The Rhythmic Medium in African Music*

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THIS ESSAY presents a summary of some current ideas about the nature of the rhythmic medium in African music. I would initially note two distinguishing points about African rhythms in the general context of critical theory. First, this discussion is grounded in general features of musical contexts that can be observed. Although the use of rhythms in African music is theoretically suggestive, its critical or philosophical relevance is not the extension of a hypothetical construct or an aesthetic manifesto. Thus, we are considering the aesthetic effect of rhythm in an art that exists, not an art that can or should be. Second, the African approach to rhythm reflects a different cultural orientation from what we normally find in Western and other cultural zones. Specifically, in African musical idioms, several rhythmic tendencies are elevated as fundamental principles of musical organization. In discussing the rhythmic characteristics of African music as indicative of cultural orientation, one begins with an assumption that modes of participation and interaction in musical performance contexts can provide a model of sensibility that reflects broader patterns of perception and aesthetic purpose.

This assumption of cultural analogy is plausible in African musical idioms for several reasons. In African societies, the extent of participation in music-making is comparatively high, and African musical activity is often described as participatory in nature. Instead of isolating performers and spectators, African musical contexts exhibit a high degree of integration of spectators into the music-making process. Many people who would merely listen within other cultural idioms are involved in African music-making through accompanying handclapping, singing, and the use of simple percussion instruments like wood blocks or rattles.[1] Also, despite some notable exceptions, African music is primarily performed as music for dancing; important parts of musical sound are frequently contributed by dancers

who wear leg-bells and leg-rattles, strike castenets, or attach other sounding devices to their bodies or clothing.

The notion of participation is also enhanced by the extent of musical activity in African cultures. Much of the documentation of African music focuses on its varied contextual uses. In many African societies, music fulfills functions that other societies delegate to different types of institutions. Music serves a crucial integrative function within many types of institutionalized activities,[2] and musicians perform a complex social role in community occasions.[3] There is special music for individuals at various points of their lives, special music for different types of work, special music for courtship and for marriage, special music for healing, for death, for particular families, for particular times of the year: in many African societies, practically any way in which one might wish to categorize a socio-cultural portrait would find its logic affirmed in musical repertory. It is frequently the case that social organizations or groups have their own music and specific musical activities to which they devote considerable energy. I have often heard assertions to the effect that if something is happening and there are no musicians present, then what is happening is not important. Even in less ceremonial veins, African youth groups are as likely to compete in music and dance as American youth groups are likely to compete in basketball. In other contexts, music and dance sometimes provide the generative dynamics of large and small-scale social movements.[4] In many African societies, musicians are the acknowledged authorities on history and custom,[5] and musicians often have important political functions.[6] In such societies, musicians often have distinct lineage groupings and hierarchical chieftaincy organizations; they undergo formal training for years, and they continue their acquisition of knowledge throughout life.[7] The variety and diversity of music-making in Africa can be ordered by the proposition that, compared to most places in the world, African societies have relatively many people who participate in musical activity.

The predominant participatory mode of African music can be said to constitute a formal characteristic that takes precedence over other elements of musical organization. In this regard, therefore, aesthetic issues can be contextualized by functional concerns of communal cohesion. The aesthetic principles that make African music work reflect the manner in which the music has been insti-tutionalized to provide frameworks for participation. The music is important to communal objectives of bringing quality to social and cultural occasions. As such, the modes of participation appropriate at musical events reflect people's concerns to achieve effectiveness

considered in social as well as musical terms, to see or present themselves at their best. The current understanding of these modes of participation is that they are based on a dominating rhythmic focus oriented toward establishing contexts of dynamic rhythmic interrelationship and communication. Learning to participate in such contexts, where musical activity serves as an agent for the representation and socialization of indigenous values,[8] contrasts with other types of pedagogy such as the verbal and written discourse typical of much Western learning, and also contrasts with pedagogies based on images, as are found, for example, in certain aspects of Christianity or in the controlling forces of meditation in a spiritual guide like the *I Ching*.

