

African Popular Music

In West African music all sorts of musical styles are popular.

Most traditional music and instruments that are played in public, such as drums and xylophones, are played by MEN. There are folk stories to explain why this is so: they say that if a woman plays a certain instrument then she will be unable to have children. Among younger people some of these traditions are changing.

Women

There is a whole area of women's music. The role and status of women is now changing as it has done in Europe and America.

Two famous women who perform W. African music are:

Oumou Sangare

Angelique Kidjo

Oumou Sangare: her music is based on the traditional music of *Wassopulou* region, where she comes from. It is popular in the sense that many like it. The music contains the following instruments: electric and bass guitar, *Kamalengoni* (5 stringed youth harp), *Karinyang* (iron scaper), *Calabash* (rattle) and violin. Oumou talks about the way her songs relate to song and dance.

Angelique Kidjo: was influenced by the traditional music of *Benin*. This consisted of long epic songs about African life, unaltered for generations. The other major influence was the new urban African music developing in the South of Africa.

Listening Task 1:

Listen to the music of Oumou Sangare and Angelique Kidjo.

- ♣ What makes the music sound popular?
- ♣ What makes the music sound traditional?
- ♣ Describe the sound of the voice – how similar is it to what you expect from a European 'pop' singer?
- ♣ Why do you think people sing in different styles – don't we all have the same basic equipment for singing?

Men

Baaba Maal: popular male musician. He has an ensemble which features acoustic guitar and concentrates on melody and he also works with an electric group **Dande Lenol** (The voice of the Race) but he has said: “even with our electronic work the influence is still African.”

Baaba Maal was born in 1953 in north Senegal. Both his mother and father were singers – his father used to call devout Muslims to prayer at the Mosque. They were not a family of *Griots*, traditional musicians. It was not expected the Baaba Maal would become a professional musician.

He says:

“At the beginning of my career I had difficulties with the griots as well as my parents, who said, “You are not a griot so you cannot sing professionally””.

He writes his songs in his native Fulani language, which caused problems to begin with. Most Senegalese people speak Wolof, including those who own the main radio and TV stations in Dakar.

Listening Task 2:

Listen to ‘Baayo’ and compare it with ‘Alla L’aa Ke’

- ♣ What are the main influences, and what are the differences?
- ♣ Consider all possible elements of vocal style, melodic contour, instrumental sound, musical construction etc.
- ♣ Is one ‘popular’ and the other ‘traditional’ in style or idea?
- ♣ Do these terms have any meaning?

Questions

1. Why was the most traditional music in W. Africa performed by men?
2. Who are Oumou Sangare and Angelique Kidjo?
3. Is Oumou Sangare’s music based on traditional music of the Wassoulou region or traditional music of Britain?
4. Why was it unexpected that Baaba Maal would become a professional musician?