

PARALLELISMS IN TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SYSTEM OF MUSIC EDUCATION AND ORFF SCHULWERK

by

W.K. AMOAKU

The acquisition of musical knowledge or, for that matter, any knowledge in any society is guided by a variety of factors prescribed by the life styles of the society as a homogeneous unit. There are as many distinct life-styles as there are societies and the norms and parameters that govern them are also greatly diverse. However, scholarship has shown that in spite of such diversities as may be encountered in the life-styles of the world's peoples, there are certain often unsuspected underlying similarities in patterns of behavior. For example, it is quite misleading to assume that the purpose of a harvest festival among the Ewe of Ghana differs from that of the Jews, Vietnamese or the Austrians. The actual celebration may vary from place to place but the primary purpose, which is religious in character, is identical.

Based on the foregoing observation, therefore, it is neither unrealistic nor far-fetched to propose that there are possible parallelisms in the traditional African system of acquiring musical knowledge and the system developed by the prolific German composer and teacher, Dr. Carl Orff.

Although scores of documentary evidence have established differences between traditional African and European systems of education, it is necessary to reiterate them here in order to make my discussion meaningful.

The basic objectives and principles of any educational system are a true reflection of that society's world view, expectations and needs. An educational system may be deliberately shaped to satisfy a social need, serve a particular political ideology or provide an economic consequence. In traditional African societies, the acquisition of knowledge is in itself a lifetime occupation based on the process of enculturation and, of course, oral tradition. By the process of enculturation, I am referring specifically to that learning process based on observation of existing patterns of behavior and active participation in organised and spontaneous activities in a geographically defined community or society as a whole. Oral tradition simply connotes the process of transmitting knowledge from generation to generation by "word of mouth".

There has been a tendency that regarded oral tradition as unreliable. This is a fallacy borne out of ignorance. Oral tradition is just as reliable as written tradition, for, as observed by Jan Vansina,¹

Oral traditions are historical sources of a special nature. Their special nature derives from the fact that they are unwritten sources couched in a form suitable for oral transmission and their preservation depends on the powers of memory of successive generations of human beings.

I must stress further that in addition to being the sources of oral transmission, oral traditions are essentially derived from an inter-relationship with the universe, which a traditional society regards as factual and constant.

Generally speaking there are three basic significant objectives of education *per se* in traditional African societies.

1. First, the system provides that every individual member of society be fully integrated both as an individual person, and as a fully participating, responsible and active member of his society with all that the term implies in the context of the traditional African;
2. Second, the development of the intellect takes second place to the heightening and refining of the intuition, of sensitivity towards influences which are non-physical in nature, and of the acquisition of that attitude through which he recognises himself as an extension of the society, which, nevertheless, he epitomizes in himself as an individual, and
3. Third, the use of riddles, proverbs, folk-tales and the learning of legends, mythologies and oral traditions, were the means through which the objectives and principles of education were achieved. This fact is further emphasized by William Bascom² in his "Folklore and Literature", Christine Oppong in her *Growing Up in Dogbon*³ and E.Y.Egblewogbe in *Games and Songs as Education Media*.⁴

The average child in a traditional African setting acquires these educational values through constant exposure to a variety of situations as well as by forming alliances with others in his or her own age and sex group. The acquisition of musical skill, which begins on the mother's lap, is systematically enhanced as soon as the child is old enough to crawl outside the family compound and play with other children.

My personal musical experiences began in a similar manner. As far as I can remember, I used to sit on my father's lap as he played the cornet and directed the local brass band. At the age of nine, I was given a toy drum as a Christmas present. I never missed any brass band performance thereafter. I tried as much as I could to imitate the tenor drummer in every number the band played. By age ten, I was assigned a "major role" as the double bell player, a position considered rather prestigious in the local brass band in those days – 1949-50.

My musical scope was further broadened as a group of the more adventurous boys, of which I was an integral member, defied all the stringent school regulations and began to play active roles in traditional music ensembles. In those days such defiance was either punishable by suspension from school or severe whipping. In any case, these frightening school and church rules did not deter me or the other hard-headed boys. We kept returning to the dance arena after each whipping session. Some lost their rights to formal education as a result of this consistent defiance.

It may be deduced from the foregoing that there are presently at least two systems of education on the continent of Africa – the traditional African system and the system of education introduced by the colonial administrations. The latter may be traced historically to the fifteenth century when the Portuguese crossed the Straits of Gibraltar and entered the Guinea Coast via Senegal. It was intensified, however, when the continent was finally partitioned by the English, French and other white settlers by the early 1900s. Consequently, a variety of Western educational systems may be found on the continent today, the dominant ones being English and French.