The model of community articulated in an African musical event is one that is not held together by ideas, by cognitive symbols or by emotional conformity. The community is established through the interaction of individual rhythms and the people who embody them. The rhythms are a kind of language, of course, but what kind of communication exists in their relationships? What is the nature of rhythmic effects? One would really have to stretch the notion of a symbol to call rhythmic communication and interaction symbolic. Somehow, though, and particularly dependent upon people coming from different individual places within the rhythmic structure of the music, a tightly cohesive whole is created, a whole that is more than its individual parts at the same time that it enhances them. The issues involved in the essentially participatory dynamics of African rhythmic organization can lead in a number of speculative directions. Among them are methodological questions regarding how one can investigate and discuss the significance of rhythms in social life. Also of interest are sociological and philosophical questions about the significance of rhythmically patterned interaction as a cohesive and generative cultural force in contrast to or in concert with symbolically or emotionally shared knowledge. This essay will present a synopsis of the rhythmic structure of African music. Those who wish a fuller account that includes the manner in which I addressed such analogical issues in my own research may consult my monograph *African Rhythm and African Sensibility* (see n. 8).

How does the rhythmic medium enhance participatory objectives in African music? The essence of rhythm is repetition, the uniform recurrence of a pattern of sound. One might say equally that the timing of the repetition defines the rhythm or that the rhythm gives structure to time; whatever, the effective power of rhythm lies in the coherence of its forward movement. We move along with a rhythm, which has a kind of compelling life, the ability to capture

or even dominate our attention. African music has a well-known rhythmic priority, and the use of rhythm in African music reflects several characteristics. The basis of these characteristics is poly-rhythm. Western music tends to rely on a single metric pulse unified on the downbeat: rhythmic movement is generally straightforward and is often articulated as an attribute of melody. African music tends toward multiple rhythmic lines defined with reference to one another: frequently, the rhythms have different starting points and different timing. As a result, those who are unfamiliar with a given piece are not clear about which particular rhythm defines the basic pulse of the music. The inability to distinguish a rhythmic foundation results in alienation evidenced as the experience of monotony or its complement, the experience of cacophony. Even without variation, a simple rhythm can be potentially disorienting, and African music exploits this ambiguity of perspective.

The example I will use to demonstrate this ambiguity is a rhythm so fundamental to African musical idioms that it has been char-acterized as the "standard pattern."[9] It would be difficult to find an African musical tradition that did not contain this rhythm, and, similarly, the rhythm frequently supports many pieces in many traditions' repertories. In Western notation, the rhythm would typ-ically be assigned a twelve-eight time signature. The rhythm could then be represented as: quarter note, quarter note, eighth note, quarter note, quarter note, quarter note, eighth note, and so on. In the representation below, the sounded note is indicated by an X.

‖: X + X + X X + X + X + X X + X + X X + X + X + X :‖

The rhythm itself seems clear enough, but one needs to find a point of reference beyond the shortest pulse for the rhythm to become musically meaningful, or more to the point, in order to dance to it.

Consider, therefore, the following ways of crossing the rhythm with a unifying pulse. I generally find that the most common initial response among Western listeners is to maintain the triple-time feeling.

‖: X + X + X X + X + X + X X + X + X X + X + X + X :‖
‖: X + + + X + + + X + + + X + + + X + + + X + + + :‖

To dance to the rhythm, though, one would need a duple-time perception, analogous to dotted eighth notes, and there are three

possibilities based on different starting points: the first example
shows the normal form; in the second two examples, the highlighted
X̲ indicates the starting point of the first example.

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||: X + X + X X + X + X + X X + X + X + X + X + X X :||
||: X + + X + + X + + X + + X + + X + + X + + X + + :||

||: X X + X + X + X X̲ + X + X X + X + X + X X̲ + X + :||
||: X + + X + + X + +̄ X + + X + + X + + X + + +̄ X + + :||

||: X X̲ + X + X X + X + X + X X̲ + X + X X + X + X + :||
||: X +̄ + X + + X + + X + + X +̄ + X + + X + + X + + :||
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The varying placement of the second rhythm imparts varying per-
spectives to the first rhythm, making it sound completely different.
In effect, the second rhythm helps the first rhythm make sense,
lets it be something one can hear and understand so that one can
move or dance to it.

