I ENCONTRO INTERNACIONAL DE ETNOMUSICOLOGIA NEGRA

16 a 18 de junho de 2026

Salvador

Closing Conference

Why Language Matters in the Composition of African Music

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Preamble.

It's a pleasure to be here this evening. Let me begin by congratulating you on convening the 1st International Meeting on Black Ethnomusicology in Salvador, Bahia. I want to pay a special tribute to Professor Pedro Acosta for his leadership and vision, and for his role in bringing about this historic gathering.

Despite the elevated sense of this occasion, however, my talk tonight is on a decidedly low, everyday topic, namely, the relationship between language and music in Africa. It is a subject that has featured in much research and writing about Africa. (The list of contributors is long, but at a minimum, it will have to include Kwabena Nketia, Nissio Fiagbedzi, Daniel Avorgbedor, Kwasi Ampene, Ama Aduonum for Ghana; and for other parts of the continent, scholars like Gilbert Rouget, John Blacking, Ruth Stone, Akin Euba, Amanda Villepasteur, Aaron Carter-Enyi, and Damascus Kafumbe). It is a subject dear to my own heart; indeed, the first article I ever published on African music was entitled "The Impact of Language on Musical Composition in Ghana." That was nearly 4 decades ago. Since then, language has featured in my studies of African rhythm, African melodic style, and African art music. So, in a way, I am in this talk returning to a familiar topic, one that I believe remains pertinent today. Our sounds and epistemologies and our very identities are mediated by language.

Introduction.

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Among Africa's great endowments, language ranks high. Here are some numbers. There are at least 2000 languages on the continent, not counting dialects. In Ghana where I come from, 80 languages have been counted in a population of 35.7 million people. And in what used to be called the Volta Region, where I was born, there is a group of 14 minority languages known as the Ghana-Togo Mountain languages (GTM). Indeed, my own mother tongue, a language called Siwu, belongs to this cluster of GTM languages, which in turn belong to a larger family of Guan languages spoken by 9.2% of the population of the Volta Region.

Take a breath

More than numbers. But I am not talking only about the sheer number of languages. I am also referring to their communicative affordances and structural diversities. Linguists have taught us about phenomena such as co-articulated consonants, tonal contrast, grammatical tone, complex noun systems, logophonic pronouns, and serial verb construction. Studying these attributes may help us gauge language's creative potentialities, including its imbrication in other expressive systems, notably music.

Before going any further, let me acknowledge earlier scholarship by citing three statements bearing on the ontology and epistemology of the language-music connection in Africa:

1. Francis Bebey (1975) QUOTE: "Without African languages, African music would not exist." [Ontology].
2. Gerhard Kubik (1994) QUOTE: "it is hardly possible today to study [African music] without the necessary background in African languages." [Epistemology].

3. And finally, me (2016): "without language, there would be no song; without song, African music would not exist. Language and music are thus tied, as if by an umbilical cord." [Ontology]

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Anyone interested in the composition of African music, be it music in a traditional idiom, a popular idiom, or in the so-called art music idiom, is bound to encounter at some point the package of possibilities known as language and to begin to make peace with it. Historically as well as conceptually, language has strong claims to priority as a primary modelling system (John Blacking). Language functions as an agent in performance and serves to mediate listeners' reception of African music. So, to assert that the spoken word was there in the beginning is not to blaspheme or to sound hyperbolic. Rather, it is to recognize language's primal origins and phenomenal presence, and to signal its vast creative potential and explanatory capabilities.

And yet, for us musicians, when all is said and done—that is to say, after we have celebrated our tone systems, melorhythms, talking drumming, praise singing, dance drumming, and a host of others—language would seem to retreat into its essential state as tonal residue, without a priori meaning, with nothing but potentiality.

How can this be so?

In sketching an answer to that question, I will consider three main issues tonight: first, speech surrogacy; second, song; and third, a phenomenon I will call a linguistic aura.

Surrogacy speaks directly to the encoding of language in instrumental playing; song, too, encodes language, but responds to additional imperatives, including the creation of edifying or pleasure-giving melorhythms, thus shifting the grounds of song towards music and away from language; and finally, the linguistic aura maintains language's presence at the deepest levels of creation—a transformed language, to be sure, stripped of its conventional semantic baggage but not of its tonal and articulative behavior. By reducing language to tone, the linguistic aura both affirms language's presence while transferring conceptual priority to music.

