*“I am an Afrikan”:*

The Journey Towards Afrikan Musicology

**Introduction**

Over the past few months I have been introduced to and thinking around the idea of an African Musicology, which I define as, “The scholarly study of African musics, by Africans.” This importance of this paramount to African scholarship, not just postcolonial Africa, but particularly the Africa of the twenty-first century as part of what the former president termed “The African Renaissance”. I must, at the outset, make it clear that this is indeed a work in progress and this paper represents the foundational thinking processes that could lead to a much broader conversation on the topic. In trying to work through this idea of African Musicology I’ve had to ask a few questions, which I will attempt to answer in this paper. First, what is musicology? Clearly I cannot put forward a branded musicology without a clear understanding of what musicology is. I will need to look at the history of the study of African music and this histories relationship to ethnomusicology. Second, what is an African? This question is a rather complex one, which I doubt will be agreed upon anytime soon. It is quite possible that I will need to be subjective in trying to answer this question. Lastly, a more philosophical question would be to explore the necessity of the proposed brand of musicology. In other words, why is there such a need, if it exists at all?

**Methodology**

For current purposes, this is one-time research, “…research confined to a single time-period…” (Kothari, 2011:3). On the other hand, with continual discussions and debates around the question at hand, it could, in fact I believe it should, lead to longitudinal research, “…[where] the research is carried on over several time periods.” (Kothari, 2011:3-4). At this point I will be using laboratory research, “…[which depends] upon the environment in which it is to be carried out.” (Kothari, 2011:4). Primarily, I will be working either from home or the library, which can then be seen as my laboratory. This is as opposed to field-setting research, which from my understanding means research that involves some form of fieldwork,

“…when social scientists talk about being in “the field,” they’re talking about being out in the real world and involved in the everyday lives of the people they are studying…think of field research as an umbrella term that includes the myriad activities that field researchers engage in when they collect data: they participate, they observe, they usually interview some of the people they observe, and they typically analyse documents or [artefacts] created by the people they observe.” (Blackstone, 2012).

The research will also be analytic wherein, “…the researcher has to use facts or information already available, and analyse these to make a critical evaluation of the material.” (Kothari, 2011:2). In this vein, this will be an exercise in exploratory research, which is defined as,

“Research that is not explicitly intended to test hypotheses…nor to solve practical problems…but is used to make initial forays into unfamiliar territory when studying new or poorly understood phenomena.” (Colman, 2014).

If we are to look at African Musicology as a set theory with its own methods and aims, then this is an endeavour in fundamental research, “…mainly concerned with generalisations and with the formulation of a theory.” (Kothari, 2011:2), which to my understanding then assumes a conceptual research approach as well, “Conceptual research is that related to some abstract idea(s) or theory.” (Kothari, 2011:2). Conceptual research is in contrast with, “…empirical research [which] relies on experience or observation alone…” (Kothari, 2011:3). This again speaks to the difference between laboratory and field research.

In the broader sense, I will employ a qualitative approach to the research problem,

“*Qualitative approach* to research is concerned with subjective assessment of attitudes, opinions and behaviour. Research in such a situation is a function of researcher’s insights and impressions.” (Kothari, 2011:4).

**Literature Review**

For this portion of the paper I have decided to take on a particularly descriptive or summarizing angle and tone. I am very aware that this is not particularly the purpose of a literature review, but this is how I will use it here. Considering that I will not be putting everything I’ve read in this review, only that which I found pertinent to the paper, again another digression from how a literature review is meant to work. None the less, I feel it better to leave discussions, debates and remarks on the literature to the body of my work. Which will make it more coherent for myself and thus easier for the reader to follow the writers thought process, in addition, this will help avoid repetition.

First, I begin with a late nineteenth century writing on musicology, “The Scope, Method and Aim Of Musicology” by Guido Adler is one of, if not *the*, first scholarly article that accounts for exactly that, musicology’s scope, method and aim. From the onset, it must be stated that although this article can be used as a basis for studying all types of music, the article is concerned with western art music in particular.

“Adler divides musicology into two streams, historical and systematic, beginning his account by describing “The Scope, Method and Aim of [Historical] Musicology.” This is broken down into three subsections, namely…” (Nkoana, 2014:2).

“…the knowledge of notations…the summing-up of historical groups [categories], usually called musical forms…the investigation of the laws of art of different periods, which takes the highest precedence; this is the actual focal point of all music-historical work” (Muggelstone & Adler, 1981:8).

In terms of systematic musicology Adler divides this too into three, namely, “…a music-theoretical section, and a music-paedagogical section” (Mugglestone & Adler, 1981). Of particular importance to the current paper in terms of systematic musicology and African music,

“A new and very rewarding adjacent field of study to the systematic subdivision is ‘musicology’, that is, comparative musicology. This takes as its task the comparing of tonal products, in particular the folk songs of various peoples, countries, and territories, with an ethnographic purpose in mind, grouping and ordering these according to the variety of [differences] in their characteristics.” (Mugglestone & Adler, 1981:13).

