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Apollinaire Anakesa

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ABOUT THE INSTRUMENTAL WORD IN SUB-SAHARAN MUSIC

By Apollinaire ANAKESA KULULUKA
CRILLASH (EA 4095) -ADECAM équipe interne
Université des Antilles

Sub-Saharan music results from the spoken language/instrumental language relation, directed by an oral culture. In this culture, these languages transmit – beyond their singularities – messages thanks to either a coded signal known by the linguistic community or previously defined among a group of individuals or is used as a true meta-language copied on the articulated and usual language used every day. Here, an instrumental musical speech can then imitate and reproduce the tonal inflexions of the language to make its matter understandable. This fact is the natural result of a strong interaction and interrelation between the spoken language and the music as well as the conception that the Africans of South Sahara have of it. As a matter of fact, one can notice that, in most of their languages, there is not a word to designate the term music itself in the exclusive meaning of the art of technically and aesthetically organizing sounds. On the other hand, a word or group of words express the word *music* as a concept with multiple strata. This concept underlying the very tight link between the musical fact and the Word, the musical act then carries a communicative importance equal to the one in a spoken language. Thus, the musician is supposed not to play –in the first meaning of the word – his instrument but to make it “speak”. When the instrument is used to accompany the singing, it generally follows adequately the tonal inflexions of the spoken language. Outside of this performance situation, it keeps its ability to deliver, by itself or with other instruments, some coded messages, rather understandable only by initiated peoples. The famous African drummed language¹ derives from this. It is a language not limited to the drums only. Its action expands to every instrumental act, including the voice, a language that I call the instrumental Word.

What concept rules such a language? What treatment is language subjected to in the affectation of its components in the musical discourse of to the instrumental Word and vice versa? What are the technical, contextual and expressive parameters that underlie, determine and contribute to the distinctive goals of the speech? These are some of the major questions to which I the author try to bring elements of answers to clear up this subject.

To better define the notion of instrumental word and to understand its essence, I will start from the postulate according to which there is no musical instrument, as automated as it can be, that can produce a sound if not by its mechanism put in action by the hands or the lips of a musician. The voice lent to the speaking instrument in Africa obeys to the same physical law. However, in this case, this voice depends on a concept which multi-factorial conception deserves some detailed explications. These explanations will enlighten its arcane starting from the basic principles that rule the Word, the music and the musical instrument. These principles are intertwined at different levels of the realization of the linguistic or musical language thanks to the sound.

With this point of view, let us first notice that in Sub-Saharan Africa, but elsewhere as well, mainly in the oral tradition societies, the Word is an active principle and the origin of any creation in the broad meaning of the word. From this principle is born and grown a life as well as varied forms of communication.

¹ On this topic, one can read with profit Simha Arom and Didier Demolin (see bibliography)

Therefore, in Sub-Saharan civilizations, the Word acquires a great importance as it is everything and everything dwells inside it. In addition, it never gets lost as it is eternally kept as it is constantly transforming itself in different ways. Through the vibratory and wave-like power of the sound that enables it and goes through the veil of the understandable language in the physical world, the Word allows a link with the metaphysical universe. It subsumes human traditions and experiences perceived through their symbolisms.

As the driving force of knowledge, the Word comprises an exceptional dimension of the analogies as well, the correspondences and the intimate reciprocities that can be expressed through diverse forms of words. These words are translated, among other things, by a singular poetry that shines across all kinds of images. The latter, endowed with a power of suggestion anchored in the ritual, the myth, as well as in the symbol, are suggested by facts and acts of everyday reality, including the musical ones.

The meaning of these facts is linguistically rendered through some languages that, in Sub-Saharan Africa, are in majority tonal: the meaning of a word varies, in principle, according to the tonality and even the tone given to each syllable. Therefore, every sentence of the spoken speech becomes the sketch of a melody, to the point that the changeover from the talking to the singing often seems imperceptible. The same thing occurs with the instrumental musical speech that, altogether with the spoken word and the sung word, forms an inseparable whole in African social life.

As a matter of fact, in general, the ways of speaking of these languages have a direct influence upon the existing vocal music and instrumental music. The all music that derive from it may not only allow the ceremonies (may they be profane, initiatory or religious) and the rituals to be celebrated, but as well evoke the cosmogonies, the myths and legends to support the work effort, to rhythm the dance, in short to give flesh to the art of life and word. Thus a “musical” word is here linked to a spoken word to give a basis to the singing – in the wide meaning of the term, vocal as well as instrumental – the singing staying then the expression of the people. The underlying sound materials, which constitute at the same time semantic elements, know an organization that produces combinations of a double expression derived from the spoken language and music. It is a typical and coded expression that respects and lies upon a peculiar syntax, one with an appropriate grammar and that, musically, follows the singularities of the form structure, of the genre and the style of the implied music.

