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# THE PROBLEM OF MEANING IN AFRICAN MUSIC

J. H. Kwabena Nketia

The study of music as a universal aspect of human behaviour is becoming increasingly recognized as the focus of Ethnomusicology. Seeger has said that the ultimate task of musicology "is to contribute to the study of man what can be known of man as music maker and music user" (Seeger 1952:366). Other writers have similarly shown concern for what "music is conceived to be" (McAllester 1954) or what music "means" to those who make it, and have referred in this connection to the close relationship that ought to exist between ethnology or cultural anthropology and music (Bukofzer 1954; Rhodes 1956). These and other considerations have led Merriam to propose a new and broader definition of Ethnomusicology, the discipline most concerned with these goals, as "the study of music in culture," and to suggest further that the discipline be regarded as concerned with the music of mankind rather than with "kinds of music" selected as in the past on the basis of geographical and other criteria (Merriam 1959, 1960). We are thus getting to the stage where structural analysis, essential as it is, is no longer an end in itself but only a part of a general and wider quest for 'meaning' in music.

This increasing emphasis on 'meaning' as a goal raises a number of problems. Basically of course there is the old bogey of the 'meaning of meaning'. (See Ogden & Richards 1946). How is meaning to be interpreted in Ethnomusicology? Is it to be interpreted in terms of meaning in cultural Anthropology, or is it to be interpreted in the sense in which a musician claims to understand music, that is through structure? Is meaning to be investigated and stated in terms of Western philosophical or psychological concepts of meaning in music--in terms of the aesthetic positions of formalists, expressionists and referentialists?

Obviously if Ethnomusicology is a "cross between Anthropology and Musicology" as Rhodes has suggested (Rhodes 1956b) its interpretation of meaning must be a synthesis of meanings. It ought to provide a broader understanding of music than can be obtained through Musicology (where it is concerned primarily with the sound complex or with one type of music) or Anthropology (concerned with the cultural component). The study of "music in culture" ignores neither music nor culture, neither formal structure nor function but unites both in a comprehensive statement of meaning. Thus in its methods Ethnomusicology must of necessity use not a single unidirectional approach but an integrated approach derived from the disciplines to which it is closely related.

The use of such an integrated approach will of course vary in extent and depth according to the problem being investigated or the type of music or idiom being studied. Functional and non-functional music, music carried on by written or partially written tradition and music carried on by oral methods will naturally require different handling in the details of investigation, analysis and statement. But they all have to be studied "in culture" and in that regard similar statements of meaning can be made for each one of them.

Such an integrated approach is of particular importance in the study of African music, first because African tradition already emphasises 'meaning,' and second because of the close identification of music with African social life. It has sometimes been said of the African that he cannot talk about his music. "No African can sing you his scale as he is not aware that he has one" (Jones 1954:26). There is, as Merriam has put it "no body of literate music theory which introduces the concept of scale, mode or interval as in the Western

system" (Merriam 1957:3). Yet the African does not perform his music merely out of force of habit. Nor does he do so because he lives, as some have thought, 'in constant dread of gods' who must be placated with music, or in fear of the magical potency of music which restrains him from making music. "One must not sing thoughtlessly to oneself, for every note summons up a spirit" (Schneider 1957:2). On the contrary the African is interested in what he does and derives pleasure from it even in ritual situations. Although there is no body of literate theory in the Western sense, there is nevertheless "a clear knowledge of which we understand relatively little as yet, of what music is and what it should be in terms of its total relationships to the culture of which it is a part" (Merriam 1957:3).

When I was working among the Akan of Ghana - and I happen to be one myself - frequently someone would come to me and ask me: Do you understand what the performers are doing? Are you following it? Do you understand the song? Do you understand what the dance drums are saying? Do you know why this piece is being played? They were all anxious to make me aware of the fact that there were other "areas of meaning" besides the sounds of drums and voices. There were things happening in the musical situation which they considered relevant. There were associations of all kinds with the musical event which they considered a part of its meaning. There were norms of behavior in musical situations which required some notice. This emphasis on understanding probably gave rise to the expression in Twi: "It is like singing a song to the Whiteman." (He looks blank.)

