

Dance-Drumming

Individual vs. Collective Sensibility

In this chapter I introduce necessary concepts that are particularly difficult for Western students to grasp. I should warn you that the subject of *collective sensibility* has probably earned me more blank stares as a teacher than all others combined, but it's probably the most important thing I can tell you about African culture, and perhaps about your own culture by comparison.

When Africans dance, they are drumming. When they drum, they are dancing. When they sing, the songs are part of the dancing and drumming. The way they approach all group activities is fundamentally and qualitatively different; what one person does is a part of what someone else is doing, and the two together are a part of a larger whole. Whatever they do, wherever and whenever they do it, *they do it collectively*. This simple statement highlights a profound gap in Western comprehension of African art forms and society, one that we must try to bridge in order to play African music with the proper sensibility.

There are many ways to appreciate the music and dance of Africa – attending concerts, dancing to the drums, studying movements and music, building a collection of recordings – but any student who hasn't explored the social context, the way Africans themselves think about and practice these traditions, is missing a crucial piece of the puzzle. African music and dance, like African society, is a collective experience, and as such it is the single most important force that binds people together.

Dancing and Drumming vs. Dance-Drumming

To practice African music effectively, we must learn to think of music the way Africans do – not as an intellectual exercise or rite of passage, but because the most important skills required to perform the music are social, not technical. The first step towards bridging this gap is to add a new term to our language, because we need to name things before we can understand them. When Africans are dancing, drumming and singing, what they are really doing is *dance-drumming*, a term coined in recent literature for a concept which is so foreign that the English language cannot otherwise express it.

An African friend once confided to me how strange it seemed that a grant he had received for dancing didn't include money for drummers. He might have felt the same way about a grant for drumming. In fact, the way we separate dance and music in the West is downright odd from a global perspective, a telling example of how we are moving towards cultural specialization and disintegration. Even when we combine the two, the bond between them seems tenuous at best. Music is used as a backdrop, to set a

mood or to delineate sections of choreography – or it may be the main dish and the dance added for flavoring – but there is never a one-to-one correspondence between musical events and dance movements.

It's important to understand how differently Africans view things in this regard. We see music and dance as two art forms which sometimes complement each other; Africans see the two as inseparable, two halves of the same body. We see them as specialized pursuits separate from mainstream society, a noble statement about what humanity may someday become; Africans see them as the very thread from which society is woven, a daily enactment of what society is and should be right now. We do music and dance *separately*; Africans do them *collectively*.

Dancers and musicians in the West are distinct subcultures with different values and aspirations. When they come together to perform, the mixture is sometimes the social equivalent of oil and water; they may occupy the same room, but they seldom occupy the same space. Relatively speaking, dancers ignore musicians and musicians ignore dancers. At parties and dance classes, drummers can play for hours in a room full of dancers and virtually ignore them the whole time. If some of the drummers drift out of time or play the wrong part, even dancers with well-developed rhythmic skills might not notice for several minutes.

In African dance-drumming, dancers and drummers are the same people. That's not to say that all drummers are great dancers or the other way around, but you can't do one without knowing something about the other. The drum music is literally part of the dance, and vice-versa. It's quite common to see dancers and drummers correcting each other and exchanging advice. Dancers are judged for their musicality and drummers for their ability to inspire energetic dancing. If a dancer stumbles or a singer stutters, the drummers might skip a beat in confusion. If a drummer plays the wrong part or drifts out of time, the dancers stop dancing immediately because they are unable to continue. If the singers stop singing, the drummers and dancers lose enthusiasm and the performance becomes dull and lifeless. No part can continue without the others; the connection between them is never broken.

What's Missing – Things To Notice

This may be a good time to stop and examine our own way of doing things so that we may better understand African dance-drumming by comparison. In particular, we should look for instances of individual versus collective sensibility; of concentrating on the parts and overlooking the whole; of emphasizing personal expression over interpersonal interaction and communal goals. Since we're dealing with the performing arts in this book, I will limit the discussion to that domain, but the same things can be observed just as well in society as a whole.

