

Analysis in African Music – Ghosts of the Past, Promises of the Future

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Abstract

The study of African music traditionally falls under the academic discipline of Ethnomusicology, but with this categorisation comes a degree of colonial baggage. Under the purview of Ethnomusicology, many have approached the topic from sociological and/or anthropological perspectives, rather than musicological *per se*. While not without value, these approaches have tended to imbue African music with mysticism rather than engage with the music analytically.

In this context has arisen an anti-formalist position, which suggests that it is inappropriate to analyse African music, because to do so is to impose an external world view on the subject. As has been powerfully argued, however, those who take this position simultaneously practice and apply other disciplinary formalisms to the subject, which opens up a raft of further questions and issues regarding the study of the cultural “other”.

Recent developments in the musical academy have questioned the dichotomy of musicological and ethnomusicological practices. Further, a body of African scholars, led by Kofi Agawu, is recasting African music as a musicological rather than ethnomusicological topic. This approach calls for scholars to value, demand and practice greater structural analysis therein; to deny African music the right to analysis, some argue, is to deny it the right to legitimacy.

This paper discusses some of the key positions and practices in the historical study of African music, recent developments in detail, and projected futures for the discipline. The author draws upon his own first-hand experience of studying and analysing African music in Ghana and Zimbabwe, and of teaching African music in Australia, to offer perspectives on the challenges and inherent value in studying and analysing the music of Africa.

Introduction

The study of African music traditionally falls under the academic discipline of Ethnomusicology, a discipline that has always struggled for a cohesive definition of itself. The discipline began as a consequence of European colonialism and relics of that mindset continue to plague the academy, and much of its language, today.

This paper looks at issues in the academy that concern the study of African music, and in particular the differing views on the place of structural analysis of African music. I begin with a very brief history of the discipline of Ethnomusicology in order to contextualise later developments. I then consider two major factors, being globalisation and anti-formalism, which have shaped the study of African music in the late twentieth century, and which

highlight some of the contradictions within the contemporary academy. In particular I consider the growing body of work from African scholars in this area.

A Very Brief History of Ethnomusicology

The academic discipline now called Ethnomusicology developed in the late nineteenth century as a means to consolidate and coordinate what had hitherto been a collection of individual notes and observations about a range of non-European music forms, from people who were, in the main, neither musicians nor musicologists¹. The earliest reports came from explorers, entrepreneurs, ministers of the church and government officials. Scottish cartographer John Ogilby published descriptive accounts of music and dancing in the Gold Coast in 1670, while some of the earliest transcriptions of African music come from the travels of the German geologist and geographer Carl Mauch in Transvaal and Rhodesia in 1869-1872².

These were agents of the developed world reporting on the musics of the undeveloped world. Much of the time the music was treated as something of a curiosity, or an oddity, and the language of the reports was peppered with terms like “primitive”³, “native” and “tribal”. In other words, the common practice was all part and parcel of colonialism, with all the power imbalances that go along with that, and the discipline has been carrying that baggage ever since.

In the European academy, the discipline was first formalised in 1885 as “Comparative Musicology”⁴. This title reflected the stated intention to compare the musical systems of various cultures of the world, although in practice, the music of the “other” was generally evaluated in comparison to what was already known, that is, western European music⁵. Around the middle of the twentieth century grew an awareness that the music of the “other” ought to be investigated according to its own terms of reference, rather than simply superimposing the musical values of the Euro-American establishment.

Accordingly, in 1950, the discipline was renamed “Ethnomusicology” by Dutch academic Jaap Kunst⁶, and began to consider not just the externally quantifiable properties of the music (scales and modes, melodies, pitch ranges and contours, rhythms and metre, etc.), but the internal properties as well: the social function, value and significance of the music. To do this, ethnomusicology borrowed from disciplines that had developed techniques for such procedures, principally sociology and anthropology. Thus developed a new direction in which sociological and anthropological techniques and processes were prominent. As a result the discipline invited into itself scholars whose backgrounds were other than

¹ Accounts of the formation, early history and definitions of the discipline are given by Kunst (1950, 1969), Merriam (1977) and Myers (1992). See also Kolinski (1957), Rhodes (1956a, 1956b).

² See Kubik (1971), Mauch et al (1969).

³ Note for example the title of Bruno Nettl’s 1956 text, *Music in Primitive Culture*.

