African Rhythms and How they are Learned

Annotated Bibliography

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A probing exploration into the inherent musicality of human beings. Blacking pursues the argument that all musical expression has validity and (often misunderstood) levels of complexity and sophistication. Many examples from his work with Venda of S. Africa; extensive transcriptions. Useful for the author’s thoughtful, honest approach to assessing musicality across cultures, and the demands which this places upon ethnomusicologists.


An examination of the “talking drums” of Africa as a means of communication. The “language of the drum” as a component of the language groups throughout the continent. Construction of drums; playing technique; phrases, etc. The role of drumming in ritual practices, ceremonies, and sporting events. Useful in understanding the relationships between sound, rhythm, and language in African societies.


Campbell, Patricia Shehan and Scott-Kassner, Carol *Music in Childhood from Preschool through the Elementary Grades* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Group/Thomson Learning


A broad overview of the nine east African nations, their history and culture. The relationship of music to religion, nomadism, urban music, etc. Useful as an introduction to east African culture and music in the continental context.


An overview of music of 14 West African nations, regarded by some scholars as a “homogeneous unit”, but with significant diversity. Discussion of geography (savanna, forest) and historical forces, and the present-day tribes and tribal clusters throughout the region. Useful for a broad understanding of tribal groupings and cultural and linguistic lineage.

A broad-ranging compilation addressing many different aspects of African music: Egyptian, Ghanaian, Maasai, Kenyan, and others, plus a discussion of the relevance of African musical assumptions and paradigms from a composer’s perspective. Ch. 5 (“Drumming in Africa”) addresses interlocking rhythms and how they combine to create new rhythmic patterns. Useful as a guide to deciphering such rhythms utilizing western notation. Ch. 8: “How Not to Analyze African Music”, a case study regarding the nuances of analytical issues and presentation of findings; includes an overview of findings by Hornbostel, Blacking, Arum, Jones and others.


An extensive bibliography of articles, journals and books on every aspect of African music. Arrangement by geography, instrument type, dance, author. Total of 3370 entries. Useful for finding articles on specific geographic regions, or by author.


One of the original exhaustive studies of African music, frequently cited since its publication. Discusses African musical genres, instruments, dances, etc. Speculates on the “homogeneity” of African music (i.e., the “standard pattern”), a concept subsequently cited and debated by many others. Notable for its broad approach to the subject, covering many tribes and topics. Also, detailed photo illustrations of Atsimevu technique.


Notes the similarities of African rhythms across diverse cultures. Cites Jones/King’s work identifying the “standard pattern”. “African hemiola”, macrorhythms, musical form, call-and-response, “microrhythms”. These concepts are combined to suggest a new approach to their analysis and understanding. Useful “table of common African rhythms”.


Koetting’s “final word” on the subject (he died the following evening), presented at the 10/20/84 Society for Ethnomusicology Conference in L. A. One of the best available articles addressing issues of rhythmic analysis of African music.


A chapter discussing a variety of African musical styles, from Kesena jongo to Highlife. Includes a straightforward explanation of 2-over-3 cross rhythms (helpful in teaching polyrhythmic patterns to “western” students). Listening examples provided on accompanying recording. Useful as a brief, generalized overview of the topic of African music, rhythms, notational issues and cultural background.


A re-evaluation of the western approach to analyzing and understanding non-western rhythms. Examines the definition of “rhythm”. Discusses typical western approaches. Cites A.M. Jones’ work w/Ewe; overlapping polymeters including 12/8, 1/4, 2/4, 3/4, 4/4, 6/8, etc. Useful in understanding rhythmic comparisons between cultures.


A small book offering a complete transcription of Kpanlogo, as performed by the Master Drummers of the Ghana Dance Ensemble. Detailed western notations, including “vertical alignments” of all parts with bell part. Intro, by Nketia. Useful in teaching/demonstrating these rhythms to any who would benefit from easily-readable western notation.


A small book offering a complete transcription of Adowa, as performed by the Master Drummers of the Ghana Dance Ensemble. Detailed with notation including “vertical alignment” with bell parts. Intro by Nketia. Useful for detailed western notations.


Overview of eight central African nations, their history, cultures and music. Notation of choral music of Central African Republic. Relationship of music and language. Examples of music’s role in group work (i.e., millet-pounding) and resultant rhythms. Pygmy cultures; Bantu, instruments. Useful for understanding the discreet “linguistic zones” and their relation to musics of the region.


