

## **African Music as Text**

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### **Abstract**

In so far as they constitute complex messages rooted in specific cultural practices, the varieties of African music known to us today may be designated as text. While performing practice and audience participation vary according to genre, the activity of meaning construction remains essential to all participants. We only have to listen to the elaborate vocal polyphony of BaAka Pygmies, the polyrhythmic dance-drumming of Fon, Anlo-Ewe, or Yoruba, the horn ensembles of the Banda-Linda; or Zairean soukous, Nigerian jùjú and fújì, Ghanaian Highlife, South African mbube; or the compositions of Fela Sowande, Akin Euba, Ephraim Amu, and Joshua Uzoigwe to begin to appreciate the kinds of fantasies that music in motion elicits. Traditional African music is not normally described as contemplative art (see Euba, "The Potential of African Traditional Music"). It is thought rather to be functional. Functional music drawn from ritual, work, or play is externally motivated. Thus funeral dirges sung by mourners, boat-rowing songs sung by fishermen, lullabies performed by mothers, and songs of insult traded by feuding clans: these utilitarian music's are said to be incompletely understood whenever analysis ignores the social or "extra musical" context. This music is then contrasted with élite or art music, whose affinities with European classical music are for the most part unmediated. Such contemplative music is not tied to an external function. Although it is in principle consumed in a social setting, it demands nothing of its hearers save contemplation, meditation, an active self-forgetting. According to this distinction, then, analysis of traditional music -- which is sometimes generalized to encompass all African music -- must always take into account the particular activity to which the music is attached, whereas analysis of European music, unburdened of attachment to external function, can concentrate on the music itself, its inner workings, the life of its tones. It does not require a great deal of imagination to see that the distinction between functional and contemplative is deeply problematic. It is especially problematic in failing to recognize the myriad opportunities for contemplation presented to makers of many so-called functional musics. I am not speaking merely of the existence of a genre of "songs for reflection" among the Gbaya (see Dehoux, "Centrafrique: Musique Gbaya"), or of the wordless chant Gogodze sung by the Ewe of Ve, Volta Region, Ghana. I am speaking rather of more familiar and ordinary genres of music. A lullaby offers an opportunity for creativity to both mother (performer) and child (audience), the former making worlds of words and allusions to please, soothe or comfort the latter. The extensive repetition of exclamations or song words found in Ewe dirges is an opening up of space for contemplation, a temporary freezing of verbal content so that underlying musical procedures -- such as certain turns of phrase, certain cadential approaches, certain spontaneously composed embellishments -- can be relished. Children's game songs that play with pitch and scalar order, or introduce rhythmic riddles, or play with tone by elevating sound over semantic meaning -- these and many other genres of music make clear that

close listening is not the exclusive preserve of élite audiences in metropolitan settings. And with each close listening, African traditional performers weave webs of meaning around the musical object, constituting it freshly with each new performance (see Agawu, *African Rhythm*). The point that African music can be legitimately listened to still needs to be made in view of long-standing views linking music and dance. Gerhard Kubik, for example, has argued that African music constitutes a "motional system" (9-46). The implication is that physical negotiation of various musical patterns is as important as the sonic trace itself. The resulting emphasis on context easily leads to a denial that listening to African music without extra musical props can be a rewarding or even.