Africa/Ewe, Mande, Dagbamba, Shona, BaAka

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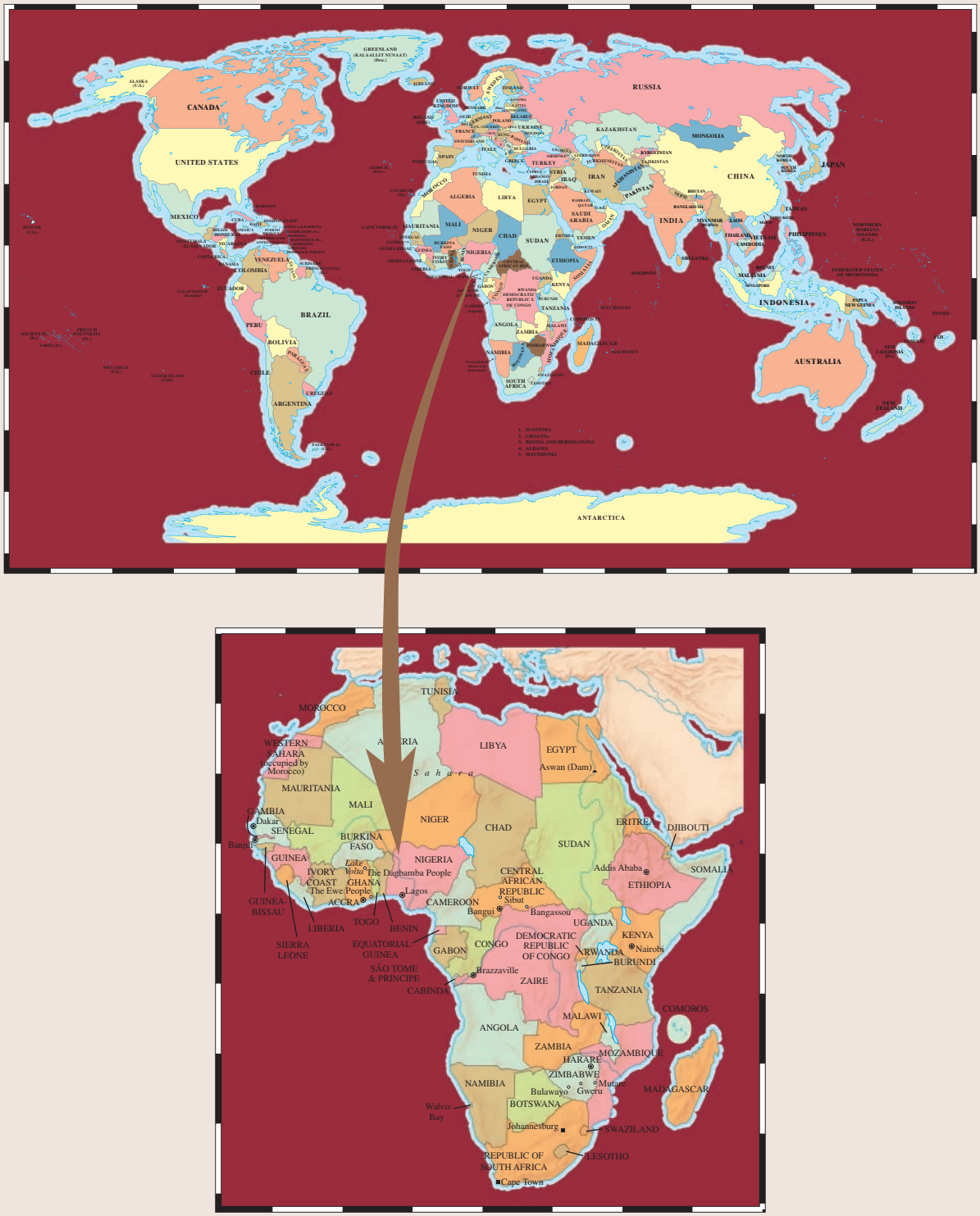
CHAPTER 3

Consider a misleadingly simple question: Where is Africa's beginning and end? At first you might say that they lie at the borders that mark the continent. But musically, Africa spills over its geographic boundaries. Calling to mind the narrow Strait of Gibraltar, the recently dug Suez Canal, the often-crossed Red and Mediterranean Seas, and the vast Atlantic Ocean, we realize that people from Africa have always shaped world history. If we invoke images—Egypt, Ethiopia, the Moors, Swahili civilization, commerce in humans and precious metals—we know that Africa is not separate from Europe, Asia, and America. As pointed out in Chapter 1, music is humanly made sound; it moves with humankind on our explorations, conquests, migrations, and enslavements. This chapter, therefore, refers us not only to the African continent but also to the many other places we can find African music-culture.

Another question: What music is African music? We could be poetic and say, "Where its people are, there is Africa's music—on the continent and in its diaspora." The truth, however, is messier. Music is never pure; music-cultures are always changing and being shaped by many outside influences. From Benin and Luanda to Bahia, Havana, London, and Harlem, music-cultures blend along a subtle continuum. African-influenced music now circulates the planet by means of electronic media. After people learn new things about music, their own personal music-cultures adjust.

The African continent has two broad zones: (1) the **Maghrib,*** north of the Sahara Desert, and (2) **sub-Saharan Africa.** North Africa and the Horn of Africa have much in common with the Mediterranean and western Asia; Africa south of the Sahara in many ways is a unique cultural area. Even so, history records significant contacts up and down the Nile, across the Sahara, and along the African coasts. Just as civilizations from the north (Greece, Rome) and east (Arabia, Turkey) have made an indelible impact on northern Africa, the south has influenced the Maghrib as well. Similarly, Africa south of the Sahara has never been isolated from the Old World civilizations of Europe and Asia. As this chapter will show, the history and cultural geography of sub-Saharan Africa vary tremendously (Bohannan and Curtin 1995).

*Words in bold are defined in the Glossary, beginning on page 407.


CANADA
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TANZANIA
ANGOLA
ZAMBIA
NAMIBIA
SOUTH AFRICA
MADAGASCAR
INDONESIA
AUSTRALIA
NEW ZEALAND
ANTARCTICA
1. SLOVENIA
2. CROATIA
3. BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA
4. ALBANIA
5. MACEDONIA

TUNISIA
MOROCCO
WESTERN SAHARA (occupied by Morocco)
MAURITANIA
MALI
NIGER
CHAD
LIBYA
EGYPT
Aswan (Dam)
S a h a r a
GAMBIA
Dakar
SENEGAL
Banjul
BURKINA FASO
GUINEA
IVORY COAST
GHANA
The Ewe People
ACCRA
Lake Volta
The Dagbamba People
NIGERIA
Lagos
CAMEROON
GUINEA-BISSAU
LIBERIA
SIERRA LEONE
TOGO
BENIN
EQUATORIAL GUINEA
SÃO TOME & PRINCIPE
GABON
CONGO
CABINDA
Brazzaville
ZAIRE
CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC
Sibut
Bangassou
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Mutare
Gweru
Bulawayo
NAMIBIA
MADAGASCAR
Walvis Bay
BOTSWANA
Johannesburg
SWAZILAND
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA
LESOTHO
Cape Town

Permit an ungrammatical question: When is an African? In everyday circumstances, people in Africa do not usually think of themselves as "African" (Mphahlele 1962). Identity arises from local connections of gender, age, kinship, place, language, religion, and work. Ethnicity comes into play only in the presence of people from a different group. One "becomes" a Serer, so to speak, in the presence of a Wolof, an African when among the French, a White in the company of a Black, a Yellow, a Red (Senghor 1967). These terms suggest relationships among people more than they mark essential characteristics of individuals. Although physical appearance and genetic inheritance do not determine culture, the bogus concept of "race" persists, feeding the ignorance that spawns prejudice and the bigotry that fosters injustice (Appiah 1992). Such labels should therefore be marked: USE WITH CARE.

"Africa" serves as a resonant symbol for many people. People of African descent, wherever they are in the world, may regard Africa as the ancestral homeland, the place of empowerment and belonging (Asante 1987). Industrialized citizens of "information societies" may envision Africa as either a pastoral Eden or the impoverished Third World. Historically regarded as a land of "heathens" by Muslims and Christians, Africa is a fount of ancient wisdom for those who practice religions such as ***santería*** or ***vodun.*** Famine relief and foreign aid, wilderness safari and Tarzan, savage or sage—Africa is a psychic space, not just a physical place.

The sections that follow introduce six African music-cultures. They show Africa's diversity and some of its widely shared characteristics. Information for two of the sections comes from my own field research; other sections are based on the ethnomusicological scholarship of colleagues—Roderic Knight, Paul Berliner, Michelle Kisliuk, and the late James Koetting. The cooperative effort that underlies this chapter seems fitting, because one vital function of African music is to mold separate individuals into a group.

Salient Characteristics OF AFRICA

- *African continent divided into two broad cultural zones: the Maghrib, north of the Sahara Desert, and sub-Saharan Africa in the south.*
- *Can be viewed symbolically, psychologically, and geographically.*
- *Defining the term African involves numerous factors that make up individual identity.*
- *Many ethnic groups, also called "tribes," "kingdoms," "nations," or "polities," distributed over vast land mass and within many nation-states.*
- *Profound effect of African music on music throughout the world.*

Postal Workers Canceling Stamps

In Chapter 1, you first heard the sounds of African postal workers canceling stamps (CD 1, Track 1). As promised, we will revisit this intriguing recording, this time examining how it reflects some of the general characteristics of African music-culture. To start, recall Koetting's description (1992:98–99):

> This is what you are hearing: the two men seated at the table slap a letter rhythmically several times to bring it from the file to the position on the table where it is to be canceled. (This act makes a light-sounding thud). The marker is inked one or more times (the lowest, most resonant sound you hear) and then stamped on the letter (the high-pitched mechanized sound you hear). . . . The rhythm produced is not a simple one-two-three (bring forward the letter—ink the marker—stamp the letter). Rather, musical sensitivities take over. Several slaps on the letter to bring it down, repeated thuds of the marker in the ink pad and multiple cancellations . . . are done for rhythmic interest. . . .

CD 1:1

Postal workers canceling stamps at the University of Accra, Ghana, post office (2:59). The whistled tune is the hymn "Bompata," by the Ghanaian composer W. J. Akyeampong (b. 1900). Field recording by James Koetting. Legon, Ghana, 1975.

> The other sounds you hear have nothing to do with the work itself. A third man has a pair of scissors that he clicks—not cutting anything, but adding to the rhythm. . . . The fourth worker simply whistles along. He and any of the other three workers who care to join him whistle popular tunes or church music that fits the rhythm.

How does this musical event exemplify widely shared characteristics of African music-culture?

GENERALIZATIONS ABOUT AFRICAN MUSIC-CULTURE

Music-Making Events

A compelling feature of this recording is its setting. Canceling stamps can sound like this? How marvelous! Obviously, the event was not a concert, and this most definitely is not art for art's sake. Like **work music** everywhere, this performance undoubtedly lifted the workers' spirits and enabled them to coordinate their efforts. The music probably helped the workers maintain a positive attitude toward their job. Music often helps workers control the mood of the workplace (Jackson 1972). (See "Music of Work" in Chapter 4.)

