TRADITIONAL AFRICAN MUSIC IN BLACK AMERICAN SOCIO-CULTURAL INTERACTION: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE²

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Africans who were taken to the United States as slaves went with a rich culture. Their interaction with white slave masters and the social circumstances under which they lived, however, forced them to assimilate alien cultural patterns which gradually coloured their African heritage. In music, the slaves learned new structural patterns and techniques which they married to their heritage to evolve what has come to be known as "Black Music" in the forms of blues, jazz, ragtime, Negro spirituals and types of popular music, including soul and rhythm and blues.

Black Americans have been expressing their musical creativity through these musical forms; since the 1950s, however, they have come to be notably associated with the performances of traditional African music. During the Black Power Movement of the 1960s, for example, Black Americans adopted traditional African music to reinforce their African identity. They formed groups that performed African music in many cities, especially on the East Coast. Although this movement is no longer the dominant force of Black Americans socio-cultural interaction, performances of traditional African music by Black Americans continue to maintain popularity in certain segments of the Black population.

The question of how the desire for African cultural patterns came to be generated in Black Americans has not been examined. A study of the literature on the activities of the Black Power Movement, which saw the beginnings of the performances of traditional African music by Black Americans, reveals a concentration of studies on its socio-economic and political gains and/or failures. The cultural aspects of the movement are either completely ignored or are given peripheral treatment in these studies (Allen, 1974; Bastide, 1972; Franklin, 1974). Anku (1988), Baker (1974) and Holmes (1974) discuss aspects of the performances of traditional African music and dance by Black Americans but they also fail to explain how and why Black Americans came to accept traditional African musical patterns as part of their heritage.

Against the backdrop of the theory that "music, wherever found, is a product of social circumstances..." (Etzkorn 1964:279). this study examines the factors that enkindled Black American interest in traditional African music.

What is my definition of "traditional African music"? It is a term of one of three categories we might distinguish in observing musical practices in

² This study is a slightly revised version of a paper presented as Faculty Lecture at the University of Cape Coast in June, 1992 and also to the 4th Plenary/Roundtable session of the 5-Day Pan-African Colloquium on The Re-Emergence of African Civilization during The 2nd Pan-African Historical Theatre Festival (PANAFEST '94) in Kumasi, Ghana.

African societies today. The first category is European Art music. This is practised and enjoyed by a very small segment of African societies; by the educated elite, to be specific, since only they gain exposure to it.

The second is Western - derived music which show a preponderance of African musical elements married to those of Western musical practices. This, which to some extent is parallel to the Afro-American music mentioned above, includes Highlife of West Africa, juju music of the Yoruba of Nigeria, Kwella jive of Zimbabwe and certain music traditions of both the orthodox and syncretic Christian churches.

The third category is the type of music which, in pre-colonial days, was usually performed on tribal basis and which, if it transcended its boundaries, did so because people who belonged to that tribe had travelled outside their tribe and had cause to use their music as a means of communication and getting together. For example, a group of Yoruba immigrants in an Akan village or district would, every now and then, get together to perform their tribal music and dances -- the occasion providing a forum or platform for sharing each other's concerns and difficulties and for reaffirming their identity with Yoruba traditions. This ethnic or tribal music which has for the most part successfully resisted the impact on acculturation and is still performed in its traditional contexts is what I classify as traditional African music for our present purpose.

Since the 1960's, when the projection of "African personality" and traditional cultures was emphasized by the leaders of independent African nations, concert promoters have put traditional African music in the theatre; as a result of this movement, traditional African music is sometimes performed outside its traditional contexts. For example, the Ghana Dance Ensemble performs Akom a ceremonial music the performance of which is traditionally incidental to a cult ritual of the same name, as part of their concert programmes. Another good example of such out-of-context performances of traditional African music was the Yoruba folk opera, Oba Koso (The King did not Hang), performed by Duro Ladipo and his cultural group from Nigeria in the 1970's. Saka Acquaye's music drama in Ga, The Lost Fisherman, is also a good illustration of this category of music which has been aptly designated "neo-traditional music" (Euba, 1970, p. 24). For the purpose of this study, neo-traditional African music shall be considered as traditional since, as music per se, it does not show any traces of foreign influence.

