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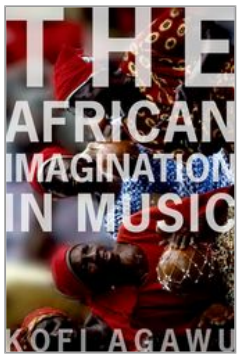

The African Imagination in Music
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The Melodic Imagination

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter disputes the frequently made claim that melody is not one of the core dimensions of African music. It does so by first showing how language serves as a gateway to song. It then assembles a number of melodies to display the workings of the African melodic imagination. Some are brief chants while others are more elaborate melodies. They include an Aka Pygmy melody, a Northern Ewe crying song, an Akpafu lament, and a song by Fela. Attention is also given to instrumental performances on the one-stringed fiddle and on the xylophone. The chapter highlights various pitch and linguistic resources and the role of archetypes in guiding melodic expression.

Keywords: melody, Aka Pygmy, Northern Ewe, Akpafu, Fela, melodic archetypes

The origin of all melody is the human voice. “Voice” connotes speech and speaking, song and singing. The theater of the

melodic imagination plays to an imperative of present action, not to a past lodged in memory and inheritance. Voice implicates intonation and intoning, the vocal and vocalizing. Voices come in a variety of timbres, too, from the ordinary to the extraordinary, from the relaxed to the tense and intense. The vocalizing mode may be direct or subtle, open or muted, plain or sly, seductive or stern. The musical voice can make language by enabling it or break language by resisting its natural tendency toward enunciation. It can nurture speech by doing what speech wants to do, namely, communicate with (imagined) others, but the "musicking" voice can also refuse the communicative function and simply bathe in sound or sonority for pleasure. Melody and language are thus locked in a profound and active dialectic; indeed, like the spoken word, melody may be said to have been there in or near the beginning.

Valuing African Melody

Just how important is melody to African music? It would seem strange to pose such a question, given the primal significance of voice and language in African cultural expression. Surely most music has content that is melodically significant, even if the commitment to purely melodic elaboration differs from community to community, style to style, musician to musician, or even occasion to occasion. I pose the question, however, because a certain lopsidedness attends some evaluations of African melodic thinking vis-à-vis other dimensions. While much has been made of African drums and complex rhythms and polyrhythms, much less has been made of the melodic imagination. In an earlier phase of discourse about African music, when scholars felt at liberty to compare the individual dimensions of different musical styles either casually (p.196) or formally, African melody was rarely singled out for high praise. William Ward, for example, writing in the 1920s, reckoned that Africans began with "a superior sense of rhythm, but that they would need to learn about harmony from Europeans."[1] Rose Brandel detected only "the beginnings of a true harmony" in Central African polyphony.[2] Robert Ndɔ, a noted composer of choral works from the Volta Region of Ghana, adopted the colonizer's language in describing African

melody as “primitive and stereotyped.”[3] Musicologist Alexander Ringer, in an important reference article, acknowledges that melody “represents a universal human phenomenon,” but he immediately qualifies the universality with an African exception: “in some cultures … rhythmic considerations may always have taken precedence over melodic expression, as in parts of Africa.”[4] Peter Fryer says flat out that melody “is not one of the essential features of African traditional music.”[5] And in his widely used textbook, *The Music of Africa* (1974), Nketia writes, “Since African music is predisposed towards percussion and percussive textures, there is an understandable emphasis on rhythm, for *rhythmic interest often compensates for the absence of melody or the lack of melodic sophistication*” (my emphasis).[6] Nketia does not cite instances of music in which melody is absent; nor does he demonstrate the “lack of melodic sophistication” in any particular style or repertoire. Since what he calls “rhythm” is most likely “melorhythm” (i.e., an alloy of pitch and rhythm), and given that most manifestations of rhythm include a pitch-differential aspect, his general claim might be qualified to reflect the sedimentation of “melody” in the purest of rhythmic expressions. It is unfortunate that what some readers routinely infer from Nketia’s remark is that Africa scores high on a rhythm test but fails the melody test.

These valuations fly in the face of all available evidence. A continent blessed with such magnificent voices as those of Malian Salif Keita, Senegalese Youssou Ndour, Cameroonian Baaba Maal, Sierra Leonian S. E. Rogie, Ghanaians Koo Nimo and Osei Korankye, Beninois Angelique Kidjo, Ivorian Dobet Gnahore, and South Africans Miriam Makeba and Joseph Shabalala can hardly be imagined as lacking in melody. The exquisite shapes, affecting mannerisms, and subtle (p.197) expressions that are delivered in performance after performance are known to bring joy to listeners, ignite deep feelings, awaken buried memories, and foster meaningful associations. Few would think of these collective repertories as melodically deficient or unsophisticated. Granted, the examples just cited are of musicians active in the popular realm, a realm excluded from Nketia’s book, but his claim is no more defensible in connection with traditional music. One

need only recall the intricate melodic thinking exemplified in the art of kora-playing praise singers from Gambia, Mali, Senegal, or Guinea or of the interlocking procedures that enable the large trajectories of “endless melody” played by great Baganda and Chopi xylophonists and Shona mbira players. One might think also of Baule, Ashanti, Kongo, and Northern Ewe dirge singers, singers whose ability to give voice to thoughts and feelings in song touches us deep in our guts, sends mourners into themselves, and engenders reflection on the meaning of life. One may even consider those brief but charming, finely shaped melodies that children from Angola, Malawi, Uganda, and South Africa produce in the course of play, melodies whose particular alchemy of dimensional interaction is not commonly found in other world music. No, there is nothing deficient, primitive, inferior, undeveloped, or unsophisticated about African melody.

Nurtured in an oral/aural milieu, African melodies typically display shapes that betray their live origins: vital, lucid, often graspable as a whole and designed to be immediately apprehended. These shapes sometimes differ in scope from the more elaborate “paper melodies” produced by European composers like Bach, Mozart, Schubert, Tchaikovsky, Richard Strauss, or Luciano Berio, but no one who has heard great singers of epics from Mali, Gambia, or the Democratic Republic of the Congo or griots and griottes from Niger, Senegal, or Guinea could possibly doubt that African musicians routinely produce extensive melodic structures.

That said, comparing the dirge singer’s melody to the products of the ostensibly high-art tradition of European classical music is not always the best way to frame a comparison. As philosopher Kwasi Wiredu reminds us, it is best to compare like with like. That is, it is more appropriate to compare art music with other art music, or folk music with other folk music, than to compare art music with folk music, especially if the point of the comparison is to arrive at a critical or qualitative judgment.[7] Communally inspired and communally targeted folk music should be compared with music of similar origins and aspirations, not with music produced on paper under regimes of solipsism, subjectivism, or narcissism, or designed to display the cleverness (sometimes (p.198) called

“genius”) of an individual composer. A more appropriate comparison in this case would be with folk songs created in the course of ordinary life, play, and ritual by Hungarians, Romanians, Chinese, Irish, Scots, and Amerindians. It is hard to see how the melodic substrate of African music can be deemed inferior in such company.

Perhaps it is all a matter of perspective—one person’s melody is another’s noise, and one person’s sophistication is another’s naiveté. Given the methodological challenges to substantiating such ideological views, it would be wise to turn away from general impressions and consider specifics, away from overt advocacy to description. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to display facets of the African melodic imagination that might enhance appreciation of the products of that imagination. At the heart of the melodic instinct is a wonderfully entangled network of expressive possibilities, a synthesis of word, tone, and rhythm entirely characteristic of African modes of expression. As before, I will describe only a handful of items, but it should be borne in mind that for each song or melodic utterance described here, literally thousands of additional exemplars exist. My hope is that African readers in particular will be able to supply their own examples of the core principles discussed here from repertoires familiar to them. This demonstration will hopefully disrupt any lingering suspicions that African melody is primitive, inferior, or unsophisticated and inspire reflection on one of the primal and most potent sources of African creativity.

Language as Gateway

If sung melody originates in part from language in motion, then a fundamental requirement for an authentic appreciation of African melody is an understanding of what the voice is saying. Without some sense of the singer’s semantic meanings, the listener’s ability to identify with a song may be limited. Consider the following sentiments expressed in four different songs:

1. “A bad leg has entered this town.”
2. “What have I done so as to be rendered naked?”
3. “My lover has deceived me ooo.”

4. “Doers of good things: hurry up and do them because I’m about to leave for a far-off place.”

These opening lines immediately put listeners in certain frames of mind, stimulating affects and generating expectations. A bad leg (1) brings bad luck or misfortune in the form of disease, natural disaster, or death. Nakedness in (p.199) public (2) is a sign that the singer has reached a limit; it marks an extreme occasion. Lovers deceive each other all the time (3), but to go one step further and codify such deception in song is to create a space for many more to share in the expression. And procrastination (4), they say, is the thief of time, so if you’re planning to do good, you better do it now because you may not have the opportunity tomorrow. You may end up in a faraway place from which no one returns.

Again, consider these randomly chosen beginnings from eight different songs:

1. “This one is a child who is just beginning to stagger about.”
2. “A hunter called Ampon lived in a certain town and needed a wife badly.”
3. “The person who gossips puts people in trouble.”
4. “You were an overpowering force, hey fire which bursts into flame!”
5. “I want to tell you about lady-o.”
6. “Gourd of urine, streaming, streaming.”
7. “I was playing moi guitar jeje, A lady gave me a kiss.”
8. “My head, please, fight for me, my spirit, please, fight, fight for me.”

These utterances announce places, people, and attitudes. They may elicit smiles, inspire resolve, make one fearful or nervous, or engender curiosity. The spoken word is, of course, not the only thing that draws a listener instantly into a singer’s orbit, but if you miss the fact, for example, that the “fight” (8) that jùjú singer King Sunny Ade is talking about is a spiritual rather than a physical fight (“My head, please, fight for me”)[8], or that the invocation of a streaming “gourd of urine” (*àɖùɖɔ ́go*) (6) is a therapeutic technique for humiliating and thus curing habitual bedwetting among Northern Ewe children,

then you are missing a vital point of entry into the imaginative worlds set in motion by these sung texts. Acculturated listeners are in possession of such horizons of expectation, and these regularly mediate their experience of performed melody.

It is true that many of us listen to songs in languages that we do not understand and still enjoy them. This is in part because the musical essence—tone, tune, timbre—brings its own attractions, attractions not necessarily mediated by a language-based semantics. Some people even claim that their level of enjoyment is not in any way diminished when they hear songs in foreign languages. (How they know that is not exactly clear.) The point here is not to reduce song (p.200) to a continuously signifying verbal narrative, for words display varying degrees of transparency in different genres of song; rather, the aim is to encourage a selective appropriation of some kind of hook, anchor, or lynchpin that can open up an individual song for the listener. Grasping the meaning of a key word or phrase at the beginning, at the high point, or at the close of a song may fix the expression and place the song as a whole in the right perspective for the engaged listener. When, for example, a Northern Ewe singer begins a song with the words *Xexeame fu* ("The world's sufferings"), she immediately strikes a sympathetic chord with many in her audience because suffering is a familiar and often lamented condition in this particular African culture. The four syllables of *Xexeame fu* are sung to the same pitch, G, but listeners who hear only the fourfold sounding of the pitch G on those syllables, or who hear only a short-long-short-long pattern of durations, miss out on the rich intertextual connotations of suffering. In some instances, the point of the song may be missed altogether.[9]

We encounter once again what I believe is a major obstacle to the appreciation of African music, namely, the frequent inaccessibility of its linguistic dimension to some listeners. It is sad that in Western Europe and the United States, listeners have been slow to embrace the verbal meanings associated with songs sung in African languages. While ensembles of drums, mbiras, and xylophones are often heard playing instrumental music on various college campuses and in various community groups, dirge, epic, or praise singers are

not as prominent, except, of course, in migrant communities. The point is not to limit the sphere of the appreciable, for people can surely be drawn to African song for many reasons, among them the timbre of a singer's voice, her physical looks, or her dynamic stage presence. But to be able to exclaim honestly and spontaneously, on hearing a riveting and culturally freighted melodic phrase, that "It has really gone inside for me!," the listener needs to have unlocked its linguistic dimension as well.

The Logic of Melodic Form

Language may thus serve as a gateway to the appreciation of sung or word-based melody, but there are other enabling dimensions. One of the first things to notice about melody is its *logic of form*. Every African melody naturally possesses a beginning and an ending, which are linked by a middle. To put it this way is to risk sounding banal because every temporally constrained expressive (p.201) act—a speech, a bereaved wife's lament, or a new mother's dance—surely has a beginning, a middle, and an ending. We must distinguish, however, between two aspects of form: a temporal aspect and a functional aspect. The temporal aspect recognizes actual, real-time placement; it records the pattern of succession. The functional aspect recognizes the tendency of the material, the intrinsic or attributed functionality of its segments, ways in which a sense of beginning can be executed and that of ending achieved. These ways include both syntactical and stylistic elements. The temporal aspect is fixed insofar as it is based on a chronology of events. The functional aspect demands a more qualitative approach; we need to recognize specific cultural conventions, as well as style-specific and piece-specific strategies for achieving those functions. In short, the attributes that accrue to a process on the basis of a simple linear ordering of its elements are not necessarily isomorphic with the *functions* intrinsic to those segments. What we hear at the beginning of a melody may or may not exhibit a typical or conventional beginning pattern; similarly, a song may end without adapting any of the conventional techniques of closure. Thinking about African melody in these dual terms—by distinguishing the temporal placement of segments from

their function—will alert us to some of the creative strategies employed by performer-composers.