⁴ This title is a translation of the German *vergleichende Musikwissenschaft*, as it was labelled by Guido Adler. See Adler (1885:14), Merriam (1977:191, 199).

⁵ Hornbostel (1928:30) asks openly “What is African music like as compared to our own?”

⁶ See Kunst (1950:7); Kunst proposed the hyphenated name, ethno-musicology.

musicological. In many instances, these scholars have used music as a vehicle through which to conduct studies of social structure and process, rather than engaging with the music itself.

Notwithstanding a new procedural openness, the discipline sustained a colonial attitude. Kunst wrote (1955:9): "To the question what is the study-object of comparative musicology, the answer must be: mainly the music and the musical instruments of all non-European peoples, including both the so-called primitive peoples and the civilized Eastern nations." The discipline was concerned with "us" studying "them".

As early as 1957, however, Mieczyslaw Kolinski recognised the inherent problems in Kunst's position, when he wrote in response to it (1957:1-2): "Nevertheless, it considers the situation from an ethnocentric point of view, for if it is true that the main subject-matter of Western ethnomusicology is the study of non-European music, that of Hindu ethnomusicology should be the study of non-Hindu music, that of Japanese ethnomusicology the study of non-Japanese music, etc."⁷

Nevertheless the new procedural direction flourished, and is reflected in the title of an iconic text of this period, Alan Merriam's *The Anthropology of Music* (1964). Merriam defined the discipline first as "music in culture" (1960:109), and later as "music as culture" (1977:202, 204). Merriam (1964:31) is critical of the "descriptive" approach to ethnomusicology:

There is another objection to the exclusive or almost-exclusive preoccupation with the descriptive in ethnomusicology, and this concerns the kinds of evaluative judgments which are necessarily made when the structure of the music is the sole object of study. In such a case the investigator proceeds from a set of judgments derived from the structure itself unless he happens to be working with one of the relatively few cultures of the world which has developed an elaborate theory of music sound. This means that his analysis is, in effect, imposed from outside the object analysed, no matter how objective his analytic system may be.

Advocating what he calls "folk evaluation" over "analytical evaluation", Merriam continues (1964:31-32): "The folk evaluation is the explanation of the people themselves for their actions, while the analytical evaluation is applied by the outsider, based upon experience in a variety of cultures."

At this time Kolinski emerged again as a strong defender of musical analysis, and is highly critical of Merriam's justifications. Commenting on both Merriam's 1960 and 1964 texts Kolinski launched a critique the like of which we see echoed three decades later. Kolinski (1967:6-7):

Most surprising is the striking opposition between Merriam's aim to arrive at a balanced merger in which neither the anthropological nor the musicological element gains ascendancy, and between the fact that his approach has not only an entirely

⁷ Kolinski (1967:4) suggests use of the terms "idiocultural" and "allocultural" musics, which refer respectively to the music of one's own culture, and that of a culture foreign to the investigator. These terms, writes Kolinski (ibid.) "have been chosen to avoid Western ethno-centricism; for example, to the Japanese musicologist the study of Western music is, of course, allocultural."

anthropological orientation but also strongly discriminates against that essential facet of musicological research which has previously been characterized as comparative musicology. Paradoxically, Merriam criticizes this field of study as being “descriptive” and uses the epithet in a pejorative sense. Since the primary interest of comparative musicology, just as of musicology in general, is focused on music itself and not on its social and cultural context, Merriam deplores that “much of ethnomusicology has not gone beyond the descriptive phase of study” (1964:29-30). Thus, he does not seem to realize that the analysis of a single musical style is descriptive, no matter whether it is carried out from a primarily musicological or from a primarily ethnological angle; nor does he seem to admit that, for example, a cross-cultural study of the shape of melody is just as broadly comparative as, let us say, a cross-cultural study of “folk evaluation” of the standards of excellence in performance. At the root of this sort of discrimination lies a basic misconception in the judgment of which fields of study are broad, important and meaningful, or limited, unessential and technical. Merriam does not recognize the fact that musical aspects which appear limited, unessential and technical to the anthropologist might be of broad and meaningful significance to the musicologist. He degrades, indeed, the whole musicological discipline, both in its historical and comparative division, to an auxiliary branch of musical anthropology when he declares that “while the study of music as a structural form and as an historic phenomenon is of high, and basic importance, in my own view it holds this position primarily as it leads to the study of the broader questions of music in culture” (1960:113). This misconception brings about an unfounded indictment of the practice of transcribing and analyzing music recorded in the field by someone else.

