

# MUSIC IN TRADITIONAL AFRICAN CULTURES: BENEATH AND BEYOND THE UTILITARIAN FACTOR<sup>1</sup>

*Emmanuel James Flolu*

J. H. Nketia has said that "the study of African Music is at once a study of unity and diversity and this is what makes it exciting and challenging" (1975, p. ix). Perhaps what excites researchers is not merely the diversity of musical cultures within Africa but also the creative resources of its music. The deeper the research on the music of Africa, the more complex and yet more illuminating it tends to be. The study of African music has therefore remained a living and a challenging intellectual venture.

While scholarship continues to explore the diversity of African music; it has only made cursory incursions into the extent to which social and cultural factors influence folk music *composition*. Yet, this knowledge is necessary for understanding the musical practices in Africa. This paper provides a broad perspective on one dimension in which certain socio-musical activities can be perceived *artistically* and explores briefly the implications for music in cultural education in Ghana.

## **The Cultural Context**

An enduring view of African music is that it is utilitarian and this has often been quoted to support such assertions as, "The Concept of music as a purely aesthetic experience is foreign to Africa" (Roberts, 1972, p. 8). The same view is emphasized by Chernoff (1979). The reason why it is a mistake to listen to African music is that African music is not set apart from its social and cultural context. Aduonum is more elaborate on this issue:

In Africa, music is life; that is it permeates all daily activities. Music in Africa is the soul which is ultimately concerned with various customs and religious practices. The African is born, named, initiated, fortified, fed, nurtured, buried with music. In Africa, music heals the sick, music directs and guides the blind, music comforts the widow, and music stops tribal warfare. Music is in the office.... Finally, music accompanies every single daily activity (Aduonum, 1980, pp. 19-20).

Social and cultural factors are equally potent materials for making and creating music. This is because, in so far as music is also a cultural activity, its creation and enjoyment exists within cultural contexts.

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Every music is a social fact, a social reality. Music is made by individuals or groups of people who live within society. It could be said that music making is a lifelong activity of every society. As sociologists point out, music does not have the slightest aesthetic worth "if it is not socially true" (Adorno, 1962, p. 197; Silberman, 1963, p. 68). Some scholars have also argued that any particular kind of music can only be understood in terms of the criteria of the group or society which makes and appreciates that music (see Shepherd, et al, 1977). But we also need to recognise that the extent to which the internal structures of music articulate the wider social context in which it is composed is problematic. John Shepherd (1977) and others have approached this difficulty from diverse angles: musical, aesthetic, sociological, and educational. Such an interdisciplinary approach has at least one advantage; it enables scholars to pursue the issue from their individual professional backgrounds, using the language and grammar each understands best.

However, Serafine points out that, whatever goes on in a musical situation cannot be seen merely as communication between composer and performer or performer and listeners. Instead, all interaction with music is "between one of those actors and a piece of music" (Serafine, 1988, p. 7). Thus, whatever the background of the scholar, any study of music must *take the piece of music* as its starting point.

### **Emerging Aesthetic Context**

The performance of indigenous music is now frequently divorced from its original social and religious setting. For example, the *Apiredi* (Ashanti executioner's dance) may be staged in a concert or on a national park as a form of secular entertainment without any accompanying execution (though this may sometimes be dramatised). Similarly a war dance, performed by school children in a festival, does not necessarily signify hostilities or tribal warfare taking place, and no one would expect to witness war activities. Various forms of ethnic rituals are nowadays performed as musical, dance or drama pieces in theatres built in Western European fashion. Although these are perceived aesthetically, it is not in the same way as we may listen to a Brahms' symphony with such "disembodied concentration". Whatever the music, whatever the medium, and wherever it is staged, it is evident that the audiences are not "participant" audiences, though they may frequently breach their designated space with shouts, clapping, and waving arms (Tuan, 1990). Subsequently, throughout the country, alongside the developments in choral music there has been a steady growth in the number of 'cultural' drama, music, and dance ensembles. Most of these groups take inspiration and guidance from the activities of the Ghana National Dance Company. Even such art works as sculptures which:

might have been created for exclusively ritual and or spiritual purposes,... are today increasingly produced for sale to tourists or foreign commercial buyers. Many such 'made for export' works imitate traditional pieces, or in any event continue a ritual

artifact traditional beyond the survival of the beliefs that underpinned it, indeed, beyond the life of the ritual itself (Dutton, 1993:13).

### **An Artistic Horizon**

It is Akin Euba (1988) who, perhaps, presents the most persuasive arguments against the notion that contemplative listening is foreign to Africa. Based on the study of Yoruba music, he points out that there are some types of music such as, for example, those associated with religion and chiefship, which are designed purely for listening and which therefore fulfill the same role in art music of both Western and other cultures. Indeed in Ghana, the cult Musics of, say Akom, Yeve or Klama represent the truly authentic forms of indigenous music. Euba argues further that, even when assigned a utilitarian role, traditional music possesses aesthetic qualities akin to those found in contemplative music of the West. Whether music that is composed within an oral tradition can be properly fitted into the intricate analytical system of the written culture of the west is a contentious issue. It would be too simplistic to say that traditional African music - no matter how challenging it is - makes the same demand on the African ear as Western classical music on the European.