These are music which, in Sub-Saharan Africa, are conceived as being the human and animal experience that express the inner order of life. As a consequence, music remains one the major factors that contribute to the regulation of life in a cosmic as well as human and natural environment. Nature is abundant with elements that take part in human life, man, for the African traditionalist, being symbolically a product of Nature, made of water, of blood, of air (breath), of earth and fire (light). Therefore, the acquisition of knowledge of Nature, by the traditionalist, is primordial. According to this conception, the accomplished man is not the one who is able to interpret the codes that rule the language of Nature, which would have as a result to alter some of the principles that could be misunderstood by a non-experienced observer. The accomplished man is the one who knows to read the codes, put another way, who finds the keys that unveil their fundamental reality, so as to master the natural laws, and with them, the purpose resulting from it and that overruns the intelligibility of the linguistic speech.

Music being thus linked with the facts of Nature and Cosmos, it constitutes, in the African culture, a complex entity of interpenetrations of multiple indivisible links that are at the same time internal and external, physical and metaphysical.

This conception of the musical object is issued from an African view of the world that is totally ordered in encased spheres, the one that gets unveiled, once more, thanks to the inexpressible word – the Word - among others, to the cosmogony and myth teller, to the one who tells oracles, legends, fables, proverbs and all kinds of tales, to the sacrifice or the shaman, the man who invokes spirits, but as well to the moralist-craftsman-artist.

In this process, initiation is the ideal setting for the formation of the neophyte, but also for the expansion of the master. It allows access to knowledge, to wisdom and to acquire various immutable values that constitute multiple knowledge that allow to assume with maturity the social responsibilities. Otherwise, the initiation allows to understand the true hidden side of the ethico-artistic symbols.

The objectivation of the underlying word in African spoken and musical languages, from where is issued the sought communication action, is done thanks to oratory and physical gestures with the help of an ensemble of instruments, musical ones. The strength of the signification of this kind of word may vary depending on the circumstances, but as well according to the context, the mean of expression and the situation of its realisation.

The language of the African instrumental word is so a part of this global communication conception. Therefore, along with the words *singing* and *dancing*, one uses – in every African language – expressions or words the meaning of which essentially describes actions: *to do*, *to play*, *to give*, *to recite*, *to speak* or *to tell* an activity, to express the instrumental musical concept, in this case, linked with this activity.

Coded thanks to melodico-rhythmic formulas, the language of the instrumental word is conceived to allow the traditionalist to tell in another way the linguistically explicit talk. It is a double language which messages go unto transcending the plain thinking understandable by the average man. So, these messages belong to different orders: ritual, ceremonial or for entertainment; sacred or profane; public or private; collective or individual.

In this context, the musical instrument is then used, as mentioned earlier, as a language on the lips or between the hands of the instrument player who manipulates it to produce this coded language through appropriate rhythmical sounds. This produces a message that, at first, may be understandable or not. In the latter case, it will constitute a speech or some “words” of a silent language for full of imagery great destinies, which word is often proclaimed in an initiatory way.

One can then understand why, in a great number of African traditional cultures, the sounds of the musical instruments are so closely linked to the spoken voice – and by deduction, to the language – that, sometimes, they are even identified with it. As a matter of fact, some peoples do not differentiate the spoken word and the sound sequences emitted by the instruments as a message. It is the principle of imitation that rules this process, an imitation that needs a technical tour de force and the display of a sometimes-astonishing virtuosity. It particularly happens among the Burundian old women who, to entertain the children, sing while making their lips vibrate between their clasped hands to get the sound of a reed instrument. On the contrary, among the Tuaregs, the singing, reproduced by the instrument, is always accompanied with a silent murmur of the throat, thanks to a mimetic technique with a ludic function called “the song of the soul: *asak dagh iman*”.

Elsewhere, some instruments with bowed strings are conceived to reach a timbre very akin to the one of the human voices.

Musical instruments may be found under a great diversity in Black Africa. Their organological richness comes from the union of different fabrication materials but depends as well on the socio-cultural features of the one who conceived them, generally an expert not only of the traditions of the community to which his product is destined to, but also of the natural environment from where this material has been obtained, as well as of its acoustic properties. The instrument maker possesses a peculiar gift for music and a wisdom that allow him to create a link between the instrument and different cultural, metaphysical and natural elements. This is the reason why, in the forest as well as in the savannah, in the desert or under the ground, in the waters or on their banks, this African instrument maker finds all kinds of plants, animals, metals and even minerals, to do his work. Some of these materials are used under their original form when others are worked upon and reshaped. They all become thereafter cultural objects-beings. They are the musical instruments, the majority of which are anthropomorphic².

The choice of the mentioned materials used for their making and the choice of their components (strings, blades, tongues, sound boxes) and of their shapes are determining not only for the organization of the sound system, the specification of the adopted musical genre and style, as well as their functions, but it also forecasts the verbal language to which the musical language will give birth.

