

African Music

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Family life

Family life to many West African is very important. Families are important; they support each other. Families also provide a focus for many community activities and because of this traditional music, dancing and singing become an important part of family life.



People who live in rural communities tend to get up at sunrise, and return to their homes for the evening meal when it gets dark. After they have eaten they may sit and talk, or sometimes they may play instruments and sing. Young children often copy music they have heard others play. Sometimes a parent will sit a child on their knee and help them to play the instruments. Groups of very young drummers practise, on drums made out of old cans or something similar. It would be unusual to find someone who goes to a music teacher for regular lessons.

Community Music

On important occasions such as religious festivals, funerals or at harvest time there is always plenty of music and dancing which everyone joins in. Music provides a good way for the whole community to meet together to enjoy themselves, talk to friends and celebrate the occasion. People are proud that they have their own versions of a piece of music which is quite distinctive – they can be offended if you suggest it sounds similar to playing in the next village. Even when living in the cities, people from the same village will meet together to dance and sing. Their music becomes very important in reminding them of where they come from.



Rhythms

If one of the main elements of western music is harmony – chords played by different instruments within the bass and melody lines – then a comparable element of West African music is rhythm. Many people think that traditional drumming in West Africa has no particular pitch – the highness or lowness of the note. However they would be quite wrong in thinking this. Within the drum ensembles the instruments have to be tuned to quite accurate pitches in relation to each other. Most West African languages are tonal, so that by using a drum that can change pitch the drummer can imitate well known phrases that people might say. Since the sounds of the drums can carry a long way, drums are often used for ‘talking’ between people some distance apart. It is recorded that when Napoleon was defeated at the battle of Waterloo the native people in West Africa knew about it before their English or French governors because the news was drummed down the coast from North Africa. You can find the idea of pitch + rhythm = speech used in many practical and social ways. For example, because the sound of a whistle can be heard further away than shouting can, if people want to attract your attention they will whistle your name, imitating the pitch and rhythm of the words.

The connection between words and music is also used to remember and describe patterns to be played on drums or other instruments. In many places there is a drum language which uses nonsense syllables which imitate the sound to be produced and tell you how to produce it. This can make it easier to remember complex rhythms.

Another aspect of much West African music is that, although it has a strong pulse, this may not be played as strongly as it would be in western music. Sometimes you will also find that there are several different parts playing at the same time with their own pulse.