Following the lead that such questions gave me, I learnt many things about the musical tradition which I did not know before and which I had not suspected. Moreover working extensively in the whole Akan area, recording and talking to musicians, dancers, heads of organisations, attending festivals and ceremonies, I got a better overall picture of the tradition than any single person I had talked to or worked with, and there were occasions when those who had helped me in turn now asked me about things they did not know and which they thought I might have found out in the course of my investigations.

It was obvious that the musical tradition did not consist only of repertoire but also of a body of knowledge in terms of which music took place or was interpreted. This required to be sorted out and systematised. It was necessary for example to check 'meaning' in their terms and how it operated in actual situations, to check and cross check individual information or interpretations, and local variations. Moreover what was referred to as meaning was not in one direction. Sometimes it was the circumstances that led to the creation of a particular piece, dance style or instrument. Sometimes it was something structural, something embodied in what one instrument or two instruments in an ensemble did. Many such problems came up when I took lessons in drumming from master drummers or read over song texts to different individuals in widely separated localities.

Another point which I observed was that quite often references to music emphasised it as an event, as a process in time. Although there was no musical notation in the Western sense, no awareness of scales, etc., there was a method of quoting rhythm patterns or imitating drum rhythms in conversation when one had to talk about them or when in the course of the narration of a folktale one had to imitate verbally what some drums were playing, or as often happened in the past when one had to teach someone to take up the office of drummer at the chief's court or drummer in some particular organisation. (See Nketia 1954.) So far Jones seems to be the only non-African who has exploited this African approach in his descriptive analyses of rhythm. (See Jones 1952, 1959.)

In reporting all this I do not imply that the same conditions will be found

everywhere or that investigations must be carried to the same depth. It may be difficult for any one to do so without the advantage I had as a speaker of Akan and to some extent a carrier of the tradition and its culture, though it ought to be possible to gain some insight into it with proper field technique covering the topics of investigation listed by Merriam (1959 and 1960). This is one of the spheres in which Ethnomusicology has to learn from Anthropology just as it has had to turn to acoustics for the analysis and measurement of pitch phenomena, to psychology for the study of musical aptitudes, perception of musical phenomena and the like or to statistics for the light it can throw on some of its problems. (In saying this I do not imply that Ethnomusicology should be an autonomous discipline. On the other hand I do not accept the view that the study of music by the methods of Ethnomusicology should be excluded from MUSIC as a discipline.)

The point I am making is that even to those whose music we investigate a musical tradition consists of 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' facts of some sort, of repertoire and the oral traditions associated with it. The analysis of scale, modes, melodic direction, intervals, harmony etc., provides one type of meaning to those accustomed to thinking of music in those terms. To the African performer and his collaborators and "listeners", the music means much more than these, for it is part of a way of life. A theory of 'crossing the beats' or 'multiple main beats' based on analysis of procedure in drumming may help in bringing order into what appears to others as 'chaos'. It may demonstrate the African musical art of achieving complexity through the use of relatively simple elements. But drumming as a cultural activity has a meaning beyond structure and the Ethnomusicologist enriches his understanding of meaning by going beyond formal analysis.

The importance of an integrated approach in the study of African music does not lie only in the fact that the music is organised as part of the process of living together, but also in the fact that formal structure and contexts of use often interact.

As is well-known, music occurs as an event in a context of situation. The varying demands of these situations often give rise to musical differentiations embodied in individual items or in a group of such items which then constitute a single musical type. Thus in Akan society the music of the heavy drum ensemble of the court constitutes a musical type distinguished from all others in certain particulars. Within this type are individual items which may be played in specific contexts. There is a piece for the royal procession, another for the battle front, ceremonial firing of musketry or for situations of distress, another for women of royal blood, and yet another for certain officials of the court.

