARIETIES OF AFRICAN MUSIC AND MUSICAL TYPES

By B. A. Aning

This paper makes at least two assumptions. First, it assumes that the music of African peoples is of more than one variety and, second, that possibly this music includes quite a few, perhaps numerous musical types. The phenomenon of the existence of multiple musical varieties and types on one continent is not peculiar to Africa. We can find parallel phenomena on other continents. In discussing the varieties and types of music that exist in Africa we shall also consider the factors that gave rise to their existence.

For the purpose of our discussion today I want to look at varieties of African music under two major categories, within each of which we shall describe the types. The first category includes what we may refer to as traditional African music, the musical heritage of contemporary Africa. The second category includes the variety we shall call contemporary or modern African music.

Traditional Music

Traditional African music may be defined 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 and is therefore distinct in idiom and orientation from the music belonging to the second categeory—namely, contemporary popular and art music. This definition can be stretched to include traditional recreational music.

Before looking at the institutions whose music constitutes the bastion of African musical idiom, we may do well to discuss briefly what the elements are that give character to traditional African music. Among the bundle of characteristics is rhythm. Rhythm may be organized unilineally, especially in the unaccompanied solo vocal music of cradle songs, in some songs associated with folk stories, in children's play songs, and in drum language. Other rhythms are organized multilineally. We find such rhythms in three kinds of music; namely, accompanied solo and choral music, unaccompanied choral music, and instrumental ensemble music. In all three forms we see that the rhythm achieves complexity by employing either or both polymetric and polyrhythmic features.

Another important characteristic feature of traditional music is its way of organizing melodies. It is now well known that different kinds of scale patterns are used by different African peoples. Some peoples build their melodies upon varieties of the pentatonic scale, others build on the hexa-

tonic scale, while others construct their songs on the heptatonic. In all three types of melodies, however, differences exist in the actual intervals employed by different African peoples. It is the characteristic use of intervallic patterns and tone patterns resulting in particular melodic and cadential patterns that gives identity to the melody of each society.

Developing from the foregoing is the way in which choral forms are organized. Most African peoples organize their choruses into two-sectional forms, dividing the music between a soloist (or a group of soloists) and a choral group or between two choral groups singing antiphonally.

Instrumental ensembles are built to conform to specific and established norms. Member instruments are therefore chosen to fulfill well-defined musical roles, the aggregate of which serve to satisfy the norms. An instrument may be included in an ensemble because of its tone color (which may contrast with that of other instruments in the ensemble) or because it has a quick sound-decay quality and therefore will be able to play a rhythm with a very high density. An instrument may be included because it has a high or low pitch and therefore has a small or great intensity (i.e., carrying power). Thus in the Akan *adowa* music, for example, the musically important time-line, to which almost every other instrument in the ensemble relates its part, is given to the iron slit-bell, whose sound is somewhat harsh and piercing. The most varied and complex rhythm patterns are assigned to the *atumpan* drums, which have the deepest and most intense tones of the ensemble. In between these two instrument types are the remaining stick or hand drums, which are given rhythms of graded and less complexity.

Having looked at some of the features that give character to traditional African music, we may now discuss the musical types in which these features operate. We noted earlier that traditional African music is associated mainly with institutions of the pre-colonial era and that because of this association it has succeeded in withstanding the onslaught of the forces of Western civilization and other forms of acculturation. It must be conceded that a lot of the peripheral practices and observances relating to some of these institutions have either changed or are now changing. In each instance, however, the core is still there, and so is the music of such cores, for traditional music is still performed as an integrated part of social, ritual, religious, or political activities.