The cross-rhythms or counterrhythms established in polyrhythmic
music have perceptual implications which are different from the
rhythmic effects of most Western music. Instead of following a well-
defined rhythmic or melodic line, a listener or a participant has to
find and put forward another rhythm that allows (or requires) him
or her to make—and add—a personal type of sense of what is
already there. Rhythmic meaning is comprehended in the relation-
ships of several rhythms. This orientation does not necessarily pre-
sent difficulties to those who have been accustomed to such music,
but as with any musical perception, it does involve learning and
experience. We may note in advance that on the simplest level of
rhythmic structure in African music, however, the tendency is already
defined toward aesthetic culminations that challenge rhythmic bal-
ance. Typically, as can be inferred from the rhythm called the
"standard pattern" above, even elementary rhythmic relationships
are sophisticated by syncopation and offbeat accentuation.

In a polyrhythmic context, notions like syncopation and offbeat
accentuation would not seem to make sense. Furthermore, the effect
of multiple rhythmic lines has been described as the clash or conflict
of rhythms,[10] in which the main pulse is obscured. Nonetheless, a
main pulse does indeed exist. Although the entrances of an ensem-
ble's parts may be "staggered,"[11] each seemingly with its own metric
sense, in combination the parts establish an emergent pulse. In
context, a player concentrates on his own part of the ensemble, an
orientation that has been called "apart-playing."[12] The separation
of rhythmic parts occasionally makes the pulse subject to misinter-

pretation by someone unfamiliar with the particular idiom, as in
the examples of potential cross-rhythms above. The pulse cannot
profitably be defined as the fastest common unit of time that can
unite the various rhythms. Rather, the main pulse is a simple duple
time that represents the timing of dance steps. African musicians
often avoid sounding notes on this main pulse, in effect leaving
room for the dancers to punctuate or anchor musical phrases;
conversely, the off-beat accentuation of percussive and melodic
accents complements and responds to dance movements. This char-
acteristic links the music to its participatory social context, bringing
the dancers into the emergent rhythmic structure.

Ultimately, there is often needless sophistication in the attention
we might pay to the complexities of an ensemble's organization or
to the rhythmic complexities of a virtuoso's improvisation. The basic
principles of African rhythmic aesthetics apply in simple as well as
elaborate articulations. Thus, for example, assigning compound
meters or changing time signatures to African music is generally
inappropriate because there is almost always a two-beat or four-
beat pulse that holds the ensemble together from the perspective
of a dancer. Likewise, there is generally no reason to think in terms
of triple-time meters or three-against-two counterrhythms. A mu-
sician might think in terms of triple-time to ensure proper hand
patterns of playing techniques, but audiences and dancers tap their
feet, move, or clap their hands according to the duple-time pulse.
In African musical contexts, the unifying perception is grounded
in movement and thus already distanced from a wide range of
rhythmic expression.

For practical purposes, we may note there is little difference
between the typical twelve-eight "standard pattern" and the common
duple-time and triple-time versions that complement it in various
idioms. What is important is to perceive the duple-time main pulse,
which is highlighted in the examples below.

‖: X̲ + X + X X + X + X + X X̲ + X + X X + X + X + X :‖

‖: X̲ + X + X + + X + X + + X̲ + X + X + + X + X + + :‖

‖: X̲ + + X + + X X + + X + X + + X X̲ + + X + + X X + + X + X + + X :‖

‖: X̲ + + X + + X + + + X + X + + + X̲ + + X + + X + + + X + X + + + :‖

In each rhythm above, the unsounded main pulse leaves room for
people in the context to mark it themselves.

It is also typical for African musicians to leave the downbeat
unsounded. In the following representation of a supporting ensemble
for an African dance, the instrumental lines avoid the pulse or

merely hint at it. A four-beat pulse is shown on the top line, and
the "standard pattern" is second; a straight line drawn from the
pulse through the represented rhythms would touch mainly un-
sounded notes.