African music often happens in social situations where people's primary goals are not artistic. Instead, music is for ceremonies (life cycle rituals, festivals), work (subsistence, child care, domestic chores, wage labor), or play (games, parties, lovemaking). Music making contributes to an event's success by focusing attention,

Close Listening

POSTAL WORKERS CANCELING STAMPS

CD 1:1

COUNTER NUMBER	COMMENTARY
0:00	Fade in during last phrase of the tune.
0:07	First complete rendition of tune; two-part harmony; restrained percussion.
0:44	Second time through the tune solo whistle; brief interlude without whistling.
2:04	Tune repeats a fourth time with more melodic and harmonic invention in whistling and rhythmic variety in percussive accompaniment.
2:36	Bass part in percussion "takes a solo" as tune finishes.
2:44	Fade-out as next repetition begins.

communicating information, encouraging social solidarity, and transforming consciousness.

Expression in Many Media

Just as Africans set music in a social context, they associate it with other **expressive media** (drama, dance, poetry, costuming, sculpture). Indeed, this example is unusual because it is a wordless instrumental. Although music making is usually not the exclusive purpose of an event, people do value its aesthetic qualities. Music closely associated with a life event is also enjoyed at other times for its own sake.

Musical Style

The whistled tune probably seems familiar to many listeners. The melody has European musical qualities such as duple meter, a major scale, and harmony. On the other hand, the percussion exhibits widespread African stylistic features such as polyrhythm, repetition, and improvisation.

History

These observations about genre and style lead to an important point about the history of music in Africa: The music-cultures of Europe, Asia, and the Americas have strongly affected those in Africa. Foreigners—Chris§¶tians and Muslims, sailors and soldiers, traders and travelers—have brought to Africa their instruments, musical repertories, and ideas. Modern media technologies such as radio and audio recording have merely increased the intensity of a very old pattern of border crossing. Like people everywhere, Africans have imitated, rejected, transformed, and adapted external influences in a complex process of culture change.

Although the concert music repertory of Europe has held little attraction for most Africans, many other musical traditions have affected African music making. Throughout Africa, Christian hymns and Muslim **cantillation** (chanting religious texts) have exerted a profound influence on musical style. West Asian civilization has influenced African musical instruments, such as the plucked lutes, double reeds, and goblet-shaped drums of the Sahel area. Euro-American influence shows up in the electric guitar and drum set, although East Asians manufacture many of these instruments. We hear the American influence of Cuban *rumba* on pop music from central Africa, and African American spirituals on southern African religious music. From praise singers to pop bands, musical professionalism is an idea about music that developed in Africa by means of the intercultural exchange of ideas.

Participation

The postal workers join simple musical parts together to make remarkably sophisticated and satisfying music. This kind of musical design welcomes social engagement. Others could participate by adding a new phrase to the polyrhythm or cutting a few dance moves. Undoubtedly, Jim Koetting "got down" while picking up his mail! Much African music shares this generous, open-hearted quality that welcomes participation.

Training

We admire the postal workers because their music seems effortlessly beautiful. The genius we sense in this recording lies in the way the workers are musical together, in their sensitivity to a culturally conditioned musical style. Here, a musical education depends on a societywide process of **enculturation**—that is, the process of learning one's culture gradually during childhood. Babies move on the backs of their dancing mothers, youngsters play children's games and then join adults in worship and mourning, teenagers groove to pop tunes. Raised in this manner, Africans learn a way-of-being in response to music; intuitively, they know how to participate effectively. Genetic and sacred forces may shape musicality, but culture is the indispensable element in musical training.

Beliefs and Values

Often, Africans conceive of music as a necessary and normal part of life. Neither exalted nor denigrated as "art," music fuses with other life processes. Traditional songs and musical instruments are not commodities separable from the flux of life. In his book *African Music: A People's Art,* Francis Bebey quotes a musician who was asked to sell his instrument:

> He replied rather dryly that he had come to town to play his drum for the dancing and not to deliver a slave into bondage. He looked upon his instrument as a person, a colleague who spoke the same language and helped him create his music. (1975:120)

Intercultural Misunderstanding

These beliefs and attitudes about music make intercultural understanding a challenge, especially for scientifically minded people from what might be called concert-music-cultures. What a non-African listener assumes is an item of music may be the voice of an ancestor to an African. When he recorded this example, Koetting found himself in this type of cross-cultural conundrum:

> It sounds like music and, of course it is; but the men performing do not quite think of it that way. These men are working, not putting on a musical show; people pass by the workplace paying little attention to the "music" (I used to go often to watch and listen to them, and they gave the impression that they thought I was somewhat odd for doing so). (1992:98)

Agbekor: Music and Dance of the Ewe People

Drawing on my field research in West Africa during the 1970s, we will now consider a type of singing and drumming, originating as a war dance, called ***Agbekor*** (ah-gbeh-kaw; literally, "clear life"). As we will hear on CD 1, Tracks 11 and 12, *Agbekor*'s music features a percussion ensemble and a chorus of singers. A complex lead drumming part rides on a rich polyrhythmic texture established by an ensemble of bells, rattles, and drums of different sizes. Songs are clear examples

of call-and-response. *Agbekor* is a creation of Ewe-speaking people who live on the Atlantic coast of western Africa in the nation-states of Ghana and Togo.

THE EWE PEOPLE

Ewe History

Triumph over adversity is an important theme in **Ewe** (eh-way) oral history. Until they came to their present territory, the Ewe people had lived precariously as a minority within kingdoms of more populous and powerful peoples such as the Yoruba and the Fon. One prominent story in their oral traditions recounts their exodus in the late 1600s from Agokoli, the tyrannical king of Notsie, a walled city-state located in what is now southern Togo. Intimidating Agokoli's warriors with fierce drumming, the Ewes escaped under cover of darkness. Moving toward the southwest, they founded many settlements along a large lagoon near the mouth of the Volta River. At last Wenya, their elderly leader, declared that he was too tired to continue. Thus, this Ewe group became known as the **Anlo** (ahng-law), which means "cramped." Other families of Ewe-speakers settled nearby along the coast and in the upland hills.

In these new lands, the Ewe communities grew and multiplied. Eventually the small Ewe settlements expanded into territorial divisions whose inhabitants could all trace male ancestors to the original villages. Family heads or distinguished war leaders became chiefs. Despite bonds of common culture and history, each division zealously cherished its independence. The Ewe people have never supported a hierarchical concentration of power within a large state (compare them with the Dagbamba kingdom, discussed later in this chapter).

Ever since those early days, the important unit of Ewe social life has been the extended family. Members of a lineage—that is, people who can trace their genealogy to a common ancestor—share rights and obligations. Lineage elders hold positions of secular and sacred authority. The ever-present spirits of lineage ancestors help their offspring, especially if the living perform the necessary customary rituals. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the Ewes in frequent military conflict with neighboring ethnic groups, with European traders, and even among themselves. The Anlo-Ewe gained a fearsome reputation as warriors.

Ewe Religious Philosophy

An Ewe scholar has commented on the sacred worldview of his people:

> A traveler in Anlo is struck by the predominating, all-pervasive influence of religion in the intimate life of the family and community. . . . The sea, the lagoon, the river, streams, animals, birds and reptiles as well as the earth with its natural and artificial protuberances are worshipped as divine or as the abode of divinities. (Fiawo 1959:35, in Locke 1978:32)

The Ewe supreme being, **Mawu,** is remote from the affairs of humanity. Other divinities, such as **Se** (pronounced seh),

Salient Characteristics OF THE EWE AND THEIR MUSIC

- *Towns and villages east of the mouth of the Volta River along the coast of the Atlantic Ocean.*
- *Decentralized society based on territorial divisions headed by chiefs, war leaders, and priests; extended family is main unit of social life.*
- *In worldview, religion permeates all aspects of family and community life.*
- *Ethos emphasizes affirmation of life in challenging circumstances.*
- *Music with polyphonic instrumental ensembles, dance drumming, and call-and-response singing.*
- *Musical style features polyrhythm.*

interact with things in this world. Se embodies God's attributes of law, order, and harmony; Se is the maker and keeper of human souls; Se is destiny. Many Ewes believe that before a spirit enters the fetus, it tells Se how its life on earth will be and how its body will die. If you ask Ewe musicians the source of their talent, they will most likely identify the ancestor whose spirit they have inherited. Ask why they are so involved in music making, and they will say it is their destiny.

> Ancestral spirits are an important force in the lives of Ewe people. The Ewe believe that part of a person's soul lives on in the spirit world after his [or her] death and must be cared for by the living. This care is essential, for the ancestors can either provide for and guard the living or punish them. . . . The doctrine of reincarnation, whereby some ancestors are reborn into their earthly kin-groups, is also given credence. The dead are believed to live somewhere in the world of spirits, *Tsiefe,* from where they watch their living descendants in the earthly world, *Kodzogbe*. They are believed to possess supernatural powers of one sort or another, coupled with a kindly interest in their descendants as well as the ability to do harm if the latter neglect them. (Nukunya 1969:27, in Locke 1978:35)

Funerals are significant social institutions, because without ritual action by the living a soul cannot become an ancestral spirit. A funeral is an affirmation of life, a cause for celebration because another ancestor can now watch over the living. Because spirits of ancestors love music and dance, funeral memorial services feature drumming, singing, and dancing. Full of the passions aroused by death, funerals have replaced war as an appropriate occasion for war drumming such as *Agbekor.*

Knowledge of Ewe history and culture helps explain the great energy found in performance pieces like *Agbekor.* Vital energy, life force, strength—these lie at the heart of the Ewe outlook:

> In the traditional . . . Anlo society where the natural resources are relatively meager, where the inexplicable natural environment poses a threat to life and where the people are flanked by warlike tribes and neighbors, we find the clue to their philosophy of life: it is aimed at life. (Fiawo 1959:41, in Locke 1978:36)

AGBEKOR: HISTORY AND CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE

Legends of Origin

During my field research, I interviewed elders about how *Agbekor* began.* Many people said it was inspired by hunters' observations of monkeys in the forest. According to some elders, the monkeys changed into human form, played drums, and danced; others say that the monkeys kept their animal form as they beat with sticks and danced. Significantly, hunters, like warriors, had access to esoteric power.

> In the olden days hunters were the repository of knowledge given to men by God. Hunters had special herbs. . . . Having used such herbs, the hunter could meet and talk with leopards and other animals which eat human beings. . . . As for *Agbekor,* it was in such a way that they saw it and brought it home. But having seen such a thing, they could not reveal it to others just like that.

*I conducted these interviews with the assistance of a language specialist, Bernard Akpeleasi, who subsequently translated the spoken Ewe into written English.

> Hunters have certain customs during which they drum, beat the double bell, and perform such activities that are connected with the worship of things we believe. It was during such a traditional hunting custom that they exhibited the monkey's dance. Spectators who went to the performance decided to found it as a proper dance. There were hunters among them because once they had revealed the dance in the hunting customary performance they could later repeat it again publicly. But if a hunter saw something and came home to reveal it, he would surely become insane. That was how *Agbekor* became known as a dance of the monkeys. (Kwaku Denu, quoted in Locke 1978:38–39)

Although many Ewes consider them legend rather than history, stories like this signify the high respect accorded to *Agbekor*. Hunters were spiritually forceful leaders, and the forest was the zone of dangerously potent supernatural forces. We feel this power in a performance of *Agbekor*.

Agbekor as War Drumming

The original occasion for a performance of *Agbekor* was war. Elders explained that their ancestors performed it before combat, as a means to attain the required frame of mind, or after battle, as a means of communicating what had happened.