Music of the Events of the Life Cycle

Events in the life of an individual—events such as birth, puberty, marriage and death—are marked with particular types of music. It must be pointed out, however, that such events are not uniformly musical events in *all* African societies. Among the Yoruba and Hausa of Nigeria, for example, a lot of traditional recreational music is used to mark the "naming ceremony" of a new born baby. The Bembia of Zambia also sing appropriate songs to welcome new-born babies and to mark the birth of twins. In the

Fon area of Dahomey a child is taught a song to be sung when he loses his first tooth. Among the Akan of Ghana, children sing a special song of insult at a special ritual organized for a regular bed-wetter. Circumcision and puberty are other important events during which special music may be performed. Boy-circumcision candidates in Senegambia are taught special songs in the evening while they are staying in the camp waiting for the circumcision wounds to heal. In central and eastern Africa, and especially in the Sambaa area of Tanzania, special songs are sung before circumcision, immediately after circumcision while the wounds are healing, and later after the wounds have healed and the candidates are returning home. The Dipo puberty rites of girls among the Adangme of Ghana and the Bemba of Zambia incorporate music. Similarly among the Ashanti of Ghana, the first day of the six-day long puberty celebration of a girl is marked with special ceremonial music.

Among the Dagarti of northwestern Ghana, the first visit of a bridegroom to the house of his bride is marked by the chanting of a dialogue between his party and the brothers-in-law. Other societies who celebrate their marriages with music making include the Dagomba of Ghana, the Yoruba and the Hausa of Nigeria.

On the occasion of death, the Bemba of Zambia, the Ewe, the Akan, the Dagarti, and several other peoples of Ghana—and in other countries, as well—sing mourning songs. The Bemba, in addition, have songs that they sing for the return from the burial and songs to be sung for "the renewal of the village fire," which was extinguished immediately after the burial. These mourning songs are usually distinguished by their characteristic singing style as well as by the text and body movements that accompany the singing. These dirges are usually unaccompanied.

Occupational Music

The organization of music in several African societies makes provision for the making of music as part of an occupational activity. The music may be performed by an individual or by a group of individuals engaged in an occupational activity. Various societies have songs which they sing to accompany domestic activities, such as grinding, pounding, or brewing beer. Among the Hausa and Nupe of Nigeria and the Dagomba and others in northern Ghana it is a commonplace thing to see individuals as well as bands of musicians performing on market days, not only for their own personal enjoyment but also for money. The Yoruba drummer-praise singers and the Senegambian *griots* perform similarly for their livelihood. In this kind of music it is the appropriateness and effectiveness of the text that wins for the musicians the patronage of and reward from the public.

Often music for group labor is so rhythmically structured that it serves as a necessary stimulus for the participants. Bands of workers can be seen lined up in an open field, cutting grass to the music of a band of one-string fiddle and gourd-rattle players. Similarly, fishermen are known to paddle

their canoes as well as draw up their nets in time to the rhythm of songs they sing. Music performed while working is different from the kind of music that a group performs in celebrating a good catch made by fishermen or the killing of big game by hunters. The death of an important hunter calls for yet another kind of music. In this case it is the text of the song, the movements accompanying the song, and the ritual performed that are important.

Religious Music

Traditional religious worship may take the form of a private ritual—for example, an individual consulting a soothsayer or a priest. In such instances the use of music is minimal; it may consist of the occasional ringing of a clapper bell or the shaking of a rattle. It is used to create an appropriate atmosphere or to punctuate speeches for dramatic effect.

A second form of worship, whether confined to members of a cult or open to the general public, involves copious use of music. Such music generally involves the performance of a mixed chorus and an instrumental ensemble. The instrumentation may include ordinary common local instrumental types or types that are considered rare. Among the Dagarti of northwestern Ghana and the Akan (also of Ghana) the xylophone and *atumpan* drums feature prominently in the ensembles of their respective important gods. The music's function is to provide accompaniment to movement and action. It also helps to hold worshippers together through the performance of the text, in which they praise and recount the achievements of the god as well as proclaim their renewal of faith in him. The songs also remind them of and strengthen their interpersonal relationships with one another.