1. Surrogacy. "Speech surrogacy is a method of communication that replaces spoken language with alternative sounds, such as drumming, whistling, or instrumental music,

to convey linguistic information. Common in West [and Central] African and various other cultures, it uses pitch, rhythm, and tone to represent spoken language without actual speech."

I'm sure you're all familiar with the phenomenon of speech surrogacy, but let us listen to three audio **examples** as a point of reference.

The first is from a recording made in the DRC featuring a horn rendering speech. You'll hear the spoken form first, then you'll hear it played on the horn. PLAY.

The second is a famous Akan poem honoring the river Tano. The text is first spoken by a female voice and then played on the so-called Atumpan drum. PLAY

The third is a very short statement—an admonition, really—played by a drummer from Akpafu, rendering a Twi text. You will hear the drummer signalling before actually speaking on the Atumpan drum. PLAY

The idea that an instrument can literally talk, that is, encode language in ways that can be decoded—this idea has fascinated many. Among iconic examples in African music history are the talking drums of the Congo, in particular the Lokele; talking drums associated with royal courts, such as those of the Asante; and the dundun talking drums of the Yoruba. There are many others, of course.

Drums are not the only instruments that speak. One can find instruments from every instrumental family producing sounds that are aligned with or allied with speech. They include bamboo flutes, trumpets, horns, and other wind instruments; stringed instruments like the seperewa, the kora, and the gonje; and even self-sounding instruments like iron bells and lamellophones. Without exaggerating, we might say that no instrumental realm in Africa is free of a linguistic aura. [Incidentally, the implications of this claim for Black ethnomusicology, which I understand as an ethnomusicology attuned to the historical experiences of black people, are worth discussing].

How does surrogacy work? Again, this is a topic that has been addressed in writings by Carrington, Nketia, Euba, Villepasteur, and others, so we will be brief in describing the mechanics.

The invariant principle of speech surrogacy is the transfer of sonic residue from its ostensibly native home to a marked, foreign home. I want to pause here and provide one example of this transfer, with some attention to the pedagogical process, which we might describe as generative. We will proceed in three steps.

1. Speak the verbal phrase (i.e. the target phrase that you wish to render on an instrument). 2. Hum (or sing in the throat) the phrase in order to lay bare its relational pitch and rhythmic profile. Finally, 3) Play the hummed version on your talking instrument of choice—a drum, a horn, flute, harp, etc.

Example. *Asuo twa okwan, Okwan twa asuo, opanin ni hwan*? [English translation: The river crosses the path, the path crosses the river, who is elder?]

The basic principle is easy to grasp by anyone who is able to recognize pitch differences across non-identical timbral domains.

Let us consider two sets of complications. The first stems from the peculiarities of language; the second from the capabilities of the instrument tasked with doing the talking.

The first complication (language). Talking on instruments is made possible by the fact that most African languages are tone languages. A tone language is "a language in which the pitch (high, low, rising, or falling) of a syllable is used to distinguish the meaning of words." In Ewe, kuku [HH] is a hat, kuku [LH] is death.

We have two-toned languages, three toned languages, four-toned languages, and so on. In a three-toned language (like Ewe), the tones are conventionally described as low, mid and high (LMH); in a two-toned language (like Twi), the tones are low and high (LH).

One difficulty with rendering a spoken phrase on an instrument is that the sonic reality of speech is a lot more nuanced and complex than its representation as three discrete tone levels might indicate. Low is not a note, but an interval (a band, a region, a range); so are mid and high; moreover, LMH grid itself is relational rather than absolute. And if one includes the intonational patterns that make speech expressive, then clearly the sonic profile of a phrase like, "Asuo twa okwan" will look a lot more complex. The reason why my pedagogical method includes a humming moment is precisely to capture the underlying sonic trace, free of interferences of articulative vehicles such as consonants and vowels, things we take for granted in spoken language. Incidentally, there are nowadays technologies [such as Sonic Visualiser] for capturing more of this nuance. My point here is simply to underline the fact of material differences between speech tone and musical tone.

The second complication (instrumental affordances). A reciprocal set of constraints stems from the capabilities of the instrument that is doing the talking. For example, the pair of Atumpan drums we heard in that performance of *Asuo twa okwan, okwan twa asuo* has exactly two main tones, a low and a high. In making the transfer, low tones are played on the lower-pitched male drum while high tones are rendered on the higher-pitched female drum. But if low in linguistic terms is an interval rather than a level pitch, then rendering speech on a drum will require considerable compromise because the full range of sounding language in all its expressive particularities is simply not available on most talking instruments. Therefore, talking on the Atumpan drums involves a necessary contraction of the sonic realm of spoken language.