As we would expect, musicians from different parts of the continent realize melodic form in diverse ways, and we would have our hands full trying to enumerate all of them here. There are, however, two recurring strategies that are of especial interest for African melody: emphatic beginnings and sudden, unprolonged or unprepared endings. In some genres, the act of beginning is conceived of rhetorically as an exclamation; it demands an accent, as if the singer intended a marked, weighty, or elevated utterance. A held high note might mark such a beginning, followed by a gradual and perhaps inevitable tapering off in the form of a descending contour. Poetically, a call out at the beginning of an utterance demarcates the onset of musical time and a concomitant departure from ordinary, lived time. Because it often involves a high note (it could even be the highest note), its production requires physical effort. The singer establishes the upper limit of the song's registral span in relation to her own equipment. Failed or imperfect execution of such beginnings can be corrected readily; one can simply begin again. Compare this strategy to that in which the singer approaches a melodic high point late in a song through a gradual and extended process (recall, for example, the English folk song "On Richmond Hill"; Schubert's "An die Musik"; the Christian song "He Lives"; the favorite Christmas song "O Holy Night"; or the German national anthem, "Das Deutschlandlied"), with no guarantee for successful realization, and where failure may be impossible to disguise. One immediately sees not only the logic but also the practical advantages of the African shape.

(p.202) An emphatic or elevated opening confers on the rest of the melody a comparatively muted stature. This is not a qualitative claim, however; it does not mean that the rest of the melody is in any way unimportant or redundant. Rather, it suggests that the superlative opening demands a differentiated continuation and conclusion. A number of scholars have noted an overall descending shape in African melody. A. M. Jones, for example, essentialized the contour of "African tunes" in this way:

> Broadly speaking, the outline of an African tune is like a succession of the teeth of a rip-saw; a steep rise (not usually exceeding a 5th) followed by a gentle sloping down of the tune; then another sudden rise—then a gentle sloping down, and so on. The tendency is for the tune to start high and gradually to work downwards in this saw-like manner.[10]

Similarly, Laz E. N. Ekwueme describes an Igbo song, "Anya Biara Ule," as follows:

> The general shape of the melody shows a downward movement. The highest note in the tune is sounded as the first note and dominates the first *okele* [equal divisions of time]. Only as an optional tone in the sixth *okele* is it reached again; otherwise the high point of the melody is also the initial point of this short tune. Thereafter, the melody drops slightly, gently meandering but dropping to the end. The lowest point is reached in the second phrase, and again in the last phrase.[11]

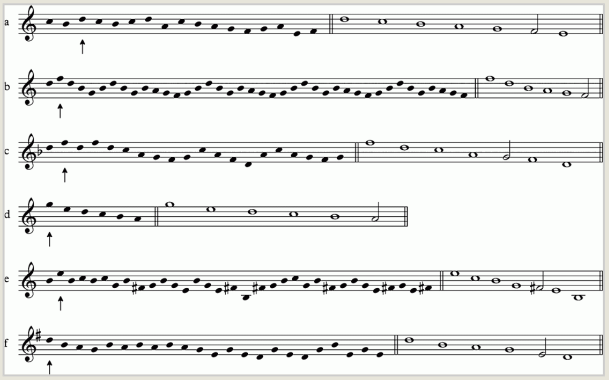
Literally thousands of songs in various traditional repertories enact this shape. Readers may verify this by consulting some of the vocal repertories assembled in Figure I.1. Although we need more context to pursue a genuine comparative poetics, we might, with only slightly mischievous intent, riff on Hornbostel's formulation and say that "*We* begin with the highest note and work our way down; *they* begin relatively low and hope to hit the high note in the middle or toward the end. They sometimes fail; we rarely fail."[12] (p.203)

Example 5.1 assembles six brief vocal melodies for a more detailed look at the downward shape described by Jones and Ekwueme. Each melody is shown in an arhythmic reduction (in black noteheads) and is followed by a summary of its pitch content (in white noteheads). An upward-pointing arrow identifies the first occurrence of the highest pitch. Tone centers are stemmed in the white-note summaries. Singing or playing through these chantlike sketches will immediately convey the overall melodic direction. Please bear in mind that there are other features of these melodies worthy of analytical attention, including strategies for beginning, continuing, and

ending; word-music resonances; and a variety of phrase-constructional techniques. We will come to some of these in connection with later examples, but let us focus for now exclusively on melodic contour.

The first example, an Akan folk song belonging to the Apoɔ genre (Example 5.1a), begins around its highest pitches (C5 and D5) and then descends to the lowest (E4 and F4). Next (Example 5.1b) is a song from a repertory accompanying initiation rites known as Makumbi from the Wagogo of Tanzania. The highest note, F5, is the second note in the reduction. The melody then proceeds with a mixture of arpeggiations and stepwise movement until it closes an octave below on F4. The high F is never heard again after its initial occurrence. Example 5.1c is a Ganda religious song from Uganda based on a characteristic pentatonic collection, F-D-C-A-G. The highest note, F5, is heard twice near the beginning; after that, the melody descends gradually, touching on D4 (a tenth below the high point) before closing on G4. Shown in Example 5.1d is a Venda children's song. Here the highest note, G5, is the first to be heard; the rest of the melody literally descends from (p.204) that high G, expressing the downward shape directly and without interruption. Next (Example 5.1e) is a Southern Ewe song, which also hits its apex (E5) early; it then proceeds often by leap to a lower register, where it dwells for the rest of the song. This song has an even bigger compass than Example 5.1c, dipping as low as B3 to create a span of an octave and a fourth between the highest and lowest pitches. Example 5.1f is a pastoral song from the Iteso of Uganda. Like the Venda example in Example 5.1d, it begins on its highest pitch (D5) and works its way through a mid register to a low, concluding one, ending on E4 but incorporating the adjacent note D4 as well.[13]

African composers do not, of course, slavishly adhere to the basic shape identified here. Artistic impulses intervene, resulting in enrichments and



Example 5.1 Six melodies exhibiting a downward shape.

transformations. Furthermore, notions of “high” and “low” may be interpreted metaphorically and in accordance with the exigencies of a particular context. As we have just seen, the highest pitch may occur not literally at the beginning but close to the beginning, while the lowest pitch may appear in the vicinity of the end rather than literally at the end. Also, the physical motion that defines something as a beginning or ending may reside in an attitude rather than in a specific constellation of pitches. Thus, a registral high point may appear in the middle of the melody without carrying the intensity or weighting associated with a beginning. The perception of a high point may depend on a play of diminutions, or on a particular sequence of gestures. And in contexts in which harmonic or contrapuntal constraints are at work, low- or high-lying pitches may be functional substitutes for other pitches, in which case the literal contour of a melody may not jive with the structural contour. Some of these attributes will emerge in the analytical discussion that follows, but analytically minded readers may wish to pursue them in various African song collections.

Endings have received relatively little attention in the literature on African music. This is a bit surprising, given their great potential to illuminate the social origins of musical form and to highlight a variety of aesthetic preferences. In some genres, such as Northern Ewe crying songs, melodies may be rendered without a prolonged sense of home-going. Factors

such as the philosophical import of the (verbal) message, the desire to preserve the mobility of a musical unit, or the preference for a provocative rather than assertive mode of communication may cause endings to use quick rhythms, finish on (p.205) scale degrees other than the putative tonic (as if ending in the middle of a process), imply linear continuation (as if endings were beginnings waiting to continue on to middles), or pass into silence without prolonged engineering. What each community or composer chooses is motivated by functional and aesthetic considerations, as well as the conventions in play; indeed, in Africa, the domains of function and aesthetics are often inseparable.

Functional attributes of endings stem from the extensive repetition of whole songs in performance. This necessitates a flexible construal of the endings of performance occasions. A melody that is going to be repeated three hundred times in the course of an afternoon's performance will likely be constructed differently from one that will be heard only once. A freighted ending would place an unnecessary burden on its capability for rebeginning or for engendering immediate repetition. The intrinsic mobility of certain African melodies, expressed in open modes and quick rhythms, results from this functional constraint. Also, because external and mundane factors like the onset of darkness, rain, or fatigue may demand that singers stop singing on a given occasion, intelligent composers often build such awareness into the structures they devise. Such endings have the potential to function as transitions back into the sphere of ordinary time.

The *avihawo* (crying songs) of the Northern Ewe is one among many genres in which the patterning of closure may well be functionally motivated. Melodies may finish in diminutive rhythms, or an utterance may be brought to a swift end, often accelerating toward that end. Ewe crying songs rarely linger in closing; more typically, they finish rather hastily, in part to register the gravity of the tragedy that has befallen the singer, and in part to install a complementary silence at the end of the performance to allow singers to contemplate the verbal message. In contrast to some (Western) traditions in which ending means slowing down both literally and metaphorically (by, for example, increasing the amount of structural

redundancy), the tradition of avihawo (and similar genres) reads the moment of ending not as a moment of death but as one of rhythmic life.[14]

Middles tend to be tied to beginnings as suffixes and to endings as prefixes, often in an organic way; they therefore tend to elicit less special, less marked rhetorical postures unless they are supporting a parenthesis in the form or an overtly allusive gesture. An ontological middle may be a functional continuation (p.206) of a beginning or a functional anticipation of an ending. While middles are in that sense fixed, they are less marked functionally and are best understood in terms of absence—specifically, the absence of an intrinsic or explicit beginning or ending function. Beginning, middle, and ending functions are recursive. A beginning can have its own middle, a middle its own ending, and an ending its own beginning. At yet later levels of structure, the middle of the ending can have its own beginning, the ending of the beginning its own middle, and the middle of the beginning its own ending. Again, the interest for us is not in the abstract possibilities of recursion but in the conventional attitudes that they enshrine.

Pitch Resources

What pitch resources are available to the producer of African melody, and how are choices made? Resources vary from group to group, from institution to institution, and in reference to diverse aesthetic goals. Typically, such resources include tone systems (most prominently, forms of the anhemitonic pentatonic scale), networks of intervallic preferences (of which seconds, thirds, and fourths in various permutations predominate), and strategies for embellishing individual notes or motives (of which the neighbor-note diminution is a favorite). Although scholars from Hornbostel to Nketia have studied African scales and tuning systems, there is, as far as I’m aware, no handy list of all available pitch resources that students might consult. What is clear, however, is that pitch awareness within a relational system is a key factor in shaping many musicians’ ways of proceeding. Such awareness is in turn amply conveyed in the choices made in the composition of melodies.

For composers working in communities in which creators are self-conscious about their artistic heritage, a new song or piece of instrumental music will often begin life as an utterance that conforms to something known; only later will it develop new qualities. The known factor is often the pitch resource (such as a pentatonic collection), which some musicians regard as a language or medium of communication; the unknown factor may reside in the motivic or thematic arrangement. The compositional ethos is to value, respect, or even revere what is inherited, not to ignore or wildly transform it to claim originality. Novelty and originality are sought in other ways: the invention of relevant themes; in the play with voice that, however adventurous, retains a human-centeredness; and in engaging performance.

The pitch content of African music should be approached in proper awareness of what may be intended and what may be fortuitous. Although a particular tone system may be akin to a heritage language, in reality, it constitutes a flexible framework for creativity, not a set of laws to be obeyed to the letter. (p.207) Pitches and intervallic sequences are meant to enable individuals and groups, not to disable them. I stress this precariousness and flexibility to encourage a more nuanced assessment of pitch usage in Africa. Too often, Westerners have gone into Africa with their measuring instruments in search of unique tuning systems. They return puzzled by the inconsistencies, the ostensible flexibility in realization, and the large margins of tolerance exercised by listeners and composers. There is, however, something intrinsically unstable about the production of pitch. Pitch articulation sometimes fosters a certain fuzziness around a core, in contrast perhaps to rhythmic articulation, which typically resists a similar degree of fuzziness. The embrace of a certain degree of fuzziness within a given musical domain is a choice, however, not the outcome of uncontrollable forces. When, for example, mbira or xylophone makers attach resonators and other timbre-altering devices to their instruments to obtain muffled sounds, they are not being imprecise. On the contrary, the apparent imprecision manifests an aesthetic desideratum. Similarly, flexibility in articulating a pentatonic collection (or, for that matter, any

conventional pitch collection) in a dirge, for example, is never a sign that a goal was not attained; rather, it is often an indication of a flexibly conceived goal. The phrase *margin of tolerance* is helpful in aptly characterizing such situations.[15]

Awareness of the material constraints on pitch choice is helpful in appreciating performances. For some instruments, pitches are fixed by the instrument maker. A xylophone, for example, may be tuned according to a certain sound ideal, be it a remembered pitch or in reference to other xylophones. Similarly, the spacing of holes on a bamboo flute, which normally determines the range and qualities of the sounds produced, is engineered partly by instruments of measurement and perception and partly by subjective judgments. And drums are constructed with tools that constrain their range of available pitches. Significant, then, are the technological means of production. Once again, we see that thinking in terms of appropriate technology is a prerequisite for correct interpretation that is appropriate for certain kinds of construction. (Although they are nowadays used here and there, tuning forks or keyboards in tempered tuning have no a priori status as regulators of pitch in Africa—which is not to say that they are never used.) In developing an appreciation for pitch in the traditional realm, we should grant that as long as individual African communities are satisfied with whatever tuning they have achieved, and as long as they have a mechanism for correcting performance errors, all is well.

