

# Group Singing and Traditional African Medicine: The Case of West Africa



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*Choir conductor*

## Introduction

Choral tradition has a strong presence in Africa. Africa's soul, its consciousness and its history are all deeply rooted in music. In addition to the happiness it brings people, African music also plays an important role in traditional societies, where it is present in all aspects of life. The traditional form of group music practice is an age-old speciality of indigenous peoples from the heart of Africa, well before colonisation led to the discovery of choral singing in its current form on the continent. As African people dislike living alone, working alone or having fun on their own, making music has primarily been a community practice, rarely one for individuals. Whether it be on a political, sociocultural, economic or religious level, singing has always mobilised groups and crowds. This group or mass practice, which would later lead to the choral singing we know today, gave rise to numerous benefits for the communities who carried it on. One of these benefits was to their health; be that physical, moral or emotional, psychological, or spiritual. It is precisely thanks to this choral singing or group practice of music that we have come to think of Africa as the continent of joy and constant high spirits. In this

article, we will present African (choral) singing in the context of traditional medicine and will demonstrate that it serves as an effective cure for the majority of social ills. We will illustrate this by giving specific examples drawn from the experiences of traditional peoples from West Africa. In this case: the *Ewe* people, the *Fon* people and the *Ashanti* people from the Gulf of Guinea, Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Ghana and Ivory Coast; the *Mossi* people, the *Gurma* people and the *Fulapeople* from the Sahel (Burkina Faso, Niger, Senegal, northern Benin, Togo, Ghana and Ivory Coast).

We will also give details about the special therapeutic role that African choral singing plays, a role which fills so many hearts around the world with emotion.

### **African Choral Singing: A Multi-Purpose Therapy**

It is widely recognised that music is good psychosomatic medicine. In Africa, choral singing is privileged to be one of the most requested and effective genres in music therapy.

On the physical level, African music is essentially based on rhythm. As a result, it creates many possibilities for dances with an array of rather dynamic rhythmic arrangements. The fact, therefore, that African songs almost always come with accompanying dances compels the singers to make all kinds of movements fairly frequently (two, three, or even four times a week). These movements provide a full body workout for the dancers, which keeps them healthy and gives them a radiant glow. This is the case for the “*Adzogbo*” dance of the *Ouatchi* and *Mina* peoples from Togo and Benin, and the “*Agbadza*” dance of the *Ewe* people (Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Ghana and Ivory Coast).

#### **Presentation of the *Adzogbo* rhythm:**

A rhythm with counted dance steps, involving acrobatic spins.

The rhythm notation is particular and is accompanied with the following onomatopoeia: djan, djan, djan.

### **Presentation of the *Agbadza* rhythm:**

An elegant rhythm, leading to a dance which works out the upper and lower limbs, and especially the back muscles, hence the name *dzimé wé* (the back dance). The notation is as follows:



The *kontcheng* is also a rhythm which inspires body movement. This is a marching rhythm, performed in a line or in a circle, by nodding one's head and swaying one's torso like the rod of a pendulum. Notation: quaver, quaver, crotchet – quaver, quaver, crotchet.



On the moral and emotional level, African choral singing, which brings many people together, gives the singers balance and raises their spirits through the calming lyrics of the songs. It also offers them a highly valued human adventure. It saves them from anger, depression and neurosis, relieves them of their worries, and provides them with peace of mind and tranquillity; exactly what is needed for strong moral health. Added to this is the cathartic aspect of singing which, by the magic of its harmonies, soothes the hearts of people in grief.

On the psychological level, the act of singing in a group drives away fear and increases the degree of the performers' virtue and valour, which gives them courage, joy and self-confidence.

On the religious and mystical level, African people believe that singing has magical, mysterious and unwavering powers,

which have control over things and therefore produce desired results. They are used in this way to influence animals, people and things in nature. Traditionally, religion has frequently relied on numerous chants and incantations against snakebites, to protect from diseases, to communicate with spirits, to tame animals, to satisfy anger and revenge, to call for rain or good weather, to evoke ghosts, to bring the dead back to life and to drive out or appease demons. Singing therefore reinforces the singers' spirituality and provides them with protection against evil spirits. Singing plays a role in healing and exorcism. The mass effect produced by choral singing releases energy; a supernatural power that heals diseases, calms anger and drives out demons. In this respect, singing is a genuine instrument of healing in traditional African medicine.

### **(Choral) Singing: A Cure for Psychosomatic Illnesses in West Africa**

Music therapy is not a new art in African traditions. This practice, which can be traced back to the most ancient of times, is still current in traditional West African society, where music is associated with healing illnesses in fetishistic convents and at initiation rites.

The traditionalist view is that the physical world is governed by the spirit world. Whenever anything good happens, it is thanks to the blessing of the gods, while anything bad is as a result of their anger, punishments or curses. Healing happens by summoning the spirits. Witch doctors can interact with the spirits, who they summon to enlist support from when healing illnesses or warding off curses.

In the case of rare or unknown illnesses, this is how priests or soothsayers carry out consultations, by chanting incantations to diagnose the nature, origin and cause of the

affliction so they can drive it off. Contact between humans and spirits is established by means of specific songs with melodic formulae and precise rhythms. These songs are most often chanted by the priest or witch doctor, relayed in a responsorial style by a choir of followers. Sometimes, special percussion accompaniments contribute to speeding up the healing process by provoking prompt manifestations of the spirits, who respond swiftly by putting people into trances and using them to reveal the cause of the illness, as well as the appropriate cure for each case. The cure may range from something as simple as a herb to be used while singing, to treatment via an exorcism chant performed over several days.

