

“Hearing” in West African Idioms

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In West African research, the concept of “hearing” defines an interesting metaphoric complex that is, perhaps, more often bewildering than serviceable. There are certainly many ways in which I have had to consider the connotations of the verb “to hear” in my research. Early during my work in Ghana, I found the peculiarities of Ghanaian English to be an avenue for me to get ideas about culture, in the same way that Ghanaian use of English is a vehicle for Ghanaians to transport local culture into another idiom (Sey 1973). There were quite a few words and phrases that were used in ways I never had heard before, and although I was not sophisticated about linguistics, I knew enough to figure that I could take these various usages as something like literal translations of words in indigenous languages, particularly when I was with people who were not totally fluent in English. Apart from idiomatic English that had become standard among those who had a secondary or university education, there was fertile ground in the Ghanaian type of Pidgin as well as in the English that were common among people who were either uneducated or who were educated up to middle school.

Their use of the word “hear” was one of the first to bewilder me. A friend and I were being served food, and when I smiled as the bowl was uncovered, my friend said, “Do you hear the scent?” The critiques of Western epistemology as being visually oriented instead of being tactile or aural are now part and parcel of any humanistic education, but at the time I could not figure out the underlying idea of how one can hear a scent. Nonetheless, in Ghana, when something smells, one doesn’t smell it; one hears it. Evidently, the word “hear” can be used in the broadest consideration as meaning “to sense” or “to perceive.” Such is the case in the two Ghanaian languages with which I am familiar, Akan Twi and Dagbani, and a Ga dictionary tells me that it is the same in that language. I assume the broad usage is even more widespread because I noticed it with people from just about every corner of the country, and indeed, I have noted most of the connotations I discuss in this article among nonliterate and semi-literate friends and associates speaking English or French in several other countries in the region.

Among the first uses of the word “hear” foreigners may encounter is the question, “Do you hear such-and-such a language?” The question is not about auditory percep-

tion or about the ability to distinguish the different tongues; rather, the question means "Can you understand such-and-such a language?" The question generally implies understanding a language when people are speaking it. In contrast, although I can read Spanish, I cannot understand it when people speak it; nonetheless, if a Ghanaian friend asked me if I could "hear" Spanish, I would probably answer the question affirmatively, if somewhat ambiguously. In the Ghanaian context, the notion of "understanding" is the major attribute of "hearing." In a complementary manner, "understanding" implies acceptance or agreement, that is, that an idea or an expression has entered into one's mind. The Twi phrase "*wo te?*"—or "you hear?"—is used in much the same way we might say "OK?" or "Are you with me?"

The Dagbani *wum* also carries that meaning, linking "hearing" to "understanding" and "learning." A person who learns the truth "hears" the truth. In Dagbani, *wum* also means "listen" with the implication of "to heed" and "to obey," in the sense that "I have heard you" would mean "I will do as you say." Conversely, someone who "doesn't hear what people say" is a person who does not receive instructions or admit advice, and the connection to "understanding" is evident in the phrase's application not only to stubborn people but also to people suffering from madness or to small children who are "not sensible." In these contexts, there thus are two complementary connotations. "Hearing" implies affirmative understanding, and "hearing" also implies receptive perception or sensing through the various faculties of feeling, tasting or smelling in addition to auditory perception. The word *wum* is even tied to the word *nyagsim*, pleasure or a pleasant taste, so that *wum nyagsim* means "to be pleased," literally, "to hear the sweetness."

Those of us who study music in such African contexts may have encountered this broad conception of "hearing" in both our research and our teaching. In the latter, we frequently must struggle to get our students to "hear" the music, and the problem is particularly acute when teaching students to perform in an African idiom. Many such students cannot "hear" the music in the sense of perceiving the rhythmic organization. They cannot find the main beat or know how to relate their part to the other parts. A particularly challenging task is for them to find a four-beat pulse in a 12/8 pattern. I normally spend what seems to me an inordinate amount of time on this problem, which is only resolved if the students learn to keep the four-beat with their foot while playing a triple-time part. If they cannot learn to do that, they almost always lose their place in the music. We might say that the students who cannot stay in time with the music cannot "hear" the music.