In this process, the ways of tuning these instruments are as well an essential criteria for the future elaboration of the instrumental language. Furthermore, it is important to note that these tuning modes have no preset models as it is the case with the piano for example. Moreover, their acoustic properties as well as the extra-musical elements that are associated with them (myths, ceremonies, rituals or entertainment) underline the pertinence of their usage in the society and allow to appreciate the diversity of the underlying practical and ideological factors. These factors are based on the inter-relational osmosis that one can see between the spoken and the instrumental language, in this case. Here is the testimony of an atypical social phenomenon: the African musical instruments are often assimilated to individuals – male and female – and associated with different social classes, and with them to ways of expressing oneself.

Among the Dogon, the Fulani and the Bambara, for instance, the musical game and the very essence of music are explained in the same way thanks to this concept of male-female complementarity, a conception that obviously has a strong influence on the sound systems of their music and the language that rules them. Thus, the parting into categories of the notes of a musical scale – here considered as the voices of the human language – is based on the nature of the tone colour, the pitch and the intensity of the sound divided into two main compasses (low and high).

On a musical technique level, and in the particular, Dogon use a musical speech in which are suggested these male and female principles which are illustrated through a specific and appropriate way of expression of the instrumental word. On this point, two distinct musical parts are played, either by a “couple” of instruments or by one instrument alone. They are generally drums, iron bells and flutes. In general, the male part is attributed to the right hand and the female one to the left hand. When a “couple” of instruments is playing, the male part is generally performed by the eldest of the talented musicians of the group.

These examples testify and justify the fact that, in African traditional societies, exists a strict repartition and regulation of the use of musical instruments, as well as for the languages that come out from them in precise contexts and situations.

For instance, the bullroarer, very common in Black Africa, is used for initiation rituals where its use follows many rules up to the point where only the initiated persons may see it, when

² See Jacqueline Cogdell Djedje (ed.), *Turn Up the Volume: A Celebration of African Music*, Los Angeles, UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1999.

the non-initiated ones are allowed only to listen to its buzzing. With the help of singular gestures of the instrument player, a certain number of coded formulas are produced to allow the buzzing to give flesh to, either the voice of the ancestors or the roaring of a lion that illustrates an authority in most cases.

Among the Suku, some sacred melodico-rhythmic formulas of the horns are used to announce solemn events, the circumcision ritual or some entertainments, while the “word speech” of the *puita* friction drums is essentially used during the ritual or initiatory ceremonies. It is an instrument for local communication which messages are spread in a relatively small space of a few hundred meters. It generally symbolises the ritual death followed by the renewal of the initiated person, the one who is hardened to all kinds of initiation trials.

Still with the Suku, the skin drum is used for ritual codes as well as for the ordinary language during entertainments to, for instance, change a choreographic scene, bring a variation of the rhythm or of the metric of the song or of the dance, to mark the end of a musical part, etc.

It must be underlined in addition that these coded formulas in an entertaining musical speech wear a double importance. Aside from the fact that these formulas are used – like the rest of the musical parts – to essentially animate the concerned entertainment instants, they constitute some significations of these different messages.

All this may as well explain another important factor that is interrelated with the language of the instrumental word: the fact that the names of the musical genres³ result from the denominations of the rituals, the ceremonies, the instruments, or other social contexts and interactions, such as musically transmitted communications linked with a manifestation, a symbol or an ideology. For example, the Akan puberty rituals in Ghana have the same name as the musical genre linked with them: *dradwom* (puberty songs). In different Kongo dialects of Central and Austral Africa, *mpungi* (wooden horns) designates both the instrument and the music, linked most of the time to rituals. To designate the concerned musical genre, one may sometimes add a substantive before or after this term that will determine its ritual and the kind of horn that is used (in animal tusks or wooden).

This non-exhaustive list of examples could be widened at will, as the cases are quite numerous.

As I cannot go any further, it seems rather important to underline that technically, the different African instrumental languages have an organization that is never fortuitous. Moreover, to the cultural data – which are generally linked with symbolism and to which is often linked the musical activity – corroborate some strictly technical musical criteria with a lot of signification.

As a matter of fact, although no explicit musical theorization exists in the African societies, the protagonists are conscious of the role played by each instrument in relation with the musical techniques (including playing modes) as well as the sounds that form their musical scale.

The sound, more than the written note, is a capital factor of high importance.

Indeed, the notion of “musical sound” is, in Sub-Saharan Africa, a very vast concept that includes, beyond the sound acoustic properties, the function of a sound in its complexity and its variability. One is not satisfied with just a “pure” sound but takes pleasure with “hybrid” sounds or with “parasite” sounds, the ones that are added to the original sound to get a richer tone colour and with it, of the sound beauty, but also to underline a well defined symbolic.

³ The musical genre is here used in the general meaning of the term, which describes the category to which a musical piece belongs. This categorisation is made, among other things, according to criteria of style, of technique, of form, of the formation of the instrumental or vocal group, of its destination, its literary support or its writing. The form is about the structure schemata of the piece of work, while the style characterises some of its parameters: aesthetics, language, nature, interpretation, country or origin and time.

