

# Introduction

---

## Scope and Purpose

This is a practical West African songbook, intended as a fun learning tool that can get students singing immediately. I've used various versions of the material with my own students for many years, refining the format gradually to make it more compelling and effective. In conjunction with the audio CD and a bit of perseverance, students can (albeit crudely) simulate the experience of living among people who sing these songs, gradually learning them and coming to understand the important part they play in African communal life.

In addition, I hope the book will serve as an eye-opening introduction to West African people and society. In spite of hundreds of researchers turning out thousands of books, articles and dissertations during this century, there are few useful introductory books available on the subject of African culture, perhaps because books alone can't adequately convey the most fundamental experiences of African life. This book combines explanation and participation to provide a unique and effective learning experience. The songs of Africa are an excellent window into the minds of her people because so much of their cultural heritage is preserved via song.

West Africa is a region of tremendous cultural diversity, and in fact this book represents songs from just a few of the many ethnic groups in the area. My sources are master *Aɲlɔ-Eve*<sup>1</sup> performing artists and scholars from a large and respected hereditary family of dancers and musicians. Most of the songs come from *Aɲlɔ-Eve* traditions or from others which are closely related culturally or historically - those that don't are seen through the eyes of *Aɲlɔ-Eve* informants. Though this narrow cultural focus has its drawbacks, in this case I think it works in the reader's favor. Books that discuss several disparate cultures can be interesting reading, but it's harder to get a feel for the people because there's less information about each culture. To appreciate the songs of Africa, it's best to understand as much as possible about the people who sing them.

Much as I've tried to convey truthful information, there is seldom one "right" answer or description when it comes to African oral traditions. Many of these dances are practiced by several ethnic groups and/or in several different locations. For example, there are long-established *Agbekɔ* dance clubs in many towns, most notably Aflao, Anyako, Afiadenyigba and Kedzi along the coast of southeastern Ghana. Each town has its own way of doing things – slightly different songs, drum parts, dance movements, sometimes

---

<sup>1</sup> Pronounced AHNG-loh EH-vay (the word *Eve* is usually written *Ewe* in English text for lack of the special *v* character). Throughout this book, an extended alphabet is used to spell African language passages. Please see Appendix A for help in pronouncing special characters.

different names for the same style – and yet, the traditions share a common root and are mutually recognized as being essentially the same dance. Oral traditions have a built-in tendency towards adaptation and variation, without which the whole process would become quite irrelevant to new generations and eventually die.

## Language

In books that require an occasional African word or phrase, it is common practice to change the spelling of African words to fit the English typewriter keyboard - but for a 7-language songbook that just wasn't a practical option. Instead, I use an extended alphabet to write phrases in the *Eve*, *F5*, *Gũ*, *Lobi*, *Yevegbe* and *Yoruba* languages. I simplify things greatly by omitting tonal markings (some of these languages are highly tonal; a slight difference in pitch can completely change meaning). Tonal notation might be useful for a native speaker or serious language student, but for the vast majority of readers it would only add confusion. In Appendix A I've included a simple pronunciation guide which readers should find helpful (but which still ignores tonality).

Readers may also notice that some Western-style conventions for capitalization have been adopted, specifically with regards to proper names and places, and also for the many spiritual deities which inhabit *Eve* mythology. This is done for the sake of clarity, and in the case of deities to show appropriate respect for the subject matter.

## Presentation

From my experience as a student and teacher of African traditions, I know there is no easy way to overcome common Western misconceptions about African art and society. Even the highly motivated student needs to encounter new ideas from several different perspectives before they start to make sense. An experience I often have as a teacher is that of explaining something several times and in several ways, being rewarded with a blank stare each time, until one day the student finally gets the idea and exclaims, "Hey, that's important! Why did you wait so long to tell me that?"

With that in mind, the book tries to present especially important ideas in more than one way and at different points in the learning process. Bits of the big picture are distributed throughout the book like eggs at an Easter Egg hunt. Some of the more important and surprising aspects of African culture are summarized in introductory sections preceding the main body of song text. Each section of songs also begins with its own introduction to the dance or religion from which the songs originate, and many of the song translations explain particular ideas in more illuminating detail.

## A Word About Song Translations

Folk songs throughout the world have much in common. The good ones have at least two *layers of meaning*: a superficial descriptive layer, which may not even make sense from a language perspective; and a deeper political, ethical or spiritual message that can mean vastly different things to different people. Truly great songs speak to us on many

different levels. New meanings become apparent as we pass through the stages of our own lives.

Folk songs often rely heavily on *imagery and metaphor*. For instance, songs about trains, lemons or rivers require personal experience with these things to be fully understood. Can a person who has never seen or heard a train or who knows nothing of its role in Western civilization appreciate a song that features a train as its main metaphor? Perhaps, but that person will need a lot of insightful help from a translator.

African folk songs are similar to their Western counterparts, but there are some striking differences which make translation even more troublesome:

- The language is often very old and full of ancient historical, cultural and religious references, not all of which are currently understood (like reading Shakespeare or Chaucer without annotations).
- Some African languages have been evolving for a very long time and are interrelated with an elaborate and equally old mythology. As a result, they can be remarkably expressive with very few syllables, so a short phrase may take several lines of English to translate.
- Languages are often mixed within a single song. It may require a translator fluent in several African tongues to give a subtle interpretation. The original words may have been corrupted or lost altogether when adopted and sung by people who didn't know the original language.

There's also the problem of *proverbs*. The *Eve* language in particular is so rich with proverbs which are commonly understood that they become an important part of the language. We have proverbs in English of course, but we don't have as many, we can't think of them as quickly, and we don't rely heavily on them for daily conversation.

As a simple example, imagine a song that goes like this:

Oh you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink.  
I guess every fool has his story.  
Yes, and still, still waters, they often run deep.  
Oh mama, don't judge a book by its cover.

Now translate this into any other language and watch the meaning melt away before your eyes.

## **Cool Vibes, Everybody**

Does all of this mean you can never appreciate these songs like a native African? Not at all. Given the vast diversity of African cultures and the way in which traditions pass between them, it's quite common for Africans to sing songs in unfamiliar languages and with obscure references, which is exactly what you'll be doing very shortly. They're still great songs or nobody would bother to sing them. So relax and enjoy them in a way that works for you, and you will be doing pretty much as the Africans do.

I do hope that you'll read each translation with enlightened skepticism, allowing your own human sensibilities to add whatever my descriptions lack. The most profound

expressions of art can't be quantified, discussed, analyzed or parsed. They simply wait for an observer who can fill in the blanks.