It is difficult to attribute the conscious acceptance of traditional African cultures by Black Americans as their heritage to any particular force of motivation. A number of factors interplayed to generate this acceptance. Available evidence, however, permits the assertion that the political independence of Ghana in 1957 and the subsequent independence of many African nations generated the interest of Black people all over the world, especially Black Americans, in various aspects of African ways of life, including music. As *Time-Life Books* puts it,

The burgeening black pride of the 1960s manifested itself in looking beyond a history of slavery for ethnic identity and finding it in Africa -- in Africans, ancient Kingdoms and newly emerging nations, and in African arts and science (1988, p. 32).

And according to Franklin, "the road to the revolution (was) paved by the rise of national states in Africa" (p. 47). Before we take a close look at how this political event came to whip up Black American interest in traditional African music, however, we need to examine a few socio-cultural events that prepared the grounds for this later episode.

In asserting that Black American pride in their African heritage was enkindled by the political independence of African nations, we are by no means implying that Black Americans were not interested in things African before this era. Culturally, the Negro of the Diaspora, including Black Americans, had always had the urge to recapture and revive his lost African heritage, while he recognized, at the same time, the need to "adapt himself to the demands of his environment" (Bastide, 1972, pp. 23-43; p. 195). This desire is epitomized in the activities of men like W. E. Burghardt Dubois who in the 1920s, long before the Negro Revolution of the late sixties, "championed economic democracy and the channeling of 'black power' and "whose keen awareness of the beauty of Negritude, both culturally and physically, predated by many years, the Black is beautiful concept of the midcentury militants" (Adams, 1972, pp. 138-139).

In the 1920s, Marcus Garvey, a contemporary of Dubois and a Jamaican sojourner in the U.S., also preached that the Black American's best hope of finding dignity and honour was not in America but in his original home, Africa. Marcus Garvey did not achieve what he stood for -- the return of Negroes to their ancestral homelands -- because his plans for the establishment of a Negro state in Africa as the solution to the problems of being a Negro in the Western World did not take cognizance of the fact that overwhelming masses of Negroes considered America their rightful home and had no desire to leave it (p.115). Adams adds that this back-to-Africa philosophy did not work because it only provided an easy escape for a frustrated, oppressed and wearied people, and did not realistically, provide a feasible solution to the problems that beset the Negro world (ibid.). Despite this failure, it is evident in the literature that Garvey, as a Black nationalist, was instrumental in planting in the psyche of Black people in the New World an awareness of their African heritage. Cronon is right in asserting that "behind the strivings of Black Power, 1970 style, lies the work of Marcus Garvey..." (1955:1st unnumbered page). To understand the Black Power Revolution of the 60s and 70s, an understanding of Marcus Garvey's ideas is essential.

These socio-political activities of the early part of the 20th century with the cultural behaviour of a number of Africans in the U.S. between the 30s and the 50s presaged the more potent movement that made every Black American sit straight and begin to think of his relationship with Africa and

Africans. Because of the latent desire of Black Americans to recover their lost traditions, the few Africans who migrated to the U.S. in the 1950s to unwittingly disseminate traditional African music were readily received. The presence of Asadata Dafora Horton (1889 - 1965), a Mende dancer and musician from Sierra Leone, in New York in the 1930s, gradually nurtured the interest of Black Americans in African musical traditions. Before he went to the U.S. in 1929, Dafora (as he came to be known) had lectured, sung and danced in Europe (Martin,1934). According to Dance Herald, Journal of Black Dance, Dafora "sang for sometime at La Scala opera house in Milan" (no author, 1974, p. 4) before migrating to the U.S. Though Dafora had a strong background in western art music, it was the rich heritage of African culture and art forms that interested him most, and he travelled to other African nations to seek additional knowledge of African folklore.

In 1934, with his ritual Kykunkor, subtitled "The Witch Woman", which consisted of dances, several songs of enchantment and an unceasing background of drumming, "he shattered the many myths concerning the potential of Black ethnic material as themes for concert dance; he proved that Black dancers could be successful on the American concert stage" (1974, p. 4). With his Shogola Aloba dance company of twenty-five Africans from the Awassa, Temeni, Kru and Asaba ethnic communities of West Africa and Black Americans, Asadata Dafora gave performances which had an abundance of attraction, not only for the dance enthusiast but also for the folklorist, the musically minded, the theatre lover and even "the casual entertainment seeker" (Martin, 1934(b), p. 6). From communications with Oba Oseijiman, a former student of Dafora, Babatunde Olatunji, who had occasion to play with the latter in the 1950s, and Arthur Hall of the Afro-American Dance Ensemble of Philadelphia, it is possible to assert that Dafora's performances in the 1930s and 40s were instrumental in paving the way for the revitalization of Black American interest in traditional African music and dances (Saighoe, 1977).