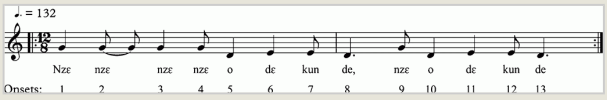
For singers, by contrast, a scalar horizon functioning on a background level may influence certain types of singing, including the negotiation of cadences. (p.208) The interstitial material often comes under additional constraints, such as those of speech tones, intonational contour, and rhetoric. Singers may thus go in and out of synchrony with, for example, a pentatonic substrate, not by rejecting its referential status, but by embracing the contingencies that separate the ideal from the realized. Erecting contingencies as evidence of a system, however, would obviously be absurd. Intention in such contexts should be given priority over realization.

Analyzing Melody

We turn finally to a handful of melodies to admire African creativity. The emphasis here will be on structure rather than style, on the inner workings of individual compositions (as they show up in pitch and rhythmic configurations) rather than repertoire-wide features. Criteria for analysis have been adumbrated in previous discussion, so only the briefest of summaries is needed here. Words are temporally tied to tones in a syllabic rather than melismatic configuration. The role of the spoken word as a vehicle for articulation is evident in syllabic settings. The existence of deep-lying pitch structures is one sign of a “purely musical” residue. In some genres, melodies are relatively short—a thirty-second length would not be unusual, although the melody would then be repeated many times in performance. Speech tone and melody may be closely correlated in some settings and loosely correlated in others; in yet others, the two proceed along separate, nonintersecting paths. While some melodies enact the rhythm of spoken language, others borrow the rhythm of dance, while still others travel back and forth between speech and dance. Most basic of all is the distinction between melodies in free or speech rhythm and those in strict rhythm. Free rhythm approximates declamation, a recitativelike mode of delivery; “free” indicates an absence not of rhythm but of a governing meter. Strict rhythm is song proper, closer to aria than to recitative, and endowed with an explicit meter from beginning to end, even while incorporating free-rhythmic effects from time to time. These criteria collectively promote a more precise characterization of the anatomies of our chosen melodies. Structural analysis cannot ultimately prove the aesthetic worth of an African melody; it can only draw attention to the kinds of structures imagined and enacted by African composers, named and unnamed. But without some such intervention, the attempt to disrupt some of the negative evaluations of African melody noted at the beginning of this chapter will be weaker still. Perhaps structural description can encourage similar acts of introspection about what African musicians do, and thus contribute eventually to more intimate knowledge of an African composition, be it a little fragment in the form of a work song or a monumental epic performance. **(p.209)**

An Aka Pygmy child’s three-note melody.

Aka Pygmy children often punctuate story-telling with songs. An example is the fragmentlike “Nzɛ, nzɛ, nzɛ,” which uses only three notes, D4-E4-G4 (Example 5.2 and Web Example 5.1).[16] Rhythmically, three different note values occur: an eighth note, a quarter note, and a dotted quarter. If we think of the dotted quarter as a lengthening of the quarter, then the operative values are actually two: an eighth and a quarter. This simple contrast (between a short and long note) enshrines a potent minimality that is entirely characteristic of African expression.



Example 5.2 Three-note melody (Aka Pygmy).

“Nzɛ, nzɛ, nzɛ” begins on its highest pitch, G4, and immediately skips to its lowest, D4. The latter is in turn “prolonged” by its upper neighbor note, E4. Onsets 4 through 8 are then repeated as onsets 9 through 13. In terms of pitch structure, a clear hierarchy is formed around the two pitches, D and G. The melody’s reigning pitch system is established definitively in this song as a [025] trichord (counting in semitones and corresponding to D-E-G, respectively); given what we know of other Aka practices, we might infer that the notes D-E-G actually constitute a subset of a larger pentatonic collection, perhaps D-E-G-A-B.

On first hearing, this little song (which in performance is repeated dozens of times) may seem unremarkable. But add to the basic oppositions in pitch and rhythmic value the implied meter, and we begin to see some special things. The underlying feel of the melody suggests a dotted quarter-note reference, so we might notate this in 12/8 as I have done. The clever feature is the way the patterns lie within the metrical cycle. The words *Nzɛ, nzɛ, nzɛ* occupy the space of two dotted quarters, the first sounding of *nzɛ o dɛ kun dɛ* occupies three, and its immediate repetition also occupies three. A grouping structure of 2 + 3 + 3 is thus suggested. We may speak of a nonalignment between metrical structure and grouping

structure: the 12/8 meter remains inviolate while the "contents" shift position within the meter. This is one of the key sources of interest in this little melody, one that resonates with other pitch-rhythm patterns whose synchronicities are tweaked to produce a similar dynamic tension. The nonalignment is further underlined by a latent call-and-response pattern whereby the first *nzɛ o dɛ kun dɛ* is the "call" and its immediate repetition provides the "response."

(p.210) Noteworthy, too, is what might be called the rhetoric of the melody. The song begins emphatically with an almost bell-like insistence on G (its highest pitch) in the context of a cross-rhythmic relation with the underlying meter (3:2, three quarters against two dotted quarters). Then it skips to (what will emerge as) the lowest pitch, taming it by means of neighbor-note action. The difference in the presentation of the G-D controlling dyad is noteworthy. While the initial G is merely asserted through immediate repetition, the closing D is defined by contrapuntal action. The mixture of assertion and contrapuntal definition is another favorite device used by numerous African melodists. Notice two further details that add spice to this melody: first is the continuity of pitch between the end of group 1 (onset 3) and the beginning of group 2 (onset 4)—both on pitch G4. Real assurance of the precise location of a grouping boundary comes only in retrospect, only after group 2 (onsets 4 through 8) has been literally repeated as group 3 (onsets 9 through 12). Notice also the pattern of introducing new pitches. New notes appear on onsets 1, 8, and 10 in the first bar (the "call") and (reckoning onsets starting on 1 again) on 1, 4, 5, 7, and 10 in the second (the "response"). The degree of pitch novelty is thus increased in the second half of the melody.

Finally, the tonal sense conveyed by the controlling dyad, G-D, retains some ambiguity and openness. Since *Nzɛ, nzɛ, nzɛ* is repeated over and over again in performance, the join between one statement and its immediate repetition thrusts the D-G interval into prominence. But this is a "dead interval"—that is, an interval between phrases rather than within a single phrase—so it cannot provide anchor for the melody's overall tonal tendency. And yet we must presume that the melody was composed with its repetitions in mind. If

so, the D-G interval is not as dead as we might suppose; it is strategically placed to carry some of the structural burden that accrues to the song in the course of performance. Whether Aka listeners hear this song with a beginning orientation as opposed to an end orientation remains to be established, but we can admire a pitch structure that seems splendidly poised between G and D. A beginning orientation would reinforce the feeling that the song is akin to a fragment, perhaps part of a larger—not exclusively musical—process; an end orientation would infer closure at the end of the melody but would receive that assurance only in retrospect.

Those who are not in the habit of granting African performer-composers large doses of intellectual prowess may be skeptical about the foregoing reading of a three-note Pygmy melody. But I hope to persuade some that in this littlest of children's songs, the constellation of metrical, rhythmical, and tonal play is engaging, the outcome distinct and even memorable. To describe a melody like this as "primitive" or "unsophisticated" is surely a travesty. True, "Nzɛ, nzɛ, nzɛ" is brief and thrives on manifold repetition, but these qualities have no a priori value. Indeed, they are precisely what one would expect from composers in an oral culture who have to depend on performers—child performers, in this case—to render the melody on many subsequent occasions. (p.211) Were the Aka compositional tradition based on a paper economy, its individual products would naturally be longer, but they would also likely acquire features that are not necessarily based on their aural value. "Nzɛ, nzɛ, nzɛ" is a miniature gem, an elemental arrangement of pitch and rhythm to produce memorable, self-propelling, and enduring melody.

(Other) Children's Melodies

There is much to admire about the ingenuity with which African children exploit minimum syntactic sequences involving pitch and rhythm. Scholars of traditional music have often noted this, but there is still work to be done in assembling inventories of children's music across the continent. These inventories can serve various ends, among them the teaching of music in schools, the study of composition, and the development of a poetics of song. We do

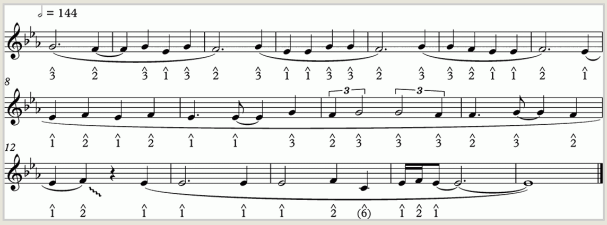
not have the space to embark on a comprehensive study of the melodic impulse in children's music here, but we can at least acknowledge a handful of examples while also pointing readers to fuller studies by ethnomusicologists and music educationists.[17]

A Vai children's game song uses mostly three pitches corresponding to the doh, re, and mi or 1-2-3 of the major scale as shown in Example 5.3. (A fourth note, lah [6] , appears fleetingly toward the end but can be discounted for the purposes of this analysis.) Written out as a succession of pitches (gaps indicate phrase groups or breath marks), the melody looks like this:

323132 311332 332112 11212113233323212 11112(6)121

From this DNA-looking-like sequence, one can extract all six of the dyadic possibilities available: 1-2, 2-1, 1-3, 3-1, 2-3, 3-2. The sequence 1-2 occurs six times, 2-1 also six times, 1-3 three times, 3-1 two times, 2-3 three times, and 3-2 seven times. The 3-2 progression is the most used in the song, while 3-1 is used the least.[18] (p.212)

Of course, no claim is being made here that the originators of this tune consciously worked out the possibilities for dyadic reversal in advance of composition. The claim is only that the melody as represented supports attributions of such a systematic and exhaustive process. Those who find the melody monotonous may be encouraged to listen differently in light of the process outlined previously. In any case, we must be careful not to underestimate what is possible in the sphere of oral composition, for insofar as the context is one of play, the playful ordering of elements is likely to have dominated the (pre)compositional process.



Example 5.3 Children’s game song (Vai).

Photo 5.1 Toy drum set, Bawku, Ghana.