> They would play the introductory part before they were about to go to war. When the warriors heard the rhythms, they would be completely filled with bravery. They would not think that they might be going, never to return, for their minds were filled only with thoughts of fighting. (Elders of the Agbogbome *Agbekor* Society, quoted in Locke 1978:44)
>
> Yes, it is a war dance. It is a dance that was played when they returned from an expedition. They would exhibit the things that happened during the war, especially the death of an elder or a chief. (Alfred Awunyo, quoted in Locke 1978:43)
>
> If they were fighting, brave acts were done. When they were relaxing after the battle, they would play the drums and during the dance a warrior could display what he had done during the battle for the others to see. (Kpogo Ladzekpo, quoted in Locke 1978:43)

The Meaning of the Name *Agbekor*

I asked whether the name *Agbekor* has meaning. One elder told me this:

> I can say it signifies enjoying life: we make ourselves happy in life. The suffering that our elders underwent was brought out in the dance, and it could be that when they became settled, they gave the dance this name, which shows that the dance expresses the enjoyment of life. (Kwaku Denu, quoted in Locke 1978:47)

Another elder told me that when people played *Agbekor* during times of war, they called it ***atamuga*** (ah-*tam*-gah), which means "the great oath." Before going to battle, warriors would gather with their war leaders at shrines that housed spiritually powerful objects. They would swear on a sacred sword an oath to their ancestors to obey their leaders' commands and fight bravely for their community. When the Anlo no longer went to war, the name changed to *Agbekor* (Kpogo Ladzekpo, quoted in Locke 1978:45–46).

The word *Agbekor* is a compound of two short words: *agbe* ("life") and *kor* ("clear"). The professional performer Midao Gideon Foli Alorwoyie translates *Agbekor* as "clear life": The battle is over, the danger is past, and our lives are now in

the clear (Locke 1978:47). Many people add the prefix *atsia* (plural *atsiawo*), calling the piece *atsiagbekor* (ah-chah-*gbeh*-kaw). The word ***atsia*** has two meanings: (1) stylish self-display, looking good, or bluffing and (2) a preset figure of music and dance. As presented shortly, the form of the lead drumming and the dance consists of a sequence of *atsiawo*.

Learning

In Ewe music-culture, most music and dance is learned through enculturation. *Agbekor*, on the other hand, requires special training. The eminent African ethnomusicologist J. H. K. Nketia describes learning through slow absorption without formal teaching:

> The very organization of traditional music in social life enables the individual to acquire his musical knowledge in slow stages, to widen his experience of the music of his culture through the social groups into which he is progressively incorporated and the activities in which he takes part. . . . The young have to rely largely on their imitative ability and on correction by others when this is volunteered. They must rely on their own eyes, ears and memory. They must acquire their own technique of learning. (1964:4)

Gideon Alorwoyie explains how one learns from the performance of an expert:

> All you have to do is know when he is going to play. . . . You have to go and pay attention to what you hear . . . to how the drums are coordinated and to the drum language, to what the responses are to the calls, and so on. You have to use your common sense right there to make sure that you get the patterns clear. Up to today, if you want to be a drummer, you go to the place where people are playing and then pay attention and listen. That's it. (Davis 1994:27)

Because of its complexity, *Agbekor* is hard to learn in this informal way. Members of an *Agbekor* group practice in a secluded area for up to a year before they appear in public. Instruction entails demonstration and emulation. With adept dancers in front, the whole group performs together. No one breaks it down and analyzes it. People learn sequences of movement and music not through exercises but in a simulated performance context. (Compare this with the teaching of *karnataka sangeeta*, described in Chapter 6.)

This style of learning depends on gifted students who can learn long rhythmic compositions merely by listening to them several times. For certain people, drumming comes as easily and naturally as spoken language. Ewes know that drumming talent often comes from one's ancestors. A precocious youngster may be the reincarnation of an ancestor who was a renowned musician. One village drummer told me of a special drummer's ritual:

> My father was a drummer and he taught me. It was when he was old and could no longer play that he gave me the curved sticks. A ceremony has to be performed before the curved sticks are handed over to you. . . . If the custom is not done the drum language will escape your mind. (Dogbevi Abaglo, quoted in Locke 1978:53)

Gideon Alorwoyie explains the effects of this ritual:

> Once the custom has been made, you can't sleep soundly. The rhythms you want to learn will come into your head while you sleep. . . . The ceremony protects the person in many ways. It protects your hands when you play and

> protects you from the evil intentions of other people who may envy you. . . . Whenever you see a master drummer in Africa, I'm telling you, he has got to have some sort of backbone. (Locke 1978:54–55)

Performing Organizations

Times have changed since Ewe hunters created *Agbekor*. Britain, Germany, and France administered Ewe territory during a brief colonial period (1880s to 1950s); now the Ewe people live in the nation-states of Ghana and Togo. Today, relatively few villages have preserved their heritage of *Agbekor*. But the tradition vigorously continues within drum and dance societies of several types: mutual aid organizations, school and civic youth groups, and theatrical performing companies. Throughout Africa, voluntary mutual aid societies are an important type of performing group (Ladzekpo 1971). *Agbekor* groups of this kind are formal organizations with a group identity, institutionalized procedures, recognized leaders, and so forth. Many members are poor and cannot afford funeral expenses. People solve this financial problem by pooling resources. When a member dies, individuals contribute a small amount so the group can give money to the family. The society's performance of music and dance makes the funeral grand.

In the mid-1970s I studied *Agbekor* with members of this type of cooperative society, the Anya *Agbekor* Society of Accra (see Figure 3.1). One of their leaders recounted how the group came into existence:

> The first Anya Agbekor group in Accra was formed by our elder brothers and uncles. They all scattered in the mid-sixties and that group died away. We, the younger ones, decided to revive it in 1970. Three or four people sat down and said, "How can we let this thing just go away? *Agbekor* originated in our place, among our family, so it is not good to let it go." We felt that it was something we had to do to remember the old family members. We formed the group to help ourselves. (Evans Amenumey, quoted in Locke 1978:63)

Codwin Agbell

FIGURE 3.1

The Anya Agbekor Society (with the author) in performance.

I also studied with school groups trained by my teacher Godwin Agbeli. In colonial times, missionaries whipped students for attending traditional performance events. These days, most Ewes value their traditional repertory of music and dance as a cultural resource. Since Ghana achieved statehood in 1957, the national government has held competitions for amateur **cultural groups** from the country's many ethnic regions. Young people often join these groups because rehearsals and performances provide social opportunities. Like many African nations, Ghana sponsors professional performing-arts troupes. With its spectacular, crowd-pleasing music and dance, *Agbekor* is a staple of their repertory.

A Performance

On Sunday, March 6, 1977, in a crowded working-class section of Accra, the Anya Society performed in honor of the late chief patron of the group. The evening before, the group had held a wake during which they drummed ***Kpegisu,*** another prestigious war drumming of the Ewe (Locke 1992). Early Sunday morning they played *Agbekor* briefly to announce the afternoon's performance. Had the event occurred in Anyako, the group would have made a procession through the ward. People went home to rest and returned to the open lot near the patron's family house by 3:30 in the afternoon for the main event.

The performance area was arranged like a rectangle within a circle. Ten drummers sat at one end, fifteen dancers formed three columns facing the drummers, ten singers stood in a semicircle behind the dancers, and about three hundred onlookers encircled the entire performance area. All drummers and most dancers were male. Most singers were female; several younger women danced with the men. Group elders, bereaved family members, and invited dignitaries sat behind the drummers. With the account book laid out on a table, the group's secretary accepted the members' contributions.

Perhaps because the word *atsia* means "stylishness," many English-speaking Ewe musicians refer to the preformed drum and dance compositions as "styles."

The action began with an introductory section called ***adzo*** (ah-dzo), or short section. Dancers sang songs in free rhythm. After the *adzo*, the main section, ***vutsotsoe*** (voo-*tsaw*-tso-eh), or fast drumming, started. The first sequence of figures honored the ancestors. Following this ritually charged passage, the dancers performed approximately ten more *atsiawo*. The lead drummer spontaneously selected these "styles" from the many drum and dance sequences known to the group. The singers were also busy. Their song leader raised up each song; the chorus received it and answered. One song was repeated five to ten times before another was begun.

After about twenty minutes the ***adzokpi*** (ah-*dzoh*-kpee), or "solos," section of the performance began. Group members came forward in pairs or small groups to dance in front of the lead drummer. The dance movement differed for men and women. As in genres of Ewe social dancing, friends invited each other to move into the center of the dance space. When everyone had their fill of this more individualistic display, the lead drummer returned to the group styles. Soon, he signaled for a break in the action by playing the special ending figure.

During the break, the group's leaders went to the center of the dance area to pour a **libation.** Calling on the ancestors to drink, elders ceremonially poured water and liquor onto the earth. An elder explained later:

> We pour libation to call upon the deceased members of the dance [group] to send us their blessings [so we can] play the dance the same way we did when they were alive. How the Christians call Jesus, call God, though Jesus is dead—they do not

> see him and yet they call him—it is in the same manner that we call upon the members of the dance [group] who are no more so that their blessings come down upon us during the dancing. (Kpogo Ladzekpo, quoted in Locke 1978:82–83)

The performance resumed with ***vulolo*** (voo-*law*-law), or slow drumming, the processional section of *Agbekor*. After about fifteen minutes, they went straight to *vutsotsoe*, the up-tempo section, and then *adzokpi*, the "solos" section. After a brief rest they did another sequence of group figures at slow and fast pace, followed by individual display.

At the peak of the final *adzokpi* section elders, patrons, and invited guests came out onto the dance area. While they danced, singers and dancers knelt on one knee as a mark of respect. After dancing back and forth in front of the drummers, they returned to their position on the benches in back of the drummers.

By 6:00, with the equatorial sun falling quickly, the performance had ended. As the group members contentedly carried the equipment back to the Anya house, the audience dispersed, talking excitedly about the performance.

Although a performance of *Agbekor* follows a definite pattern, it is not rigidly formalized. A. M. Jones, a pioneering scholar of African music, comments on the elasticity of African musical performance: "Within the prescribed limits of custom, no one quite knows what is going to happen: It depends quite a lot on the inspiration of the leading performers. These men [and women] are not making music which is crystallized on a music score. They are moved by the spirit of the occasion" (Jones 1959:108).

CD 1:11

Agbekor (5:32). Traditional music of the Ewe people. Field recording by David Locke. Anlo-Afiadenyigba, Ghana, 1976.

MUSIC OF THE PERCUSSION ENSEMBLE

We now turn to music of the percussion ensemble for the slow-paced section of *Agbekor* (see Transcription 3.1, later in the chapter). Instruments in the *Agbekor* ensemble include a double bell, a gourd rattle, and four single-headed drums (see Figure 3.2). Listen to CD 1, Track 11, for the entire ensemble, then listen to CD 1, Track 12, to hear the bell (*gankogui*) by itself, followed by each instrument with the bell (*axatse, kaganu, kidi, kloboto, and totodzi*), and finally the polyrhythm of all the parts. Note that I have decided not to present the music of the lead drum here. Not only is the material quite complicated, but I believe it best that students approach lead drumming only after a significant period of study, preferably with an Ewe teacher.

CD 1:12

Demonstration: *Agbekor* (3:54). Performed by David Locke. You will hear the bell by itself, followed by each instrument with the bell (*axatse, kaganu, kidi, kloboto, and totodzi*), and finally, the polyrhythm of all the parts.

