

The Development Process and Musical Significance of the African Drum

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Abstract: African drums serve as essential instruments embodying the core rhythmic elements of sub-Saharan traditional music. Originating from the Mali Empire, they evolved through history into powerful tools for communication, emotional expression, and cultural transmission. Drums such as the goblet drum, tree drum, and djembe possess distinctive acoustic features and functions. African rhythms are known for their complexity, structural significance, and ability to influence both emotional states and physiological responses. As integral parts of daily life, rituals, and social interaction, African drums continue to play a key role in preserving cultural identity and fostering collective cohesion through their dynamic rhythmic language.

Keywords: African drums, development history, cultural transmission

1. Introduction

The African continent is located in the western part of the Eastern Hemisphere, bordered by the Indian Ocean to the east and the Atlantic Ocean to the west. It straddles both sides of the equator. On this vast land, the music of tropical Africa south of the Sahara Desert has distinct regional characteristics. The full drumbeats and richly changing rhythms endow African music with infinite vitality. As the embodiment of African music rhythms, the African drum is a highly representative musical instrument in the African musical language. It has unique musical charm, holds an unparalleled important position in the daily life of the African people, and is also widely spread around the world.

2. The Origin and Development of the African Drum

2.1 The Emergence of the African Drum

In ancient Africa, the lifestyle was primitive, and it was inconvenient to transmit information over long distances. Against this backdrop, the African drum emerged during the Mali Empire in the 13th century, mainly used for sending signals in daily life and warfare. It evolved from a household utensil used for pounding coarse grains — the mortar. Initially, it was made by blacksmiths, had an hourglass shape, with the larger open end covered by a goatskin, and was sounded by hitting it with both hands.

2.2 The Development of the African Drum in its Native Land

In the 1960s, the African drum gradually developed from an accompanying musical instrument into a solo instrument that could be played independently, and formal drum music learning institutions and courses began to emerge. During the development of the African drum in Africa, different styles evolved due to regional differences. For example, there are the Djembe, Sabar, and Tama[1] drums in Senegal, and the “Dame Dame” drum[2] in Côte d’Ivoire.

The Guinean drum master Mamady Keita learned to play the African drum since childhood. In 1964, he joined the Djoliba Song and Dance Troupe in Guinea and became the youngest musician in the troupe. He performed with the troupe in various places, popularizing and promoting African music culture. Around 1980, he served as the artistic director of the Djoliba Song and Dance Troupe and stepped down when he left the troupe in 1986. During this period, he won many gold awards in pan-African competitions, was regarded as the most powerful African drummer, became famous, and became a leading figure in West African percussion music, greatly promoting the development of the African drum in its native land.

2.3 The Internationalization Process of the African Drum

After World War II, many West African drum art masters emigrated to Paris, France, and the African drum began to be accepted by Europe and embarked on the path of internationalization. In the 1950s, with the independence of most African countries, Sekou Touré, the then President of Guinea, organized the establishment of the Djoliba National Song and Dance Troupe, which went on tour performances around the world, bringing African traditional music to the stage[3].

The drum master Mamady Keita not only enjoys a high reputation in Africa but also plays a crucial role in promoting African music culture abroad and the internationalization of the African drum. Throughout his life, he released many African

drum music albums, as well as documentaries on African drum performance and teaching, such as the NHK documentary - Mamady Keita and 38 little hands, (It records that Mamady went to the volcanic island fishing village of Mishima in southern Japan and taught 16 Japanese primary school students to learn the djembe drum and West African culture.) and the live music album - Mogobalu, etc., having a huge impact worldwide. Mamady Keita was also the first drummer to facilitate the cooperation between overseas study camps and the Ministry of Arts and Culture of Guinea. In 1990, 35 students from Europe came to Conakry, Guinea, to study drum art and dance courses, and this study camp has continued to this day. Then, in 1991, Mamady established his own school, Tam Tam Mandingue (meaning the drum of Manding) in Brussels, the capital of Belgium. This school quickly caused a sensation and thrived. As a result, within a few years, branch schools were opened in Paris, Munich, Conakry, the United States, Japan, and Israel. Currently, there are more than a dozen branch schools around the world. Thus, the African drum music culture has spread globally, people have formal channels to learn and understand African traditional music, and the African drum has gained a high international reputation.

During the process of the African drum taking root and flourishing around the world, the ingenious combination of modern popular culture and the traditional African drum has also emerged. Since the 1980s, the African drum has gradually merged with popular culture. Taking American popular music, which has the most extensive influence, as an example, jazz, which is based on African indigenous music, is a leader in American popular music and is welcomed by people all over the world due to its free and improvisational characteristics. The distinct feature that differentiates jazz from other popular music genres is its rhythm. Greatly influenced by African drum music culture, the strong syncopation is its most prominent characteristic[4].

3. Types of African Drums

There is a wide variety of African drums, and there are also diverse classification methods. When understanding African drums in terms of the playing combination, it can be considered that the African drum is a playing combination of the Djembe drum and the Dunun drum. (It is a transliteration, and it is actually the bass drum in Africa.) When classified according to the origin and popular regions of African drums, they can be divided into three regions: West Africa, East and Central Africa, and South Africa. Due to different transliterations, many African drums with different names are actually the same thing. Here, five common and distinct types of African drums will be introduced.

