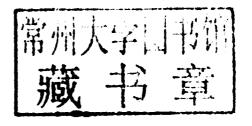
THEORY OF AFRICAN MUSIC **VOLUME I** GERHARD KUBIK

Theory of African Music

VOLUME I



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Theory of African Music

VOLUME I

Gerhard Kubik

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Contents

Volume I

Preface to Volumes I and II 6

Introduction 9

- I. Xylophone Playing in Southern Uganda 47
- II. Harp Music of the Azande and Related Peoples in the Central African Republic 87
- III. A Structural Examination of Multi-Part Singing in East, Central and Southern Africa 169
 - Section 1: Homophonic Multi-Part Singing in Bantu Musical Cultures of East and Central Africa 171
 - Section 2: Nsenga/Shona Harmonic Patterns and the San Heritage in Southern Africa 210
- IV. Composition Techniques in Kiganda Xylophone Music. With an Introduction into Some Kiganda Musical Concepts 249

Section 1: The Amadinda 264 Section 2: The Akadinda 290

Section 3: Are Amadinda and Akadinda Pieces Structurally Related? 306

Transcriptions 308

- V. Concepts About Movement and Sound in the Eastern Angolan Culture Area 329
 - Section 1: Musical Enculturation 330
 - Section 2: Patterns of Body Movement in Mbwela/Nkhangala Boys' Initiation 349
 - Section 3: Likembe Tunings and Musical Concepts of an Adolescent Kachokwe: Kufuna Kandonga 382

Notes 405 Bibliography 416 Sound Examples of CD 1 456 Contents of Volume II 464

Preface to Volumes I and II

This book has been designed to serve as a reader in African musicology for students, scholars and people with a wide interdisciplinary range of interests. It contains ten chapters, originally written in English, and an introduction. The area it deals with is Africa south of the Sahara, with some sections devoted to specific musical cultures, others to regions and yet others to the musical concepts and practices of individuals. Among the culture areas relatively well represented in this book are those of southern Uganda (Ganda/Soga), central and south-western Tanzania (Gogo, Pangwa, Kisi, etc.), southern Malaŵi (urban musical cultures), eastern Angola (Ngangela/Cokwe), Central African Republic (Zande, Banda, Nzakara, etc.), Shaba Province of Zaïre (guitar music of the 1950s), Gabon, northern Congo and south-western Central African Republic (Fang', Mpyemõ, etc.), Yoruba culture of Nigeria, Ewe/Fõ culture in Togo, and various musical cultures in southern Africa including the !Kung' (San speakers), Nsenga, Shona, Lozi, etc. This configuration reflects the regional emphasis of my particular fieldwork, which is the foundation of this book. Naturally, many other cultures and peoples also came into consideration with regard to selected aspects of their music/dance practice.

Some of the chapters have been written specifically for the present text: Chapter IX ("Genealogy of a Malaŵian Musician Family"), Chapter VI ("The Cognitive Study of African Musical 'Rhythm'") and the introduction. Some others are revised versions of papers that were first published between 1964 and 1969: Chapters I and II, Section 1 of Chapter III, and Chapter IV. My research in eastern Angola in 1965 is summarized in Chapter V, drawing on earlier articles. Finally, there are three papers, virtually without any revisions, but in one case considerably enlarged, which represent more recent emphases in my research and are therefore included here, although they had been published in other contexts: Section 2 of Chapter III on the San heritage in southern Africa, Chapter VIII on Yoruba chantefables and Chapter X on the *tusona* ideographs in Angola and north-western Zambia. Chapter notes give the source of each paper.

Although I have tried to keep revisions of some of the early writings, particularly those that became Chapters I, II, III (Section 1) and IV, to a minimum and preserve as much as possible their style and diction, the present book has its own dynamics; in the process of preparation I unavoidably had to read through the original texts again, eliminating inaccuracies, errors, a fair amount of misprints and occasional editorial interventions not sanctioned by me. Generally, it seemed necessary to bring the early texts a little more in line with my present-day approach and knowledge without, however, sacrificing their character and substance. Thus, in some places additions have been made, drawing on unpublished field data from the 1960s rather than data obtained on

more recent field trips. Here I have tried to work selectively, exercising all the restraint needed to avoid damage.