One by one the phrases are not too difficult, but playing them in an ensemble is surprisingly hard. The challenge is to hear them within a polyphonic texture

Close Listening

DEMONSTRATION: *AGBEKOR*

CD 1:12

COUNTER NUMBER	COMMENTARY
0:00	*Gankogui* phrase by itself; phrase occurs twelve times; each phrase starts on high-pitched stroke 2 and ends on low-pitched stroke 1.
0:34	*Gankogui* and *axatse* phrases in duet.
1:07	*Gankogui* and *kaganu* phrases in duet.
1:40	*Gankogui* and *kidi* phrases in duet.
2:13	*Gankogui* and *kloboto* phrases in duet.
2:48	*Gankogui* and *totodzi* phrases in duet.
3:20	Full ensemble made up of composite of all phrases (see Transcription 3.1).

that seems to change depending on one's point of musical reference. The reward in learning to play these parts is an experience of African musical time.

The Bell

"Listen to the bell"—the continual advice of Ewe teachers. Every act of drumming, singing, and dancing is timed in accordance with the recurring musical phrase played on an iron bell or gong called ***gankogui*** (gahng-*koh*-gu-ee). On first impression, the part may seem simple, but when set in the rhythmic context of Ewe drumming, it becomes a musical force of great potency. Repetition is key. As the phrase repeats over and over, participants join together in a circling, spiraling world of time.

Tempo, Pulsation, and Time-Feels

Although many contrasting rhythmic phrases occur simultaneously in the percussion ensemble, competent Ewe musicians unerringly maintain a steady tempo. Rather than confusing the players, the musical relations among parts help them maintain a consistent time flow.

The time-feel (meter) most significant to Ewe performers is the ***four-feel.*** Together with the explicit bell phrase, these four beats provide a constant, implicit foundation for musical perception. Each is a ***ternary beat,*** meaning that each has three quicker units within it. When my students first learn a dance step, a

drum part, or a song melody, I advise them to lock into the bell phrase and the four-feel beats. Interestingly, this type of groove—often marked by a $\frac{12}{8}$ time signature—is widespread in African American music (see Chapter 4).

To an Ewe musician, these four-feel beats automatically imply a ***six-feel*** (six quarter notes, or $\frac{6}{4}$ meter). The four- and six-feels are inseparable; they construct musical reality in two ways at once. This is the power of 3:2.

The ***axatse*** (ah-*ha*-tseh) is a dried gourd, about the size of a cantaloupe, covered with a net strung with seeds. In some *Agbekor* groups its role is to sound out the four-feel beats. In another frequently heard phrase, downward strokes on the player's thigh match the *gankogui* while upward strokes against the palm fill in between bell tones. As the only instrument played by many people at once, the axatse "section" provides a loud, indefinite-pitched sound vital to the ensemble's energy.

The high pitch and dry timbre of the slender ***kaganu*** (kah-gahng) drum cuts through the more mellow, midrange sounds of the other drums. The *kaganu* part articulates offbeats—that is, moments between the four-feel beats. The late Freeman Donkor, one of my first teachers of Ewe music, said that the rhythm of *kaganu* brings out the flavor of the other parts, like salt in a stew.

In descending order of relative pitch, the three other drums in the ensemble are ***kidi, kloboto,*** and ***totodzi*** (*kee*-dee, *kloh*-boh-toh, and toh-toh-*dzee*). Each drum adds its own phrase to *Agbekor*'s unique polyphony. There are two ways of striking a drum skin. In bounce strokes the stick bounces off the drum skin, producing an open ringing sound; in press strokes the stick presses into the drum skin, producing a closed muted sound. Bounces contribute the most to the group's music; presses keep each player in a groove. The parts discussed as follows are widespread, but some *Agbekor* groups use slightly different versions.

- In the *kidi* part, three bounces and three presses move at the twelve-unit pulsation rate; the phrase occurs twice within the span of one bell phrase.
- The *kloboto* phrase has the same duration as the bell phrase. As if inspired by bell tones 7–1, the part's main idea is a brief bounce-press, offbeat-onbeat figure. The *kloboto*'s insistent accentuation of offbeat moments can reorient a listener into perceiving them as onbeats. This type of implied beat shift (displacement) adds to the multidimensional quality of the music. Competent Ewe musicians, however, never lose orientation—they always know the *kloboto* presses are right on the four-feel time.
- The *totodzi* part begins and ends with the *kloboto.* Its two bounce strokes match bell tones 2 and 3, its three press strokes match four-feel beats 3, 4, and 1. Notice the impact of sound quality and body movement on rhythmic shape: The phrase is felt as two strong-hand bounces followed by three weak-hand presses, not according to a three-then-two timing structure.

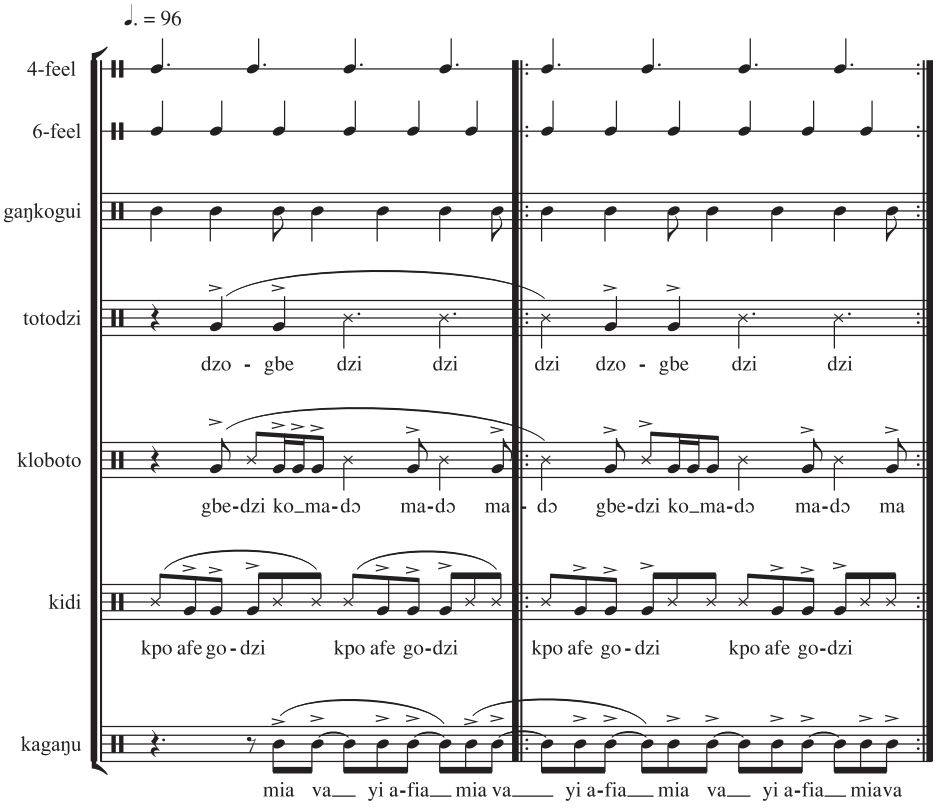
To get into the drumming, begin by hearing each phrase "in four" and in duet with the bell. Then, stay "in four" but hear ever-larger combinations with other parts. Next, switch to the six-feel. The point is to explore the potency of these phrases, not to create new ones. Stretch your way of hearing, rather than what you are playing. Strive for a cool focus on ensemble relationships, not a hot individual display (Thompson 1973).

Drum Language

As happens in the instrumental music of many African peoples, Ewe drum phrases often have vernacular texts, called **drum language.** Usually only drummers know the texts. Even Ewe speakers cannot understand drum language just by hearing the music—they must be told. Secrecy makes restricted information valuable and powerful. In many parts of Africa, "speech must be controlled and contained if silence is to exercise its powers of truth, authenticity, seriousness and healing" (Miller 1990:95). During my field research, I asked many experts whether they knew drum language for *Agbekor.* Saying he learned them from elders in his hometown of Afiadenyigba, Gideon Alorwoyie shared the following with me. *Agbekor*'s themes of courage and service are apparent (see Transcription 3.1 and text). His word-for-word and free translations appear beneath the Ewe texts.

TRANSCRIPTION 3.1

Agbekor drum language



Ewe Text and Translation of *Agbekor* Drum Language

Totodzi *Dzogbe dzi dzi dzi.*
battlefield/on/on/on
We will be on the battlefield.

Kloboto *Gbe dzi ko mado mado mado.*
Battlefield/on/only/I will sleep/I will sleep/I will sleep
I will die on the battlefield.

Kidi *Kpo afe godzi.*
Look/home/side-on.
Look back at home.

Kaganu *Miava yi afia.*
We will come/go/will show
We are going to show our bravery.

SONGS

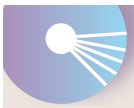
Texts

Agbekor songs engage the subject of war. Many songs celebrate the invincibility of Ewe warriors; others urge courage and loyalty; some reflect on death and express grief. Songs memorialize heroes but do not provide detailed historical information. Unlike the freshly composed songs found in contemporary idioms of Ewe traditional music, *Agbekor* songs come from the past. A song's affective power derives, in part, from its association with the ancestors.

Structural Features

In performance, a song leader and a singing group share the text and melody. As illustrated in the songs presented shortly, this **call-and-response** idea supports a variety of subtly different musical forms. The tonal system of *Agbekor* songs has evolved entirely in response to the human singing voice, without being influenced by musical instruments. An ethnomusicologist can identify scales, but in comparison to tuning in South Indian music-culture, for example, an Ewe singers' intonation seems aimed at pitch areas rather than precise pitch points. Melodic motion usually conforms to the rise and fall of speech tones, but Ewe speakers easily understand song lyrics even if the melodic contour contradicts the tonal pattern of the spoken language. Songs add another layer to the rhythm of *Agbekor*. Not surprisingly, a song's polyrhythmic duet with the bell phrase is all-important.

On CD 1, Track 11, listen again to excerpts from my recording of a performance by an *Agbekor* group from the town of Anlo-Afiadenyigba on August 14, 1976. There are three slow-paced songs, one song in free rhythm, and one fast-paced song.



CD 1:11

Agbekor (5:32). Traditional music of the Ewe people. Field recording by David Locke. Anlo-Afiadenyigba, Ghana, 1976.

a. Three slow-paced songs (0:00–2:52)
b. One song in free rhythm (3:02–4:20)
c. One fast-paced song (4:27–5:32)

Slow-Paced Songs

We begin with the slow-paced songs (see the Close Listening guide). Song 1 announces that people should prepare for the arrival of the *Agbekor* procession. In the A section, the group repeats the leader's text but with a different tune. In the B section, the melodic phrases are shorter, the rhythm of call-and-response more percussive. The song ends with leader and group joining to sing the group's first response.

Text, SONG 1

Leader:	‖:	*Emiawo miegbona 'feawo me.*	
		Afegametowo/viwo, midzra nuawo do.	A^1
Group:		Repeat lines 1 and 2 :‖	A^2
Leader:	‖:	*Oo!*	

Group:	*Midzra nuawo do.* :‖	B
All:	Repeat lines 1 and 2	A^2
Leader: ‖:	We are coming into the homesteads. People/Children of the noble homes, get the things ready.	
Group:	Repeat lines 1 and 2 :‖	
Leader:	*Oh!*	
Group:	Get the things ready.	

Close Listening

AGBEKOR VULOLO (SLOW-PACED SECTION)

CD 1:11

COUNTER NUMBER	COMMENTARY
0:00	Fade-in on Song 1.
0.05	One time through Song 1 (see Text, Song 1).
0.38	Song leader begins Song 1 again, but group raises Song 2 so song leader joins them.
0.42	Song leader continues Song 2 from line B^2 (see Text, Song 2).
0.48	Song 2 repeated seven times, each time taking about 10 seconds.
2.02	Song 3 (see Text, Song 3).
2.21	Song 3 repeated.
2.40	Fade-out during next repetition of Song 3.

