

Composers and Songs

Composers and Society

Songs play a vitally important role in African society; like many things about African life, however, this may be difficult to fully appreciate at first. A song might be a political advertisement, a call for social justice, a taunt to an adversary, an act of courtship, a cheer, a punishment, a boast, a memorial, a prank, a petition for higher wages, a memorial to great deeds, a demonstration of respect, a history lesson, a call to revolution, a reminder to wear condoms ... you get the idea. Practically everything worth doing in Africa has some sort of music associated with it, and every music has its songs. From peasants to politicians, everyone knows that songs are often the best way to reach people.

All of this makes song composers very important people in the scheme of things, and begins to explain why they command such respect. In Western culture, the politicians and social activists must be master media manipulators, because their messages are delivered to the people through television, radio, newspapers, and the like. In West Africa, the movers and shakers of people and ideas must use composers or be composers themselves to get their ideas across, because music is the prime medium and composers are the masters of that medium.

In a larger sense, the composer's role in African society is to create an image of a good and desirable life – not so much reflecting the life that people actually lead, but rather an ideal that everyone can aspire to. In a process refined by countless generations, these social visionaries and their idealistic images are put to work constantly reevaluating and redefining society's most critical assumptions and values. In the normal course of dance-drumming activities, the entire town helps to define the desirable attributes of communal life, then actively molds its citizens to conform to these ideals of ethics and behavior.

Here's how it works. Composers rise to the rank by their ability to move and inspire people, and by the potency of their ideas. The composer's visions are presented to the community in the form of new songs. A process of natural selection weeds out songs which have a weak message or which people find disagreeable; these simply won't get sung. On the other hand, songs which achieve widespread popularity are sung repeatedly in social and religious settings. Their messages are absorbed at an early age by young audiences. Lyrics remembered from childhood return to mind later in life to guide and encourage the developing individual, and eventually to change the very fabric of society.

Common Song Themes

What kinds of songs do composers write in Africa? There is no fixed answer to that question because African traditions are always evolving. We can learn something, however, by exploring a body of traditional songs for common subjects. Although each song has its own creative life, songs with these themes seem especially popular and occur repeatedly in this book:

- **Enthusiasm songs** – Cheers and exhortations to liven a performance.
Let's be lively and enjoy ourselves, we'll be at our best today. We'll dance and play with energy and vitality. Everyone will be proud of our fine performance.
- **We are sanctioned songs** – Confidence-building and self-congratulations.
We will do what we have planned. The most important people say we're doing a good job. If you don't wish us success, why not go somewhere and die?
- **Morale and self-esteem songs** – Finding dignity in the face of adversity.
These outsiders see us as animals, as some kind of dirt. Our splendid heritage and civilized ways make them look like barbarians, but they can't appreciate that. We follow our irreproachable ancestors; there is nothing wrong with us.
- **Personal growth songs** – Proverbs that guide individual development.
Turn obstacles into stepping stones. Keep your insides as clean as your outsides. Tend to the little things for a spiritual life.
- **Ethical conduct songs** – Social lessons repeated often, but without naming individuals (although a small town may have a particular offender in mind).
Don't commit adultery. Don't be stingy about money. Care for the needy. Don't be a gossip. Don't laugh at a neighbor's misfortune.
- **Castigation songs** – Somebody has done something atrocious and is mentioned by name. The offender will hear the song everywhere (if it's good) and will be forced to leave town. The ultimate form of African social justice. *Kayiboe has molested a child. Can you believe what some people will do?*
- **Religious instruction songs** – Rules for various ritual situations.
Perform rituals faithfully. Do them correctly to ensure our future. When this pattern of seeds is cast, take the following action. After this, you must do that.
- **Altered state songs** – Ritual chants which induce various spiritual states.
We will enter a spiritual state to protect ourselves from weapons (or other less tangible forms of assault). The evil will pass over us but have no effect.
- **Leadership / role model songs** – Praise for great leaders present and past.
We are inspired by our great leaders. Look at Hede, see how he helps us. Or: Where are the great leaders of the past, now that we really need them?
- **Mourning songs** – Commissioned for the funerals of important individuals.
Here lies the casket of a fine man. The house of a great warrior is left vacant.

- **Political action songs** – Calls to arms that rally the people to fight injustice.
Let's work together to overthrow corruption and greed. Our songs are a sharp axe that can fell the most deeply rooted trees.
- **Classic war songs** – These prepare warriors for battle, intimidate the enemy.
We are fierce, we are strong. We know our land, they don't. There is no way they can win. We will crush them in battle. Don't come to war unless you are ready to fight like a warrior.
- **Next-generation war songs** – Moving beyond war, preparing to wage peace.
It's easy to shout and boast, but think of the consequences of what you're saying. If war comes, you'll soon be shaking with fear. Cool down, think it over.

These categories are listed merely to help you get started. As I hope you'll see, each song has some indescribable quality that sets it apart from the rest. They are as unique and uncommon as the composers who created them.

Form and Function

Virtually every song involves some sort of *call and response* between a song leader and the community. This is not only true of songs, but of the dance and music as well. A song leader, lead dancer or master drummer will make a call or a gesture, and others are expected to respond immediately with a new chorus, dance movement or supporting drum pattern. This is, by the way, a reflection of *how* African society works and an important aspect of *why* it works. The responsibilities of leadership and also of good follower-ship are reinforced through musical traditions simply because, as in life, everything requires cooperation to succeed. Both effective leaders and attentive followers emerge from this lifelong training to fill the roles that tradition has defined for them.

Paradoxically, the greatest creativity in African art (some would say in all art) emerges from following rigid traditional guidelines. *Eve* songs in particular frequently use a standard form (AABBA), or some close variation of it, to great advantage. A typical song begins with an intriguing statement (A) which grabs your interest but is somehow puzzling or incomplete. This first statement is begun by the leader and finished by the chorus. Soon the meaning is clarified or at least elaborated by a second statement (B), again split by the leader and chorus. There is always a reiteration of the initial statement at the end (A), this time sung by the entire group, as though it were being reconsidered or reinforced in light of the center section. It is a wonderfully effective form which has spawned thousands of potent and stylish creations.