LA MÚSICA
ENTRE ÁFRICA Y AMÉRICA

A MÚSICA ENTRE ÁFRICA E AMÉRICA
MUSIC BETWEEN AFRICA AND THE AMERICAS

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MINISTERIO DE EDUCACIÓN Y CULTURA

MONTEVIDEO
2013

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Kazadi wa Mukuna

AFRICANISMS IN THE AFRO-BRAZILIAN MUSICAL CULTURES

A LINGUISTIC CONSIDERATION

In spite of the large body of literature devoted to the scrutiny of the African music in Africa, and its influence in the Diaspora, the explanation of the nature of the elements of African music often evades the mind of casual scholars. One of the most puzzling aspects of African music that continues to fascinate scholars, is the principle that governs the creative process of its rhythmic organization, both vocal and instrumental, and its predominance in the musics of Black people, wherever they are in the world. Closer examination of this practice in the musical expression of the Afro-Brazilian tradition, for example, reveals that scholars have frequently failed to recognize certain cultural and linguistic sources that are crucial to the understanding of the creative process of this music. Among these phenomena are the impact of the two levels (syntax and semantic) of African language on the two levels (sonic and temporal) of the music, both on the continent, and its survival in the collective memory of the African descents in the New World. [1] In this paper, I argue that the concept of the creative process in the vocal music of Africa is contained in the different levels of its languages. The demise of African languages in the New World rendered musical elements vulnerable to modification or to replacement by other languages with concepts rooted in different principles of organization.

Introduction

The absence of written documents about the African oral tradition has led unseasoned scholars to erroneous interpretations of Africanisms,

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1   See also Kazadi wa Mukuna. "Creative Practice in African Music: New Perspectives in the Scrutiny of Africanisms in Diaspora." *Black Music Research Journal* Vol. 17, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 249-250.

in cultural manifestations in the Americas in general and Brazil in particular. For example, the existing scholarship attests to this assertion in the fields of Brazilian folklore, history, anthropology, sociology and ethnomusicology. Examination of the available documents written about an Afro-Brazilian cultural manifestation in these disciplines, reveals for the most part a lack of interpretative realities. These concerns are often magnified in writings of those scholars who fail to approach their scrutiny of Afro-Brazilian's cultural manifestations within what Maultsby has called the "African frame of reference," [2] sculpted by the oral tradition, and Kwabena Nketia acknowledges as "the 'reference system' of values" in terms of which music is made, performed and interpreted. [3]

Although new scholarship is beginning to shed light on this matter, some writers continue to perpetuate a Eurocentric perspective by analyzing Afro-Brazilian cultural manifestations according to European theories rooted in written literature. This practice has frequently led writers astray. Musically, I assert that due consideration needs to be given to the impact of the semantic (meaning) level of the African tonal languages on the sonic level of music, and that of the syntactic level (structure of the word) of the language on the rhythmic organization of the music. [4] To avoid repeating what has been written previously, let us focus herein at the impact of these two levels of African languages on the musical organization.

Language: Semantic Level

African languages are predominantly tonal; that is, the meaning of each word is determined by the sequential pattern of its tonal inflections. For example, in Lingala [5] the words *mokolo* and *mokolo* have the same spelling, but they differ from each other, when their respective

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2   Portia Maultsby. "Africanisms in African-American Music," in *Africanisms in American Culture* edited by Joseph E. Holloway. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 205.

3   J. H. Kwabena Nketia. "African Roots of Music in the Americas: An African View," in *Ethnomusicology and African Music: Collected Papers – Modes of Inquiry and Interpretation,* Volume one. Accra: Afram Publications, 2005, p.324.

4   Kazadi wa Mukuna. "Creative Practice in African Music: New Perspectives in the Scrutiny of Africanisms in Diaspora." *Black Music Research Journal* 17, 2 (1997): 239-250.

5   Language spoken in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

tones are applied to their syllables – *mòkòlò, mòkóló* –. Semantically, the first word means "a day," whereas the second means "an elder." In the Igbo language spoken by the Igbo people in Nigeria, a similar concept prevails. For example, the word akwa has several meanings revealed by the direction/pattern of tonal accents applied to the same spelling – *ákwá* (to cry); *àkwá* (egg); *àkwà* (beside); *ákwà* (cloth). Among the Ewe of Ghana, the word *to* presents similar considerations. Semantically, on the one hand, *tó* signifies mountain or ear; but, on the other hand, *tò* means to "summarize, to state briefly".