Song 2, set at sunrise on the day of battle, urges Manyo and his warriors to "be cunning." Leader and group divide the text: the leader identifies the actors and the action, then the group evokes the scene.

Text, SONG 2

Leader:	*Agbekoviawo, midze aye.*	A^1
Group:	*Ada do ee,* *Kpo nedze ga nu.* *Ada do!*	B^1
Leader:	*Manyo hawo, midze aye ee.*	A^2

Group:	Repeat lines 2–4.	B^2
Leader:	*Agbekor* group, be cunning.	
Group:	The day has come. Beat the double bell. The day has come.	
Leader:	Manyo's group, be cunning.	
Group:	Repeat lines 2–4.	

Song 3 expresses an important sentiment in *Agbekor* songs: celebrating the singers' power and denigrating the opponent. Here, the enemy is a "hornless dog," that is, an impotent person, and "we" are incomparably great. Ewe composers often make this point by means of rhetorical questions: "Who can trace the footprints of an ant?" that is, Who can defeat us? "Can the pigeon scratch where the fowl scratches?" that is, Can the enemy fight as strongly as we can? "Can a bird cry like the sea?" that is, How can the enemy compare to us? In these playful self-assertions and witty put-downs, we see a parallel with the genres of African American expressive culture called **signifying** (Gates 1988; see Chapter 4 of this book for examples).

Text, SONG 3

Leader:	‖:	*Avu matodzo,* *Dewoe lawuma?*	A^1
Group:		Repeat lines 1 and 2 :‖	A^2
Leader:	‖:	*Dewoe?*	B^1
Group:		*Dewoe lawuma?* :‖	B^2
All:		*Avu matodzo* *Dewoe lawuma?*	A^2
Leader:		A hornless dog. Are there any greater than we?	
Group:		Repeat lines 1 and 2.	
Leader:		Any?	
Group:		Greater than we	
All:		Repeat lines 1 and 2.	

Fast-Paced Songs

Like many songs from the fast-paced section, song 5 celebrates heroic passion. For example, another song says simply, "Sweet, to put on the war belt is very sweet." Song 5 (see the Close Listening guide) opens with the vivid image of a confrontation between two war gods (So). The Fon from Dahomey and the Anlo are about to fight; the beautiful warriors are preparing; will they have the courage to enter the fray?

Text, SONG 5

Leader:	‖:	*So kpli So, ne ava va gbedzia* *Tsyo miado.*	A
Group:		*Woyawoya* *Ava va gbedzia.* *Tsyo miado.* :‖	B
Leader:		*Oo.*	C
Group:		*Fowo do gbea.* *Miayia?* *Anlowo do gbe.*	C
Leader:		*Oo.*	D
Group:		*Anawo do gbea* *Tsyo miado.*	
All:		Repeat lines 3–5.	B
Leader	‖:	So and So—if war breaks out on the battlefield We will have to dress gorgeously.	
Group:		*"Woyowoya"* `War breaks out on the battlefield. We have to dress gorgeously. :‖	
Leader:		Oh.	
Group:		The Fon are out on the battlefield, Should we go? The Anlo are out on the battlefield.	
Leader:		Oh,	
Group:		The cowards are out on the battlefield. Should we go? The Anlo are out on the battlefield. Repeat lines 3–5.	

Close Listening

AGBEKOR VUTSOTSOE (FAST-PACED SECTION)

CD 1:11

COUNTER NUMBER	COMMENTARY
4:19	Break in recorded selection.
4:28	Fade in on Song 5 leader call A and group response B sung twice (see Text, Song 5).

4:39	Song 5 leader-group call and response C and D (see Text, Song 5).
4:44	Song 4 all sing section B (see Text, Song 4).
4:47	Song 5 repeated.
5:05	Song 5 repeated.
5:24	Fade-out as new song is raised.

As we have seen, *Agbekor* is a group effort. Music and dance help cement social feeling among members of an *Agbekor* society. Others types of African music depend more on the virtuosity and special knowledge of individuals.

A Drummer of Dagbon

Musicians have had important functions in the political affairs of many African traditional states. We turn now to the life story of one such person.

On CD 1, Track 13, we will hear singing and drumming of the Dagbamba people (also known as Dagomba) from the southern savanna of western Africa (Ghana). I recorded the music in 1984. The performers are ***lunsi*** *(loon-see;* singular *lunga, loong-ah),* members of a hereditary clan of drummers. Like a Mande *jali,* a *lunga* fulfills many vital duties in the life of the Dagbamba—verbal artist, genealogist, counselor to royalty, cultural expert, entertainer. The *lunsi* tradition developed in Dagbon, the hierarchical, centralized kingdom of the Dagbamba (Chernoff 1979; Djedje 1978; Locke 1990).

CD 1:13

"Nag Biegu" ("Ferocious Wild Bull") (2:08). Traditional Praise Name Dance song of Dagbon. Performed by *lunsi* drummers of the Dagbamba people. Field recording by David Locke. Ghana, 1984.

THE DRUMS

Lunsi play two kinds of drums—*gung-gong* and *lunga* (see Figure 3.3). For both types, a shoulder strap holds the drum in position to receive strokes from a curved wooden stick. The ***gung-gong*** (goong-*gawng*) is a cylindrical, carved drum with a snare on each of its two heads. The cedarwood of a ***lunga*** is carved into an hourglass shape. By squeezing the leather cords strung between its two drumheads, a player can change the tension of the drum skins, which changes the pitch of the drum tones. In the hands of an expert, the drum's sound closely imitates Dagbanli, the spoken language of the

FIGURE 3.3

Lunsi in performance.

Patsy Marshall

Salient Characteristics
OF DAGBAMBA AND THEIR MUSIC

- *Live in the southern savanna of western Africa in present day Ghana.*
- *Centralized and hierarchical kingdom.*
- *Lunsi (drummers) are members of a hereditary clan.*
- *Lunsi each act as speech artist, family historian, royal advisor, cultural specialist, and entertainer.*
- *Drumming based on texts in local language.*
- *Drumming and singing used as forms of musical praise.*
- *Drummers submit to lengthy and rigorous training under demanding teachers.*

Dagbamba. *Lunsi* "talk" and "sing" on their instruments. These musicians are storytellers, chroniclers of the history of their people and their nation.

A PRAISE NAME DANCE

"Nag Biegu" (*nah*-oh bee-*ah*-oo) is one of the many Praise Name Dances (*salima*) of Dagbon. Its title means "ferocious wild bull," referring to an enemy leader whom Naa Abudu defeated in a dramatic man-to-man fight. This *salima* praises Naa Abudu, a king of Dagbon in the late 1800s who is remembered for his courage and firm leadership. Scoffing at the challenge of a war leader from a neighboring nation, Naa Abudu said, "I am dangerous wild bull. Kill me if you can." As they dance to the drumming, people recall the bravery of the king.

The music has a verse-chorus form (the Close Listening guide). In the verse, the vocalist and leading *lunga* drummers praise Naa Abudu and allude to events of his chieftaincy; the answering *lunsi* and two *gung-gong* drummers punctuate the verses with booming, single strokes. The drummed chorus phrase works like a "hook" in a pop song, that is, a catchy, memorable phrase. In this piece, we can hear another case of music built from the temporal duality of 3:2.

Close Listening

"NAG BIEGU" ("FEROCIOUS WILD BULL")

CD 1:13

COUNTER NUMBER	COMMENTARY
0:00	Call by leading *lunga* drum.
0:08	Chorus by answer *lunga* and *gung-gong* drums.
0:21	Verse by vocalist and leading *lunga* drum.
1:59	Chorus by answer *lunga* and *gung-gong* drums.
1:09	Verse by vocalist and leading *lunga* drum.
1:45	Chorus by answer *lunga* and *gung-gong* drums.
1.55	Fade-out during verse.

The Dagbanli text and an English translation of the chorus phrase are as follows:

Nag Biegu la to to to.	It is Nag Biegu.
Nag Biegu la to to to.	*It is Nag Biegu.*
Nag Biegu la to—n nyeo!	It is Nag Biegu—that's him!
Nag Biegu la to.	It is Nag Biegu.
Nag Biegu la to.	It is Nag Biegu.
Nag Biegu la to—kumo!	It is Nag Biegu—kill him!

LIFE STORY: ABUBAKARI LUNNA

I have tape-recorded many interviews with my teacher from Dagbon, Abubakari Lunna (see Figure 3.4). When I met Mr. Lunna in 1975, he was working as a professional with the Ghana Folkloric Company, a government-sponsored performing arts company based in Accra, the capital of Ghana. In 1988 he retired from government service and returned to northern Ghana, where he served his father, Lun-Naa Wombie, until Mr. Wombie's death. Presently, Mr. Lunna supports his large family as a drummer, farmer, and teacher. The following excerpt of his life story focuses on his teachers.

My Education in Drumming

My father's grandfather's name is Abubakari. It is Abubakari who gave birth to Azima and Alidu; Azima was the father of [my teacher] Ngolba and Alidu was father of Wombie, my father. Their old grandfather's name is the one I am carrying, Abubakari. My father never called me "son" until he died; he always called me "grandfather." I acted like their grandfather; we always played like grandson and grandfather.

When I was a young child, my father was not in Dagbon. My father was working as a security guard in the South at Bibiani, the gold town. I was living with one of my father's teachers, his uncle Lun-Naa Neindoo, the drum chief at Woriboggo, a village near Tolon. When I was six or seven, my mother's father, Tali-Naa Alaasani [a chief of Tolon], took me to his senior brother, a chief of Woriboggo at that time. I was going to be his "shared child." In my drumming tradition, when you give your daughter in marriage and luckily she brings forth children, the husband has to give one to the mother's family. So, I was living in the chief's house.

I was with my mother's uncle for four or five years when he enrolled me in school. They took four of us to Tolon, my mother's home. I lived with my mother's father. We started going to the school. Luckily, in several weeks' time my father came from the South. He called my name, but his uncle told him, "Sorry. The boy's grandfather came and took him to be with the chiefs. Now he is in school." My father said, "What?! Is there any teacher above me? I am also a teacher. How can a teacher give his

Jeff Todd Titon

FIGURE 3.4

Studio portrait of Abubakari as a young man.

Ann Whetstone

FIGURE 3.5

Studio portrait of Lun-Naa Wombie, Abubakari's father.

There are significant differences of ecology, history, and culture between what Abubakari calls "the North" and "the South."

Whereas his father comes from a long line of drummers, Abubakari's mother comes from a royal family.

Just as the royals of Dagbon have an elaborate hierarchy of chieftaincies, so the *lunsi* have a pyramidlike system of titled positions of authority.

child to another teacher for training in a different language?" Early in the morning, he walked to Tolon. He held my hand. I was happy because my father had come to take me [see Figure 3.5].

My father spent one month. When he went to the South, he took me with him. Unfortunately, at Bibiani my father didn't have time to teach me. One year when my father came back to Dagbon for the Damba Festival [an annual celebration of the birth of The Holy Prophet Muhammed], he told my grandfather, Lun-Naa Neindoo, "If I keep Abubakari at Bibiani, it will be bad. I want to leave him at home. I don't want him to be a southern boy."

I began learning our drumming talks and the singing. Lun-Naa Neindoo started me with ***Dakoli Nye Bii Ba,*** the beginning of drumming [that is, the first repertory learned by young *lunsi*]: "God is the Creator. He can create a tree, He can create grass, He can create a person." You drum all before you say, "A Creator, God, created our grandfather, Bizung [the first *lunga*]." The elders have given *Dakoli Nye Bii Ba* to the young ones so that they can practice in the markets. When they know that you are improving, they start you with drumming stories and singing stories. On every market day we, the young drummers, came together and drummed by ourselves.