An excellent examination of Ewe polyrhythmic music. Discusses Africans’ ability to hear 12/8 divided into 4’s, 3’s, 6’s, 8’s, etc. This article really sums it up. Very useful in notating/understanding the five major principles surrounding the “standard pattern” in African music.


A study of a specific Ewe dance. Discusses rhythmic structure, the dance performance, musical notation/ transcriptions, the accompanying songs, etc. Ch. 4: “The Percussion Ensemble”, provides detailed rhythmic transcriptions and explanations of cross-rhythms in 12/8, 6/4, 3/4, and 24/16 time signatures. Especially useful in understanding the polyrhythmic structures and how they combine, and a discussion of issues involved in notating this type of music.


Examines Adzogbo, a dance of the Ewe of Benin, Togo and Ghana. Details the relationship of polyrhythmic musical texture and the movements of dancers, and the identical rhythms of the sung/spoken parts and the master drum. Descriptions of the cultural significance, performance features, and “drum language” of the piece. Useful for detailed transcriptions showing relationship of words to bell and drum parts, and the syllables which represent specific drum strokes and sounds.


Addresses “unacknowledged assumptions” regarding African rhythms: 1) equal pulse base, 2) derived “steady musical beat”, 3) a basic, organizing principle, 4) “starting points” for rhythmic groupings. A section on “Time from the Western Point of View” (a linear perspective), and how this affects our view of African rhythm, plus time from the African point of view, including “time reckoning” (how/whether people actually mark time as it passes). Useful in understanding/contrasting the western and African perceptions of time, its passage and marking.


An overview of the characteristics of the African “musical system”. Musical activity as an integral and functioning part of society. Summary of issues such as the standard pattern, rhythm, melody, form and function. Useful as a generalized orientation to African music in its cultural context and several musical/aesthetic issues.


Detailed and highly instructive guide to executing African rhythms. Easy-to-understand notations of cross-rhythms, hemiolas, and methods for verbalizing and understanding them. Very useful for teaching African rhythms to oneself or to a group.

  
  A “brief introduction” (145 pages) to the music of Ghana. Provides a broad, yet fairly specific, overview. Includes chapters on the organization of folk music and cultural context; musical types (classifications: recreational, occasional, incidental); melody; form; harmony; rhythm. Many detailed transcriptions (melodic, harmonic, rhythmic). Also a discussion of instruments and their construction and contributions to the ensemble. Esp. useful for the transcriptions and commentary.


  
  A 200-page study of the Akan tribe in S. Ghana. Primary focus is the social implications of Akan drumming and its musical and linguistic aspects. Drum types and construction; modes of drumming (signal, speech, dance). Ch. 4: “The Verbal Basis of Drumming”, relates drum sounds to speech syllables. Also chapters on large segments of the population (bands, religious sects, Warriors, etc.) who use drumming in particular ways. Useful for understanding the cultural meanings of Akan music.


  A description of the three primary rhythmic aspects of the Anlo (Ewe) peoples’ “Atsio”. 1) Anlo timing in higher, softer parts, 2) the process of timing one’s part to the bell, creating rhythmic polyphony, 3) other players performing “in duet” with this bell, and the resulting timing. Useful for a clearer understanding of how the players in Anlo music interact (consciously or unconsciously) with one another.

A detailed description of the role of the atsimevu (lead drum) in Ewe’s Atsia dance drumming. Physical description of the instrument; types of strokes and sounds; a tablature for notation. Useful for an understanding of the eight main strokes, the sounds they make, and how to execute them.


A discussion of rhythm as a function of the division of time and successions of events. Discusses human perceptions as the primary determinant of rhythm. Offers a graphical method for analyzing multiple rhythmic components of a musical passage, plus diagrams of metric aspects of poetry and song lyrics. Useful in applying consistent methods of rhythmic analysis to varied musical styles.


A discussion of the musical culture, instruments and rhythms of the Anlo people of Anyako, Ghana. Describes five primary attributes of Anlo music (non-equidistant governing accents; diverging simultaneous rhythms; levels of sound; earthward dancing; low-pitched singing). Provides graphical analyses of diverging simultaneous rhythms and multi-layered sound patterns. Useful in understanding the complex relationships between all aspects (accents, instrumentation, lyrics, sound levels) in a particular passage.