Kolinski continues (1967:9):

There is no doubt that Merriam's work comprises an impressive range of valuable information stimulating the anthropological branch of ethnomusicology; however, his above-mentioned attitude toward musicology, coupled with his adherence to an extreme behavioral school of thought denying any impact of psycho-physiological factors upon musical structure, does not serve the cause of comparative musicology and, therefore, of ethnomusicology in general.

What is urgently needed is the formulation of concepts and methods designed to bring about an objective, thorough, and meaningful analysis of musical structure. We cannot accept or reject a priori the contention that all musical structure is culturally derived unless we have examined all available pertinent data.

Meanwhile, parallel to Merriam's anthropological approach arose Mantle Hood's concept of “bi-musicality”⁸, which argued that investigators of non-Western musics should be performers as well as researchers, and should learn to play the music they are researching, as an important way of informing the enquiry. Hood's position is in fact a restatement of an argument put by Abraham and von Hornbostel in 1909-10 (see Abraham & von Hornbostel, 1994:443.)⁹

The respective doctrines of Merriam and Hood saw something of a bifurcation in the discipline, which endures today. Several other significant, if gradual, developments through

⁸ See Hood (1960).

⁹ Abraham & von Hornbostel 1994 is an English translation by George and Eve List, of the authors' original 1909-10 text in German.

the latter twentieth century, and into the twenty-first, have brought many challenges and changes to the discipline, and it is mostly these developments that concern this paper. I shall address here the consequences of globalisation and anti-formalism.

Globalisation

Merriam's position in 1964 sustained the ethnocentric approach that Kunst had earlier espoused (1964:25): "the ethnomusicologist is not the creator of the music he studies, nor is his basic aim to participate aesthetically in that music ... Rather, his position is always that of the outsider."

In 1969 Klaus Wachsmann (1969:165) wrote: "ethnomusicology is concerned with the music of other peoples . . . The prefix 'ethno' draws attention to the fact that this musicology operates essentially across cultural boundaries of one sort or another, and that, generally, the observer does not share directly the musical tradition that he studies . . ."

This insider/outsider distinction is one of several dichotomies in the discipline that are increasingly being challenged, and viewed by many—though by no means by all—as intrinsically false. At worst it is a continuation of the colonial position, the notion of "us" studying "them".

The situation has evolved rapidly, however, both in the field and in the academy. Ethnomusicologist Timothy Rice is one who follows the performer-researcher model. About his studies of the Bulgarian *gaida* (bagpipe) in 1980, Rice challenged the insider-outsider dichotomy when he wrote (2008:51): "In the process, I believe I moved to a place untheorized by the insider-outsider distinction so crucial to much ethnomusicological thinking. ... My understanding was neither precisely that of an outsider nor that of an insider."

African scholar Kofi Agawu¹⁰ is unequivocal about this dichotomy (2003:180):

The truth is that, beyond local inflections deriving from culture-bound linguistic, historical and materially inflected expressive preferences, there is ultimately no difference between European knowledge and African knowledge. All talk of an insider's point of view, a native point of view, a distinct African mode of hearing, or of knowledge organization is a lie, and a wicked one at that. This idea needs to be thoroughly overhauled if the tasks of understanding and knowledge construction are to proceed in earnest.

Agawu goes further (2003:180-181):

The idea that, beyond certain superficial modes of expression, European and African knowledge exist in separate, radically different spheres originated in European thought, not in African thinking. It was (and continues to be) produced in European discourse and sold to Africans, a number of whom have bought it, just as they have internalized the

¹⁰ Victor Kofi Agawu publishes variously as V.K. Agawu, V. Kofi Agawu, or Kofi Agawu.

colonizer's image of themselves. Presumption of difference, we have said repeatedly, is the enabling mindset of many musical ethnographers, and one such difference—perhaps the ultimate one—embraces our respective conceptual realms.

Rapid globalisation with its expansions in people movement and access to information and education means that the academy is no longer the exclusive premise of the European. Our academies are now full of the “other”; they are our students, our lecturers and our colleagues at all levels and in all functions. The recent 43rd World Conference of the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM) in Astana, Kazakhstan, hosted 478 delegates from some 90 countries¹¹. In this context, how can anyone be held to be “other”, except from a colonialist perspective?

