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The Invention of “African Rhythm”*

By KOFI AGAWU

Inventing “African Rhythm”

THE NOTION that the distinctive quality of African music lies in its rhythmic structure, and consequently that the terms *African music* and *African rhythm* are often interchangeable, has been so persistently thematized in writings about African music that it has by now assumed the status of a commonplace, a topos. And so it is with the related ideas that African rhythms are complex, that Africans are essentially rhythmic people, and that Africans are different from “us”—from Euro-Americans.

Consider a few of these characterizations. The eleventh-century Christian physician and theologian Ibn Butlan, in a tract entitled “On How to Buy Slaves and How to Detect Bodily Defects,” claimed that “if a black were to fall from the sky to the earth, he would fall in rhythm.”¹ In other words, even while facing certain death—speaking as metaphorically as Butlan did—blacks (especially black women) continued to exhibit an essential and irreducible rhythmic disposition. The association of dancing with death, the racist conferral of particular sensibilities on particular groups of people, and the construction of African rhythm as complex, superior, but ultimately incomprehensible: these and other implications of Ibn Butlan’s casual remark are found reproduced in diverse ways and with diverse accents throughout the history of discourse about African music.²

*I wish to thank Daniel Avorgbedor, Stephen Blum, Arnd Bohm, Olakunle George, Martin Hatch, Patrick Mensah, Roger Parker, Ronald Radano, and Christopher Waterman for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

¹ Paraphrased by Amnon Shiloah in *The Theory of Music in Arabic Writings (c. 900–1900): Descriptive Catalogue of Manuscripts in Libraries of Europe and the USA* (Munich: G. Henle Verlag, 1979), 160.

² This history is yet to be written, but some of its materials may be gleaned from, among other sources, *Zentralafrika*, ed. Jos. Gansemans et al. (Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1986); *Westafrika*, ed. Gerhard Kubik et al. (Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1989); A. M. Jones, “Drums Down the Centuries,” *African Music* 1, no. 4 (1957): 4–10; Walter Hirschberg, “Early Historical Illustrations of West and Central African Music,” *African Music* 4, no. 3 (1969): 6–18; Kofi Agawu,

Leaping from the eleventh century to our own, we encounter the following. Erich von Hornbostel describes a piece of African xylophone music in which he found one of the parts "syncopated past our comprehension."³ W. E. F. Ward, writing in 1927, finds "the basis of African rhythm . . . to be so completely different from that of Europeans that the European system of bar lines is foreign to African music." (Incidentally, the use of bar lines remains one of the most contested issues in transcriptions of African music.) Echoing the medieval Arabic writer quoted earlier, Ward further claims that "Africans have not merely cultivated their sense of rhythm far beyond ours, but must have started with a superior sense of rhythm."⁴ In the inaugural issue of this JOURNAL, Richard A. Waterman opens his study " 'Hot' Rhythm in Negro Music" with the claim that "those who have had opportunity to listen to Negro music in Africa or the New World have been almost unanimous in agreeing that its most striking aspect is its rhythm."⁵ And the Reverend A. M. Jones, writing with characteristic enthusiasm and confidence in 1949, declares that "if anyone were to ask, 'What is the outstanding characteristic of African music?', the answer is, 'A highly developed rhythm.'" Furthermore, "the African is far more skilled at drumming rhythms than we are—in fact our banal pom, pom, pom on the drums is mere child's play compared with the complicated and delicate interplay of rhythms in African drumming."⁶

Any suspicion that these are simply "older" characterizations of African music (they were all written before 1950) is quickly laid to rest by the continuing reproduction, in slightly—but only slightly—sanitized form, of the same motif. Helen Myers writes in a reference article that "rhythmic complexity is the hallmark of African music."⁷

"Representing African Music," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1992): 245–66; and Eric S. Charry, "Musical Thought, History, and Practice among the Mande of West Africa" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1992). In an unpublished paper, Stephen Blum, citing Bernard Lewis (*Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Inquiry* [London: Oxford University Press, 1990]), notes that "the Medieval Arabic literature on racial stereotypes provided many of the images that were subsequently deployed by European and American writers."

³ Erich von Hornbostel, "African Negro Music," *Africa* 1 (1928): 52.

⁴ W. E. F. Ward, "Music in the Gold Coast," *Gold Coast Review* 3 (1927): 203–4, 222.

⁵ Richard A. Waterman, " 'Hot' Rhythm in Negro Music," this JOURNAL 1 (1948): 24.