Another African who did much for the propagation of traditional African music in the U.S. was Michael Babatunde Olatunji, a Nigerian musician. When Olatunji was enroute to the U.S. in 1950, he hummed a Yoruba tune to himself. An American sailor, apparently ignorant of Yoruba melodic structures, kindly admonished him that "a strange man in a strange land shouldn't sing strange songs" (Holmes, 1974, p. 40). Olatunji, a Yoruba drummer with much talent, drive and creativity, settled in Atlanta as a student in Public Administration at Morehouse College. To earn his living, he slowly invaded Georgia with fascinating Yoruba rhythms and his "strange songs" teaching, performing and demonstrating techniques in African musicianship.

After graduation in 1954, Olatunji moved to New York where he sought "to bring to the Black American a pride in his heritage, and an awareness of his culture" which the ravages of slavery and history had robbed him of (Saighoe, 1977, p. 8). Through his teachings, performances and recordings, Olatunji gradually showed Americans, both Black and White, the

other side of African culture which Hollywood and her Tarzan stories had

failed to portray to the rest of the world.

In 1951, while Asadata Dafora in New York and Olatunji in Georgia were slowly laying the foundation for the Black cultural identity movement that was to flower a decade or so later, a young Ghanaian Exchange Programme student at the University of Pennsylvania, named Saka Acquaye, was also steadily preparing a Memphis - born dancer whose role in the cultural movement "brought him recognition as a unique force in the crystallization of Afro-American culture into creative forms (Baker, 1974, p. 57-62). The dancer, Arthur Hall, had seen African music and dances, in the Hollywood films and, even though he did not know anything about African music and dance, he strongly felt that what he saw and heard "didn't ring true" (Baker, 1974). In his quest to expand his understanding of music and dance forms, which he hoped might subsequently lead him to African forms, he took dance classes at the Judimar School in 1951 when his family moved to Philadelphia. It was then that he met Saka Acquaye who introduced him to traditional African music cultures. This exposure determined the direction of Arthur Hall's development and the role he came to play in the Black American's quest for African cultural traditions.

When Arthur Hall was interviewed in Ghana in 1974 about the extent to which Saka Acquaye had influence his career as a dancer and choreographer, he is reported to have recalled that Acquaye showed him "beautiful things that I never knew about" (no author, 1974, p. 1). He added:

African dance as an art form was something new to me, and I felt that if I was going to have a future in the dance world, I would be doing myself a favour by learning about my heritage and doing America a favour by enriching them with this art form (pp. 2-4).

He disclosed that since Americans knew very little about Africa at that time, their responses to the African dances and music was rather "cool" and that his friends, mostly Black questioned the wisdom in his profound interest in such "primitive" traditions. His persistence in studying and performing with Saka Acquaye immensely helped in preparing him for the unique role he came to play in the Black cultural awareness movement which we shall examine presently.

The afore-mentioned cultural activities of the few Africans and Black Americans constitute the trends that prepared the grounds for Black American interest in African cultures. This scenario, coupled with the political independence of African nations, helped to transform the desire of Black Americans to recapture and revive their lost heritage into the more potent form of the Black Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 70s. It is against the backdrop of this scenario that we shall examine closely how the political independence of African nations came to enkindle Black American interest in traditional African music.

In London, on September 2, 1928, Marcus Garvey, in a speech on African Nationalism, is reported to have said, "Now we have started to speak, and I am only the forerunner of an awakened Africa that shall never go back to sleep" (Cronon 1955, p. 39). At the end of the Second World War there were only two independent African nations, south of the Sahara: Liberia and Ethiopia. Then, swiftly, starting with Ghana in 1957 and accelerating into the sixties, nation after nation emerged out of colonialism as if to fulfill the prophecy of Garvey. These political activities of African nations struggling to set their motherland free from the shackles of imperialism and colonialism, strongly gave Black Americans a sense of pride and filled them with a surge of energy to shake themselves out of their shells and to uphold their dignity, -- a dignity the foundation of which had been laid by Garvey and his followers. From this time, Africa came to be viewed as being more than the "Dark Continent" that Hollywood and text books had projected to the world. People came to realize that Africans have social, political and cultural patterns of which all Black people, no matter where they lived in the world, could be proud.