For those who are skilled in voodoo, in order to be healed the afflicted person must, in some cases, sing and dance to rhythms prescribed by the fetish or deity by following rituals over a specified time (three days, one week, one month or even three months) according to the severity of the illness.

In these instances, it is the quality of the worship or supplication, as well as the patients' devotion, that determines to what extent the patients are healed. If the patient is unable to sing or dance due to the burden of the disease, members of their family are asked to do so on their behalf. Healing ensues as soon as the deity or fetish accepts the worship.

The use of music for healing or as a release from curses is widespread across West Africa and takes place in various forms, depending on the ethnic group or the local custom. Given that the same people groups can be found spread over three or four countries, it is not uncommon to come across the same songs or methods in several countries.

Certain exorcism chants and healing songs, which are proven to be effective, are often written in fetishistic languages that only initiates can understand. Priests use these languages musically in traditional chanting and by singing prophecies to





## **Practical Cases of Healing Through Singing in Traditional Religion**

Naturalists declare that only the spoken word or the sung word (songs) are able to heal someone. To do so, you must enter into the afflicted person and take on their ailment or their burden yourself, then summon the healing spirit from nature to come and cure them.

The musician healer focuses and sings. In reality, exorcisms are carried out by substitution. By chanting incantations, the healer draws out the soul from the patient and bears it in their own body. In this way, when the musician healer sings, it is in fact the soul of the patient who is singing within them. If the patient's soul is therefore able to sing within the body of the musician healer, then they can be healed.

### **How Does it Work? (The Procedure)**

The patient is placed between seven people, who represent the seven (7) spirits of God, or seven deities. The musician healer, who is familiar with the names of the spirits, summons them by chanting incantations and sends them into the patient's body. These spirits take action within the body of the afflicted individual and restore their health before returning their soul to them. This entire procedure is carried out to a musical programme, most of which is vocal.

### **The Principle of Healing Through Traditional Music Therapy**

It is necessary to separate the individual's soul from the ambient world for an out-of-body experience and replace it with someone else's (often the soul of the healer themselves or of a pure or holy innocent). Absorbing or removing the

afflicted person's soul is done by singing and by summoning spirits, who come to seek and converse with it while the body is healed by the actions of other spirits. Each of the summoned spirits has a specific role to play in the healing process. According to the individual case and the severity of the illness, the spirits of 3, 7, 14 or 17 deities are summoned.

### **The Case of Snakebites**

In the case of snakebites, the deity "*Vodun Dan*" must be summoned, done so by performing their song. They will come and retract the venom, whereby the affected individual is miraculously healed by substitution. The international centre of the deity *Dan* is located in *Ouidah*, in Benin.

Long-term healing can also be obtained through singing. This begins with a speech. Afterwards, the patient is required to sing while smiling. By doing so, they end up being healed.

### **Conclusion**

Traditional African music is, first and foremost, an acoustic reflection of the cultural realities of traditional African societies. In this way, it truly forms part of the cures for several ills within these societies. Deities or spirits have always been relied on for healing through singing. Healing is always received, and always by substitution under the influence of special music. This music is in the form of chanted incantations, which allows for communication with the deities or spirits who do good. In this regard, choral music, which allows for a rather lively group practice, successfully plays the role of the relay or choir in response to the healer's solos. The *Nogokpo* and *Essem* convents in Ghana, as well as the *Parakou* one in Benin, are gifted in this traditional regional music therapy.



## Appendix

### Some healing songs

#### Limulaya

- Song to summon the seven (7) spirits or deities
- Language: Ewe
- Translation: With a resounding voice, Limulaya, I summon you to come and rescue me



#### Mega d'asi le nu nye o

- Translation: Do not desert me, I will live forever by your side
- Language: Ewe

Me-ga d'a-si le ɣa nye'o... Me-ga d'a-si le ɣa nye'o...

Me-ga d'a-si le ɣa nye'o... Gha'wo ko ma-na daa.

### Karabusu

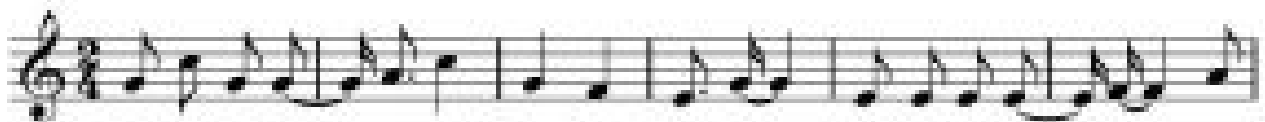
- Summoning of the spirits Yeve, Hebieso, Lissa, Sogbo and Patapa to come and take action
- Language: A mixture of Ewe and Hindu languages

19  
Ka - ra - hu - su ya - ga... Oo... ya - ga...

23  
Ka - ra - hu - su ya - ga... Oo... ya - ga...


### Zamalina

- Song to summon the deity Yeve
- Language: Ewe (language of the deity Yeve)
- Translation: If Yeve or Jehovah were not here, where would I be?


  
 Za ma li na\_\_ do do do do do loo, Za ma li na\_\_ do do

7  

  
 do do do. Za ma li na\_\_ do do do do do, Za ma li na

14  

  
 \_\_ do do do do do mi. Ye ho wa me\_\_ lio, fi

19  

  
 ka ye ma na loo. Ye ho wa me\_\_ lio. fi ka ye ma na.  
 me ka ye ma yo.



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principal rotating artistic director of the *African Youth Choir* for four years and, since May 2018, has been the coordinator of the “African Youth Choir” project with the African Confederation of Choral Music. He has performed concert tours with his choirs in France, Spain, South Korea and Germany, and has participated in choral festivals in several African, European and Asian countries. Email: [sylvain.gameti@gmail.com](mailto:sylvain.gameti@gmail.com)

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