

## MUSICAL TRAINING IN TRIBAL WEST AFRICA

by

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With the possible exception of the "Bush Schools" set up by the tribes for initiation purposes or by the secret societies such as the Leopard Society, traditional instruction in Tribal West Africa was not on an institutional basis. It was based on the principle of slow absorption of musical experience and active participation rather than formal teaching. The social organization was helpful, for the child was absorbed into all activities of the tribe and these activities were generally connected with music.

The child's first lessons in music were given by his mother. Immediately after birth the child was placed on his mother's back while she went about her daily tasks. Accompanied by the child she washed clothes in the river, pounded cassava to rhythm, danced and sang. In this way the child from his birth was introduced to the music of his culture. He learned what the music required in terms of both bodily movement and vocal effort. He formed through these early experiences the habit of listening to the music of his people.

Through his mother the child also learned to develop his sense of pitch. The cradle songs were the medium of instruction.<sup>1</sup> The songs taught to him were simple melodically for the ranges seldom extended beyond two or three notes. The musical intonation was kept as close as possible to the speech tones, for the child learned the songs whose intonation was speech-like more readily than those which followed complex intonation. As soon as he was able to sing, the child's role was changed from that of a listener to that of a more active participant. At first the child babbled fragments, then short rhythms, and finally he was able to join in the actual singing.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the cradle songs, the mother sang or chanted fairy tales, folk tales, and simple historical tales. Through these the child gradually absorbed much of the unwritten literature of the tribe.

Some of the child's lessons in social etiquette were taught by song. He learned what his future place would be and how to prepare himself for that place. He learned about his relations with the adults and others in the tribe. He was taught to conform. After he had learned these lessons, he passed the first step in becoming a socially-educated African.

It was the duty of the parents to see that their children could dance and sing properly. In the evenings they taught them to sing and clap their hands. They insisted that the children get the correct rhythm and rehearsed them until they were perfect.

Mothers among the Ashanti were also responsible for teaching their daughters funeral dirges so that their memory would not be disgraced by their daughters' performance at the funeral. This training was carried out on the way to work on the farm or in the evening after dinner.

Other musical activities soon supplemented the teaching of the parents. As soon as the child was old enough to walk he began to participate in musical games led by the older children. The child would consciously imitate his elders in these games. No child was too young to start. A simple demonstration of this type of activity is shown in the following quotation:

"A favourite amusement of women with infants just beginning to walk is to let them dance. The tiny tot, barely able to maintain an upright posture for ten minutes or so, is set up on its legs. A couple of women, usually the women of the homestead, play with an infant thus when they have no work on hand calling out

<sup>1</sup> J. H. Nketia, *Cradle Song* (unpublished manuscript), p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

to it, with laughter and warmth, come on, dance, begin to sing and clap a dance rhythm and execute a few steps.

By the age of five years children have learnt, in a sketchy and diagrammatic but specifically recognizable way, the rhythm and the main steps of the festival dances. The six years' old has advanced so far that he or she can sometimes join the real dancing of the adolescents. His sense of rhythm is accurate, he learns the songs quickly, and he has the pattern of the dance clearly.<sup>3</sup>

The games were varied. Some of them were mere play: others were imitative of adult life. "Sometimes the children stand tandem in a circle and keep step to the beat of the drum. Again they march in a circle and sing responsively. Another game they like is to catch hands in a circle and lean back, kicking first one foot and then the other towards the centre. As they kick they go around singing as they whirl."<sup>4</sup> Music was thus an important part of the children's games. Through them the child learned to sing in the style of his culture just as he learned the language.

Some of the games were designed to improve the child's rhythmical responses. Every daily task was performed rhythmically, but it was in the games that the child consciously developed the rhythmic awareness of two against three, the compound rhythm which is the basis of much of West African music.

