B. Mus. Ethnomusicology Essay 3

Title: To what extent is music and trance an integral part of African religious practices?

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Music has for thousands of years been associated with the onset of trance. We can go back as far as the Greek legends of Orpheus and read how he was able to calm the wildest of beasts and coax trees and rocks to dance with his trance inducing virtuosity on the lyre. We know that a trance itself can be either calm or frenzied. One can enter a trance of tranquility by practicing meditation while listening to soothing music, but there is also another kind of trance which can provoke extreme physical agitation in an individual. This kind is usually induced by more intense, aggressive, and rhythmic music. In such an altered state of consciousness an individual may seem like they are having an uncontrollable epileptic fit. The person may be so disassociated from his or her environment that they have no control over their actions or words. Sometimes the individual may even adopt a personality that is distinctly unlike their normal disposition. In certain parts of Africa this type of behaviour is interpreted by various religions as the 'spirit possession' of a body, and it is actively encouraged by certain religions through the enacting of specific musical rituals. This essay will attempt to analyse two of these religious rituals and investigate how integral a role music and trance play in them. The religions in question are those of the Shona people of central and southern Africa and the Ju/'hoansi of southern Africa.

The Shona is the name collectively given to several groups of people who mainly populate Zimbabwe and western Mozambique. Their descendants can be traced back over two thousand years and their current population is estimated at about 8 million throughout Africa. The Shona bira tradition is a fine example of how African music can bring separate individuals together as a participatory polyphonic community.[1] The Shona believe that the spirits of their ancestors can travel back to the physical realm

[1] *Worlds of Music*, 3rd edition, ed. Titon, Jeff Todd, p. 119, Schirmir Books, New York, 1996.

to provide advice to descendants. The only way to summon these spirits is by means of possession trance, which entails a spirit merging with the physical body of a living human and using them as a means of communication with those in need of aid, consultation, or direction. The Shona recognise four different types of spirits; the spirits of dead relatives (*mudzimu*), past Shona chiefs (*mhondoro*), friends and animals (*mashave*), and evil witches (*muroyi*). The ritual in which people attempt to evoke a spirit is the *bira* and the instrument believed to best summon one is called the *mbira*, which consists of a wooden board staggered with metal keys and often fitted into a resonator to naturally amplify its sound. There are many different kinds of mbira in Africa but the one most popularly employed in a bira is called the *mbira dzavadzimu*, which translates literally as "the mbira of the ancestors". This type of mbira has a range of three octaves and is tuned to a seven-note scale. Players can alternate the interval sizes by using alternative tunings. When playing the mbira dzavadzimu the musician either sits with the instrument on their lap or else they sit on the ground with the instrument on the floor in front of them. Players produce a melody by plucking the keys; their thumb striking downwards on the keys, while the index finger of the opposite hand strikes upwards from beneath. By playing with multiple fingers he or she can produce complex rhythms, harmonies, and counterpoint.

The Shona claim that nothing satisfies the spirits more than the sound of a well-played mbira piece. Therefore, a mbira player must play to his or her full potential in order to make the possession of a bira participant more probable. Many pieces have been passed down from one generation to another, which has resulted in a well-preserved repertoire of songs for players to choose from, although it is said that spirits prefer to hear songs which they were familiar with in their own lifetime.

The bira ritual is usually held in a small house built especially for the spirit.

Such a house is called a *banya*. If for whatever reason the construction of a banya is not possible then the ritual may take place in a converted village roundhouse.[2] Once the evening commences it is the mbira ensemble's full responsibility to induce the possession of a spirit medium. The music they provide should instill the attendees with the required inspiration and vigour to partake in the singing, dancing, and clapping associated with the ritual, the culmination of which should hopefully provoke a possession trance in an individual or in multiple individuals throughout the evening. The handclapping and dancing provide rhythmic accompaniment to the mbira song. With the former we have participants clapping complex rhythmic figures which interlock with the music and sometimes accentuate the weak beats of the mbira meter. In reference to the latter we observe dancers stamping intricate rhythms with their feet, as if the ground is "the membrane of a drum".[3] This style of dancing is called *shangara.* Sometimes the dancers may imitate the rhythms of the hand-clappers but often the two groups produce rhythms independently of one another, even though they are performing at the same time. The overall effect of hearing such dense and complicated rhythms in the handclapping and dancing, such penetrating music from the mbira ensemble, and the cries of ululation from female participants results in an immersive and captivating aural experience, which serves to heighten the experiences of all involved.

