

SOME SOURCES ON MUSIC IN WESTERN SUDAN FROM 1300-1700

by

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African music seems to be still viewed as being without history, at least when judged by the attention paid to this aspect of it. It is only recently that a few scholars have directed their interest to the study of African music in the 19th century¹. The history of music in Africa in 'mediaeval' times gives rise to even more questions. Though we are furnished with a fairly complete knowledge of 'mediaeval' West Africa in almost all its aspects by Arabian and Sudanese contemporaries of the time, few scholars contributed to the exploration of these early sources².

The historians and their respective works this account refers to are, in chronological order:

1. Al-'Omari: *Masalik el absar fi mamalik el amsar*³ (between 1342 and 1349).
2. Kâti, Mahmoûd: *Tarikh el-Fettach*⁴ (1519).
3. Sa'di: *Tarikh es-Soudan*⁵ (1655).
4. Anon: *Kano Chronicle*⁶.

Al-'Omari, born in 1301, was secretary of the Sultan of Cairo and from 1340 worked as a state secretary in Damascus. He died in 1349 in Damascus without having visited West Africa himself. His *Masalik* was written between 1342 and 1349.

Mahmoûd Kâti was born in Timbuktu in 1468 and died in 1593. He was twenty-five when Askia-Muhammad 'The Great', the Songhai ruler came to power. He became a member of the Askia's personal staff and accompanied him on his pilgrimage to Mecca. He began his great chronicle in about 1519 and his sons and grandsons brought the story of the empire of Gao down to about 1665.

Sa'di was born in 1569 in Timbuktu, a few years before the Moroccan invasion. He was a notary in Jenne and then became imam of the mosque of Sankore. In 1637 he returned to Timbuktu where he held the position of a kâteb, taking part actively in official politics.

The *Kano Chronicle* "may perhaps have been written by some stranger from the north who settled in Kano, and collected the stories of former kings handed down by oral tradition". (*Kano Chronicle*: 59). The exact date of its formation is unknown, but it is probable that it is well before the Fulani jihad in 1804. As to its reliability "it seems . . . highly probable that, except for the very early kings, the *Chronicle* is roughly accurate". (*Kano Chronicle*: 60.)

Before entering into the details of the music it will be necessary to trace in broad

¹I only mention some of them:

Guignard, M.: "Mauritanie. Les Maures et leur musique au XIXème siècle" in R. Günther (ed.), *Musikulturen Asiens, Afrikas und Ozeaniens im 19. Jahrhundert*, Regensburg, Bosse, 1973.

Kazadi, P. C.: "Trends of nineteenth and twentieth century music in the Congo Zaïre" in R. Günther . . .

Kirby, P. R.: *The musical instruments of the native races of South Africa*, Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1965.

Mensah, A. A.: "Music of nineteenth-century Zambia" in R. Günther . . .

Nketia, K.: "History and the organization of music in West Africa" in K. P. Wachsmann (ed.) *Essays on music and history in Africa*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1971.

²Hirschberg, W.: "Early historical illustrations of West and Central African Music" in *African Music*, Vol. IV, No. 3 (1969).

³published as: *L'Afrique moins l'Égypte* (translated by Gaudefray-Demombynes) Paris, Geuthner, 1927.

⁴Ed: We regret having been unable to set correctly the accents on the following words: Al-'Omari, Masalik, absar, mamalik, amsar.

⁵translated by O. Houdas and M. Delafosse, Paris, Maisonneuve, 1964.

⁶translated by O. Houdas, Paris, Leroux, 1900.

⁷translated by H. R. Palmer in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 38, 1908.

lines the historical events that took place since the beginning of the 14th century, for "when we look at the history of music in this area . . . we must direct our attention first and foremost to the political and social factors arising from the impetus of trade and the conquest of Islam, for it was the absorption of new musical elements and ideas into the political and social organization that tended to determine the directions of musical development". (Nketia 1971: 9.)

The date 1300 marks the height of the power and the extension of several Western Sudan empires such as the empire of Mali, which, under its ruler Mansa Musa (1307-1337) covered most of the western and central regions of Western Sudan. It was preceded by the powerful empire of Ghana which lasted from about 750-1076 when it started to collapse under the heavy attacks of the Almoravid Berbers. Meanwhile Islam had made its appearance in West Africa and found strongholds in a few important trading centres along the Sahel zone.

