

The Roots of a

SAX

Uncle, Idowu Adeku, taught me both how to play and make 'sakara' drum in the Sixties. He had lived in Abeokuta and Ilugun so there was quite a lot to learn about traditional musicians and life in general. My grandmother, Iya Idowu, who was a kola nut trader, was then shuttling between Ilugun and Ibadan where I grew up with four other brothers. She in particular taught us all those wonderful moral instilling folk tales and their respective songs. She was also Iya 'ndi Ogun as her house was right in front of an Ogun shrine in Ilugun.

The part of Ibadan where I lived for some years, during the Sixties, was not very far from Chief Obafemi Awolowo's house, and during the seasonal Egungun (Ancestral) Festivals, the major masks would come to pay homage to him: Apan'sanpa, Ololu, Abidiege, Oganke, Dake ja etc. I often went with childhood friends to see these 'ancestral guests', and we would go home later to practise all we had heard on plastic pails and empty cans of ovaltine and milk. The complex rhythmic patterns in processional and poetic forms, and the traditional songs for specific 'ancestors' became rather familiar after a while. And similar to what happens during Halloween Celebrations here in the US, we would also go from door to door during Christmas Celebrations in Ibadan, imitating both the rhythm and dance steps of the 'guests.'

The Igunnuko also made their seasonal visitations, long towering ancestors, who more or less vanished in your very eyes as they swirled and eddied in their near ethereal movements. Their

Wole
Alade

dances were quite unusual, and we actually thought they were dancing 'Towers of Babel' with thundering sounds on the ancient drums accompanying their steps!

At other times it would be a different 'ancestral guest' from other parts of Nigeria; this was of course before the Civil War. There was one in particular, called Ekpe, an Ibibio ancestor, who always came alone, with a unique sound from 'the other side.' He had a headgear which gave an impression of a huge flower dancing alone in the hot sun.

On Sunday morning 'professional beggars', both men and women would wake us with their 'Babi Allan kawo' chants, and for me Islamic life style had really become synonymous with being a northerner for I really couldn't tell the difference for many years, until I met Obadijah, at Ede who was both a northerner and a Christian. Many years later at Apata Ganga the early morning chant of the muezzin was also almost a daily routine, as early as about five-thirty in the morning you would hear him chanting. '...Al' Akbar', as they called the believers to prayer with an obvious middle eastern, in particular Arabic, touch to it.

And quite frequently 'talking drum ensembles' would stroll by, and greet you on their 'gangan and iya ilu' for money. Although these were professional drummers in their own right, as well as historians and poets and custodians of traditional knowledge and culture, time and values had changed, and were still

changing, so they had to make ends meet by walking round the city and playing for anyone who was likely to give alms. Frequently they would show up at social functions, weddings, burials, naming ceremonies, chieftaincy titles, Christmas and New Year's Eve celebrations. The purchase or acquisition of property, the return of a child, husband or wife from 'abroad', or a promotion on the job, would often lead to a party, and these traditional musicians would always show up as invited guests or not.

Apart from the 'professional beggars' who came from all over the country, there was the occasional grand performances given by this brilliant Shehnai or Algaita virtuoso who came from a section of the northern part of Nigeria. The instrument had come many years ago with Arabic traders. The high pitched sound of his double-reed instrument, similar to the western oboe, summoned us for another afternoon performance; he had four or five other drummers playing Djun-djun or Bembe of different sizes. It was then time to find a way, some excuse to leave whatever you were doing for yet another afternoon show.

