Samuel A. Floyd,

told during burial ceremonies to amuse the spirit of the deceased, for the dead, who are reported to be susceptible to humor and excitement, like trickster tales.

These stories are intimately related to the nature of African music. In the trickster tales, we find several features that appear in African storytelling and that they "share with the other African performance traditions": indirection, argument, and opposition, as well as "overlap, apart-playing, and interlock" (Abrahams 1983, 20), all of which will concern us later.

Myths generate legends, which have a historical basis that is embellished by imaginative and fictional elements. Focusing on extraordinary occurrences, legends occupy a station somewhere between myth and historical narrative. The heroes of myth often become the subjects of the legends, so it is not surprising to see characteristics of the gods in legendary heroes. Unlike myths, however, which are the stuff of African metaphysics, legends treat everyday living; they are didactic and tutorial. Myths, tales, and legends serve as inspiration and material for both African music and the ceremony and ritual of which that music is a part. With this notion in mind, we return to the ring.

The activities that took place in the ring were strictly regulated; the dances and the music were institutionalized, and the behavior of the participants was policed by dance chiefs, chief and assistant drummers, line leaders, crowd controllers, and other regulators, each of whom played specific and important roles. The choreography, music, tales, and participants, then, were focused toward the primary objective of the ceremony (Huet 1978, 12; Keil 1979, 247). In this controlled environment, Dance, Drum, and Song, together with the reciting of myths and sometimes the donning of masks, resulted in a "complicated network of elements" that reinforced the unity of the community, transcending daily life (Huet, 13). And "the effects of the drums are heightened by the simultaneous rhythmic stimulation of other sensory receptors because the participants are dancing, singing, and moving together in close proximity in a ceremonial atmosphere in which possession manifesting the presence of the gods is expected" (Walker 1972, 147). Regulated Dance, Drum, and Song was central to the order and success of ritual.

My concern here is primarily with Drum and Song, the musical components of ritual. Understanding Drum and Song as a unit is central to the proper study of the transformation of African music into African-American music; with its own elaborations and its own social, cultural, and aesthetic underpinnings. The main barrier to studying African music is similar to what in the past prevented the study of African religion. This is the assumption that since cultural practices differ widely among more than three thousand African ethnic groups, it would be futile to try to describe or characterize something called "African religion," and that to even attempt such study would be naïve. Indeed, such attitudes themselves have come to be considered naïve, as Mbiti's ([1969] 1990) study demonstrates: despite this diversity, there are underlying similarities among all African religions. For music, scholars such as Nketia (1974),

Bebey ([1969] 1975), and others have demonstrated the same. Alan Lomax (1975), for example, has demonstrated that across black Africa there exists an

> extraordinary homogeneity of African song style. . . . When most Africans sing they are non-tense, vocally; quite repetitious, textually; rather slurred in enunciation; lacking in embellishment and free rhythm; low on exclusive leadership; high on antiphony, chorally; especially high on overlapped antiphony; high on one-phrase melodies, on litany form; very cohesive, tonally and rhythmically in chorus; high on choral integration or part-singing; high on relaxed vocalizing; and highest on polyrhythmic (or hot) accompaniments.
>
> This relaxed, cohesive, multileveled, yet leader-oriented style, is distinctly African. It dominates African song from the Cape of Good Hope to the Straits of Gibraltar and west into the American colonies, and is the source and symbol of African cultural homogeneity. (46)

In sum, Lomax found that "the common stylistic thread that unites all Africans is repetitious, cohesive, overlapping or interlocked, multi-leveled, and hot," that "song style functions as a suitable symbol for and reinforcement of social norms," and that "the erotic content of Pygmy song was of service to an expanding economy that needed manpower for its growing lineages" (48, 49). African song in general is erotic because "fertility and sexual prowess are central values in African life"; African dances are "designed to educate boys and girls for their adult sexual roles in a polygynous world" (49). Lomax's survey shows that prominent in African culture is

> the use of bodily polyrhythm, in which the trunk and the pelvis of the dancer and the hands and sticks of the drummers steadily maintain two separate and conflicting meters. This twisting pelvic style (and its reflection in hot rhythm) infuses African work and play with a steady feed of pleasurable erotic stimuli. . . . The non-complex structure of text and tune and the multi-leveled structure of Pygmy-Negro performance style afford added incentives for group participation, opening the door for anyone to make a contrastive and complementary personal contribution to the whole sound. Where the whole society is needed to accomplish heavy, monotonous hand labor in intense heat, we find a communication style maximally inviting, encouraging and eroticizing participation by all present. This style was continued under slavery and now forms the baseline for the entire Afro-American tradition. (50)

Lomax's conclusions are provocative, and their implications will be explored in the chapters that follow. For now, however, let them suffice as descriptions and partial explanations of African musical style, while we take a look at what other scholars have noticed about African music.