When the Woriboggo chief made my father *Sampahi-Naa,* the drum chief second to the *Lun-Naa* [the highest rank of drum chief], he could not go back to Bibiani. My father said, "Now, I am going to work with you on our drumming history talks." He began with the story of Yendi [seat of the paramount chieftaincy of Dagbon]: how Dagbon started, how we traveled from Nigeria and came to Dagbon, how we became drummers, how it happened that our grandfather Bizung made himself a drummer. If he gave me a story today, tomorrow I did it correctly.

I was with my father for a long time, more than five years. My father was hard. I faced difficulty with my father because of his way of teaching. My father would not beat the drum for you. He would sing and you had to do the same thing on *lunga*. If you couldn't do it, he would continue until you got it before adding another.

[Later] . . . my father sent me to my teaching-father, Ngolba. He had a good voice, a good hand—every part of drumming, he had it. He had the knowledge, too, and people liked him. When he was drumming, he would make people laugh. People would hire him: "We are having a funeral on this day. Come and help us." I traveled with him, carrying his *lunga*. Because of his drumming, Ngolba never sat at home; every day we went for drumming. That was how people got to know me. Any time I was walking, people started calling, "Ngolba, small Ngolba." And with my sweet hand and my quick memory, everyone liked me.

Already I knew something in drumming, so for him to continue with me was not hard. I only had to listen to his story and follow him. When we went to a place and he told stories, I tried to keep it in my mind. When we were resting that night, I asked him, "Oh, my uncle, I heard your talk today. Can you tell me more about it?" There, he would start telling me something. That is how I continued by education with Mba Ngolba. I was very young to be drumming the deep history rhythms with a sweet hand.

My father called Ngolba and advised him, "I am not feeling happy about all the traveling you and Abubakari are doing. Drummers are bad. Somebody

might try to spoil your lives. Find something to protect yourself. And protect Abubakari too." Father Ngolba—I can never forget him. Sometimes, when I was sitting at home, he would call me to get something to drink. I couldn't ask him, "Father, what is this?" In Dagbon, you can't ask him—you have to drink it. My Mba Ngolba did it for me several times.

Another reason why I liked my teacher, my Father Ngolba, is that despite his quick temper, he didn't get angry with me. He loved me. He didn't take even one of his ideas and hide it from me. Even if I asked him about something common that many drummers know, the thing left—he didn't hide it. He would tell me, "I have reserved something. If you bring all your knowledge out in public, some people with quick learning can just collect it."

I respected Ngolba like my father. During farming time I got up early in the morning and went straight to the farm. When he came, he met me there already. If it was not farming time, I would go to his door, kneel down, and say good morning to him. I would stay there, not saying anything until at last he would ask me, "Do you want to go some place?" Only then could I go. Teachers can give you laws like your own father. That is our Dagbamba respect to teachers.

Father Ngolba died in the South. When an old drummer dies, we put a *lunga* and a drumstick in the grave. The man who was with Ngolba when he died told me, "Your father said, 'Only bury me with this drumstick—don't add my *lunga* to bury me. Give my *lunga* to Abubakari.'" I said thank you for that. We finished the funeral back in Dagbon. The second brother to Ngolba spoke to all their family, "Ngolba told me that if it happens he dies, Abubakari should carry on with his duties. He should take his whole inheritance. And Ngolba had nothing other than his *lunga*." I have his *lunga*; it is in my room now. [See Figure 3.6 for a recent photo of Abubakari and members of his family.]

Image not available due to copyright restrictions

Mba means "father"; for a *lunga* drummer, your teacher becomes your teaching-father.

According to Dagbamba etiquette, children never question the orders of their father.

Shona Mbira Music

The recording of "Nhemamusasa" (CD 1, Track 14) features another uniquely African type of musical instrument. It is known outside Africa as "thumb piano"; speakers of the Shona language call it *mbira* (mmm-*bee*-rah). The "kaleidophonic" sound of its music (Tracey 1970:12) provides us with another insight into the musical potential of 3:2 rhythmic structures. Further, the *mbira* tradition shows another way African music can transform a group of separate individuals into a participatory polyphonic community. Information for this section draws primarily on the research of the ethnomusicologist Paul Berliner (1993).

CULTURAL CONTEXT

History

The Shona, who live in high plateau country between the Zambezi and Limpopo Rivers, are among the sixty million Bantu-speaking people who predominate in central and southern Africa. Since about 800 C.E., kingdoms of the Shona and

Salient Characteristics
OF THE SHONA AND THEIR MUSIC

- *Significant pre-colonial Shona civilization was supplanted by a long period of European colonialism and invasions by African ethnic groups.*
- *Mbira, a plucked idiophone, is the important traditional instrument; players regard their instrument as a companionable friend.*
- *Mbira music has two interlocking parts and several styles of singing.*
- *Mbira and mbira music are part of rituals of spirit possession that connect the living with spirits of ancestors.*
- *In, the twentieth century white settlers displaced black Africans from their lands and imposed a racist system that was overthrown in the l980s by armed resistance.*
- *Music played an important role in the war of liberation.*
- *A decentralized, agricultural society.*
- *Mbira music connects the Shona with their ancestral spirits.*

neighboring peoples have ruled large territories; stone fortresses such as the Great Zimbabwe number among Africa's most impressive architectural achievements. These kingdoms participated in a lively Indian Ocean commerce with seafaring powers such as the Arabs, Persians, and Indians (Mallows 1967:97–115). The Portuguese arrived about 1500. Eventually, the large-scale Shona states faded under pressure from other African groups, notably the more militaristic Ndebele in the 1800s. The Shona became a more decentralized, agricultural people.

At the turn of the twentieth century, English-speaking settlers took over the land and imposed their culture and economy on the local Africans. The colonial period in what was then called Rhodesia was brief, but it radically affected most local institutions. As in neighboring South Africa, a systematic policy of land grabbing left Africans materially impoverished. Racist settlers scorned African culture; many local people came to doubt the ways of their ancestors. For two decades after the independence of other contemporary African nation-states in the 1950s and 1960s, white Rhodesians maintained their dominance. Finally, a war of liberation (1966–1979) culminated in majority rule and the birth of the nation-state Zimbabwe in 1980.

Music played a part in the struggle. Popular and traditional songs with hidden meanings helped galvanize mass opinion; **spirit mediums** were leaders in the war against white privilege (Frye 1976; Lan 1985). After decades of denigration by some Africans who had lost faith in traditional culture, the *mbira* became a positive symbol of cultural identity.

Shona Spirits

From the perspective inherited from the Shona ancestors, four classes of spirits (literally *mweya*, or breath) affect the world: spirits of chiefs (*mhondoro*), family members (***mudzimu***), nonrelatives or animals (*mashave*), and witches (*muroyi*) (Lan 1985:31–43). Although invisible, the ancestral spirits nonetheless have sensory experience, feel emotions, and take action to help and advise their beloved descendants. *Mbira* music helps connect the living with their ancestors.

Humans and spirits communicate by means of possession trances. In possession, a spirit enters the body of a living person, temporarily supplanting his or her spirit. Once embodied in its medium, an ancestral spirit can advise his or her living relatives, telling them things they have done wrong and how to protect themselves and ensure good fortune. Similarly, a *mhondoro* spirit may advise a gathering of several family groups regarding matters that affect the entire community, such as the coming of rain. Possessions occur at ***mapira*** (singular *bira*), all-night, family-based, communal rituals. *Mbira* music and dancing are significant elements in these events (Berliner 1993:186–206; Zantzinger n.d.).

THE *MBIRA*

Construction

Mbiras of many different styles of construction occur throughout Africa and its diaspora. Most *mbiras* have four features of construction: (1) a set of long, thin keys made of metal or plant material, (2) a soundboard with a bridge that holds the keys, (3) a resonator to shape and amplify the sound of the plucked keys, and (4) jingles that buzz rhythmically when the keys are plucked. The instrument matches the bilateral symmetry of the human body; that is, left-side keys are for the left thumb, right-side keys are for the right thumb and index finger. The longer, bass keys lie toward the center of the soundboard; the shorter, treble keys toward its edges (Berliner 1993:8–18).

On our recording of "Nhemamusasa," we will hear an instrument that is frequently used at spirit possession ceremonies: the ***mbira dzavadzimu,*** literally "***mbira*** of the ancestors" (mmm-*bee*-rah dzah-vah-*dzee*-moo).

In performance, musicians place the *mbira* within a large gourd resonator (*deze*) that brings out the instrument's full tone; when playing for personal pleasure or during learning-teaching sessions, the resonator may not be needed (see Figure 3.7).

Bottle cap rattles or snail shells attached to the soundboard and resonator provide the important buzzing ingredient to the music. Performances usually include hand clapping, singing, and a driving rhythm played on a pair of gourd rattles called a ***hosho.***

The Player and the Instrument

In performance, the instrument faces toward the player. Repeatedly plucking the keys in prescribed patterns, musicians establish cycles of harmony, melody, rhythm, and counterpoint. Each key on the *mbira* emits a fundamental pitch and a cluster of overtones; the resonator shapes, reinforces, prolongs, and amplifies

Paul Berliner

FIGURE 3.7

Younger *mbira* players Luken Kwari (left) and Cosmas Magaya (right) emulate the demonstration of their elder, John Kunaka (center).

this complex tone. The buzzing bottle caps not only provide rhythm to the music's texture but also add to the instrument's array of tuned and untuned sounds. Tones overlap. The *mbira*'s sound surrounds the player. In this music, the whole is far more than the sum of the parts (Berliner 1993:127–35).

Creative, participatory listening is an essential aspect of this music-culture. Performer and audience must hear coherent melodies in the *mbira*'s numerous tones. Many pieces exploit the creative potential of 3:2 relationships; often one hand is "in three or six," while the other is "in two or four." Hand-clapping phrases provide a good way to join in the performance and experience this polymetric feeling.

For players immersed in the process, the *mbira* takes on a life of its own. Here is how Dumisani Maraire, one of the first teachers of Shona music to non-Africans, explains it:

> When a mbira player plays his instrument . . . he is . . . conversing with a friend. He teaches his friend what to do, and his friend teaches him what to do. To begin with, the mbira player gives the basic pattern to the mbira; he plays it, and the mbira helps him produce the sound. He goes over and over playing the same pattern, happy now that his fingers and the mbira keys are together. So he stops thinking about what to play, and starts to listen to the mbira very carefully. (Maraire 1971:5–6)

"NHEMAMUSASA"

According to the Shona, ancestral spirits love to hear their favorite *mbira* pieces. Musical performance is an offering that calls them near, thus making possession more likely. Because of its important social use, this repertory remains stable over many generations. Pieces for *mbira dzavadzimu*, most of which have been played for centuries, are substantial musical works with many fundamental patterns, variations, styles of improvisation, and so forth. These pieces have two interlocking parts: ***kushaura,*** the main part, and ***kutsinhira,*** the interwoven second part. Since each part is polyphonic in its own right, the interaction of parts creates a wonderfully multilayered sound. The vocal music, which has three distinct styles—***mahonyera*** (vocables), ***kudeketera*** (poetry), and ***huro*** (yodeling)—adds depth to the musical texture and richness to the meanings expressed in performance. In our discussion here, we only scratch the surface of the *kushaura* part of one piece.

CD 1:14

"Nhemamusasa" (lit. "Cutting Branches for Shelter") *kushaura* section (2.39). Traditional Shona. Field recording by Paul Berliner. Zimbabwe. 1971.