Some chapters are compounded, i.e. two or more separate papers on related topics have been joined to form one chapter with sub-sections (e.g. Chapters III and V). In other instances the substance of a paper written earlier is preceded by a brief introduction written more recently (Chapters I, II, III, IV).

In organizing the ten chapters, I have tried to proceed from simple to more complex topics, re-enacting in some manner my own learning progression during the last three decades. This should be especially beneficial for students who are not yet very familiar with the subject. Thus, at least at the beginning, the chapters follow the order in which they were written, beginning with "Xylophone Playing in Southern Uganda" (completed in 1963), "Harp Music of the Azande . . ." (1964) and Section 1 of "A Structural Examination of Multi-Part Singing . . ." (completed in 1966). The chronological order, although broken in places, is visible as a guiding principle, and so it is not by coincidence that "African Space/Time Concepts . . ." (written between 1981 and 1984) concludes the book. For a number of reasons, mainly didactic, out of a need for some kind of grouping by region and subject matter, it was not possible to remain faithful to an absolutely chronological order. The final arrangement of the material, therefore, is a compromise in the interest of the student, who should now be able to study the texts without constantly turning pages.

While I introduce in this book a number of regional cultures, with their concepts of movement and sound, my overall approach in this work is comparative. Sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly, all the papers published here touch on theoretical issues ultimately concerning African music as a whole. For this reason the title *Theory of African Music* seems to be justified for this book. It should not be misunderstood, however, as programmatic. "Theory" here is a framework, interdisciplinary in its orientation, to bring our current database and its evaluation under some kind of umbrella. Neither is it to be understood in the narrow sense of "music theory" (for which reason the book is called Theory of African Music and not African Music Theory) or as being dogmatic in any manner. Actually, one of my objectives here is to make us a little more aware of what we may gain from a flexible methodology, and to teach methodology not merely by abstraction, but by application. I have tried to summarize for the benefit of readers from all nations and all cultures some of my field experiences in the course of attempting to understand African music and its conceptual background.

Introduction

For most researchers today the term "African music" refers to musical practices of the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa. Not normally included in the term are those in Arab-speaking North Africa, belonging to a Euro-Asian rather than African culture world. For similar reasons the music of European settler communities particularly in southern Africa, is not included.

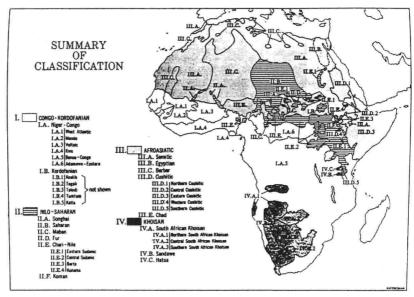
"African music" in an extended sense also includes "dance;" both are intimately linked aspects of the same cultural complex. Further ramifications of African music/dance lead the researcher to include "oral literature," theatre arts and some aspects of visual anthropology in his area of study. But African music is also closely connected with language, to an extent that it is hardly possible today to study it without the necessary background in African languages. And finally, as Alan P. Merriam (1964) has stressed, there is the socio-cultural side of the phenomenon which requires the student to be well versed in the theoretical framework of current cultural anthropology.

African Languages and Music

Stylistic traits in African music have been found to be correlated with language in Africa, at least in its broad divisions, and in many cases also with regional ethnic/linguistic relationships. Christoper Ehret (1981:28) has observed:

Polyrhythmic music and dance ... is often thought of as quintessentially African. In fact it appears to be a feature of culture particularly associated with Niger-Congo peoples. It has spread so widely because Niger-Congo societies, especially the Bantu, have covered so much of the continent and it has come to have an enormous impact on modern Western popular music and dance because so many of the African slaves transported by Europeans were of Niger-Congo background. Outside the Niger-Congospeaking regions in Africa other musical styles, frequently based on stringed instruments, tend to prevail, along with quite different styles of dance.

It is important therefore to link African music studies to the language map of Africa. The broad divisions of the African language panorama form four super-families: I. Niger-Kordofanian II. Nilo-Saharan, III. Afroasiatic and IV. Khoisan (Greenberg 1966). These are reflected in the musical panorama by the existence of broad style areas within Africa, inspite of intensive cultural exchange which has taken place across these boundaries since time immemorial.



Map 1. Joseph Greenberg's classification of African Languages. Map and description reproduced from Greenberg 1966 [31970]:177. "Congo-Kordofanian" = "Niger-Kordofanian" in a more recent version of the classification (Murray 1981).

