

THE INFLUENCE OF TRADITIONAL INSTRUMENTS ON THE PERFORMANCE AND
SOUND OF EAST AFRICAN MUSIC

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When referencing a topic as broad and multidimensional as that of the sound of East African music, one must be particularly vigilant to avoid the pitfalls of essentializing a region as culturally rich and diverse as all of East Africa. Of the 12 countries comprising this region (although definitions vary), Ethiopia, which alone is near twice the size of Texas, is home to a population speaking over 70 languages and 200 dialects, while in Uganda, over 32 different languages are spoken each accommodating different tribes and each tribe with its own varieties of music.¹ As the “cradle of civilization” with an agricultural history dating back roughly 10,000 years, the extent to which such musical traditions reach in this vast region of Africa are considerable indeed. In that music and dance are also so integrally knit into the fabric of East African culture to this day, it is perhaps no surprise that even in view of the at times brutal European colonization of this land, indigenous traditional music, instruments, and techniques remain an inexorable component of the musical landscape.

Depending on where one goes in East Africa, the presence and influence of traditional instruments can vary considerably. In rural villages where modern conveniences such as electricity and municipal services may be a rarity, indigenous and handmade instruments can be found in great abundance. In rural Uganda for instance, one can find musicians playing traditional flutes and panpipes, tubefiddles, xylophones, rock chimes, bells, rattles, and the like.² In cities and urban centers, where one is more likely to encounter more contemporary African music (generally a blend of indigenous traditions, colonial music, and emergent global trends³), the presence and influence of traditional instruments may at times be less apparent to the untrained observer.

¹ Gregory F Barz, *Music in East Africa*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 77.

² *Ibid.*, 78.

³ Steven Cornelius, “Week 2 – Cultures of Africa: A Musical Snapshot,” Boston University Online, <http://vista.bu.edu/webct/urw/lc5116011.tp0/cobaltMainFrame.dowebct> (accessed February 8, 2011).

The guitar, sometimes seen as a mere substitute for indigenous string instruments, has sparked the most innovation and change in urban African music of any other instrument on the continent.⁴ Although the use of the guitar was not considered significant until the twentieth century, its African roots can be traced back as early as the 1500s when Europeans first made significant contact with sub-Saharan Africa.⁵ Its predominance in contemporary popular African music is now however undeniable. Of the two essential styles of urban popular music, the “song” or listening style, and the “dance” style, the guitar is often featured prominently.⁶ Kubik writes; “The trinity of lead, rhythm and bass guitars has been the model for nearly 40 years; sometimes locally manufactured instruments are added to this combination to lend an indigenous or national flavor.”⁷ Owing in part to its physical similarity to many indigenous instruments⁸ and greater range possibilities, African musicians have applied to the guitar traditional techniques borrowed from the *nyatiti* (lyre) playing style in Kenya, the slide style of the *likembe* in the Congo, and the *seprewa* (Akan lute) techniques of the Akan area of West Africa.⁹ Conversely, characteristic guitar styles have been applied by African musicians to the Ugandan *lukeme* (lamelaphone). The traditional gourd-resonated bow *ndonga* has also been observed imitating the function of the bass guitar as well.¹⁰

⁴ Stephen H. Martin, “Popular Music in Urban East Africa: From Historical Perspective to a Contemporary Hero,” *Black Music Research Journal*, 11, no. 1 (Spring, 1991): 44. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/779243> (accessed February 7, 2011).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁷ Gerhard Kubik, “Africa,” In *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.bu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/00268> (accessed January 19, 2011).

⁸ e.g., the *kibangala* and the *ngoni*

⁹ Gerhard Kubik, “Neo-Traditional Popular Music in East Africa Since 1945,” *Folk or Popular? Distinctions, Influences, Continuities*, in *Popular Music* 1 (1981): 93-94. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/853245> (accessed February 7, 2011).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 87