On CD 1, Track 14, we hear "Nhemamusasa" (*neh*-mah-moo-*sah*-sah), revered by the Shona as one of their oldest and most important pieces (see the Close Listening guide). It was played for ***Chaminuka,*** a powerful spirit who protects the entire Shona nation. The song title literally means "Cutting Branches for Shelter." One of Berliner's teachers reports that "'Nhemamusasa' is a song for war. When we [the Shona] were marching to war to stop soldiers coming to kill us, we would cut branches and make a place [tent shelter] called a *musasa*" (John Kunaka, quoted in Berliner 1993:42). In 1991 Erica Kundizora Azim (Personal communication, Erica Azim), an experienced American student of *mbira*, heard a contemporary interpretation of the song's meaning from a female Shona friend:

> Homeless people sit in their shantytowns with nothing to do.
> No work.
> Trouble is coming.

Evidently the piece evokes profound feelings. For the Shona, sentiments evoked by pieces such as "Nhemamusasa" make them effective for use in rituals of spirit possession. Even for those of us without inside knowledge of Shona cultural history, the musical surface of "Nhemamusasa" sparks powerful feelings.

Close Listening

"NHEMAMUSASA" ("CUTTING BRANCHES FOR SHELTER")

CD 1:14

COUNTER NUMBER	COMMENTARY
0:00–0:46	***Kushaura mbira* part by itself.**
0:00	Fade in during fourth 12-pulse phrase.
0:04–0:13	First full occurrence of 48-pulse cycle.
0:04	First 12-pulse phrase.
0:06	Second 12-pulse phrase.
0:08	Third 12-pulse phrase.
0:10	Fourth 12-pulse phrase.
0:13–0:20	Second occurrence of 48-pulse cycle.
0:13	First 12-pulse phrase.
0:15	Second 12-pulse phrase.
0:17	Third 12-pulse phrase.
0:19	Fourth 12-pulse phrase.
0:20	Third occurrence of 48-pulse cycle; 12-pulse phrases approximately every two seconds.
0:28	Fourth occurrence of 48-pulse cycle.
0:36	Fifth 48-pulse cycle.
0:43	Sixth occurrence of 48-pulse cycle.
0:47	***Kutsinhira* part enters.**
0:51	Seventh occurrence of 48-pulse cycle.
0:59	Eighth occurrence of 48-pulse cycle.
1:07	Ninth occurrence of 48-pulse cycle.

1:14	Tenth occurrence of 48-pulse cycle.
1:22	Eleventh occurrence of 48-pulse cycle.
1:30	Twelfth occurrence of 48-pulse cycle.
1:38	Thirteenth occurrence of 48-pulse cycle.
1:45	Fourteenth occurrence of 48-pulse cycle.
1:46	***Hosho* (rattle) enters.**
1:54	Fifteenth occurrence of 48-pulse cycle.
2:01	Sixteenth occurrence of 48-pulse cycle.
2:09	Seventeenth occurrence of 48-pulse cycle.
2:17	Eighteenth occurrence of 48-pulse cycle.
2:24	Nineteenth occurrence of 48-pulse cycle.
2:32	Break in temporal flow to announce end of performance.

THOMAS MAPFUMO AND *CHIMURENGA* MUSIC

This section on Shona music-culture closes with an example of what might be termed modern traditional music: "Nyarai" by Thomas Mapfumo and Blacks Unlimited on CD 1, Track 15. Mapfumo has dubbed this style *chimurenga* music. With its pop band instrumentation and studio production, the music sounds new, but Mapfumo and his audience hear its links to *mbira* music (Bender 1991:163; Eyre 1991:51). Mapfumo and his guitarist, Jonah Sithole, intentionally model their arrangements on traditional music (Eyre 1988:87–88). Like some types of *mbira* music, "Nyarai" is recreational music for dance parties that also comments on topical issues.

Chimurenga music helps us realize that centuries-old traditions need not be obsolete or nostalgic (Waterman 1990). The word ***chimurenga*** ("*struggle*") refers both to the war against the white regime in Rhodesia and to a style of music that rallied popular support for the cause (Bender 1991:160–65; Eyre 1991; Manuel 1988:104–6). In the 1970s the music became popular among Africans despite white censorship of song lyrics and an outright ban on artists and recordings. Just as African slaves in the Americas encoded their own meanings in the texts of African American spirituals, African freedom-fighting songwriters used allusion to make their points. The baffled censors knew a song was subversive only when it was on everyone's lips, but by then the word was out.

Thomas Mapfumo remembers the development of the *chimurenga* music in the following interview with the music journalist Banning Eyre (square brackets mark Eyre's comments, curly braces mark mine):

> I grew up in the communal lands, which used to be called reserves, for the African people. . . . I grew up with my grandparents who were very much into

traditional music. Each time there was an *mbira* gathering, there were elder people singing, some drumming, some clapping. I used to join them. In the country, there were no radios, no TVs. . . .

{Later Mapfumo lived with his parents in the city and joined bands doing rock and roll covers.}

I was into a lot of things . . . even heavy metal. There were rock band contests held in Salisbury {now Harare}. . . . Some South African bands would cross the Limpopo [River] into Rhodesia to compete. There were a lot of black bands playing rock 'n' roll music, and we were one of them. But not even one black band ever won a contest. And I asked myself: "What are we supposed to be if this isn't our music? If they [the whites] claim it to be their music, then we have to look for our own music." As a people who had actually lost our culture, it was very difficult to get it back. . . .

{After several years of singing with different bands that toured the beer halls of Rhodesia in the early 1970s, Mapfumo began writing more-serious lyrics.}

One afternoon, we came up with a nice tune opposing Mr. Ian Smith [the final prime minister of white-minority-ruled Rhodesia]. . . . This tune was called "Pa Muromo Chete," which means "It Is Just Mere Talk." Mr. Smith had said he would not want to see a black government in his lifetime, even in a thousand years. So we said it was just talk. We were going to fight for our freedom. This record sold like hot cakes because the people had got the message. Straight away, I composed another instant hit called "Pfumvu Pa Ruzheva," which means "Trouble in the Communal Lands." People were being killed by soldiers. They were running away from their homes, going to Mozambique and coming to live in town like squatters. Some people used to cry when they listened to the lyrics of this record. The message was very strong. . . .

The papers were writing about us. . . . Everyone wanted to talk to us about our music, and the government was very surprised, because they had never heard of a black band being so popular among their own people. They started asking questions. . . .

{In 1979 Mapfumo was detained by the police. After liberation, the popularity of the *chimurenga* style declined, but in the late 1980s he regained local popularity with songs that criticized corruption.}

We were not for any particular party. . . . We were for the people. And we still do that in our music. If you are a president and you mistreat your people, we will still sing bad about you. Never mind if you are black or white or yellow. . . .

{His lyrics still make social comment.}

Today, Zimbabwe is free. . . . So we are focusing our music world-wide. . . . We have been in a lot of world cities. We have seen people sleeping in the streets and governments don't look after these people. That is what our music is there for today. We will never stop singing about the struggle. (Eyre 1991:78)

"Nyarai" ("Be Ashamed") was recorded after the government headed by Robert Mugabe came to power in Zimbabwe. Our recording (CD 1, Track 15) is an excerpt from the longer recorded version (see the Close Listening guide). The lyrics celebrate victory and chide people ("Be ashamed") who are unreconciled to change. The song is a praise poem for the warriors, their leaders, their families, and their supporters. Although on this recording Mapfumo praises Mugabe for his role in the war of black liberation, subsequent events in Zimbabwe have brought mixed reviews for Mugabe's leadership of that troubled country.

CD 1:15

"Nyarai" ("Be Ashamed"), excerpt (2:29). Thomas Mapfumo. Performed by Thomas Mapfumo and Blacks Unlimited. *Thomas Mapfumo: The Chimurenga Singles, 1976–1980*. Gramma Records Zimbabwe. Shanachie CD 43066.

Close Listening

"NYARAI" ("BE ASHAMED")

CD 1:15

COUNTER NUMBER	COMMENTARY
0:00	Fade-in.
0:08	8-beat cycles begin.
1:16	Vamp on word Nyarai.
1:33	"Shout out" to war heroes.
1:48	Guitar solo break.
2:01	Brass enters; fade-out.

The BaAka People Singing "Makala"

Our final example of African music-culture differs dramatically from the traditions of the Ewe and Dagbamba. It brings us full circle to the communal, inclusive spirit of African music so clearly present in the music of the Ghanaian postal workers. Information for this section relies on the field research of Michelle Kisliuk (Kisliuk 1998).

On CD 1, Track 16, we hear the singing, hand clapping, and drumming of the BaAka (*bah*-ka) people. The immense, ancient, thickly canopied tropical forest exerts a powerful influence on life in central Africa. The BaAka are one of several distinct ethnic groups who share certain physical, historical, cultural, and social features as well as adaptations to the natural world (Turnbull 1983). Here I will refer to these groups collectively as ***Forest People.*** Because of their physical size, non-Africans have called the *Forest People* "Pygmies." It is an ethnocentric label; their size is a benefit in the forest and plays a minor role in the way they are viewed by their larger African neighbors.

For millennia the Forest People existed in ecological balance with their environment. Sheltered in dome-shaped huts of saplings and leaves, they lived with kin and friends in small, loose-knit groups. Because these hunting bands needed only portable material possessions, they could easily shift their encampments every few months according to the availability of food. They obtained a healthy diet through cooperative hunting and gathering, allowing them ample time for expressive, emotionally satisfying activities such as all-night sings. The social system was informal and flexible: men and women had roughly equal power and obligations, consensus decisions were negotiated by argument, children were treated gently. Individuals were not coerced by formal laws, distant leaders, or threatening deities. The forest was God, and people were children of the forest (Turnbull 1961:74).

At this point you may be wondering why the preceding paragraph was written in the past tense. During the colonial and postcolonial eras, external forces have confronted the Forest People to a degree unprecedented in their history. They now

live within nation-states forged in violent anticolonial wars; multinational timber and mining companies are at work in the forest; scholars and adventurers visit some of them regularly. In short, the Forest People now face great changes.

Earlier I mentioned the Western ethnocentric view of the Forest People. Throughout history, other peoples have drawn on this culture in various ways. Let us now look at three images that reflect the conflicting roles that the Forest People play in the world's imagination.

THREE IMAGES OF THE FOREST PEOPLE

Primal Eden

For thousands of years, members of the world's imperial civilizations have found renewal in the music of the Forest People. In 2300 B.C.E. an Egyptian pharaoh wrote to a nobleman of Aswan who had journeyed south to the Upper Nile:

> Come northward to the court immediately; thou shalt bring this dwarf with thee, which thou bringest living, prosperous and healthy from the land of the spirits, for the dances of the god, to rejoice and (gladden) the heart of the king of Upper and Lower Egypt, Neferkere, who lives forever. (Breasted 1906, in Davidson 1991:55)

Today, aided by books and recordings, the Forest People continue to exert a pull on the world's imagination. In particular, the beautiful life of the BaMbuti recounted in Colin Turnbull's *The Forest People* has entranced many. Recordings by Simha Arom have introduced listeners to the intricacy of BaAka vocal polyphony (Arom 1987). For many people, this music-culture evokes cherished values—peace, naturalness, humor, community. In the music of the Forest People we want to hear an innocence lost to our complex, polluted, violent world.