Despite differences in structure, the objectives of Western educational systems are identical. Apart from offering a conventional platform for communication and "advancement", Western educational systems in Africa have proved to be the most

effective means of perpetuating Western values and life-styles. It sounds incredible but true that innumerable Africans think of themselves as Europeans - coffee or tea, bacon and egg in the morning with Beethoven's Fifth Symphony as "background" music.⁵

It is not the purpose of this paper to castigate "Afro-Europeanism" in Africa. Nevertheless, it is necessary that attention be drawn to these observable contrasting features as a guide to understanding Africa as it is today.

The introduction and acceptance of Western education in Africa has helped create additional medium of musical expression - formal music education. Although this is not as widespread as the traditional system of music education, it has nevertheless, made a substantial impact on the lives of those who have been exposed to it through classroom instruction or other available means.

The need for an African version of the Orff Schulwerk was, in my opinion, necessitated by the current trend of socio-religious and political situations in Africa, i.e. The rise of nationalism, borne out of the rash of politically independent African states. It will be unthinkable for Nigerian, Ghanaian or Angolan children, for example, to go to school to learn to sing and play German or English songs - Baa, baa, black sheep, have you any wool? Or Ha, ha, ha, laughing is contagious, etc. In nine out of ten African schools, music lessons are truly the most abhorred of all lessons by children. Apart from the fact that children do not relate to the entire process of learning, the music teacher, who is also the classroom teacher of all other subjects in the curriculum, is usually untrained in the subject and consequently approaches her lesson from an amateur point of view; a music class is nothing but a singing class, anyway.

The necessity to create a traditional African oriented system of music education for classroom use is underscored by the present deplorable situation. This new approach must neither be entirely African nor European. It must be a reciprocal kind of approach that overemphasizes neither but at the same time provides the necessary ingredients for musical growth and development of musical skills among school-age children.

Of all the contemporary trends in music education, Orff Schulwerk is perhaps the closest to traditional African approach to music. The essentials of Schulwerk which include speech, rhythm and movement come rather close to the traditional African concept of music making, notwithstanding that Schulwerk is also associated with tuned percussion.

As a product of the Orff Institute, one of the most startling features of my learning experience in Austria was my familiarity with the whole process of imparting musical knowledge. It was this fact that guided me primarily in compiling the small volume of African Songs and Rhythms for Children in the Orff Tradition. Dr. Orff was particularly interested in the volume because of the endless possibilities that it offered. For example, a German television team headed by Dr. Regner, the Director of the Orff Institute in Salzburg, Austria, has just returned from a filming mission in Ghana. This was intended to provide a documentation of the adaption of Schulwerk in an African country as well as eight or so other countries around the world.

In conclusion, no one can deny the fact that African traditions have stood the test of time. In much the same way, it will be absurd to ignore those aspects of these

traditions that have been affected most by the impact of Western influence. Furthermore, the emergence of "Afro-European" life-styles as a result of the Western impact on Africa constitutes a compromise of the two basically distinct life-styles. Unfortunately, however, there is a severe lack of relative educational materials that can give these life-styles a meaningful expression in every-day life. In the meantime, these life-styles, which are neither European nor African, are an impediment to any form of progress, for they do not relate entirely to the West nor to traditional Africa.

Traditional African educational systems are potent with values that are immensely beneficial to contemporary trends in education per se. History has shown that the more technologically and economically advanced a society becomes, the less its respect for the arts. They are simply regarded as part and parcel of the economic bag.

It is, therefore, gratifying that Dr. Orff has delved back into the past to pull out a system of learning that relates directly to the Western society and indirectly to those non-Western societies that have no choice but to satisfy the demands imposed by modernization. If African societies are, indeed, eager to retrieve their traditional systems of imparting musical knowledge and skill in the formal classroom situation, Orff Schulwerk is definitely a positive addition to the existing processes.

NOTES

- 1 See Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, Chicago; Aldine Publications, 1965.
- 2 William Bascom, "Folklore and Literature" *The African World: A Survey of Social Research* ed. Robert A. Lystad, New York; Praeger, 1965, p. 469.
- 3 See Christine Oppong, *Growing Up in Dogbon*, Accra; Ghana Publishing Corp., 1973.
- 4 E.Y. Egblewogbe, *Games and Songs as Education Media*, Accra; Ghana Publishing Corp., 1975.
- 5 I have made a similar observation in another study, *Symbolism in traditional institutions and music of the Ewe of Ghana*, University of Pittsburg, Ph.D. Dissertation, 1975 (unpublished).
- 6 W.K. Amoaku, *African Songs and Rhythms for Children*, Mainz; Schott, 1971, also available on record, Folkways, 1978.

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