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Author

Stein Hunt, Danica L.

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THE CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN IN AFRICAN MUSIC

Danica L. Stein Hunt

Introduction

There are many problems with studying women in music, especially women in African music. There have been many misconceptions and stereotypes about African music in general. There is reference material on women's roles, music, and Africa, but very little on women's roles in African music!

In this paper I will try to explore the direction of women's roles in the music of Africa, limiting my discussion to an overview of some specific areas. The questions I want to pose are as follows: What are some of the traditional roles of women? How have these roles changed? What are the new roles? How are social and religious changes reflected through music, in the repertoire that women perform and the instruments they play? On the other hand, does music itself serve as a vehicle for change? What effect does change have on female roles within the musical realm? These are large issues, questions I wish to consider.

Much of the material for this paper was obtained from interviews with two people who have knowledge and insight on African music—Christian Horton, an ethnomusicologist from Sierra Leone who teaches at UCLA, and William Anyonge, a UCLA biology graduate student from Kenya. I also use my experiences in UCLA's Ghanaian music and dance ensemble, under the direction of Kobla Ladzekpo.

I will begin by examining the roles of women as they were and still are in many traditional areas of the continent. I will then discuss the vocal and instrumental aspects of music in the contexts of initiation or puberty rites, work, religion, and public or social performance. I will also discuss how the music in those contexts has changed, and the effects of the introduction of Islam, acculturation, and urbanization. I will look at the new opportunities that have arisen for women in Africa, and conclude by suggesting some ideas on the future of women in African music.

Traditional Roles of Women and Music

In the past, women's musical roles were closely linked with birth, initiation, marriage, and work activities. The first three events are functions of womanhood itself, but work activities stem necessarily

from the subsistence strategy of the society. In addition, outlets for female music-making include religious and social activities. How then are women's roles in music related to these situations?

In much of Africa, girls have traditionally gained their training for adulthood in puberty rites or initiation ceremonies. The *sande*, a West African secret women's coming-of-age society, still exists. In the past, the *sande* girls were often kept in seclusion for years at a time, while they received intensive training in music and dance. Here they learned songs and dance techniques, as well as how to use cosmetics properly. Scarification, thought to make the young women more beautiful, was performed. Female circumcision was also done, to simulate the pain of childbirth.

Various types of songs and instruments were, and still are taught in the *sande*. Among the Kpelle of Liberia, the girls learn responsorial songs with allusive song texts, which contain lessons for adulthood (Schmidt, 1989). They also learn to play the gourd rattle. Among the Vai of the same area, a *kengai* (a professional female musician) trains the girls on *sasaa*, or gourd rattle (Monts, 1989). In Sierra Leone, the initiates learn the *sandebii*, a medium-sized drum played with one hand and a stick (Christian Horton, interview). In these groups, the standard songs taught to the young women include songs for pregnancy and childbirth, lullabies, and other "female" songs.

Work activities are another context for music-making where women have specific traditional roles. At the basis of a society is its survival strategy. A society can only function within the limits set by production of food (Maquet, 1972). Therefore, music and other aspects of culture arise from that foundation. This means that the roles and music of women will vary according to whether the society is a group of hunter-gatherers, agriculturalists, pastoralists, or urbanites.

William Anyonge (interview) reports that among the farming and cattle-raising Luhya of western Kenya, men fish, care for the cattle, and otherwise obtain food for the group while women cook, do farmwork, and fetch water. According to Anyonge, the women always sing as they work. The songs are about the work and their hard lives, and often contain proverbs or cryptic messages. Women also sing moral or lesson songs to the children. These songs are all standard items in the repertoire and many have been handed down for generations.