Primitive Savage

Paired with this image of primal utopia is the notion of primitive savagery. According to this view, Pygmies represent an early stage of cultural evolution, a primitive way of life associated with the Stone Age. By definition primitives do not know the achievements of "high" civilization—science, mathematics, engineering, philosophy; they have no electricity, no industry, no nations, no armies, no books. If this is the stuff of civilization, then like other native peoples in remote locations on earth, the Forest People must be "primitive."

But calling a human group "primitive" establishes a dangerous inequality. It can justify genocide; enslavement; servitude; colonialism; underdevelopment; land grabbing for lumbering, mining, agriculture, and tourism; and reculturization through evangelism, schooling, wage labor, and military service. From this imperialist perspective, cultures that differ from the "modern" way must change or be eradicated.

Salient Characteristics OF THE BAAKA AND THEIR MUSIC

- *Live in the forested areas of tropical central Africa.*
- *One of several distinct ethnic groups who share common characteristics.*
- *Social unit: small, close-knit group of families and friends.*
- *Move from place to place in search of food through cooperative hunting and gathering.*
- *Music functions as vehicle for social critique.*
- *Music mirrors egalitarian social structure and communal way of life.*
- *Few musical instruments; emphasis on polyphonic vocal music with a sophisticated multi-part texture.*

Unique Culture in a Global Village

Instead, we can characterize the Forest People with concepts that are less emotionally charged. They are nonliterate and nonindustrial, with a relatively unspecialized division of labor and a cashless barter/subsistence economy; theirs is a homogeneous society with small-scale, decentralized social institutions, egalitarian interpersonal social relations, and relative gender equality. Their God is everywhere in this world, and they exist within the web of nature.

Forest life is not an idyllic paradise, however. Hunters sometimes share meat from the day's hunt only after other members of their group complain about its unfair distribution. People suffer from disease, hunger, violence, and anxiety. For the past four hundred years they have shared the forest with Bantu and Sudanic agriculturalist villagers; more recently, they have adjusted to international forces. Compared to one's own culture, the Forest People may seem better in some ways, worse in others. Undoubtedly, their culture is unique.

The next section presents a detailed description of a BaAka song. This will set the stage for seeing how the music-culture of the Forest People functions as a resource in their adaptation to change.

"MAKALA," A *MABO* SONG

Setting

The performance-studies scholar and ethnomusicologist Michelle Kisliuk recorded "Makala" (*mah*-kah-lah) in December 1988 in the Central African Republic (see the Close Listening guide). The setting was a performance event, or ***eboka,*** of ***Mabo*** (*mah*-boh), a type of music and dance associated with net hunting (see Figure 3.8). Hunting not only provides food but is a key cultural institution as well. At this performance, novices (***babemou***) and their entourage from one group had walked to a neighboring camp to receive hunting medicine and related dance instruction from experts (***ginda***). Over the course of two days,

Michelle Kisliuk

FIGURE 3.8

BaAka in performance.

CD 1:16

"Makala" (name of unknown person) (2:20). Traditional BaAka song. Field recording by Michelle Kisliuk. Central African Republic, 1988.

Close Listening

"MAKALA"

CD 1:16

COUNTER NUMBER	COMMENTARY
0:00	Music takes shape as male singers, drummers, and women gradually join in.
0:16	Melodic and text theme is sung once.
0:20	Theme is elaborated in rich multipart chorus.
0:55	Prominent high-pitched yodeling.
1:16–1:33	Different drumming and prominent countermelody.
1:46	Theme stands out.
1:52	Hand clapping joins in until recording fades out.

performers presented *Mabo* for this ritual purpose as well as for the pleasure of learning new songs and dance flourishes. At times a small-scale affair involving only the *Mabo* specialists and their students, the *eboka* sometimes swelled into a much larger social dance attended by a crowd of BaAka and villagers. Kisliuk recorded this song on the evening of the first day (1998:98ff.).

Form and Texture

An *eboka* of *Mabo* consists of sections of singing, drumming, and dancing. Each song has a theme, that is, a text and tune. By simultaneously improvising melodic variations, singers create a rich polyphony. After five to fifteen minutes of play with one song, they begin another. From time to time, the *eboka* is "spiced up" with an *esime*, a section of rhythmically intensified drumming, dancing, and percussive shouts (Kisliuk 1998:40–41).

Timbre

Men and women of all ages sing "Makala." Using both chest and head voices, they obtain a great variety of tone colors that range from tense/raspy to relaxed/breathy. One striking feature, yodeling, involves quick shifts between head and chest voices. Musical instruments include drums and hand claps. Two different drum parts are played on the drum skins that cover the ends of carved, cone-shaped logs. Often, Forest People enrich the percussion by rapping with wooden sticks on the drum's body and striking together metal cutlass blades. Forest People

also make music with instruments such as flutes, trumpets, and harps, but not in *Mabo*.

Theme

Because many different parts occur simultaneously, just listening to the recording does not easily reveal the song's melodic theme. Kisliuk learned the theme when hearing it sung in isolation from other parts by a young woman walking along a path. Singers often do not raise the theme until they have established a richly interwoven polyphony; even then, they are free to improvise on its melodic features.

As in Native American songs, singers mostly use vocables (see Chapter 2). The sparse text of "Makala" is typically cryptic (Kisliuk 1998:99).

Text, "MAKALA"

moto monyoncjo	beautiful person
Makala	name of an unknown deceased person from the Congo, where *Mabo* originated
na lele, oh	I cry [implying a funeral setting in this song]

Turnbull reports that songs of the BaMbuti often mean "We are children of the Forest" or "The Forest is good." In troubled times they sing a longer text: "There is darkness all around us; but if darkness is, and the darkness is of the forest, then the darkness must be good" (Turnbull 1961:93).

Polyphony

The polyphonic texture of this choral music is complex. Like a well-made multitrack rock and roll recording, the layered parts in "Makala" sound fresh with each listening. Forest People use many different qualities of multipart song. I hear musical processes that can be labeled as heterophony, drone/ostinato, layering, counterpoint, and accompaniment. Happily, reality confounds neat analysis; there are no absolute distinctions among these polyphonic devices.

MUSIC-CULTURE AS AN ADAPTIVE RESOURCE

Restoring Balance

The active force of music-making contributes to the Forest People's enduring yet ever-changing way of life. The BaMbuti encode the practical, moral effect of song in their words for conflict and peace: ***akami,*** noise or disordered sound, and ***ekimi,*** silence or ordered sound (Turnbull 1983:50–51). Troubles arise when synergy among people and symbiosis with the forest is disrupted. Communal singing "wakes the forest," whose benevolent presence silences the *akami* forces (Turnbull 1961:92). With yodels echoing off the trees, the forest physically becomes one of the musicians.

Enacting Values and Creating Self

Improvised, open-ended polyphony embodies egalitarian cultural values such as cooperation, negotiation, argument, and personal autonomy. By making social

relations tangible, performance helps individuals develop identity within a group. Kisliuk gives a firsthand report of her participation:

> My senses tingled; I was finally inside the singing and dancing circle. The song was "Makala," and singing it came more easily to me while I danced. As I moved around the circle, the voices of different people stood out at moments, affecting my own singing and my choices of variations. I could feel fully the intermeshing of sound and motion, and move with it as it transformed, folding in upon itself. This was different from listening or singing on the sidelines because, while moving with the circle, I became an active part of the aural kaleidoscope. I was part of the changing design inside the scope, instead of looking at it and projecting in. (1998:101)

Autonomy Within Community

Most members of a BaAka community acquire music-making skills as they grow up (enculturation). During times of crisis, the group needs the musical participation of every member. For example, in a memorable scene from *The Forest People,* even when others in the hunting group insult and ostracize a man for setting his hunting net in front of the others', he joins the all-night singing and is forgiven (Turnbull 1961:94–108).

Although collective participation in performance is highly valued, individuals may stand out. Kisliuk writes that the community knows the composers of individual songs and originators of whole repertories such as *Mabo*. Explicit teacher–student transmission does take place between the old and young of one group and among members of groups from different regions. Turnbull wrote of an acclaimed singer/dancer who seems particularly emotional and prone to time/space transformation during performances: "He was no longer Amabosu; he had some other personality totally different, and distant" (Turnbull 1961:89). BaAka repertory has a varied history and a dynamic future. Music connects the people to their past, while helping them negotiate their present.

Conclusion

Contrary to the images of chaos and despair conveyed by international mass media, we have encountered African music-cultures of stability, resourcefulness, and self-respect. Abubakari Lunna's life story reveals the rigor of an African musician's education. The erudition, commitment, suffering, and love are profound. Although he says good drumming is "sweet," clearly it is not frivolous or just fun. We could call it "deep." We have seen that many Africans value the achievements of their ancestors. The Ewe rigorously study *Agbekor* and recreate it with passionate respect in performance. Innovative *chimurenga* music draws its inspiration from classics of Shona repertory.

African music-cultures are strongly humanistic. The human body inspires the construction and playing technique of musical instruments such as the *mbira.* The spontaneous performances of postal workers and the ritual ceremonies of Forest People point out an important feature of many African music-cultures: Music serves society. As we have experienced, many kinds of African music foster group participation.

Although I encourage African-style musicking, musicians who cross cultural borders need sensitivity to limits and contradictions. To me, nothing approaches the power of time-honored repertory performed in context by the people born into the tradition, the bearers of culture. When non-Africans play African music, especially those of us with white skin, the legacy of slavery and colonialism affects how an audience receives the performance. Thomas Mapfumo, who as a young rock and roller faced discrimination, now competes in the commercial marketplace with international bands that cover African pop songs. How many enthusiasts for African music love its aesthetic surface but regard spirit possession as superstition?

Music is a joyful yet rigorous discipline. The hard work of close listening yields important benefits. By making clear the sophistication of African musical traditions, analysis promotes an attitude of respect. This chapter has musical examples with rhythms based on 3:2. As we have seen, this profound and elemental timing ratio animates many African traditions.

Thinking about musical structure raises big questions that resist simple answers: Can thought be nonverbal? What approach to music yields relevant data and significant explanation? By treating music as an object, does analysis wrongly alienate music from its authentic cultural setting? How can people know each other? Each chapter in this book benefits from this type of questioning. We seek to know how people understand themselves, but we must acknowledge the impact of our own perspective. Not only does an active involvement in expressive culture provide a wonderful way to learn about other people, but it can change a person's own life as well. From this perspective, ethnomusicology helps create new and original music-cultures.

Inquiry into music-cultures need not be a passive act of cultural tourism. On the contrary, a cross-cultural encounter can be an active process of self-development. When we seek knowledge of African music-cultures, we can also reevaluate our own. As we try our hands at African music, we encounter fresh sonic styles and experience alternative models of social action. Just as African cultures are not static, each student's personal world of music is a work in progress.

Study Questions

1. How does African music help people cope with the challenges, responsibilities, opportunities, and problems in their lives?
2. How has the outward and inward flow of people, ideas, and things to and from Africa had an impact on African music, and vice versa?
3. How do general features of African musical style become meaningful in specific situations? For example, how do call-and-response, multipart texture, repetition, and improvisation operate in a given cultural, social, historical, and/or personal case?
4. How do the culture, history, and music-culture differ among different regions of Africa or within one region, such as West Africa?
5. How does the *Agbekor* performance reflect the history and culture of the Ewe people?

6. How did Abubakari Lunna learn to play the *lunga*? What does this indicate about the music-culture of the Dagbamba people?
7. Music is an important mode of communication in Africa. What do the two Shona examples reveal about this function of music in culture and society?
8. Why and/or why not is it reasonable to characterize the music-culture of the Forest People as "primitive"? Compare to your own music-culture the value of music as an adaptive resource for the Forest People.

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