

Was Ssempeke Just Being Kind? Listening to Instrumental Music in Africa South of the Sahara

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Abstract

This briefly poses, but does not attempt to answer, the question of how Africans listen to the performance of instrumental music. Several statements from African musicians stress the importance of verbal texts in the content of the instrumental patterns and suggest that they may well listen in a different way from the way Europeans do. Two recorded musical performances of Baganda and Basoga villagers are cited to show how readily a participating audience reacts to changes in musical patterning by changing the texts they sing. A short discussion of the music of hocketing trumpet ensembles further underlines the conceptual importance of verbal texts that form the kernel of such performances.

1. "Talking Through His Instrument"

This is a speculative contribution but is also rather personal, for it stems from a view I expressed two years ago concerning my son's own attempts to become bi-musical. Andrew, born in Uganda in 1965, began seriously to explore the musical repertory of the Baganda (of Uganda) a decade ago, when he was in his twenties. After becoming competent on the relatively fixed court repertory of the *amadinda* (*entamiivu*) and *akadinda* xylophones, he turned his attention to the *ennanga* (harp), which is generally considered to be the source of much of the xylophone repertory. He became remarkably proficient in a small number of well-known harp songs, such as 'Ganga', 'Ssematimba ne Kikwabanga', etc. One evening after hearing him perform in the presence of his teacher Albert Ssempeke, I rather knowingly remarked that he really must now strive to become fluent in the Luganda language because, no matter how competent he became with his fingers on his *ennanga*, unless he could sing convincingly, no Muganda person would think much of his performances. He was in fact already singing some of the well-known texts of the songs as he played, but did not have sufficient linguistic knowledge to allow him to compose his own texts in re-

sponse to different performing contexts, nor to play with the ideas developed by other singers whose versions of the song were known to him.

"Ah, but," said Ssempeke, "it does not matter one bit because they can hear him talking through his instrument".

Ssempeke's remark caused me to think also of the blind Musgoga singer Mata, who can be heard singing with his group in a performance of his song 'Otabona bu-kaire' (Despite my old age) on the CD *Uganda: Village ensembles of Busoga* (Cooke 1997). The Basoga are Bantu-speaking neighbours of Ssempeke's people—the Baganda—and generally speaking have a similar musical culture.

Oh you! Ah me! I am restless
 Oh you, we were friends
 Despite my old age
 As I am here, I can look good among my in-laws
 Though I seem old and grey-haired
 As you see me, I am presentable at my in-laws' place
 Though I seem old
 Could you please give me that girl, friend, even though I don't have a cow [the cattle dowry]?
 My spirit, Maama is numb
 I've risen early to sing for the clan elders
Endongos [lamellaphones] played in the absence of girls are not pleasant to listen to
 I've risen early to sing for the clan elders, friends
 Where there are those who appreciate, others despise
 Could you please give me that girl, friend, even if I don't have a cow?
 Dear you! Eh! Lughaire [his bass *endongo* lamellaphone], I have mine who will satisfy me
 Hear the way it is booming, my in-laws, it's talking.

A minute or more later comes the line:

It is [the *endongo*] conversing.

And again, near the end:

Despite my old age, could you please give me that girl, friend, even if I don't have a cow?
 Listen, how it has sounded—I have called you—I am overjoyed
 Our instrument Lughaire Matege.

If one ignores the rather whimsically sad references to his age and to his inability to wed a young wife, his comments about his lamellaphone, which he gives the personal name Lughaire, suggest, like the remark of Ssempeke, a duality in the performance. On the one hand is his own vocal delivery, with its usual kaleidoscopic imagery and play with words and ideas, and then parallel with it is the declamation of his own instrument and the other instrumentalists that accompany him (he is usually accompanied by a quartet or trio of other instrumentalists who generally do not sing).

The question arises concerning Mata's Basoga listeners. Do they simultaneously enjoy the individual vocal delivery of the singer and in addition listen to the 'conver-