Similarly the possession dance of the Akan has over twelve different drum pieces, each of which corresponds to a specific style of dancing or movement, and they follow each other in certain prescribed sequences (Nketia 1957). Tracey has also shown how the xylophone music of the Chopi of East Africa is organised in relation to the dance routine (Tracey 1948). A careful study of African dance music and the movements in terms of which the rhythms are articulated may thus give us further insight into the music and how it is organised.

The need for considering the situation of occurrence even in formal analysis then must not be overlooked. Form in African music, as Wachsmann has pointed out, "is the by-product of several processes which include the participation of single persons and groups, the dance formation adopted by these persons and groups and the application of commas, semicolons and full stops in speech when word groups, phrases and paragraphs are shaped. . . . Thinking of the relationship between the leader and group leads us closer to the character of the performance than thinking in terms of analysis of musical form

(Wachsmann 1953:55). I have similarly shown how the Akan dirge is tied up with social structure, the extent to which its form is bound up with the verbal thematic patterns and how the stanzas are built up musically and textually in the context of performance. The dirge occurs as an event. Its total expression includes the stylised movements of the singers, the wail and the stylised sob that punctuates the section of a piece (Nketia 1955).

It is refreshing to find corroboration of the need for such an approach in a recent major work on African music devoted primarily to structural analysis; in particular the following which shows the author's awareness of a wider area of investigation than he was able to explore: "Such is the unity of African music with African social life, that all sorts of subsidiary questions concerning the social setting of the music have to be considered before the music as a whole can be said to have been mastered. There has been too much to do. . . . ; it remains to discover all that lies hidden in these scores" (Jones 1959:9).

It is evident then that in the field of African music, the material which the Ethnomusicologist handles itself demands that notice be taken of 'culture'. The study of 'music in culture' is not only desirable but necessary. If we accept this, then we must be prepared to face afresh the problems of meaning that it raises in order that we may get nearer our ultimate goal of contributing to the study of man "what can be known of man as music maker and music user". We must be prepared to treat African music as we treat any other music - in the perspective of the music of all mankind, and as music worth studying by and in itself and not as in the past only in terms of Western art music.

Returning then to the main problem posed at the beginning of this paper, I would like to conclude with a brief observation on a technique for dealing with aspects of meaning in synchronic studies of African music. In my experience a 'contextual' technique such as has been used in the analysis of linguistic and ethnographic data handles 'music in culture' most adequately. It is principally a perceptive technique and requires both analysis (involving the abstraction of elements from wholes such as culture, situation, event, song, etc.) and synthesis (or the interrelations of such elements to one another and to wholes). Topics of investigation such as Merriam has listed (Merriam 1959 and 1960) are not isolated but mutually related topics set up and defined through the perception of music in culturally defined contexts. The contextual technique is thus implicit in the definition 'music in culture', culture being the context in which music is studied.

In synchronic studies attention should be paid to the processes that shape and define 'music in culture'. Regarding music as an event occurring in varying contexts of situation, the investigator proceeds to analyse such event and the components of its context from the point of view of the immediate situation as observed by him and the situation in a general context of culture.

In the first instance he studies the event in respect to (i) the participants - musicians, dancers and others (ii) relevant actions such as dance movements and other actions occurring simultaneously with the music, (iii) relevant objects such as musical instruments (regular sound producing instruments of the culture), sound producing objects such as dancers idiophonic adornment, a pan, a kerosene tin, a box or packing case, etc., not regularly regarded as "instrument" in the culture or outside the dance situation. (iv) the music considered in terms of i-iii and in terms of established categories of musicological analysis, including of course the analysis of song texts.

In the second instance he studies musical events in respect to (v) the body of culturally defined usages that govern them. This will include the examination of different occasions of performance and the values in terms of which they take place. (vi) the relationship of musical events with other aspects of culture,

and (vii) factors which affect the course of musical practice such as culture contact or social change.