⁶ A. M. Jones, *African Music in Northern Rhodesia and Some Other Places*, The Occasional Papers of the Rhodes-Livingstone Museum (Livingstone, Northern Rhodesia, 1949), 13, 7–8.

⁷ Helen Myers, "African Music," in *The New Oxford Companion to Music*, ed. Denis Arnold (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 1:28.

Among the “pervasive principles” of sub-Saharan African musical style recognized by Bruno Nettl, “complex development of rhythm” is judged to be “most prominent.”⁸ Francis Bebey identifies “an instinct for rhythm” among Africans, while Philip Gbeho, like Ward, believes that “where rhythm is concerned, the African is ahead of the European.”⁹ Henry Weman, in a book entitled *African Music and the Church in Africa*, states that “the African is supreme in his mastery of rhythm; we might even begin to speak about contrapuntal rhythm in this connection, since independent voices appear as rhythmic lines and weave a strange pattern of rhythmic excitement and vigour.”¹⁰ Léopold Senghor, principal architect of the négritude movement, devoted several publications to demonstrating a specific and uniquely black rhythmic sensibility. He identifies “imagery and rhythm [as] the two fundamental characteristics of the African-Negro Style,” arguing that “nowhere else has rhythm reigned as despotically [as in Black Africa].”¹¹ Again, in a set of guidelines for adjudicating music festivals in Africa, judges were told that “complexity of rhythm is often a fair guide to the authenticity of an African song.”¹² A review by the Reverend Dr. Brian Kingslake of A. M. Jones’s magnum opus, *Studies in African Music*, includes a colorful description of African rhythm as strange and complex:

[Jones’s book] introduces us into a strange enchanted world of pure sound, made up almost entirely of complex patterns of drum and gong taps. To call these “complex” is an understatement; the very thought of them makes one dizzy! Imagine two drummers playing together in cross rhythm, 3 against 2. Now stagger them so that they are out of phase. Now add two other drummers, and a singer, and clap accompaniment, all rhythmically at cross purposes and out of phase with one another.¹³

Finally, Kwabena Nketia, the most prominent African scholar of African music, justifies the apparent poverty of other dimensional

⁸ Bruno Nettl, “Africa,” in *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, ed. Don Randel (Cambridge, Mass., and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986), 18.

⁹ Francis Bebey, *African Music: A People’s Art*, trans. Josephine Bennett (New York: Lawrence Hill, 1975), 17; and Philip Gbeho, “Music of the Gold Coast,” *African Music* 1, no. 1 (1954): 63.

¹⁰ Henry Weman, *African Music and the Church in Africa*, trans. Eric J. Sharpe (Uppsala: Svenska Institutet för Missionsforskning, 1960), 58.

¹¹ Léopold Senghor, “Africa-Negro Aesthetics,” *Diogenes* 16 (1956): 37, 30.

¹² “Music Festivals in Africa: Notes for the Guidance of Adjudicators,” *African Music* 2, no. 1 (1958): 62.

¹³ Rev. Dr. Brian Kingslake, review of *Studies in African Music*, by A. M. Jones, *African Music* 2, no. 2 (1959): 85.

behaviors in African music by appealing to the predominance of percussive textures: "Since African music is predisposed towards percussion and percussive textures, there is an understandable emphasis on rhythm, for rhythmic interest often compensates for the absence of melody or the lack of melodic sophistication."¹⁴ And there are literally hundreds of such statements scattered throughout the literature. African rhythm, in short, is "always-already" complex.

Note that this notion has been promulgated by *both* Western and African scholars: Hornbostel, Jones, and Weman are Europeans; Nketia, Bebey, and Gbeho are Africans. It is therefore not simply a case of westerners (mis)representing African music—although, given the political and economic realities that have shaped the construction of the library of African music, and given the blatant asymmetries of power that the colonial encounter has produced, there are solid grounds for indulging in the politics of blame. What we have, rather, are the views of a group of scholars operating within a field of discourse, an intellectual space defined by Euro-American traditions of ordering knowledge. It is difficult to overestimate the determining influence of this scholarly tradition on the representation of African music.

Resisting "African Rhythm"

Not everyone has been swept along by this tide, however. Among dissenting voices are those of scholars who have questioned rather than actively countered the portrayal of African music as an essentially rhythmic phenomenon. Introducing Ugandan and Ghanaian music to his American readers, James Koetting refers to "our fixation on African rhythm," while Klaus Wachsmann identifies "a Western fantasy about African rhythm" in some of the decisions that have influenced the making of sound recordings of African music.¹⁵ And David Rycroft, in an otherwise favorable review of John Miller Chernoff's book *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*, expresses skepticism about the applicability of the author's conclusions, arrived at from a study of drumming in two Ghanaian communities (Ewe and

¹⁴ J. H. Kwabena Nketia, *The Music of Africa* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), 125.