Music of Political Institutions

One of the most important sets of musical types in Africa societies, especially in those societies with centralized political systems, is the music set relating to political organizations, i.e., music of the court and music for festivals. Religious values and myths are attached to some symbols of office, which frequently include some musical instruments. The *bagyendanwa*, for example, is a symbolic sacred drum among the Ankole of Uganda, who organize a special cult around it. Among the Akan of Ghana, political hierarchy is marked, among other things, by the possession of and use of particular musical instruments or by the sizes (physical or numerical) of instrumental ensembles. Hence, while a small village chief may own and play one or two short animal trumpets, the bigger chief may have, in addition, another set of five or seven trumpets—*ntahere*. Whereas the small chief may have only one or two musical types at his disposal, such as the *twenesini* (the signal drum) and the *bommaa*, the head of the Ashanti nation commands a dozen or more different instrumental ensem-

bles, whose physical and numerical sizes cannot and should not be equalled by any other chief in Ashanti.

Of course, the wide variety of a chief's musical instrument types means that he can be provided with a wide variety of music whenever he meets other chiefs and thus achieve status. If his instruments are larger than another chief's instruments, they can produce more powerful sounds, which also contributes to his status. It may be added that individual members of the society cannot own or perform upon these important court instruments. The special court instruments and musical types may be used on ritual and ceremonial occasions in which the chief is the principal character or on occasions in which he merely takes a minor role. The ceremonies may include rituals which he performs privately with his councilmen in the "stool room" in his home or national festivals which he celebrates with his subjects in public, and at which time the entire community renews its loyalty to him and the state as well as strengthens its beliefs and respect for the values that provide the foundation of the whole society.

Other wings of the political system responsible for judicial, administrative, and military welfare of the community also have their music. Not only do the Akan have special drums, for example, with which they summon councilmen to the court, but what is more, they have appropriate drum music that was played when people guilty of petty or capital crimes were ridiculed or executed in the past. Among most peoples in central and eastern Africa, as well as among some in West Africa, military organizations were charged with the duty of defending the state not only in war but also in other emergencies. When the organizations took part in national or local festivals and ceremonies during peace time, special music was performed. Consequently their music is varied, including music for both war and peace time activities. Whatever the original purpose of these institutional musical types, the musicians never lose sight of the entertainment values of their music. Programs are so organized that there is always time allowed for the enjoyment of music and the dance.

Traditional Recreational Music

The various societies in Africa possess numerous musical types of recreational music. This kind of music may be performed by individuals or by groups of individuals, who do not necessarily bind themselves into regular bands. They may gather to perform together (usually in the evening) upon the instigation of one or two persons. Such music is often choral with little or no improvised instrumental accompaniment. Frequently, this kind of music is performed by women—for example, the Ga *adaawe*, the Dagomba *tora*, or the Akan *nnwonkoro*. Children, too, have their own special games that include special kinds of songs.

On the other hand, there exist types of music which are performed by musicians who band themselves together to form permanent groups and who specialize in a particular musical type. Such are the *nindo* music of

the Gogo and the *manyananga* and *migobo* of the Sukuma, both societies of Tanzania. In Ghana the Akan specialize in *adowa, sanga, adenkum,* and *akosua tumtum,* while the Ga play *tuumatu, tsuimli, amedzulo,* and *awaa,* and the Ewe play *agbadza, gahu, agbekor, dzokoto,* and *akpese.*

All of the musical types constituting this variety of African music share in common one thing: the music employs those artistic values that operate in the given society. As mentioned earlier, these types may include traditionally accepted scale and melodic patterns, defined organization of rhythms (horizontally and vertically), and systems of part-singing. In addition, the selection of instruments in ensembles respects traditional discrimition for tone color and for qualities of intensity and density. Last, but not least, the selection of musicians, the purpose of, and the time and place for the performance of any given music gives due consideration to traditional expectations. Consideration of these factors, in fact, provides the basis for the creation of types of traditional music.

Contemporary (Modern) African Music

I believe this kind of African music, which I wish to refer to as contemporary or modern African music, will be the subject for discussion in two papers to be presented later. I do not intend, therefore, to discuss this music in any great detail. Perhaps I shall only attempt to provide the broad background for the two distinguished African composers who will follow me. I shall also raise a number of questions to which I shall give only partial and general answers, intentionally leaving the questions to be more fully and extensively answered in the two papers referred to above.

What is this contemporary or modern African music? How did it come about? In what ways is it similar to or different from traditional African music To what audience is this variety of music directed?