Thus, this addition is generally made according to a given ritual evocation or according to the musical destination of the instrument. Taking into consideration the sound factor influences the way of tuning an instrument as well. This is the reason why there are scarcely, for this last topic, neither models of tuning using a tuning fork nor pre-defined sound scales that would be used for tuning a same kind of instruments. An African musical instrument is often a unique and typical “being”.

It is one of the major reasons why, in most Sub-Saharan peoples, a name is given to each sound of the instrumental sound scale. For instruments that can make only one sound, like whistles and horns, this name may then be the one of the instrument that, at the same time, evokes the periods or the phraseological cycles performed, but as well, in a metaphoric way, one's own register that can either represent a vocal tone colour or illustrate the power of a character, an ancestor, a god or an animal.

Within an orchestral, vocal or mixed ensemble, the name given to the instrumental sound allows a double differentiation, the one of an order and the one about the positioning of the musician and his instrument in the vocal and instrumental ensemble used. Here, a sound is also the image of the “voice” within the meaning of the word carried by every member of the community (clan, tribe, ethnic group, initiated persons, neophytes, musicians etc.) Moreover, it is a word carried by the practitioner and his instrument, which he will have to put to advantage, share or even oppose to other words so as to make appear some truth, suggest a proverbial, anecdotic, mythic or legendary thinking, or others.

During the performance, the different voices or sounds played get together in diverse melodic-rhythmic motives put on different heights. In this process, the intertwining of the set of these motives often creates complex polyphonic and polyrhythmic combinations with synchronisms of great sophistication. All these parts may alternate, superpose, oppose or intertwine each other, offering a musical speech where is developed a recurrence at the same time of featuring contrasts thanks to the dephasing of the accents and the obstinate rhythms used as a layer for the variant parts as well as the variegated and repetitive rhythmic structures considered as points of reference and of metric beat. This technical structure of the parts often lies on a combination of small simple basic melodic and rhythmic units. During the development of the musical speech, these fundamental elements – that generally lay on a pivot – bear variations of the intervals, the rhythm and the accents that equally influence the periodicity of the lengths, the metric or the tone colours.

Technically speaking, the instrumental word is the musical result of a structuring of the sound material into melodic and rhythmic schemes constituted in coded formulas, that follow quite strict rules when it comes to ritual and ceremonial music, but suppler for entertainment music. Among the driving forces that rule the organization of the instrumental word, one can find the form, often cyclic, inside of which are developed some melodico-rhythmic cells and sequences that are more or less long.

The formal constructions are underlined by monodic or pluri-vocal formulas and by simple or polyrhythmic rhythms, formulas that are generally repetitive and varied and know very little development. Often, when it happens, it is made through the addition of intervals that, at the same time, are subject to height variations. Several small developments may then be performed by the alternation or the simultaneity of the ostinatos to which are opposed, or upon which are superimposed very little unfolded motives.

In addition, the sense of parody and a natural tendency to like it (textual and/or musical transformation and adaptation) favour the creation of numerous irregular structures and even of a rhythmic plurality. On this level indeed, the music of Black Africa offers a great variety of formulas (rhythmic and metric, from simple to complex ones, from the measured to the

non-measured, from the slow to the fast, via the moderate ones). These formulas generally characterize the musical styles and genres of a given community. They often form the codes of the instrumental word language.

Repetition globally rules the simple and short melodies with a periodic cyclic structure, which notes gravitate around a sound axis, but sometimes have two or three pivots. Thanks to the principle of variation, these formulas may then be loaded with ornaments or put up with some changes of rhythmic and metric pulsations as well as changes of sound colour.

In Sub-Saharan musical systems, the timber has a variety of hybrid sounds that one can define as sound masks. As mentioned earlier, here, the sound colour hybridisation is a process of enrichment by addition – to the original instrumental sounds – of new sounds with the help of accessories, may they be instrumental or not, hung either on the bridge or on the upper part of the blades of the *sanza*, or attached, like a vegetal membrane, on the body of the principal instrument. We find there one of the most appreciated techniques by the Africans who are constantly looking for complex sounds that mostly allow them to evoke different situations. By associating and merging several sound colours, they create singular groupings or sound alliances, some of which are used for ritual evocations.

Beyond their purely technical and stylistic aspects, repetition, rhythm, form, variation and sound colour are principles of high symbolic value that imply ideologies that will not be described in detail in the restricted frame of this article.

Nevertheless, one shall remark that, in some cases, the form of the adopted musical speech is much more important than the fidelity to the text or to the spoken word. In this case, it keeps the signification of the transmitted message. Here, the spoken word is transposed or rather transfigured in the instrumental sound language and becomes a suggestive thinking. This imaginary thinking will be used to musically signify what will appear to be only aesthetic subjects for the neophyte but turn to be especially significant for an initiated person.