My paternal grandfather lived in Erunmu, a couple of miles away from Ibadan, and there lived also another ancestral mask called 'Alukuu.' He only came out in the night, to see him then you had to stay up all night. We had tried a couple of times in the past, but this particular night grandfather, Pa James

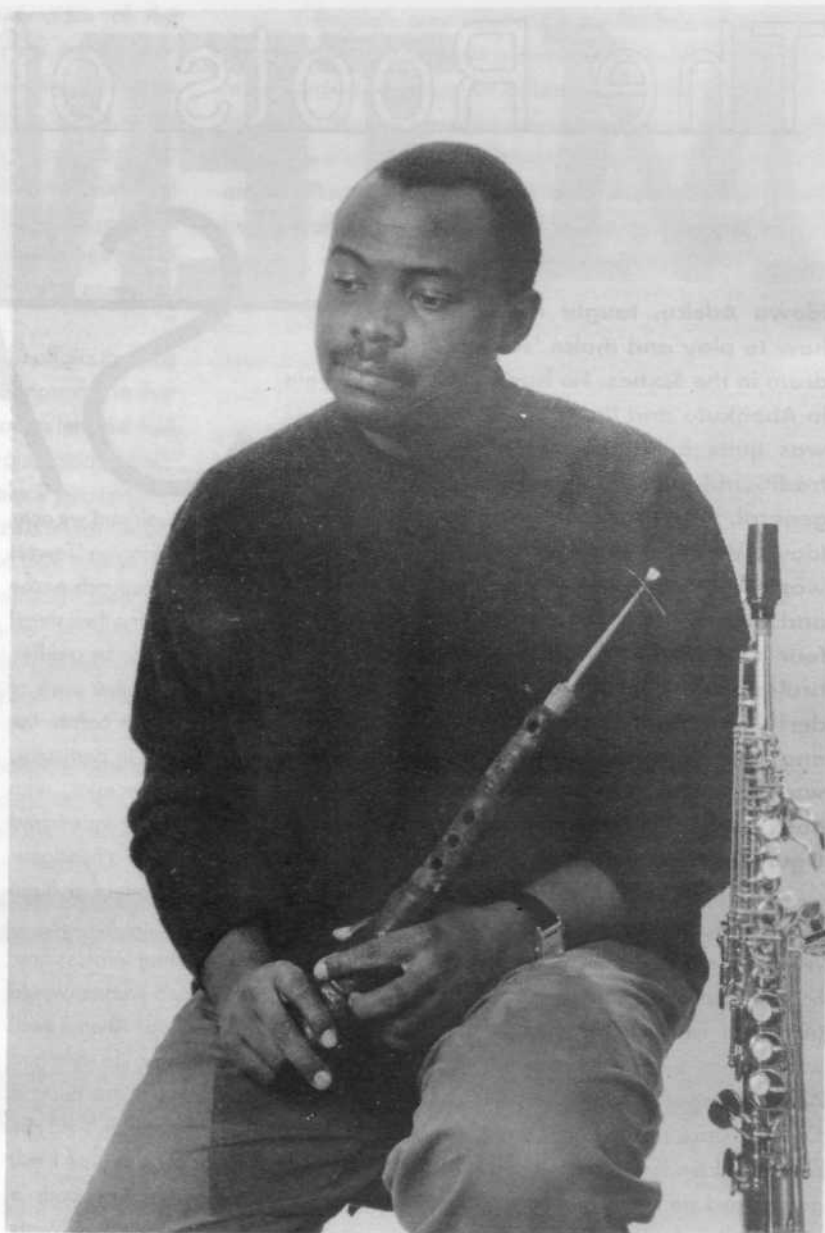
Alade, was wide awake, and he quietly announced to my older brother and I that 'Alukuu' had come to see us. He prayed for us and grandfather gave him some money. He also had a peculiar chant.

Occasionally we would also travel to Ago Owu, a section of Abeokuta, to visit our cousins the Ajamabusos. Their house was between Lafenwa and River Ogun, and there we saw entirely different 'ancestors' with tribal marks and rather small heads. They also came with their unique sounds much of which I still 'hear' till this day.

My church, for many years, did not allow the use of traditional musical instruments perhaps for fear it might lure converts back to their traditional ways. But during the yearly Harvest and Bazaar ceremonies called 'Ikore' in Yoruba, we would be treated to some traditional songs and dances by the same 'mothers' and 'sisters' who were regular members of the choir. And several times after the weekly sermon on Sabbath day, I would beg the janitor to lock me inside the church so I could play the piano before my parents started looking for me.

And there were 'a million' Aladura churches all over the place, with very early morning and evening services, where intense traditional rhythms and folk nuances were merged with western-Christian hymns. At any time during 'service' one could easily walk in and merge with the congregation.