Many of the resultant musicological strands, including the readings in this literature review, follow directly from ideas expressed in this paper by Adler; how instruments are handled, notation and transcription, aesthetics, “…what is the beautiful in music and how is this related to the general concept of the beautiful in art?” (Mugglestone & Adler, 1981:11), organology or, “…the history of musical instruments as regards their construction and usage…” (Mugglestone & Adler, 1981:9)

Second, I come to early twentieth century writings based on comparative musicology. In his article, “African Music”, Reverend Arthur Morris Jones essentially advocates for more effort to be put into the study of African music. He seems to understand, at this early stage – 1949 – that even the term African music is problematic because of the sheer size of the continent. In this article, Jones acknowledges the differences both in the aesthetics and societal meanings of music between Europe and Africa. To this end he breaks down,

“…this social music-making into four distinct classes. There is ceremonial music, music for communal work, music for communal recreation, and private, individual music.” (Jones, 1949:291).

He discusses form, rhythm, and melody and is candid about his view of African music being, “…in fact, a highly developed art form.” (Jones, 1949:295). Finally, Jones seems to suggest that it is westerners or European scholars who need to study and learn more about African music so as to help “the African” better understand or help develop his own music,

“…young African musicians are now coming to England with Colonial scholarships to study music but there is no one here who has the knowledge to guide their studies along lines profitable for the understanding, let alone the development of their own music.” (Jones, 1949:296).

All this with a sense of colonial master grandeur, implying, in a sense, that Africans themselves cannot or could not do so,

“It may well be that what is needed is some central institute in London – or an extension of, say, the School of Oriental and African Studies - which could attract prospective research workers and send them into the field, and act altogether as an Empire focus for musical research with particular reference to Africa.” (Jones, 1949:296).

Jones intentions are commendable and he does indeed make mention of the setting up of the African Music Society in Johannesburg, whose aim, Jones says, “…is to co-ordinate research in [African music].” (Jones, 1949:296).

Five years prior to the publishing of Jones’ article,

“[At] The sixth International Discussion Meeting…held at the School of Oriental and African Studies…Mr Fela Sowande read a paper on African Music.” (Sowande, 1944:340).

He, like Jones, discusses the importance of rhythm in African music, also alluding to the fact that Africa has a whole cannot or rather, should not be viewed as one large, but homogeneous area. Instead Sowande suggests, as should be common knowledge today, that the continent is indeed an amalgam of different races, cultures, religions and etcetera. He acknowledges that,

“The Slave Trade, with the consequent disruption of African family life and the introduction of Western influences, left its mark on African music. Not only was the European scale introduced, but new rhythms and themes entered in, and the whole character of the music was changed.” (Sowande, 1944:342).

In terms of the trajectory of African music, Sowande places the responsibility firmly in the hands of “…contemporary African composers.” (Sowande, 1944:342).

E. M. von Hornbostel, as an earlier scholar, also writes on African music. In his article “African Negro Music, published in 1928, he asks and answers two questions,

"…What is African music like as compared to our own? …How can it be made use of in Church and School? …The answer might be as brief as the questions: … African and modern European music are constructed on entirely different principles, and therefore…they cannot be fused into one, but only the one or the other can be used without compromise.” (Hornbostel, 1928:30).

I particularly like both the above quote and the one to follow for they are succinct in the explaining the body of the article,

“The attention of most of my readers will only be engaged by the second of these points as being of practical interest, while the first is of a more theoretical nature. But my second answer being only a conclusion drawn from my first one, I shall have to support it by entering on some theoretical detail…” (Hornbostel, 1928:30).

Hornbostel begins with an account of the phonogram and how it revolutionised, “…our insight into foreign music…” (Hornbostel, 1928:31). Following this, the author goes into a proper comparative musicological exercise, beginning with the comparison between European harmony influenced music and melody based music of Africa,

“The main difference is this: our music (since about A.D. 1600) is built on harmony, all other music on pure melody…pure melody does contain elements related probably to those which, in our music, have contributed to form harmony.” (Hornbostel, 1928:34 & 35).

Following this detailed exploration of the melodic aspects, structure and basis of African and other non European music, Hornbostel goes on to analyse,

“…antiphony (here understood to be the alternate singing of solo and chorus), part-singing, and highly developed rhythm…three features [which] stand out above all others, and have been noticed and stressed accordingly by all those who have heard Negroes sing…” (Hornbostel, 1928:39).