To begin with, dancers and musicians trained in Western institutions concentrate on learning individual steps and parts, then combining them to make a finished performance piece. In even the best performing ensembles, the whole is viewed in terms of its technical or esthetic qualities, but almost never as a living social organism. There is often little or no attention paid to the collective awareness which in Africa binds all

performers into a common experience. In rural Africa, children grow up observing and even participating in the traditions they will someday take part in. Only later do they begin to study the parts, the drum patterns and dance steps, long after the whole is clearly understood as a social institution rather than a performance piece.

Audiences in the West do not consciously view performing groups as social entities. After the show, they are unlikely to comment on the social aspects of the performance, other than to observe that the performers “seemed to be having fun.” They are much more likely to have noticed individual emotional expression or technical prowess, or lack thereof. After all, we think of performers as professional artists and entertainers, not as members of a community. Whether there are one, two or a hundred dancers or musicians on stage, we judge them primarily by individual achievements, far less by the social interaction between them. In contrast, African dance-drumming is judged primarily by the cohesiveness of the community which is performing, since that is precisely its purpose. If the people do not perform well together, it is a shameful affair.

In spite of this, the same Western audiences wildly appreciate performing groups whose members obviously enjoy each other’s company and enthusiasm. I think the reason is pretty obvious; in our culture, people would desperately love to share common purpose and creative expression with others, but seldom get the opportunity. Watching performers do just that is a great vicarious thrill. It’s such an important element that the practice of performers pretending to have fun with their colleagues on stage has become standard professional craftsmanship – and for the most part audiences are so desperate for this stimulation that they are willing to settle for an act.

Collective sensibility (or lack thereof) is especially noticeable when people sing together. When Western students learn to sing African songs, whether we’ve had musical training or not, the biggest problem we have is not with the accent, nor intonation (singing in tune), not even the rhythm; it is how we perceive ourselves in relation to the group that stands out clearly as un-African. Individuals are self-conscious, concerned mostly with what they themselves are doing and whether it is esthetically or technically correct. Even after subtleties have been mastered, there is little awareness of how each singer affects others nearby or the group as a whole. In fact, singers actively avoid eye contact with others. Most students sing softly so as not to call attention to themselves, or don’t sing at all in the hope that no one will notice. Some with more confidence may sing forcefully but still in isolation from others, overpowering nearby singers.

There is always a shared awareness of the totality when Africans sing, dance and play music together. The singers feel the way in which each voice blends with the chorus, and the chorus in turn adds its collective voice to the drums and dance to create a single living organism. Individual performers feed off of each other’s palpable spirit and enthusiasm. The confidence apparent in each voice, drum or moving body reflects the pride of the community, not of the individual, and so there is never a question of self-confidence. There is a common understanding that each individual must contribute whatever he or she can to the life of the performance, and that the human, emotional quality of participation is far more important than technical skills.

Crossing Over – Things To Try

In short, getting started in African dance-drumming is not just a matter of learning tunes, steps and drum licks; there are new social skills to acquire as well. Armed with all of this intellectual baggage about individual versus collective sensibility, how does one make the transition to participating with the proper social attitude? Let me offer some concrete suggestions to experiment with while singing in groups (the principles are the same whether you're singing, dancing, or drumming). With a little courage and guidance, it's easier than you might think.

First of all, use your voice to feed the voices of the people next to you. If they're singing weakly and you have a bit of confidence to spare, try reinforcing their sound with your own. Don't think about how your voice sounds alone, only how the two or three sound together, and make the most of that sound. This might not make sense to you until you try it, but give it a shot. It really works.

Next, remember that your job as an individual is to contribute what you can to the success of the group. What your fellow singers need from you is not so much sound or technique, but *spirit*. As you sing, look around you and notice where the enthusiasm is, and where there could be more. Sometimes just sharing a brief smile with someone can have amazing results. Don't try to do more than you're comfortable doing; that's not the idea. You're supposed to contribute *what* you can, not *more* than you can. Try to imagine what the song circle would be like if everyone simply contributed what they could. Wouldn't that make a tremendous difference? If you start doing it, pretty soon everyone will; that's human nature.