Apart from Sabbath on Saturdays, certain church services were featured on the radio and it was always something to look forward to, although we belonged to a different church altogether. The different church choirs sounded wonderfully well. At other times it was the works of Western trained Nigerian composers, those who had studied Western Traditional Music and practised either in Europe or the United States of America, like Fela Sowande, Akin Euba, Laz Ekwueme, Sammy Akpabot etc. Included were of course very well known Western composers



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like Beethoven, Handel, Mozart, Hayden etc.

Both Idowu and another uncle Benjamin Funmilayo took me and my older brother to the cinema to see Indian movies. The music was different yet we could relate to it. Uncle Idowu even worked at some point at Rex Cinema, on J. Allen Road, Ibadan. He had, of course, seen 'every Indian film available,' and would simply relate to us the ones we hadn't seen! 'Ade Love', the actor and singer, was obviously also influenced by this music, as he developed a style of singing

from this Indian source.

I didn't get any encouragement whatsoever from my parents. Modern musicians just didn't have a good reputation, so it was not an option for you. You simply had to be a lawyer, medical practitioner or an accountant, so for many years although everyone knew I had musical talent, I couldn't tell them I really wanted to be a professional musician. I had to prove it later to my father when my professor, Wole Soyinka showed him both my letters of admission and scholarship to the Berkeley College of Music, Boston.

Mother told me that she once nursed the idea of becoming a member of Hubert Ogunde's Dance and Theatre Group. She had grown up in Abeokuta listening to both traditional songs and Islam influenced genres of music—Waka, Sakara, and Apala. At home we heard Yusuf Olatunji, Haruna Ishola, Dauda Epo Akara, Ebenezer Obey, Idowu Animasaun, Toye Ajagun etc. etc. She also made it possible for us to see Hubert Ogunde and his troupe a number of times at Obisesan Hall in Ibadan while he was on tour of the country.

I would later meet Idowu Animasaun, Toye Ajagun and Dele Ojo at Anjola Aboderin's place, in Ibadan. Aboderin I had met earlier on through Deola Kumapayi. A truly gifted electrical engineer he fixed musical instruments and built new amplifiers and P. A. Systems when approached by local musicians. He actually built one for me as well, at a time when my obsession with music led me to work part-time as a disk jockey! I also met Chris Waterman, the American ethnomusicologist and bass player, at Anjola's place; he was then doing research on the history of juju music in Nigeria. His book has since been published, 'Juju-A Social History and Ethnography Of An African Popular Music' by the University of Chicago press. All kinds of musicians came to Anjola, and those who wanted their electrical appliances repaired. It was to him that I

finally handed over the management of Afro Linkage Ensemble when I left the country.

Mother and father also had been co-tenants with Moses Akanbi, (Baba Ade) the drummer, on Koyejo Street, Ibadan in the Sixties, who was then a member of Eddy Okonta's band. He often would bring his snare drum and tom-toms home. They were usually in the corridor or in the verandah, and there began my training on the drum. A number of musicians paid him a visit, especially the band leader himself, Eddy Okonta, and I would day-dream about playing with them someday. Their performances took place at the Paradise

Four of us even formed a quartet modelled after African American Gospel Singers and the Kings' Herald Singers of the United States: Dokun Abolarin, Bayo Aina, Kehinde Ogunrombi and I. Kayode Olajide belonged to a different group.

Hotel, situated at the present site of the Broking House in Ibadan. Moses Akanbi has since been playing on Sunny Ade's band.

Sina Fagbenro's father lived just next door as a young legal practitioner, and his mother brought him regularly to play with us. We would meet years later to make music while he was a student at the University of Ibadan. For a while Deji Haastrop, the writer, also lived downstairs with his mother. Kayode Olajide, the saxophonist, lived further down the road. His musical experience and development indeed almost parallel mine. One of the truly insightful and inventive of contemporary musicians in Nigeria!

