

The Evolution of Traditional Rhythms in Redefining the West African Country of Guinea

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Abstract : The traditional rhythms of the West African country of Guinea have played a centuries-long role in defining the different people groups that make up the country. Throughout their history, before and since colonization by the French, the different ethnicities have used their traditional music as a distinct part of their historical identities. That is starting to change. Guinea is an impoverished nation created in the early twentieth-century with little regard for the history and cultures of the people who were included. The traditional rhythms of the different people groups and their heritages have remained. Fifteen individual traditional Guinean rhythms were chosen to represent popular rhythms from the four geographical regions of Guinea. Each rhythm was traced back to its native village and video recorded on-site by as many different local performing groups as could be located. The cyclical patterns rhythms were transcribed via a circular, spatial design and then copied into a box notation system where sounds happening at the same time could be studied. These rhythms were analyzed for their consistency-over-performance in a Fundamental Rhythm Pattern analysis so rhythms could be compared for how they are changing through different performances. The analysis showed that the traditional rhythm performances of the Middle and Forest Guinea regions were the most cohesive and showed the least evidence of change between performances. The role of music in each of these regions is both limited and focused. The Coastal and High Guinea regions have much in common historically through their ethnic history and modern-day trade connections, but the rhythm performances seem to be less consistent and demonstrate more changes in how they are performed today. In each of these regions the role and usage of music is much freer and wide-spread. In spite of advances being made as a country, different ethnic groups still frequently only respond and participate (dance and sing) to the music of their native ethnicity. There is some evidence that this self-imposed musical barrier is beginning to change and evolve, partially through the development of better roads, more access to electricity and technology, the nation-wide Ebola health crisis, and a growing self-identification as a unified nation.

Keywords : cultural identity, Guinea, traditional rhythms, west Africa

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