Remains of Ritual: Northern Gods in a Southern Land

Reviewed by David Locke

I read this book three times before writing this review. The first time through was frustrating: the organization of information seemed jumbled up and the writing style needlessly arty. Rather than review it then, I let the book "lie fallow" on the shelf for a few months. On second reading, the book's design drew me in and I came to appreciate its many well-written, evocative passages, as well as its strongly argued ideas and conclusions. Rather than aggravating me with an authorial persona as ethnographer-hero, Steve Friedson's adventures in Ghana held my attention. I enjoyed meeting the text's cast of characters and was able to project myself into the intense world of spirit possession in the Ewe Brekete shrines that the book successfully conjures. I appreciated the opportunity to learn a great deal about Ewe culture and I empathized with the author's control over the pace at which information was disclosed. Frankly, two readings were insufficient for fully digesting the text's data and argument, so I started to re-read it immediately after finishing the nostalgic final passage. As a reader I was not ready to leave the two worlds that the text successfully conjures: the world of the author, as well as the world of the practitioners of the Brekete shrine system.

In my opinion this is a very strong ethnomusicological monograph and a superb study of an important West African religious system. *Remains of Ritual* successfully demonstrates the potential of the discipline of ethnomusicology to be at the forefront of scholarly discourse on culture, rather than a junior sister to disciplines such as anthropology and philosophy. The main reason that ethnomusicology has the potential for a leadership position, as the author points out, is the primacy of aesthetic force in human life. This book proves that studies of Ewe religious practice that marginalize music and dance should be regarded as deficient.

The subject of this book is *Lahare Kunde*, a.k.a. "Brekete," a *gorovodu* religious practice of the Ewe-speaking people of Ghana and Togo. The author argues that it is reasonable to locate Brekete within a major global religion—"African spirit-god worship"—which, though decentralized and lacking a brand name like "Christianity," has many common aspects shared by its myriad particular instantiations. Important features of this religion include behavior usually called "spirit possession" and objects usually called "fetishes." *Remains of Ritual* provides a detailed ethnography of the Brekete shrine religion with special attention to its aesthetically charged feeling tone and the inner experience of its devotees. The author glosses the book's overall plan thusly: chapter 1 "the turn of the dance," chapter 2 "the chanted call to prayer," chapter 3 "the musical silence of sacrifice," chapter 4 "the sounds and movements of wake keeping," chapter 5 "the play of the drums," and chapter 6 "the poetics of divination" (12).

Since the 1920s the Brekete religion has gained many adherents in Eweland. One factor for its growth, not only among Ewes but throughout coastal western Africa, is the power of the Brekete gods who successfully

> . . . promoted fertility, cured intractable illnesses that proved resistant to other remedies, protected against the evil intentions of others, restored balance in personal relationships that had turned poisonous, and ensured success in business as well as other aspects of life in both urban and rural environments . . . (25)

A second factor is the captivating sound of two brekete drums being played together and the aesthetic force of the ritual performance.

The book begins with two sections, "Southern Lands" and "Northern Gods," that explain its foci and approach. Three key points are made:

- First, music and dance will be given their proper due, for unlike other studies with rigid social scientific paradigms, this text realizes that "there is an important issue of aesthetic force, a proverbial elephant in the room, that largely has been ignored" (8). Readers will encounter "the embodied presence of these dancing gods, the soundscape of a tuned world, the sheer intensity of being-with the gods in a musical way" (8). By redressing this lacuna, the text argues for the centrality of ethnomusicology as a discipline in any effort to

adequately theorize, explain, and document phenomena like the Brekete shrine religion.

- Second, spirit possession, libation/sacrifice, and god-objects will be understood within the frame of reference of the culture-bearers, namely, they are what the people say they are. Rather than "explain them away," the author draws on terms and concepts of phenomenology, primarily from Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, to validate these cultural practices. Spirit possession, for example, is a simultaneous "being present" and "being away." I found the phenomenological rubrics helpful for gaining cross-cultural insight into the nature of spirit possession. Gleaming fetishes become characters in the book's virtual world by means of vivid photographs of Brekete god-things, description of their manufacture, and complex discussion of how they are continually revitalized with the gushing blood and dismembered body parts of sacrificial animals.