¹⁵ James T. Koetting, "Africa/Ghana," in *Worlds of Music: An Introduction to the Music of the World's Peoples*, ed. Jeff Todd Titon (New York: Schirmer, 1984), 66; and Klaus P. Wachsmann, "Music," in *Journal of the Folklore Institute* (Indiana University) 6 (1969): 187.

Dagomba), to areas in eastern and southern Africa.¹⁶

The first error in the above characterizations, then, is the putative claim that African music constitutes a homogenous body of music. A continent with a population of upward of 400 million distributed into over forty-two countries and speaking some thousand languages is virtually unrecognizable in the unanimist constructions that some researchers have used in depicting African music. In his groundbreaking assessment of the nature of knowledge about Africa, V. Y. Mudimbe provides a sustained interrogation of the very idea of "Africa," showing it to be a construction of European discourse.¹⁷ The epistemic violence perpetuated by unanimist constructions of Africa has been identified and subjected to an incisive critique by another philosopher, Paulin Hountondji.¹⁸ What is interesting to me, however, is the ongoing resistance to knowing about Africa. Why should we bother to learn the strange and often unpronounceable names of people in remote places practicing weird customs when we can simply invoke the all-purpose "Africa"? There is, I suggest, an unwillingness to lift the veil that now enshrouds Africa, a fear that doing so might have a civilizing effect on the discourse of the West, thus depriving its practitioners of one of their most cherished sources of fantasy and imaginative play.

But the error of unanimism is a relatively trivial one, for seen in the context of the history of European and American constructions of Africa, the continued use of the phrase "African music" when one's authority is an African village, town, or region reproduces the

¹⁶ David Rycroft, review of *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*, by John Miller Chernoff, *Popular Music*, vol. 1, ed. Richard Middleton and David Horn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 208–10. Rycroft writes: "Chernoff seems to be a compulsive continentaliser (like my colleague the late A. M. Jones). Many of his claims just *are not* acceptable as pan-African, either to someone who (like me) was born and bred in a quite different corner of the continent (where they have musical bows and no drums, and dance to their own slow polyphonic singing), or to anyone familiar with other quite big sections of Africa where the lyre is the dominant instrument, or the xylophone, or the *mbira*. To return to my earlier analogy: why set yourself up as an expert on European cookery when all you have tried is Dutch?" (p. 209).

¹⁷ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

¹⁸ See Paulin J. Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth or Reality*, trans. Henri Evans with Jonathan Rée (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983). Kwame Anthony Appiah has also discussed unanimist presuppositions, linking them specifically to European racialism: "The very invention of Africa (as something more than a geographical entity) must be understood, ultimately, as an outgrowth of European racialism" (Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1992], 62).

metonymic fallacy—the part representing the whole—faced by most writers on Africa.¹⁹ While “Nigerian music” is African music, “African music” is more than “Nigerian music.” To grant the former equation, however, is to undermine the force of the anti-unanimism argument, for it might be claimed that, with a few exceptions, no writer pretends to be able to represent the continent comprehensively. In that sense, global titles like “*Studies in African Music*,” “*African Polyphony and Polyrhythm*,” and “*African Rhythm and African Sensibility*” are no more misleading than the regional “*Musique Dan*,” “*Drum Gabu*,” or “*Venda Children’s Songs*.”²⁰ At any rate, this part-whole problem is a product of European and postcolonial discourse, so that a crude model of simple alterity obscures the fact that the lines of connection, influence, and affiliation in the construction of these discourses are too complex to submit to an explanation enabled by a simple binarism.

David Rycroft’s insistence that other parts of Africa be brought into the picture in evaluating the claims of any self-styled study of “African rhythm” brings us to the second, less trivial, error contained in these characterizations, namely, the retreat from comparison. All of the remarks quoted earlier presuppose a comparative framework: “African rhythm” is “complex,” presumably in contrast to a “European rhythm” or even an “American rhythm” that is simple. To “set [Africa] off as a musical culture area dominated by [the] concept [of rhythm],” as A. M. Jones has suggested that we do,²¹ is necessarily to imagine other “culture areas” in which rhythm plays a less decisive or less significant role; it is to embrace the kind of mythology that allows some Europeans to claim harmony and deny it to the Africans, or some Asians to claim elaborate melody and deny it to the Africans. For such comparisons to have force, we need to do more than casually allude to the other term in the binary framework. In practice, however, a comparative framework, although logically presupposed, rarely leads to explicit comparison. Instead, one side of the opposition

¹⁹ For further discussion of this problem, see Appiah, *In My Father’s House*, 3–27.