At the Cocoa House, Ibadan, in the early Seventies, I had my first opportunity to see a saxophone and Orlando Julius was playing it. A section of the building was then used for occasional social functions and Christmas/End of Year celebrations. He also played regularly at the Paradise Hotel and knew Moses Akanbi quite well.

Father belonged to an association back in the Sixties and early Seventies which sometimes invited Ojoge Daniel to perform during their Christmas parties and other functions. This would later repeat itself at the Ibadan Tennis Club, near the Iyaganku High Court, a mere quarter of a mile from my house where I heard both King Sunny Ade and Ebenezer Obey live for many years. Prior to this, Tunji Oyelana and The Benders, with Anjola Aboderin on keyboards, made impressions on me during their yearly Christmas performances at the Tennis Club. Akeeb Kareem the singer, was also in Ibadan during this period.

Jimi Solanke, actor and musician, purchased my very first saxophone years later, an alto, when he formed a group with Biddy Wright, myself and some other fellows at the University of Ife, which Kayode Olajide bought off me so I could get a plane ticket to the music school in the United States.

I taught myself every other instrument I played until my formal training in Boston. The only other musical training was given by a real African Queen, the Olori of the Oba of Ede, Oba Adetoyese Laoye, The Timi of Ede. I actually dined once with the king when one of his sons, Adio, took me to the palace on a Sunday afternoon. The king himself was known to be a master on the talking drum, aside from being a pharmacist, before his ascension. Olori played the piano and taught us to sing. After her weekly lessons, I would begin my 'improv' on the piano. We were very well equipped to sing in the school choir. Four of us even formed a quartet modelled after African American Gospel Singers and the Kings'

Herald Singers of the United States: Dokun Abolarin, Bayo Aina, Kehinde Ogunrombi and I. Kayode Olajide belonged to a different group.

In Ede, we encountered the major travelling theatre groups including Duro Ladipo, Kola Ogunmola, and Oyin Adejobi. They all came at some point or the other to Baptist Grammar School, Ede, and some of us found our way to see them. Of course this was only additional to their weekly appearances on the television and radio.

At the Polytechnic Ibadan, I was fortunate to have Bukola 'Bukky' Jinadu, Ayo Assaf, Yinka 'Laleye, M.D.', the late Dele Falode, Deola Kumapayi, Paul Konye and Deji Olaopa. Mellow Yirenyki, Kunle Ajayi and Eric, the drummer, came later to the Polytechnic Ibadan as 'Ifa', with more musical experience than most us. I later joined them and would have long rehearsals usually between 11:30pm and 6:00am. We reproduced almost every solo part played by reputable jazz artists and also had the opportunity to travel to Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria for a performance. The music department at the Polytechnic, Ibadan, allowed me to use the piano room and some wind instruments, although I wasn't a music student. There I met Bateye, the composer, and Adeleke, a master on the talking drum. The repertoire was huge but it was made up mainly of 'Jazz Standards' and popular tunes from the United States, and so were artistic directions in general among our peers. The more of a Western influence you exhibited, to that extent you were accepted, which resulted in 'a stifling' of original and authentic insight! Every group had to be a copy of another foreign one, in the US or in Europe.

Fela Anikulapo Kuti created the awareness of the worth of having a culture, and being proud of it, consciously furthering it, through his 'Yabbis' that almost always preceded his performances at the Polytechnic, and the Universities of Ibadan and Ife. In particular I found his departure from conventional Western ten-

dencies in music impressive, especially his use of modal harmony, but I would later stop listening to him mainly for the fear that I might begin to sound like him. Kuti remains for me a wonderful example in musical innovation and authenticity.

The Journey to Berklee College of Music, Boston began with an introduction from Deji Olaopa, who was also very kind to share his musical knowledge and books with me. He lent me a Soprano C Flute which his brother sent him from England, with which I taught myself to play the instrument. He would become one of the backbones of 'Afro Linkage Ensemble' formed a couple of years later. Once his father advised both of us to stop wasting time on Western

Western Traditional and Modern music forms.