Olly Wilson (1992a) has observed in African music what he calls a "heterogeneous sound ideal" that results from "the timbral mosaic created by the interaction between lead voice, chorus, rattle, metallic gong, hand clapping, various wind or string instruments, and drums, which exist in greater or lesser

degrees of complexity in almost all African ensemble music" (331). He goes on to say that the heterogeneous sound ideal is reflected in vocal music as well. The "extraordinary unaccompanied singing of the Dorze people of Ethiopia is characterized not only by polyphonic and canonic textures, but also by the usage of a wide range of vocal timbres that help define its stratified musical structure" (332). What Wilson is referring to here is, of course, Africans' overwhelming preference for timbres that contrast rather than blend and their adoration of the resulting "tonal mosaic" as ideal for their culture. Together, drum, rattle, bell, voice, and hand claps not only contrast but commingle—harmonize, in their own way—in a heterogeneous fusion that is unequivocally African. Such exclusive focus on this kind of mosaic was carried into the diaspora and is the sound ideal of the ring; it sonically defines ring music.

Adding Wilson's heterogeneous sound ideal to Lomax's discoveries further documents a concept of African music and expands our understanding of it. But there is more. A number of scholars have commented on the verbal and melodic basis of African rhythm. Bebey ([1969] 1975), for example, tells us that in African music, the "prime motive of the instruments is to reconstitute spoken language" (115). Nketia (1974) says that "although rhythm is the primary focus of drumming, some attention is paid to pitch level, for the aesthetic appeal of drumming lies in the rhythmic and melodic elements." (137–138). And Wilson (1992a) maintains that "the pre-existing repertoire of drum patterns used by master drummers in many African cultures is based on musical patterns derived from selected genres of oral poetry" (330). The rhythm-motives of the drums and the pitches therein, together with the contrasting timbres of the instruments, result in Wilson's "mosaics of tone color and pitch," a realization of the "heterogeneous sound ideal" (331).[3]

All the rhythmic processes to which I have referred are controlled by the time line, which Nketia (1974, 131–138) describes as an externalized pulse, usually manifested in hand clapping or in the rhythms of an idiophone such as a bell. The time line is an integral part of the music itself and is therefore usually more complex than a simple accompanying pulse; it is usually "additive or divisive . . . embodying the basic pulse or regulative beat as well as the density referent." It is against the time line that the other instruments play the multilinear rhythms that yield the exciting interlocking, cross-rhythmic, and polyrhythmic configurations of African music. What Nketia calls the "time line," Jones (1959) terms "background rhythm," pointing out that it is most

3. The effectiveness of pitch changes in African drumming is especially evident in the dance drumming recorded by John Miller Chernoff on *Master Drummers of Dagbon* (1984), particularly on "Lua," "Kurugu Kpoa," and "Zuu-Waa." The last cut is also a good example of polyrhythmic and cross-rhythmic drumming. The recording *Songs and Instrumental Music of Tanganyika* in Decca's Music of Africa series is also a good source of examples.

frequently played by a clapperless bell called the *gankogui:* "the foundation *par excellence* of the background rhythm section—which usually plays steadily and continuously right through a dance" (1:52–53). Jones gives the following example of a background rhythm (or time line):

Gankogui

8va

Clap

Resultant

GO-dzi GO-GO dzi GO · dzi GO · dzi.

Jones (1959, 1:54) points out that the practice of having an idiophone lay the foundation rhythm of a musical performance is common in West Africa and goes on to describe how the other foundation instruments relate to the rhythm of the time line. His transcription of an Adzida Dance (2:112–133) is illustrative, particularly in its first section (Club Dance) where the instruments enter one after the other (Example 1). In this case, the *high atoke* (gong) sets the time line, but in subsequent sections, the *gankogui* takes it (for the complete transcription, see 2:112–167). The multilinear rhythms in such performances, played in a heterogeneous instrumental environment of "sonority contrasts," result in what Nketia (1974) calls "little tunes" (137–138). I shall return to these concepts again as we traverse the transformation of African music into African-American music and its development.

