
BOOK REVIEWS

Fiddling In West Africa: Touching the Spirit in Fulbe, Hausa, and Dagamba Culture. Jacqueline Cogdell DjeDje. 2008. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 352 pp. 19 b&w photos, 34 figures, 10 maps. ISBN: 978-0-253-21929-9. pb.

A culmination of more than three decades of multi-sited field research across west Africa, noted ethnomusicologist Jacqueline DjeDje's latest text is a long-awaited book-length treatment of one particularly under-explored instrument in the literature on African music – the “fiddle”. Along with her numerous article publications on this topic, this recent offering augments the relative wealth of scholarship on drums and drumming in this region of the continent, highlighting the importance of bowed stringed instruments in west Africa by illustrating their significance in constructing complex multi-layered ethnic, religious, inter/national, and personal identities.

As she examines fiddling in three particular ethno-linguistic groups – namely the Fulbe in Senegambia, the Hausa in Nigeria, and the Dagamba in Ghana – she engages in a comparative analysis, pointing to the complex social interactions that occur as culture moves across time and space. As she provides a discussion of the origins of the fiddle, its dispersion, and retentions over vast cultural, temporal, and geographical landscapes; her focus, however, is primarily on the variations that exist between regions, ethnic groups, and individuals in order to combat essentialist stereotypes of homogeneity in African (fiddle) music. For this, she closely scrutinizes the intricate formal and stylistic features associated with fiddle performance practices in each culture area. Particularly, she notes the ways in which the interrelationships between geographical location, cultural and political history, personal innovation, and religion have created distinctive permutations of an ancient instrumental tradition. Her attention to detail on this point is vital to her overall argument that such developments have given fiddling here a unique “African” identity, countering literature that posits African fiddling as mere derivations of Arab practices.

After a narrative introduction that focuses on her fieldwork with a master fiddler in northern Ghana, Chapter One provides a useful overview of the broad intellectual terrain that is at the heart of her expansive study. Imbedding the fiddling tradition within the context of trans-Saharan trade, Arabization and Islamization, European influence, and other music within Sudanic west Africa, DjeDje gives socio-historical depth to her subsequent general discussions of the instrument's classification, history, distribution, construction, transmission, performance practices (i.e., style, form, aesthetics), and performance contexts (i.e., weddings, funerals, religious ceremonies, rites of passage, etc.). Of note, she provides a relatively lengthy discussion detailing three performance styles – Sahelian, savannah, and forest. While she concludes that pentatonicism is prominent in all three (41), she perceptively notes that the variations and innovations that occur in each locale persist and will have meaning only if they

adhere to the established aesthetics of a particular people (42).

Her second chapter focuses on fiddling in Senegambia among the Fulbe. This is a logical place to begin, because she argues that the fiddling tradition had existed among the Fulbe before its proliferation to the Hausa and Dagbamba. That is, Fulbe were introduced to the fiddle by North Africans around the eleventh or twelfth centuries, before they subsequently helped to directly and indirectly disseminate it to the other two groups. After a first-hand narrative of the *nyanyeru* (fiddle) in multiple performance contexts, including most notably a wedding, she continues with a methodical discussion of Senegambian geography, history, and ethnicity. Most importantly, she explicates the cultural values associated with constructing Fulbe identity, noting that the Senegambian Fulbe were largely “unwilling to accept outsiders into their society” (59). Although this cultural practice has given the Fulbe a reputation for conservatism and presumably has led to intense preservation of fiddling traditions, since independence, DjeDje notes that, “many changes have occurred” (59) due to the confluence of mass urban migration, modernity, and globalization.

Overall, as she points out, her attention to Fulbe fiddlers gives counterweight to the plethora of studies conducted on the “politically powerful” within Mandinka and Wolof society (60). It is not surprising then that the majority of the chapter focuses more acutely on specific performance practices and people she encountered within Fulbe culture. While she enumerates the variety of performance contexts of the *nyanyeru*, her emphasis continues to be on the links between identity and fiddling. In other words, she connects the gender, status, and other markers of fiddlers’ personal identities to the formal and technical features of their individual playing styles; she does this effectively by combining brief life histories of three particular musicians with detailed descriptive transcriptions of their performances.