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‖: X + + X + + X + + X + + X + + X + + X + + X + + :‖
‖: X + X + X X + X + X + X X + X + X X + X + X + X :‖
‖: + X X + X X + X X + X X + X X + X X + X X + X X :‖
‖: + X X X + + + X X X + + + X X X + + + X X X + + :‖
‖: + + X + X + + + + + + + + + X + X + + + + + + + :‖
‖: + + X + X X + + X + X X + + X + X X + + X + X X :‖
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The off-beat accentuation of percussive lines merely suggests the
pulse, which is in turn demonstrated in context by participants. It
is almost as if the sounded notes lift the dancers up while the
unsounded notes are accented by downward or emphatic movement.
The model of participation in African musical idioms, suggested by
such notions as apart-playing or the separation of parts, is based
on establishing an integrating perspective that presupposes distance
from the sounded rhythms. Variations in accentuation do not dom-
inate but rather complement and complete perception. Improvi-
sations that mimic speech or range far from metrical patterns are
anchored by an underlying pulse that is relatively slow when com-
pared to a pulse defined by the syllables of rhythmic phrasing. The
rhythmic medium in African music has therefore been characterized
as "cool" rather than "hot,"[13] indicating a distanced integration of
diverse elements instead of an intensive or compelling focus on a
prominent element. The metaphor of coolness does not preclude
emotion or excitement, of course: the nature of the participatory
context requires that people supply their own energy in the minimal
sense that they have to bind whatever tension exists among coun-
terrhythms or in the more constructive sense that their self-assertion
adds to the whole and encourages others as well.
    There are several characteristic musical devices that increase the
interest and intensity of polyrhythmic music. First, in many if not
all African musical idioms, is the percussive texture, which often
can be felt as well as heard. Second, the multiple rhythmic rela-
tionships established by counterrhythms are complemented by rhyth-
mic antiphony, a familiar feature of African-American music and
generally referred to as "call-and-response." A certain rhythmic
pattern every one or two measures serves as an answer for variations
which either fill the gaps in its recurrence or occasionally extend

to overlap it. Third, the association of rhythms with linguistic phrases, particularly in lead instruments and melodic vocal lines, allows further deviation from the pulse. Fourth, rhythmic phrasing can be extended over two or four or even more measures, since the pulse is maintained apart from predominant lines. Finally, there are many inherent rhythms that can emerge as variations from the repetition of an individual rhythm. Thus the "standard pattern" shown above, which is already syncopated, can be further syncopated by simple omission. The following examples, all ones I have heard in Africa, do not even begin to exhaust the possibilities:

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‖: X + X + X X + X + X + X X + X + X X + X + X + X :‖
‖: X + X + + + + X + X + + X + X + + + + X + X + + :‖
‖: + + X + + + + X + X + + + + X + + + + X + X + + :‖
‖: + + X + + + + + + X + + + + X + + + + + + X + + :‖
‖: X + X + + + + X + X + X X + X + + + + X + X + X :‖
‖: X + X + + + + + + X + + + + + + + + + + + X + X :‖
‖: X + + + X + + X + X + + X + + + X + + X + X + + :‖
‖: X + + + X + + X + X + X X + + + X + + X + X + X :‖
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African musicians use all these devices to create a flexible and open structure for rhythmic variation. African musical events present an ongoing framework of participation that we might compare, borrowing critical metaphors, to individualized readings of a poly-rhythmic context or to leaving the reader his or her share of the text. Rhythmic cohesion is enhanced by the way differences are placed into amicable or fruitful relationship. Therein lies an approach to the ethnographic notion that the institutionalization of music in Africa can possibly provide a nexus for perspectives on functional interrelationships. In any case, it is clear that the rhythmic medium functions according to organizing principles that solicit participation and encourage movement. A few ethnographers are only now beginning to explore the analogies that may exist between musical sensibility and the way in which African societies manage the organization of social cohesion and differentiation. Nonetheless, it is now a generally accepted axiom of current ethnomusicology that the use of rhythms in African music is a socializing element that patterns interaction and enhances a sense of togetherness at community events.

