

African Drumming, the Spoken Language of the People: An Interview with Doris Green

conducted
by

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Thank you for this interview. You contend that a large percentage of the music of Africa is played on percussion instruments and that it is greatly misunderstood. Why do you believe that the music of Africa is greatly misunderstood?

DG (Doris Green): First, African music is based on the spoken language of the people, and considering the number of different languages spoken on the continent of Africa, made it difficult for people to be able to create a single written system that would incorporate all the different instruments under one alphabet wherein each student, viewer, or outsider could read the symbol and be able to produce the indicated sound each and every time. Africa had been seeking a way to write her music so it could be shared among other African peoples; but they were unsuccessful.

What happened when you presented your work in Africa?

DG: When they heard of my work, they began to correspond with me; naturally I had questions to ask them. I asked them how they identified certain tones on the drum. African drums are not tantamount to the piano wherein “Middle C” is always identifiable by its sound, or its placement on the staff; as well as being identifiable regardless who is playing this note. The epitome of the situation is it is also identifiable even when the piano is out of tune. African music does *not* have a conclusive comparable identifier, nor is it necessary for standard drums.

While in Africa, what did you learn about the drum?

DG: On my premier trip to Africa I gleaned that there were other sounds not commonly played on the Congo drums that were the common drums played in New York. Congo drums were played basically as a “skin on skin” contact, never with a stick.

Drums that were played with a stick were those drums used in parades. During the rise of the Mambo and other music predominately played by Latin musicians, Tito Puente introduced the Timbales drums that were played with sticks. But sticks were commonly used on drums throughout various parts of Africa.

You visited Nigeria and other nations in Africa, during that time, what was your specific experience in Nigeria?

DG: The Yoruba people when questioned about details of specific drumming styles, particularly those generated by Africa's most complex drum, the Talking Drums of Nigeria, commonly called "*Iya -Ilu dun-dun*", puzzled me. I knew that the drum had two principal sounds, low, and a high tone. This type of drum is played by applying pressure on the strings. Obviously no pressure on the strings constitutes the low tone, but how many strings were pulled to create the high tone. I was given the answer "a few strings" constitutes the high tone. This left me with the theory of a lack of a *conclusive identifier*, such as Middle C. for African *talking drums*. I worked with The Timi of Ede, Oba Adetoyese Laoye, I; as well as Duro Ladipo both musicians known for their prominent knowledge of this drum. My demonstration to Duro Ladipo stunned him as he recognized the music I had written for a similar drum called "Donno", commonly played in Ghana was the key to writing music for 'talking drums'. He told me my work was extremely important to the salvation of writing African music thereby preventing its loss. He told me that my work was the best he had seen and was certain of its success when applied throughout Africa. But he also added that the work I had written for Africa's most complex drum was just a beginning and required more study. He invited me to return to Nigeria to personally work with him on the application of my system, Greenotation, to the *Iya Ilu drum* as well as the *Bata drums* of Nigeria. The Timi of Ede, Oba Adetoyese Laoye, 1 as well as Duro Ladipo were two of Nigeria's foremost authorities on Yoruba instruments.

You and others from the U.S. engaged the music of Nigeria and Ghana, was there a particular reason why?

DG: The music of Nigeria and Ghana were attracted to us because we all speak English, whereas the music of other countries of Africa such as Senegal, Ivory Coast, and Guinea was underexposed to us because they spoke French. And unfortunately Nigeria went through a period of unrest and I was unable to return to Nigeria. During the periods of unrest, both the Timi of Ede and Duro Ladipo died.

Who was Timi of Ede and Duro Ladipo, and what role did they play in African music?

DG: The Timi of Ede, Oba Adetoyese Laoye,¹; as well as Duro Ladipo were two of Nigeria's foremost authorities on Yoruba instruments. They specialized in the Talking drum, Bata drums as well as other Yoruba drums.

The Talking drums or the Donno are complex, did that present you with a challenge in writing the music?

DG: Although I have had success with writing music for the Talking drums, or the Donno, the work needs further exploration, because the talking drum Iya Ilu Dun-dun is capable of producing a range of sounds, more research needs to be conducted to determine exactly how this is accomplished. This was not a problem for other drums and instruments used throughout Africa. It is unfortunate that Duro Ladipo passed away before we had the opportunity to conduct further research. I have notated the music of percussive instruments of all forms including melodic percussion, and water drums.

Where did you first present your Greenotation system?