²⁰ See A. M. Jones, *Studies in African Music*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959); Simha Arom, *African Polyphony and Polyrhythm: Musical Structure and Methodology*, trans. Martin Thom et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); Hugo Zemp, *Musique Dan: La Musique dans la pensée et la vie sociale d’une société africaine* (Paris: La Haye, Mouton, 1971); David Locke, *Drum Gabu: A Systematic Method for an African Percussion Piece*, Performance in World Music Series, vol. 1 (Crown Point, Ind.: White Cliffs Media Co., 1987); and John Blacking, *Venda Children’s Songs: A Study in Ethnomusicological Analysis* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1967).

²¹ Jones, “African Rhythm,” *Africa* 24 (1954): 84.

is given short shrift, conveniently silenced, suppressed, ensuring that writers' initial prejudices reemerge as their conclusions.

Even the occasional exception to the tendency to retreat from comparison encounters problems at the level of framing. For example, Chernoff's effort to show what is different between "our music" and "African music" invokes the opening four bars of Beethoven's Sonata in G Major (Kinsky-Halm Anh. 5).²² But the choice is already problematic, for Chernoff was writing during the late 1970s, at a time when "our music," which presumably means European and American music, could scarcely be configured without—choosing more or less at random—Brahms, Bartók, Carter, Reich, or Stravinsky, or without Hungarian, Bulgarian, or Scottish folk song. Whether it is appropriate to compare, for example, Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* (with its acknowledged challenges to, and extensions of, conventions of metrical articulation) or Steve Reich's *Music for Pieces of Wood* (with its undisguised appropriation of the identifying rhythm of a Southern Ewe dance) with African music, or whether it is appropriate to juxtapose Akan funeral dirges with Karelian laments, is for our purposes less important than the fact that such comparisons are, in principle, possible. A determined researcher could easily show that the sum of isolated experiments in rhythmic organization found in so-called Western music produces a picture of far greater complexity than anything that Africans have produced so far either singly or collectively. One could, in short, quite easily invent "European rhythm."

Allied to the retreat from comparison is a retreat from critical evaluation of African musical practice. The pious dignifying of all performances as if they were equally good, of all instruments as if they were tuned in an "interesting" way rather than simply being out of tune, of all informants as if a number of them did not practice systematic deception, and of dirge singing as if the missed entries and resulting heterophony did not result from inattentiveness or drunkenness: these are acts of mystification designed to ensure that the discourse about African music continues to lack the one thing that would give it scientific and hence universal status, namely, a *critical* element. As with other disciplinary practices (one thinks of anthropology, literature, and philosophy), African musicology desperately needs these critical searchlights if it is to become more than a colorful

²² Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*, 41–42.

but marginal spot on a multidisciplinary map.²³

"African rhythm," then, is an invention, a construction, a fiction, a myth, ultimately a lie. But my purpose here is neither to chastise nor to pretend that as scholars of music we can somehow do without such mythologizing, such lying. Rather, I want to try and understand the terms of this invention by speculating on the motivations and impulses of scholars. I realize that this may be a dangerous, potentially offensive, and politically incorrect enterprise. But since institutional and professional pressures constrain what and how we think and write about African music, such self-examination may not be entirely inappropriate.

How, then, has "African rhythm" been invented? I offer three cases.

Case 1. Interrogating a Lexical Gap

It seems remarkable that it never occurred to the Reverend A. M. Jones (or if it did that he did not mention it), in the course of writing some 533 printed pages mainly on the rhythmic structure of African music, in particular that of the Southern Ewe people, to ask his "native" informant, Desmond Tay, whether the Ewe have a word for rhythm or at least a concept of rhythm.²⁴ Had he done that, Jones might have met with a blank stare or a puzzled look. And had he pursued the point, he would almost certainly have been led down a strange (I use this "orientalism" advisedly) and picturesque terrain of overlapping words, concepts, and ideas.

There is no single word for rhythm in the Ewe language. If you look in Dietrich Westermann's dictionary or *Gbesela* (literally, "hearer of voices") of 1928, for example, you will find the consecutive entries "rhinoceros," "rhyme," "rib," "ribbon": the absence of an entry for "rhythm" between "rhyme" and "rib" is glaring.²⁵ Could it be that Westermann was somehow unaware of the popular constructions of Africans as rhythmic people, or that in seeing Africans make music on a daily basis he remained unstruck by its rhythmic character? Perhaps lexicons are meant only to record what is verbalized, not to mirror patterns of behavior.