I have made much of the ritual context of African music, but ritual was not the traditional African's only avenue for self-expression and communal expression through music. Play, sport, work, relaxation, the everyday events and vicissitudes of life, and other periodic interactions of living were accompanied by and expressed in musical forms ranging from the simple to the complex. Songs of satire, love, praise, play, mockery, insult, celebration, morality, patriotism, war, nonritual dance, and exorcism were all part of the African musical experience and were performed vocally and instrumentally, the last on a large variety of idiophones, aerophones, membranophones, and chordophones. In these media, traditional African music made use, variously, of a musical vocabulary that included melodic monophony, heterophony, and polyphony; parallel thirds; "tongue clicks, suction stops, explosive endings, throaty gurgles"; overlapping call-and-response events; and "hand-clapping

with off-beat syncopation" (Kebede 1982, 45, 50, 131).[4] Styles ranged from the simple monophony of Watusi warriors to the complex melodic polyphony of the Pygmies of Central Africa. African song is related to African calls, in which "peasants melodically call to each other to announce an emergency or news considered important to villagers, to fix a time to go to market, to organize a work gang to farm the land of a sick neighbor, and just to convey greetings to a friend. Calls travel long distances, echoing over mountains and hills" (130).

Scholars seem to agree that the aim of African music has always been to translate the experiences of life and of the spiritual world into sound, enhancing and celebrating life through cradle songs, songs of reflection, historical songs, fertility songs, songs about death and mourning, and other song varieties. Singers of songs, accompanied and unaccompanied, made use of "a mellow tone to welcome a new bride; a husky voice to recount an indiscrete adventure; a satirical inflection for a teasing tone, with laughter bubbling up to compensate for the mockery—they may be soft or harsh as circumstances demand" (Bebey [1969] 1975, 120). Such expression and communication was facilitated by the fact that African music emerges from

> the intonations and rhythmic onomatopoeia of speech. . . . African voices are used to echo the speech and thoughts of the people as faithfully as possible without embellishment. Their technique is a quest for truth. An African singer will stutter if he is singing about a stammerer or will literally attempt to tie his tongue in knots when he has something difficult to say. He cups his hand over his ears to discover unusual sonorities and reproduces them with a dexterity that amazes and delights his listeners. The African singer alternates head and chest voice like a game of hide-and-seek in a labyrinth of rhythm. Every note that he sings is a reflection of life itself and his technique is amply suited to his role of depicting life. His voice recreates a world of laughter and pain, mockery and praise; and it throws open the gates of time to reveal a glimpse of the future. (129, 132)

Nketia (1974) agrees with Bebey, pointing out that Africans "treat songs as speech utterances," inspired, perhaps, by "the importance of the song as an avenue of verbal communication, a medium for creative verbal expression which can reflect both personal and social experiences," by the influence of the verbal texts themselves, and by the prospect of enhancing musical expression through prosodic analogies (177, 178). This accounts, to some degree, for an African performance style characterized by "rapid delivery of texts, explosive sounds or special interjections, vocal grunts, and even the whisper"

4. As Komla Amoaku counsels, "You cannot separate any of these from that all-encompassing world view that does not separate the sacred from the profane, no matter how simple or complex the music" (personal correspondence). For more on Amoaku's African views and scholarship, see Amoaku (1975).

in their musical performances (189). It also accounts for the African's expectation that a musician would make up texts extemporaneously and then set texts to tunes and tunes to words. And this expectation and practice also characterized instrumental music, in which mnemonics were used for teaching and memorizing rhythms and nonsense syllables were employed as "verbal scores" (188). Nketia even speculates that multimeters and additive rhythms were "derived from the treatment of speech rhythms in vocal music" (188). He also calls attention to the use of "speech surrogates": "clan name or praise poems may be played on drums, or the lead trumpeter of a trumpet ensemble may call the names of members of the ensemble in his introductory solos" (235). And through all of this, the traditional African musician was concerned strictly with the artistic merit of his performance, not with the technique he used to render it. He paid little attention to technique, since it was "very much a matter of individual taste" (Bebey [1969] 1975, 132).

