
AFRICAN MUSIC HISTORIOGRAPHY: THE CASE OF GHANA

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ABSTRACT: *Interest in Africa surged in the early decades of the twentieth century resulting in the institutionalization of African Studies from the time of World War II. African historical studies, however, began in earnest after 1960 spurring ethnomusicologists to seek historical perspectives in African music. Since the African historical tradition has been primarily oral, the historian of African music is confronted with challenges. This essay aims at discussing possibilities, challenges, and limitations of music historiography in a predominantly oral culture using Ghana as a case in point. The author proposes the consolidation of the histories of individual musical traditions within Ghana into documents whose aim will be to give an overview of music history. A two-pronged approach is suggested – firstly, a systematic documentation of historical sources relevant to Ghanaian cultural areas, and secondly, local/regional/thematic studies relative to categories of music, organology, etc. This will enrich understanding of the historical past of Africa in general.*

KEYWORDS: historiography, oral culture, organology, systematic documentation, Ghananin culture,

INTRODUCTION

The early decades of the twentieth century saw an upsurge of interest in Africa. This led to “a coordination and sponsoring of African Studies” by Europeans (Kapteijns, 1977, p. 15). The International Africa Institute founded in 1926 became a center of research on ethnological, linguistic and sociological issues pertaining to Africa. Since World War II, African Studies has become institutionalized. This is evident in the numerous Institutes of African studies that mushroomed in both Africa and the West. African historical studies, however, did not take off until the years after 1960 (ibid). Developments in African historical studies stimulated ethnomusicologists to search for historical perspectives in African music. In the 1950s, some scholars were of the view that the historical study of non-western music was a goal that was unattainable because of lack of written sources. This, however, did not deter ethnomusicologists from exploring historical dimensions in the African field (Nketia, 2005). This essay aims at discussing the possibilities, challenges and limitations of music historiography in a predominantly oral culture using Ghana as a case in point. I suggest a two-pronged approach towards the consolidation of the histories of individual musical traditions within Ghana into documents whose aim will be to give an overview of the music history of Ghana.

African Music Historiography

It is a well-known fact that “the African historical tradition has been mainly oral” (op.cit., p.7). Oral traditions have been defined as “verbal messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation” (Vansina, 1985, p. 27). The messages “must be oral statements spoken, sung, or called out on musical instruments only” (ibid.) and these become oral traditions as they are “transmitted beyond the generation that gave rise to them (ibid., p.

13). Studies on oral traditions as historical sources have shown them to have advantages and limitations. As Vansina points out, oral tradition is unique in that it provides inside information. He notes that “Without oral traditions, we would know very little about the past of large parts of the world, and we would not know them from the inside. We also could never build up interpretations from the inside” (p. 198). This and other advantages notwithstanding, it is impossible to rely solely on oral traditions for music historiography in the African context. First of all, the time-depth of oral tradition is limited. How far back in time can one go with orally transmitted information? Perhaps a couple of centuries. Related to this is “a lack of chronology” (ibid., p.187) in most African societies making dating difficult. As Moniot (1986) points out, “oral traditions do not include reliable dates” (p.52). Again, vital information may be lost as these verbal messages are transmitted from one generation to the other. Migration, for example, may interfere with the smooth transmission of messages. Therefore, as has been suggested by some scholars for the study of African history in general, oral tradition must be used in conjunction with other historical sources.

Kubik (1994) classifies existing historical sources on African music. Apart from oral historical sources, he outlines the following categories – objects, pictorial sources, written sources and sound recordings. Using a combination of these sources, Kubik notes that, “it is becoming possible [...] to reconstruct major portions of Africa’s music history” (p. 21).

The main goal of African music historiography is to discover the “historical processes that affected the cultivation and maintenance of musical instruments, categories of songs, stylistic changes” and also to ascertain the “relative age of musical types” (Nketia, 2005, p. 253) or “the particular and ultimate origin of individual music styles or instruments” (Merriam, 1967, p. 93).