Additionally, one will notice that, in the orchestral domain, the Black continent offers as well various instrumental groups, going from the smallest to the greatest formations of around one hundred musicians⁴. In Bantu big orchestras, for instance, music is, in general, narrowly linked to an ensemble of word events. Here, the musical matter constitutes the reflection of numerous thoughts, images or allusions that underlie an evoked event (for example: a ritual, a glorification of the authority or a simple popular entertainment). The instruments used play socio-musical roles, especially illustrated through the organization of the performance and the stage disposition of the protagonists: place of each instrument in the ensemble, moment when the musician starts playing, number of notes that he plays, length and periodicity of the executed sequences, as well as the heights (low, middle, high) of the notes emitted and the sound colour of the instrument itself. In relation with the social position of the character symbolised by the musician and his instrument, all these elements of a musical performance bear a great social connotation and belong to a peculiar language, the one of the instrumental words where the sound element remains, as mentioned above, a capital factor. Moreover, depending on its destination, the language is another factor that determines the typological and organologic choice and the Sub-Saharan instrumental ways of playing.

If, as previously discussed, this African instrumental language is falls within a global communication conception narrowly linked to word, the making itself of a music instrument already prefigures this concept.

⁴ The orchestras of this importance are generally reserved to the ceremonies of enthroning of great kings. It happens among the Luba, the Pende and the Kongo of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

At the end of their making, many African musical instruments, mostly the ones devoted to peculiar rituals and ceremonies, are welcomed as real living beings, with all the honours and ritual practices that would be applied to the character they represent. Like humans, these instruments are therefore given a word language that, however, is their own. The instrument maker strives to give “a voice” to the instrument. It is a personal voice that makes every instrument “a being” that speaks only, either by the tapping of the hands or of beaters on its body, or by scraping its body or rubbing its strings, or by blowing air in its orifices. This voice is always subsidiary of the choice of codes to be used.

During this process, the living beauty of the sounds they produce is not only restricted to technical and formal principles of their structure to produce a musical work. Their sounds will be at the same time the echo of multiple sounds of the natural environment from where they are issued, while representing an energy that is the vehicle of the manifestation of the symbolised spiritual and physical forces.

How can an African musical instrument then be gifted with a voice that makes it be assimilated to a living being?

We have seen earlier that the material itself used for the instrument making comes from materials that, initially, are treated by African traditionalists as “living beings” (vegetal, animal and mineral).

Therefore, the musical instrument is only a metamorphosis of these beings of Nature into a cultural object through which will be delivered some coded messages that live thanks to the strength of the sounds. They are messages delivered to humans, to spiritual beings and even to the “beings” of Nature, through the intervention of the ritual(s) and other specific ceremonies. It is at this stage that an African instrument is transformed while being assimilated to a new “living subject” that is granted with a sound articulation akin to the spoken language. Symbolically, the instrument lives with human or animal beings that are sculpted on its body. The articulated human word or the voice of the character for which the instrument has been made will be evoked, as said before, by means of the word being struck, blown, rasped, rubbed or scraped. From this instrumental coded voice will then arise the instrumental word. From then on, the musical sound that will be produced by the concerned instrument will take the shape of a mask that transforms or transfigures the verbal thinking. For the instrument, this verbal thinking becomes a rhythmic and dynamic wave, full of meaning. It becomes a vision of the world, but also a strength and an energy that transcend any written creationism or gestural only.

One will remark as well that, like for the instrument, an orchestra is often symbolised by a human “being” or an element of nature. Thus, for instance, the Senufo-Fodonon musicians of Ivory Coast name the *Bolonyen* orchestra – comprising calabashes, one string bow harps and rattles, an orchestra specialised in funeral music – by the name of the *sotonyon* antelope (*cephalophus rufalitus*). This animal is an allegory of the link between this Senufo population and the natural universe of the bush. The instruments of this orchestra globally represent the language of the antelope and of the living beings that surround it.

Furthermore, in a general way, it is important to underline that the tree used to make an entertainment music drum is not the same as the tree used to make the delivering messages drum during the circumcision. It is the same for the shape given to the instrument. In this last case, it is the *mutundu*, a porous tree with very wide leaves and which bark produces a red sap, that is used for the making of skin drums (whether they be struck or friction drums) among most of the Kongo peoples of Central Africa. This red sap symbolises the spilling of blood that must flow during the circumcision to evoke the purification of a way via which transit the elements of life. Just like blood, this sap is the symbol of the new life that the

neophytes are called upon to acquire at the end of the ordeals of their initiation. Here the spilling of blood is necessary only in this ritual occasion for sacred reasons of purification, since this act evokes a death of the former nature of the initiated so that he can enjoy a new life marking the continuity that involves present and future.

The interactions between a spoken word and an instrumental word are varied. One can distinguish cases of a common identification that can go up to the submission of one to the other, on the rhythmic levels (between the musical pulsations and the tonal accentuations of the language mostly among the African tone languages). This identification may as well indicate the complete independence of one towards the other. In this case, the coded meaning of the instrumental language is only accessible to the initiated. The language codes of an entertainment instrumental music are different from the ones for rituals or ceremonies. The instrumental speech of entertainment music carries more aesthetic messages that, as a reminder, indicate a variation for dancing, a change in the singing, in the stage, or announce an intermission or the end of the show. On the contrary, during important rituals and ceremonies, the coded instrumental language is a musical word full of meaning that evokes cosmogonies, myths, legends, oracles, proverbs, moral words, prayers, and so on...