²³ For a discussion of an analogous point, see Hountondji's critique of ethnophilosophy in *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, 55–70.

²⁴ Jones, *Studies in African Music*.

²⁵ Dietrich Westermann, *Evefiata or Ewe-English Dictionary* (Berlin: Reimer, 1928).

Indeed, in West Africa other vocabularies for talking about music similarly and strikingly lack this term. According to Charles Keil, the word *rhythm* “really has no single equivalent in Tiv” (nor, incidentally, is there an equivalent for the word *music*). Lester Monts finds “no equivalent of the word rhythm” in the Vai language spoken in western Liberia. David Ames and Anthony King include no entry for rhythm in their work on the Hausa, the most widely spoken sub-Saharan African language. And Eric Charry, writing about the Mande, says that he has “not come across an extensive Mande vocabulary related to rhythm.”²⁶ Such a consistent absence may come as a surprise to those for whom “African music” and “African rhythm” have always seemed synonymous.

It is, of course, an old critical move to attempt to undermine an ethnographer’s findings by showing that the people studied do not have a word for something attributed to them. (The boringly famous example is, of course, the supposedly large number of words by which Eskimo refer to “snow.”) It is not my aim here merely to rehearse that particular tactic. Rather, we need to learn from the absence, interrogate its causes. In doing so, one quickly discovers—and here I draw on my own work among the Northern Ewe—that, although the equivalent of a single word meaning “rhythm” is not to be found in Ewe, related concepts of stress, duration, and periodicity do in fact register in subtle ways in Ewe discourse. What this suggests is that the semantic field of rhythm is not a single, unified, or coherent field, but rather one that is widely and asymmetrically distributed, permanently entangled, if you like, with other dimensions. Ewe conceptions of rhythm often imply a binding together of different dimensional processes, a joining rather than a separating, an across-the-dimensions rather than a within-the-dimensions phenomenon. Rhythm, in other words, is “always-already” connected.²⁷

Jones could have recovered some of this genealogy either by asking his informants directly about terminology, or better, by eavesdropping on conversations among Ewe musicians during rehearsals or perfor-

²⁶ Charles Keil, *Tiv Song: The Sociology of Art in a Classless Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 47; Lester P. Monts, *An Annotated Glossary of Vai Musical Language and Its Social Contexts* (Paris: Peeters-SEAF, 1990), 90; David W. Ames and Anthony V. King, *Glossary of Hausa Music and Its Social Contexts* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971); and Charry, “Musical Thought, History, and Practice,” 210.

²⁷ For further discussion and illustration of this conception of rhythm, see my *African Rhythm: A Northern Ewe Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

mances. Whenever things went wrong, for example, Jones would almost certainly have heard remarks dealing with, or at least alluding to, rhythm. But this way of doing fieldwork—striving to attain an invisible status in order not to eliminate but to minimize the harmful effects of interference caused by the (white) ethnographer's presence—would not have appealed to Jones. "The African," as he was fond of saying, was an informant, not a theorist. The African "is utterly unconscious of any organized theory behind his music. He makes his music quite spontaneously."²⁸ Africans provided the data with which Jones built his theories, theories that were prominently stamped "Made in the West" and designed not only for the local market but for export back to the colonies.²⁹ At the risk of misrepresentation, we might describe the genesis of Jones's project as follows: Having sensed the importance of polyrhythm, polymeter, syncopation, and cross-rhythm in African music, and having refused either to acknowledge the incidence of such techniques in "Western music" or to bring Western usages into direct confrontation with African ones, Jones produced a view of African music that confirmed his initial prejudice that the complexity of African rhythm is emblematic of the otherness of African peoples, their essential difference from us.³⁰

Africans are simply different from westerners—or so it seems to some. Although a few writers have noted the compatibility between African and European music, most have chosen to overlook the potential for symbiosis. Hornbostel frequently refers to "them," Jones and Weman to "the African," Blacking to "the Venda," Monts to "informants," and Nketia to "African societies," totalizing expressions whose primary purpose, although merely identificational, might be read as carrying evaluative baggage as well.³¹ When was the last time an ethnomusicologist went out to discover sameness rather than difference? When did we last encourage our students to go and do

²⁸ Jones, *African Music in Northern Rhodesia*, 111.