One of the challenges the music historian faces in the Ghanaian context (as in many other African countries) is the diversity of cultures one finds in the nation. Ghana, as a geographical locale, is host to a conglomeration of ethnic groups. One cannot speak of a Ghanaian music tradition per se, but rather of a number of musical traditions within Ghana such as the Akan musical tradition, the Ewe musical tradition and so on. The historical trajectories of the traditions may differ requiring the scholar to examine the migration as well as socio-political, religious and economic histories, among others, of each tradition. As Kubik (1994) observes from his studies in African cultures, “musical styles and specific traits are rarely linked in a rigid manner to entities as small as “ethnic groups” (p. 11). He notes that “More often they are linked to ethnically related population clusters, speaking languages belonging to the same [linguistic] zone” (ibid.). Again, he points out that, “musical traditions in Africa have had individual life-spans, they started at some point in history and vanished at another” (p.21). However, a great number have survived to present day.

Studies tend to focus on particular musical traditions and some traditions have been studied more extensively than others. The traditional areas that seem to have preserved their cultural practices and traditional systems provide windows through which their musical past can be reconstructed for as Nketia (2005) rightly notes, the study of the present is crucial in historical studies because “the present, to a large extent, encapsulates the past” (p.244).

Of the oral sources available, the music historian may explore song texts some of which are known to contain historical information. For example, Nketia (2005) cites song texts (from Akan funeral dirges) in which references are made to musical creations attributed to kings, as

well as some in which particular instruments are mentioned (p. 262 – 265). Generally, song texts seem to be “capable of existing unchanged in the folk idiom over substantial periods of time, although we do not know for how long” (Merriam, 1967, p. 88). Their time span may be relatively short. The other difficulty of gleaning historical information from song texts, according to Merriam (ibid.), has to do with the authenticity of the texts. In other words, how accurate is the message or description that is conveyed? The principle of selectivity and interpretation, which Vansina (1985) explains as a limitation of oral tradition, also needs to be considered. Simply put, selectivity means that information about the past may be sifted leaving only that which is considered to be relevant or significant in the present. Interpretation, on the other hand, implies the alteration of information from the past in order to give it new meaning. The principle can occur in the process of transmission of song texts.

Historic accounts in which musical instruments and musical activity are described are a good source for the music historian. Arab historical records are said to contain sporadic references to music in Africa (Nketia, 2005) and these perhaps, in the West African case, may date back to the period Shaw (1985) designates as the Islamic Contact Period in West African history (c. 700 A.D. – 1475 A.D.).

Historical sources on African music include travelers’ accounts, pictorial documents, colonial records and missionary accounts. Written mostly by Europeans, these documents were based on eye-witness accounts and/or oral sources. In spite of their bias, these sources are of great value to the historian of African music. For example, Hirschberg (1969), in his article on early illustrations of West and Central Africa, uses the reports by the following authors as sources for West Africa – Pieter de Marees (1603, 1605), Wilhelm Johann Müller (1676), Otto Friedrich von der Gröben (1694) and François Froger (1698). It is evident from Hirschberg’s article that the earliest historical illustrations of West African music date back to the early seventeenth century and De Marees’ work is particularly relevant for the Gold Coast. Bosman and Barbot, whose works date back to the eighteenth century, also make references in their works to music on the Guinea Coast.¹ In the early nineteenth century, Bowdich recorded his observations of Asante music.² All these works and others combined provide information on musical practice in West Africa for a period of about four centuries.

Written sources also include transcriptions of African music. According to Merriam (1967), “although fragments of notated songs appear from time to time in the accounts of early travelers, explorers, missionaries, and others”, “the validity of these transcriptions [...] is in considerable doubt” (p. 89). More recent transcriptions, with the advent of sound recording equipment, are perhaps more reliable despite the debate on the “correct” representation of African music in notation. However, it is unclear the nature of the information that these transcriptions provide the music historian. Perhaps with accurate transcriptions from the past, stylistic changes (which may stem from external influences and/or other factors) can be observed when the ‘old music’ is compared to music of the present day. Merriam’s assertion made in the 1960s requires further investigation. He notes that:

“To the best of my knowledge, no sharp differences exist between past and present music sound systems in Africa; but again to the best of my knowledge, no really detailed comparative studies of such materials have been undertaken” (Merriam, 1967, p. 89).

Since sound recording is a relatively recent technological development, comparing African music of the fourteenth century, for example, with twentieth century African music, is a challenging task to undertake. While the latter is well-captured in some form of notation and in recordings, the former has not been captured in any concrete form that will facilitate the work of the music historian. While it may appear that African sound systems have remained, to a large extent, the 'same' over a substantial period of time, the music itself cannot be said to have remained the same for the same period of time even though, according to Nketia (2005), "music in the oral tradition [...] changes slowly" (p. 243).

