

Leading Music Education
International Conference
May 29-June 1, 2011

Don Wright Faculty of Music
University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada

Western Ontario, May 29 to June 1, 2011

Community Music and The Culture of Trans-border Peace in West Africa
The case of the Assiko in Gorée (Sénégal)
workshop/paper

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What is Assiko from Goree?

In one sentence, **Assiko** is a dance and a beat from Goree island in Senegal, West Africa.

Some Geography and History

Goree is an island 3 km off the coast of the Dakar the capital city. A 20 minute ferry ride takes you to a very quiet and beautiful place where an estimated 1,500 people live.

For the Europeans (the Portuguese, Dutch, French, Spanish and British who fought over the island until it became French) Goree was a **strategic stop** over before the Americas. The Portuguese were the first Europeans who set foot in Goree in 1444. They probably brought with them **Adufe**, a moorish frame drum also used in Spain (12,14,16 inches). This is how far the origin of the Assiko drum has been traced for now.

The Assiko drum

The Assiko drum is a frame drum just like the Adufe. In Goree it is covered with a she-goat skin which has a better sound than any other animal skin. The skin is tightened around the frame with push pins. Sticks are not needed to play the Assiko drum but just bare hands. Interestingly enough, just like the Adufe, the Assiko drum comes in three sizes: big, medium and small; the Adufe we studied comes in 12,14,16 inches. In Goree, the big size is the **basse**, the medium size is **contrebasse** and the small one is **tintin**. They have different drumming patterns thus creating a swing, a 'contrepoint' and syncopation that is very pleasant to dance to.

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So An Assiko band features one **basse**, one **contrebasse** and one **tintin** plus **Sha Sha** (or shaker) and a call and response vocal style led by a person who sings a verse, a line or a chorus before the band or the crowd responds.

Today the Basse, Contrebasse, Tintin configuration has evolves to **Basse, Contrebasse, Dounounba** (from Guinea) and **Djembe** (form Mali). This is due to the migration of songs, drumming techniques and even instruments that are also taking advantage of free movement to be included in other cultures. Across the borders of Senegal, Mali, Guinea, The Gambia, Ivory Coast, songs and instruments are travelling thus setting new rules, new styles or at least new parameters in the musical styles that already exist.

The origin of the Word ‘Assiko’

We are not clear what the origin of the word is: the word Assiko shows up in a few songs
‘assiko si mama ye!’

‘Assiko siko zumayeh ‘

Assiko is also known as **Goombay** in the Gambia. The song goes *‘Xaleyi goombey leen ‘* encouraging the youths to dance the Goombay (also written ‘Gumbe) because the style is inherited from the forefathers who did not know tango, disco or whatever style the young generation happened to be dancing to.

Even if the Goombay is also a musical style amongst the Lebou ethnic group in Dakar, Senegal and even though the Lebous share a lot of cultural elements with the population of Goree, the lebou Goombay has very little to do with the Assiko of Goree.

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At this point we need to make mention of *Assiko* in Cameroon: we have not been able to verify it but informal sources say that the music of the Bassa people from Southern Cameroon is also called Assiko. It is played with a glass bottle, vocals and the guitar. The interesting point in this is that in Goree and in many other parts of Senegal, people have used a glass bottle, a spoon or a fork and vocals to sing and dance to the Assiko beat: the glass bottle is used to keep the beat while a chair is used as a drum. According to the same informal sources the name Assiko in Cameroon is derived from the Bassa words 'Issi' for earth and 'Go' for foot. (Again, this has not been verified info; just hear say but worth mentioning). Also worth talking about is the Ashiko from Nigeria.

The Assiko Style

Assiko from Goree is a 4/4 moderate (neither slow nor fast) acoustic dance beat for couples or solo individuals. It is an assemblage of various rhythms that were brought onto the island by slaves who were captured all across sub-Saharan Africa and who transited by Goree before being shipped to the Americas to be sold as plantation workers where they gave birth to the Gospel, the Blues, Jazz...). It is then no surprise to hear in Assiko (also called 'Siko' by locals old timers) beats from West African countries (the Gambia, Mali, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, as far as Congo).

Trans-border movement in music is not a new phenomenon in African music much less in the case of Assiko. If so far the frame drums have been traced to Adufe or even Bendir, the songs are clearly marked by and with African elements that are so obvious; Let us keep in mind that Goree is an island where slaves used to be kept before they were shipped to the Americas; this made it so that Africans gathered in Goree before their very humiliating trip across the Atlantic were able

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to share cultural aspects from their birthplace: the Bantous, the Bambaras, the Malinkes, the Yorubas, basically all ethnic backgrounds were unhappily represented in Goree ; they expressed their sorrow and their desire to be free through songs that they taught each other or at least learnt from each other; the Bantou beat seemed to be the favorite beat and the most appropriate for the purpose: the slow to mid tempo pace 4/4 rhythm accompanied songs which words and lyrics may not make any sense in any language taken in today's context:

The leader calls: *'Assoko ssi Mama yea'*

The crowd responds: *'Si Si yo Si yo'*

(These words have no translation in Wolof, which is the language spoken in Goree)

The leader calls *'Siko Siko'*

The crowd responds *'zooma yea'*

This and many other phrases and words and verses have no translation in Wolof. The people who have been singing these songs passed on from generation to generation say they learnt them exactly with those words and never questioned them or wondered what they meant: everybody knows the words and sings the songs and never tried to figure them out.