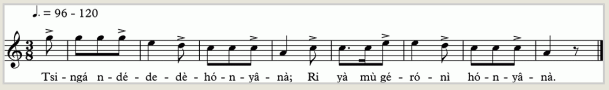
Children’s melodies do not unfold only in single lines; sometimes they do so in multiple voices. *Akazehe* greeting routines performed by pairs of Burundian females exemplify such polyphony. Separated at a short distance and using only a handful of notes in strict rhythmic alignment, two singers unfold captivating narratives in open-ended song. The principal technique is one of interlocking, a procedure more commonly encountered in nonvocal music (such as music for xylophones or panpipes), but it is used to great effect in this enthralling gamelike exercise (Web Example 5.2).[19]

Polyphonic vocal games featuring anywhere from two to six voices among the Bibayak Pygmy of Gabon show that African melody can reach creative heights even within the juvenile’s world. These beautiful games are quintessential instances of *playing*; they are enacted by beating the mouth to produce sounds that harmonize with or are coordinated with those produced by other beaters of the insides of voices. Polyphonic regulation is both metric (12/8) and scalar (the pentatonic), and children develop a feeling for coordinated composing in

the moment through such games. (A tiny fragment from one such polyphonic game is transcribed in Example 7.3.[20]) (p.213)

Popular children's games featuring externalized movements often deploy a generic clap pattern as a backdrop to repeated song. One such game from the Northern Ewe has a clap pattern with an interonset pattern of [1-2-1-2-2], according to which the first 1—the shorter of the two contrasting note values—falls on the downbeat of a 4/4 meter. Participants are arranged in a circle, and each child instantiates his or her clap with two neighbors—one on the right, another on the left. The game begins by activating the clap pattern as an ostinato; then, as soon as the ensemble is secure, songs are exchanged over it for as long as the performers desire. The melodies that accompany this game often follow the descending archetype mentioned earlier, while verbal texts range in content from the elevated to the banal. One song explains why "We do not send a fool to the market." The reason is that the fool "goes and buys soap water and calls it a drink." The song's melody rises initially, reaches its highest pitch, hovers around it, and then descends rapidly at the close.[21]

Equally popular are children's stone-lifting games. Played in circular formations, they invariably feature song. Some songs may be in a traditional idiom, while others have a popular flavor. The latter can be heard, for example, in (p.214) some Baule children's songs.[22] Melodies are typically based on relatively small intervals of seconds, thirds, or fourths; they incorporate lots of repetition and sometimes feature patterns of accentuation that compete with those of the accompanying physical movements. Children's game songs from Angola also provide vivid illustrations of these features.[23] And in one Venda children's song (Example 5.4), the upbeats within the ruling 3/8 meter consistently receive an accent even as the melody descends from a high G. Again, a dynamic feeling emerges from marking notes that are subservient to others in the metrical hierarchy.[24]

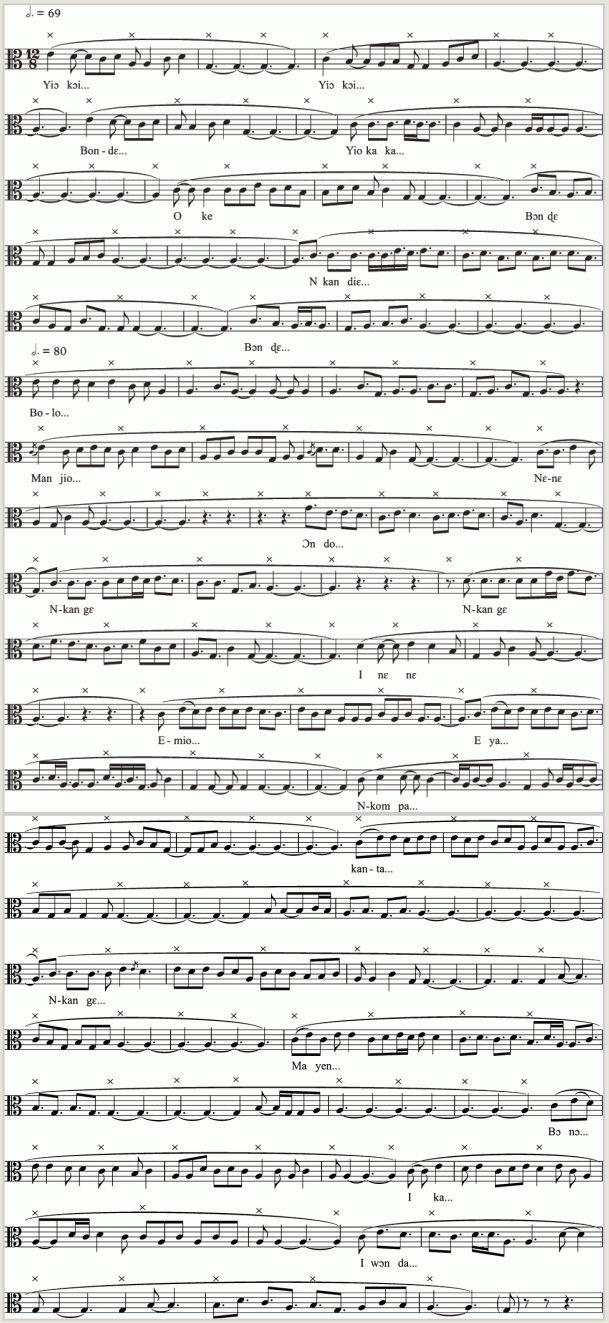


Example 5.4 Children's song (Venda).

Finally, in a register not necessarily created by children but invariably aimed at them, lullabies display some of the ingenuity we associate with African melody. Recorded lullabies display a variety of features that, while not unique to the genre, are often appropriated for expressive purposes. A lullaby may involve a childlike song using just two or three pitches, it will typically invest in repetition, and it may involve an alternation between speech and song. Lullabies fundamentally embody a melodic impulse, albeit one that assumes a variety of linguistic and expressive forms.

Example 5.5 is an outline of a lullaby from the Nkundo of the Democratic Republic of the Congo that illustrates melodic thinking guided by a narrative impulse (Web Example 5.3).[25] Our female singer has selected two adjacent notes (G3 and A3) to serve as anchors or resting points for an extended discourse. Between appearances of this dyad, the members of the ruling hexatonic set (E-D-C-B-A-G) are used to spin short melodic statements. The accumulation of these fragments advances the narrative, while the intermittent return to the G-A dyad has the effect of a refrain, albeit one performed by the same singer. Note the gentle clapping of hands that adds a measure (p.215) of metrical control in spite of the declamatory ambience of the performance. Indeed, if we gather together the phrases by number of pulses, we observe a fascinating additive pattern in which four-pulse, five-pulse, six-pulse, seven-pulse, and eight-pulse phrases succeed each other in an unpredictable pattern: 4 + 5 + 4 + 6 + 4 + 6 + 6 + 5 + 8 + 7 + 6 + 6 + 6 + 6 + 5 (the recording tapers off at the end). Overall, the lullaby owes its effect to the combination of a vocal narrative parsed asymmetrically (a genuine narrative, in other words), a "strophic" impulse signaled by the returning phrase-end notes, and an underlying cyclic regularity contributed by the handclapping.

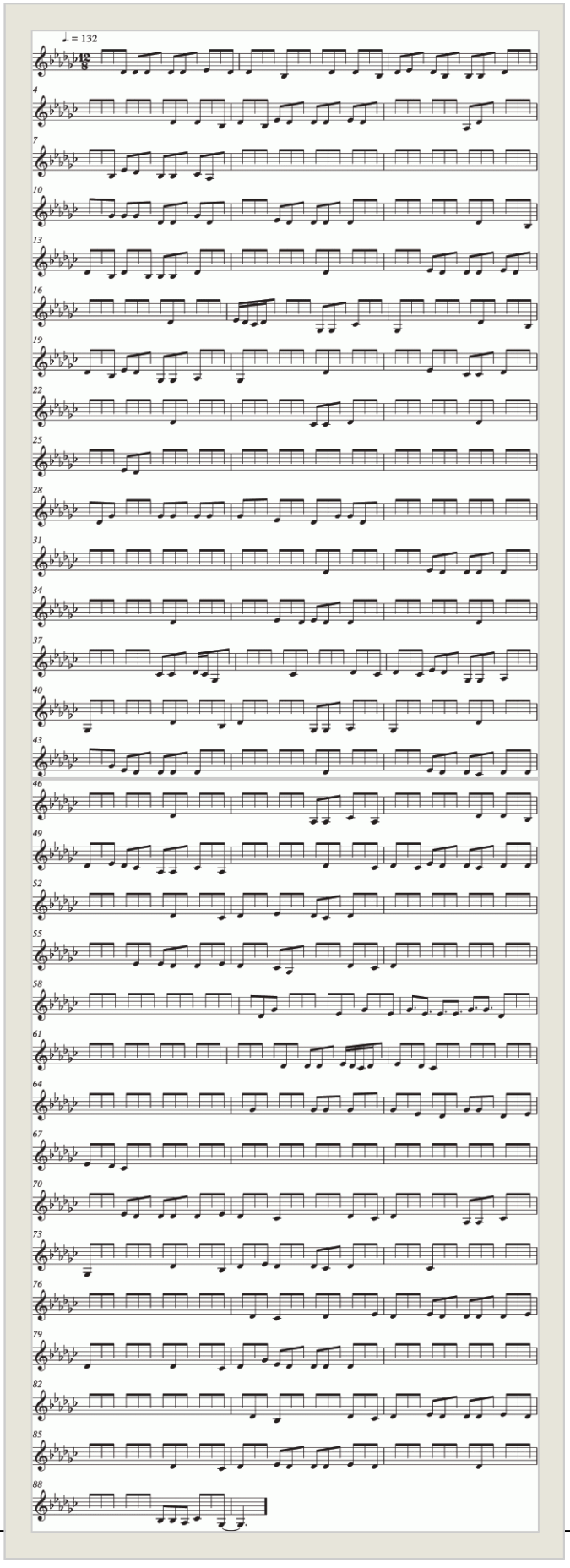
(p.216) **An Aka Pygmy**



Example 5.5 Lullaby (Nkundo).

entertainment song, "Ame ngolo." Accompanying himself on a *bogongo* (a harp zither), Ndole, an Aka Pygmy man, announces in song that he is "the palm-tree squirrel" (Example 5.6, Web Example 5.4).[26] His melodic imagination will be shaped by a clever use of repetition and by the use of long

vowels like *ee, aa,* and *ay*. The sound of language is vivid throughout, and the performance exemplifies a deliberate musical narrative comparable in scope to the berceuse from the Democratic Republic of the Congo we have just listened to. The difference between the relatively brief children's songs and rhymes, on the one hand, and Ndole's more extended tracts, on the other, provides some measure of the scope of the African melodic imagination.



Example 5.6 Entertainment song, “Ame ngolo” (Aka Pygmy).

Photo 5.2 Gonje and handclap, Tamale, Ghana.

I have used a form of pulse notation to represent Ndole’s song, the thought being that microlevel activity at the eighth-note level is significant enough to be maintained as a reference point throughout. The notation underreports the actual durations of the singer’s notes, being concerned only with their initial activation. It is important not to be misled by the resulting sparseness. Only the melodic line is transcribed. The accompaniment, which takes the form of a selective reinforcement of the singer’s main notes, is excluded.

As the transcription shows, “Ame ngolo” consists of relatively brief phrases that unfold in a pragmatic manner. The beginning of the recording is not (p.217) marked; rather, it comes across as if we were in a middle, part of a process that is already underway. Ndole’s harp zither has already set the pace and atmosphere during the first twenty seconds. He then sings phrase after phrase, varying the notes and contour as he goes along. Moments of intensity are achieved by means of register, as when the singer gets up to G♭4 (bars 28 to 29, 59 to 60, and 65 to 66). These are interspersed with extended moments representing “home” and hovering around the opening D♭4. Ndole occasionally dips into the lowest register,

touching G♭3 in the process. Overall, the octave G♭3-G♭3 sets the registral frame for the melody.

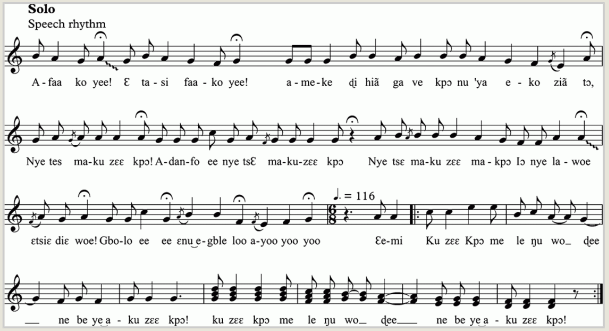
(p.218) "Ame ngolo" has a mesmerizing quality that is achieved by introducing tiny variations into phrases in such a way that the succession of phrases is never predictable. An improvisatory aura prevails here, but far from implying that the song is simply thrown together, the authorial hand seems firm throughout. Ndole accepts and maintains the integrity of the hexatonic collection Gb-Eb-Db-Cb-Bb-Ab, even while allowing his voice to deviate naturally in microtonal distances from the relatively fixed pitches played by the harp zither. Voice and (p.219) instrument rarely agree literally, but no one would be disconcerted by what is only an apparent discrepancy. The aesthetic is minimalistic in both pitch and verbal content; this allows the underlying musical processes to claim our attention. Phrases reach for focal points and subside thereafter, but the overall phrase discourse is never predictable because it does not submit to hypermetrical control. The singer's manner creates the impression that a certain amount of self-absorption is in play here, and that an invitation to contemplation or reflection may be part of the message. Although Ndole comes from a thoroughly communalistic musical culture, he is nevertheless free to exercise his musical imagination in an individual way on occasions like this. The communal ethos in African performance contextualizes rather than curbs individual creative impulses.

A Northern Ewe crying song, "Afaa ko yee."