In certain parts of Africa, particularly in Egypt, archaeological findings have made research in instruments extremely rich (Merriam, op. cit.). According to Sachs³, this is attributable to "the extreme aridity of the desert soil and the Egyptian belief in the magic power of painting and sculpture" which has resulted in the preservation of hundreds of instruments as well as art works depicting musical scenes. The situation in other African areas outside Egypt is different. Archaeological record in the less arid areas seems to be scanty particularly because materials out of which instruments are constructed are easily perishable (ibid.). According to Nketia (2005),

"in the literature of African music ..., a great deal of attention is given to traditional musical instruments, techniques of drumming and African rhythmic procedures, the music of tuned idiophones (mbira and xylophones), notation and transcription (since this is music in oral tradition to which literate musicians hope to gain access), aspects of the socio-cultural context of music and problems related to music and social change as well as the reconstruction of the history of music in oral tradition" (p.111).

It appears, however, that not many researchers aim at reconstructing African music history. Ethnographic studies, in certain cases, are conducted not with the primary goal of searching for historical evidence in traditional African music.

This notwithstanding, there have been efforts by some scholars since the 1960s to contribute to knowledge of African music history. One key volume on the subject is the 1971 publication *Essays on Music and History in Africa*, which is a collection of papers covering East, West and South Africa as well as issues of Islam and African music. While this compilation is not exhaustive in dealing with the numerous musical traditions in Africa, it seems to be the first of its kind and of great historical significance. Kubik (1994), in the introduction to his book *Theory of African Music, Vol. 1*, also presents a brief section on African music in history based on sources available at the time. He describes, for example, iconographic material dating ca. 6000 – 4000 B.C. which he notes as 'probably one of the oldest testimonies of music/dance in Africa in existence' (p.22). Methodological issues in African music history research have been discussed, for example, in Nketia's (2005) paper "On the Historicity of Music in African Cultures".

While the above-mentioned efforts are aimed at African music history in general, there is the need for regional/national histories that will feed the "continental picture", so to speak. It is in this regard that a historiography of African music in Ghana is relevant. Although ethnographic studies abound as well as specific works on the music histories of individual musical cultures, there is the need to galvanize interest in a national history of music. A collection of studies by

different authors (similar to *Essays on Music and History in Africa*) may be the ultimate goal with the aim of giving an overview of ‘music in Ghanaian history’.

The task may require a two-pronged approach. First of all, there should be a systematic documentation of historical sources relevant to Ghanaian cultural areas or regions as Nketia (1970) suggests for the study of musical history in Africa. He notes that, “There is a need to build up a variety of sources of historical data in a systematic manner from oral traditions, linguistic, ethnological and archaeological material as well as from available documentary sources” (p. 49). Secondly, efforts must be made “to recover music history through both local and regional studies of historical topics that relate to categories of music” such as court music, ritual music, etc., “distribution studies and topics related to problems of organology or musical style” as well as “thematic studies that cut across ethnic boundaries” (Nketia, 2005, pp. 247-8).

While the collective effort of musicologists and music historians can help attain the goal of recovering the history of African music in Ghana, one challenge still remains. How do we go beyond the time-depth of oral traditions? How do we go beyond the past five centuries or so that oral tradition enables us to investigate? For as Fage (1971) points out, there is “a very close connection between the maintenance of formal oral tradition and the existence of a formal state (or mode of government)” and that oral traditions “may be expected to extend back to the declared origins of current states, which are seldom more than about five centuries old” (p. 259).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, “the oral traditions of many African states can be used and treated as the equivalent of written chronicles, provided that they are used with due care and circumspection. But the time-depth of even the best of these is limited. We are doing very well if we can follow them back for as much as five hundred years or so. Moreover, oral traditions are not *record* material; they are not absolute data. They are *ex parte* statements which must be subjected to careful checking and cross-checking”. (Fage, 1971, p. 258)

The use of oral traditions in conjunction with other historical sources is therefore of paramount importance in the quest to reconstruct the musical past of Africa in general and of Ghana in particular. The systematic documentation of historical sources that will facilitate regional, local and thematic studies is of essence and altogether, these studies will enrich our understanding of the historical past of Africa.

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