Introduction: Sub-Saharan African music

Africa is a vast continent, with the Sahara Desert covering much of north Africa. It now has a population of 1.3 billion people, with nearly 3000 ethnic groups and 1000 distinct languages. Throughout history, social and economic interaction and interchange among ethnic groups, and European colonisation since the nineteenth century, have shaped African politics, religion and culture. Following European colonial rule, English, French and Portuguese are spoken widely in many countries. From the 1500s to the 1800s the slave trade resulted in a great outward movement of around 10 million people from West and Central Africa to the Americas. With such expanse and diversity, music in Africa is far from homogeneous. Yet it is possible to speak of unifying features of African music, with widespread commonalities shared across the continent. In Africa, music is closely bound with social life, religion, politics and economics. Work life, everyday activities, and rituals are accompanied by singing, music and dance, which take place mostly outdoors.

In the past, imperial courts supported musicians, who also served as historians through story-telling, and as ritualists or healers. Familial lineages of musicians are common, with musical knowledge passed on from father to son. Music specialists were also attached to social groups such as the hunters, warriors' associations or ritual societies. These have their own distinct forms of music that they perform in connection with their ceremonies and other activities. Non-professional musicians also exist in many societies; music is learned through social experience, exposure to musical situations and participation.

The types of instruments used in different regions and by different ethnic groups in Africa vary greatly. However, similar families of instruments can be found, although they may show local characteristics in design, construction and name. For example, rhythmic instruments such as rattles, metal bells, castanets, cymbals and drums are found throughout Africa. Melody instruments such as xylophones, zithers, lutes, flutes, reed pipes and horns are played in many societies but they exist in different forms, shapes and sizes. Very often in African music, musical sounds that do not produce definite pitch are heard. For example, the buzzing of bottle caps, beads or shells attached to the sides of drums or sounding board of melodic instruments provide rhythmic texture and add to the instrument's array of sounds.

Although each society and ethnic group in Africa may have distinct ways of organising their instrumental and vocal music, there are some musical traits that characterise sub-Saharan African music in general.

One of the most distinctive characteristics of sub-Saharan African music is its rich and complex organisation of rhythm. Lines of music are rhythmically independent in terms of their strong and weak beats, resulting in polyrhythm. A common device is an ostinato, the principal beats of which may or may not coincide with the principal beats of the other lines in the texture. The ostinato helps to maintain a consistent and steady time flow, particularly in an ensemble of percussionists.

In sub-Saharan African music, pentatonic and hexatonic scales are very common, although heptatonic scales are also found in abundance. There is a wide tolerance of pitch variation for the steps of the scale.

African melodies tend to move downwards and are short and repetitive, with frequent use of intervals of seconds, thirds and fourths. In story-telling traditions, vocal melodies usually conform to the rise and fall of speech tones, although some vocal styles may make deliberate use of melodic leaps.

Melodic ostinato features strongly in many types of African music. Recurring melodic patterns are often found in instrumental or vocal parts, though these tend to be varied rather than stay in the same form each time. It is also common to have several ostinato parts layering each other.

Call and response is commonly used. This may take place between vocals or between instrumental and vocal parts. Several types of call and response forms may be found: where the second singer echoes every musical phrase sung by the first singer, or a lead singer begins with a few notes and another singer joins in as soon as possible, joining with the first singer to the end of the phrase or section. In some songs, the response remains virtually the same while the call phrases change.

In African singing, vocal timbre tends to be raspy and tense as chest voice with tight throat is frequently employed. Yodeling or ululating (a high-pitched vocal sound accompanied with a rapid back and forth movement of the tongue and uvula) is also commonly practised, usually by women.

Candidates do not need to study music from the whole of sub-Saharan Africa but should be taught about the instruments and musical features of Kora music and Afrobeat, which are described in the following sections. The instruments or terms specific to this world focus with which candidates should be familiar are printed in bold. Information has been provided on the history and socio-cultural context of this music for the benefit of teachers; candidates should have a general awareness of the background to each style but will not be tested in detail on this.