We can speak of the diminishing of the sound of language when language is transferred to a sound-producing instrument. This challenge is negotiated differently depending on

the instrument. With its ability to bend pitch and thus produce the interstitial, the Yoruba dundun for example has a greater capability to render speech than the Akan atumpan. Clearly then, other factors are at work in the encoding and decoding of language, factors that exceed the basic principle of reproducing language on an instrument.

One such factor is the available pitch resource of an instrument, including tuning. Instruments have different sets and arrangements of notes. While the Atumpan has two, some bells have one, while the seperewa has 8, and so on. So, choices must be made when talking on one of them. A recent article by McPherson and Obiri-Yeboah, for example, shows that surrogacy on the seperewa is confined to two notes, G3 and A3 for low and high respectively. All the remaining 6 notes of the seperewa are useless for performing the gimmick of surrogacy! (They are, however, not useless for performing song or instrumental music).

In the interests of time, I will not talk about the uses of surrogacy by modern African composers (like Euba, Omojola, Oluranti, Kafui, and others).

The thing to carry forward from this brief exploration of speech surrogacy is that surrogacy aims to preserve the relational pitch dimension of speech, as well as its rhythmic or at least syllabic mode of articulation. We will see similar constraints in song, and later in pure instrumental music, where there isn't a comparable communicative obligation; the overriding obligation there is to create a condition for dance or play.

2. Song. Song is conventionally understood as an amalgam, a coming together of two elements, namely: word and tone. (You can also speak of words and music; language and music; or even text and music). Whether the word preceded the tone in the genesis of a song, or whether the tone formed the compositional origin, or whether, by some miracle, the two emerged simultaneously, they typically co-exist in song. There are different modes of co-existence, depending on song type. Some modes are harmonious and concordant; others are discordant or fraught because the components never quite

relinquish their individual identities. We might say therefore that an irreducible residual tension attends all instances of words and music coming together to form that compound structure we call *song*. Putting it differently: To the extent that there is a global rule about the nature of word-tone interaction in song, it is that such interaction invariably produces a *doubleness* at its deepest level.

Some of the challenges in theorizing African song stem from this doubleness. For the composer of a song in an African tone language (like Ewe, Twi or Yoruba), the language component comes already freighted with its own "music." So, strictly speaking, song is not a coming together of the separate domains of words and music; rather, it is a coming together of, on one hand, words as a domain that already contains its own music; and on the other, music as a separate domain.

Let me give an example from the oeuvre of Dr. Ephraim Amu, the father of Ghanaian choral music. Amu once made setting of a biblical text, John 3:16, "For God so loved the world." The Ewe words are "Alegbegbe, Mawu lo xexeame" . As a native speaker, Amu sets this text with exemplary fidelity to speech tones. But he is composing a song with four parts, so he is obliged to use various contrapuntal devices to offset what would be obligatory parallelism if the parts were to sing the same text at the same time. This kind of choral music, which is widespread throughout Ghana, Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa, is testimony to European influence and to the considerable extent to which the original music inscribed in our languages has been undermined, erased, violated. PLAY.

We probably need a workshop involving composers to fully appreciate the challenge of setting tone-language texts, but what we have seen here is that the music of language is prominently expressed in the sequence of speech tones. So if you wish to set to music the Ewe phrase *Esrom miele* [We're learning it] or the Twi phrase *Momyenkoso mfro* [Let us continue to climb], you may choose to make patent the latent or natural melody of the spoken language; or you may create a tune based on other aesthetic preferences,

some of which may be shaped by the musical systems in use (like pentatonic scales, quartal harmonies, and so on).

African tone languages come with different degrees of sedimented song, and different composers approach their task of song creation with different degrees of commitment to the attributes and imperatives of spoken language.

It would take us too far afield to rehearse the diverse ways in which language and music are brought together in song, but if you'll forgive the following generalization, it is that: In a number of Ghanaian traditional repertories (like funeral dirges, declamatory song), words and melody are closely matched; in a lot of popular song, especially that which draws its harmonic vocabulary from European sources, and in the singing that goes on in many Christian churches, the intrinsic music of language is often ignored; and in the varieties of art music, although some composers respect the natural endowments of language (like Amu, for whom tone-tune parallelism was an article of faith), others turn a deaf ear to them. In some cases, there is an actual resistance to the tonal freight of African languages.