In the micro-cultural dimension, however, it is not always possible to link stylistic traits in African music to invariable "ethnic groups." Remembering the iridescent character of many ethnic group designations, the confusion arising from the mixing up of self- and outsider-appellations, the frequent lack of clear delineation between "ethnic," "sub-ethnic," habitation area and clan names, as well as the influence of colonial administrations on ethnic terminology, it is often difficult to take existing "ethnic groups" as a reliable framework for reference. While in some areas, such as southern Uganda, ethnic names became markers of nationhood (cf. the Baganda = people of the Kingdom of Buganda), in many other areas terminology is not clear-cut. For example in eastern Angola there are people calling themselves VaLuchazi in the plural (literally: "the people who originated from the Luchazi river"), VaMbunda ("the redearth people," i.e. people settled in areas of laterite soil), VaNkhangala

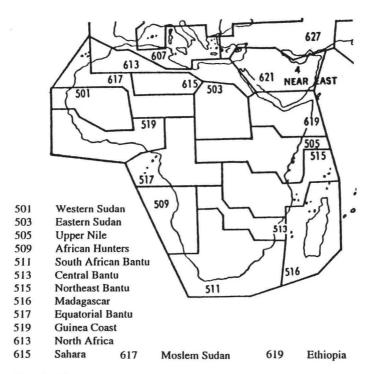
("the people building their villages in the dry forest") VaMbwela, VaLwimbi, VaNgondzelo, VaNyemba and so forth. But is there anything like a Luchazi culture, or Luchazi music in particular, to be distinguished from a Mbwela and Nkhangala music? - Certainly there are some differences from area to area. There are also differences linked to dialectal variants of the language, notably between Luchazi and Mbunda in the realm of phonology, but essentially it is the same culture. And VaMbwela as compared to VaNkhangala in the Kwandu-Kuvangu Province of Angola are virtually indistinguishable in their culture and language. What "distinguishes" them is merely their environmental preferences, with the VaMbwela settling close to the swampy river grasslands called chana, and the VaNkhangala a mere kilometer further "inland" on the edges of the forest zone (musenge).

All these languages belong to Malcolm Guthrie's Zone K, Group 10, in his tentative classification of the Bantu languages (Guthrie 1948) and this seems to be a more reliable reference, so that one can speak of a "Zone K-Group 10 musical culture," a clumsy term but scientifically much more tenable than "Nkhangala music" or "Luchazi music." In eastern Angola it is the appellation given these populations by outsiders that, in this case at least, seem to have hit the point more accurately. It was the Ovimbundu traders from central Angola who in the 18th and 19th century began to speak of all the eastern Angolan peoples as Vangangela (= "people of the aurora," "people of the east"), lumping together into one category populations with a widely identical cultural profile. Unfortunately this term is not acceptable to many of the people concerned (cf. also Chapter V).

From my own studies in African cultures I have gathered that musical styles and specific traits are rarely linked in a rigid manner to entities as small as "ethnic groups." More often they are linked to ethnically related population clusters, speaking languages belonging to the same zone. In addition there is also the phenomenon of sub-cultures (including musical styles) carried by even smaller units within the larger community, for example by professional associations in a stratified society, or, within a non-stratified society, by age-sets. And finally, there is the individual creative musical personality, long neglected by field workers in African music who have looked at it as "folk" or "tribal" (ethnic) music. As a leader, guide and innovator he plays a most important role in many African cultures.

Style Areas

In his Cantometrics scheme, aimed at a world-wide comparative sampling of vocal styles, "Africa" is divided by Alan Lomax into the following broad song style zones (1968:80): Western Sudan, Moslem Sudan, Guinea Coast, Eastern Sudan, Ethiopia, Upper Nile, Equatorial Bantu, Northeast Bantu, Central Bantu, African Hunters, South African Bantu and Madagascar. In Map 2 these broad delineations were drawn intentionally with a ruler in straight lines, demonstrating that it is impossible to make exact geographical borders between the style areas.



Map 2. Alan Lomax's song-style areas in Africa. Reproduced from Lomax 1968:314, extract

Some reservations with regard to Lomax's methodology of sampling have been expressed by critics of the Cantometrics project, regarding external viewpoints in the rating system, the employment of exclusively Euro-American personnel during the investigation process etc. (cf. Pantaleoni 1970:131). However in spite of those criticisms Alan Lomax's African style areas seem to be much closer to reality than were earlier attempts to divide Africa into distinctive cultural or musical zones.