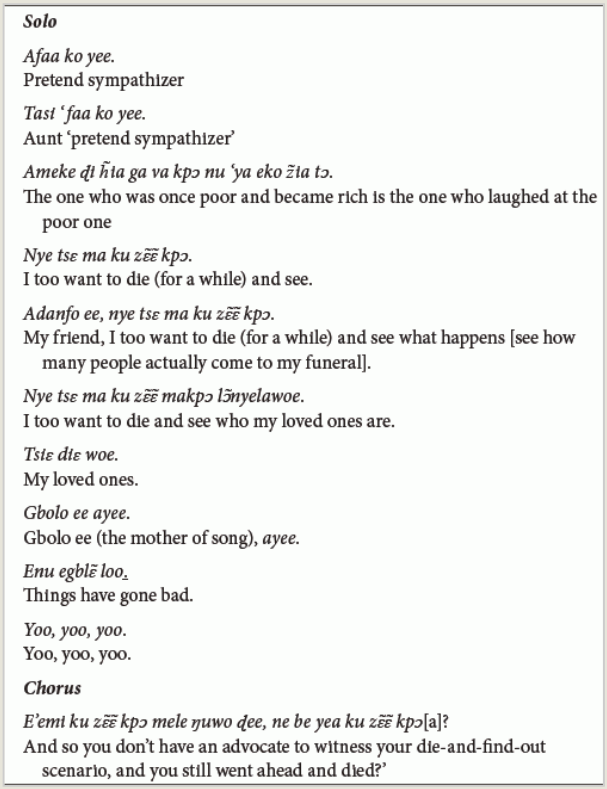
"Afaa ko yee" begins as a song about a "pretend sympathizer" and ends by posing a rhetorical question about seeking sympathy: "Why did you try to die just to see if you had any loved ones who would come and mourn your passing?" The moral to all of us is simple: some actions are irreversible, death being one of them, so calculate carefully before you try to die. Northern Ewe women sing this crying song (*aviha*) to remind us of one of life's lessons. (p.220)

The song's outer form is in two parts. The first, sung solo, is in a free declamatory form; in the second, the solo singer is joined by a chorus in strict, fully metrical rhythm (Example

5.7, with the text in Ewe and English in Figure 5.1, and heard at Web Example 5.5). The juxtaposition of free and strict is, as we have seen, a basic organizational device in many African communities. The free sections allow individual expression and maximum verbal content; the singer takes advantage of the semantic freight of verbal language. In the strict section, verbal and semantic content are kept to a minimum; the composer selects a memorable, poignant, or synoptic phrase that the chorus can repeat again and again. This refrain typically encapsulates the central message of a song. In this second part, the constraints of group expression impose themselves not only metrically but also pitch-wise. Singing together is easier if there is an explicit meter and precise rhythmic values and pitches. Again, this centuries-old free-to-strict form is as logical as it is simple and efficient; it continues to support many melodic utterances today.



Example 5.7 Dirge, “Afaa ko yee” (“pretend sympathizer”) (Northern Ewe).



Solo

Afaa ko yee.
Pretend sympathizer

Tasi ‘faa ko yee.
Aunt ‘pretend sympathizer’

Ameke ɖi ɦ̃ia ga va kpɔ nu ‘ya eko ʒ̃ia tɔ.
The one who was once poor and became rich is the one who laughed at the poor one

Nye tsɛ ma ku zɛ̃ɛ̃ kpɔ.
I too want to die (for a while) and see.

Adanfo ee, nye tsɛ ma ku zɛ̃ɛ̃ kpɔ.
My friend, I too want to die (for a while) and see what happens [see how many people actually come to my funeral].

Nye tsɛ ma ku zɛ̃ɛ̃ makpɔ lɔ̃nyelawoe.
I too want to die and see who my loved ones are.

Tsiɛ diɛ woe.
My loved ones.

Gbolo ee ayee.
Gbolo ee (the mother of song), *ayee.*

Enu egblɛ̄ loo.
Things have gone bad.

Yoo, yoo, yoo.
Yoo, yoo, yoo.

Chorus

E’emi ku zɛ̃ɛ̃ kpɔ mele ŋuwo ɖee, ne be yea ku zɛ̃ɛ̃ kpɔ[a]?
And so you don’t have an advocate to witness your die-and-find-out scenario, and you still went ahead and died?’

Figure 5.1 Text of “Afaa ko yee.”

The deep sources of melodic imagining in this crying song lie in the moment-by-moment realization of the poetic text. The framing of sentiments, the choice of words, and their musical animation all reveal high levels of ingenuity and skill. Equally impressive are the ways in which the singer negotiates the constraints imposed by speech tones. Let us then go inside the song, listen to its interior, and observe some of the workings of the African melodic imagination at close quarters. Not all aspects of the song lend themselves to verbal explication; some of the singer’s sentiments and turns of phrase will typically elicit a smile, nod, wink, sigh, or grunt, but the precise sources of these responses have as much to do with things “inside” the song as with predispositions that listeners bring to their audition. Indeed, a great deal of significance resides in the interstices within the song to which only the acculturated have (p.221) access. It is helpful to keep this supplement in mind even as we explore a few of the specifiable aspects of sound and meaning.

Let us follow the process from beginning to end, using segments of text as place markers.

Afaa ko yee.

This names a “pretend sympathizer,” one who might be crying with you but doesn’t mean it, one who expresses sorrow with you but is secretly thinking something else. The singer’s melody literally realizes the (p.222) direction of tones, using the toneless but not directionless intensifier *yee* as the point of rest.

Tasi ‘faa ko yee.

(“aunt pretend sympathizer”). We know she is a woman, a paternal aunt, perhaps the mythical older female relative to whom we attribute all kinds of mischief. Musically, the same process of word realization is evident. Notice the motivic connection between the two segments of melody: Bb-A-G-A is slightly expanded to G-B-A-G-F-G. Important here are the fermata-bearing terminal notes: A in the first segment and G in the second. Again, the subtle ambiguity in tonal sense emerging in the larger A-G “structural” progression is noteworthy. In one sense, the first A is a question to which the following G is an answer, for there is a direct sense in which the figure of the pretend sympathizer announced in the first segment is properly identified in the second segment by the addition of *Tasi* (“aunt”). Culture bearers know, however, that the A-G progression could be the beginning of an extended descent spanning the melody as a whole, in which case A would be the pitch of priority, being the point of departure. It’s too early in the game to arrive at any definite predictions about pitch priority, however. The main point here is the encoding of an ambiguity. Indeed, as the recitative that constitutes the first half of the song unfolds, we will come to appreciate the increasing functionality of the note A as a “dissonant” neighbor to G.

Ameke dị ñia ga va kpɔ nu ‘ya eko žia tɔ.

There are many words here! We learn a little history: “aunt pretend sympathizer” is in fact a person who was once poor, became rich, and now is laughing at the poor. Teasing may be rampant among the Northern Ewe, but teasing someone about his or her poverty is not normal; it is considered unkind. Still, the rich-poor dialectic is a central social construction that influences the ways in which people interact with one another. Here we are virtually in the realm of speech, matching syllables of text to short durations, and correlating speech

tone with melody in phrases like *ga va kpɔ nu* (MHHH) or in the word *ziatɔ* (LH). But the pitch A is never far from consciousness, ending the segment, and enhancing its function as a reciting tone of sorts. The note A's importance within the structural melody continues to be reinforced, and we are likely to infer that satisfactory resolution will hinge on the destination of that A.

Nye tsɛ ma ku zɛ̃ɛ̃ kpɔ.
("I too want to die [for a while] and see"). The colorful device of iconicity intrudes here in the form of the word *zee*, a "picture word" that opens up a dimension of sound symbolism by describing the temporary nature of the death. *Zɛ̃ɛ̃* literally conveys a sense of temporariness. To die for a while to see how many people show up at your funeral is, of course, a foolish thing to do since you cannot die and come back. This message is clear. But it does not remove the desire, experienced regularly by Northern Ewe, to see who their true relatives are. In societies with strong social bonds, the suspicion that (p.223) not all your "relatives" care about you can be wounding, and if one has to go to great lengths to find that out, then so be it. In this case, however, the person who needed this psychic reassurance unfortunately lost out. Musically, the balance between song centricity and speech centricity shifts somewhat in this phrase: whereas the two previous phrases were located toward the song end of the spectrum, this one is close to the speech end. This subtle traffic between speech mode and song mode (and the numerous stages in between) is a vital source of animation in African song.

Adanfo ee, nye tsɛ ma ku zɛ̃ɛ̃ kpɔ.
("My friend, I too want to die [for a while] and see what happens [see how many people actually come to my funeral]"). The singer slows the narrating down by restating what she said before, only this time she addresses a "friend" (*Adanfo*). The construction here is similar to that which was used at the very beginning of the crying song, where a statement was made and then repeated immediately with an additional word. The effect of such an amplification varies. It can intensify the affect, come across as a revelation, or provide a sense of

resolution. The rendition of *Adanfo* pitch-wise adds a more prominent interval (a rising perfect fourth) than the one that ended the third segment; *Adanfo ee* also perfectly mirrors the speech tone (LLLH). Notice, again, that the previous phrase ended with a “question” on A, while this ends with an “answer” on G.

Nye tsɛ ma ku zɛ̃ɛ̃ makpɔ lɔ̃nyelawoe.
(“I too want to die and see who my loved ones are”). This is the third time the die-and-see sentiment is being portrayed. We sense the urgency of desire. The segment ends on an A, and the rhythm is close to that of speech. The drooping of speech at the end of the phrase animates an iconic dimension.

Tsiɛ diɛ woe.
The singer calls out to “my loved ones.”

Gbolo ee ayee.
The performer intrudes on the performance, reminding us that she, *Gbolo* (“the mother of song”), is in charge here.

Enu egblɛ̃ loo (“Things have gone bad”). Details may be forthcoming, but since we all know what it means for things to go bad, we can draw on that experience to empathize with the singer. Musically, the descending (augmented) fourth B-F echoes the (perfect) fourth C-G of the previous phrase.

Yoo, yoo, yoo.
. Thank God for song words, which can always be thrown in to express that which cannot be expressed, to compensate for a waning of inspiration, or to allow the musical instinct some autonomy. These words, which are without semantic freight, finish off the soloist’s recitative on a G. Is this, then, the resolution? Has A, heard at the ends of five of the eight phrases, been a preparation for G all along?

E’emi ku zɛ̃ɛ̃ kpɔ mele ŋuwo ɖee, ne be yea ku zɛ̃ɛ̃ kpɔ[a] ?
(“And so you don’t have an advocate to witness your die-and-find-out scenario, and you still went ahead and died?”). This is the “call” of the call-and-response portion of the (p.224) song that will now involve all the singers, not just the lead singer. The word *E’emi* means “thus” or “therefore,” a natural transition between the metrically “free” and “strict” halves of

the song. The singer questions the dead woman: Why did you go ahead and do this even though you knew there was only one possible outcome? The meter enters decisively, alongside a pitch formation that will emerge as the song's melodic archetype (a descending shape spanning a major sixth, B-A-G-F-E-D).

Ku zɛ̃ɛ̃ kpɔ mele ŋuwo ɖee, ne be yea ku zɛ̃ɛ̃ kpɔ[a] ?
Repeating most of the words from the previous segment, the chorus responds, also in meter and with harmonies, some of which proceed in parallel with the melody while others follow oblique motions. In performance, the call-and-response pattern is repeated several times depending on the occasion and on the eagerness to move on to a different song message. Overall, the descent begun in the call sections in the form of an A-G descent is amplified in the metricized call section to C-B-A-G-F-G (the high E is a substitute for C) and, more elaborately, transformed into D-C-B-A-G-F, the last with a supporting D. Some may hear a Dorian flavor in this disposition of pitches. Although the Northern Ewe do not normally refer their modality to the ecclesiastical modes of European medieval theory, their music is often modally based. Indeed, the modal flavor of a great deal of traditional melody is readily heard in arrhythmic renditions (refer back to Example 5.1) and suggests that we may have underestimated the African contribution to world modal practices.

The melodic imagination displayed in this crying song is potent and attractive. Foremost is the poetic dimension, which accounts for the choice of theme and words and for the rhetorical strategies by which it is developed. Then there is the underlying relational pitch sense, which, on a local level, seeks to accommodate the prescriptions of spoken Ewe within a more purposeful song environment; on a more global level, it initially restrains the recitative section on the pitches A and G before leading to the ultimate discharge in the form of a fully elaborated archetype in the choral response. Finally, there is rhythm, expressed both in the overall progression from free to strict and as it emanates from spoken language. These are not inconsiderable achievements in a "folk" milieu. By what standard of reckoning, I wonder, could "Afaa ko yee" ever be consigned to the category "unsophisticated?"

An Akpafu lament, “Ɔwere ame bɔi lo kpi kutukã” (“The river creature died of thirst”)

(Web Example 5.6). [27] Laments and dirges sung by Akpafu women represent some of their most distinctive forms of musical expression. Carvers of song are typically motivated by death, loss, or tragedy, and they (p.225) often encode an enigma, a paradox, something imponderable, a deep thought, or a profound question in their verbal texts. Why? Because such genres, contrary to a once-accepted view that they serve a primarily functional purpose, are inducements to deep contemplation; their purpose is to provide food for thought for thinking performers and their audiences. The sociohistorical and philosophical worlds that they set in motion are multiple, and melody is the chief vehicle for articulating that multiplicity, that wide resonance. Melody brings language, music, and voice into a mutually reinforcing relationship, displaying once again facets of African creativity.

Let us begin with the entirety of the singer’s text, shown in Figure 5.2.

Ɔwere ame bɔi lo kpi kutukã
The river creature died of thirst

Mme gɔ mezi ɔkpokpo ne, nda si mmra so?
I who am sitting on the river bank, what should I do with myself?