²⁹ Hountondji has taken note of the movement of theories between Africa and the West; see his "Recapturing," in *The Surreptitious Speech: Présence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness, 1947–1987*, ed. V. Y. Mudimbe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 238–48.

³⁰ A fuller account of Jones's work would recognize a latent, largely undeveloped comparative framework in many of his writings. His work would therefore not provide the best instance of a retreat from comparison. But even Jones tends to underdevelop one term of his binary structure: the West.

³¹ Hornbostel, "African Negro Music"; Jones, *Studies in African Music*; Weman, *African Music and the Church*; Blacking, *How Musical is Man?* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1971); Monts, *An Annotated Glossary of Vai Musical Language*; Nketia, *The Music of Africa*.

fieldwork not in order to come back and paint the picture of a different Africa but of an Africa that, after all the necessary adjustments have been made, is the “same” as the West? So strong and powerful is the founding premise of difference that the ongoing invention and reinvention of “African rhythm,” far from buttressing epistemological claims, presents the writer with a mirror image of the dictates of this very ideology of difference.³²

Case 2. The Politics of Notating African Rhythm

Consider an apparently purely technical issue such as transcription. Earlier researchers such as James Koetting and Hewitt Pantaleoni—motivated by the belief that African music is fundamentally different from Western music—decided that Western staff notation was simply not suitable for conveying the reality of African rhythm in its uniqueness and individuality.³³ They then proceeded to invent new and improved notations for the job at hand, notations that have fortunately fallen by the wayside in the subsequent practice of representing African rhythm. I say “fortunately” because the problems that Koetting and Pantaleoni wished to address, such as the importance of indicating timbre or method of playing, or of neutralizing the downbeat emphasis supposedly normative in Western music, are by no means unique to African music. In other words, Western music, too, suffers from being notated in the way that it has been notated so far; if a new notation should be developed, it should be developed for *both* African and Western music. The problem of notation is a universal one. To localize it for the African context is to deprive its specifically African manifestation of any claims to universality, any standing among influential discourses.

Notation has always been prescriptive, and it will continue to be prescriptive because it involves the translation of actions, the reading of codes, the deciphering of signs, and ultimately, the subjectivizing of meaning. Notation therefore relies importantly on the role of a *supplement*. To make it descriptive by loading it with much more information is to attempt to reduce the size of the supplement, and with that the creative role of the performer. Koetting’s Time Unit Box

³² Of interest here is the discussion of “symbolic violence” by Vincent Crapanzano in his *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 129–30.

³³ James Koetting, “Analysis and Notation of West African Drum Ensemble Music,” *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology* 1 (1970): 115–46; and Hewitt Pantaleoni, “Toward Understanding the Play of Sogo in *Atsja*,” *Ethnomusicology* 16 (1972): 1–37.

System (TUBS), which uses dots enclosed in boxes to represent drum strokes, thus ostensibly avoiding some of the *a priori* assumptions of staff notation, in particular of metric notation, oversimplifies and therefore distorts the accentual implications of notated Western music. While granting that TUBS "is no more rhythmically accurate than Western notation," Koetting nevertheless proceeds to emphasize the importance of sonority and rhythm in African drum ensemble music. To do this, however, he must of necessity undercomplicate "Western rhythm patterns":

Sonority and rhythm are generally equal in importance, rhythm being somewhat more significant in some patterns and sonority somewhat more in others, particularly those derived from speech patterns. For that reason, the drum ensemble patterns should be studied as rhythm/sonority patterns and must not be too much equated with Western rhythm patterns, which we often think of without pitch and tone quality as significant elements."³⁴

Do we really think of "Western rhythm patterns . . . without including pitch"? Doubtless some people do, but even passing acquaintance with some of the more sophisticated theories of rhythm of European tonal music will reveal that it is well-nigh impossible to exclude pitch from any account of accents or rhythm.³⁵ Do we need a new notation for *The Rite of Spring*, for example, or for certain moments in the Brahms symphonies where a consistent across-the-bar-line figure gives one the impression that the bar line has shifted? Descriptive notation, whether used by Koetting, Pantaleoni, or anyone else, embodies a putative resistance to the supplement; and it is this impossible attempt to eliminate the supplement that spells the doom of advocates of new notations.

The premise of difference may also have led Jones to make certain questionable decisions about transcribing African music. A cursory glance at the second volume of his *Studies in African Music* confirms the complexity of African rhythmic systems. A sometimes rapid succession of meters, staggered bar lines tracing crooked paths from the top to the bottom of the texture, and unusual groupings of notes:

³⁴ Koetting, "Analysis and Notation," 120.