In this inter-relational ensemble constituted by these two languages, linguistic and musical, one must not forget that the instrumental speech is no more dependent on the ordinary spoken language, but more on a discourse with a symbolic range that involves several phenomena of the cultural arts. These latter determine the nature of the instrumental word to adopt through the temporal and spatial modalities that can be either profane or sacred, individual or collective, ritual, ceremonial or just for entertainment.

Like music and dance that have adjusted to the symbolism that identifies the cultural factors, the musical instruments used have a great social importance. They are conferred with socio-cultural functions, sometimes illustrated via diverse imaged shapes that are particularly worn on the body of the instrument, but as well via the peculiar sounds it produces. This is why most of the Sub-Saharan musical processes have much in common with a ritual – in the wide meaning of the term – that is to say among most of the peoples who live in the South of Sahara, every musical system comprises an organization with an internal logic that is very often conditioned by external social events, but with which it frequently stays narrowly linked.

The musical sound combinations created are full of prototypes or of special choreographic or rhythmic features that, most of the time, are in an inter-relation with the ritual, ceremonial or entertainment activity to which the music refers. These sound prototypes –composed of one or several privileged elements, musical ones in this case – are used as codes that determine and bring out the nature and the type of the message carried. It is the case of a formal musical structure or of an instrumental sound colour or of a rhythmic formula or else of their association, in the deployed musical discourse that may be enough to express the concerned message. Before illustrating this topic with an example of this reality, it is important to remind the importance of the “Word” principle, motor of the instrumental language described here.

We saw, in the introduction, that the Word rules the speech, the principles and all kinds of prescriptions, underlined by rules that organize the cultural civilisation, including the Sub-Saharan one. The Word is these civilisations’ motor of communication. Associated with the instrumental musical language, this communication –that occurs between individuals, between them and Nature as well as with the metaphysical universe – has a varied nature. It is a communication which core is constituted by the code systems or predetermined formulas that set the very style and the essence of the message.

As we cannot develop this part here although it has important details that would need more than a chapter of a book, let us remark nevertheless that the distinction of a message is made according to the nature and the tuning of the instrument, of the sound register and of the intervals used, of the type of rhythm and metric employed, and finally to the underlying melodic formulas.

These formulas are structured in space and time, following the principles of repetition and variation. Becoming dynamic by the way of multiple rhythms and specified by the sound heights that vary between two to several sounds played in alternation or simultaneously, these formulas are always adapted to the level of importance of the news or of the message: it can be for example a call to gather for a ceremony, an entertainment or any other community action. This message may as well be linked to the announcement of the arrival of an important character or of an enthroning or else of the death of a renowned person. It may be as well for an important public trial (the traditional law court, often under a baobab, or in a dedicated place) or announcements concerning hunting, crop or fishing activities, or even a fun activity. For all these messages, the time and the place of announcement are never left to hazard. For great events, for instance, they take place between 5 p. m. and 6 a.m. It is the case for the death of a chief that is usually announced at sunset, and recalled at the second singing of the cock, between 3 and 3 30 a. m.

If sunset here represents the light that scatters on the material body that lies on the death bed, body that now must go back to earth, the early morning announcement is rather prefiguring of the light illuminating the spirit of the dead person that rises to the better world of spirits.

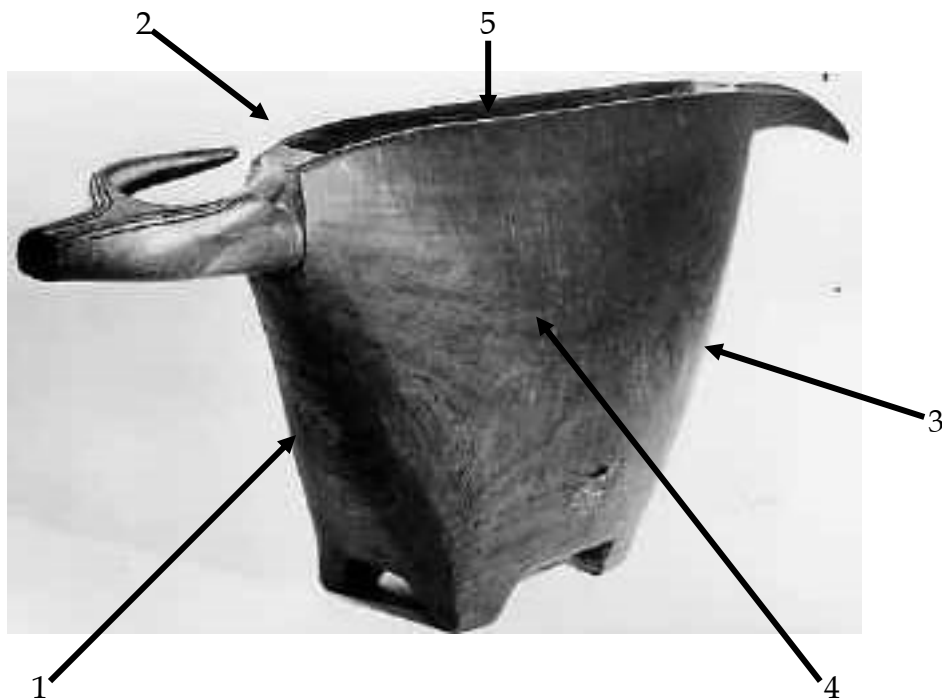
The message sent to the community follows different steps. Here is an example that comes from the Suku culture (South West of the Democratic Republic of Congo).