About 1464, the year by which Sunni Ali came to the throne of Gao, Mali was overrun by the Songhai empire. Timbuktu and Jenne were then the great centres of Muslim scholarship.

About 1400 the influence of another group of states founded as early as about 1000, the Hausa states, began to make itself felt in the eastern region of West Africa. Though some of these states temporarily came under Songhai or Bornu rule, Kano, Zaria etc. continued to be prosperous centres of trade and power until the 19th century.

The development of politics went on in a more or less steady flow along these lines established in the early 14th century until about 1591, when the disaster of the Moroccan invasion gave rise to the collapse of the Gao empire of the Songhai.

The socio-economical structures that underlie these events may be characterized by a series of marked changes.

1. The spread and increase of metal working (especially in weapons and iron tools)
2. Resulting from this is the growth of productivity and trade inside West Africa and between West and North Africa.
3. The foundation of great urban centres
4. The stratification of society into noblemen, free citizens, caste people and slaves and
5. A high degree of division of labour.

Since history presented itself to the understanding of early Sudanese writers and Arabian travellers as being 'made' by kings and tyrants it is clear that their chief interest was focused on the history of the various dynasties and kings. That is why we do not find many references to music as it might have been in subordinate classes⁷. Thus, a picture of music and its function in 'mediaeval' West African societies as described by contemporary authors can only be reconstructed as the music of the ruling class.

Kakaki and Kettledrums

One of the prime royal instruments found throughout West Africa even today is the *kakaki*, the Hausa term for a long trumpet-like instrument of metal or wood. According to Schaeffner, long trumpets along with drums and kettledrums, as we shall see later, form "insignes du royaume/insignia of kingship" (Schaeffner 1952: 1485). The earliest records confirm their existence in the Near East. Though the Arabs do not seem to have used them in the early days of Islam⁸, there can be no doubt that "elles ne pénétrèrent en Afrique qu'avec la domination arabe/they only penetrated Africa under Arab domination" (Schaeffner 1952: 1480). It is of extraordinary interest in this connexion

⁷the only exception being a passage in the *Kano Chronicle* reporting a meeting of the adherents of the Tchibiri-cult, held in order to protest against Islam (during the reign of Tsarnia: 1307-1343). Maybe that is why the Muslim author of the *Kano Chronicle* asserts that "Of drums and cymbals there were a thousand . . ." (*Kano Chronicle*: 69).

⁸see Ibn Khaldun: *Proligomènes II (de Slane)*: 50.

to read in the Kano Chronicle that during the reign of Sarki Tsamiam of Kano (1307-1343) "long horns were first used in Kano" (Kano Chronicle: 70). This is also the time when Islam, comparatively late, was introduced in Kano. Therefore it might be well argued that the long horns of the Kano Chronicle are in reality *kakakai* (pl.)⁹. The Chronicle goes on to say that the tune they played was 'Stand firm, Kano is your city'. (Kano Chronicle: 70)¹⁰.

Similarly, the *Tarikh el-Fettach* provides us with a reliable date for the first appearance of the *kakaki* in the city of Agadez, for it states that in about 1500-1501 the Askia Muhammad of the Songhai empire "*fit une expédition contre Tildza dans l'Ayar* (i.e. Agadez, V.E.), où parvinrent les kakaki, ce qui n'était encore jamais arrivé auparavant/made an expedition against Tildza in the Ayar (i.e. Agadez, V.E.), where the kakaki had reached, which had never happened before" (*Tarikh el-Fettach*: 135 f). Though Islam had established itself for a long time past in the city of Agadez, it must be assumed from this passage that despite the influence of Islam, the *kakaki* did not form a part of the local rulers' regalia.

The earliest mention of the *kakaki*, as far as I can see, is the one cited previously from the Kano Chronicle. Besides this it must have been known and used in Bornu, for the Kano Chronicle states that in the time of Sarki Dauda (1421-1438) "*Dagachi, a great prince, came from South Bornu with many men and mallams. He brought with him horsesdrums and trumpets . . .*" (Kano Chronicle: 74)¹¹.