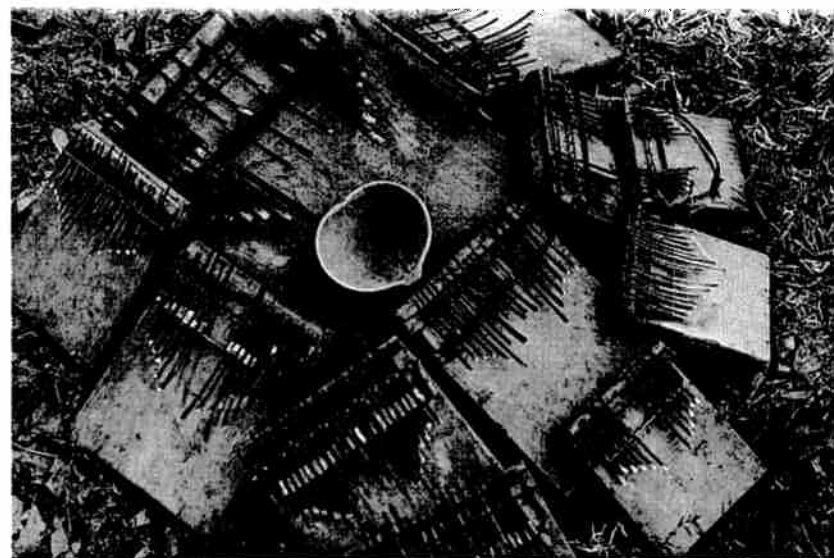


Fig. 1. *Okemes* of the Dim Abilo *okeme* group, Barr subcounty, Lira district, Lango, Uganda. Photo: P. Cooke. 1997.

sation' of the instruments (in as far as informed listeners may recognise the common texts associated with the songs within the repeated instrumental patterns)? Or do they, like most Europeans, enjoy the patterning of the instrumental sound as absolute music accompanying the singing? Do they do both? Among the listeners are of course his fellow players; are they (individually or collectively) really conversing with Lughaire and with one another through their instruments? We know they are conducting a 'musical' discourse, but is it for them also verbal? In short, do his Basoga listeners attend to the music differently from the way Europeans might attend to the pattern-play of their instruments?

Another example, this time from a very different ethnic group, the Luo-speaking Lango of northern Uganda, makes essentially the same point and begs the same question. Julius Ekukha of Apala, a famous singer/performer on the *okeme* (box-resonated lamellaphone; see Fig. 1), recorded for me one of his songs warning people about AIDS. He addressed the young men who had crowded close to listen to him, advising them (in song) to spend their leisure practising their *okeme* songs and not to go around looking for sex (tape PCUG97.4; see Fig. 2).

Neno youth me Apala tin obino.
 Dong iwot goyo wunu okeme,
 Okeme wu akok i ngo.



Fig. 2. Julius Ekukha of Abia parish, Lira district, Lango. Photo: P. Cooke, 1997.



Fig. 3. 'Abwoc yie kec' okeme group from Abia-Apala, Eastern Lango, Uganda. Photo: P. Cooke, 1997.

(See the youth of Apala have come today,
Go ahead and play your *okeme*;
What is your *okeme* saying?
[literally: '*okeme* your is crying that what?']).

The *okeme* is popular among the youth of Lango, who like to form orchestras of different-sized *okeme*-s and rehearse carefully composed songs that contain extended choral utterances in addition to those of the lead singer. That is, the youths both accompany their lead singer by singing long choral sections in response, while simultaneously playing continuous and continuously varied instrumental accompaniments. These groups—and there are many in Lango district—enjoy playing at well organized inter-village competitions during the second dry season each year. Teams are judged on many aspects of their performance: dress, choreography of the dancers, instrumental and vocal ensemble and theatrical content, but probably above all for textual content and the message developed by the lead singer (see Fig. 3).

Ekukha asks what their instruments communicate, not what the young men sing. Of course, Ekukha may have been making a metaphorical reference to the *okeme* and really was referring to the complete performances of the young men. Nevertheless, the Lango scholar Okaka Opio Dokotum also hints at the dual form of communication in his description of how judges go about assessing performances at competi-

tions. In addition to providing an extensive discussion of the verbal aspects of performance, he adds:

The manner in which the musical instruments are played is [also] closely scrutinised by the team of examiners [who make] a studious effort to listen to the tune of the instruments and their overall effect on the performance, because, the audience is attracted both to the song and the music as a single unit. An examiner may kneel down and put his ears close to the drum or lie down to pick the sound of the thumb piano. He can stop one instrument to check the individual performance of the other members of the team who may be weak but hide in the general pool of excellence The examiners also attend closely to the drum language or language of the thumb pianos in relation to the song, dance and response of the audience (Okaka 1997:209).¹

2. "Make Your Instrument Sing"

While evaluating the remarks of Ssempeke, Mata and Ekukha, I am also aware of the piece of advice commonly given by instrumental teachers in Europe to their pupils: 'Make your instrument sing'. In other words, make it give forth flowing melodious phrases as if they were being vocalised. But we do not usually tell the performer to think of words and how best to render them on their instruments and, of course, it is often the case that many of the tunes Westerners play on instruments have no words, even if we are trying to make our instruments 'sing'. Classical Indian musicians—both Carnatic and Hindusthani—also lay great stress on the ability of instrumentalists to 'imitate' the singing voice and furthermore to keep any associated texts in mind as they play. Are they like Mata, Ssempeke and Ekukha? Are they really listening for representation of texts as well as musical qualities in the playing?