At the University of Ife, a good friend and colleague Femi Ogunrombi gave me an opportunity to perform with his Choral and Dance Troupe called 'Ayoro Voices', specializing in traditional music. He also kindly entrusted me with a silver alto saxophone to use with the group! A major help towards my acquaintance with the instrument. Yemi Akinpelu who introduced me to Amos Tutuola, as he then lived close to the writer at Odo-Ona in Ibadan later directed 'Ayoro Voice' after Femi Ogunrombi left Ife.

I took a few sight reading lessons with Ms. Mary Seavoy of the Ife Music Department, and Western music theory with Dr. Adegbite, who allowed me to 'sit in' for a couple of his lectures. And Meshida, the violinist, gave my very first opportunity to play with a chamber orchestra conducted by Yemi Akinpelu. I read everything I could find on the theories of Western Traditional, African Traditional and African American music.

Oduduwa Hall, Ife, had a wonderful Steinway Grand Piano and with it I continued to teach myself to play. The beauty of the hall in those days lured me to sit in there for hours, day-dreaming sometimes, at other times getting up to practise on both the piano and saxophone. I performed in this hall several times, and saw every important theatrical and musical performance. For me it was simply a bigger vision of the performance hall at the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, Ibadan to which a wonderful lady, Mrs Oyelewa, a family friend, who was a receptionist for many years at the Corporation, took me a number of times. She worked from 7:00am to 3:00pm, and I would be there through the hours.

I got acquainted with the well known broadcaster Laolu Ogunniyi through Deji Olaopa, and with him we learned to write commercial jingles, and scored music for both theatre and film

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music; told us to pay more attention to indigenous forms and I took his advice seriously to heart.

I simply had to listen to every new music I came across regardless of style or origin, and I had to read their liner notes, as a lot could be gained by simply reading them. And that was how Dixon Akingbade became a teacher both in the business of 'disk jockeying,' and in generally introducing me to serious secular forms of African-American music through his collection of records. I laid my hand on over a thousand records, from Traditional, African American, Continental to

(video). We rehearsed at Radio OYO, the Performance Centre on Mokola Hill, and then Safari Club where years before I had met, for the first time ever, both Femi Johnson and Soyinka at 12:00 in the morning.

A campus group called 'Paperback' with Victor Egbe, Dotun Kukoyi, Kehinde Ogunrombi, Yetunde Adeaga and Bisade Ologunde on keyboards, also offered opportunities for occasional performances. (There began a close, and quite an interesting musical relationship with Bisade Ologunde who came regularly from Lagos during the experience at 'Segi') Later I teamed up with Bukola 'Bukky' Jinadu, who had now moved to Ife, Sola Adeaga, M.D, and separately again with Paul Wiltshire, Jide Awosika, the late Stephen Jide Olowu, M.D on drums, Wale Popoola also on drums and David 'Kunle Akinde on bass. I also collaborated with Joke Longe who sang and played piano professionally, Jumoke Fashola, Tope Babayemi as bass player and manager, the Aboabas, 'Staccato' of the University of Ibadan, led by Sina Fagbenro, and Ladi Williams, a pilot and guitarist. I even had a few serious discussions with Dizzy K. Fashola, of the 'Baby Ki Lo De' fame, who had come briefly to Ife to deepen his grasp of music. 'Paperback' also had an opportunity to open a show for the American pop group 'Shalamar', with Howard Hewitt, Jody Watley and Jeffrey Daniels singing, at the Oduduwa Hall amphitheatre (A couple of years later 'Afro-Linkage Ensemble' also performed with the Tennessee State Jazz Quintet at the Theatre Hall of the University of Ibadan, with Andre Ward on alto saxophone. We would meet again a couple of years later as students at the Berklee College of Music, Boston, where I also met composer Seyi Sonuga).

I met both Ayo Bankole Jr. and Femi Kuti through Jide Awosika. With Femi I had this lengthy discussion about the future of music in Nigeria at the Conference Centre, Ife, when he was

visiting to participate in a joint performance organized by a campus girls-only club called 'Styx'! They had asked Sola Adeaga, M.D, and I to negotiate with him on their behalf concerning this show. I also met Gloria Rhodes, Bayo Adepetun, M.D, and Tunde and Frances Kuboye over the same weekend. Tunde and Frances later made me an honorary member of their ensemble for which Frances Sang and Tunde both arranged and played the bass. I considered having Tunde produce a project I was working on then but had to put it on hold to pursue a formal, professional musical training.