- Third, instead of presenting carefully amassed evidence, the writing style and organization of content privileges knowing asides, poetic turns of phrase, telling anecdotes, vicariously shared adventures, comic interludes, and character descriptions. Rather than trying to systematize his information within a stable and unitary disciplinary field, Friedson has decided to come at his subject from a variety of perspectives—travelogue, musical analysis, religious history, cross-cultural philosophy, ethnography, ethnology, and the psychology of altered states. This motile approach, it is argued, more appropriately aligns the medium of the text with the iridescent nature of its content.

> But when . . . facts are linked to narrowly defined sequences of cause and effect, the resulting analyses tend towards a stasis that is antithetical to the multidimensionality of spirit possession. (10)

> A glance from the side, a fleeting glimpse of that which moves on the periphery, is much more in keeping with the phenomenon at hand, though it will never be as comforting as the cold discourse of certainty. (11)

The text is an effort to introduce the local world of its African subjects to its worldly readers, taken to be highly schooled, erudite cosmopolitans who likely are enthusiastic about black culture and alternative spirituality.

> How do we go along with ways of being-in-the-world so radically different from our own possibilities? . . . What does it mean to be embodied by a deity, to be-there and not-there at the same time? (9)

The reader senses that while the author knows that communication across this cultural divide is problematic, he believes that he can assist the purported *we* to gain enhanced empathy with the supposed *them*.

In contrast to the position taken by those who urge that studies of Africa begin from an assumption of its similarity with other cultures, Friedson asserts African difference:

> . . . an acknowledgment of the reality of a different way of being-in-the-world. Instead of suppressing the body as the antithesis of a higher spirit on the way to an ever more perfect knowledge, trance dancing privileges the body as the site of a gathering of mortals and the divine. (11)

This reviewer agrees that the culture of the Brekete shrine religion has features at significant variance from the culture of post-Enlightenment modernism, the assumed culture of the book's readers. But if the author had recognized similarities shared between the African research site and the varieties of world religious experience, he could have placed the Brekete system within a larger field shared by Hasidic Jews, Sufi Muslims, and Holy Spirit Christians. Africans could avoid being fixed as Others in another's gaze, whether condescending or awestruck.

To close this review, I will discuss the text's musical analysis. Under the rubric of the neologism "ontomusicology" (a reader must indulge an academic's penchant for imagining new disciplines, or renaming existing ones), Friedson argues a crucial point that connects music theory with cultural practice.

> African cross-rhythms, based on polymetry, are the site where at least two rates of motion are present at all times, always available for rhythmic elaboration. . . It is an ontological structure, a musical way of being-in-the-world in multiple ways. . . (113)

And later, when talking about three-in-the-time-of-two musical situations:

> It is a cognitive shift that foregrounds a fundamental difference in approach to rhythmic praxis. From childhood, Ewes have been trained to hear and feel the other. This is not just a musical technique, but a specifically African approach to rhythmic life, a way of being-in-the-world that gives it energy and force. Instead of striving for similitude, difference is sought; homogeneity gives way to complementarity and relationality, the hemiola principle at work. (143)

In the case of the music of the Brekete shrine, the text argues that music having a temporal frame of twelve pulses is rightly understood to be equally "in four" and "in six" (akin to being in 12/8 and 6/4 time signatures simultaneously). This strong position in favor of polymeter runs counter to the monometric concept forcefully put forward in recent work by highly regarded music scholars such as Kofi Agawu, Willi Anku, James Burns, and Meki Nzewi who report that the "four feel" is the culturally agreed-upon temporal structure, not to mention older work by Simha Arom, James Koetting, Gerhard Kubik, and Alan Merriam who question the cultural relevance of the concept of meter. The author recognizes A.M. Jones, Rose Brandel and Hewitt Pantaleoni as important "ancestors" for his theoretical position.[1] The value of the author's framing of the issue lies primarily in the bold linkage of music—cross-rhythms, specifically—with other realms of human life in Eweland, such as the emphasis on kinesthetic balance and sensitivity to inner feeling states (see Geurtz). As the author argues:

> Ewes have developed this rhythmic sense of crossing into an art that permeates not only musical life, but the very way people experience the world and each other. There is no one absolute stable ground to point to and from which to posit a world; rather, there are always multiple shifting groups that are equiprimordial. Relationships, both social and cultural, physical and metaphysical, don't calcify into rigid formulations, closed and unwavering, but are continually opening out to that which is not there, thus a moral order fixed in absence, an exponential curve into possibility. (139)

I was with him up to "equiprimordial" but I do not see that the last sentence would not apply to all human experience, except perhaps the ideal world of a fanatical fundamentalist.