With this expansion, the academy and the discipline have seen a significant increase in the number of African scholars engaging with the study of African music, prominent amongst whom have been Kofi Agawu, Willie Anku, Daniel Avorgbedor, Francis Bebey, Lazarus Ekwueme, Akin Euba, J.H. Kwabena Nketia¹² and Meki Nzewi, and I shall turn to consideration of some of these authors below.

Amongst the earliest publications by African authors were S.D. Cudjoe's 1953 article “The Techniques of Ewe Drumming and the Social Importance of Music in Africa”, Nketia's 1954 “The Role of the Drummer in Akan Society”, and Phillip Gbeho's 1954 “Music of the Gold Coast”¹³. As the authors were trained in the Euro-American academies, it is not surprising that these early publications dwelt in the established (i.e. Eurocentric) terminology of those academies. Cudjoe employs terms like “compound rhythms” (p.280), “broad triplets”, “short triplets”, “semiquavers” (p.281 and elsewhere), “quaver” (p.284 and elsewhere) and time signatures such as 4/4, 6/4 and 12/8 (p. 81 and elsewhere). The meaning of these terms and symbols is entirely contextual; they have no intrinsic meaning, but only in relation to each other, or to other structural elements. Their usage in this context, therefore, speaks of certain Eurocentric assumptions about musical structure, but more to the point they really tell us little about what is happening in African music. Nketia's article, on the other hand, makes no attempt at addressing any musical content, but remains sociological of nature, as does Gbeho.

By the end of the twentieth century much had changed, and there were many significant publications by African authors. I do not propose to present a catalogue of these here, but special mention must be made of Kofi Agawu, a Ghanaian scholar who is celebrated not only for his writings on African music, but also for his innovative analysis of Western Art Music¹⁴. Willie Anku was another African scholar who (until his untimely death in 2010) offered revolutionary approaches to the analysis of African music¹⁵. The works of Agawu, Anku and

¹¹ The Conference programme can be seen at: <http://www.ictmusic.org/ictm2015/programme>. See also Rasmussen (2015:15).

¹² Prior to 1964, this author published as J.H. Nketia.

¹³ The Gbeho and Nketia articles are both from the inaugural issue of the journal *African Music*, published by Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa.

¹⁴ Agawu's 1991 text *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music* is widely held to be a landmark in this field.

¹⁵ See in particular Anku (1992, 1993, 1997, 2000, 2007).

others assume greater significance in the context of another development in late twentieth century ethnomusicology, the movement I refer to as “anti-formalism”.

Anti-Formalism and Responses to it

“Anti-formalism” is not a unified, coordinated or centralised belief system with a credo and a mission statement; rather it is a pervasive set of assumptions about the role of theory and analysis in non-Western music forms, and it arises in a great many contexts. Nor does the anti-formalist movement title itself in that way, or in any way, but I adopt the label given to it by Martin Scherzinger (2001), as it is both convenient and accurate.

The anti-formalist movement is primarily a consequence of the influx of sociological and anthropological methods to the discipline of ethnomusicology, and accordingly, scholars who were equipped in those disciplines, but not necessarily in music *per se*. The movement grows from the stated position of Merriam (1964:31, as cited above), and his dismissal of the “descriptive”. As we have seen, this approach has resulted in a large amount of study, under the banner of ethnomusicology, that effectively investigates social structures and processes through the medium of the music, but without engaging with the actual music itself. I take care to emphasise that anti-formalism is not an inevitable or inescapable consequence of the socio-anthropological paradigm. That approach does not necessarily entail anti-formalist ideas, it’s just that that is the sector where anti-formalism principally lives.

Akin Euba assesses the situation in this way (2001:138): “I have often wondered why ethnomusicologists shy away from music theory. Could it be because there are persons in their ranks who cannot read music (in any notation)? We in Africa should seek to promote musical literacy rather than discourage it.”

Let me make it clear that I have no wish to discredit or invalidate such pursuits in academia, but I do question whether they properly belong in the discipline of ethnomusicology, or whether they should be included in their alternative disciplines. Further, while I carry no objection to any author’s wish not to engage with structural analysis, I do take issue with some of the recurring justifications for not doing so, which amount to denial of the validity of the practice.