A modification of the direction of any aspect of these tonal sequences alters the meaning of the word or renders it meaningless. To maintain the meaning of each word in the melodic pattern of a song, the directions of the interval derived from the semantic level of each word, have to be observed. However, the shaping of the final melodic contour is left to the creative discretion of the individual composer to determine the final range of each interval.

Proceeding with this understanding of the linguistic restriction on melodic structure, when a melodic line is sung by voices beginning at different pitch levels, the harmonic result can only be a parallel texture. Until recently, this logic remained beyond the understanding of non-African writers, or they simply refused to recognize the impact of the language on the musical organization in Africa. To them, the practice of parallel singing in Africa is viewed as a representative of the embryonic phase of the evolution of European harmony. Paul Collaer writes, "And the African polyphony followed the same evolutionary phases as that of the European. But, the African stopped his development at the European phase of the XIII century." [6]

The semantic level of the language in Africa also plays a pertinent role in the ethnic group's decision-making for the selection of a musical instrument with which it is identified. In this case, an instrument is selected partially for being capable of reproducing the tones of the language spoken by the ethnic group. It is not an accident that in Africa the bulk of musical instruments used

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6   Paul Collaer "Notes sur la musique d'Afrique Centrale." *Problèmes d'Afrique Centrale (*26) 1954, pp. 267-271.

in surrogate languages are those that produce two tones (high and low). For example, the two-headed hour-glass shaped membranophone called *dùndún* in Nigeria is the only logical instrument capable of reproducing the various tones of the Yoruba language. Heterophonic singing is practiced when two or more tones are the same as the semantic level of a word. In this case, the composer or one of the singers often has the option to deviate from given parallel singing for the sake of harmonic variety.

The impact of the language is also felt in the instrumental rhythmic structure. Kwabena Nketia writes,

> This is because an important factor that gives African music its primary identity lies in the specific types of rhythmic organization developed by African societies and which are derived to a large extent from the prosody used in African languages. There tends to be a close relationship between speech rhythms and musical rhythms, except that musical rhythms are controlled by a set of timing principles. [7]

Frequently a phrase or series of nonsense syllables [kon-ko-lo, kon-kon-ko-lo] serve as a memory aid to a musician and/or to a master drummer to instruct a rhythmic pattern for an apprentice. Although an individual time-line may appear simple when executed alone, the difficulty in understanding the final rhythmic tapestry of African ensemble stems from the relationship, created by the combination of different time-line patterns in a composition. Referring to this practice as one type of organization found in Afro-Brazilian music traditions, Martha Ulhôa asserts

> Another type of organization that has greatly influenced and marked the formation of Brazilian popular music is the polyrhythmic concept of the African rhythmic organization. In this design, it has independent patterns that are intertwined. Players repeat a different rhythmic "phrase" that makes sense, in the intertwining relationship with all of them. [8]

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7   Kwabena Nketia, op. cit., p. 350.
8   Martha Tupinambá de Ulhôa. "Métrica derramada: prosódia musical na canção brasileira popular. *Brasiliana: Revista Quadrimestral da Academia Brasileira de Musica,* n. 21 (maio 1999), p. 52.

The stratification of any number of time-line patterns results, from the interlocking relationship of all patterns in what Meki Nzewi has referred to as an *ensemble thematic cycle* (ETC) – a section of the composition in which all time-line patterns are recycled (repeated), regardless of the number of times an individual pattern reoccurs, before reaching a new starting point. Ulhôa expresses this concept in the following terms:

> Although the rhythmic phrase of each individual player of the ensemble may be repetition of simple patterns, the sound resulting from a set of African percussion is quite complex in terms of timing and texture. The sense of musical rhythm in African music emerges in the weaving relation of its parts; musicians find their entrances not by counting beats, but adjusting themselves to other players with independent parts performed in different metric clusters. [9]

This organizational practice is rooted in the African philosophy of existence, which says that "I belong, therefore I am", which stresses the symbiotic relation that brings significance/meaning to one's life. In music, it is as if each rhythmic pattern contains holes that provide "receptacles" for another pattern, and so on. Although the structure of a composition may be conceived rhythmically, the result of this rhythmic relationship between patterns performed on instruments with varying pitches produces a melodic formula. [10]

The study of Africanisms in Brazil is barely touching on the linguistic dimension of the issue. In the past, when dealing with linguistic consideration, scholars devoted their attention to the survival of words from African languages in the New World in Portuguese, Spanish, English, and Dutch. In Brazil, Ulhôa writes,

> In the Brazilian music, there is a conflict that occurs between the rhythmic process of traditional European design, which seeks the concurrence of a linear time, and the design of Amerindians and Africans circular time. Mário de Andrade suggests that this is sure in the event of the Amerindian, and possibly in the case of Africa.