Continuing to show the diverse ways in which the fiddle is employed in west Africa, Chapter Three illustrates that this instrument is not necessarily always a signifier of ethnic identity or high status. As DjeDje elucidates, within Hausa communities in northern Nigeria, fiddle (*goge*) performance, along with the identity of its practitioners, appears to be most profoundly shaped by the instrument’s controversial relationship with Islam. She points out that while many Muslims find fiddling profane, the *goge*’s role in Bori ceremonies persists, providing a productive avenue to examine the complex, contemporary, often contentious interactions between Islam and pre-Islamic religion in Africa. This chapter also examines *goge* performances in nightclubs, highlighting recent innovations that showcase the dynamism of this music as well as retentions of the sacred in secular contexts. In so doing, this section demonstrates the ways in which Hausa fiddlers fuse the new with the old to cope with modernity (120). While looking at more recent developments of *goge* performance, her discussion is also attentive to the origins of the instrument in northern Nigeria, juxtaposing a careful analysis of multiple conflicting oral histories to untangle the diverse perspectives and understandings of fiddle music in this region. Ultimately, she again demonstrates how fiddle music

expresses multiple identities by coupling life histories of three Hausa goge performers with detailed analyses of their playing styles.

Her lengthiest case study, Chapter Four examines *gondze* (fiddle) music by the Dagbamba in northern Ghana. Throughout, she foregrounds *gondze* performance's distinct relationship with royalty, including its transformations during its role in ongoing chieftaincy disputes in the region. She also points out that Dagbamba fiddlers enjoy a unique position vis-à-vis other west African fiddlers, because they are unequivocally held in high regard. Similarly, noting that Dagbamba fiddle performances are distinct from others in west Africa, she highlights their focus on text and singing rather than fiddling alone. Broadly, her chapter is a welcome addition to previous literature on the music of the Dagbamba, dovetailing well with the noted work of John Miller Chernoff, David Locke, and J.H. Kwabena Nketia, who have primarily focused on the *luna* (talking drum). Particularly, she complicates some of the testimony given to Chernoff about the origins of the fiddle in northern Ghana. Lastly, she again concludes the chapter by showing the diversity of fiddle performance as well as its significance in shaping/expressing individual and cultural identity by microscopically analyzing the playing styles of three fiddlers.

Despite its undeniable contributions to African music scholarship, there are a few areas that may invite critique. While her detailed musical transcriptions and analyses help demonstrate a connection between playing style and identity – that is, how each performer employs the fiddle in unique ways that demonstrate both cultural value systems and personal character – some less technically inclined audiences may find them cumbersome. Additionally, while DjeDje clearly recognizes the dynamic nature of fiddling and “tradition” in general, her persistent imposition and juxtaposition of the phrases “traditional culture” and “modern times” not only seemed historically imprecise, but also served to set up an outmoded dichotomy between the two throughout the text. Similarly, it would have been beneficial to clarify and situate her conception of modernity within the broad discourse on this topic as well as include the ways in which it is understood and considered relevant by fiddlers themselves.

Aside from these minor notes, one cannot help but applaud the results of DjeDje's decades-long dedication to the subject of fiddling in west Africa. Her wide-ranging ethnographic study will provide a firm basis for further analyses of this topic. Namely, in the conclusion she encourages others to more extensively examine fiddling practices within ethnic groups in west Africa that were beyond the scope of this particular project. Additionally, while this work urges music scholars in general to continue her synthesis of organology and social history, more specifically, the author invites further examination of topics such as the relationship between language and fiddling as well as how fiddling has been practiced globally. Although broad cross-cultural comparative studies such as this have largely fallen out of favor in ethnomusicology (and other related disciplines), DjeDje's incisive and productive ethnography reminds researchers that they should not necessarily throw out the baby with the bath water.

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