In one such game the child is held between two adults and swung gently at first and then violently to the following accompaniment:



DE.VI MASE NOE DE NE DA . NE OLA.YA ULA.YA DE.WA DA.NE

Children's bands played an important part in this musical training. The children made play instruments. They improvised drums by stretching pig or goat bladders across the open ends of tins or bottles. The boys made zithers and musical pots. Then they formed bands to imitate the music of the adult musicians. It was in these bands that the child received his first lesson in ensemble playing.

Individual instruction within these groups was unsystematic and unorganised. The young relied on their imitative ability or on occasional correction by the listeners for their instrumental training. They acquired the technique of learning by observation.

Further musical training was given to the child through social experience. Much importance was attached to the child's participation with the adult in musical activities. He had an integral part to play in all adult performances. During the course of these performances he learned not only by observation but by doing. His part was simple at first, requiring little effort and knowledge, but as he advanced in age he was expected to perform more intricate roles until he became a full participant in the activity.

One such activity, which included both old and young, is noted by Kennett: "The senior women were in the middle of the circle leading the antiphonal singing. In the ranks were three little girls whose ages ranged from ten to twelve years and one very small and solemn person who cannot have been more than five who performed the motions of the dance and sang the songs conscientiously as anybody."<sup>5</sup>

### Formal Musical Training

The bush schools were responsible for the formal musical training. These schools were held in secluded places during periods determined by the council of elders. In

<sup>3</sup> M. Fortes, "Social and Psychological Aspects of Education in Taland", Supplement to *Africa*, XI. 4 (1938), p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> Albert D. Helser, *In Sunny Nigeria* (New York: Revell and Company, 1926), p. 142.

<sup>5</sup> A. M. Jones, *Studies in African Music*, Vol. II. (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> B. L. A. Kennett, "The Afashi Dancers of Kabba Division Northern Nigeria", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, LXI July to December, 1931), p. 439.

general, the schools for boys were held in the forest, while the girls' schools were nearer home. The schools prepared the youths for the initiation ceremonies which celebrated their entrance either into full tribal adulthood or into a secret society. Before they could participate in these ceremonies, they had to go through a systematic series of educational experiences which would give them the necessary skills for taking their place in the tribe.

Singing, playing, and dancing were considered important parts of the bush school activities. The children were trained in these skills by the elders of the tribe. This training enabled the elders to discover potential leaders of songs and to prepare them for more important roles in the tribal festivals.

The emphasis was on the retention of existing patterns and musical styles. The child was taught the traditional responses and correct bodily movement for the songs and dances. He learned the rhythms played by his ancestors. Song, dance, drumming — all had a long tradition of use behind them.

Some experimentation with new forms was encouraged but this training was given only to those who were destined to be the future master drummers, court musicians, song leaders or story tellers. The popularity of the master drummer or *griot* (praise singer) was based on his ability to improvise. The *griot* must at a moment's notice be able to compose a song concerning an unexpected event. The verse of the song must rhyme and have meaningful continuity. The master drummer must be able to improvise for an extended period of time, using complex rhythms. The court musician and story teller must be able to relate the triumphs of the past as well as current events. They must have excellent memories, which must be developed. To be at a loss for a word or tone would cause them to be replaced by more able performers. The children who were trained to hold these positions had to be given special training to develop these skills.

Two methods were used in choosing the music specialists in the tribal society. They could be chosen from among the most promising players in the bush schools or they could be born into the position because they belonged to a family of music specialists. Those chosen in the schools would be apprenticed to the master musician. This teacher would receive no fee for the instruction. The student would follow him as he practiced his craft and observe his techniques. The observation was supplemented by direct teaching on occasion but the greater part of the training was received through the process of slow absorption of the musical repertoire.

The children who belonged to the musical families learned their art earlier, almost from birth. In the drum family they played with miniature toy drums; in the *goje* family, they played with small *goje*. Their older brothers who were already participating in the family ensemble taught them the accompanying parts while the older children practised the difficult parts of the master players. As the children advanced in knowledge they were permitted to take a more active part in the family ensemble.

