Female Voices from an Ewe Dance-drumming Community in Ghana: Our Music Has Become a Divine Spirit

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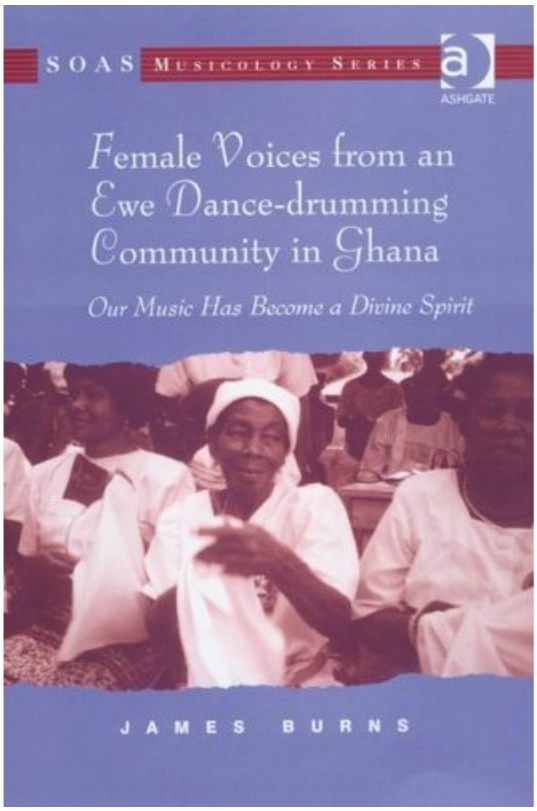

Ashgate has once again published a must-have book/DVD combo. *Female Voices from an Ewe Dance-drumming Community in Ghana: Our Music Has Become a Divine Spirit* (2009) by James Burns is crucial for those interested in music of Africa and those intrigued by the musical stories of women and female communities. The DVD is integral to understanding an important contribution Female Voices offers; namely, the actual female voices, music, and images from an Ewe community in southeastern Ghana.

So why write another book on the music of Ghana, and in particular, another book on Ewe music? Well, Burns provides several answers. First, almost all texts dealing with Ewe music focus on rhythm in some form or other: "Out of the work of foreign researchers, for example, emerges an ongoing trend which has abstracted and even fetishized Ewe rhythm without attempting to address other aspects of music behavior" (9). The persistent focus on Ewe rhythm has created a space where Ewe music can be abstracted, analyzed and taken entirely out of cultural context (10). Second, and maybe more importantly, is a broader problem within African studies generally, namely that "female musicians have been virtually ignored throughout West Africa" (9). Female Voices is not simply another story or another ethnography; it is a well-balanced, expertly crafted study that is at the same time intensely personal, musically insightful and rich with documentation and information.

The book is divided into an introduction and four chapters. Burns's introduction entitled "Our Music Has Become a Devine Spirit; Music and Identity in an African Town," not only introduces the Ewe of Dzodze (a small border town in southeastern Ghana), but sets the tone of the entire book by bringing us immediately into an Ewe song text. While Burns situates his study by citing Agawu, Blacking, Chernoff, Koskoff, A. Seeger, Shehan, and Stone, among others, his approach relies heavily on linguistics, the analysis of song texts, metaphor, proverbs, and oral history. Burns's language fluency is one of the many strong points of this rich ethnographic work. This proficiency shines clearly in Burns's analysis of song texts, especially in the tricky area of proverbs and their inherent tendency toward interpretive analysis. In short, Burns's command of the Ewe language allows for a theoretical and analytical approach to grow organically from within the language and music itself.