One may still consider that such references to instruments singing or talking are no more than metaphoric expressions. Some further data however points even more explicitly to a basic difference between what Europeans and Africans south of the Sahara are listening for with regard to instrumental performance. Ben Aning, writing of Kakaraba Lobi, discusses one of Kakraba Lobi's compositions called 'Sidigidi mengo o' and quotes Kakraba himself explaining about it: "It is like no other Lobi music It does not speak. It has no words. It is like European music. When you listen to 'Sidigidi mengo o' it is played in the western style, the way they play loud and soft. So I can say it is a very interesting composition". Kakraba is clearly distinguishing between his traditional repertory, which 'speaks', and European instrumental music, which does not (Aning 1989:106).²

Being unable to go off to the field and research this topic further among traditional musicians and audiences, I put these thoughts to James Makubuya, a predominantly western-trained Ugandan ethnomusicologist. He confessed that, when listening to African instrumental music, the tendency to listen for texts is so strong that he finds himself trying to fit phrases in Luganda (his native tongue) to the patterns he hears, even when it is instrumental music of the Nilotic Acholi people of Northern Uganda, whose language he does not know but whose music he also admires.

3. Instrumental Texts

I speculate then that many African peoples, especially those for whom linguistic tone is an important feature of their communication, listen to instrumental music differently from westerners. Firstly, in the case of instrumental music that accompanies vocal performance, they will be attending to and pondering over the texts declaimed by the singers. But many Africans will also more likely be listening for that music's known or possible textual content. Such instrumental transformations of 'texts', which are often repeated many times because of the cyclical nature of the music, may be perceived as a complement to that which may be simultaneously sung by a vocalist. Simha Arom uses the term 'key phrases' for such texts, and he identifies their musical forms in his analysis of the music of Banda-Linda trumpet ensembles (Arom 1991). Included in any set of key phrases will be of course the choral refrain, which is also usually incorporated into the instrumental cycle. As is well known, such refrains, whether sung by a chorus or played by instrumentalists, endorse the sentiment of the singer, encourage the singer and keep all present in mind of some single basic musical idea as the singer develops his or her message. Since the instrumental part usually spans complete cycles, it also maintains the musical flow while the singer is taking time to draw breath and think about his or her next utterances.

In the course of his exploration of cognitive aspects of *amadinda* xylophone music, Wegner concluded that recognition of the nuclear theme (or the 'key phrase', if one uses Arom's term) is the main inherent precept rather than perception of one or other 'inherent patterns' produced by auditory streaming as musicians interlock their individual parts. Particularly useful in the support of my present argument are the comments he included from Baganda musicians. Among them is the comment of Joseph Kyagambiddwa that "when the hands play the parts together one can hear the voice part mysteriously looming up" (Kyagambiddwa 1956:106). A second, taken from Kubik (1983), is also worth including: "A Muganda interrupted a performance and expressed his amazement about the fact that a non-Muganda (Kubik) was able to play a xylophone part without knowing "the words behind the melodies". He continued: "It is much easier for me to remember the melody which you have just played by simultaneously recalling the words" (Wegner 1993:224). In a brief "Response" to Wegner's paper I introduced the concept of the 'tone bank', the dense resultant pattern produced when the xylophonists interlock their parts. I suggested that a reason why the tone banks are so dense (containing furthermore much disjunct movement using intervals of fourths and fifths) is that they provide a stream of sounds within which more than one text-bearing melody can be extracted and others can be created by making changes to just one or two tones in the bank, or even by subtle changes of accentuation (Cooke 1994:476–77; see also Cooke 1995:153).

Among my field recordings are a number of examples where singers listen to instrumentalists playing a xylophone song and sing along with it (usually the basic response phrases of the song being played). During the course of the performance, they abruptly change those verbal phrases to fit a newly introduced variant of the instru-

mental cycle within one or two cycles of it being first sounded. One example (tape PCUG92.4.19) features Abudu Kimbwa, one of the members of the former *amadinda* (*entamiivu*) team that played at the court of Kabaka Muteesa II. Listening to colleagues from his home village switching from one variant of the song to another without pausing, he immediately sang different key phrases of the song in turn. He did this in response to a specific request from me for texts associated with the song 'Veneneka'. The other taped example is of young Basoga children doing the same, spontaneously and as with one voice, while older musicians were playing their *embaire* xylophone (tape PCUG88.11.2).

In the case of the *entamiivu* ensemble it was uncommon to hear singing during performances but in the second case, that of the Basoga, singing frequently accompanies *embaire* playing. In both cases the listeners were familiar with the verbal texts represented in turn within the variant forms of the cyclical pattern and promptly recognized them.

