Special Issue
Sound Cultures of Africa

Introduction

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This special issue represents some of the latest results of a research project which has been carried out since 1995 under the title of “Sound Cultures of Africa.” In order to grasp the vast and fertile reality of African sound activities, including oral traditions, dances, and rituals, we propose to use the term “sound culture.” By so doing, we reconsider the concept of “music” that has been used in Europe since the 15th century, as well as that of “ethno-musicology” derived from “music.”

Our research project is noteworthy in five respects. Firstly, we have worked closely with officers in the intangible cultural heritage program of UNESCO with a view to preserving African sound cultures in their socio-cultural contexts. Thus far, little research has attempted to study these sound cultures holistically. Secondly, we have consistently published the results of our first-hand field research in the official languages of the researched societies. This is exceptional in Japan, where almost all research results are reported in Japanese. Thirdly, we have sent our publications free of charge to our African partners – those people who used to be called just “informants” – in order to make available the fruits of our research, as well as to receive corrections, questions, and critiques from the very people we have studied. Fourthly, by publishing in the official languages of the researched African societies instead of in Japanese, as already mentioned, we have been able to reach the global community of scholars, particularly in the Francophone and Anglophone worlds, from whom we have received constructive criticisms and suggestions for further research. Lastly, through these activities we eventually aim to examine broad questions concerning the nature of representation in colonial languages, as well as the impact of colonial rule in Africa.

For complex reasons, only three papers are included in this special issue. It should therefore be appropriate to mention briefly the academic backgrounds of the main members of our research group. Junzo Kawada, the leader, belongs to the first postwar generation of professional Japanese cultural anthropologists. Born in 1934, he was trained as an undergraduate student at the University of Tokyo, where a fully-fledged program in
anthropology had opened in 1956 under the aegis of Eiichiro Ishida (1903-1968). Ishida espoused the ideal of “general anthropology” and was strongly supported in his endeavor by Tadao Yanaihara (1893-1961), the then president of the University of Tokyo. The curriculum introduced at that time consisted of world ethnography, prehistoric and physical anthropology, linguistics, cultural dynamics, fieldwork training, and so forth. To teach these courses, notable scholars were occasionally invited from the U.S.

By contrast, with the exception of Itsushi Kawase, whose research will be reported below, many of the younger members of our research group were originally trained in disciplines other than anthropology, although they all specialized in this field at the master’s level or beyond. In one way or another, they represent the second generation of professional anthropologists in postwar Japan. As this special issue shows, a distinctive characteristic of postwar Japanese anthropology lies in its coverage of a wide range of topics culled from around the world.

The first paper to be presented has been authored by Tadasu Tsuruta. Its significance derives from Tsuruta’s detailed, long-term observations of the vicissitudes of sound cultures in Tanzania. After delineating major political changes since the country’s independence, he analyzes the subsequent multidimensional transformation of sound cultures there. Although his notion of “music” differs from mine, his conclusions are convincing. As he remarks, “musical activities formerly embedded in communal rituals have been transformed into sophisticated performances staged by musical specialists, in accordance with the increasing role played by cultural troupes, especially in the ‘official arenas’ of national politics and Christianity. At the same time, cultural troupes continue to perform in the ‘communal arena’ of familial ceremonies, fulfilling the needs of the rural community” (Tsuruta, this issue).

In the second paper, Itsushi Kawase reports on the multifaceted activities of wandering singers known as “Lalibaloč” in Northern Ethiopia. Since 2001, Kawase has closely examined changes in the vocal culture of the Lalibaloč by using a cinematographic participant-observation method. His major findings throw light, first, on the ways the Lalibaloč actively collect personal information about their customers – in Kawase’s terminology “targeted clients” – in order to make their performances profitable, and second, on the importance attached to the conversations and jokes the Lalibaločoč exchange with their customers as part of their operations.

The last paper shows some of the results of Junzo Kawada’s long-term research into the Mossi drum language. Based on sound spectrographic analyses and experimental tests with drummers, as well as on personal training under Mossi masters, Kawada contends that their drumming is a set of simultaneous and consecutive reflexes of the human body. From this Kawada draws the following hypothesis: “For a well-trained drummer, a series of distinct verbal messages are reproduced, not vocally through the mouth, but by drum sounds produced by means of touching the fingertips on different points on the surface of
the drum.” This hypothesis is examined with the rich ethnographic data that Kawada has collected.