³⁵ See, for example, the discussion in Victor Zuckerkandl, *Sound and Symbol*, vol. 2, *Man the Musician*, trans. Norbert Guterman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973); or that in Fred Lerdahl and Ray Jackendoff, *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983). Although both of these works postdate Koetting's study, the phenomena they discuss go back to the earliest theorizing about musical rhythm.

these and other features make it difficult to find the conductor's beat that would unlock the secrets of African drum ensemble playing. Jones, in fact, believed in noncoincident main beats. The graphic severity and unwieldiness of his transcriptions would seem to confirm the essential difference, the otherness, perhaps even the exoticism of African music. Yet, since Jones was transcribing a dance repertory, it should have occurred to him that (even African) dancers need a regular, recurring beat to guide their negotiation of movements. By shunning regularity and isochrony, Jones encourages fantastic views about Africans dancing with their whole bodies, each body part performing a different rhythm in a different meter.³⁶

Two specific flaws in Jones's work exemplify further the impulse to distance the Southern Ewe from the Europeans. The first, which is purely technical, concerns the use of staggered bar lines to represent perceived changes in accentual pattern. This aspect of Jones's work has been properly and extensively corrected in the work of David Locke, who, like Simha Arom, understands ensemble textures as isochronous rather than polychronous, and based on a recurring cycle of beats.³⁷ A second flaw, apparent in Jones's transcription of play and fishing songs at the beginning of his book, stems from his equation of the word *accent* with metrical accent, thus overlooking all the other types of phenomenal accent that emerge in a performance of Ewe song. One applauds Jones's effort to recognize the pertinence of Ewe speech accents in song, a feature to which subsequent transcribers have paid little attention. Alas, the technical means were not adequate to the task.³⁸

The point of entering into these minutiae of transcription is not to quibble over minor details but to remind us that politics and ideology can exert a strong influence on something as apparently technical as the making of transcriptions. To his credit, Jones continued to use "Western" staff notation, bar lines, time signatures, clefs, and phrase marks to render comprehensible Southern Ewe music, thus bringing the music into a sphere of discourse that is enabled by a distinguished

³⁶ "Cross rhythms," according to Jones, "... make every muscle in [the African's] body clamour for dancing" (*African Music in Northern Rhodesia*, 22). Jones is not the only writer who has taken note of this polyrhythmic behavior. Ward refers to "a native dancer keeping with different sets of muscles five different rhythms at once" ("Music in the Gold Coast," 222).

³⁷ See David Locke, "Principles of Offbeat Timing and Cross-Rhythm in Southern Ewe Dance Drumming," *Ethnomusicology* 26 (1982): 217-46, among many publications; and Simha Arom, *African Polyphony and Polyrhythm*.

³⁸ I have provided alternatives to Jones's transcriptions in the epilogue of my *African Rhythm: A Northern Ewe Perspective*.

intellectual history and undeniable institutional power. For power is what it is all about, distortions, contradictions, imperfections, and all. A postcolonial transcription, then, is not one that imprisons itself in an ostensibly "African" field of discourse—an "Afrocentric transcription," perhaps—but one that insists on playing in the premier league, on the master's ground, and in the north. An ideology of difference must be replaced by an ideology of sameness so that—somewhat paradoxically—we can gain a better view of difference. In other words, only if we proceed from a premise of sameness and grant difference in the unique expression of that sameness are we likely to get at the true similarities and differences between "African" and "Western" musics.

Case 3. African Rhythm as Invented by Africans: Responsible Theory or Epistemic Violence?

A third method by which African rhythm has been invented, a method that has been gaining in influence in the last two decades, is one by which the invention is attributed either directly or indirectly to African subjects themselves. The researcher ostensibly presents *their* viewpoint, an "emic" or insider view as opposed to an "etic" or outsider view. For example, in his article "Rhythmic Design in the Support Drums of Agbadza," Jeff Pressing states, "In *Agbadza Kpoka* an unvarying rhythmic background is provided by *gankogui*, *axatse* and *kagan*, which is most correctly (in Ewe terms) conceptualised in 12/8 time."³⁹ These are the same Ewe who do not have terms in their language for "rhythm," "meter" or "time signature." How did they articulate the concepts attributed to them by Pressing? Clearly several acts of translation have taken place in the construction of Pressing's ethnography, yet these acts have been underreported. It is not that one cannot guess what Pressing might mean; it is rather that the legitimizing phrase, "(in Ewe terms)," framed, incidentally, by an all-powerful parenthesis, needs to be unpacked if its claims are to have force.