Up until the 1960s, the main kind of contact between Africans and Americans was through religious institutions, exemplified by he activities of the Jehovah's Witness organization and the Baptist Church, and through the commercial interest of a few companies which had investments in Liberia. The missionaries were white and the representatives of the companies were also white. This means that the direct interaction between Africa and America was one between white Americans and Africa. When we also consider the fact that the British, the French and the Portuguese were at the helm of affairs in African nations, we could conclude, at least in theory, that the relationship operated mostly between White Americans and colonial administrators who were also white. It was the political independence of African nations that opened the way for the United States to come to countries like Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Zaire and Uganda to establish embassies and to carry out economic packages of foreign aid or investments directly with the people. The door of contact and interaction was opened to governmental, institutional and private organizations as well as to individuals. This was the time when many Black Americans came to Africa as tourists, exchange programme students or volunteers with the Peace Corps.

The presence and cultural behaviour of African diplomats and the bulk of African students who went to the U.S. in search of knowledge to prepare for various roles in their developing motherland, the businessmen who went on business transactions and the tourists who went to sample the American life-style as a diversion from the British and French conservative and puritanic patterns of life, all had an impact on Black American cultural outlook. For an illustration, let us consider the Black mailman on his usual rounds in Washington, D.C. who sees, at the Ghanaian Embassy at 2460 16th Street, N.W., or at the Nigerian Embassy at 2201 M. Street, N.W. a Black man like himself with even more prominent African features in a beautiful kente or buba (respectively, Akan and Yoruba tribal dresses), being addressed as "Your

Excellency". Out of sheer curiosity, this mailman might ask to know more about this Black man who has the respect of both Black and White Americans. He goes to a party at a friend's house and sees a number of Black men clad in apparel different from what he knows of but identical to those he saw at the embassies earlier on. These encounters with Africans in *joromi* (popularly known as *dashikis* in the U.S.), *batakari* (smocks) and *buba* enjoying or dancing to traditional and Western - derived music (highlife, juju music, Kwella jive), rub off on the Black American as a realization that the Black person too has a right, and legitimate one at that, to take pride in his own cultural heritage.

After this kind of contact, Black Americans began to look critically at the veracity of what they had been told about Africans living in jungles; slowly, but steadily, the image of being ashamed to exhibit anything African began to be neutralized.

The African-Black American contact coincided with the Civil Rights Movement, which in a very subtle and indirect way fanned the flame of desire for African cultural traditions in Black Americans. Unlike Garvey, Martin Luther King, the brain behind the Movement, and the Black American nationalists of the 60s and early 70s did not preach the back-to-Africa theory. As an African looking into Black American social behaviour, I am inclined to agree with Nzuwah that the Black Power Movement admonished all Black Americans to claim their right of being Americans, and to have the fundamental right to say what they wanted to say as Americans (Saighoe, 1977).

Malcolm X agreed with King's reasoning but added that the Black Americans, like any other American, should be able to identify with his ethnic heritage; that since there are Irish-, Jewish-, Polish-, Americans, etc., the Black American should be proud to say he is an African-American. This identity with Africa and the socio-cultural events already discussed gave birth to the "Black is beautiful" concept that came into vogue in the 1960s and 70s (Saighoe, 1977).

Another event that contributed to this cultural awakening was the release of Olatunji's album, "Drums of Passion," in 1958, by Columbia Records. This album, the first commercial recording of traditional African music in the U. S., paved the way for musicians like Miriam Makeba, Guy Warren, Hugh Masakela and few groups, including Ballet African of Guinea, and later in the 1960s, the Ghana Dance Ensemble, the Atilogwu Dance Troupe of Nigeria, the National Dance Company of Senegal and the Royal Dance Ensemble of Burundi. In the 1960s, as mentioned earlier, African nations made a conscious effort to recreate and reassert their African traditions which had been interrupted by colonialism. In pursuance of the objective of stablizing and perpetuating African aesthetics and of "projecting African-personality", groups, such as those named above, were formed under the auspices of the governments of various independent African nations. In 1959, Dag Hammerskjold, the then Secretary General of the United Nations gave a reception for the Ballet African. This reception and the subsequent

performances of the group and other dance companies strengthened the

exposure of Black Americans to traditional African music.