1 Kora music of West Africa

The ***kora*** harp-lute is the main instrument of the ***jeliya*** praise singer tradition of the Mande people of West Africa. The homelands of the Mande people span across the modern nations of Mali, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Senegal and Gambia. Today, Bamako is the capital of modern Mali and the heartland of Mande culture. Traditional Mande culture and music, including the art of the *kora*, are preserved and continue to develop both within Mali itself and throughout the former Mande empire.

The *kora* is a 21-stringed long-necked harp-lute. It has a long (about 120–130 cm), straight, hardwood neck that passes through a large half-calabash gourd resonator covered by a leather soundboard. The strings, running perpendicular to the face of the instrument, pass through notches on the side of a high bridge and are anchored to the bottom of the neck with a metal ring. On a *kora*, the longer, thicker strings are physically above the shorter, thinner strings. For a *kora* player, the bass strings are referred to as the 'high' strings, while the treble strings are 'low'.

The instrument is tuned to a seven-tone scale by adjusting the tuning rings along its neck. Traditionally, there are four standard tunings for the *kora*, each with a regional association. Although *kora* players generally agree on the tunings, much variation exists in practice. This allows *kora* players to collaborate with other African or Western instruments, the latter becoming common today as African musicians are more visible on the international music scene.

The performer sits to play the instrument, resting the *kora* on his lap or with the tailpiece resting on the floor. Two stick handles placed on either side of the neck are gripped to keep the instrument vertical. The performer plucks the strings using the right-hand forefingers and thumbs. The fingers play a treble melody while the thumbs create a bass line. Two- to four-note chords, rapid scale passages with fingers or thumbs in alternation, octave doubling, brushed chords strummed by one finger and damped notes are also possible. The musician may tap on the stick handles or the gourd resonator to add a percussive sound. Often, a metal plate punctured with metal ringlets is attached to the bridge. These vibrate with the vibrations of the strings, producing a 'buzzing' timbre.

Musical Features

The *kora* is part of the *jeliya* praise-singing tradition; the performer either accompanies himself in the singing, or the instrument may be played by other members of the family.

Instrumental parts

In the *jeliya* praise-singing tradition, there are two sections in the performance by the *kora*: ***kumbengo*** and ***birimintingo***. The *kumbengo* section is a repetitive ostinato pattern with a steady rhythm. The melody of this part is typically derived from the vocal line. Subtle variations in the *kumbengo* melody may occur with each repetition. The role of the *kumbengo* is to establish the tonal and metric framework of a piece. The steady, repetitive nature of the melody also allows the *kora* performer to focus their thoughts on the texts or on the audience. The performer may at times knock on the handgrip with the right forefinger to produce a percussive sound but a more common technique, referred to as the ***konkon***, is tapped on the back of the *kora* by an apprentice or another person.

The *birimintingo* section is characterised by fast, virtuosic improvisatory runs and sequential motifs. These may be inserted when the *kumbengo* breaks, or it may be played while the ostinato is sustained in the lower parts by the thumbs, creating layers of polyphony.

Vocal part

Several styles of verbal presentation may be found in one performance: speech-like performance for storytelling, a recitative-like style for formulaic praises and proverbs, and melodious singing. The *jeli's* praises usually descend, starting high and falling to a sustained note at the end of the phrase. The text-setting tends to be syllabic with little or no melisma. Vocal phrases are fairly free rhythmically; they may be separated by instrumental sections, allowing the singer to collect his or her thoughts. The vocal timbre is one of forceful chest resonance sung with a tensed throat.

Two forms can be found in the vocal part: *donkilo* and *sataro*. *Donkilo* is a tune with several phrases of text, while *sataro* is an open-ended, improvised passage of spoken or chanted text. After a section of *sataro*, a singer may return to the *donkilo* or give way for an instrumental break.