With Ayo Thomas, the percussionist on 'Ayoro Voices', we started

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playing at Gboyega Aderemi's Mum's in Ife-Ife. It later led, under the guidance of former Ife professor, Yomi Durotoye, to the formation of 'the Afro Linkage Ensemble', who actually named the ensemble, and introduced us to Professors Akinwowo and Wole Soyinka, and Femi Johnson of the Broking House, Ibadan. We moved to the Cocktail Lounge of the Broking House called, Segi, and Niyi Ajayi, M.D, offered his drum set and played sometimes, and Bayo Adepetun, M.D, came from Lagos to play keyboards whenever he could.

Durotoye introduced me musically

to John Coltrane, and by the time I left Nigeria I had heard most of his works, and met a very close friend of his, Yusuf Lateef on sabbatical at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Dr. Lateef advised me to study flute in order to have a thorough grasp of the woodwind instruments. In the Sixties he had worked with Babatunde Olatunji, master of African Percussion with whom John Coltrane collaborated a few months before he passed on. (I would eventually have the opportunity to work as Olatunji's personal assistant for three years). Lateef presently lectures at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

'Segi', the cocktail lounge of Femi Johnson's Broking House, Ibadan, provided the opportunity to bring together all the friends I had performed with in the past. It gave us the opportunity to also compose new tunes on a weekly basis, sometimes we simply made new arrangements of the most popular songs and 'jazz' tunes of Nigeria and the US. I managed the alto saxophone and bata drums.

Dayo Adekola, legal practitioner and entrepreneur, who also played bass and saxophone, had his Bamboo Corner in Bodija, and Kunle Bolarinwa's 'Cave' was off Queen Elizabeth's road. They both provided alternative places for performances.

For the three years I worked as personal assistant to Olatunji, playing acoustic guitar, drums, saxophone, agogo and singing, we travelled all over Europe and Japan, and did workshops in the United States. Through him I came across the late Frank 'Suru' Eken and Sikiru Adepoju, master percussionist, who had performed with both Obey and Orlando Julius in Nigeria before relocating to the US.

'Lagbaja' also came by, spent about three weeks with me in the US when he was about to release his first musical project. We spent days discussing the social, political and spiritual situation in Nigeria, and in particular,

'new' tends in musical practice, and what should be the deeper concerns of the artist. He has since released, I believe, yet another musical album.

Inventing

There exists in my experience three main types of harmonic practice, those which one would readily find in my part of Africa; the modal use of pentatonic sounds in traditional music, Mohammedan harmony in northern Nigeria, the Islamic south, and over the entire continent itself; the major-minor harmony of Western Traditional Music, including many variations of African-American Spirituals and Gospel Music in the churches, and the combination of Western influences and traditional music in Aladura churches. On the continent, in general, similar strains abound in one form or the other irrespective of instrumentation.

However, for some years now my goal has been to explore an extension of traditional musical practice by using the sound of the modal pentatonic as the main basis for composition, and also the other predominant sounds as a reflection of

life on the continent as a whole. This then is one singular artistic venture. Many others are of course open to the inventive artist. Traditional music in general was, and still is, being composed in praise and worship of the Creator, and in honour of the 'deities' and the 'ancestors', they contain therefore a lot for the student of culture to gain from. As traditional Africans use all instruments to imitate speech patterns, and rhythmic accompaniment are also derived from that embedded in speech, the very sound which musical instruments then strive to imitate, quite a lot then is possible for an inventive artist given the range of instrumentations that is available today. But as man continues to be surrounded by all kinds of sound - finer gross material, ethereal, animistic and even spiritual, much more of which he is not aware, and which he often precipitates, thereby leading to tangible, visual and aural experiences, it became very important to gain the fullest understanding of the true meaning of music, primarily for myself, and to use parts of it which affect, inspire and impress themselves on me, personally, toward certain ends. **GR**

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