To this reviewer, the debate about the temporal structure and rhythmic system of Ewe music should be framed as an issue of heuristic value. It is fruitless to argue over "how they feel it," as if scientific postulates are tangible facts in the world. Instead, the relevant issue would better be phrased, "What theoretical system of musical temporality will produce understanding that is not only empathetic and relevant to the experiences of culture-bearers and but also conducive to the development of co-cultural understanding between insiders and outsiders? What system will most productively support documentation of the inherited heritage of repertory? What system is best suited to effective teaching of the tradition? What system enables us to ask good questions that are likely to lead to further significant insights?"

In the case of this text, I found it revealing that having negatively assessed the work of other scholars as being rigid and laden with inappropriate technical jargon, the author himself commits these very transgressions against "ontomusicology" when trying his own hand at detailed systematic analytic description of drumming phrases (see pages 147–151, for example). This reviewer, having dealt with these linguo-centric pitfalls in many lengthy works, knows that finding fault with others is much easier than writing lucid musical analysis that sheds relevant and helpful light onto complex and culturally distinctive musical works and systems.

The text has passages about Ewe music that I found brilliant. Here is one on repetition:

> It is much more a retrieval, continually recovering and bringing forward that which is left behind . . . . This bringing forward, which is precisely a reaching back, builds on itself, creating a stacking of sonic material

> that seems to suspend forward motion and linear sequencing. . . . What sogo elaborates on is not so much a rhythmic pattern as a cross-rhythmic site located in a standing field of intense motion. . . . In this stacking effect of the riff, there is both a thickening and simultaneously an opening up of sonic space. This is not merely an acoustical phenomenon but a bodying-forth-in-the-world. (115)

Or another on the bell part:

> . . . the bell's timing is the hinge of a suspended musical world around which all else turns. . . . It is something in between a meter and a rhythm, something that at once defines a rate of motion and gives that motion a life of its own. . . . More than merely an acoustical phenomenon, the bell's timing is held in the body of very drummer, singer and dancer, because it is part of the body [explained in a short footnote as a mind-body unity that holds an image of the world], the source from which it came and the destination of its specific realizations. It is precisely as body that each refraction of the musical texture has the possibility to rehearse the bell in a different way. (137-138)

Regarding the bell, I am discouraged that Friedson sets himself apart from all other scholars of Ewe music when numbering the strokes in the Agbadza bell phrase (114, 138). A concept of "rhythmic modes" of the bell phrase analogous to the tonal concept of pitch set modes like makam, raga or pathet elegantly handles this facet of the music. In the case of the Agbadza bell phrase, mode 1 (quarter-quarter-eighth-quarter-quarter-quarter-eighth) and mode 2 (quarter-eighth-quarter-quarter-quarter-eighth-quarter) have the cultural valence of being *fundamental*, but depending on the specific polyphonic context of relationality, the phrase may be felt to begin on any time point within the temporal cycle, including a moment of silence. A series of time values set within a recurring temporal cycle is inherently circular, which means that assigning numbers to items in the set should be guided not only by ethnographic insight but also the intelligent design of a comprehensive theoretical system. There are many powerful heuristic reasons to assign the number one to the phrase's only stroke that may be sounded on the lower-pitched bell. The time is long past for arguing over the most elementary aspects of Ewe musical structure.

Notes

1. Strikingly, the work of J.H.K Nketia is omitted from the book's discussion. No contemporary theorist of other musical traditions is cited either, such as Michael Tenzer's work on periodicity or Justin London's work on meter in Western art music. This reviewer is glad that Friedson supports positions I have espoused since publishing my doctoral dissertation in 1979.

Editors' note: Though this volume of *PRE* appeared after the 2010 Annual Meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology, David Locke's review was written and submitted before *Remains of Ritual* was awarded the Alan Merriam Prize.

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