DG: My first direct offer to apply my system of notation came from Nigeria with an invitation to apply my system to the *Igbin* set of Yoruba drums. This offer came from the Timi of Ede, Oba Adetoyese Laoye, I; the *Igbin* set of drums as well as other drums used throughout Africa did not require a *conclusive comparable identifier*. And armed with my system of writing African music, then called Muziki Wa KiAfrika, and now called Greenotation I went to East Africa to study and research African music and dance. I studied different drums and rhythms from East Africa to West Africa, from Tanzania to Senegal.

In my early research I concluded that the drum made twelve different sounds that were supported by my research, some of which were documented and pictured in books. When I posed this question to Godwin Agbeli, a drummer from Ghana, I was boldly told that a drum only made *five* sounds. He identified these sounds with the words *Ga, Dzi, De, Dzi' To*.

I felt insulted by his denial of the work I had done. After all, he had not been to these African countries and did not know the sounds of their instruments. I referred him to my list of a dozen sounds, I had uncovered during my research, He boldly denied that "Chak" which is a slap to the drumhead; playing the drum with the cusp of the hand, and striking the side of the drum, did not exist in Ewe drumming. I explained to him that he was wrong and the sounds that I had presented to him did exist.

One day when he was drumming and uttering the sounds Dzi, Cha, Cha. I stopped him and indicated that he was actually slapping the drum each time he uttered the sound “Cha”. Then he had to admit that the slap actually did exist in Ewe drumming. Eventually he acknowledged that the dozen symbols I showed him actually did exist in African drumming.

In connection to your work with Godwin Agbeli you also introduced African music and dance in higher education in the U.S., can you tell our readers about that?

DG: I was the first person to teach African music and dance in Brooklyn College, and made sure that courses on the Black experience were included in the curriculum. Yes, I worked diligently for years to have African music and dance part of the curriculum and I felt responsible for the success of this endeavor. If students were to become competent in this area of expertise, then I had to raise the competency level of Godwin Agbeli, a personality I brought from Ghana to teach the first course in African music and dance at NYU. I had to change him from being a performer to becoming an effective teacher. This was not an easy task. I would spend many hours days and months with Agbeli teaching him the elements of music, the principals of dance movements through Labanotation. He openly admitted that he had never heard of Labanotation. I was the first person to teach African music and dance in Brooklyn College.

Before you introduced your system for writing, were there other systems?

DG: Yes, there were several attempts to notate African music, but I found all of them inadequate, primarily because there was no connection to dance. Some could NOT distinguish between a ‘rest’ and the duration of a given tone. There was an attempt to write music for African drums done on the campus of the University of Ghana at Legon. This project was based on the principals of Labanotation, including the vertical staff. I reviewed the attempt at notation and realized that the professor from SUNY Oneonta had only a passing knowledge of Labanotation and misinterpreted several symbols used in Labanotation. A primary reason for having a written system for African music must be able to include all the instruments of the ensemble, which was not evident in this attempt. Also he used the margins to explain sections of the music. All explanations should be displayed and understood from the symbols therein. To me this was a poor attempt at creating an effective system of writing African music. The fact that Labanotation was used to create this system without a connection to African dance is shameful. The primary beneficiary of African music is African dance, and the two should be written as an integrated score. As a certified teacher of Labanotation, I felt that this attempt to create a system to write African music was totally ineffective.

In conclusion, are there any final aspects or notes our readers need to know?

DG: Yes, African dance is inseparable from its music. In fact no dance is performed in Africa without some form of musical accompaniment. Therefore, it is imperative that both African music and dance are represented in a single integrated score, as they exist in Africa. As a certified teacher of Labanotation, I have used Labanotation to write the dance movements and aligned it with Greenotation, my system for writing African music, to constitute a single inseparable integrated score of both African music and dance.

Thank you.

DG: You are welcomed, and thank you for this opportunity to share my research.



Doris Green (www.dorisgreen.org) is an ethnomusicologist, musician, dancer, certified teacher of Labanotation, creator of Greenotation, a system for writing the music of percussion instruments, and aligning it with the accompanying dance movements in a single integrated score. She was born in Brooklyn, did her undergraduate work at Brooklyn College, and her graduate studies on a doctoral fellowship at New York University. She was a faculty member at Brooklyn College, New York University, Teachers College of Columbia University, the New School for Social Research and Adelphi University. For her work in African music and dance, she received three City University of New York Faculty Research Awards which allowed her to teach and conduct research in several nations in Africa, from Tanzania to Senegal. She won the coveted Fulbright Award and spent a year teaching her system of notation in Ivory Coast and the Gambia. And later, she returned to Africa as a State Department Cultural Specialist to teach Ghanaians how to write dance on the computer at the University of Ghana at Legon. She is also the creator of *Traditions Journal*, and her autobiography *No Longer an Oral Tradition: My Journey Through Percussion Notation*.