For insight regarding the type of intelligence involved in the

exploitation of the rhythmic medium's aesthetic potential, we might observe the way African musicians and dancers manipulate the basic principles of polyrhythmic expression. The sensibility manifested in the music requires precision in execution and balance in control. Polyrhythms create a delicate tension. In the face of transient and changing rhythmic relationships, it is easy to shift one's time perspective and lose one's place. Presuming an appropriate degree of rhythmic experience, musicians put pressure on people's perception by playing with time, by promoting rhythmic dialogue, by putting pressure on people's rhythmic perception, even by challenging their ability to maintain perspective. The music falls short of its expressive purpose in two ways: it loses energy if rhythmic communication becomes oversimplified, overrepetitive, or redundant; it loses complexity if the musicians make mistakes and play out of time or if they stretch time perception so much that people become confused. When the music relinquishes its relation to movement, it abandons its participatory potential. Therefore, aesthetic command of the rhythmic medium is achieved through a clarity in expression that manages the movement of intensity.

<div align="right">PITTSBURGH, PA.</div>

NOTES

1 General ethnographic overviews of African music are J. H. Kwabena Nketia, *Music of Africa* (New York, 1974); and Alan P. Merriam, "African Music," in *Continuity and Change in African Cultures,* ed. William R. Bascom and Melville J. Herskovits (Chicago, 1959), pp. 49–86.

2 See A. M. Jones, *Studies in African Music,* 2 vols. (London, 1959); Charles Keil, *Tiv Song* (Chicago, 1979); Merriam, "African Music"; Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston, Ill., 1964); Hugo Zemp, *Musique Dan: La musique dans la pensée et la vie sociale d'une societé africaine* (Paris, 1971).

3 See S. Kobla Ladzekpo, "The Social Mechanics of Good Music: A Description of Dance Clubs among the Anlo Ewe-Speaking People of Ghana," *African Music,* 5 (1971), 6–22; J. H. Kwabena Nketia, *Drumming in Akan Communities of Ghana* (London, 1963).

4 See John Blacking, "The Role of Music in the Culture of the Venda of the Northern Transvaal," in *Studies in Ethnomusicology,* ed. M. Kolinski, vol. 2 (New York, 1965); "Music and the Historical Process in Vendaland," in *Essays on Music and History in Africa,* ed. Klaus P. Wachsmann (Evanston, Ill., 1971); T. O. Ranger, *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa, 1890–1970: The Beni Ngoma* (London, 1975); David B. Coplan, *In Township Tonight!: South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre* (London, 1985).

5 See David W. Ames, "A Sociocultural View of Hausa Musical Activity," in *The Traditional Artist in African Societies,* ed. Warren L. d'Azevedo (Bloomington, Ind., 1973), pp. 128–61; David W. Ames, "Igbo and Hausa Musicians: A Comparative Examination," *Ethnomusicology,* 17 (1973), 25–78; Ayo Bankole, Judith Bush, and

Sadek H. Samaan, "The Yoruba Master Drummer," *African Arts,* 8 (1975), 48–56, 77–78; Paul Berliner, *The Soul of Mbira: Music and Traditions of the Shona People of Zimbabwe* (Berkeley, 1978).

6   See Charles Cutter, "The Politics of Music in Mali," *African Arts,* 1 (1968), 38–39, 74–77; Roderic Knight, "Music in Africa: The Manding Contexts," in *Performance Practice,* ed. G. Béhague (London, 1984), pp. 53–90; Gordon Innes, *Sunjata: Three Mandinka Versions* (London, 1974).

7   Regarding the Dagbamba of northern Ghana, for example, see John Miller Chernoff, "Music-Making Children of Africa," *Natural History,* 88 (1979), 68–75; John Miller Chernoff, "The Drums of Dagbon," in *Repercussions: A Celebration of African-American Music,* ed. Geoffrey Haydon and Dennis Marks (London, 1985), pp. 101–25; Christine Oppong, *Growing Up in Dagbon* (Accra-Tema, Ghana, 1973).

8   See John Miller Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms* (Chicago, 1979); Robert Farris Thompson, *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act in the Collection of Katherine Coryton White* (Los Angeles, 1974).

9   Jones, *Studies in African Music, passim.*

10   See A. M. Jones, "African Rhythm," *Africa,* 24 (1954), 26–47.

11   Jones, "African Rhythm," p. 41.

12   Robert Farris Thompson, "An Aesthetic of the Cool: West African Dance," *African Forum,* 2 (1966), 93–94.

13   Thompson, "An Aesthetic of the Cool," *passim.*