The numbering of the above (i-vii) does not represent procedural steps but only areas of investigation. They all suggest that the investigator must be in touch with his material in its setting at some point. He must acquire some experience of it - at least through observation. As some investigators have pointed out participation or learning to perform is sometimes a useful investigation technique. (cf Kirby 1934:viii). (All these are of course the ideal, which may not be possible for everyone and I do not rule out other means of assembling data when information cannot be obtained at first hand. Indeed in such a wide area, we cannot but rely on other sources provided we know how to interpret and handle the material.)

Information about musical events may be gathered through questions arising from the observation of situations. The practised field worker can often anticipate many of these questions. He can thus find out a good deal about the musical culture with proper interview technique outside actual situations. As Bascom has pointed out, this is something which even the non-musical Anthropologist can do to some extent. (Bascom 1959:9). In terms of the technique suggested above, this will be part of the process of contextualisation. It can, therefore, be better done when it is guided by an insight into musical events. It cannot be adequately stated without reference to actual events and their components, that is to items i-iv.

In outlining the scope of the contextual technique, I do not imply that there is no place for partial or restricted studies. Any aspects of the musical event - the music, the performers, the dance, etc. - may be isolated for detailed examination. One could even deal in detail with an aspect of these items such as rhythm or tonal organisation according to the problem one is interested in investigating. If such studies, however, are to contribute to our understanding of 'music in culture', they must be contextualised: they must be related to the larger whole from which they are abstracted and to other elements with which they are closely related. Analysis must go hand in hand with synthesis for it is the relations in synthesis that enhance our understanding.

On the same basis one might study musical situations or musical occasions such as ceremonies of the life cycle, festivals, public worship involving the use of music. But these have to be dealt with from the point of view of the music for which they provide a context and, therefore, part of the definition of its meaning. This is an important difference that ought to be seen in such a study and other studies in which the material is organised in terms of social structure or social organisation, social institutions, etc.

Meaning in African music then must be regarded not as involving one statement but a plurality of statements derived from different but mutually related phases of investigation of ethnographic and musical character, and one might more appropriately speak of areas, or modes of meaning rather than meaning in general. Thus in so far as formal analysis gives one an insight into the structure of music, we may regard the result of this phase of study as providing one facet of meaning. In African musical studies such a study would be keyed as far as possible to values in the culture. Thus as Wachsmann has suggested the conventional cent measurement of instrumental tunings would be supplemented by a description that "enables us to see the range of values which the musician has applied" (Wachsmann 1953: 50).

It is significant to note that this kind of consideration - analysis oriented to African cultural values - has been borne in mind by a few investigators in respect of other aspects of formal analysis. Jones insists that his analysis of African rhythmic procedures reflects "what the African actually does". He

maintains that his "description of African technique is not an hypothesis. . . . Any person who puts the matter to the test with a party of Central Africans will find this to be so" (Jones 1954:26). Thirty one years earlier Kirby had expressed much the same point of view when he commented on the difficulty of "banishing from the mind all prejudices and remembrances of European musical methods and ideas" (Kirby 1923:25).

Other aspects of meaning in African music are expressed in statements dealing with the interrelations of structure and function, structure and context, structure and movement or dancing, while the relationship between music and other aspects of culture provide yet another mode or modes of meaning. Other modes of meaning may be established by comparative methods: the musical material of African cultures may be considered in relation to one another, and in relation to those of other cultures.

The field of African musical studies then is large and many-sided; each phase of investigation directed towards a specific problem of music in African culture contributes to our understanding of this music. There is no doubt that the value of such contributions will be greatly enhanced if they are guided by a conceptual framework derived from a common discipline. I believe that 'music in culture' meets this need better than any other framework proposed so far, considering the nature of the African material.

A contextual technique such as I have outlined enables the various modes of meaning in this music to be investigated and stated in a comprehensive manner without losing sight of 'music in culture' or of our ultimate task of contributing to the study of man "what can be known of man as music maker and music user".

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