Among the Suku, the first information of this type of message is first transmitted through friction drums then through three struck drums. These are sacred instruments, initially conceived especially for this type of event. They have different sound pitches essentially distributed between two main registers, the low and the high, the medium range instruments having only a subsidiary role.

According to tradition, the concerned instruments are played at the entrance of the village (essentially the friction drums) then in the centre (especially the struck drums) and then in the house of the dead (all the instruments). During these different phases, several coded formulas will follow one another to tell about this event with two connotations: unhappy because the chief is leaving his people, happy because he lives again in the afterlife.

The rhythmic buzzing of the friction drums indicates, according to the sacred formulas, this painful departure, when other formulas played by the struck drums will tell his name, will indicate that he has gone away and will recall his most remarkable merits. To do so, the musician first strikes once at each end of the lips of the instrument followed by a strike in the centre. Then, one will make follow very variable formulas that are repetitive with variable speeds. The number and the frequency of the apparition of the repetitions and variations of each coded musical formula are subject to a specific symbolism. This number is essential in that it contributes to the specification of the announced message.

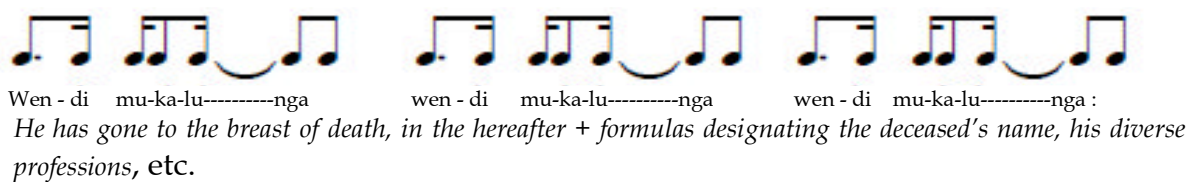
An example of the rhythmic formulas announcing the death of a Suku chief



Serie of five-five time beat, inserted with a silence between each other: *death of a well-known authority*



Serie of three-three time beat:



The circumcision ritual is often announced between 4:30 a.m. and 5 a.m., using the wooden and animal horns.

The arrival of the Suku king, Meni-Kongo, is announced by the rhythm of the double skin drum, on which alternated strokes, struck at each end of the instrument, underline with majesty the steps of the members of the procession. It is the melodic formula of the *ndemba* little bamboo flute that carries the content of the message. It is accompanied by some *sanza* and friction drums.

What can be concluded about the instrumental word in the South of Sahara?

TO CONCLUDE

We have seen that the reason for being of African music is nothing less than life and man, with everything this can involve materially as well as spiritually. This is a concept that escapes from any convention or academism. The lived musical sounds are very naturally organised and adapted through everyday life as well as initiatory and ceremonial activities.

In this way of thinking, two concepts strongly interlace to give a meaning to the musical phenomenon. One is *art*⁵ that implies musical conception and structure of the instrumental and vocal techniques. On the other hand, the *culture* of sounds is more linked with ideology and is attached to aesthetic and communication concepts, but also to the way of living these sounds by the men between themselves, by man and his natural environment, and by man with the spiritual world as well.

Here, the notion of culture is understood under individual and social perspectives, through the reality of the personal, collective or community life experience of the musical act. This cultural notion concerns the various and complex phenomena that go from the art to the technique, from the initiation to the religion, from the infrastructure to the superstructure, from the repetitive or cyclic process to the cumulative process, from principles to laws, from ideology to science. It is defined, on the other hand, as the relation frame of collective and systematic representations (the one of opinion, the one of the rigor of the initiates or of the specialists) resulting from a specific view of the world by the actors of this culture. It is in this African cultural universe – based on orality and narrowly linked to the Word, and so to the Speech, with everything it represents – that the concept of musical word, including the instrumental one, is anchored, a universe outside of the arcana of which its language will not have any meaning, and therefore will not be understood and its own value will not be recognised. Indeed, the instrumental word, adapting adequately with this universe that rules its way of working, stays all the same founded upon the primacy of a coded word. This latter is ruled by various factors that come from the harmony and from the relationship that man has not only with his community, Nature and the metaphysical universe, but also with himself. Here, the Word is the root, the very essence of this idea of the human, of Nature and of the spiritual universe.