Euba addresses this phenomenon quite bluntly (2001:138):

The current philosophy of ethnomusicology stresses music as culture, music in culture, music in society and other issues surrounding music rather than music itself. The theory of music (which is the core element of music-making) receives little or no attention from ethnomusicologists. I would even venture to say that, judging from the current attitudes of ethnomusicologists, the theory of music is at variance with the philosophy of ethnomusicology. A field of study that avoids the central core of music making (i.e. creativity) is of no use to Africans.

Euba continues (p.139):

I find it baffling that anthropological dissertations that have little or no musical content continue to be presented to departments of music. This is a position that is unsuitable for Africa. In Africa, those who want to study anthropology should go to departments of anthropology and those who want to study musicology should go to departments of music. We do not need in Africa a field which is called ethnomusicology while it is really a branch of anthropology. We do not need in Africa a field in which music has been literally squeezed out. Take the music out of ethnomusicology and what you have is ethno—ology.

Agawu (2003:183) writes that “The importance of analysis for African music research cannot be underestimated. Gone are the days when African music was either reduced to a functional status or endowed with a magical or metaphysical essence that put it beyond analysis.”

Let me briefly address two major texts on African music of the latter twentieth century: John Miller Chernoff’s *African rhythm and African sensibility* (1979) and Paul Berliner’s *The soul of mbira. Music and traditions of the Shona people of Zimbabwe* (1981). Now I defend both these texts as incisive and inspiring, and I use them both academically; the quality and validity of the texts is not under any form of interrogation here. Both authors, however, dwell on the societal-cultural contexts of the music, rather than on the structural analysis thereof.

Berliner (1981:xvi) writes: “This book tries to analyze mbira music in its broad cultural context and to give the reader a feeling for the significance of the music among the Shona. ... it would be difficult to gain insight into the meaning of any music divorced from its culture.”

Chernoff (1981:30) writes that “the quality of a specific performance cannot be judged by whether the music conforms to an abstracted formal model of ‘musical’ properties or structures as defined by the Western tradition. These properties may serve as a basis for an academic description¹⁶ of diverse African musical idioms, but people do not relate to the music on such a basis.”

Chernoff is absolutely correct—people do not relate to African music on the basis of academic description. But people do not relate to *any* music on the basis of academic description; the fact that people do not relate to the music of J.S. Bach on the basis of academic description does not mean that the academic description of Bach has no value. This, therefore, is not a reason to eschew the structural analysis of African music, and herein lies a clue to the bifurcation in the ethnomusicological discipline.

I posit that the socio-anthropological approach does not value musical analysis because it generally has no ambition to engage with the music of the “other” at a performative level¹⁷;

¹⁶ Chernoff’s use of the term “description” here recalls Merriam’s dismissal of the “descriptive”.

¹⁷ There are exceptions, of course. John Blacking spent twenty-two months from 1956 to 1958 living with the Venda of Northern Transvaal, and learning to sing their songs and play their music, notwithstanding his conviction that “the roots of musical variety are to be found in culture and not in music, and in the human organization of sound rather than in its natural qualities” (Blacking, 1965:20).

the socio-anthropological ethnomusicologist is always in the position of the detached observer, the cultural “outsider”, and has no intention of moving from there. By contrast, the performer-researcher understands very well the necessity of theory and analysis; the latter are central to the performer’s ability to develop the cognitive structures that are essential to coherent performance.

Echoing Kolinski’s 1967 assessment of Merriam (above), Scherzinger mounts a powerful critique of this anti-formalist approach to the study of African musics, in which he addresses both the Berliner and Chernoff texts cited above, and numerous others. Under this thought regime, writes Scherzinger (2001:7) “all African music is irreducibly embedded in its social dimensions and hence all methodological abstractions therefrom constitute a fundamental epistemological breach.”

Scherzinger goes further (p.10):

Any commitment to a particular contextual enclosure for the music under investigation is at once partly patterned by an idealizing inscription (that is, as it were, an immanent formal dimension). The methodological stability of a context of inquiry requires independent principles and criteria. In other words, there is a “formalism” lodged in the very choice of the “social context” the ethnomusicologist deems relevant to a particular music. This choice is political. Thus the written result cannot be wholly unfabricated, or free of formalist constraints.

If I may summarise my take from Scherzinger here, it is that all academic enquiry entails formalism in some manner, indeed to dismiss formalism outright is to dismiss the possibility of academic enquiry. But within the discipline of ethnomusicology we have a school of thought that argues against formalism in one regard, while practicing it in another. The decision as to which kind of formalism is acceptable and which is not, therefore, is a political decision, not an academic one.