Finally, a word about confidence. When you sing, let your confidence come from the pride you feel for the group, not for yourself. Your sense of self-worth may come and go, belief in your own abilities may waver, but community pride is something you can always count on. Try to identify more with the group than with yourself. When you've mastered this, you will never feel shy about singing in groups – and ironically, identifying with a community can be a source of personal pride and self-worth. If you've ever wondered why Africans as a group seem to enjoy remarkable self-confidence, now you know at least part of the reason.

An Institution of Higher Learning

Having touched on the *what* and *how* of African dance-drumming, it's time to discuss the *why*; specifically, why are these traditions so important? Africans who practice traditional dance-drumming generally do so because it's entertaining and because it fulfills obligations to family and society; but like all worthy traditions throughout the world, these institutions exist for many good reasons other than entertainment. There are several levels of education and acculturation going on within this traditional framework. Songs play an important part in the learning process, but the music and dance as well have been carefully crafted over hundreds of generations to serve society in several important ways.

Among the *Aḡlɔ*, physical strength and skill are trained from birth, and are instilled largely through the dance-drumming traditions. Virtually all gatherings and social events feature some form of dance-drumming festivities. The dances are physically demanding; they require great skill and a refined sense of balance and timing. They are also fun, so just about everyone participates. Young children trying to mimic their parents soon mature into formidable dancers and musicians. In the process, a wide range of physical and mental skills are enhanced.

There is also a great deal of social acculturation going on here. How to lead, how to follow, how to succeed, how to think and behave in ways that benefit everybody – it's all taught through dance-drumming. Individuals who practice dance-drumming are learning the very same skills that will allow them to work together collectively towards improving the communal quality of life. You will learn more about this as you explore the songs in this book, so I only mention it in passing here – but if I had to choose the most important or fundamental purpose of African dance-drumming, this would be it.

There is still more to learn through dance-drumming than just physical and social skills. As we delve further into the esoteric aspects of traditional African life, it becomes more difficult to describe in terms commonly understood in the West. New ideas often require new ways of thinking. Nevertheless, we have much to gain by exploring beyond the boundaries of our own understanding.

In a remarkable way, these disciplines teach a state of mind which can overcome great obstacles, which can turn ordinary people into heroes. In the face of surprising and terrible circumstances, warriors must be able to remain calm, to preserve the free use of reason and judgment. The mind must be raised above the fear and confusion which anticipation of great peril can create. Dance-drumming prepares individuals on many levels to face such moments of crisis. If a flight simulator can teach pilots to react calmly in dangerous situations, why not a life simulator for the human spirit?

The artistic elements of *Aḡlɔ-Eve* music are not just abstract phenomena; they represent and recreate some of life's real challenges. A main beat scheme (the most fundamental beat or pulse, the place where you clap your hands) represents a strong purpose in life. Secondary beat schemes (another simultaneous and inescapable way of feeling the music) represent an obstacle. Tension is created by *cross-rhythms*, the customary polyrhythmic overlapping of beat schemes which is at the heart of all *Eve* music and dance. Performers face the difficult challenge of integrating and balancing these opposing forces.

For the young student struggling to master a musical style, training and correction is likely to come in the form of philosophy rather than technical advice. Lack of subtlety in handling sophisticated rhythmic contrasts is criticized as lack of a strong sense of purpose, inability to balance the contrasting obstacles in life. Blocking off or ignoring a beat scheme to ease the tension of opposing cross-rhythms is criticized, sometimes severely, as unwillingness to face life's challenges. The student is guided by proverbs – such as *To solve a problem you must convert obstacles into stepping stones* – then expected to independently apply such abstract advice to the task at hand.

Finally, there is an elusive element of spiritual growth associated with dance-drumming, elusive because our language lacks the words and concepts to discuss it. Some styles of

music, when understood and performed correctly, have an immediate physiological effect on both performers and audience. Like a prayer or meditation, it acts as a catalyst for mystical experience. Two or more cross-rhythms can fill your head and force the cessation of conscious thought, allowing other channels of communication to open. On religious festival days, entire towns are filled with such music, carrying for miles to neighboring villages. When my African friends describe childhood memories of being surrounded by such music, I can't help thinking that their lives have been profoundly enriched by the experience, and they seem to feel the same way.