How are they supposed to "hear" the music? Africanist ethnomusicology contains an extended debate on this question. Part of the issue reflects the alienation or anxiety with which Westerners or non-Africans have responded to African music, that is, claiming to hear either a monotonous or a cacophonous jumble of sound. Racism has no doubt affected many people's inclination to listen, or perhaps made them want to shut the music out of their hearing, and we have all seen the stereotypical movies in which "jungle" beats drive people crazy. Efforts to describe African music more favorably have affirmed with self-conscious irony whatever level of evidence

the stereotypes offer: the rhythmic dynamics that have confused some listeners are typically described as based on counterrhythmic tensions and rhythmic conflict. Such descriptions project an aesthetic goal of maintaining balance, epitomized in a dancer's ability to embody rhythmic complexity in movements that highlight the parts of an ensemble.

The practical problems of describing African music, often met and developed particularly within issues of transcription, have complemented the problem of hearing with the problem of representation. The most common resolution is the one often chosen by novice musicians: such efforts begin by finding the lowest common denominator, that is, the fastest pulse upon which all the various notes can be placed, and then by choosing a convenient duple meter like 4/4 or 12/8. Sticking to duple-time is a sensible choice because dancers have two feet. What is potentially inhibited by the fastest-pulse approach is a sense of longer rhythmic movements or phrasing and larger organizing cycles, to say nothing of generative linguistic and stylistic elements. This latter approach would tend to locate rhythmic units through the longer timing of antiphonal phrasing, that is, call and response. Hearing an ensemble as a whole, however, is precisely the problem of newcomers and those who cannot find a basic rhythmic handle, for whom the shortest-pulse approach provides a way into the rhythmic structure.

Researchers in most African idioms have found that the local vocabulary for discussing rhythms has very little to do with the metric factors discussed in the preceding paragraph. Among Dagbamba musicians, I noted what I consider a significant use of the notion of "hearing" the music, even though the usage contained another ambiguous reference. I was trying to gather descriptions of vocal music, and I was surprised by the application of the word "clear" to describe the voice of a certain singer whose voice was throaty and gravely and rough; he had the type of voice we sometimes hear from blues singers. The word "clear" was also applied to another singer whose voice was high-pitched and piercing, almost nasal. The notion of clarity in that context did not refer to vocal qualities. The common thread in the descriptions of these two singers, I was told, was that one could "hear" them well. Clarity and hearing were thus linked, as in other contexts, to the notion of understanding: that one could hear them well meant that one could easily understand and get the meaning of the words they were singing. Again, too, understanding was related to perception: because of the clarity of the voices, one could hear them from a distance, though again the idea is that one could make out the words. A singer does not need to sing loudly to be considered good; one can go closer to a singer with a soft voice. With regard to singing, I was given the example of somebody talking behind me: the sound of that person's voice might make me turn around to see who was talking, whereas somebody else might be talking and I would not turn around. The description was refined with the observation that a singer's voice could become clearer if he or she became more knowledgeable about the songs, thus to sing so that the words would come out comprehensibly, and the listeners would "catch" them. When my African associates talked about singing, and quite frequently when they talked about

drumming, it seemed clear that what they were hearing was words. Hearing "clearly" thus refers to the facility of perception, but more specifically to the facility of the perception of meaning.

Typically, there is hardly even much vocabulary at all to discuss musical structure in a way that answers the question of how the music is to be heard. A metaphor of hearing, for example, is not normally used to describe the loudness of music. Dagbamba drummers, like musicians in many other African societies, use the notions of "high" and "low," with which we discuss pitch, to describe music that is loud or quiet. They use the concept of "hot" to describe drumming that is intense, fast, or loud, and they use the concept of "cool" to describe drumming that is moderate in speed and intensity, or that lays back in the rhythmic groove. Music that is "thick" is music that is dense not in terms of sound but in terms of meaning, in the sense that a bush with many branches is thick or a proverb with many ambiguous applications or many historical allusions is thick. Music is "clean" when there is no confusion among the musicians or with the leader. Music "curves" when the rhythms change.