One wonders how members of such communities who are not familiar with the texts listen to such music. Do they have a second mode of listening—attending to the instrumental sound as pure music? Or do they ponder over the melodic-rhythmic phrases that are in the foreground at any one time, wondering what texts they might stand for? Perhaps, like James Makubuya, they individually invent texts that can fit what they hear. Multiple decoding of musical performance is a necessary corollary of the polysemic nature of much African music.

4. Chorussing Trumpets

Of particular interest in this respect are the various sub-Saharan African bands of trumpets or flutes played in hocketing style (i.e., frequently with only one or—in the case of some trumpet ensembles—sometimes two pitches available on each players' instrument). In all cases the melodies produced by these ensembles appear to be derived from verbal texts. Arom's analyses of Linda trumpet ensembles have shown how polyphonically rich and varied the patterning becomes during performances as each trumpeter inserts his pitch into the cyclical pattern: "individual variations proliferate so as to create the densest possible musical lattice". A few sentences later, however, he aptly adds:

It is more than probable that the horn orchestras are not intended to be heard vertically in the strict sense. Just as the musicians attempt to produce melodic phrases, so it would seem that the listener tries to extract certain melodic motifs from the complexity of the musical texture, and combines them in whatever way he pleases. He is therefore an active listener, for he is constantly obliged to pick out the sounds in the vertical agglomeration which can be put together to reproduce the melodic phrase he wants to hear (Arom 1991:504).

Arom does not go so far as to suggest that they are listening for verbal phrases, though of course he had demonstrated earlier that key phrases were vocally—if not verbally—derived.

In his account of "Trumpet and Flute Ensembles of the Berta People", Artur Simon remarks, "As the melodies are short and repetitive, the texts are also short and can only transport aphorisms or limited statements which generally reflect the world of ideas within these peasant communities" (Simon 1992:264)³. However, each of these 'limited' statements reiterated continuously by the trumpets serves as a conceptual anchor—a verbal one—within a performance which can often involve a whole community dancing slowly in concentric circles amid an extraordinarily rich acoustic and choreographic environment. In this environment, jingling of rattles or bells on clothing and ankles mingles with individually sung phrases, shouts and calls, and the kaleidoscopic sound of the trumpets and sometimes drums as well. All combine to produce what Baumann—writing of similar practices among the Miri of the Nuba mountains, describes as "a powerful affective experience"⁴. This is of course a particularly rich listening experience and more, because of the participatory nature of the activity.

But as a listening activity, is it any different from being a performer or member of the audience during, say, a finale of a Mozart opera when the different soloists come together musically to sing of their different reactions to the dramatic situation they find themselves in? In such a case a listener's attention—be it performer or audience—may be constantly switching from one soloist's line to another, or to the individual foregrounded instruments in the orchestra. And if a performer, one's attention also is directed toward one's own part in the ensemble and its relationship to any of the others: from focus on non-verbal elements such as timbre, harmony, rhythm or melodic line to focus on utterances. In one way it is different, because in Europe we tend to think of musical instruments as making sound patterns—at times giving melodic, harmonic, rhythmic and timbral support to words—but not usually presenting and reminding us of verbal texts.

To return to my very first question: Ssempeke probably was being kind, in that performance on a harp in Uganda, like performance on many other instruments, is seen essentially as a complement to song; it involves not only the utterance of previously learned texts associated with a particular song but freshly composed texts as well. This is not to suggest that performing instrumental music without song represents incomplete or inadequate performance, but his remark drew attention to the complex function that instrumental performance may have in Africa south of the Sahara. It suggests that no analysis of instrumental performance can be complete unless it takes into proper account the necessity of instruments to convey verbal as well as musical meaning, and it reinforces the truism that study of the cognitive activity involved in listening to instrumental music performance must be fruitful in enhancing our understanding of man as a music maker.

Notes

- 1 The *okeme* teams rarely make use of drums and then only as time markers, but Okaka refers to them here because he was simultaneously discussing a second competitive genre, the men's *ikoce* dance, which employs a drum chime on which melodies are played that are clearly derived from texts.
- 2 During his performing tours to Europe, Kakraba had ample opportunity to attend classical concerts and to experience 'absolute' music. He became aware of a basic difference between such music and his own traditional music.
- 3 A few sentences earlier Simon had remarked, "If a composer of a tune is known and mentioned by the people, he or she is not the one who made the music but the song text". This follows naturally, for if, as I suspect, the Berta language is tonal, then any text will carry its own melody within it. The person "who made the music" may simply be the one who worked out how to create the instrumental transformation—that is, how to represent the melody on the trumpets.
- 4 This is a theme discussed at length by Baumann writing of festival dances of the Miri. With specific reference to their gourd-trumpet dance Sorek he comments, "Married men ... had themselves, together with virtually all their fellow villagers, been carried away by the intricate beauty of the gourd's interlocking sounds, the supple tension and relaxation in the dancing, and the physical experience of being 'in tune' with other" (1987:182).

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