The musical artistry of Africans supported their ritual in a profoundly mystical universe, a universe in which African peoples sought union with the invisible—God, lesser gods, spirits, and the living-dead—a universe in which "the use of euphemism, symbol, allegory, and secret" were a normal part of the oral expression of society (Zahan [1970] 1979, 114, 154). Understanding this universe is important if one wishes to understand African music either for its own sake or as the antecedent of African-American music. Elements of African ritual, myth, and legend reside in, are supported by, and parallel those of African Dance, Drum, and Song. These elements and relationships will serve as points of departure and reference, guides to inquiry and analysis, and foundations for the development of a new critical theory of African-American music, as we traverse the transformation and development of the transplanted African musical tradition.

In concluding this chapter, I would like to address briefly the communal context in which Dance, Drum, and Song took place in traditional Africa. Dance, Drum, and Song was inseparable from the traditional communities in which it existed—communities in which social and cultural conformity and egalitarianism prevailed, in which extraordinary individual achievement and the failure to live up to one's social obligations were interpreted as hostility toward the community (Davidson 1969, 66). Simultaneously, however, the artistic boundaries of the community, even within its highly controlled ritualistic system, were stretched by the creativity of individual members of the community, particularly by the master drummers and by the venerable griots, who were virtuosi on a variety of musical instruments. The coexistence of these apparently contradictory processes—discouragement of exceptional achievement, on the one hand, and the veneration of it, on the other—was possible

because of the prevalence of what Davidson has described as a sense of "controlled freedom" in which "an inner tension and creativeness . . . emerged in artistic triumphs that were morally inspired" (66–67, 68). This controlled freedom took place within a moral order in which daily interdependence was the normal state of affairs. It was, in Davidson's words, a "robustly collective" society. Based on collective responsibility, it was a society in which exceptional individual achievement was expected to serve the community. This was its moral imperative. The moral order was maintained through the telling of tales and myths and through ritual; it was enforced by chiefs, elders, secret societies, and the general community.

Clearly, traditional African communities, insofar as they conformed to the general description outlined here, were more concerned with the community than the individual and had rules whose primary purpose was the protection of the society. Musical innovation did take place in these nonindividualistic communities, and these innovations were easily assimilated into the prevailing system. The reason for this easy absorption was that innovations were not subversive; they were made on the verges of existing performance practices. It is in this context that a critical system evolved, as evidenced by the fact that

> dancers were celebrated not because they knew the steps—practically everyone knew the steps—but because they danced them supremely well. Drummers were admired for the rhythms they could hear and play, rhythms so complex that an unskilled listener like myself cannot even recognize them. . . . There was an exacting scale of achievement; and the criteria were aesthetic. (Davidson 1969, 163)

And it was against such a scale that individual competition took place, with rhyming games and other competitions prevalent in communal African societies.

In traditional African society we thus find a complex, flexible, and dynamic religious and aesthetic system based on intricate moral and artistic beliefs and practices, all governed by societal structures and procedures. The religious system included ideas that we recognize as both monotheistic and polytheistic, with the former subsuming the latter. It was a system that, instead of opposing good and evil, recognized a single power capable of both. It was this system, with its moral and aesthetic supports, that would most fundamentally determine the emergence and course of African-American music.

CHAPTER 2

Transformations

You cannot escape God. You will meet him in foreign lands.
Namibian proverb

The music, yearning like a God in pain . . .
John Keats

In the late nineteenth century, George Washington Cable watched an exhibition that took place in New Orleans's Place Congo, later to be known as Congo Square.[1] African slaves were engaged in their usual Sunday recreation, performing transplanted African dances with musical accompaniments. Cable's ([1886] 1969b) striking and informative narrative is so engaging that I will quote from it at length:

> The gathering throng closed in around, leaving unoccupied the circle indicated by the crescent of musicians. The short, harsh turf was the dancing-floor. The crowd stood. . . . The pack of dark, tattered figures [was] touched off every here and there with . . . bright colors. . . . [There stood] the squatting cross-legged musicians . . . grassy plain

1. Since writing the introduction to this chapter, I have come across information demonstrating that Cable's description was constructed from others' first-hand knowledge of such events (Starr 1995, 41; Turner 1956, 227–233). But I have chosen to leave my statements as I have written them, since Cable's description, although imaginative, conforms to the essentials of actual reported accounts of such activities.