Among the rice-farming Kpelle of Liberia, women play a strong role in the society. They do almost all of the work associated with rice farming—they cultivate the rice, own rice farms, control the granary, and allocate the rice (Schmidt, 1989). In the work cooperative, or *kuu*, men and women work in separate groups. In the women's *kuu*, songs encourage the workers and comment on the hard work. The best singer is the song leader and also the work leader, mediating disputes and

delegating tasks. Musical repertoire and instruments change with the phases of the rice-planting season. During the bush-cutting, where men assist with the heavy work, women sing accompanied by small drums and slit gong. During the rice planting, the singing is in a call-and-response form, accompanied by slit gong and gourd rattle (the song leader guides the singing; "officers" of the women's *kuu* play instruments). Protecting the seedlings is the responsibility of the women and children who sing songs to scare birds away from the young plants. During the harvest, singing is unaccompanied since it is too hot at that time of the year for the workers to carry instruments around with them.

Religious events provide yet more performance opportunities for women. Anyonge reports that Luhya women were, and still are, very active in church groups, singing religious songs and hymns and clapping their hands. He describes a day-long funeral he recently attended and says that all of the women of the village, dressed in white, gathered at a place not far from the church. Then they walked to the church together, singing all the way. He mentions that there were many different vocal parts interacting with each other to create a beautiful and moving sound. He adds that the village is alerted to the death of a member by the moaning and singing of women.

In Benin, the Egun people have a church music called *agahu*, which consists of drums of various sizes, iron bells, gourd rattles, singing, and dancing. The singing may be in Egun, Fon, Ewe, English, or French (Kobla Ladzekpo, personal communication). In Sierra Leone, drums were considered "agents of the devil" in the past, and were not allowed to be played in church (Horton, interview), so singing has played a key role in this context.

Social or public events are another context in which women have a traditional place. According to Horton, some social groups in Sierra Leone like the Egungun, a secret society, include both men and women. Men play drums while women play rattles and shakers and clap their hands. Among the Kpelle, songs performed by women in a social, public event have a nucleus of five singers—one "song starter," or timekeeper; three "song catchers," or supporting parts; and one "who puts in the words," or soloist (Schmidt, 1989). The best female soloists are hired for special events, and they are expected to be talented and highly versatile. The best soloists can gain prestige, become financially independent, and travel. In Ghana, a dance called *tokoe* is performed by young girls in a coming-of-age ceremony in front of the entire village. The girls receive gifts from their female relatives and they dance, while professional male musicians accompany the dance with bells, gourd rattles, and drums (Kobla Ladzekpo, personal communication). In the Sudanic region, women often sing praises to kings and other officials. According to Jacqueline DjeDje in her essay,

"Women and Music in Sudanic Africa" (1985), female praise singers accompany drummers at feasts at the royal palace. Dagomba women also may play one-string fiddles and rattles, in addition to singing choral responses.

These are a few examples of traditional music-making ceremonies, most of which are still practiced today. However, some have been modified or adapted for current use.

New Roles and Music

Of all the changes that have occurred in Africa throughout history, three in particular have had a great impact on the music of Africa and female roles: the introduction of Islam, acculturation from other areas (particularly from Europe and the United States), and urbanization. These three areas overlap to some extent. Islam is particularly widespread in the Sudanic region, where it was introduced through merchants and emissaries. Acculturation is the result of European colonization and other foreign contacts. Urbanization is, to some extent, also an outgrowth of foreign contact; many aspects of city life in Africa today have been Western-influenced. How have these phenomena changed the musical events mentioned previously?

Initiation rites are greatly abbreviated today in much of Africa. Since many children now attend school, they cannot be secluded for years or even a few months in the *sande*. Adults often hold wage-paying jobs in the cities, limiting their time to participate in *sande*. According to Horton, female circumcision is being abandoned in many areas as people become more educated and as the law begins to limit it. Along with this abandonment of traditions comes a loss of some of the musical repertoire. Songs to accompany circumcision are no longer useful, and thus are set aside.

For societies which have retained their methods of food production, little has changed. However, among some peoples such as the Kpelle, men are leaving the farms to take up wage-paying jobs, leaving women in complete control of the farm. People who move from their traditional areas to the city find a new set of circumstances to deal with. Anyonge reports that he and his family moved from their village in western Kenya to Nairobi when he was seven years old and as a result of the move, many of the women's work songs, now devoid of their traditional contexts, were put aside.