In this section, Hornbostel propagates for comparative musicology and also compares it with linguistics and ethnography,

“Comparative musicology is…forced to proceed downward, as it were, and by differentiation; and has, therefore, in certain respects, an advantage as compared with linguistics and ethnology. These begin by having a bewildering number of individual facts at their disposal; starting from these facts, they had to search for resemblances, to prove connexions, and are now on their way upwards from dispersion to increasingly large units. This synthetic process is directly opposed to the natural process of differentiating a unit, and therefore has difficulties and pitfalls of its own.” (Hornbostel, 1928:39).

Considering the tonal nature of many African languages, it comes as no surprise that Hornbostel goes on to discuss “Tune And Words”,

“It is particularly interesting to study the mutual influence between speech and singing in connexion with those language in which changes of pitch and their direction determine the meaning of the words…” (Hornbostel, 1928:55 & 56).

To conclude, Hornbostel comes back to the question of how the knowledge of how African music works can be used practically, again,

“…How can [African music] be made use of in Church and School? … [African music and European music] cannot be fused into one, but only the one or the other can be used without compromise.” (Hornsbostel, 1928:30).

Of this last section a few things are of importance, namely the following,

“[European] music cannot be a substitute for the Negro’s own…The mixture of ‘white’ and ‘black’ music, with a kind of musical pidgin as result, would be, if not impossible, yet most undesirable.” (Hornsbostel, 1928:61).

The author goes on to suggest that only three ways remain to achieve some kind of amalgamation of African and European music,

“…[Africans] are taught to sing [European] songs such as they are…[Africans] are encouraged to produce songs, tune, and words [in the European style]…or [Africans] are encouraged to sing and play in their own natural manner, that is to say, in the African manner.” (Hornbostel, 1928:61-62).

The author then answers an initial question, “To what extent one can be broad-minded in this respect, as far as the Christian church and school are concerned, I am not competent to judge.” (Hornbostel, 1928:62). Finally landing on the tonic of his argument that,

“From a musical point of view one cannot be broad-minded enough. African music is not conceivable without dancing, nor African rhythm without drumming, nor the forms of African song without antiphony. It will be necessary to come to a definite decision and choose either African music or European custom. It is not possible to eat one’s cake and have it.” (Hornbostel, 1928:62).

J. H. Kwabena Nketia writes an illuminating paper on “African Music and Western Praxis: A Review of Western Perspectives on African Musicology” (1986). This is a detailed look at the lifeline of African musicology from colonial time to the mid eighties; dividing the timeline into colonial, “…pre-independence decade (1950-60)…the period of Great Transition (1960-1970), and…the following decade.” (1986:38). Nketia speaks to the importance of “Recording Programs” to the history and journey of African musicology, highlighting, however, that some scholars, like Hugh Tracey, were advocating for giving,

“…priority to the systematic recording and publication of African music or to the study of African music as an object of aesthetic rather than ethnological interest.” (Nketia, 1986:40).

The theoretical aspects of the study of music from a European perspective have also developed from, “The evolutionary approach of comparative musicologists, for whom Africa represented a stage in the linear evolution of music…” (Nketia, 1986:41) to reach a stage in African music scholarship wherein, “…new approaches to the problem of the historicity of music in African cultures.” (Nketia, 1986:41). We have seen a move towards the study of “…acculturation in music…” (1986:41), coupled with,

“…considerable interest in the terms and concepts used by African peoples to refer to their music, musical instruments, aspects of performance, categories of musicians, and the social context of music.” (Nketia, 1986:42).

This idea of understanding the social context of music means,

“Some of these Africanists genuinely desire to share in the African musical experience and to make performance not only a tool of research…but also a source of aesthetic experience.” (Nketia, 1986:43).

This in turn has meant, “…scholars are now more cautious in their use of Western terms and descriptive categories…” (Nketia, 1986:44), even with this in mind, Nketia suggests that,

“…Western scholars could make even greater strides towards the development of perspectives on African musicology that are truly Africa-centered if the vestiges of eurocentricism in methodology and orientation…were to be curtailed.” (1986:43).

Of paramount importance is to this paper is the fact that more of the research into African music, particularly on the continent, has to be done by African scholars self. This should be supplemented with greater communication and sharing of knowledge and ideas between foreign scholars and those based in Africa.

Nketia does a masterful job of reviewing the state of African musicology from colonial times up to the late twentieth century when he penned the article under discussion.

**Afrikan Musicology**

So what then is musicology? According to Grove Music Online, the term musicology has varies connotations, the first and most basic of which - to my mind – is “…the scholarly study of music.” (Duckles et. al., 2014).