From the time of the Black Revolution, the performances of traditional African music came to be emphasized in Black American socio-cultural interaction; they argued that there is hardly a people with cultural identity who have no musical traditions. If their roots are in Africa, then the unencumbered African music is their musical heritage. It was during this period that Olatunji and his ensemble came to be in demand in New York and in other states. Through their performances, they helped Black Americans, both young and old, to catch the spirit of the revolution and to learn more about their African heritage. This accent on Black pride and Olatunji's role in it made prophetic his 1954 vision of bringing to the Black American a pride in his African heritage. By this time, Arthur Hall, who had been ridiculed by his peers in 1958 for his involvement in African musical traditions, had become the mainstay of the cultural revolution. In 1971, Milton J. Sharp, the then Governor of Pennsylvania, wrote in commendation of Arthur Hall's activities:

The Arthur Hall Afro-American Dance Ensemble is teaching worlds of people about their cultural heritageand this includes both Black and White worlds, who might equally respond to the dancing drums of Africa. . . his ensemble has brought its colourful interpretations of the Black Soul, as expressed in authentic dances, to colleges and school campuses, television, dance festivals, theatres and night clubs throughout the nation.

Therefore, as Governor of Pennsylvania, I am pleased to commend Arthur Hall's Afro-American Ensemble for their outstanding efforts in teaching people about their cultural heritage while also bringing enjoyment and

entertainment to people of all ages.

That these words came from the pen of a white governor in acclaim of a Black artist underlines the impact Arthur Hall's musical activities made on the communities in which he performed. These words also give us some idea about the role of music and dance in the "Black is Beautiful" revolution. Music became the strongest vehicle for teaching Black Americans about their heritage. Through short explanatory programme notes that accompanied performances of various dance groups, people were gradually introduced to African music and culture.

Traditional African music also became the tool of politicians who used it to spur people on to action and to emphasize the unity and identity of Blacks. In Washington, D. C., for example, before Black nationalists gave their political speeches, music groups performed to set the mood and to prepare the listeners. However, as the Black Power Movement became less

militant, these functions were also played down.

After this exposure to traditional African music, Black Americans whose interest had not died with the waning of the Black cultural identity movement began their quest for participation in this music and many groups came to be formed; these included:

Egbe Onilu Drummers based in Atlanta, Georgia. Uhuru Sasa, Nugoma Watoto and Weusi Umoja based in Baltimore, Maryland. Olatunji Dance Troupe based in New York, N. Y. Afro-American Dance Ensemble in Philadelphia, PA. Asafo Dancers and African Culture Drummers and Dancers Inc. based in Washington, D. C.

Out of these groups emerged some excellent performers like Oba Oseijiman of Oyotunji village in South Carolina, Melvin Deal of Washington, D. C., Arthur Hall of Philadelphia, Nana Dinizulu of New York and others who paid a series of visits to African countries to sharpen their skills and to better their understanding of the music as it is performed by continental Africans.

As the Black Power Movement and its attendant cultural re-awakening became passive, two types of traditional African music performances emerged on the Black American socio-cultural scene. The first category includes groups that perform African music on the stage for entertainment and educational purposes. Their performances have no extra-musical connotations; they perform music only for its aesthetic value. Even when they include a ceremonial musical type on their programme, only the artistic qualities of the music are emphasized. The second category is constituted by groups that perform various African religious and ceremonial musical types. These groups perform music only as part of religious or ceremonial situations.

Common objectives underlie the musical activities of the two categories: to identify with African musical traditions and to teach other Americans about them. It is in their approach towards the achievement of these objectives that they differ; while those in the first category emphasize the artistic qualities of a music genre, the others have a predilection for contextual usages, making the musical performance incidental to the context.

From the foregoing, it is possible to assert in conclusion that the musical activities of Asadata Dafora, Michael Babatunde, Olatunji, and Arthur Hall, among others around the middle of the century prepared the grounds for nurturing Black American interest in African music traditions. These activities, coupled with the political independence of African nations, helped to transform the desire of Black Americans to recapture and revive their lost heritage into the more potent form of the Black Cultural Revolution.

The revolution struggle brought in its trail a renewed cultural awareness of Black heritage. There arose a crave for cultural identity and affinity with African cultural patterns. Black Americans adopted African names; some identified themselves with certain African sacred cults and many

emphasized "African outward appearances" in matters of costumes and decor (Anku 1988, p. 171). There were many who decided to go African. If certain segments of the Black American population are performing traditional African music in today's United States and elsewhere, it is because they see it as their musical heritage and as an avenue for expressing their creativity. Their performance of this music functions as a sign of their membership in the African heritage.

It is indisputable that the political gains of the Black Revolution helped Black Americans socially as well as economically, if only temporarily, but it is equally true that whatever pride these gains afforded them was demonstrated and reinforced through the expression of their African identity. However, not much studies have been done on the cultural and aesthetic aspects of the revolution; if this discussion is able to generate or engender interest in those areas of the revolution, its objectives will have been attained.

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