There were some tribal differences. Among the Dagomba the children were trained at home. They played with the family ensembles on the accompanying parts as soon as they were able to go to the ceremonies. Among the Akan the children from the families received their training elsewhere. This was done because it was believed that if a father taught his child he would be hastening his own departure from life by training his successor.

There seems to be some disagreement among musicologists concerning the methods used in teaching. A. M. Jones has stated that there was no direct teaching. The father or musical relative encouraged the drummer. The art was acquired through play. The boys formed gangs for practice and worked at any drum pattern they fancied. After they had practised in this way, they were given an opportunity to take part in the real drumming.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> A. M. Jones, *Studies in African Music*, Vol. I. (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 35.

J. H. Nketia, however, noted that the prospective drummers were trained by expert drummers.<sup>8</sup>

Both musicologists are correct. The training of the professional musician differed from tribe to tribe according to the differences in the social structure and differences in the position of the musician within the tribe. The Ashanti and Dagomba who have traditional court musicians had to provide for their replacement in a more formal manner. This was done by training within the musical family. Children from outside these families received less formal instruction.

The secondary drummers were not given this formal training. Their skills were obtained through observation and practice. The structure of drum music which has parts of varying difficulty — from the accompanying idiophones, the accompanying drums, through the secondary drums, to the improvising master drum — provides opportunities for including in the drum ensemble the individual who has developed a small amount of technique.

The xylophone parts were also learned in this manner. The prospective player practiced the easier parts first, and then proceeded to parts of greater difficulty.



Repertoire and techniques of playing were taught by rote. Because of the absence of written music, the musical repertoire was transmitted through the memories of the tribal musical authorities — the master musician and the story teller. They, the principal teachers of the embryo musicians, vocalists and instrumentalists, used the techniques of rote teaching, imitation and repetition.

The aim of the professional drummer was to combine rhythm and tone in order to get a variety of combinations. The pupil attained his rhythmic facility by imitating on a drum the rhythms the instructor played on the pupil's back. Through this imitation the pupil learned the amount of pressure necessary to produce the rhythmic effects he desired.

Tonal technique was taught through the use of nonsense syllables. The pupil repeated them after the instructor and then tried to play them on the drum, varying the position of his hands and the striking force. This would cause the desired variation in pitch. Because his ears had been trained through imitation of the instructor's voice, he quickly learned to detect mistakes made by his hands.

The master drummers in tribes with tonal languages, such as the Yoruba and the Ashanti, used the nonsense syllables more extensively in their drum instruction than did the other tribes. Because the drums in these tribes were used to transmit messages, the pupil had to learn to imitate the human voice accurately. The nonsense syllables were used as a first step in teaching the art of varying the pitch of the drum. For instance:

da                      di                      da                      di

would cause the pupil to strike the middle, side, middle, and side again, of the drum. If he was playing on the tall drums he would vary the pitch by striking each drum in turn. The hourglass drum, on which a great deal of tonal difference can be achieved, was also taught in this manner. The prospective hourglass drummers had an additional difficulty, for they had to discover how much pressure must be exerted by the left arm to produce the desired tone.

The other specialists — the story teller and song leader — also learned their art through imitation. The potential song leader would first learn the correct responses along with

<sup>8</sup> Statement by J. H. Nketia, personal interview. June, 1961.

the other members of the tribe. If he was chosen for this position he had to learn the repertoire through careful repetition and memorisation. Then he had to add to the past repertoire by composing new songs for new occasions. The story teller or tribal historian had an additional task. He must learn the tribal history so that he could recite it on any occasion.

It is important to remember that the aim of tribal musical training was to expose all children to musical experiences. Potential specialists received more extensive training but all children in the tribal society received some musical training.

This method of slow absorption of the musical repertoire and technique was geared to the close-knit tribal society in which the social organization helped in training the young. Present-day tribal situations demands a different orientation, however, for with the breakdown of tribal institutions, this method is no longer completely effective.