Kakakai and kettledrums are also testified for the end of the 16th century, when for example on March 16th, 1584, El-Hâdi came to see his brother Askia El-Hâdj, son of Askia-Daoud (1549-1582) accompanied by a band of trumpets and kettledrums. (. . . *se faisait précéder par des trompettes, des timbaliers . . .*/. . . *was preceded by trumpets and kettledrum players . . .*" *Tarikh es-Soudan*: 191). And a *kakaki* announced the arrival of his brother Askia Mohammed-Bâni (1586/87-1588) to the balamâ Sâdiq. ("*Sâdiq ne fut averti de l'arrivée de son frère que par le son du kakaki à la porte de sa maison . . .*/*Sâdiq was only warned of the arrival of his brother by the sound of the kakaki at the door of his house . . .*" (*Tarikh el-Fettach*: 234 f). Some decades later we find them again in Kano, where "*whenever Kutumbi* (Sarki from 1623-1648, V.E.) *went to war or to Salla, he was followed by a hundred spare horses. Forty drums were in front of him, and twenty-five trumpets, and fifty kettledrums*". (Kano Chronicle: 85.)

As for the functions of the *kakaki*, besides representation of power, announcements and war signals, it also seemed to mark the proclamation of a new sultan. The *Tarikh es-Soudan* tells of the brothers of Askia-Muhammad-Bano that they attempted to make his rival Nouh, the Bental Farma, sultan of Songhai and that for this purpose "*il fut convenu qu'une certaine nuit déterminée il* (Nouh, V.E.) *se rendait dans un endroit fixé d'avance qu'il ferait alors sonner ses trompettes et qu'à ce signal tous les conjurés se réunirent pour le proclamer sultan/it was agreed that on a certain night he* (Nouh, V.E.) *would go to a previously appointed place, that he would then order his trumpets to be sounded, and that on this signal all the conspirators would unite in proclaiming him sultan*". (*Tarikh es-Soudan*: 195.)

Another kind of trumpet is referred to by Al-'Omari who speaks of "*trompettes faites de cornes . . . qui sont préparées avec beaucoup d'art/trumpets made of horns . . . which are constructed with great skill*" (Al-'Omari: 69) by the people of Mali under its ruler Soleiman, brother of sultan Mansa Musa (1307-1337). Similarly, the same transverse horns, as they are still used today, must be understood by 'two horns' which, together with a 'bell'¹² were found during the destruction of the place of worship in Santolo¹³ by Kano troops between 1349 and 1385 (Kano Chronicle: 72).

⁹as the original texts did not lie before me, the correctness of Palmer's translations remains to be verified, if not actually doubted. The same applies to the following translations whenever such instruments as horns, trumpets, kettledrums, trompettes, timbales, etc. are mentioned.

¹⁰I have no further information about this.

¹¹Palmer suggests that by 'Dagachi' is meant Othman Kalnama who took refuge in Kano in 1432.

¹² maybe this is the Hausa 'kuge'.

Algaita

The sources do not say much about the *algaita* but the *Tarikh es-Soudan* and the *Kano Chronicle* give us at least some indications.

During a session held by the Askia Mohammed-Gâo "*les instrumentistes, joueurs de guitare, de nezoua¹⁴ et de clarinette¹⁵, assis sous la tente du pacha en arrière de l'estrade, jouaient de leurs instruments/the instrumentalists who played guitar, nezoua and clarinet, sat under the pasha's tent, behind the dais, and played their instruments*". (*Tarikh es-Soudan*: 287.) The *Kano Chronicle* informs us that about 1703: "*when Bugan became Turaki Kuka he sent messengers to Sarkin Yawuri to ask him for 'Algaitas'. The Sarkin Yawuri gave him ten Algaitas, and three Kurra-Kurra¹⁶. The messenger brought them to Turaki Bugan. Bugan kept them three months, and sent them to the Maidaki Mariamma (mother of the Sarki Mohammed Sharefa: 1703-1731, V.E.) . . .*" (*Kano Chronicle*: 89 f).