Thus, the African instrumental word stays a symbol full of meaning that awakes in the consciousness and the memory of those who understand its language, the power of the word that goes beyond the meaning, a power of suggestion anchored in the metaphors and the myths that can be translated by facts and acts, may they be ritual or not. It is an object-language that is subsumed by the phenomenon of representation. It is a way of recreation, a symbol, a blazon, a working technique, a counterpart of speech and a cosmogonic system where the sounds form a language that creates a tighter and more intimate link between man and natural as well as supernatural.

Implying the speech and the voice –through coded sounds – the language system of the Sub-Saharan instrumental word is naturally linked with the systems of the local languages.

The messages that derive from it may be delivered in a direct and specific way. Numerous components of these spoken and musical languages are used in different unities and structures with determined relationships. They are, in an analogical way, two sound systems possessing a “vocabulary”, a “grammar” and a “syntax” which content – sometimes referential – is expressed, as seen before, into a context or accordingly to it. According to the phonatory characteristics of the language one speaks, one can obtain a variety of playing modes and even of tonal colours that can determine a musical genre⁶. All these modes of vocal playing

⁵ It is mainly linked with the practical aspect, as well as the word « art » cannot be separated from “craftsman”.

⁶ On the vocal level, these playing modes exist inside an ensemble of well-defined circumstances. Each of them is adapted not only to a repertoire or a music genre but also to a type of voice: falsetto, throaty, restricted or open,

are, at different levels, assimilable and transmittable, by imitation, in the language that is at the same time concrete and symbolic of the instrumental word.

It is then easy to understand that between the spoken language and the instrumental language, practices easily overlap and leave impermeable their limits, which only the initiates know the apparent or hidden dialectic bridges. Here, we are in front of a language strategy that turns the sense of the speech announced into a multidimensional level.

However, the musical language of the instrumental word leads to a comprehension ground that goes beyond the spoken language, thanks to its ensemble of sound phenomena that are sometimes not understandable even by the person who produces them.

So in the Sub-Saharan musical systems, the “sound” phenomenon requires an exceptional consideration. Here, in the process of musical creation, sound stays an essential factor that must be overcome in two ways, first as a force and a symbol that generates energies, then as a physical agent linked to metaphysics through its creative power. Thus, the sound is considered by the African traditionalist, as an energy phenomenon that draws in its own truth, but as well in its own reality that sometimes transcends the human understanding.

Through music, and with it the language of the instrumental word, sound operates through melodic and rhythmic micro and macro-structures that, once they are produced, must come to life, live, tune and harmonize to make a link between men themselves, between man and Nature, and between man and the spiritual.

The African instrumental word avoids in such a way all impoverishment of its language through written or frozen signs that only carry very limited significations that are only accessible to the five human senses.

As “word” or “speech”, there are several universes and types of instrumental languages in Sub-Saharan Africa. According to the context of the performance and its underlying mode of expression, one can find instruments which message can be brought on a long distance of dozen of kilometres. It is the case of the wood drums, of the struck skin drums and of the horns; on medium range distances, with the friction drum and some wind instruments, as well as some bells; and at last, the ones which message is only delivered in short distances; whether one is inside a courtyard or a house. This last category mostly includes string instruments, lamella instruments, scrapers, rattles, jingles, bells, as well as some other low range wind instruments (including flutes, to give one example).

Even if the African traditionalist lends a “voice” to a musical instrument that, through its sound language, would emit messages, certainly coded but understandable to the initiate, it is obvious as well that it is not the instrument considered as an object that “speaks”, but the musician who, following a certain logic of predefined thought and traditional cultural precepts, gives the instrument a code, as a pre-established principle. Except for the codes that rule entertainment music, the other codes generally refer to a proverb, a maxim, a myth, a legend or any other message with a moral value, a prohibition, a prayer and so on. When he expresses in such a way, the instrumentalist – using his gestural or body language – lends to his tool this famous voice, which “word” can be expressed via its melodic, rhythmic, harmonic and sound colour components. His musical instrument can then “speak”, as long as the adopted language obeys to a coherence that is ruled by the code and its symbol.

Through the diversity of its idioms and its sound systems conceived in an osmosis relation, the African instrumental word constitutes a double fact, at the same time musical and cultural, applied to – as a reminder – the rituals, the ceremonies and the entertainments. This fact is

gliding, using portamento or flattered. They refer as well to the voices taken on a high or low range, with a more or less accentuated pulsation, to the voices using recitative, whisper, onomatopoeia or to the ones that fall, are into a vocal aspiration or with cut out sounds.

inscribed in musical and extra-musical time and space, depending on the circumstance for which the music that results from it is performed.

It is a language, a voice and a speech conceived in human's imagination and mind, the voice and the words being vivified through the sign language of the musician and his instrument. This latter, conceived as a human being that takes part into the materialisation of the sought language also forms the symbolic image of the links between the facts and the phenomena implied in this language, links that extend to the material used for its making. This material then becomes a reference to the life of Nature (physical environment) with which the African traditionalist often lives in osmosis.

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