

IROKO

Theatre Company

London African Story 2009

Agogo



This is a double bell made of iron which produces two pitches. It is an instrument originally used by the Yoruba tribe from Nigeria. In West African music it tends to play a foundation rhythm that keeps the time. “Agogo” means “time” in Yoruba language. It is also used to pre-empt special announcements at social gatherings.

Variations of the agogo are used for traditional religious ceremonies. An ensemble of agogo type bells are played for the worship of *Ogun*, who is the Yoruba god of Iron.

The African roots of much Brazilian and Cuban music are clearly traced from the distinct rhythms played on this instrument.

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Djembe/Jembe



This drum is originally the instrument of the Mandinka tribe, who are now found across several West African countries, including Mali, Gambia, Senegal and Guinea-Bissau. Its origins have been traced back to the huge Mali Empire of the 12th century.

It is carved from one solid piece of wood and covered with goatskin. Ropes are used to tension the skin. Although this skin can be tightened to produce a very high-pitched sound, the drum simultaneously produces a heavy bass sound.

The drum is played with both hands, either sitting or standing, when body straps are attached. There are many sounds the drum can produce, but the three main sounds are the “slap” the “tone” and the “bass”. It is generally a very loud drum.

The djembe is often played with “*ksink ksink*” attached - a set of flat tin shakers, which represent the shields worn by drummers who used to play during a battle. During these times the drum would be used to send messages and also motivate the warriors as they entered the battlefield.

Today, the drum is used for a huge array of different social occasions such as weddings, funerals, religious festivals and to accompany dances.

Over recent years, the popularity of this drum has increased so much, that it is now the most commonly found African drum in the world.

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Djun-Djun / Doun-Doun / Dunun

This set of three drums date back to the 12th Century Mali Empire, when they were developed to play with the djembe drum. Djun-djuns provide both the rhythmic and melodic base for the whole djembe ensemble. They are carved from solid tree trunk, and are double-headed with thick cow skin, which is tensioned with strong rope. They are very deep and powerful sounding drums.

The trio consists of : *Doundoumba* (largest)
Sangban (medium)
Kenkeni (smallest).

The djun-djun is traditionally played with two sticks. One stick plays on the drums while the other stick simultaneously plays a bell that is attached to the drum. These drums can be played either on their sides, or standing upright

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Kpanlogo

The Kpanlogo drum (pronounced “Pan-low-go” in the West) is the traditional instrument from Ghana. It is carved from a single log and has a curved, tapered body. The drum’s head is made from goat, antelope, or cow skin. This skin is tensioned with the use of thin rope attached to several pegs, which are hammered in or released, to adjust the tuning before playing.

The drum bears a resemblance to many other ancient drums, such as the Yoruba *Igbin* drum. Its sound is similar to a modern day conga drum and at times, it has been referred to in the West as African Conga. It is played with either hand or sticks.

Kpanlogo drums are usually decorated with detailed carvings of traditional “*Adinkra*” symbolism. These are actually visual representations of social thought concerning the history, philosophy and religious beliefs of the Akan people of Ghana and Ivory Coast. The symbol above shows one of the most popular symbols, known as “GYE NYAME” symbolising the immortality of God.

Kpanlogo music is often adapted in Ghana and it can be played on lots of other instruments besides the drum.

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Sekere

The Sekere (pronounced Shekere) is a West African instrument made from a hollowed out gourd or calabash. It is actually a fruit that grows on a vine in various different sizes, which is then covered on the outside with a net of seeds, beads or shells. The hardened outer shell is traditionally used as a container for water, palm-wine, etc.

In Africa, gourds are often used as resonators for many other musical instruments. The sekere is played in a variety of different styles and techniques, and there are different traditions associated with this instrument. It is generally loud, bright and sharp sounding.

The very large beaded calabash is called an "*agbe*" by the Yorubas in Nigeria and is traditionally played with both hands by professional musicians. The beads are often made from cowrie shells, which were once an ancient form of currency in Africa. The sekere play a very important role in certain traditional West African music and is often connected with religion's rites, chants, mantras and prayers. In Ghana and Togo, the Ewe tribe call it "*axatse*". In Sierra Leone there is a similar type of sekere called "*shegureh*".

Like so many other instruments, the sekere survived the Transatlantic Slave Trade and so we find that in Cuba and Brazil, the Yoruba religious traditions using sekere, are found to be almost exactly the same as in Nigeria. Brazilian music often uses a beaded coconut shell called "*afuxe*" which is not far away from the Ghanaian name, "axatse".