Burns begins the introduction by addressing key theoretical issues in the Dzodze community: namely, the "three

categories of social identity" and the three motifs that frame his discussion and analysis throughout the text. He identifies three overlapping groups that have formed out of the particular British colonial and Christian historical past: "the Christians who practice Christianity exclusively," the "Culturalists, who follow Culture exclusively" and the majority whom he calls the "Mediators, who creatively mix Western Christian norms with aspects of Culture such as rites for the ancestors, Afa divination and herbal medicine" (5-6). Burns borrows the interpretive motif concept from the field of oral literature. The three motifs come from local Ewe sayings and song texts and identify a key element in community musical life: "Motif I: Attractive Variation," "Motif II: The teeth are smiling but the stomach is different," and "Motif III: We are a (music) Community" (21-23). Motif I, based on a local proverb, pertains to the "precarious dynamic between praise and jealousy." Musicians want to be artistically interesting by bringing their own style and voice to their performing but also want to blend into the background in order to avoid unwanted jealousy (21). Motif II, Burns explains, comes from an Agbadza-Ageshe song and articulates the "ambiguity between appearance and reality" (22). Motif III comes from the title of a Dzigbordi song and speaks to the importance of these musical associations, particularly in women's lives. Burns explains that musical associations not only create community and understanding between women who may otherwise be rivals, but also influence economic activity and increase women's economic stability (23).

Video 1: Excerpt from the beginning of Burns's documentary showing a Dzigbordi group performance (DVD chapter 3).

Chapter one, "Daughters of the Drum; The Social Environment of Female Artists in Dzodze," deals primarily with what it actually means to be a women in Dzodze. Burns paints a multifaceted and complex picture of life in the community; here he also refers the reader to DVD chapters four and five in order to have a more complete experience of the community's sights and sounds. Burns describes Dzodze as being "cosmopolitan" but modifies Turino's usage, which was articulated in the Zimbabwean context, where particular urban populations are connected to global networks. Burns writes, "I would like to employ the term cosmopolitan as a non-pejorative term to refer more generally to people throughout the world who connect to these global distribution networks in various ways and to varying degrees" (27). This definition is quite broad, but I think Burns's point here is to locate Dzodze not only as a site of lasting cultural traditions, but one that is connected to the global economy and perhaps is, as a community, more globally aware and active than the reader would think. Chapter one then locates us geographically, socially, and economically, but primarily it addresses the pertinent issues around gender and women's expression. This discussion is of great importance particularly in the context of African studies where even the idea of gender is problematized and may not be necessarily congruent with the African experience. Burns writes, "Effective intercultural discourse should seek to tease out local conceptions of gender through an examination of both linguistic terminology and the underlying habitus of gender distinctions" (34). He then discusses not only sex and gender expressions, but also women as culture bearers and mothers and issues around polygyny, economics and spirituality (34-48).

Both chapter two, "The Dance Space; Music Associations, Territories and Events," and chapter three, "We are a Community Dance-drumming Group; The Dzigbordi Habobo of Dzodze," are rich with ethnographic detail. They include personal interviews, descriptions of group history and performance practice, song transcriptions, photographs of musicians, singers and dancers, as well as descriptions and creative transcriptions of hand and stick drumming techniques. To conclude chapter three, Burns offers an ethnographic description of a funeral where the Dzigbordi group performed over two days in March of 2003 (105–120). Although every event is inherently different, Burns's description gives the reader a concrete sense of the Dzigbordi performance culture within an intimate community context.

Chapter four, "Doing it for Everyone to See; The Oral Artistry of Dzigbordi in Performance," is the longest and most substantial chapter, and is perhaps the one that is most crucially linked to the DVD. Burns opens his last chapter with the following:

The combination of the collective power of music with the potency of the divine spirits protects people in a rapidly changing environment. Looked at in this light, the song texts of the Dzigbordi dances take on a much deeper meaning, and what appear to be familiar tropes of loss, unhappiness and group solidarity actually represent the collective struggle for life, hope and significance of an entire community. (123)

Zooming in a bit closer, as the book has been doing gradually from the beginning, this final chapter focuses on five women from the Dzigbordi group and includes lengthy musical transcriptions as well as interviews. Each woman has a unique solo dance performance style that is linked to, or an expression of, her life experience in some way.

Because of the expressive nature of dance and music, it is very important to watch the DVD along with this chapter. In fact, each of the five women has her own chapter on the DVD.

Video 2: Excerpt of the interview and solo Atsiã dance of Dzatsugbi Agoha, the lead singer (henogã) of the Dzigbordi group (DVD chapter 14).