What we can make out of this though is that some English words are very clearly identifiable in some songs traced back to The Gambia, to Nigeria and to Ghana

'give me money taxi driver , I no k' (like in letter 'K'). We traced the song to a Nigeria/Ghanaian highlife song with the same chord progression the same notes and the same beat saying *'if you marry taxi driver, I don't care'*

Another song was traced back to Liberia and to the Caribbean: *'ko ko leo ko Mama ko ko leo ko, chicken cryin' for day'* .

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This shows us that trans-border quality of Assiko is a reality in the songs but also in the instruments used.

It is unthinkable to have an Assiko band without a 'shaker' which is really the spice in the music; This central element in Assiko is played with the same patterns as the **Carignan** from Mali which exported its technique to Goree island thus augmenting the beat with a new element that , on top of the 4/4 Bantou beat could be recognized by many as a dance pattern.

So just to recap at this point: Assiko from Goree in Senegal is a result of various cultures meeting and creating something new, Pan African and universal that goes beyond the borders of Senegal and beyond West Africa. The words that are used are sometimes made up words that phonetically may sound very rhythmical with an irresistible swing to them even though semantically may not mean a thing (*don't mean a thing if it ain't got that...swing!*).

Even if people of different ethnic backgrounds may not speak the same language, Assiko beat and dance has the power to get them on the dance-floor and boogie to the same beat with songs which words are known or not created or passed from generation or made up.

On several occasions we have noticed that certain dances have a strong ethnic nature to them; a person who is not from that ethnic background may not be able to dance to it. In the case of Assiko, anyone can dance to it giving thus an opportunity of sharing, mutual understanding and joyful celebration of life.

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The same way Ghanaian and Nigerian Highlife and Congolese Rumba made their way across West Africa gathering various crowds on the dance-floor, Assiko similarly brought various nationalities together with its multi faceted, multi cultural and trans border nature.

The Evolution Process

Yes we agree: music is a lifelong learning process. Assiko has been undergoing transformation and mutation; different generations sing the same song differently, have different dance steps to a beat played by different instruments. This does not prevent Assiko from being very popular.

Even though no artist leads the way in 'purposefully' getting involved in making sure the memory and the promotion of Assiko is taken care of, the style is still alive and remains Goree island' vivid signature. No school formally or informally teaches Assiko; the style is still passed on from parents to children with no professional or ethnic pre-requisite knowledge. However the 4/4 beat and sing along nature of Assiko have invaded school playgrounds and recreational places where children convene for educational /school activity or for mere fun: various songs in various African languages with unknown origins are still in motion with new twists and sounds added to them as new generations make these songs their own. Choirs in churches have adopted some aspects of the beat. Even adults often use Assiko beats when engaging in sing along activities: a leader, sings, the group responds, someone plays the bottleneck (empty bottle hit with a spoon or a fork in a 3/2 pattern which one finds in, Senegal, Guinea, The Gambia, The Ivory Coast, Mali and other parts of Africa where the 3/2 signature is a very recognizable stamp when women sing and dance and clap) .

This is trans-border collaborative efforts where various nationalities agree to express themselves as they see best: they may not be aware that at the time they are on the dance-floor they are

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calling for trans-border multi-ethnic PEACE. Then trans-border PEACE becomes a reality because people from various nationalities decide this is the best they can do right now, and that given the choice, this is all they'd do. Where politicians failed to unite and develop, Assiko comes in to build and gather. These are the moments of trans-border peace, the moments of smile, of togetherness.

This is where our songwriters are challenge today to think GLOBAL; to think about what makes it that someone from Ethiopia can meet someone from Cameroon along with someone from Australia and Japan, and spend time, even if just for 4 minutes and dance to rhythms of peace. This is where our policy makers and people who carry the voices of the people in decision making bodies are challenged to come up with new tools and catch up with music. This is where educators are challenged to articulate programs of peace that are smart and intelligent enough to bring people together and introduce them to other musical styles and help children appreciate what's different because what's different may be a life changing experience.

African currencies have failed to bring PEACE to the continent. Resource management has been the reason for terrible and devastating conflicts in various parts of the continent. Political directions and choices have lead Africa to argue a lot about democracy and good governance; election fraud, coups and political instability have been an unfortunate mark in African politics. When we start recognizing that there is diversity in our Community, we put ourselves on the path to envisioning Peace; that is at least my conclusion for now.

Community Music and The Culture of Trans-border Peace in West Africa: communities have produced music with local elements that travelled and came together to sing PEACE and show that with music we speak a language that only needs personal commitment to PEACE. Our borders have been our limits that keep us in fear of discovering the OTHER person in front of us; stepping into the other person's shoe and listening to what the other person has to say created a beat called ASSIKO, a beat with a 4/4 signature that various Africans recognize and appreciate

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because it celebrates a big Community which members accept that each person has the option to add something and improve our lifestyle.

Thank you for making that step and for your very appreciated attention.