Another definition of musicology as put forward by the Journal of American Musicological Society (viii, 153), as quoted by Duckles et al. is, “…a field of knowledge having as its object the investigation of the art of music as a physical, psychological, aesthetic, and cultural phenomenon.” (2014). The problem with this definition is the use of the word “art” for, at least in seTswana, sePedi, and seSotho, there is no equivalent word. This harks back to Nketia, indeed terminology can lead to the exclusion of certain cultures and ideas. One could argue that that is all a semantic power play, however I would disagree. Language is the, for this writer, the carrier and even changer of culture. Therefore, when we use certain words to describe something in one language, but that thing being described exists in both cultures, one is left out.

Lastly, there is the idea of looking at musicology as studying music not just as a product, but looking at it within context, the context of society, the context of culture as well as treating musicians as part of the study, “This type of inquiry is also associated with ethnomusicology” (Duckles et al., 2014), ethnomusicology is essentially a hybrid form of study which blends the study of music with anthropology.

So if these are the various definitions of musicology, what is this brand of African musicology that I have put forward? Unlike the manner in which Nketia speaks to African musicology, I do not mean simply the scholarly study of African music. What I mean, very specifically, is

*“The scholarly study of African music, within the African social and cultural context, by African scholars, for the benefit of Africans first, and the rest of the world after, thus also playing the role of African music custodian and/or curator.”*

African scholars and more importantly, educational institutions should be in the forefront of disseminating knowledge on African music to new and later generations, this is the crucial reason why this need for an African musicology as I’ve described it is necessary. Essentially, these minds and institutions based on the African continent need to move away from prioritising Western classical music or other forms of music from outside the continent and be focus more on local styles and music. Jean Kidula outlines this thought clearly,

“Methods of acquiring European musical knowledge had to be learned by many students. This processed distanced the notion of lived music, studied music, and music appreciation… It was, and still is, difficult for students to accept African musicianship as viable and “elite”, since it has been presented in anthropological, rather than musical, terms and locations. The music considered serious for academic pursuit was European music.” (Kidula, 2006:104-105).

Indeed as has been suggested by Nketia, Jones and Adler, the study of notations and using notations to explain or give access of African music to foreigners could prove crucial in sharing knowledge. That being said, making African students study this form of reading and writing is not only a hindrance to having more Africans studying music, African music, but also takes away from the way in which music is taught in Africa, or should I say in South Africa, I speak here from experience. Let it be said that I am in no way suggesting that the European notation system should not be taught at all in African colleges and institutions; for that would be tantamount to saying African music should not be taught in institutions outside the continent. What I am saying however is that the teaching and learning of African music should be a lived experience.

Tied in with this is the idea of an “African Renaissance”. African scholars, musicians, instrument makers and other keepers of musical knowledge should themselves come up with new standards of approaching the study of African music. The question of subjectivity should be placed aside for current purposes, until such time that enough knowledge and information has been garnered on local musics. It has been suggested by some writers that for instance, “…African musicology pursued by Africans could not properly be considered ethnomusicology…” (Nketia, 1986:50). This has less to do, in my eyes, with the idea of ethnomusicology being a study of “the other”, but more to do with an assumption – I see the irony here – that one cannot study their own home music without being subjective. But can this be so if for so long Europeans themselves have been studying their own folk music? Just as Bela Bartok spoke to “The Influence of Peasant Music on Modern Music” (1921), but was not accused of being subjective, not to my knowledge in any event. Furthermore, using the size of Africa could solve the issue of subjectivity; scholars from different regions could study their counterparts’ music from other regions.

I have purposefully left the definition of an African to last, for as I stated at the outset, this is a complex question. For purposes of being concise and keeping it simple, I here define an African as anyone born and raised on the continent of Africa. To think of it in terms of politics or administratively, anyone who holds an African birth certificate. This, for the current moment, leaves out the diaspora. The reason I choose this delineation is due to the size of Africa; there is a vast number of musical cultures and traditions across the continent, not to mention the syncretic musics that have blossomed. So there will be enough samples to begin this mission. From this, African scholars can be leaders in setting standards of studying African music, standards which can then be extended to studying music of the African diaspora. Lastly, we can no longer use race, color, creed or culture to exclude Africans. Many people of different races are, “more African than Africans”, with many young people in South Africa – again, from personal experience - unable to speak their home languages well, while we have citizens such as Johnny Clegg who can speak isiZulu fluently and has lived as a Zulu man for much of his life.

**Conclusion**

I have tried in this paper to put forward an idea of how to take the idea of African musicology forward, a way in which it can be redefined with the focus on Africa. I have looked writings on African musicology to get a foundation of this brand of musicology, looking at the education system as well as scholarly trends. Taking this idea as part of the broader idea of an African renaissance, I based much of my thinking as an African from an African perspective for the betterment of Africa. There is much that needs to be done within this field of scholarship for Africa to find a more specific understanding and way forward.

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