Text

Although the texts of *jeliya* praise songs may relate to a specific individual, they also deal with the history of the Mandinka people. Through the *jeliya* tradition, Mandinka history and events are passed down the generations.

The *Jeliya* Tradition

The *jeli* (pl. *jelilu*), also known by the French term *griot*, is a class of professional hereditary music specialists. They are musicians born into the tradition; boys inherit their father's craft as a lifelong profession while young women marry within their fathers' occupational group. Female *jeli* do not play melodic instruments but are highly trained singers.

In the past, the *jeli* served a specific patron, such as a royal family, an important official, a wealthy merchant or a particular occupational group. Their duty was to serve their patron by singing praises in their honour. Since colonial times, with the change to the social structure of traditional society, the tradition has changed. Few families can afford their own *jeli*. Today, political leaders or anyone with wealth may become patrons. *Jelilu* today perform at weddings, political events and naming ceremonies. They are highly respected for their knowledge and musical artistry, providing a vital link to the culture of the past. The *jelilu* are gifted with money by the person praised. As there are no longer supported by a single patron, serving a broader clientele enables a *jeli* to earn a living.

2 Afrobeat – popular music of West Africa

Popular music in West Africa is an urban phenomenon that emerged during the early decades of the twentieth century. It is the culmination of social, historical and political processes which began with European colonisation and Christian missionary activities. Furthermore, trans-national movement of returning slaves from the West Indies, the Caribbean and Britain brought musical styles such as jazz, swing, calypso and rhumba, and cha-cha-cha into Africa. These became fused with traditional African music, resulting in the development of styles of popular music such as Palm-wine guitar music, Highlife and Juju. These were mostly accessible to the European ruling elite and rising middle class. But it was the migrant working class who served as the conduit in the acculturation of indigenous and Western idioms and the dissemination of popular music among the wider populace, fostering a new African modernity.

Afrobeat[1] fuses earlier West African popular music styles such as **Highlife**, which has Western **jazz** and Afro-Latin influences, with American **soul** and **funk** and traditional African music elements. Shaped by the Nigerian-born Fela Kuti (1938–1997) in the late 1970s and 1980s, Afrobeat gained widespread popularity in Nigeria and was a huge influence in the dance music of West Africa throughout the 1980s.

Fela Kuti grew up in colonial Nigeria, influenced by Western values. He learnt Western music theory and piano in school and in his late teens got into the music of jazz, Highlife and Juju in the Lagos music club scene. In 1957, he left for London to study at Trinity College of Music. On returning to Nigeria in 1963, he formed a band called Koola Lobitos, playing fusion jazz-Highlife music. After encountering Black Power activism and the sounds of American jazz and funk, Fela Kuti was inspired to explore his African identity in 1970. He called his new sound 'Afrobeat' and began fusing his music with traditional African elements.

Fela Kuti's music influenced many musicians in West Africa and beyond. Today, through Afrobeat artists such as Tony Allen, drummer in Fela Kuti's band Africa '70 and one of the co-founders of the genre, Femi and Seun Kuti, sons of Fela Kuti and US-based Nigerian artist Abass Akeju, the genre continues to be very popular internationally.

Musical Features

Instrumentation

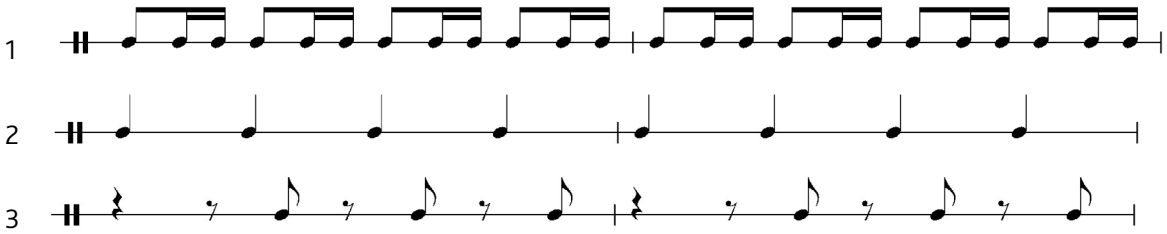
Afrobeat bands feature a large ensemble of Western instruments, including electric lead guitar, electric bass, electric keyboard or organ, and a 'horn section' of trumpets, alto, tenor, baritone and bass saxophones and trombones. In addition to a drum kit with cymbals, traditional African percussion instruments are used, including conga drums, maracas, metal agogo, wood block and **shèkèrè** (gourd rattle). The lead singer may also play an instrumental solo, typically on trumpet, saxophone or keyboard, while a chorus of singers and dancers provide backing.