These kinds of metaphors do not easily lend themselves to Western descriptive terminology. This lack of fit sometimes reminds me of von Hornbostel's well-known statement seventy years ago (1928:53) radically contrasting African and Western rhythmic conceptions: "We proceed from hearing, they from motion." What Hornbostel meant was that he thought African drummers mark their time from the action of lifting a stick preceding a sounded beat, as if they were counting from the beginning of their motion, but counting nonetheless. I am not sure how much credit to give Hornbostel for focusing on rhythmic conception through what he perceived as a lifting movement in playing technique, for I do not know whether he may have thought through his idea to extend it to dancers. Taken out of context, though, the statement makes a strange kind of sense. Movement is the key to "hearing" the music. If the music relinquishes its relation to movement, it abandons its participatory potential. Western students who are trying to master their parts in an African drum ensemble are never solid in their playing unless they learn to move their bodies with the beat while they play their parts. Some might be able to hang on for a while with pure musicianship, but if the music speeds up a bit (or more likely, when Western novices are playing, slows down), their lack of relationship to the ensemble and the flow of the beat becomes evident because they either stay where they are or they have to stop and reorient themselves. When they keep time with body movement while they play their off-beat pattern, however, they are more like dancers.

Normally, one can look to dancers to know the appropriate time-sense of a piece of music. The feet step on the four beats of a measure or on the first and third. Marking the main beats with movement, say, as "one" and "three," a dancer—or a dancing drummer—establishes a dynamic relationship to the other rhythms, grounding them, so to speak. The meter is defined by beats that are not emphasized or played by the musicians precisely to make room for dancers or participants to add their presence and complete the music. While their feet mark the downbeats, the rest of their bodies may relate to the various counterrhythms or accentuated offbeats of the ensemble.

What one hears in African drumming, as I noted in *African Rhythm and African Sensibility* (1979), is a rhythmic organization that anchors participation through dancing or movement, through sounds that leave open gaps that support the potential interrelationship of the musicians and the dancers. Hornbostel may have been more on target than he realized with his observation about lifting as a defining motion: the sounded notes rather lift the dancers up, and we see the sounds carried by other parts of the body, by the shoulders and head, by the hips, or as we know from jazz, by the fingers snapping on the "two" and the "four" beats. But the downbeat is still on the "one."

Again, the preceding description uses the broader connotation of "hearing" to imply demonstrated comprehension as a companion to receptive perception. How the music is actually heard will probably remain a mystery, and efforts to investigate the phenomenology of perception are generally forced and unproductive: the vocabulary is not there, and people do not seem concerned enough with the issue to try to talk about it. What is more likely is that we might infer how they listen through observations, like those above, of behavior in musical contexts. How successful those inferences are is an open question. We shall have little if any direct evidence to extend our own concerns with what the music sounds like into a conception of how the music is supposed to be "heard" by African musicians and audiences. There may be some people who will try to discuss the processes of perception, but again, it is likely that their testimony, like ours, is motivated by an application of Western scholarly conceptions.

In context, when my African associates wondered whether I "heard" the music, they were asking whether I could respond to the music: Did I know the meaning of what I was playing? Did I know the dance? When you "hear" the music, you "understand" it with a dance. The music "moves" you or makes you "move." A drummer talked about beating to make the dancers happy and make their bodies strong to dance well, to let the drumming go "through" their bodies. An associate who was with us elaborated that one would beat "through to" the dancers so that their bodies would be "enlightened." "Hearing" music, like "hearing" a language or "hearing" the truth or "hearing" the scent of a soup, refers to perception as a form of recognition. A Dagbamba drummer whom I thought at first to be a virtuoso was criticized at one point in his career for having a wrist that was too fast. His fault was something like mumbling when singing: even though his technique was immaculate and what he played was in perfect time, people listening felt that his playing was not clear; he lost the "feeling" of the particular dance beat he was playing, and what he played began to sound like other dances.