Some Contemporary Challenges to the Discipline

One hundred and thirty years after it was first constituted as Comparative Musicology and sixty-five years after it was renamed Ethnomusicology, the discipline remains bifurcated and still struggles for a coherent and consistent definition. While it is identifying scholars as insiders and outsiders, “us” and “them”, it will suffer the negative connotations of colonialism. While its practitioners are advocating anti-formalist positions, it will continue to discredit half of its own stated purpose. But is this perhaps just an academic problem for privileged academics—a “first world problem” as many young people today might express it?

The African position on this matter is instructive. Akin Euba brings to the question a clarity that recalls Kolinski’s warnings (cited above) of ethnocentricity within the discipline (Euba, 2001:139):

Ethnomusicology is irrelevant to African culture. What is relevant to African culture is African musicology. Let us develop a musicology that suits African needs just as other

cultures ... developed musicologies that suit their needs. Let us not force African music scholarship into the field of ethnomusicology, which is really designed to promote Western perceptions of non-Western music. If we accept ethnomusicology it means that we accept the Western view of us rather than form our own opinion of ourselves.

“According to this logic”, writes Locke in response (2014:22), “the world can support multiple musicologies, each focused on the scholarly study of a musical field defined by geo-cultural boundaries ... but none of these many musicologies should arrogate to itself the task of being supraculturally objective and free from cultural bias.” Locke (p.23) advocates the name of “Comparative Ethnomusicology” for a “sub-discipline within ethnomusicology most focused on the global questions of biological history, cultural evolution and species-wide behaviour.”

A more recent stepchild of Ethnomusicology is the phenomenon of “World Music”, which now finds its way into numerous tertiary music programs around the world, and into the titles of several high profile academic texts¹⁸. Having been invited to lecture in units called “World Music” in more than one Australian university, I have found myself having to explain to students that “World Music” is not a musical genre as such, but a convenient marketing label for grouping together a wide range of musical phenomena that may have nothing more in common than the fact that they are not “Western” music—they are not “our” music. Thus the term merely extends the ethnomusicological and retro-colonial idea of “us” and “them”. At worst, “World Music” is the privileged first-world person’s convenience for the commodified music of the less privileged, and I do invite students and colleagues to think carefully about its implications before succumbing to the convenience.

The Purpose and Value of Analysis

Notwithstanding the presence of anti-formalist sentiments, many authors do practice structural analysis of non-Western musical forms, and many have also strongly advocated its value, and we have visited some of these above. I do not catalogue these here, but I do make further mention of Agawu, who writes (2003:173): “Analysis, the act of taking apart to see how the thing works, is a vital and potentially empowering practice. No one who has extended our understanding of African musical language has managed without analysis. Studies of rhythm, multipart procedures, melody and the dynamics of performance are inconceivable without contemplation of events and processes at different levels of structure.”

To this I add a simple truism offered by Tenzer (2006b:5): “We submit that analysis is a path to musical awareness and better musicianship.”

¹⁸ See for example Bohlman (2002), Nettle et al (1992), Tenzer (2006a), Tenzer & Roeder (2011), the journals *Analytical Approaches to World Music* (<http://www.aawmjournal.com/>) and the *Journal of World Popular Music* (<https://www.equinoxpub.com/journals/index.php/JWPM>), and nine volumes of *The Garland encyclopedia of world music*.

How then do we value the properties and processes of musical theory and analysis in African music? I have alluded above to the value of analysis in building cognitive structures that are essential to performance, and this matter is particularly important in the context of a music that is traditionally learned aurally rather than through notated form, as is the case with African music. Agawu clearly recognises this fact (2003:xii) “African music, as a performing art in a predominantly oral tradition, poses uncommon challenges to those who seek to establish its texts and define its analysable objects.”

To the degree that musical notation is a representation of the cognitive structures of the notator, to learn music from notation is to learn a pre-defined cognitive structure. By contrast, and in the absence of notated form, students of African music are largely compelled to create and develop their own cognitive structures, as clues from teachers are few. In this context can arise numerous possible cognitive structures in different individuals, all of which are equally “correct”. This potential for ambiguity—or what Locke (2011) calls “simultaneous multidimensionality”—is at the same time amongst the most challenging and rewarding aspects of the pursuit.