The *agahu* music of Benin, in the past performed only in church, is now performed in public for entertainment in Ghana (Kobla Ladzekpo, personal communication). In Sierra Leone, where they were

banned from use in churches, drums are today being used in new music composed especially for use in church (Horton, interview).

Music in social contexts now encompasses many forms. Religious and other "functional" music is being used for entertainment. It is even being performed on concert hall stages in Africa and all over the world. Women's social roles are changing. In the Egungun society of Sierra Leone, women today have more freedom. The senior women are involved in major discussions that take place in the society's meetings.

Islam has been a major influence on music and female roles in Africa. In many situations, including religious festivals and inside mosques, women are segregated from men or banned entirely. Muslim women observe *purdah*, religious seclusion. These roles have led to new female participation in music. DjeDje (1985) reports that Muslim women in the Sudanic region are attracted to spirit possession cults, called *bori* in Hausaland, because of their entertainment value and because *bori* offers them an outlet, as they are so often excluded from the public rituals of orthodox Islam. DjeDje (*op. cit.*) adds that in public, women sing praise, historical, or legendary songs while men play the instrumental accompaniment. Dagomba women sing praise, genealogical, and war songs at royal feasts. Only women participate in music for birth rituals and weddings. They also sing lullabies, courting songs, and educational songs to teach their older children (DjeDje, *op. cit.*). Occasionally, female professional singers are hired to entertain women at marriage feasts, where they may perform critical songs which ridicule co-wives. Some instruments have been adopted from Arab countries. In Yorubaland, two types of tambourines have emerged: a round one with jingles attached, and a rectangular one which women have favored (Omibiyi-Obidike, 1979). The *kakaki*, a long metal trumpet, enjoys great use among the Muslim Yoruba, as does the *goge*, a one-string fiddle.

Acculturation has changed many aspects of African life and music. The highlife music of West Africa, the *kwella* of South Africa, and the popular music of Zaire have resulted in part from European and American presence in those areas. Recording technology and Western demand for recordings (perhaps as a method of preservation) have resulted in the rise of popular recording artists, male and female. African music is also being presented on the concert hall stage. Traditional and popular musicians, such as South African singer Miriam Makeba, are giving concerts all over the world and using foreign musical elements in new compositions. Music is being notated, perhaps again in response to Western demand for preservation.

Urbanization is probably the biggest present-day factor in changing musical roles of women. In Monrovia, Liberia, new creative

outlets for the Kpelle and other Liberian women have stimulated a new interest in performance (Schmidt, 1989). The National Cultural Center in Monrovia has supported female Kpelle singers and dancers. Here, women have begun to examine their roles and functions within the society and create new music. The Liberian recording artist Fatu Gayflor has become extremely popular. In her song "Market Day," she recognizes the vital economic role played by market women, in lyrics such as "Mama de go to Rally Time Market every morning/Just to make me at least have some kala . . ." and "Mama workin harder while Papa's in the liquor shop o?" (from Schmidt, *op. cit.*). Many women are moving to Monrovia, seeking opportunities for musical performance and liberation. In other cities, similar situations exist. Yet when women travel to the city, a certain amount of tradition is lost. Earlier, we mentioned Anyonge's report that upon his family's move to Nairobi, many of the traditional women's songs were abandoned. As he grew up in Nairobi, the only women's work songs he was exposed to were those that his mother sang in the home. He mentions the lack of a sense of cohesiveness and the changing of oral traditions in the city. He adds that female singers from Zaire are extremely popular in Kenya. Their music, sung in Swahili and Lingala, can be heard on the radio (most residents of Nairobi own a radio). Anyonge mentions that Kenyan recording artists generally leave Kenya to perform in Europe where exposure and promotion are easier to obtain. On the popular music scene in Nairobi, he reports that female singers are often incorporated into bands as back-up singers. In nightclubs, these bands will often play popular music for a time, then play traditional African music for an hour or so. During the traditional music, everyone participates in dancing. He adds that the few people with television sets in Nairobi can watch MTV and that foreign artists are popular. But the sexy image cultivated by many foreign female singers (especially Americans) is not acceptable to most Kenyans.