If speech surrogacy is based on the diminishment of language's sonic properties, song exhibits a similar diminishment, but with one difference: whatever language element is undermined by the song's melody is not finally eliminated because, as long as the words remain, their intrinsic tonal properties remain too, if not in actuality then psychologically. It is in this sense that hearing song is always like hearing two musics, sometimes in alignment, sometimes dissonantly.

A simple way of framing what I have been saying about African song is that language invariably leaves traces on song, whether or not the composer approaches the linguistic resource in a friendly way, or in an antagonistic way, or simply indifferently. These traces amount to an aura, and I would now like to turn in the third and final part of this talk to the linguistic aura that is cast over musical production in Africa.

3. Linguistic aura.

By linguistic aura, I mean a language trace, imprint, or impression inscribed in musical space without the explicit presence of lexical items. The trace could take many forms—a gesture, a rhythmic pattern, a mode of articulation, and so on. Recognizing that these gestures, patterns, or modes of articulation originate in fully-freighted language compels performers, interpreters, and listeners to continue to reckon with language even in the most abstract instrumental music.

Let me provide just three examples. As you listen, see if you sense the linguistic aura that I have been talking about.

Example 1. My first example is a magnificent tone poem by a flute ensemble from Guinea recorded in 1988 and published on a Musiques du monde label. I come to this music with no ethnographic preparation; I draw mainly from my knowledge of other West African traditions. The track is labeled Griots de labe, and it is a recreation of a griot performance by a family of flutes who will enact the roles of singer and accompaniment. Griots, incidentally, are word smiths tasked with performing histories, genealogies, praise, and so on. So, the spoken word lies at the heart of the griot's art. Sometimes, a griot will exceed the spoken word and enter the realm of the sung word. Such singing typically elevates delivery, facilitates memorization, and mediates understanding.

In the performance we are about to hear, a groove is first created to ensure that a communal ethos is activated. No one listening to the griot stands outside the temporal constraints of this groove.

Once the groove has been established, the griot can begin to spin his narrative—to talk, that is. We hear him soar above the flute ensemble, singing in a rhetorically marked way, and contrasting the groove's repeated short patterns with his own longer phrases. PLAY.

While I cannot tell you what the lead flute is actually saying, I think we can all agree that he appears to be saying something, perhaps imitating speech in the medium of song, in the medium of wordless song. It is in this sense that we may speak of a linguistic aura in the performance. Specifically, the speech mode is activated, but not speech itself. Think of the process as a transfer from a vocal realm to an instrumental realm in which language-specific residue is neutralized, emptied of lexical meaning while remaining meaningful through the preservation of the morphologies of speech. PLAY

Example 2. In our earlier discussion of surrogacy, we identified the Akan *atumpan drums* as sound-producing objects capable of talking, and sometimes entrusted with relaying messages, proverbs, announcements, or poetry for the occasion. The same pair of atumpan drums is entrusted with advancing the lead drummer's narrative in the ensemble drumming that supports the Adowa dance.

I want to focus here on a tiny excerpt from the lead drummer's narrative to illustrate what I'm calling a linguistic aura. According to Ghanaian music theorist and ethnomusicologist Willie Anku (1949-2010), who made a detailed analytical study of Adowa in 1992, structural procedure is carried out by the manipulation of successive themes by the lead drummer. Anku identified 7 such themes in this reconstructed digital recording of Adowa. Theme 1 is stated, then elaborated for as long as the drummer and dancers need. Then a stock bridge passage signals the transition to the next theme, Theme 2. This, too, will be elaborated for a specified interval, after which a bridge passage will prepare the way for Theme 3. And so on until all 7 themes have been introduced and variably elaborated. The performance ends with a closing signal whose final onset occurs typically on beat 1 of the metrical cycle. Let us listen to the first two themes played, not by the full Adowa ensemble, but just the bell and the lead drummer: PLAY.

This logical form is, according to Anku, enlivened by several creative procedures involving manipulations of groups of 12, but don't worry, I won't go into them. I simply want to mention two things that contribute to the linguistic aura.

The first is heard in the manipulation of verbal phrases under a variety of regimes of repetition. It turns out that each of Anku's seven themes is associated with a verbal phrase. Theme 1, for example, is Tome kume, menie, Tome kume, adampa [I am at your mercy, or I am at your disposal. If you pass the phrase through my humming machine, it sounds like this. And now you can hear it played by the simulated atumpan drum. The drummer does not merely repeat the verbally inflected theme; he manipulates it. My point is that that a linguistic aura accompanies the motivic discourse. PLAY.