Texture, timbre and rhythm

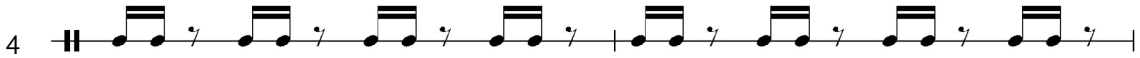
The textural and timbral characteristics of Afrobeat are reflected in the bright sounds of the horn section, playing sometimes in unison and also syncopated melody lines. The percussion instruments emphasise the pulse and complex interlocking polyrhythm. The saxophone and trumpet engage in call and response form at times. The chorus, too, perform in a responsorial form. Electric guitars play chopping rhythmic figures and all the different parts combine in layers.

1 'Afrobeats' should not be confused with 'Afrobeat'. The former was coined by London DJ Abrantee in 2011. It has become an umbrella term that incorporates Highlife, Juju music, Fela Kuti's Afrobeat and other West African popular music fused with hip-hop and house music.

Rhythm is one of the most defining features of Afrobeat music. Its organisational principles reveal three complementary layers: bottom, middle and top. The bottom layer is made up of interlocking electric bass and bass-drum patterns; the middle layer is played by the rhythm guitar, congas and a snare back beat; and the top layer, played by the wood block and shèkèrè, provides ostinato patterns. Three variations of the rhythm played by the shèkèrè can be identified in many Afrobeat songs:



The wood block typically plays the following semiquaver ostinato pattern, which is central to Afrobeat rhythm:



Instrumental and vocal melody and harmony

The horn section plays in unison or provides short melodic riffs to support the lead vocals; individual instruments may also play improvised solos. The vamping guitars frequently use seventh and dominant ninth chords, revealing a jazz influence. African polytonality is also common, with the rhythm section staying near one tonal centre while the horn section plays a fourth or fifth away.

Afrobeat song melodies tend to be short, simple and repetitive. The melody is based on the Western diatonic tonal system but African chants and folk tunes also influence the music, particularly the use of the pentatonic scale, and the characteristic call and response between the chorus and lead singer, which adds to the traditional African feel.

Song text and lyrical contents

Note to teachers – not all Afrobeat lyrics are appropriate for playing in class. You are advised to listen to the content carefully first.

At the time when Fela Kuti was shaping his style of Afrobeat, Nigeria had recently gained independence. As the country flourished, due to the discovery of oil in the late 1950s, corruption in the government was rife. It was in this context that Fela Kuti decided to use Afrobeat music to challenge the ruling elite. The themes in Afrobeat song lyrics reflect everyday life in Lagos, depicting different aspects of African problems. They also include didactic lyrics denouncing anti-social behaviour or lyrics that explore African self-determination. Kuti also engages his audience with lengthy talks and social comment. This section of the performance is known as the ***Yabis***, a talking segment in which Fela gets the attention of the audience through dialogue. This established his reputation as a fearless rebel. Fela Kuti's acts of challenging the government led to his music being banned on air and he was regularly harassed, arrested and imprisoned. Today, subversive themes are still a part of Afrobeat songs.

Fela Kuti wrote his lyrics in Yoruba and in pidgin English, the lingua franca of urban Nigerians. Using pidgin English made his songs more widely understood outside Nigeria. His song lyrics are often short, mirroring his short, simple melodies.