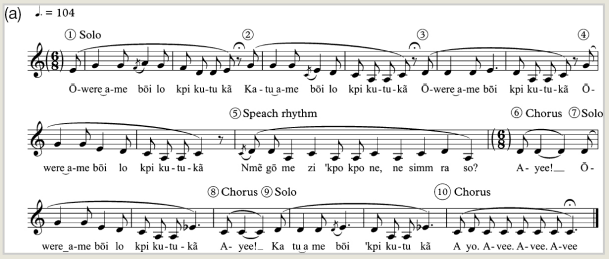
Ayee!
Ayee! (an exclamation)

Figure 5.2 Text of “Ɔwere ame bɔi.”

The song poses an enigma: if the river creature who lives in water and therefore has unlimited access to it died of thirst, then what about me, a land creature who sits on the bank? Texts like this recognize the existence of a higher, superior force; they acknowledge the limitations of man’s knowledge and power. In performance, the soloist’s lines may be subject to variation, to an exploration of the essential truths enshrined in the song’s message. The chorus parts, by contrast, are fixed, providing the ecology that grounds the song as a whole.

The transcription in Example 5.8a shows that the singer maintains the rhythm of spoken Siwu, most obviously in the syllabic setting. Indeed, the musical setting may be heard as a

translation of the spoken text into a sung text. The most decisive moment in this act of translation is the exclamation *ayee*, a song word with no semantic equivalent, functioning as an intensifier. The chorus renders *ayee* twice as a short-long rhythm that mirrors its spoken form. At the same time, *ayee* represents a firming up of pitch and a reinforcement of the lament's songfulness. If the lament as a whole sports a declamatory ambience, the interventions of *ayee* transform declamation into song.



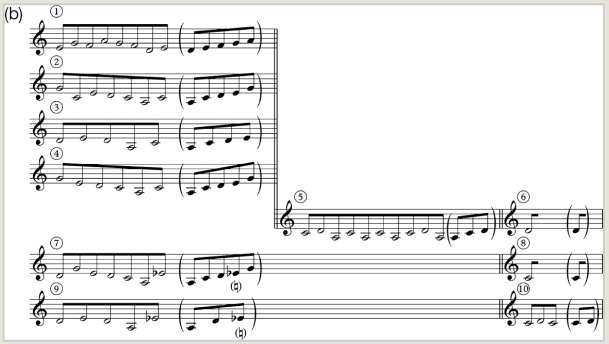
Example 5.8a Lament, "Ɔwere ame bɔi" ("The river creature") (Akpafu).

I have divided "Ɔwere ame bɔi" into ten little phrases or units. Seven are sung by the lead singer, while three are sung by the chorus. Specifically, phrases 1 through 5 are sung solo, while phrases 6 through 10 alternate between chorus and solo, finishing with the chorus. In terms of the poetic (p.226) structure, the two versions of line 1 each constitute a complete syntactical/semantic unit, and this is repeated to form phrases 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, and 9 of the song. Line 2, which embodies the singer's question, is compressed into phrase 5, and the choral response *ayee* of line 3 becomes phrases 6, 8, and 10, the last extending the number of *ayee*s to four (although that number could change in other performances). The rests between phrases enable singers to incorporate both spoken interjections particular to the occasion on which the song is being sung and ululations of diverse intensities and lengths. When it is sung at a funeral, for example, spontaneously spoken phrases like *Tete!* ("Father!"), *Nna iyo boa bo soo?* ("In whose house shall we be hosted?"), or *Tete, masɛ o kama ne ana ni* ("Father, we prepared for your coming back, but you did not return") might be spontaneously spoken in the rests or silences to intensify the emotion.

In practically all Akpafu songs, pitch is organized hierarchically. This does not make the organization predictable. On the contrary, there is considerable play between the hierarchies deriving from the inner tendencies of the pitches and those deriving from the conventional points of rest (cadences). Indeed, different collections of pitches acting as referential constructs may articulate different levels of structure.

“Ɔwere ame bɔi” discloses its hierarchic structure by closing on (an arbitrarily chosen) C, emphasizing that pitch throughout the song, and leading to it by means of a 2-1 progression. Heard in isolation from the rest of the song, the chorus parts (phrases 6, 8, and 10) provide the clearest definition of C as center by articulating 2 (phrase 6), then 1 (phrase 8), then an alternation of 1s and 2s concluding on 1̂ (phrase 10).

Example 5.8b summarizes the pitch content in the form of an arrhythmic transcription showing aspects of structure that lie deeper than the foreground. The layout follows the chronology of the phrases and includes the pitch content of each phrase in stemmed black noteheads. Phrases are arranged (p.227) paradigmatically to emphasize internal parallels. Thus, phrases 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, and 9, which are based on lines 1 and 2 of the text, are placed in one column; phrases 6, 8, and 10, which compose line 3 of the text, occur in another column; and phrase 5 is in a column by itself. Perhaps the most striking feature of Example 5.8b is its pentatonic substructure (A-C-D-E-G), which interacts with, but does not dominate, the C-centered hexatonic structure of the musical surface. We may speak of a “middle ground” pentatonic substructure, which subtends a foreground hexatonic scale. If phrase 4 displays the ideal form of the pentatonic substructure, all the other phrases may be heard as departing in various ways from that ideal. Phrases 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 10 are all subsets of the ideal. Phrase 7 parallels the ideal but includes a “mixture” of its third element (E and E-[♭]. Phrase 1, although the first to be heard, is properly a subset of phrase 4, but it, too, includes five elements. Its pitch, F, may be explained as a “borrowing” from the hexatonic surface pattern.



Example 5.8b Pitch content of “Ɔwere ame bɔi” in arrhythmic reduction.

Another feature of “Ɔwere ame bɔi” summarized in Figure 5.3 is the hierarchic distribution of intervals. (The taxonomy excludes so-called dead intervals, that is, intervals that cut across phrase boundaries.) This particular exercise is suggested by the predominant syllabic articulation in song, which sets into relief the succession of intervals. The table confirms the centrality of major second and minor thirds (both prominent in the pentatonic scale); together they make up 76.19 percent of the song’s intervals. They may be said to constitute the basic syntactic framework of the song. There are no intervals bigger than a perfect fifth, and none smaller than a major second. While minor thirds make up 35.7 percent of the collection, major thirds make up only 4.76 percent. There is a slightly lower incidence of ascending intervals (42.86 percent) as opposed to descending ones. The relative paucity of larger intervals (major thirds, perfect fourths, tritones, (p.228)

	M2	m3	M3	P4	A4	P5
Ascending	5	8	2	1	2	0
Descending	12	7	0	4	0	1
Totals	17	15	2	5	2	1
Totals as Percentages	40.48	35.71	4.76	11.9	4.76	2.38

Figure 5.3 Distribution of intervals in “Ɔwere ame bɔi.”

and perfect fifths) gives added significance to their rhetorical effect when they do occur.[28] Translating the reality of “Ɔwere ame bɔi” into numbers is simply a way of capturing some of its features. I am aware, however, that these numbers do not normally impress humanists, probably because such

analysis involves dissecting what is, after all, an artistic product and displaying its material constituents in summary form. In giving priority to constituent elements, it might be further argued, the approach overlooks the symbolic domain altogether. If the analysis were to go no further than constructing taxonomies, there would be reason to point to its incompleteness. Taxonomies, however, have their uses. For example, they can highlight a particular feature, reveal a tendency, draw attention to a significant absence, or perhaps reinforce (or indeed undermine) an intuition the analyst might have begun with. African students should be encouraged to undertake analytical exercises whereby they pass their communities' songs through as many sieves as possible so that they can obtain the most comprehensive views of musical structure.

Still, no matter how thorough or comprehensive, a taxonomy takes us only so far; it needs supplementation in the form of musico-poetic exploration. So let us turn to word-music relations. One of the most fruitful mechanisms for developing a poetics of African song is closure, the general tendency to close.[29] In many African languages, concepts of closure are expressed through notions of ending, concluding, finishing, and dying. The Akpafu, for example, whose lament we are looking at, will sometimes say *Yiɔ ro,* meaning "it is finished," a phrase that marks different forms of closure. It may be used when a substance such as palm wine has been consumed, when a song is at an end, when something precious like an earthenware pot is broken, or when somebody has (p.229) died. They will say *yiɔ ɖai,* meaning "it has been cut," to signify the end of a temporal process, such as a song, or when a stream ceases to flow. They might also say *ka ilɛ*, meaning "it is enough" or "it is well," or *bo ro 'ɖe,* meaning "we have finished eating (or consuming) it."

Taking a clue from this kind of indigenous discourse, we may distribute the constituent segments of "Ɔwere ame bɔi" into patterns of open and closed gestures. This allows us to observe another aspect of the relationship between verbal and musical meaning. Figure 5.4 sets out this information, using an arbitrary scale from 1 to 3 to represent degrees of closure or

openness (O-1 is most open, O-2 less so, and O-3 least so). Each phrase of text and each corresponding phrase of music is labeled “open” or “closed” and assigned a possible weight. Obviously, the degree of closure is sometimes determined contextually, so that even a phrase as closed as the first line of the poem may appear to be open if we attend to its initiating function—we expect something to follow. There is thus some subjectivity in the assigning of weights. We may nevertheless observe several interesting contradictions between the patterning of language and of music. For example, while phrase 10 is musically without rival in its degree of closure in the song, the text retains an element of openness. The cumulative *Ayee! Ayee! Ayee!* gains in rhetorical force while at the same time leaving unresolved this particular response to tragedy. Repetition provides emphasis and implies musical closure, but what is emphasized here is the openness of the text—a declaration, in effect, that the question posed in the text is ultimately unanswerable. Conversely, phrase 1, which is firmly closed (p.230) syntactically, is musically open, and requires an answering phrase (phrase 2). Thus, the succession of phrases 1 and 2 as “question” (open) and “answer” (closed) produces a resultant profile that is “closed.” These conflicting tendencies speak to the nature of the relationship between word and tone; they suggest an unsettled relationship as the condition of song.

Phrase	Musical sense	Poetic sense
1	O-1	C-2
2	C-2	C-2
3	C-2	C-2
4	C-2	C-2
5	O-2	O-3
6	O-3	O-3
7	O-1	C-2
8	C-2	C-3
9	O-1	C-2
10	C-3	O-3

Figure 5.4 Degrees of closure within "Ɔwere ame bɔi."

If a little lament like this can raise such interesting interpretive issues, and if by implication the scores of other Akpafu laments and dirges, the hundreds of songs by their Northern Ewe neighbors, or the tens of thousands of songs produced by other African groups are similarly engaging, then it is difficult—once again—to see why anyone would belittle African melodic achievement.

An Afrobeat song by Fela: "Shuffering and Shmiling."

First recorded in 1978, "Suffering and Smiling" is Fela Anikulapo Kuti's biting critique of the adoption of foreign religions by modern Africans. Serious fun is made of Africans as Anglicans, Catholics, and Muslims. His strategy is to contrast the lives of archbishop, pope, and imam with the lives of their many African followers, and to remind us that the archbishop in London, the pope in Rome, and the imam in Mecca are all busy enjoying themselves in their various locations while their unthinking followers on the African continent face all kinds of problems. And yet Africans smile even as they suffer.

As social critique, Fela's music is well understood thanks to writings by Veal, Olaniyan, and Olorunyomi,[30] so that aspect of his work does not need to be addressed here. My interest is in one aspect of his artistry, namely, his melodic imagination. Although we know him as composer, performer, band leader,

cultural icon, and inventor of Afrobeat, we know him less comprehensively as a purely musical innovator. And yet there are special shapes to his choice and arrangements of harmonies, the rhythms of phrase succession, and the trajectories of his melodies. And voice lies at the heart of Fela's message. By "voice," I mean not just the peculiar grain of Fela's voice but the very idea of voice as an embodiment of a complex subjectivity. Even though his recordings are noted for extended periods of improvised instrumental playing (the almost-fourteen-minute-long recorded performance of "Lady," for example, begins with six minutes of funky instrumental playing), his melodic impulses are strongly vocal in origin. A range of melodic effects, from simple two-note punctuations to long phrases of original intoning, as well as pretend-singing, suggests that attention to Fela as melodist might enhance appreciation of his art.

(p.231) The single most important pitch resource for Fela is the anhemitonic pentatonic scale. He uses other scales, of course, including elements of diatonicism borrowed from the hymn tradition, and modal elements from funk and jazz. But within this pluralistic pitch environment, the pentatonic sound appears frequently and prominently. Sometimes it is heard as a complete set, sometimes in fragmentation; the pentatonic also admits interferences from other scales. For a keyboard player, the pentatonic is readily available as the black keys of a piano. Fela clearly availed himself of this resource and inserted pentatonically based interludes into many of his performances. Most interesting is the fact that the pentatonic is also deeply associated with African traditional music, and although Fela most likely got his pentatonic from the keyboard, its ancient qualities may have reinforced his fascination with it. The meeting of an old African pitch construct and a nearly identical construct available on an instrument brought by Europeans to Africa is a striking coincidence. For Fela, the pentatonic represents a kind of double authenticity.