The foregrounding of native voices provides an attractive means of resolving certain moral and ethical dilemmas arising from working with Others. We are engaged in dialogue; our texts are polyphonic. Indeed, when earlier I criticized Jones for failing to ask his informants what the Ewe word for rhythm was, I seemed to imply that Jones's error could simply be corrected by finding the appropriate Ewe word and incorpo-

³⁹ Jeff Pressing, "Rhythmic Design in the Support Drums of Agbadza," *African Music* 6, no. 3 (1983): 5.

rating it into what is unavoidably a prefabricated theoretical framework belonging to the researcher's field of discourse. In this way, consumers of the theory would be lulled into believing that all due rights and privileges have been granted to the owners of native thought and expression. The theorist is heroically absolved from possible guilt stemming from the failure to acknowledge "the native's point of view."

But the nature of native discourses, their epistemological status, and especially the manner in which they pass from folk philosophy to a full-fledged ethno-theory: these are issues far too complex to be addressed merely by asking native informants for African language equivalents of English, French, or Portuguese words and phrases used in discussions of music and performance. Searching for such equivalents (or nonequivalents) without taking into account the histories of individual terms, and ignoring the important role that colonial and missionary discourses have played in granting these terms conventional status: these are moves likely to seriously undermine the explanatory value accorded the terms. Moreover, the question of who orchestrates the dialogue, who owns or signs the text, and in some cases who gets paid for it: these are troubling questions that may not be facilely consigned to the margins of our theorizing, especially when such theorizing results in confident claims about our knowledge of other (living) human beings.

One could of course confine the discussion of dialogism or polyphonism to the strictly discursive level, a level that celebrates the internalism and even autonomy of critical texts. "Dialogic editing," rather than embracing an intricate series of transactions between historically situated researchers and the researched, takes refuge in an all-consuming textuality whose ultimate effect is a denial of reality.⁴⁰ Unless it results in concrete political action, the dialogic impulse must be seen for what it is, namely, an attempt to continue to validate what is essentially a monologue by incorporating an image of "native discourse" into the monologist's theory and in his or her own terms. Not only do researchers exonerate themselves from the standard—and often ineffectually symbolic—charges of imperialism, neocolonialism, or anachronism, but they are able to lay claims to an authentic African voice speaking a different (non-Western) native language. Although this way of doing fieldwork may seem merely inefficient, it actually substitutes a particularly virulent form of political violence for "mere" epistemic violence.

⁴⁰ On "dialogic editing," see Steven Feld, "Dialogic Editing: Interpreting How Kaluli Read *Sound and Sentiment*," *Cultural Anthropology* 2 (1987): 190–210.

The claim in this paper has been that the notion of a special disposition toward rhythm in African music is an invention of Western discourse. I have not contested the pragmatic value of such an invention, but have rather tried to understand some of its enabling structures and ramifications. By framing the critique in political terms, I have risked overpoliticizing scholarly procedures that some would regard as lying outside (even beyond) politics. Yet no sociology of knowledge, and certainly not a sociology of knowledge about African music, can proceed very far without encountering the explicitly political. That is why any attempt to solve the problems addressed in this article, specifically to counter the invention of "African rhythm," must eschew the soft strategies of dialogism and the solicitation of emic viewpoints in favor of the one solution that has not yet been tried: a direct empowerment of post-colonial African subjects so that they *can* represent themselves.

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ABSTRACT

"African ryhthm" was invented in the 1950s when, thanks to pioneering research by the Reverend A. M. Jones, Alan Merriam, Gilbert Rouget, Erich von Hornbostel, and John Blacking, among others, "African music" was construed as an essentially rhythmic phenomenon. Three decades and a sizable body of empirical research later, it is easy to see that an overriding ideology of *difference* (between "Africa" and the "West") motivated these early efforts. This essay reinvents "African rhythm" not by denying its own ideological construction but by engaging in an imaginary dialogue with earlier researchers in an effort to concretize that which was missing from their representations. In it, I develop a view of African rhythm in which its mechanical aspects (grouping, accents, periodicity) are shown to reside in broader patterns of temporal signification (movement, language and gesture). Although this is a less elegant proposition (in the mathematical sense), it is phenomenologically truer to the African experience. The latter, in turn, is not a mystified precolonial essence but the more "contaminated" and inherently contradictory condition of postcoloniality itself. "African music" in this construction is not synonymous with "African rhythm," although the latter's apparent complexity, explicitly thematized in earlier writings, re-emerges against a richer conceptual background.