3.1 Bass Drum



Figure 1. African Bass Drum

The bass drum is what is often referred to as the “Dundun drum” in daily performances. It is a very important performing instrument among African drums. Traditionally, there are three sizes. The largest one can be called Dunumba, the medium-sized one is called Sangban, and the smallest one is called Kenkeni. (There are different transliterations, and it is also known as Kenkeni, Sangba and Djunmba. There are products of other different sizes.) Its function is to provide a stable rhythm for the performance and can be said to be the “pulse” of the drum music.

3.2 Slit Drum



Figure 2. African Wooden Drum

The slit drum, also known as the African wooden fish, is an instrument from Guinea. Different sounds can be produced when striking the two sides of the drum. The slit drum is regarded as a ceremonial instrument used in sacrificial rituals. The Chinese wooden fish is a branch of the African slit drum, and both of them possess strong theological and religious attributes.

3.3 Kpanlogo Drum



Figure 3. The Kpanlogo Drum in Africa

This kind of drum originated from the Alak region of Ghana in West Africa. Its main use lies in sacrificial ceremonies. There are quite a few ways to play it. Usually, it is performed in an ensemble by six drums of different sizes. It can be struck with bare hands or drumsticks, or both methods can be combined.

3.4 Bougarabou Drum



Figure 4. The Bougarabou Drum in Africa

The Bougarabou drum originated in West Africa. In sacrificial ceremonies, people used the Bougarabou drum to pray for warfare. This kind of drum could also ward off enemies by imitating the sound of a tiger. Its playing method mainly involves hitting it with hands or a cone. The shape of the Bougarabou drum best conforms to people's stereotypes of African drums. Generally, when we talk about the "Djembe drum" or the "African drum", the first shape that comes to mind is that of the Bougarabou drum. This shape has also been widely promoted and made into African djembe drums with relatively low prices[5], thus facilitating the widespread dissemination of African drum music culture.

3.5 Talking Drum



Figure 5. The African Talking Drum

Due to different translations, all the terms such as "talking drum" and "drum that can talk" refer to this kind of "talking drum". Another name we often see, the "African goblet drum", also refers to this talking drum. The talking drum can be said to be one of the most ancient percussion instruments. It is mainly in the shape of an hourglass, and the drum ropes evenly and densely connect the two drumheads at both ends. By adjusting the tightness of the drum ropes, the pitch can be adjusted. It has a wide range of pitches and can convey a variety of information, just like human language, hence the name talking drum.

4. The Significance of African Drums

African drums hold a pivotal position in the daily life of the African people and have had a profound impact on African

traditional music. They have multiple functions at the levels of life, society, and religion, and can be said to be closely connected with the lives of the African people.

In terms of daily life and entertainment, African women will sing and dance to the rhythm of the drums in their daily lives. Husbands will respond by praising their wives in drum language. The industrious and intelligent African working people use all the things that can be struck in their lives, such as basins and mortars, and even the thumping sound when cutting down trees, to beat out lively and enthusiastic rhythms. Accompanied by joyful songs and dances, they express the deep affection between lovers or use them to entertain guests from afar. It can be seen that African drum music is an indispensable part of the lives of the African people.

African drums also have social significance such as conveying information and expressing praise. When the warriors return triumphantly, they will be greeted by the sacred rhythm of the African drums. When playing the African drums, drummers create a unique “drum” language by changing the strength of their arms and the striking positions, and by changing the jumping rhythm patterns of the music, to convey various messages. This “drum” language is widely used in the lives of the African people. It can be used as a signal to resist the enemy on the battlefield, to call on people to participate in gatherings and labor, or to report fires, natural disasters, etc.

African drums are even more exalted religious instruments in the hearts of the African people and play an irreplaceable and important role in religious and sacrificial activities. For example, the “African wooden fish” Kpanlogo drum introduced above is one of the commonly used African drums in sacrificial performances. In ancient Africa, when doctors treated patients, they attached great importance to the rhythm of percussion music, and the doctors were also drummers.

To this day, with the development of productive forces and changes in social structures, the direct impact of drum music activities in the production process may have decreased. However, African drums still play an important role in new forms and occasions. African drum music continues to serve as a daily form of cultural expression, reflecting and shaping the social life and spiritual world of the African people that are independent of both Eastern and Western cultures. This set of values and spiritual characteristics constitutes the unique culture of the African people in the world.

5. Conclusion

African music is an important part of Africa’s unique value culture, and it has the characteristic of the soul and music complementing and merging into one. Everyone has rhythm flowing in their body and soul, and everyone can resonate with it. This way of inheriting music is in the same vein as the way of inheriting African ancient culture, that is, using sound or oral language instead of written language. For the people of all ethnic groups in Africa, drum music with distinct rhythms is not only a daily means of communication, but also the understanding of life and living by their ancestors. By singing together or playing African drum music, the African people are closely connected. They share emotions and experiences in the drum music, strengthening the sense of collectivism and social cohesion. It is believed that in the near future, the unique African music culture will continue to develop and continue to shine in the process of cultural globalization!

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