Sometimes, my teachers used to tell me to listen to this or that aspect of some music I was learning, but they were not telling me how the music should be heard. The parts or the instruments I was advised to listen to varied from dance to dance, and focusing on one or another is the pathway to participatory or percussive individuality. What they were pointing to in each instance was just something I might hear in relation to my part, with the implication that if I heard the other part, I might know my

own better. Similarly, in *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*, I described a situation when I was trying to record the parts of a piece individually so that I could learn them better. My teacher found it very difficult to play without a counterrhythm, and he complained that he could not "hear" his part without another part. He needed something to play against in relation to what he was playing. If anything, therefore, in multipart music, I believe that musicians "hear" or listen to other parts: their own parts are the responsive movement to what they hear. In the incident in the book where I describe the time when I finally played a drum very well, what I was hearing was not the sound of my own drum but that of my counterplayer. Looking at African musicians, we have designated probably two different images as icons of concentration. One image, as in the incident I described above, displays the musician looking directly at another musician, or at the ensemble, or at a dancer or a spectator. The other image might seem dissimilar: it shows the musician with his head raised slightly and turned over his shoulder, with his eyes closed and mouth drawn; the key to this second image, I would suggest, is that the musician's ear is turned to the music.

It is not that an auditory connotation of "hearing" is absent in West African research. People I knew talked about the texture of music, referring to the way that rattles or various buzzing implements enhanced the music and made it "nice." They talked about feeling the physical vibrations that emanated from the instruments. They could discuss the qualities of someone's voice or the qualities of someone's playing, and they praised someone who could bring out the full range of an instrument's voice. But by and large, their terminology was mainly focused on effects, on clarity and identification. Listening to drumming in the distance, a friend may say that he or she "hears" the drumming, but the immediate qualifier will be either the name of the drumming or the statement, "I hear it but I can't make it out." Again, "hearing" as broadly conceived sense perception is typically linked to "hearing" as accommodating or receptive understanding.

We have come a long way to be able to perceive the polyrhythms in African music, and we can justifiably represent a piece of music as a delicately structured combination of interrelated rhythmic parts. Each of the multiple parts provides a perspective or a way into the piece, adding complexity and interest. If I were asked to connect the extended West African conception of hearing with our more narrow one, to answer the question of what manifest sounds people respond to, I might be tempted to eschew the ideas that they are listening to the whole complex at once or to particular rhythmic lines, and I would look again at movement. Even after nearly thirty years of playing African music, I am reluctant to hazard a guess about what people hear when they are listening to music. I do know that I myself might focus temporarily on a particular part in percussive relation, but mainly I hear a very basic and unembellished rhythmic movement, something like an emergent composite of the lowest pitched and most palpable vibrations of the music. I "hear" this fundamental beat in the sense that I feel it. It is not necessarily tied to a particular part or instrument like a bell or any other of the instruments that are sometimes designated as time-keepers. It might be described as a characteristic feeling or an abstraction or an essence of each

beat, what you hear of drumming a mile away, or from around the corner, yet it is something that makes a piece or an idiom identifiable as itself. Even as the various rhythms and solo styles change from ensemble to ensemble or group leader to group leader or even from generation to generation, the beat remains recognizable. If the particular rhythm I'm beating has a meaning, and I know it, I will be listening to the words while my body responds to the basic rhythmic movement.

At this point, I believe that in West African research, we have very limited methodological resources for any search for an auditory phenomenology of hearing. The metaphor of "hearing" has many connotations in West African idioms, and we should be alert to its interpretive potential even while we acknowledge that its definition is rarely clearcut in our descriptions or translations. We spend time learning how to hear the music for ourselves, breaking it down and thinking our way into it. We often have documented that process in classrooms and publications, primarily with the objective of explaining the music to people who are similarly as unfamiliar with the music as we were when we first began learning about it. Obviously, such work serves its purpose, but frequently, it happens that that process later becomes an obstacle, for we can abdicate the mission of recognizing other levels of meaning to which people in West Africa allude when they talk about the way they experience music.

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