A related sign of a linguistic aura is improvisation. Lead drumming is sometimes described as a mode of improvisation. Anku argues, however, that what we call *improvisation* or composing in the moment is in fact a learned process. For him, to improvise is not to engage in a free, anything-goes play; rather, the improviser draws on stock themes and known ordering procedures in response to the interactional exigencies of the moment (including exchanges with the dancers and supporting drummers and singers) and the normal will to be clever, to display one's imagination as a drummer.

To the extent that improvisation is the closest we come to speaking music as a language, the atumpan drummer featured here is always beholden to language, enveloped in a linguistic aura.

But what if you do not understand the language of a particular theme? Remember that these themes include a wide range of linguistic usages, from proverbs, poems, wise sayings, praise, historical or secret references, and profane utterances? So we might posit a strategic opacity as one of the goals of surrogacy. The verbal basis of speech surrogacy is meant only to be recognized, not necessarily understood; speech surrogacy is not a transparent discourse available to everyone who has normal competence in a language; it is rather a coded language aimed at specific subgroups. Indeed, in the

broader history of talking drumming, there are many drummers who speak on drums without knowing the languages, or even without saying anything, only mimicking the speech mode. And there are listeners for whom only the manner of speaking is accessible, not the specific meanings. This condition is not confined to practices outside the native origins of a given dance drumming; insiders, too, may not get what the drummer is saying. Have we thus invented a practice of surrogacy?

Example 3. My final example is meant to suggest that the inaccessibility of the semantic or sense dimension of talking drumming may paradoxically be an enabling condition for appreciating the linguistic aura and with it what we might as well call purely musical processes.

Here is an excerpt from the Pan African Orchestra's debut album. Track 3, entitled "Ewe 6/8 rhythms," is in the idiom of Southern Ewe music, specifically the popular recreational dance Agbadza. Like Adowa, it features an ensemble, this time of rattles, bells and various drums, including the so-called lead drum or master drum.

Listen, if you will, to the lead drummer for the kind of language-like utterances I've been talking about. PLAY.

You will have noticed immediately that the passage features a succession of patterns or themes or motives, each of which is stated and then repeated or elaborated. Unlike Anku's adowa, these themes are not identified with specific verbal origins or associations. When I hear them, however, I hear a mode of delivery redolent of speech: patterns of onsets that invite identification with language, almost like wordless words, like the patterns produced during our humming stage in the generative approach to surrogacy and song. I hear tone-rhythmic sequences that suggest words, but I could not tell you what they mean. Few listeners will be able to recover literal lexical items from that performance, but I would guess that many will sense a linguistic aura—a language-like presence that is veiled in the absence of words and their semantic

dimension. Language here is reduced to sound and duration. In other words, language is reduced to music.

I'm on the verge of saying that language casts a long shadow on all African music. Thinking again of the three domains in which we have carried out this inquiry (surrogacy, song and a linguistic aura), we can reach the following conclusions. In the case of speech surrogacy, the intention is to transpose spoken language directly into another medium. In the case of song, the intention is to accommodate the tonal and durational dimension of spoken language within the constraints of song, song being a compound with two irreducible inputs. And in the case of linguistic aura, the claim is that a whiff of articulative language emanates from many a musical texture, most prominently in the narratives spun by the lead drummer in dances like adowa or agbadza.

I have heard it said, that in the beginning was the word, or that in the beginning was language. For those musicians who, anxious perhaps to preserve the priority of music, wish to modify the thought from "in the beginning was language" to "In the beginning was music," we can agree that the spoken word is both tone and duration, a music, or a proto-music.

Conclusion.

I have been exploring three related issues under the broad topic of language-music relations in Africa: surrogacy; song; and the linguistic aura. There are, of course, other issues we have not mentioned; and there is, of course, a lot more to say about each of these issues. Whether or not you agreed with the claims I've made, I hope we can agree on one thing, namely, the centrality of natural language to musical expression.

I would like to end with a brief message to my brothers and sisters in the African diaspora. If there is any merit to the contention that language was there in the beginning, that it functions as humanity-defining essence (as Meki Nzewi would say), and that our

musical practices are deeply rooted in language, then, even allowing for change and redefinition through history, our African identities will remain incomplete until we eliminate or significantly reduce this linguistic deficit. I am not saying that we should somehow put aside the languages we have acquired in the new world; on the contrary, I'm saying that even while maintaining and excelling at the use of languages of the new world, we might develop a heightened awareness of the linguistic aura that envelops our ancestral cultural practices.

Thank you!!