Alan Lomax observes a remarkable homogeneity in the song-styles within "Africa,"

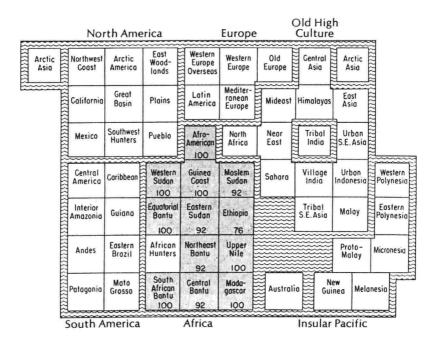
interrupted only by the African Hunters (Pygmies and Bushmen), whose low representation in the quartile lists (15 percent) required that they be excluded ... Even this departure from the general homogeneity, however, is more apparent than real, for although the African Hunters appear low in the statistical ranks, their own quartile list is completely dominated by African areas (Lomax 1968:91-5).

Lomax's findings seem to confirm that the music of Khoisan speakers in southern Africa, as well as the music of the Pygmies in several pockets of central Africa, represent cultures apart from the mainstream of African music south of the Sahara, i.e. the music of speakers of Niger-Congo languages (I.A. in Joseph Greenberg's classification 1966). This picture, however, is blurred by two factors which have been given relatively little attention in the literature: 1. Bantu- and Khoisan interaction in southern Africa (including especially Lomax's areas 511 South African Bantu and 513 Central Bantu), 2. that Khoisan music and Pygmy music represent in fact, totally different musical culture areas, in contrast to impressions gathered previously partly due to the lumping together of two unrelated peoples from the viewpoint of an evolutionistic interpretive framework. Thus, even the term African Hunters is too broad, quite apart from the fact that it can be even less geographically delimited than any of the other song style areas, due to the scattered distribution of hunter/gatherer populations in Africa.

As the "core," and even as an original historical point of dispersal of "black" African musical cultures, two zones appear foremost in Lomax's results: Guinea Coast and Equatorial Bantu. Lomax finds that an average similarity of 84% of the traits binds these two regions with those of the Central Bantu and the South African Bantu. Tracing these cross-relationships further, he finds that there are also remarkable similarities between the region Upper Nile and South African Bantu. Without doubt, the similarity profile reflects, in part, remote relationships in time, and the direction of past migrations.

Although the position of the African Hunters and their possible inclusion in or exclusion from the African culture world is a topic still to be discussed, the Afro-American style area on the other hand showed a sufficient similarity profile to be included.

The musical areas of North Africa and Sahara are excluded from "Africa" in Lomax's schema. They are considered to be fundamentally different from those of sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in vocal style. Most of the cultural zones described in George Peter Murdock's "Ethnographic Atlas" (1967) as "Circum-Mediterranean," were therefore excluded from the "Africa" style world (Lomax 1968:80). This does not



Ill. 1. African song style areas in global perspective. Reproduced from Lomax 1968:92

minimize in any way the enormous cultural exchanges which have gone on between north Africa and sub-Saharan Africa ever since an effective trans-Sahara trading network was established. There was considerable trade across the Sahara in Roman times between the Mediterranean and the western Sudan, as is testified in numerous rock paintings in the Tassili n'Ajjer (Algeria). It greatly intensified after the Islamic conquest of North Africa, the Islamic penetration of the early African states in the Western Sudan from ca. 700 A.D., and from trade and slavery. All this has resulted in the "Islamization" of African music in vast areas of west Africa, but also in a strong impact of African musical traditions in some areas of the Maghreb, notably in southern Morocco.

Lomax's Moslem Sudan is one of the Islamized musical regions. Another (not shown by Lomax as a separate zone) is the coastal strip of east Africa, as far south as Sofala in Moçambique. In east Africa, musical traditions displaying "Arab" or "Islamic" influences are found even far inland, for example in southern Uganda, and at Lake Malaŵi, not only along the Indian Ocean coast. Several musical instruments of Arab origin can be seen in both regions. The one-string bowed spike lute known in

some parts of west Africa as goje or goge has been related to the Arabic rehah

On the other hand some east African bowed lutes such as the onestring endingidi of southern Uganda, or the two-string izeze, popular among the Wagogo of central Tanzania, show much closer affinities to Chinese bowed lutes. This would not eliminate, of course, Arab traders as intermediaries between south-east Asia and the east African coast, especially in view of the substantial Omani control of the Indian Ocean trading network during the 10th to 18th centuries.