Fela's narrative in "Shuffering and Shmiling" unfolds through a combination of spoken and sung phrases, including some that lie in between. Varieties of repetition are of the essence here, and there is an uncanny play of temporalities to

accompany Fela's delivery of his central message against foreign religions (but not, on this occasion, for indigenous religion). The song starts with an instrumental groove that serves as an invitation. Fela introduces a series of punctuations: *mmm, eee, waaa, ooh*, and so on. These nonlexical elements announce his presence through the unmistakable timbre of his voice; they also reinforce the idea that this is a music event rather than a speech event. Fela then tells his fellow Africans to "please listen to me as Africans," while "non-Africans" are told to "listen to me with open minds." This spoken injunction is followed by incipient song in pentatonic mode: "Suffer, suffer for world, na your fault be that." Again, the communication of this theme is enhanced by percussive sounds made by the voice: *atsu, atsu, oh, ahaa*, and so on. The musical texture fully activated, and Fela having captured his listeners' attention, he tells them to focus their minds on "any goddam church, any goddam mosque, any goddam celestical, including seraphim and cherubim," the last perhaps the most charismatic church in Nigeria in the 1970s.[31] From here on, Fela assigns an unchanging response, "Amen," to his chorus of girls as he advances his critique. He explains the ridiculousness of the Christians' message that one should suffer on earth in preparation for enjoyment in heaven and reminds people of how the archbishop, pope, and imam are enjoying themselves. (p.232) All of this is delivered in melodic fragments that never stray from the pentatonic collection. He even caricatures the language and modes of praying associated with those religions, employing a strategic gibberish (Latin and Arabic) that is at once amusing and blasphemous.

Fela continues in song by contrasting the enjoyable life of the foreigners with the everyday suffering of his people. They suffer in their houses, in overloaded buses, and at work; they lack water and power in their homes; they are constantly being harassed by the police and army; they receive queries from their superiors at work. These messages are subjected to repetition. The song finishes in an extended instrumental mode, again using pentatonic elements but incorporating allusions to church-hymn harmonies and big band sounds at the very end.

Although the spoken word and its semantic meanings are central to Fela's "Shuffering and Shmiling," the melodic imagination on display here is fundamentally tone derived, not word derived. The snippets of melody heard are, as we have seen, wedded to the pentatonic scale. Rhythmically, Fela sometimes indigenizes the English language by adding extra syllables ("pope" becomes a two-syllable word, *popu*; "imam" a three-syllable word, *imamu*; and so on). He also sometimes incorporates a disproportionately large number of syllables into a small melodic space—a sign that the purely musical impulse is dominant. The pentatonic core thus supports various forms of vocalization, traversing the entire continuum from speech (or unformed song) to fully formed song. Note that the pentatonic sound field is not confined to the sung portions of "Shuffering and Shmiling" but extends to the instrumental portions as well, especially to the bits of keyboard invention that Fela invites us to listen to for what he calls a "secret."

It is easy to get caught up in Fela's postcolonial discourse, nod in positive agreement with his critique of foreign religions, and overlook or underappreciate the artistry on the ground that shapes a variety of enunciations. In a sense, that is precisely what a successful artwork does: it foregrounds the message while hiding the means. The critic's task, however, is to illuminate the conditions of possibility for the work, and it is my contention that the melodic impulse expressed through various forms of vocalization within a pentatonic territory is especially rife in "Suffering and Shmiling," a thoroughly engaging and entertaining song by one of Africa's most notorious musicians.[32]

A gonje (one-stringed fiddle) performance.

A rich performance tradition widespread in West Africa but also found in Ethiopia, Sudan, Libya, Eritrea, (p.233) and elsewhere is the one-stringed fiddle tradition. In West Africa, the instrument is known by a variety of regional names (*gonje* being one of the most common), and it is associated with several ethnic groups in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, the Gambia, Ghana, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and elsewhere. Gonje performance is an excellent site for observing the exercise of the melodic imagination. Endowed with the ability to speak,

stammer, and sing, the gonje functions in a variety of musical roles, sometimes leading, sometimes taking a back seat.[33] We have space here for a single performance.[34]

Mr. Akurugu, a Kusasi Muslim from the North East of Ghana, is praising a paying patron in song. He sings in the Kusasi language but occasionally incorporates words and phrases from another language, Twi. He accompanies himself on the gonje not by playing a separate accompaniment pattern but by replicating the sung melody. It is a moot point whether the instrumental melody or its vocalized parallel should have conceptual priority, for the evident outcome is one of considered unanimity. The basic mode of delivery is free and declamatory (speech mode), and this characterizes the performance as a whole. At one point (4′ 32″)), however, the rhythm and mode of address change, and there seems to be a drop in stylistic register from the decidedly high style in which the praise song began to a lower, more popular style. A will to iconicity may be sensed in the intended sameness of vocal and instrumental melody and the material discrepancies that unavoidably attend the actual execution.

The performer's intention is to play and sing the same melody; hand and mouth should agree. But this is not as simple as it sounds, especially if the performer is making up some of these praises as he goes along. Mr. Akurugu has to decide in advance what to say (including which conventional phrase to use), then sing and play it at the same time. He needs, in other words, to don his iconic caps to achieve agreement. Singing and playing that which is being composed in the moment demands an acute futuristic sense. There is no question that Mr. Akurugu possesses plenty of it. The outcome of his quick thinking is a series of indistinct unisons (*unscharfe unisono*, Adorno would call them in Mahler[35]) in which intention and realization align imperfectly, giving us a more potent view—an aural view, so to speak—of the very nature of oneness.

(p.234) Near-alignments between what is played and what is sung may be heard in other performance traditions, but the view of synchronicity that they afford differs according to the nature of the instrument. Singing to the accompaniment of fixed-pitch instruments like xylophones and mbiras places the

onus on singers to adjust their tunings as appropriate. With the gonje, however, there is some room for mutual accommodation. The paradoxical result is a continual and intentional “deficit” on the most microlevel of the ensemble resultant sounds. Such ostensible discrepancies, however, are more usefully thought of as expanded unisons to privilege fixed intentions over fluctuating realizations. Widespread throughout Africa, expanded unisons are a vital source of aesthetic fulfillment in melodic expression.

A Dan woman’s lament.

This is a captivating recording of a woman of the Dan ethnic group lamenting the passing of her husband.[36] In this unrestrained and presumably heartfelt performance, she allows the intrinsic music of spoken language to lead the way. Her delivery incorporates song words (like *buoo*) and interjectory particles (like *oo*) from time to time to heighten the expression. The outcome is a lament that assumes an overall shape of a constellation of melodic fragments. Inevitably, perhaps, a pentatonic substrate constrains her choice of pitches. No single archetype mediates the logic of large-scale form; rather, form emerges gradually from an accumulation of grief-bearing sentiments delivered in uneven segments. There are several moments of intensity, some achieved by sheer volume, some by the accumulation of repeated fragments, and some by the depth of verbal expression. We listen and mourn with the Dan woman, but this is not communal song that anyone can join in. We may recognize melodic snippets here and there from songs we know already, but the singer is not issuing an invitation for collective vocal action. These are *her* sentiments about death, about the particular death of her husband, and although they invoke shared or remembered song, they represent an unduplicated utterance.

Among the techniques that guide the Dan woman’s melodic expression is an opposition between occasional long notes and frequent short, syllable-based notes, as well as repeated use of song words to achieve moments of respite. This assembly of fragments has its high and low points, but just as there is no overall governing melodic archetype, so there is no choreographed trajectory. Rather, the song is an accumulation

of moments—some are short while others are long, some help to mark time while others advance the emotional narrative, and some are hurried and directional while others meander and kill time.

(p.235) **Interlocking melodies in xylophone performance**. The melodic imagination displayed on the African xylophone grows in part from “invitations” issued by the instrument itself. Slabs over resonators arranged in ascending or descending order provide the conditions of possibility for a network of creative actions. These include the basic striking action, which confers on the xylophone aesthetic a percussive aura. Striking a note at a time produces a digitalized texture and gives us a view of the melo-rhythmic dimension of the xylophonist’s art. Xylophones of limited range suggest an isomorphism with the speaking voice, while those with a huge range accentuate fundamental differences between the human voice and man-made instrument. Xylophone timbres may also provide another view of the indistinct unisons and octaves we mentioned in connection with the gonje, adding another dimension to our appreciation of equivalence. The xylophone is not just a melodic instrument; when played with multiple players, or even by a single skilled player, the music displays a contrapuntal essence. Xylophone counterpoint is expressed either in compound melody (when played by one player) or in the interlocking of melodies (when played by several players on a single, large instrument).

The procedure that animates interlocking melody is one of the supreme instances of contrapuntal thinking in African music. The hands of highly skilled xylophonists (like Kakraba Lobi and Bernard Woma from Ghana) do not function independently. The left hand knows what the right hand is doing at every moment, and vice versa. Similarly, when six Baganda men sit in threes across from each other behind a giant *amadinda* xylophone and make music, their individual parts are never conceptualized as separate or autonomous; on the contrary, they are connected through interlock. Although it has been suggested that *amadinda* xylophone players are not beholden to a single, gross pulse and that individual players possess individual beats, it is difficult to see how this can be practically possible. How do two players playing on the same

instrument ensure that their ostensibly separate and independent beats do not coincide? Only keen awareness of the other's temporal constraints, it would seem, can assure that the desired outcome of an irreducible multiplicity—if that indeed is what it is—does not collapse into a unanimity. There is, then, a level of dependence among players on some level. Indeed, the very idea of interlocking implies that performers enter into each other's spaces and do so with importunity. With a few exceptions, African ensembles are not sites for the display of willful autonomy; on the contrary, ensemble performance is normally coordinated by a third factor. Each individual player (or singer) carries a conception of the full ensemble sound in his head; although he produces only his part, he nevertheless *knows* that it is contributing to a whole that is known in advance. What a beautiful (p.236) idea for making music together! It further suggests that a polyphonic or harmonic imagination is basic to music making. In approaching a piece of xylophone performance, be it from Eastern Nigeria, Mozambique, Burkina Faso, or Gambia, we should attend to the *interdependence* of parts and admire the manifest as a token of the hidden.

Melodic archetypes.

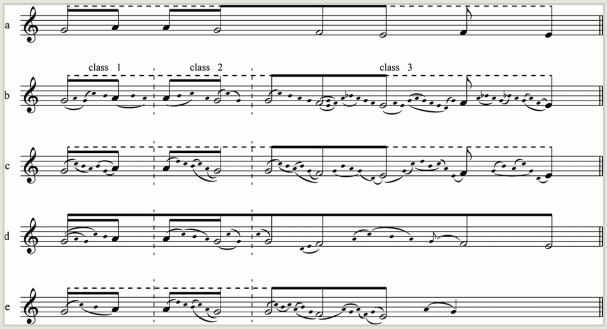
African musicians do not normally pluck new melodies out of thin air; rather, they typically rely on habits of music making and on tried-and-true methods for shaping utterances. Acts of composition are therefore acts of repetition. In a number of traditions, melody is built from schemata or archetypes, basic pitch shapes that are given a variety of verbal, rhythmic, and expressive forms. The funeral chants of the Senufo are built on a stable pitch structure to enable delivery of verbal content: an archetype, Bb3-C4-Eb4-F4-Bb4-Eb5, spanning an octave and a half.[37] The call to prayer sung to assemble devoted worshippers in Muslim communities is often based on a skeleton melody that is then elaborated and embellished.[38] A beautiful rendition of "Kalefa ba" by M'Bady and Diaryatou Kouyaté (kora and voice) relies on a recurring pitch framework anchored by notes that belong to the pentatonic collection. The constancy of the framework guarantees the coherence of the structure without muting departures necessitated by an evolving verbal content.[39] In a cognate

tradition, the singing of “Lambango” by Mariatu Kuyateh relies on a descending archetype that constrains melodic utterance.[40] Indeed, many performances of praise, histories, and genealogies in the tradition of griots are made possible by tunes that lie beneath the surface and are used as vehicles for the delivery of verbal content.

It comes as a surprise, therefore, to encounter A. M. Jones’s verdict that “Africans rarely, if ever, conceive of melodies in the form of abstract music.”[41] On the contrary, abstractions in the form of archetypes, schemata, or orienting contours occur in numerous traditions. It may be that traditional musicians are reticent about *talking* at an abstract level about music, but abstractions are (p.237) deployed many times a day in individual cultures. The knowledge is inscribed in the doing; it is an enabling knowledge, not one that is separately packaged for consumption as an ethno-discourse. Indeed, in situations of error, such knowledge is readily called upon.

Limitations of space do not allow for extensive demonstration of the shaping role of archetypes in African melodic expression, but we might mention a basic melodic contour found in certain Northern Ewe melodies and shown in the top layer (a) of Example 5.9.[42] The melodies it supports span a gamut of styles from the traditional through the neotraditional to the popular. The use of the archetype thus cuts across stylistic boundaries.