Things are changing quickly in Africa. As we have seen, some traditional ways are being modified. Foreign influences are widespread, especially in urban areas. Women have become involved with the idea of "liberation" and are taking advantage of the new opportunities open to them.

Which Direction?

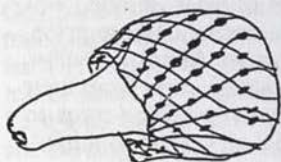
It certainly seems that the roles of women in Africa are "modernizing" or "progressing." Many writers compare this phenomenon with the women's liberation movement in the United States. But what are African women being liberated from? What

"backward" state are they emerging from? It seems that women have not so much suffered the stifling oppression of men as they have simply played a complementary role. This is not to imply that African women happily toil away as wives, mothers, rice farmers, and water fetchers, perfectly content with their place in society. African women's roles have been deeply rooted in the biological aspects of womanhood. For many African women, it seems as though this is a source of deep pride. From the material I have studied, it is clear that many African women, like many women all over the world, derive great satisfaction from their roles as wives and mothers. Perhaps they acknowledge these roles as their unique contributions to society, as men have theirs. And in Africa, there is a great deal of respect for women's roles.

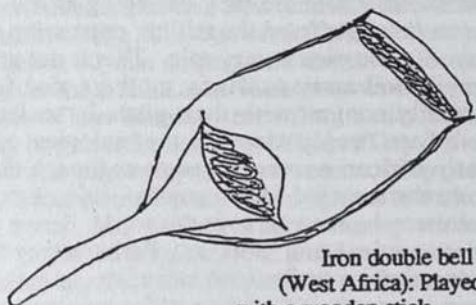
"Modernization" brings with it a dichotomy. William Anyonge wistfully mentions a lack of cohesiveness upon his move to Nairobi; something was lost. But Fatu Gayflor and others have performed a valuable duty to African women as a result of the opportunities open to them in the cities. The dichotomy is this: more freedom and opportunities versus a loss of group identity and some of the musical repertoire. For women like Gayflor, the opportunities outweigh any disadvantages. Perhaps the issue should not be whether African women are better (or worse) off today. The bottom line is that today, there is a choice for many women. Someone who is dissatisfied, or simply wishes to take advantage of new avenues of performance, has that option. A woman who is satisfied with her traditional activities and songs does not have to change.

Women from South Africa and Zaire have entered the popular music scene. Their music brings a message—of peace, of solidarity, of bettering oneself, for example—that the rest of the world wants to hear now. As worldwide interest grows, demand for music and artists will bring forth even more African female musicians. And perhaps more attention will be focused on the specific issues of gender and music.

Instruments

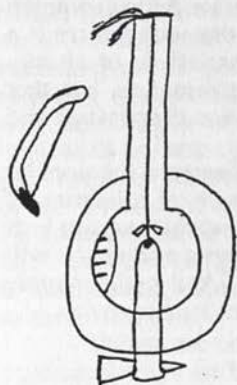
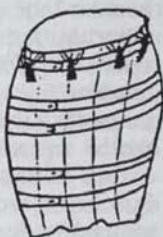


Gourd rattle (West Africa):
Hollow gourd covered with
netting strung with beads or
shells.

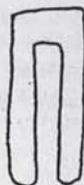


Iron double bell
(West Africa): Played
with a wooden stick.

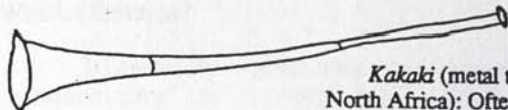
Drum (West Africa):
Wood body with animal
hide head. Played with
wooden sticks, hands, or
both.



Goge (one string fiddle) and
bow (West Africa): Body is
usually made from a calabash,
string is animal hair, and bow is
wood with animal hair string.
The instrument is held horizontally.



Slit gong (all of
Africa): Made of a
single piece of wood,
hollowed out as
shown, and played
with a wooden stick.



Kakaki (metal trumpet) (West and
North Africa): Often six feet long, the
three sections can be taken apart for transport.

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