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Transcriptions of the Efe Pygmies and
the Vai of Liberia

This paper serves as an introduction to the transcriptions which follow. These transcriptions have been made from two sources: a Compact Disc called Songs from the Edge of the Forest--Polyphonies of the Efe Pygmies, and a record called Vai Music of Liberia (Folkways Records Album No. FE 4388). Selections transcribed from the CD were: tracks 1,3,6, and 7; selections transcribed from the record were tracks 4,5, and 7. I have given each example an order number for ease of reference (see transcriptions). I would first like to discuss some general problems I encountered with transcribing this music (and then, of course my solutions), as well as making some comments and hopefully correct historical or social explanations for the musical devices and processes of which each society makes use.

The problem which hounded me during every second of transcription was the quality of the recordings. Most of the music to which I listened, especially the Vai music of Liberia, seemed to have been recorded with one, maybe two, microphones. Stereo effects, such as panning different instruments into opposite channels, were not used; all the music was straight up the middle. The performances were, of course, recorded live on the field instead of in a studio. While this technique surely captured more of the feeling and intention of the music, it made for a very homogeneous sound--a homogeneous sound out of which I found it difficult to pick individual voice lines and instruments. Also, probably due to the performers' lack of recording knowledge, voice parts tended to fade in and out of the mix as they changed their distance from the microphones. At times such

as these, where harmonies may disappear or briefly appear, I could not be sure whether these changes were truly variations on the song form or merely variations in dynamics.

I must admit that some of these problems would have seemed inconsequential had I been a native of the African society whose music I was transcribing. For example, when transcribing rock and roll (a medium I am familiar with), since only one chord voicing is generally used, the experienced transcriber never has to pick out the individual notes of the chord. He needs only hear the root of the chord and then plug in the cliché. Unfortunately, I am not an experienced African transcriber. I wondered sometimes whether slight changes in rhythms were worth noting. “Were these changes simply performance errors or were they subtle, yet important cues to the native listener? Was that passing loss of harmony due to faulty microphone placement or the performer’s musical good sense?” I thought. Even broader questions made me wish I were a native. “Is this song’s structure merely a repetitive figure or a basis for important improvisations which act as musical signals?” I did not want to take any of my Western musical biases for granted. But in the end I had to.

Except for the first track on the CD (“Two boys’ initiation songs”), I lumped all the song forms together as being the repetitious singing of a singular musical phrase. Some phrases lasted four measures, others only a measure, but I almost always disregarded slight aberrations from the general musical phrases as just that--slight aberrations. No variations pointed to a progressive form. The song titles usually supported this theory. Examples 2 and 3 (“Song before honey gathering” and “Elephant hunting-song”) sound like work songs. Examples 5 and 7 (“Arabic birthing song” and “Historical song”) had liner notes in the record jacket which indicated their functions were similar to work songs (the first being a therapeutic song for “labor” and the second being a song for singing on the march). Sometimes I would find (based on my silly Western ear) variations which seemed of interest, as in example 6. This particular example was strange because it contained voice parts which resembled a call-and-response format yet the call

phrases and response phrases were continuously repeated. This structure is unlike the typical call-and-response song where each phrase is varied by the caller for changes in text. Example 1 followed the traditional call-and-response format more closely.

Example 1 is a good song to examine first since, while sharing a few common characteristics with the other music I transcribed, it is basically different from the rest. The call in this song was easy to hear and therefore the subject of my transcription. The response, however, was a veritable slush of singing due to the large amount of people in the chorus. I think, although I am not sure, that the response was simply an echo of the call. I therefore wrote in “res” where the chorus sings back the previous call. Hopefully, I have not seriously handicapped my transcription. Worthy of notice is the way in which, by bar 15, the caller cuts his phrases in half. The response follows this change accordingly. Since a few minutes later in the piece (past the scope of my transcription) the caller's phrase lengths revert back to full measures, this shortening effect's purpose, I speculate, is to heighten the tension in this precadential area so as to bring about a satisfactory cadence back to the beginning of the piece. When the piece does circle back to the beginning, the opening C natural becomes a very poignant climax to the song which is mostly in A-flat dorian. The final point to notice in this song is the consistent emphasis of the off-beat. Phrases full of syncopation give a strong forward momentum to the music, keeping musical interest during long stretches of repetition.

The opening C natural of the previous example had the effect of changing a piece in A-flat dorian to A-flat mixolydian. This change seems very logical (from a minor third to a major) upon examining the rest of the Efe music. Examples 2,3,and 4 (the rest of my Efe examples) all firmly lie in the mixolydian mode. To a classically trained ear, the outlining of a dominant seventh sonority may sound unstable, but to the jazz, blues, and (obviously) African ear, this sonority is a basic harmonic foundation. Also of interest is the conservation of absolute pitch between the three a cappella numbers (1,2,4). Only when thumb-pianos (the likembe and domu) provide accompaniment in B mixolydian do

the singers change their key. G-flat major and its modes are somehow in the Efe ear. Their music shows a natural ear for counterpoint, as many of the lines in example 2 and 4 are similar to fourth species suspensions. The Efe's choice of tones from the mixolydian mode is also interesting; it's always tones 1,2,3,5, and 7. One could analyze these tones as chosen from a limited range of ascending thirds from the root (1,3,5,7,9) or as neighbor notes to the root (2,7) with the tonic chord (1,3,5). I do not know. Of course, I doubt the Efes know either. Of course, I doubt it really matters anyway. Rhythmically, the Efes employ techniques of hocketing. In example 2, the three lower voices shift to a dotted-eighth note figure on the and of three. The high woman's voice fills in the rhythmic void these syncopated voices have created. Notice also how the likembe and hand clap beat the combination of the two rhythms, forming a rhythmic foundation. In example 3, this rhythmic foundation is the domu. The likembe and men's voices play/sing cross rhythms to this domu, filling in the rhythmic space. Example 4's rhythms are a little more complicated, but just notice the extreme syncopation; someone always sounds a sixteenth note after every main beat.

The Vai music of Liberia also uses hocketing techniques. Example 6 shows this process at its peak: wherever the shaker rests, the chorus's response fills in the gap. The caller has the same rhythms as the response, so he, too, fills the rhythmic holes. This particular example had a few oddities. The first was an excited caller. Her voice floated above the main caller's voice and seemed to encourage an excited response from the chorus. She usually followed the basic rhythm of this piece, but often sounded more like she was speaking than singing. I transcribed her most musical (to me) call, which also seemed to be the basis for her other improvisatory yelps. Her offbeat B natural opening and offbeat ascending minor third ending were truly exciting. The other oddity was an excited droner. This singer droned the sound "eh" usually on a minor second above the root (while the root and a major second above the root were also sounding). The last time she decided to sing a major third above the root (while both a minor third and perfect

fourth above the root were sounding). I have no explanation. If her desire was to intensify the music, then I suppose she reached her goal.

The harmonic structure of the Vai music is similar to the 's, too. Whereas the s generally used a major third in mixolydian mode, the Vai use the minor third in dorian mode. The Vai also seem to have a perfect memory of pitch since all three a cappella songs are in the same key. Instead of counterpoint, however, the Vai use simple parallel harmonies of fourths, sometimes interspersed with thirds. Their melodies usually move by stepwise motion, with occasional jumps of a third or an even rarer fourth. All being accounted for, their textures are relatively simple.

Even with simple textures, this African music is very unique. It has its own special problems in transcription for the Western ear--problems for which I have hopefully found solutions. Any harmonic or rhythmic topics still left in the dark should become clear after the following six pages of transcriptions.