The capacity for ambiguity is exemplified by a project undertaken by Nicholas England in 1964, in which he invited four ethnomusicologists—Robert Garfias, Mieczyslaw Kolinski, George List and Willard Rhodes—to each transcribe the same piece of music (a “song with musical bow” of the Hukwe people of the Kalahari region, south-west Africa), from the same recording of the song, and compare their findings in a symposium (see: England, 1964; Garfias, 1964; Kolinski, 1964; List, 1964; and Rhodes, 1964). The results differ from each other significantly, yet all are discernibly the same song. Each transcription tells us something about what the notator heard and considered important in the recording; each is a representation of a unique cognitive structure. A more recent example of variability in transcription is found in the respective interpretations of the *adowa* drumming tradition of the Ashanti people of Ghana by two African authors: Anku (1997) and Zabana (1997).

Having accepted the value of analysis, one is faced with the question of what type of analysis is best. Agawu (1990; 2003:187-189), Ekwueme (1975/76) and Stock (1993) have addressed the matter of Schenkerian analysis¹⁹ as applied to non-Western musics; all find it entirely valid, although with differing qualifications (and not without their own critics).

My own thinking is that the most appropriate system of analysis and transcription (the latter being a vehicle for analysis) is ultimately dependent upon context—what is actually happening in the music, and what does the analyst aspire to illustrate through analysis. In some instances the Schenkerian system may achieve the desired result; in other instances it may be what Agawu (1990:225) calls “a departure from orthodox Schenkerian principles”; elsewhere a significantly different approach may be required, and may effectively be fashioned for the purpose from a skilled analyst’s personal toolbox. It all begins with the analyst determining the significant elements in whatever the source music is, that should be represented in analysis.

¹⁹ Heinrich Schenker’s systems of analysis view music in three levels of structure: background (structural skeleton), middle-ground (structural substance) and foreground (that which is heard by the listener).

Given the multiplicity of possible approaches, and the ambiguity inherent in much African music, the challenge to the analyst is to develop and allow for a range of possible cognitive structures, without taking any as definitive. Each interpretation may look at the same musical architecture from a different perspective; all may be true, but no single one is “the truth”. In this sense I find support from Barwick, who writes (1990:60): “I propose that analysis is a process of understanding rather than a methodology for producing ‘truth’.”

In the chapter titled “How Not to Analyze African Music”, from his landmark text *Representing African Music. Postcolonial notes, queries, positions* (2003), Agawu examines a number of important analytical studies conducted over the last century, from both African and non-African analysts, and going back to Erich von Hornbostel’s 1928 paper “African Negro Music”. Agawu’s conclusion (2003:196) is salient:

How not to analyze African music? There is obviously no way not to analyze African music. Any and all ways are acceptable. An analysis that lacks value does not yet exist... We must therefore reject all ethnomusicological cautions about analysis because their aim is not to empower African scholars and musicians but to reinforce certain metropolitan privileges. Analysis matters because, through it, we observe at close range the workings of African musical minds.

Conclusion

If analysis of African music needs any validation, it finds it in the writings of Kofi Agawu. Those who wish to pursue the socio-anthropological approach to the topic also have much to contribute, but that position faces two common impediments. One such impediment is that any anti-formalist stance is not only counter-productive, but contradictory, and only serves to highlight its own limitations and the political biases inherent within it. The other impediment is that, though undoubtedly well intentioned, that position tends to justify itself in the “us-and-them” mindset, the idea that it is “we” who study the “other”, which is a relic of colonialism. These are the issues that beset much of what passes in the discipline of ethnomusicology, although there are also encouraging signs that the discipline is evolving.

Meanwhile, analytical practices in African music continue to grow and expand, and with this growth come new challenges. While analysis should be encouraged, it is important to temper expectations that analysis will reveal “truth”, rather than understanding (to recall Barwick, as cited above). Notation systems, as a vehicle for analysis, are a vital part of the process, but they too should be used judiciously. No notation system, and no analytical method, should be elevated to an “official” practice; it is vital that such systems remain plural, varied and flexible, in order to reflect the ambiguities that constitute such a rich component of African music.

We are fortunate to have conspicuous African scholars such as Kofi Agawu leading the way, but importantly the process must remain open to all participants. We cannot return to the days of “us” and “them”.

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