Scholarly Authority

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When I wrote a term paper on fiddle music of the Luo of Kenya as a final project for J. H. Kwabena Nketia's Music of Africa course at UCLA in Spring 1971, I never imagined that I would be regarded as a scholarly authority on the subject of African fiddling. 1 Writing the term paper was intellectually rewarding because I learned much about a musical tradition for which I had no knowledge. However, in no way, did I believe that conducting library and archival research on the subject would make me an authority on this little-known East African musical tradition. Rather, I believed my classmate and colleague Washington Omondi, a Kenyan music scholar taking courses in ethnomusicology and African music at UCLA, was the authority. Although his research at that time focused on the thum, the Luo lyre, Omondi encouraged me to pursue investigations on the Luo orutu (the one-stringed fiddle) and provided me with insightful information about the instrument not available in secondary sources.

When I began my doctoral research in fall 1973, I began taking fiddle lessons with Salisu Mahama, an instructor of the Dagbamba one-stringed fiddle (gondze) at the Institute of African Studies (IAS) at the University of Ghana, Legon (DjeDje 2002:145-149). A culture bearer born in 1934, Mahama began fiddling when he was six or seven years old. When he was appointed an instructor at IAS in the early 1960s, he gained greater prominence in Dagbon, his home region, not because the Dagbamba people believed Mahama was especially learned. Rather because of his position at Legon, he had begun to ask questions of his elders about gondze so he could share this material with students at Legon. Thus, Mahama became a respected and well known authority in Ghana for both his unique playing style and historical and cultural knowledge about gondze. After working with Mahama for many years in collaborative projects (he died in 2001), I felt that my role in these endeavors was similar to my researching the paper on the Luo. In my mind, there was no justification for me to be regarded as the authority on fiddling, because I was not a culture bearer.

Yet in the early history of ethnomusicology, Western-trained scholars conducting research on musical traditions different from their cultural or ethnic heritage were considered and recognized as the scholarly authorities. 2 This paradox led Nketia to assert: "The claim of superior scholarship or scholarly authority made in the early days by some of my colleagues and the assumption that greater objectivity resides in the outsider who studies the musical cultures of other people did not always impress me. . ." (Nketia 2005:5). In later years, the reasons for distinguishing between the research of culture bearers and Westerners by some ethnomusicologists went beyond objectivity, and arguments for dismissing the work of culture bearers became more complex. Not only did Westerners raise questions about the "quality" of the culture bearers' work, the opinions of many culture bearers were designated as too parochial (Nketia and DjeDje 1984). Philosopher Kwame Appiah also argues that culture bearers were not often invited to engage in discussions of authority because many in the West believed culture bearers to be ignorant of traditions other than their own, or they judged works using standards of only their local culture. Therefore, the opinions of culture bearers on worldly issues were less warranted (Appiah 1997:137-139). In the end, the research of culture bearers was marginalized on many fronts. In some camps, they were not considered to be authorities of their own traditions. In other camps, their ideas were considered to be too local, thus limiting their ability to comment on issues of universal or global importance.

In the twenty-first century, with the discipline of ethnomusicology having celebrated its 50th anniversary and ethnomusicologists having debated a variety of issues – e. g., insider-outsider perspectives, race, gender, sexuality, interpretive theory, and postcolonial theory — is discourse on scholarly authority even relevant in today's world? William Noll suggests that differentiations are behind us when he states: "I do not regard anyone's interpretation of culture as inviolate, final, or best, and that includes any single native ethnographer. It includes my own work as well. Diversity of opinion is characteristic of the ethnographic literature from Eastern Europe, as it is of ethnography from other parts of the world. How that diversity is measured or qualified is a crucial part of the interpretive process of the reader. More important, it is a necessary part of a fieldworker's interpretation" (Noll 1997:164).

While using culture bearers as partners in the fieldwork experience is now commonplace, the real question is what happens after the fieldwork has concluded, particularly when both present their findings on the subject? Whose work will receive attention and who will be recognized and quoted as the authority?

As ethnomusicology grows and becomes more enriched intellectually with members from a variety of musical and

cultural backgrounds who will most likely bring new interests, issues, and concerns to the table, will the need or desire for scholarly authority become less or more relevant or will it become camouflaged in other ways? What about the fads or intellectual trends that seemed to prevail the discipline in the latter part of the twentieth century (Noll 1997:167; Euba 2001:139)? Is this evidence that the desire for scholarly authority continues to be important?

As new researchers enter the field, it is important to prepare them to participate confidently in all scholarly debates. Instead of advising future researchers to become clones of ourselves and others, we need to introduce them to the perspectives of scholars of diverse experiences and backgrounds; provide them with the basic research methods, analytical tools and skills to pursue topics on many subjects; and teach them how to synthesize their thoughts in a coherent and thoughtful manner. Rather than require them to read publications and uncritically adopt the theories of a select group of scholars, we should encourage them to be innovative, not trendy, by using and developing new research paradigms that arise from their fieldwork experiences and ethnographies. 3 Ideally, we should be free to choose how we conduct research and the sources we use to interpret our material. However, a continuing problem is the exclusion and lack of respect given to diverse voices and culture bearers. Thus, some changes are warranted.

With regards to my own research on African fiddling, I admit that I want to be recognized for my contributions. Instead of being regarded as the scholarly authority on fiddling, I prefer to be known as one person who has researched the topic. My research on fiddling has allowed me to tell one story about an African musical tradition that few know. The way I present my findings may be different from culture bearers, but it is in no way more or less important.

Notes

1. Because much of my African music research has focused on fiddling, this accolade is often used by colleagues when introducing me in public presentations or when reviewing my scholarly publications.

2. Whether I would have been regarded as an authority is questionable because I am an African American conducting research on African music. Some may think the two traditions are too closely related.

3. In summer 2005, faculty in the UCLA Department of Ethnomusicology compiled a list of suggested readings for its graduate students to help the students become acquainted with the different conceptual ideas, perspectives, and theories of scholars in world culture. The list now appears on the department's web site.

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