Drums

The following functions of drums and drumming can be observed in the chosen sources:

1. Proclamation of the king: The *Tarikh el-Fettach* tells of the proclamation of Askia Ishâq II that "*on battit le tambour en l'honneur d'Ishâq, on le reconnut pour chef et on le proclama roi . . ./they played the drum in honour of Ishâq, they acknowledged him as chief and they proclaimed him king . . .*" (*Tarikh el-Fettach*: 244.)
2. Sign of royal dignity: The *Tarikh es-Soudan* tells of an event that took place in about 1523/4 when Bella, nephew of Askia El Hâdj Mohammed, was about to be appointed successor to the sultan of Timbuktu. "*Aussitôt que ses frères aînés connurent sa nomination ils furent très irrités et jurèrent de crever son tambour le jour où il viendrait à Kâgbo . . . Quand Bella eut connaissance de tous ces propos il jura à son tour de crever la derrière de quiconque voudrait crever son tambour. Puis il se rendit à Kâgbo faisant battre le tambour devant lui. Arrivé à un certain endroit bien connu près de la ville, qui marquait la limite à laquelle tous les tambours devaient cesser de battre, sauf celui du prince, Bella donna l'ordre à ses hommes de ne point interrompre leur batterie tant qu'ils ne seraient pas arrivés à la porte du palais du prince/as soon as his older brothers knew of his nomination they were very angry and swore to bust his drum the day he came to Kâgbo . . . When Bella found out all this he swore in turn to bust the backside of anyone who wanted to bust his drum. Then he proceeded to Kâgbo with the drum beating in front. Once he had arrived at a certain well-known place near the town which marked the point where all drums but that of the prince should stop playing, Bella gave the command to his men not to interrupt their beat until they had reached the door of the prince's palace*" (*Tarikh es-Soudan*: 131f).
3. War signal: "*Mais il (Askia El-Hâdj-Mohammed, V.E.) . . . ordonna de battre le tambour sur-le-champ et commença à rassembler ses troupes . . ./But he (Askia El-Hâdj-Mohammed, V.E.) . . . ordered the drum to be sounded immediately and began to assemble his troops.*" (*Tarikh el-Fettach*: 105.)
4. Representation in public: "*Le lendemain matin, l'Askia (Askia Ishâq II, V.E.) fit battre son tambour et monta à cheval . . ./The next morning the Askia (Askia Ishâq II, V.E.) . . . ordered the drum to be beaten and mounted his horse . . .*" (*Tarikh el-Fettach*: 284.)

¹³the *Kano Chronicle* says of this place that it is the "key of the south" (*Kano Chronicle*: 71).

¹⁴translators' footnote: "*Nous ignorons de quel instrument il s'agit ici; dans le maser. A, le mot pourrait se lire/we do not know what instrument this is; in the A manuscript the word could be read as:*

¹⁵obviously this is a wrong translation. Cf. footnote 9.

¹⁶unknown.

5. Herald's instrument: "*Le messenger arriva vers midi; il fit battre le tambour qu'il avait apporté et la foule se groupa autour de lui . . . /The messenger arrived about midday; he beat the drum which he had brought with him and the crowd gathered round him . . .*" (during the siege of Jenne by Sunni Ali) (Tarikh el-Fettach: 95).

Remarkable is the fact that, according to the Tarikh el-Fettach, Askia Mohammed-Bouankan (1531-1537) is said to be the first "*qui . . . se fit accompagner de tambour dans ses voyages en pirogue /to be accompanied by drumming on his canoe voyages*" (Tarikh el-Fettach: 158) and "*inventé, en fait d'instruments de musique, le fotorifo et le gabtanda*¹⁷; *le fotorifo ressemble à une trompette et le gabtanda est une sorte de tambour, mais de son plus grave que les tambours (ordinaires); ces deux instruments étaient connus dans son pays, mais (auparavant) le roi de l'Ayar était le seul à posséder des fotorifo /invented, as regards musical instruments, the fotorifo and the gabtanda; the fotorifo is like a trumpet and the gabtanda is a kind of a drum, but deeper in tone than (ordinary) drums; these two instruments were known in his country, but (previously) the king of Ayar was the only one who possessed the fotorifos*". (Tarikh el-Fettach: 158.)