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9 Ulhôa, op. cit., 52-53.

10 See also Kazadi wa Mukuna. "Creative Practice in African Music" New Perspectives in the Scrutiny of Africanisms in Diaspora." *Black Music Research Journal* Vol 17, no. 2 (Fall 1997).

According to Andrade, this practice is derived directly from the speech rhythm. [11]

Language: Syntactic Level

In addition to the macro level definition of the word *syntax* that focuses on how a thought is formulated in the structure of a phrase, in this discussion, I am considering the definition of the word syntax at its micro level, to reveal the extent to which the syllabic structure of a single word in African language impacts the temporal aspect of vocal music. This assertion has been proven in the formulation of nonsense phrases by master drummers to represent a specific time-line pattern they use as a reminder and/or teaching tool. [12] As African languages lost their semantic levels in the New World they became obsolete. To communicate among themselves and with those in control, enslaved Africans were compelled to learn English, Portuguese, Spanish, and other European languages. They adopted only the semantic level of these languages but expressed themselves according to the syntax of their original languages. Writing about the relationship between West African languages and certain African-American linguistic patterns, Asante states:

> The language spoken by African-Americans was greatly influenced by the phonological and syntactic structures of their first languages. Whatever semblance of English they learned had the unmistakable imprint of African languages, much as the English spoken by the average French person is rendered in many instances in terms of French phonology and syntax. [13]

Musically, this linguistic adjustment gave birth to a new creolized conceptualization – a combination of European melodic and harmonic concepts expressed rhythmically within the African frame of reference. This assertion is sustained by the predominance of rhythm as heard in African music on the continent and in the Diaspora, in other words while the melodic line and harmonic implication may follow the European concept of musical organization, the rhythmic organization of the music is definitely

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11 Ulhôa, op. cit., pp. 48-49.
12 For a detailed discussion of this syntactic influence on the temporal aspect of music in Africa, see Kazadi wa Mukuna, op. cit., Fall 1997.
13 Molefi Kete Asante. "African Elements in African-American English," in *Africanisms in American Culture*, edited by Joseph E. Holloway. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 22.

African. Writing about Africanisms in Afro-American music in the United States, Portia Maultsby concludes with this statement:

> African retentions in African-American music can be defined as a core of conceptual approaches [...] Black people create, interpret, and experience music out of an African frame of reference – one that shapes musical sound, interpretation, and behavior and makes black music traditions throughout the world a unified whole. [14]

This 'African Frame of Reference' is encapsulated in the African oral tradition and passed down from generation to another. Amadou Hampaté Bâ expresses the role of oral tradition in Africa in these terms:

> It is at once religion, knowledge, natural science, apprenticeship in a craft, history, entertainment, recreation, since any point of detail can always take us all the way back to primordial unity. [15]

Oral tradition, to use Hampaté Bâ's expression, "served to create a particular type of man, to sculpt the African soul." [16]

In light of the above discussion, it can be asserted that the concept of rhythmic organization in African music derived from the syntactic aspect of their languages is maintained through oral traditions in the collective memory of the enslaved Africans that were carried to the New World, serving as the source of rhythmic organization in the music in the Americas. This linguistic source of organization, coupled with the influence of the Amerindian musical organization, has unified the style of music, which demonstrates the predominance of rhythm derived from syntax of African languages. Stylistic differences between these musical traditions stem from the concept of musical organization encountered in melodic structures and harmonic implications of their respective European languages coupled with the local Amerindian musical influence. Each language has a definite influence in the musical organization focused on the non-rhythmic aspects of the music.

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14 Portia Maultsby, op. cit., p. 205.
15 Amadou Hampaté Bâ, "The Living Tradition," in *General History of Africa – I: Methodology and African Prehistory* edited by Joseph Ki-Zerbo. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981, p. 168.
16 Amadou Hampaté Bâ, op. cit. p. 168.

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