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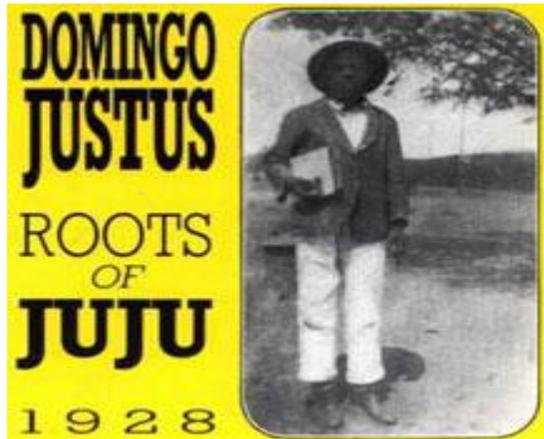
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Album sleeve courtesy of Amazon.com

Popular West African Musicians of the First Half of the 20th Century

The earliest recordings of popular and folk music genres by musicians from the parts of West Africa that were colonised by Britain were mainly from Ghanaian and Nigerian artistes. These musicians were the trailblazers for the styles of music known today and Highlife, Juju, Fuji and Palm wine guitar music.

London based record companies began to see the commercial potential in making recordings for the growing UK African communities as well as for the city dwellers and elite communities of the African countries. This meant that by the late 1920s acts such as Frank Essien/Edmund Tagoe, Nicholas Van Heer and George Williams Aingo were celebrated for making pioneering Highlife/Palm wine records, while Justus Domingo made a recording now known as “Roots of Juju” (Heritage Records 054403).

This recording featured guitars and drums, with vocals in Yoruba that are described as “heavily accented”. Indeed there is speculation regarding Domingo’s true origins. Some say he was an Igbo man, while others suggest he was a first generation Brazilian returnee, since he made the recording in an era when many Brazilian Yoruba descendants returned to Lagos from Bahia.

Irewolede Denge is another founding father of Juju. Some recordings of his are accessible on You Tube. He had a most attractive voice and singing style. Songs that are readily accessible include “Orin Asape Eko”(1937)

Tunde King is credited with giving Juju music its name. He was also a direct influence on Tunde Nightingale, possibly the most influential Juju bandleader before the time of I.K. Dairo. King’s contemporaries include artists such as Ogoge Daniel and Speedy Araba.

Ayinde Bakare recorded on HMV from 1937 and is credited for being the first Juju musician to use amplified guitar on a recording, in 1949. Popular both in Nigeria and amongst UK based Africans, he survived and performed well into the 1970s when he passed away under mysterious circumstances. “Ojowu ‘Birin”, one of his songs is available to hear on You Tube.

Meanwhile, the Islamic influenced genres of Yoruba music such as Sakara, Apala and Fuji can also be traced back to 1940s recordings by artists such as Abibu Oluwa and his group. Their records featured the sounds of Goje (a one stringed African fiddle), Dundun (talking drums) and other sounds associated with the music of better known artists such as Yusufu Olatunji, Haruna Ishola and Sikiru Ayinde Barrister

Other forbears of Sakara and Apala include Hadji Amusa/Hadji Mustafa, and Ishaku Dan Zhabarumoh. These artists can be heard on a compilation record called “Echoes of Africa” (Wergo SM 1642 2)

Also to be heard on this recording is a pioneering Nigerian Highlife Brass Band – Lagos Mozart Orchestra.

The Ghanaian acts can be heard on a compilation recording entitled “Early Guitar Music from West Africa 1927-1929” (www.venerablemusic.com). Samples from this CD can be heard on www.cduniverse.com

A compilation recording featuring Juju’s early stars is “Awon Ojise Olorun – Popular music in Yoruba Land 1931-52” (Savannahphone)

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Why IROKO

IROKO Theatre Company was born in September 1996. In sub-saharan Africa, when a child is born, some factors determine the name the child is given. Some of the factors could be circumstances surrounding the birth of the child e.g. family history, marital history, events within and/or outside the family, etc.

There is a saying that “The iroko tree never dies!” The roots of the iroko tree go deep into the soil of Africa. It stands tall and strong against the African sky. Our sculpture, our architecture, our masks and our drums come from this tree and are permeated by its spirit. Through the iroko tree, our culture is rooted in the soil of our land and from these roots it derives its strength.

IROKO Theatre Company was formed primarily to nurture and uphold the African culture, which we believe, just like the iroko tree, will never die!

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