There are also vast areas in Africa which are virtually free from Arab or Islamic influences: Angola and northwestern Zambia is one of them. The traditional circumcision schools for boys found across Angola, with their dances and music, have a history not to be related to Muslim circumcision.

Apart from north Africa and the Mediterranean, "Africa" has had intensive contact with other parts of the world, particularly along the east coast. Cultural exchange across the Indian Ocean in historical times is a topic that has stimulated many writers including Hornbostel 1911, Kunst 1936, Jones 1959a, 1971b, Jeffreys 1961 and others. Here probably lies the explanation for a surprising finding by Alan Lomax, who remarks that the Guinea Coast and Madagascar, in his song-style sample, are linked by a score of 86%. Madagascar thus falls into the African cultureworld on stylistic grounds. Looking at the pattern of similarities further east. Lomax found that

only Western Polynesia (in the upper quartile of 60 percent of the African areas), Eastern Polynesia (30 percent) and Tribal India (30 percent) show any degree of affinity (Lomax 1968:94).

Within the vast expanse of the African continent, extremely distant areas often display similar, even identical traits, while adjacent areas may be set apart stylistically. The multi-part singing of the Baule of the Côte d'Ivoire, in triads within an equiheptatonic tonal system, is so close, even identical to the part singing style of Ngangela-, Chokwe- and Luvalespeaking peoples in eastern Angola, that this is immediately recognized by informants from both cultures. Why this is so is a riddle. The two areas are separated by several countries (Congo, Gabon, Cameroon, Nigeria, Benin, etc.) with different approaches to multi-part singing. Another historical riddle is the presence of practically identical xylophone playing styles and instruments in northern Moçambique (among Makonde- and Makua-speaking peoples) and certain peoples of the Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia, especially the Baule and the Kru. The jomolo of the Baule and log xylophones in northern Moçambique such as the dimbila of the -Makonde or the mangwilo of the -Shirima are virtually identical instruments.

- 1. They are both constructed over a base of two banana stems, sometimes especially among the -Makonde over two stems of wood with isolating cushions placed on top, which are either grass bundles (Makonde) or bundles of dry banana leaves (Baule).
- 2. Slats, usually six, are placed over the support.
- 3. The slats are tuned to a hexatonic scale with narrow intervals of about 160-180 Cents and one large gap.
- 4. The instrument is played by two musicians sitting opposite each other, each holding two beaters and striking the slats on their ends.
- 5. It is played by young boys or adolescents, often in the fields outside the village to chase monkeys away from the crops. Though the music is mostly instrumental, song titles and implicit song texts refer to this subject.
- 6. The music is created by combining <u>interlocking</u> patterns. The first musician, who is often the disciple, begins with a basic pattern, while the second one, who is the expert and teacher, falls between with a more complex pattern and plays variations. Sometimes the same patterns are combined in canon-style (Herzog 1949).
- 7. Simultaneous sounds arise predominantly from striking two keys at a distance of "one empty key between." In the prevalent tuning of this instrument this gives "neutral" thirds.
- 8. Sometimes the experts player employs a cross-hand technique, i.e. striking the slats with hands crossed for example, if he wants to show the learner what to play.
- 9. It is common practice to exchange slats with each other to suit individual pieces. The order of the notes on a *jomolo* (Baule), *dimbila* (Makonde) or *mangwilo* (Shirima) is not always in the form of a "scale," but depends on the piece the musicians want to play. Occasionally, the same movement patterns are applied to a different layout of the slats, and this gives another tune.

Diffusionist theories of various kinds have been offered to resolve such riddles. A.M. Jones has assumed the presence of Indonesian settlers in certain areas of east, central and west Africa during the early centuries of our era who would have been responsible for the introduction of xylophones and certain tonal-harmonic systems (equipentatonic, equiheptatonic and "pelog"-scales) to Africa (Jones 1964a). Ethnohistorians on the other hand have tended to accentuate the importance of coastal navigation (implying the use of hired or forced African labour on European ships) as an agent of culture contact between southeastern Africa (Moçambique), west-central Africa (Angola, Zaïre) and the west African coast.