In setting up the category of contemporary African music I include any vocal or instrumental work composed by an African or by a non-African who has had some experience in performing traditional African music. Such a work may be written either for an African medium or for a foreign instrumental medium. Such a composition may employ one or more of the elements that characterize a particular African style—namely, the rhythmic, scalic, melodic, harmonic, textual, and instrumental organizations. Contemporary African music also invariably employs some of the elements characteristic of another (usually Western) musical idiom. Thus we get a work that is neither pure African or Western music. It is African because it includes here and there a rhythm or melodic pattern that is very African. In some of the songs sung in churches, for example, a piece may be in an African language and might have passed for an African item but for the fact that often the composer has butchered the language, melodically speaking, to an incomprehensible level. It cannot, therefore, be labeled a traditional African song. Some contemporary African composers write choral works harmonized in four-part homophonic style—a style that is very alien

to the African idiom and that immediately disqualifies it for the traditional music label, but gives it instead the contemporary label.

Contemporary African music comes about as a result of the influence of Western culture and commerce. Most, if not all, of the composers of this kind of music have had some formal Western education, often in mission schools. A few of them had a considerable amount of formal education in Western music, ranging from the level of secondary school music to University music, either in Africa or abroad. As a result, when they write, they marry elements of the two idioms (African and Western) together, producing what we have labeled contemporary African music.

I consider the contemporary category to comprise two main types, the popular and the art types. Undoubtedly designed to fill the vacuum created by the apparent alienation of most African youths from their traditional music, the popular type is the modern counterpart of the traditional popular music discussed earlier. We often see in this music an unusually heavy amount of Western musical mannerisms, even though the composers may make an effort to give their music an African rhythmic touch. There are several ways that composers may mix African and Western music languages. Frequently, for example, an essentially Western instrumentation is used with "drops" of instruments of African origin. Such is the High Life music of West Africa, whose ensembles now comprise Western guitars and other string instruments, brasses, a few woodwinds, the electronic organ and a jazz percussion set. To this instrumentation may be added an African bell, an hourglass drum or, occasionally, the *atumpan* talking drum. A few other musics in this category are the *juju* of the Yoruba of Nigeria and the *pachanga* and other styles from the Congo and Zaire Republics.

Generally the composers of contemporary African art music have reached much higher levels of education in Western music than the writers of popular music. Unlike the popular music types, the art music is not meant to accompany dancing. Art music may be regarded as falling into three categories. In the first category, I include the kinds of songs usually sung by church Singing Bands. These songs often are written in a local language and in four-part harmonies, using a level of harmonization that is very elementary and frequently of a poor quality. Another type in this group includes the music of the cantatas usually composed for secular and private choirs. The quality of the music is better than that written for the Singing Bands, but it cannot be regarded as being the best that can be produced. Very little accompaniment is called for, usually a European melodic instrument or none at all. One cannot discuss this class of African art music without mentioning what some churches are doing. Some Roman Catholic priests have written, in diverse ways, original songs or adapted indigenous songs into new forms for use in the Mass. Mention may be made of the *Missa Luba* and *Missa Kwango*, both of the Republic of Zaire, and the Dagari Mass of northwestern Ghana.

The second category of contemporary African art music includes more serious vocal music, written by composers with extensive training in Western music. These composers write for solo voice with chiefly Western instrumental accompaniment as well as for all types of choruses—male, female, and mixed. They write in local languages, and even though they succeed in injecting African rhythmic character into their music, their harmonies reflect Western classical, romantic, and modern styles.

The third and final category of African art music includes that written entirely for solo instrument or combinations of instruments, very few of which are African. Works in this category may be labeled African only by virtue of their use of African melodic themes and some characteristic rhythmic patterns. While the contemporary popular music types and, as well, types belonging to the first-named category of art music (i.e., the church music) are intended for the general public, music belonging to the second and third categories usually finds sympathetic and comprehensible audiences only among those members of the public who have themselves had a high level of Western education. What the inherent problems are that face the contemporary African composer of art music I leave to Messrs. Atta Annan Mensah and O. Akin Euba to deal with in their respective papers.