If a mbira player knows a certain spirit's musical preferences then he or she can more easily bring about a possession trance in a medium. If the mbira player is not familiar with the spirit, then experimenting with various pieces, in order to find one they think the spirit would approve of is usually the course of action. If possession does occur it is usually quite sudden, and may seem disturbing to an observer who is not

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2 F. Berliner, Paul, *The Soul of Mbira*, p.188, University of Chicago Press, 1981.

3 Ibid, p.194

familiar with the ritual. One moment a person may be sitting calmly, absorbing the music, then without warning they may be flung to the ground, foaming at the mouth, speaking in tongues, and convulsing wildly. Such an event usually produces cries of great ululation from the women while the dancers stomp their feet harder and the mbira ensemble begin playing their instruments as vigorously as possible. However, the possession of an individual does not mean the mbira ensemble's role in the bira has come to an end, for once a spirit arrives in the body of a participant the mbira players are also responsible for preventing its early departure. By playing as skillfully as possible the ensemble assures the spirit and encourages it to continue participating in the possession. Their ability to appropriately entertain the spirit is therefore a reflection of their talents as an ensemble.

After musically partaking in the ritual for a certain length of time the possessed individual asks the ensemble to cease playing so that he or she can have a consultation with the people in need of direction or advise. Unless one of the mbira players has an issue which he or she wants the spirit to address then the ensemble usually leaves the bira for an hour or so in order to give the others privacy. The medium and participants then discuss the appropriate issues and problems that concern the latter and the mbira ensemble is only allowed to return to the ritual once the possessed medium has addressed everything asked of him or her. When the players return then everyone resumes their participation in the music until sunrise. In light of the above details concerning a typical Shona bira, one can see that it is the intense amalgamation of the singing, rhythmic foot-stomping, and clapping from the ritual's participants which empower the mbira players to induce a possession trance in a medium, thereby crafting a wormhole from modern day Africa back to the time of one's ancestors.

Let us now investigate how music and trance are incorporated into the religious

life of another African community and if there are any stark contrasts between their practices and those of the Shona. The Ju/'hoansi are a Bushmen society who inhabit the Kalahari semi-desert in Namibia and Botswana in Southern Africa.[4] Their descendants can be traced back thousands of years, and over the ages their people have left an innumerable amount of mysterious cave paintings depicting scenes of human and animal life in beautiful detail. However, many of the paintings, of humans particularly, display exaggerated dimensions. Not only are their bodies out of proportion but sometimes they are painted flying above clouds, swimming deep underwater, and resembling certain animals in terms of mannerisms and body parts. After years of confusion scientists and historians have researched enough into the ancient mythology of the Ju/'hoansi to conclude that many of these paintings are intended to be depictions of the experiences of local mediums during *curing dances*.[5] Like the *bira* ritual practiced by the Shona this is a ritual entailing possession trance. The purpose of these curing dances is to share healing-power, or what the Ju/'hoansi refer to as *n/um*. A curing dance can take place for the most trivial of reasons, the visit of a friend of the community for example. However, the ritual is also called for when there are more serious matters at hand, such as when a member of the community has fallen dangerously ill. There are therefore no strict rules concerning when a curing dance can or cannot take place.

The religion of the Ju/'hoansi constitutes extremely basic and few ideas. The religion consists of three gods, the first being *Gao N!a*, creator of everything, the second being *Gauwa*, the god of the dead, and the third being *n/um*, the healing-power already

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4 Ralls-Macleod, Karen, and Harvey, Graham, p. 123, *Indigenous Religious Musics*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2000.