Although the use of traditional instruments has been slowly disappearing from ordinary life as most former African colonies emerge into the global modern world,¹¹ their presence and influence is nonetheless intrinsic to the sound of contemporary East Africa music. Indeed traditional music-making continues to serve important ritual and routine purposes throughout the region.¹² A brief survey of various radio stations of Uganda and Tanzania broadcasting simultaneously over the internet¹³ will often reveal the prominent contribution of African tradition, drums, and percussion, although the formidable musical influence of the West is not without ample representation as well.¹⁴ In some cases locally made instruments have survived *because* of their incorporation into modern music making. Kubik writes that “*valimba* gourd-resonated xylophones in southern Malawi probably survived into the 1990s due to local musicians learning to copy music first from popular Kenyan records and then from Zimbabwean records.”¹⁵ Modern *Soukous* music typically employs traditional Congolese percussion instruments, and *Palm Wine* music combines African shakers and hand drums along with Western banjos¹⁶ and guitars.¹⁷ In *Juju* music, “electricity and the ability to amplify voices and strings created the possibility of bringing in heavier percussion, in particular the Yoruba talking drum, or ‘gangan’.”¹⁸

Even in the field of contemporary African classical music, the influence of traditional instruments can at times be plainly evident. For example, the first movement of Ugandan

¹¹ Steven Cornelius, “Week 4 – Traditional Music and Instruments in East Africa,” Boston University Online, <http://vista.bu.edu/webct/urw/lc5116011.tp0/cobaltMainFrame.dowebct> (accessed February 11, 2011).

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ e.g., Kameme 101.1 FM, East FM 106.3, and KASS FM

¹⁴ This observation is the result of my own unscientific survey of listening to several hours of internet broadcasts of a number of Ugandan and Tanzanian radio stations chosen at random over the period of two days.

¹⁵ Gerhard Kubik, “Africa,” In Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online.

¹⁶ As asserted in the film *Throw Down your Heart* featuring the well-known banjo player Bela Fleck, the banjo is thought to be a descendant of the Gambian *akonting* that is still played today.

¹⁷ Steven Cornelius, “Week 2 – Cultures of Africa: A Musical Snapshot.”

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

composer Justinian Tamasuza's composition for string quartet, *Mu Kkubo Ery' Omusaalaba*, often relies on the "imitation and evocation of Ugandan instruments such as the *endingidi* (tubefiddle) and the *akadinda* (xylophone)" by members of the quartet when performing the piece.¹⁹ Similarly, as strict social stratification continue to soften in East Africa, the *valiha* tube zither, once mastered only by aristocracy and performed exclusively for sacred ceremonies, has in recent years come to be included in popular and secular music as well as most African celebrations.²⁰

Despite the many assertions that African traditions and the use of traditional instruments is slowly disappearing (particularly in urban areas)²¹, there is evidence that such aspects of African culture are not likely to fall into complete extinction any time soon. Ellert and other researchers maintain that traditional instruments have indeed survived in spite of "the invasion of Western civilization and its cultural values."²² Traditional music is still practiced as an integral part of social life, and indeed almost all African governments have created language bureaus, national dance companies and/or cultural troupes in support of cultural development.²³ Cornelius maintains that in East Africa; "both traditional music-making and modern African genres are encouraged and supported,"²⁴ and Barz writes; "children...learn traditional music and dance in elementary schools today while others continue to learn the traditions of their culture and community in their home village communities."²⁵ Similar to the way we embrace cultural growth

¹⁹ Gregory F Barz, *Music in East Africa*, 102.

²⁰ Steven Cornelius, "Week 2 – Cultures of Africa: A Musical Snapshot."

²¹ Steven Cornelius, "Week 4 – Traditional Music and Instruments in East Africa."

²² Ibid.

²³ Eric A. Akrofi, "Major Problems Confronting Scholars and Educators of the Musical Arts in Sub-Saharan Africa," <http://www.maydaygroup.org/php/ecolumns/comparativemusiced-reports/africa-akrofi.php> (accessed January 19, 2011).

²⁴ Steven Cornelius, "Week 3 – Music of East Africa," Boston University Online, <http://vista.bu.edu/webct/urw/lc5116011.tp0/cobaltMainFrame.doweibct> (accessed February 1, 2011).

²⁵ Gregory F Barz, *Music in East Africa*, 87-88.

and change here in the West, Africa too is not a museum piece to be frozen in time and placed under glass. It is clear that recognition and respect for our heritage is vital to self-understanding. If we do not know where we have been, it is difficult to carve an informed path to where we are headed. Barz asserts; “in many ways the identity formation in East Africa embraces *both* Western and indigenous African musical aesthetics—‘departing’ yet retaining, ‘repudiating’ while simultaneously preserving.”²⁶ In a review of the sources cited, it is quite remarkable that the evolution of African music and culture seems to have developed a more harmonious balance between the old and the new than we have experienced here in the West.

²⁶ Gregory F Barz, *Music in East Africa*, 100.

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