It is perhaps easiest to see an artistic dimension of African music in a specific cultural ceremony. For example, watching a funeral celebration, we can identify a number of participating groups. First are the elders who are seated to receive donations on behalf of the bereaved family. This group is continually obliged to be present. The second are sympathizers and well-wishers; who must also fulfill social and moral requirements. The third group are by-standers. Their presence is largely to appreciate the whole proceedings from which both cultural lessons are learned and aesthetic pleasures are derived. A funeral is, therefore, to a large extent, a kind of dramatic time to learn: like a work of art, it *teaches*. "The master-of-ceremonies, priest, (chief mourners), producer, or director creates art from the ensemble or media and codes..." (Turner, 1988, p. 23). There are actors as well as critics. These proceedings could occur without the accompaniment of music, if for example, the deceased was known not to have actively participated in communal projects during his or her time.

However, a few yards away from this group, the musicians - a highlife band, a choir, brass band, or any indigenous musical association - set up their stage. Their music serves to unite the kinds of all the attendants to sustain the spirit of the funeral, and as Merriam puts it, "a summation activity for the expression of values, a means whereby the heart of the psychology of a culture is being expressed" (Merriam, 1964, p. 225). To the musicians, all those present at the funeral ceremony - elders, sympathizers, and spectators - constitute a target audience who must be treated to a satisfactory performance. In the musicians' opinion, the occasion is also for them to display their expertise, and win the confidence and admiration of the public. In part, their invitation to future social and similar functions is dependent upon the success of that day's performance. Therefore, they strive to achieve the best level of

artistic excellence. Furthermore, some of the spectators present may have nothing to do with the funeral at all. These are drawn to the arena by the music. Some may come from other villages, far and near, attracted by a particular musician or group of musicians in attendance that day and their presence is purely aesthetically motivating.

At this stage, then, the funeral takes on a different meaning besides a mere cultural performance. It becomes a concert hall, though not in Western theatrical sense, in which activities are simultaneously culturally mediated, artistically shaped, and aesthetically inspired.

Let us take the extreme case of the *Sisala* of Northern Ghana as another example. The *gangaar* drums have been sounded. "An elder is dead, and all sympathizers are invited". There, under the tree, are seated the drummers, and facing them is a group of women, wailing and pacing up and down to the rhythm of the drums. They are surrounded by other members of the village who are looking on enthusiastically though not without sympathetic feelings. To the ordinary observer, the significance of this might be blurred, but to the main actors, who know the traditions and code of values, it is quite explicit: it is a musical activity. Blending the sound of wailing with the rhythm of drums is an artistic enterprise. It is a cultural activity which serves as "a moral and symbolic force, a symbolic indicator of change, and a link with the past and future" (Kaplan, 1990, p. 28), but what is being presented on stage, for both the living and the dead, is *art*. Nothing seems to happen at random but activities are musically and artistically interwoven, controlled and directed by the master drummer just as the conductor of a symphony orchestra "blends and opposes the sounds of the different instruments to produce an often unrepeatable effect" (Turner, 1988, p. 23). No matter how deeply emotional one feels about the loss of the elder, you cannot join in this musical mourning if you are not an expert drummer or if you are unable to synchronise your steps with the rest of the singers. The performers are engaged in a creative activity, combining fact and memory on one hand, imagination and adventure on the other. As Richard Schenchner has argued, "It is also clear that rituals are not safe deposit vaults of accepted ideas but in many cases dynamic performative actions in new ways" (Schenchner, 1993, p. 228). The question remains, what are the by-standers doing? Are they sympathizing or attending a concert? It is unlikely that anyone present would not require both a musicianly and an artistic attitude in order to appreciate this artful cultural performance. Visually, it is a ritual, drama, but aurally, the spectators are listening to music.

### **The Challenges for Music and Cultural Education**

So far, in this paper, we have noted that beneath socio-musical activities there is an aesthetic value. It could be said that the ideas presented here have implications for musical practices in other African countries. The study of music in African cultural education must now move beyond the utilitarian values and focus on the reciprocal contextual, artistic and stylistic elements inherent in indigenous music. What remains is the formulation of an appropriate philosophy of music education.

It is important for art educators also to consider the need to increase social awareness and patronage for proper artistic appreciation. However, more thought has to be supplied to the traditional settings in which African folk arts are practised so that presentation in modern theatres does not distort completely the original artistic elements and values inherent in them. Much effort is needed to establish a medium through which the skills and ideas of traditional artists, arts organisations, educational institutions, and architects are brought together to design theatre houses which are sympathetic to the African environment, able to sustain, captivate and increase the participatory level of the Ghanaian public, as well as provide innumerable opportunities for attracting the interest of the foreign audience. This is an inter-artistic work, which calls for cooperation with specialists from other arts - drama, dance, fine art and craft - as well as with other agents, politicians, cultural officers, writers and publishers. True cultural education, however, begins only when students confront the complexities of intercultural relationships and of the resulting artistic and aesthetic problems.

Students must be immersed not only in the music they study but also the cultural factors which inform and mediate the composition and performance of the particular music. The challenge is to work toward a medium of instruction in which the visual dimensions - dance, drama and social activities - enhance aural perception. There is need for further research initiated from the point of view of arts education as well as from within the African attitude to music making.

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