Orchestras and griots

As the development of the arts was highly dependent on the preferences and religious attitude of the respective kings¹⁸, it is small wonder that the Tarikh es-Soudan emphasizes that the successor of Askia Muhammad 'The Great', Askia Mousa, who "*n'avait pas ouvert son âme aux choses de ce monde /had not opened his soul to the things of this world*" (Tarikh es-Soudan: 145f), "*maintint la royauté de la façon la plus remarquable . . . Il multiplia les orchestres, le nombre des chanteurs et chanteuses /upheld the kingship in the most remarkable manner . . . He increased the orchestras, and the number of singers, male and female*" (Tarikh es-Soudan: 145).

Besides many others elsewhere the Tarikh el-Fettach gives further proof of the existence of professional musicianship in 'mediaeval' West Africa. "*Enfin il (Askia Ishâq II, V.E.) arriva à son camp, où il avait trois de ses servantes autrement dit de ses concubines, et quatorze joueuses de flûte de la caste des forgerons /at last he (Askia Ishâq II, V.E.) arrived at his camp, where he had three of his maid-servants, or to put it another way, his concubines, and fourteen flute-playing girls of the blacksmith caste . . .*" (Tarikh el-Fettach: 249).

The function and social position of the griots in 'mediaeval' West Africa may be assessed by two remarks (though not very clear ones) in the Tarikh el-Fettach and the Tarikh es-Soudan. On the one hand, griots were like any other person subject to capture and enslavement in cases of war¹⁹; on the other hand they stood in high esteem with the courts. When in 1550 the Askia Daoud "*fit une campagne contre Tagba . . . dans le pays Bâghena . . . il . . . ramena de cette expédition des chanteurs et un grand nombre de chanteuses dites Mâbi; il les installa à Kâgbo dans un quartier spécial, agissant envers eux comme l'avait fait Askia-El-Hâdj-Mohammed à l'égard des gens de Mossi /went on a campaign against Tagba . . . in the Bâghena country . . . he . . . brought back from this expedition male singers and a great number of female singers known as Mâbi; he installed them at Kâgbo in special quarters, treating them as Askia-El-Hâdj-Mohammed had the people of Mossi*" (Tarikh es-Soudan: 168). It is questionable whether these *mâbi* are the Fulani griots (sing. *mâbo*, pl. *mabube*). Equally is it not clear whether the *gesere* griots of the ancient empire of Ghana are thought of when the Tarikh el-Fettach mentions that during the reign of

¹⁷I could not find out which instruments are meant by these terms.

¹⁸this becomes clear if one reads the following passage from the *Arabic history of Sokoto* by Hajji Sa'id: ". . . and he (Atiqu, sultan of Sokoto from 1837-1842, V.E.) changed many abuses which had developed in the administrative measures by means of which the Commander of the Faithful Muhammad Bello had ruled them. The first thing he did in this way was putting to death a kettle drummer in the middle of his playing so that they abandoned that and became such that you would not hear the sound of a drum nor anything like it save when the army was setting out on an expedition." (Sa'id: 165f).

¹⁹according to Salmen (Salmen 1956: 27f) griots were exempted from execution in case of capture.

Askia Muhammad (1493-1529) "*personne ne peut, dans une audience royale, interpeller le prince par son nom, sauf les guissiridonké/no-one, at a royal audience, may call upon the prince by his name except the guissiridonké*"²⁰ (Tarikh el-Fettach: 14).

As far as can be concluded from these few examples the history of West African music shows a great consistency concerning the social functions of music and musical instruments. And it shows in some of its aspects a deep correspondence with the general outlines of social history in West Africa, thus strengthening Nketia's argument that "the development of musical traditions in West Africa must be sought in the social history of the West African peoples". (Nketia 1971: 8.)

²⁰the translators' footnote to this runs: "*Nous ignorons l'étymologie et la signification de ce mot, dont la lecture d'ailleurs n'est pas absolument certaine/we do not know the etymology and meaning of this word, its reading is in any case not absolutely certain*".

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