

MUS3520: Non-Western / World Music
Pelkey / 2006

Lecture: Brief History of Medieval West Africa

From about 500 AD to 1700 AD, there were three major imperial civilizations that flourished in West Africa among the Mande-speaking people.

The three empires were centered on the "Sudan," a strip of fertile land just south of the Sahara Desert, stretching from the Atlantic Ocean east to the Red Sea.

These were cosmopolitan, urban-oriented, trading empires.

Ghana -- the first empire, centered on the "Soninke" people; their oral history has been preserved by their "griot," or musical story tellers ("Praise Name Songs")

ca. 300 AD (toward the end of the Roman period in North Africa) -- commercial power of Ghana emerges; camel trade routes between western Sudan and North Africa established; Nomadic Berber tribes were the link between the Soninke and their trading partners. (About a 40-day journey by camel caravan.)

Gradually, Soninke control extended over much of western Sudan.

At the same time, Islam began to spread into North Africa and even into the regions south of the Sahara. Arabic sultans were interested in Ghana because of its control of gold mines and salt mines in western Sudan. They sent missionaries to work to convert the Soninke because a jihad would not be possible (distance plus desert).

Only a minority of the people of Ghana initially converted, but the kings allowed the Muslim missionaries to build mosques, to teach, and to worship.

Political structure consisted of city-states with social hierarchies, controlled by armies of the head king. He received visitors and diplomats in a courtyard outside his house. His status was emphasized through his gold jewelry, fine clothing, and royal musical instruments.

Ghana's empire fell apart under stress from two sources: a new missionary / military effort under the "Almoravid" Muslims (who pushed into Southern Spain, Northwestern Africa, and then south into Ghana) and from the rival Susa people of western Africa. (ca. 1050-1059)

Mali -- this second West African empire controlled the gold and salt trade from about 1200 to 1500. Formed by the Mandinka people.

The king, called the "Mansa," ruled through a council of elders representing the various clans of the people.

Great mythic war hero who formed the empire -- Sundiata, the "Hungering Lion."

He is supposed to have ruled Mali from 1230 to 1255.

Many of the Mansa of Mali were devout Muslims; some even made the "hajj," or sacred pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina. This helped to spread the fame of West African wealth; even those in Europe heard of it, and this was one reason that European ships, in search of gold, began to sail to West Africa in the 1400s and 1500s.

Once again, internal strife led to the collapse of control of trade, and a new Mande-speaking people established authority over the gold and salt trade routes.

Songhay -- This third medieval West African empire grew along the Niger River.

Gradually filled the political void left by fall of Mali. Initially, there was intense conflict between the leaders of Songhay and the various groups who had converted to Islam.

Then, a general who was devout took over and established the Askia dynasty.

The Askia were the most politically sophisticated rulers of West Africa.

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Lecture: Introduction to Traditional Music of Sub-Saharan Africa

I. Some General Ideas

--Where can we hear African-influenced Music?
"African Diaspora"

--Traditional versus Modern (popular) Music in Africa:

--The People of Africa:

--Some General Characteristics:

- (1) purpose and contexts:
- (2) rhythm:
- (3) time-keeping:
- (4) patterns of singing:
- (5) heterophony and intervals:
- (6) "buzzing"
- (7) musical phrases:
- (8) audience-participant:
- (9) drums, drumming, and ideophones:
- (10) wind instruments:
- (11) chordophones:

II. The Ewe, the Shona, and the Mande

III. The Mbira

IV. Some Musical Examples

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Lecture: Introduction to Perspectives on Popular Music and the History of African Popular Music

I. Study of Popular Music in Musicology:

- a recent field of study

- urbanization and modernization

(failure of traditional music to fulfill contemporary social needs)

- economic and political hegemony?

- modernization, culture, education, and nationalism:

II. What is "Popular Music"?

- performance contexts:

- spectrum of social classes:

- commercial support vs. subsidies:

-- auto-didactic learning:

-- more or less sophisticated?

-- amusement or "magic"?

-- historical media:

sheet music

radio

television

**film (economics in the Third World)

cassette technology (dissemination and individual control)

CDs and musical piracy

III. The Voice of the People or Cultural Control?

Some critical perspectives:

IV. History of Popular Music in Sub-Saharan Africa

-- many traditional elements retained

BUT some simplification:

-- social contexts of performances:

-- Ethnically exclusive or inclusive?

-- Three major sources of external influence:

-- **Historical overview:**

African brass bands

African rumba and konkomba bands (**listening example**)

1920s: "blackface Vaudeville" and ragtime music

1940s:

1960s:

Political Song:

history of recording in Africa:

V. Repertory Focus: West African High-life and Juju

Definitions:

Some West African Examples:

“Orin Asape Eko” (1937)

“Ore Mi Kini Se?” (late 1930s)

“Sowemimo” (early 1950s)

“Sugar Soup” (1969)

“Saturday Night” (1969)

“Bus Conductor” (1969)

“Ebony” (Dance Hall Music) (1969)

Examples from South Africa will be heard during our Cohort Activity.