Describes in detail the “support” parts played by gankogui, axatse and kagan in this warrior (now recreational) dance of the Ewe. Intricate analysis of phrase structures within the kidi part’s many variations. Useful for detailed manner in which these parts support the lead drum.

Reich’s personal reflections on his travels to Ghana in 1970, including detailed transcriptions of Ewe rhythmic patterns for bell, rattle and drums. Comments on the challenges of learning these rhythms, as well as the cultural context of the music, and relationship between drum beats to spoken language patterns. Useful as a source of accurate transcriptions of two Ewe beat patterns. Interestingly, Reich (in 1980) composed a piece entitled “Clapping Music”, which hybridizes a typical 12/8 Ewe rhythmic style with his “process music” compositional approach.


An introduction to polyrhythms and their importance in African music, including one notation depicting the simplest polyrhythm, % to 6/8. Some great generalized statements about the nature of polyrhythm (for use in Ethno project report).


The author discusses the traditional ways in which W. African children learn the music of their tribes, based on “the principle of slow absorption of musical experience and active participation, rather than formal training”. Socialization through participation in tribal music. Discusses disagreements regarding teaching methodologies - deliberately trained or not? Author notes that with the breakdown of tribal institutions, these methods are not always followed. Excellent as a source for traditional teaching/learning methods.


An effort to provide music educators with more effective tools for teaching world (esp. African) music in the classroom.
Extensive bibliography of books, recordings and other resources.
Exercises to develop “multi-layer” hearing in students.
Useful tool to educators seeking to get students started with understanding and playing African music.


A concise discussion of issues involved in understanding African rhythm, and the impact of the researcher’s perspective. Stone contrasts the views of Agawu and Keotting (western notation vs. grasping to understand the African musician’s own perception of the music). Useful as a brief overview of the subject.


An examination of the use of technological media and the “feedback interview” as methods for understanding music events in the field. Discusses issues of communication, multi-sensory aspects, interpretation, social relationships, etc. Guidelines for selecting and utilizing recording media. Useful as both a theoretical and practical guide to field recording and obtaining performer feedback.

Devoted to Mande music and dance traditions of Mali, Senegal and Guinea, and the ways in which it has been translated into African-American styles. Strong emphasis on aesthetics. Rhythmic patterns, both within the djembe drumming and the dance movements are explicitly illustrated. Technical illustrations of djembe construction and assembly. Notations of overlapping parts for djembe and other instruments. A brief discussion of learning methods for young drummers. Extensive chapter on the art form’s evolution in the U.S. Useful as a broad overview of this particular tradition and its aesthetics, both in Africa and America.


An examination of African rhythmic material from a “theory” approach. Comparison of African and western rhythms. Recognizes the “significant musical commonalities across cultural groups in sub-Saharan Africa”. Does African music have “meter”? Yes - as an underlying plus, felt but not always heard. How is meter “inferred”? The “syncopation shift” in African and western (popular) music. Useful in its citation of many other well-known authorities (Jones, Waterman, Chernoff, Koetting, Panteleoni, Blacking, Locke, Pressing, etc.)


Lists hundreds of periodical, articles, etc. on the subject of sub-Saharan African music. Articles categorized by region. Indices of authors, tribes. Separate section devoted to books on the subject. A major effort at organizing the many publications, books and authors who researched African music and culture prior to 1964.

A very practical (if somewhat dated?) guide to field research into African music. Suggestions regarding etiquette, locating performers, achieving rapport, participating in music and dance, etc. Discussion of field notes, recording techniques, field cards, etc. Especially useful in developing “field research protocol” for my Ghana project, summer ’04.


A true “introduction” to the subject, readable by lay persons, and covering melody, rhythm, form, instruments and music’s role in African culture. Easy-to-understand illustrations of melodies and corresponding rhythms. Useful as a text for those less familiar with the complexities of African music.


An overview of the geography, people and culture of ten North African nations. Relationship of music to the Islam faith and worship practices. Music in folk life (events, celebrations, rituals, poetry, dance) and popular music are discussed. Useful for a broad understanding of N. Africa’s history, geography and cultural forces.