5 Ibid, p.124.

6 Ralls-Macleod, Karen, and Harvey, p.126.

mentioned above.[6] When creating mankind Gao N!a supposedly embedded this healing-power in the base of peoples' spines but rendered it inactive, so that it was the peoples' duty to evoke it from its dormancy during a curing dance. Once the Ju/'hoansi awaken the n/um it can be shared with other members of the community to cure diseases, expel dissent, prevent death, and other misfortunes. The physical manifestation of n/um is human perspiration. The Ju/'hoansi also claim that Gao N!a regularly visits people in their sleep and channels to them through their dreams the songs which are most capable of extracting n/um from the body during a curing dance.[7]

The curing dance itself is a dangerous night-long song and dance ritual that is rich in complexity. The ritual commences in the late evening with the lighting of a fire in or close to the camp. A typical curing dance is made up of three separate two-hour periods, the first being early in the night, the second right after midnight, and the final part around dawn. Each of these parts is further divided into separate rounds of singing and dancing of five to fifteen minutes. There are also numerous resting periods between rounds so that the participants can regain energy to last through the night.[8] The centerpiece of the ceremony is the fire, around which a ring of women sit shoulder to shoulder. These women sing the songs that are channeled to them in their dreams. Like the participants of the Shona bira the Ju/'hoansi women clap out complex rhythms with their hands, providing the ritual with a driving sense of vigour. Around the women is a second ring, which generally consists of male dancers stamping the ground in rhythm to the song. Once again, we hear echoes here of the dancers in the Shona bira ritual. However, these dancers also have rattles attached to their legs which give the ritual an added percussive force. They also adopt abnormal postures while dancing, usually

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7 Ibid, p.127.
8 Ibid, p.128.

stretching their arms far back behind them - perhaps this explains the strange and disproportioned cave paintings? Like the immersive aural experience of the bira, the individual elements of the curing dance blend and merge to produce a unique sonic experience that swathes the body and consequently the mind. The intense mood generated from the handclapping, foot stamping, and singing can subsume an individual and lead to disassociation of the mind, which helps the dancers to fall into a trance (!kia). The physical strain of such a frenzied ritual can also deprive oxygen to the brain and burn out the dancers' energy; testing the limits of the human body in such a way surely encourages the onset of trance. Once their bodies become synchronised to the rhythms of the songs and dances then it seems the participants' minds switch to auto-pilot and they lose awareness of the toll they are putting on their bodies. In such a state many dancers charge towards the fire, only to be held back by the inner circle of women. It could be that the dancers are mistaking the fire in the middle of the ring as the fire in the base of their spines, which is how Gao N!a describes n/um. The songs of the curing dance are supposedly what ignite the fire in the spine, causing the dancer to heavily perspire as a result of the n/um 'boiling' in the body. By perspiring, the Ju/'hoansi believe they are releasing their n/um to be shared with the other members of the community; they thus rub their sweat onto others to protect and heal them. It is hard to overstate the integral role which music and trance play in the lives of the Ju/'hoansi, particularly in light of the fact that the curing dance is the only ritual their religion employs.

In conclusion, we can see from the two different examples in this essay that music and trance play a vital role in African religious practices, many of which share similar characteristics. The Shona bira and the Ju/'hoansi curing dance are two examples of rituals that have much in common. They both involve multiple people

singing, dancing, handclapping, and foot-stomping in order to induce an overwhelming sensory experience that hopefully culminates in the individual falling into a possession trance. Both rituals also exert the body to a very high degree for an extended period, often starting in the late evening and sometimes not finishing until the following afternoon. When something is not right in the physical realm the people of both religions turn to the higher powers, using music and trance as the means of communication. However, there is one noticeable disparity in the aims of each ritual. The Shona use music and trance to contact a spirit which they can converse with and consult for advice. They believe the spirit is present at the ritual and can be addressed, by virtue of it possessing the medium. The Ju/'hoansi on the other hand, do not actually communicate with a spirit, there is a possessing 'agent' present at the curing dance but it cannot be fielded questions as it is not an intelligent, responsive being; it is merely a form of healing-energy which is shared amongst the people. In other words, the Shona use music and trance to evoke 'someone' while the Ju/'hoansi use music and trance to evoke 'something'.[9] Of course there is always the question of whether or not the individual is actually possessed by a non-mortal entity - perhaps they are just experiencing an epileptic fit or the effects of over-exertion on the body and brain. But then this raises another question - does the authenticity of a religion or religious practice really matter? Many people would argue that if living a certain way of life gives someone a feeling of security and wellbeing then it doesn't matter whether they worship Jesus Christ or the sweat that drips from their body! If one believes music and possession trance have acted as stepping stones to them having a more content life then we shouldn't try to question their beliefs, for surely it is better for them to be blissfully faithful then miserably faithless.

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9 Ralls-Macleod, Karen, and Harvey, p.131.

Works Cited:

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