The archetype is made up of the following pitch sequence: G4-A4-G4-F4-E4-F4-E4. The opening pitch (G4) is elaborated by neighbor-note motion (G4-A4-G4) and then descends

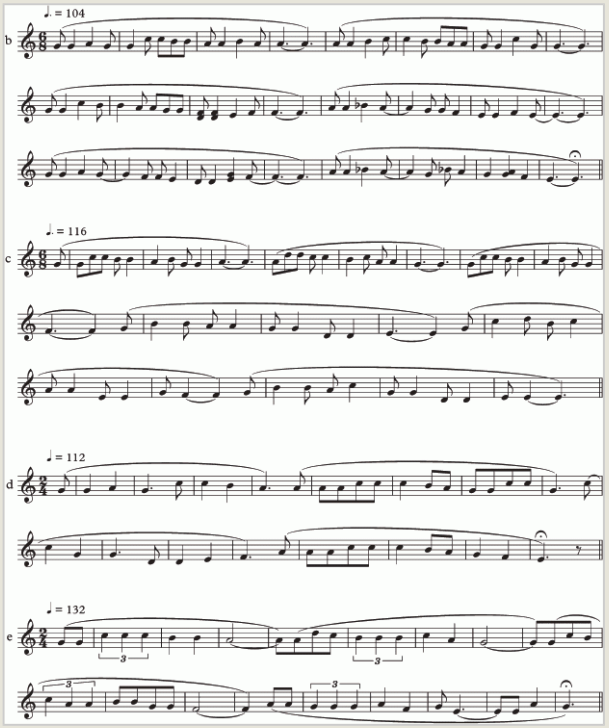


Example 5.9 Melodic archetype with four realizations (Northern Ewe).

through a third (G4-F4-E4) to a terminal pitch (E4). This last is also subject to a complementary prolongation (E4-F4-E4). Calling it an archetype recognizes a level of abstraction and the possibility for diversity in realization. The initial G-A progression, for example, may be elaborated into something like **G4**-C5-B4-A4-B4-G4-**A4** (see level c in Example 5.9); the third descent in the middle of the archetype (G4-F4-E4) may be extended to a fourth, fifth, or sixth and subjected to internal decoration; and elements within the final E4-F4-E4 neighbor prolongation may themselves be subject to further prolongation. Archetypes are like deep songs that enable a variety of surface compositional utterances. (p.238)

The remaining layers in Example 5.9 display four tunes that reproduce the archetype (three of them may be heard at Web Example 5.7). Start by singing through the four songs (labeled b, c, d, and e in Example 5.10). (They are presented here without words to keep the focus on pitch and rhythm.) Then compare each song to its corresponding reduction in Example 5.9 (also labeled b, c, d, and e) and then to the archetype. Finally, compare the songs to each other. It will be immediately apparent that they all belong to a tune family. This mode of composition is widespread in world cultures, but it is not readily associated with songs using tone languages because of the constraining influence that speech tones are thought to exert on musical melody. The possibility exposed here, however, is that tone is not always a determining influence on tune, and that originary musical elements in the form of archetypes also exist. (p.239) As for the supposed absence of abstraction in African thought, this demonstration should once again call it into question.[43]

Conclusion



Example 5.10 Four Northern Ewe melodies (cf. Example 5.9).

The songs discussed in this chapter were chosen to demonstrate some of the ways in which the African melodic imagination has been exercised in rich and thoughtful ways. I began by postulating the voice as the origin of all melody. With the voice comes presence, a specifically human presence, and with human presence comes the possibility of meaning, be it the intended meaning of a singer or player or the reconstructed meanings supplied by thoughtful listeners. We have seen that the melodic imagination is expressed in a variety of forms, ranging from the deliberately restricted (but no less ingenious) universe of children's game songs to the elaborate and ornate declamatory singing of praise songs, laments, and dirges. Repetition and variation are key techniques in the manipulation of a variety of pitch collections. Conventions of beginning and ending are equally significant, and they are regularly deployed by songsmiths. Language as sound and sense is key to African melodic expression, as we have seen in instances of syllabic articulation, speech-tone influence on melody, instrumental melodies with vocal origins, or creative violations of norms. Ideas about melody will continue to engage us in subsequent discussion (especially of polyphony in chapter 7), but I hope that this chapter begins to dispel

misplaced skepticism about African melody and to provide some grounds for (re)valuing this primal domain of African creativity.

Notes:

(1.) William E. F. Ward, “Music in the Gold Coast,” *Gold Coast Review* 3 (1927): 223.

(2.) Rose Brandel, “Polyphony in African Music,” in *The Commonwealth of Music*, ed. Gustav Reese and Rose Brandel (New York: Free Press, 1965), 27.

(3.) Robert Ndɔ, unpublished lecture, circa 1985.

(4.) Alexander L. Ringer, “Melody,” *Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed July 21, 2013, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/18357.

(5.) Peter Fryer, “Our Earliest Glimpse of West African Music,” *Race and Class* 45 (2003): 107.

(6.) Nketia, *The Music of Africa*, 125.

(7.) Wiredu, “How Not to Compare African Thought with Western Thought,” in *Philosophy and an African Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 37–50. An exception may, however, be made for acts of contrapuntal reading, whereby one reads across repertoires without regard for conventional genre boundaries.

(8.) Christopher Waterman, *Jùjú: A Social History and Ethnography of an African Popular Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 142.

(9.) For an insightful study of the philosophical content of song texts in one African community, see Kofi Gbolonyo, “Want the history? Listen to the Music! Historical Evidence in Anlo Ewe Musical Practices: A Case Study of Traditional Song Texts” (Master’s thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 2005).

(10.) A. M. Jones, *African Music in Northern Rhodesia and Some Other Places, The Occasional Papers of the Rhodes-*

Livingstone Museum (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1949), 11.

(11.) Laz E. N. Ekwueme, “Analysis and Analytic Techniques in African Music,” *African Music* 6 (1980): 91.

(12.) I have elsewhere suggested that this pervasive melodic contour may be motivated by two factors. First is the overall Earth orientation found in the symbol economies of many agrarian societies. This origin would crucially depend on a culture’s interpretation of downward melodic motion as Earth oriented. Second is the possibility that an utterance whose speech tones are falling is under the jurisdiction of the so-called downdrift phenomenon, whereby successive high tones lose some height in the course of an utterance. See my “Variation Procedures in Northern Ewe Song,” *Ethnomusicology* 34 (1990): 222–223.

(13.) Nketia, *Folk Songs of Ghana* (Legon: University of Ghana, 1963), 160; Polo Vallejo, *Mbudi mbudi na mhanga: universo musical infantil de los Wagogo de Tanzania [The musical universe of the Wagogo children from Tanzania]* (Madrid: Edicion del autor, 2004), 148; Joseph Kyagambiddwa, *African Music from the Source of the Nile* (London: Atlantic, 1956), 26–27; Blacking, *Venda Children’s Songs*, 148; Nketia, *The Music of Africa*, 156; Mbabi-Katana, *African Music for Schools* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2002), 183.

(14.) See, for example, the Northern Ewe lament “Àɖàŋutɔ” (“The counselor”), transcribed and analyzed phrase by phrase in my book, *African Rhythm,* 83–89. The closing phrase, “Miyɔ àɖàŋùtɔ névá kpɔ ɖá,” is sung in hurried rhythms. Numerous examples appear in several of the transcriptions published by various authors in the *Journal of the Association of Nigerian Musicologists*, 6 (2012), ed. Christian Onyeiji. Further examples may be heard on the CD, *Songs of War and Death from the Slave Coast* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 1998 or 1999), recorded by Michel Verdon in Abutia Kloe, Ghana.

(15.) Gerhard Kubik, “African Tone Systems,” 50.

(16.) Heard on the CD, *Centrafrique: Anthologie de la musique des Pygmées Aka* (Paris: Ocora, 1987), track 15, “Trois jeux d’enfants: Nze-nze-nze.”

(17.) See, among numerous examples, Thomas F. Johnston, “Tsonga Children’s Folksongs,” *Journal of American Folklore* 86 (1973): 225–240; John Blacking, *Venda Children’s Songs*; Agawu, *African Rhythm*, 62–73; Akosua Addo, “Ghanaian Children’s Music Cultures: A Video Ethnography of Selected Singing Games,” (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 1995); *The Oxford Handbook of Children’s Musical Cultures*, ed. Patricia Shehan Campbell and Trevor Wiggins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Kyra Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); and Minette Mans, Mary Dzansi McPalm, and Hellen Odwar Agak, “Play in Musical Arts Pedagogy,” in *Musical Arts in Africa: Theory, Practice and Education* (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2003), 195–214.

(18.) CD, *Music of the Vai of Liberia* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Folkways, 1998), track 10.

(19.) Serena Facci, “Akazehe del Burundi. Saluti a incastro polifonico e cerimonialità femminile,” in *Polifonie. Procedimenti, tassonomie e forme: una riflessione a più voci*, ed. M. Agamennone (Verona: Edizioni Il Cardo/Ricerche, 1996), 123–161.

(20.) CD, *Musique des pygmées Bibayak. Chantres de l’épopée* (France: Ocora, 1989).

(21.) See the CD accompanying Agawu, *African Rhythm*, tracks 8–11, for examples of Northern Ewe children’s game songs.

(22.) CD, *Côte d’Ivoire: Baule Vocal Music* (Ivry-sur-Seine: Auvidis, 1993 [orig. 1972]).

(23.) See recording accompanying Kubik’s *Theory of African Music*, vol. 1.

(24.) Blacking, *Venda Children’s Songs*, 50.

(25.) CD, *Anthologie de la musique Congolaise (RDC),* vol. 11, *Musique des Nkundo* (Tervuren: Musée royal de l'Afrique central, 2007 [orig. 1971–1972]), track 9. In making the transcription shown in Example 5.5, I have filled in the gaps between phrases by extending the ending notes to avoid using rests.

(26.) CD, *Centrafrique: Pygmées Aka* (Paris: Ocora, 1998), track 5.

(27.) The following analysis is drawn from an earlier study of mine, "On an African Song from Akpafu," *Sonus* 10 (1989): 22–39.

(28.) For a description and critique of "semiotic" studies of melody, see Raymond Monelle, *Linguistics and Semiotics in Music* (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Press, 1992), 59–89 and 162–192.

(29.) Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: How Poems End* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,1968), 74.

(30.) Michael Veal, *Fela: The Life and Times of an African Musical Icon* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000); Tejumola Olaniyan, *Arrest the Music!*; and Sola Olorunyomi, *Afrobeat!: Fela and the Imagined Continent* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press; Ibadan, Nigeria: Copublished with Institute Français de Recherche en Afrique, University of Ibadan, 2003).

(31.) See John Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), for an account of the historical background to the religious politics that Fela critiques.

(32.) For engaging readings of Fela's songs, see Olaniyan, *Arrest the Music!*. Bode Omojola's *Yorùbá Music in the Twentieth Century* includes a detailed study of Fela's song "Zombie," 177–188.

(33.) The definitive study is Jacqueline Djedje, *Fiddling in West Africa: Touching the Spirit in Fulbe, Hausa, and Dagbamba*

Cultures (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008). Equally valuable is the companion songbook, *Fiddling in West Africa (1950s-1990s): The Songbook* (Los Angeles: UCLA Ethnomusicology Publications, 2008).

(34.) CD, *Ghana: Music of the Northern Tribes* (New York: Lyrichord, 1976), track 4.

(35.) Adorno, *Mahler*, 62.

(36.) CD, *Africa: The Dan* (recorded by Hugo Zemp), track 3, "Solo Song of a Woman."

(37.) CD, *Sénoufo: Musiques des funerailles fodonon* (France: Chant du monde/Harmonia Mundi, 1994).

(38.) Ready examples are available on the CD accompanying *Africa: The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, track 4, "Vai Call to Prayer," and on the CD, *Spirit of African Sanctus: The Original Recordings by David Fanshawe (1969–73)* (Wotton-under-Edge, England: Saydisc, 1991), track 2, "Call to Prayer."

(39.) CD, *Introduction aux musiques africaines* by Monique Brandilly, track 19, "Kalefa ba."

(40.) CD, Jeff Todd Titon, ed., *Worlds of Music: An Introduction to the Music of the World's Peoples*, CD 2, track 15, "Lambango."

(41.) A. M. Jones, *African Music in Northern Rhodesia*, 11.

(42.) For a fuller discussion, see my "Variation Procedures in Northern Ewe Song." See also Jones's article, "Swahili Epic Poetry: A Musical Study," *African Music* 5 (1975/1976): 105–129, for a detailed study of an extended epic whose melody is built on "little tunes" that are subjected to a range of variations.

(43.) For a related discussion framed in terms of Schenkerian applications to non-Western music (rather than the use of archetypes as here), see Jonathan Stock, "The Application of

Schenkerian Analysis to Ethnomusicology: Problems and Possibilities," *Music Analysis* 12 (1993): 215–240.