As someone who has basic knowledge of the ensemble and general sense of the music, I found this chapter's lengthy transcriptions of each performance and solo dance difficult to read, despite, or perhaps because of, the prescriptive nature of the bell and drum parts. The notation includes particular stem and note head placement for the different strokes played on the bell (gankogui), the two mid-sized drums (kidi and sogo), as well as the more complex patterns played on the lead drum (atimevu). The transcription also includes the vocal line in Ewe, the lead drum language in Ewe (on atimevu), cues for each change in the dance, and larger markings noting the different sections of the piece. Without a dedicated interest in learning this Ewe ensemble music, these five transcriptions were most helpful structurally in allowing the reader to see the overall progression of the performances.

The five Dzigbordi women featured in this chapter (Dasi Amedahe, Esther Amegble, Dzatsugbi Agoha, Sylvia Segla, and Xornam Tagborlo), their life stories, and the DVD in general are perhaps the most lasting contributions of Female Voices. I do not mean to downplay the overall merits of the text, but rather to accentuate the unfortunately rather rare inclusion of substantive interview transcriptions and personal accounts that highlight particular voices and expressions of female dancers and musicians in the African context. Also, including contextual general information that introduces the viewer to Ewe culture is an invaluable educational resource. I was initially perhaps too critical of the DVD, partially due to the variation of recording quality and noise, but I quickly realized how essential the DVD was for portraying the female voices that do not come across as clearly in the book alone. While Burns does discuss gender in the Ewe context, feminist or cultural theory is not the primary focus of the work. Rather, he remains focused on the women themselves, the Dzigbordi group, and their lived experiences. The DVD reflects this focus and enhances our understanding exponentially.

Despite the expressed hardships particularly of the five women profiled in the final chapter, Burns concludes the book on a positive note, echoing his earlier sentiment that the Dzigbordi group "demonstrates how dance-drumming continues to be culturally and artistically relevant" in the contemporary moment (1). Burns writes:

> Like Dzodze itself, the music of Dzigbordi is constantly adapting and evolving. Today it is currently in the hands of a community of women, who find artistic expression, emotional catharsis and a connection with the divine inside of the music. ... Finding strength in the music of Dzigbordi, they maintain a positive outlook while hoping for a better tomorrow. (196)

Burns's academic rigor and sincerity shine through in this intriguing work that highlights the personal without losing sight of the larger context. Burns's sincerity and respectful approach follows other exemplary studies that not only aid in the reader's comprehension by artfully contextualizing and situating the work, but also allow the music and voices of the community to tell their own stories.

Brief notes reviewing the DVD:

The accompanying 85-minute DVD from 2007, with the same title as the book, both stands alone and enhances the reading of Female Voices. Perhaps the most significant potential impact of James Burns's work is based on the common adage: "a picture is worth a thousand words." This truly applies here, especially given the educational potential, which seems to be the intent of the producers and author. The DVD begins with a video of the Dzigbordi group engaging in group dance-drumming and then goes into a very nice contextualization of Ewe music, culture and history more generally. After introducing Ewe culture and the geographical area, the documentary moves from the general to the specific getting into the Dzigbordi group itself. As I mentioned above, the DVD includes interviews and solo performances of five women from the group providing an even closer look at specific life stories and performance styles. Esther Ofori, an Ewe graduate student at Binghamton University, narrates the film in English and gives it a kind of calm authoritative tone. Although the film is focused on "the lives and artistry of female performers in the Dzigbordi community dance-drumming troupe of Dzodze" (197), the images and footage provide an intimate look at West African culture and daily life not only fascinating to "Africanist" ethnomusicologists or avid music lovers, but valuable for practically any educational setting that deals with West Africa.

Links for more information on James Burns and the Dzigbordi group:

James Burns Binghamton University Faculty Profile [1]

Ashgate publisher's website for Female Voices [2]

Two recent Dzigbordi music videos produced by James Burns:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TqR7ZfDBUZ0 [3]
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISy5LnHz3e8&feature=related [4]

Community Empowerment Project; Empowering communities through cultural preservation [5]

Source URL: https://ethnomusicologyreview.ucla.edu/journal/volume/16/piece/468

Links:
[1] http://www.binghamton.edu/music/faculty.html
[2] http://www.ashgate.com/isbn/9780754664956
[3] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TqR7ZfDBUZ0
[4] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISy5LnHz3e8&feature=related
[5] http://www.cepafrica.org