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African Drumming: An Examination of Drumming in Ghana, Its Intentions, and Application in Music Therapy Practice

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Abstract

Drumming is a phenomenon that is found in many cultures throughout the world. Although each culture has a different use and intention in which drumming is incorporated, there are many common elements that overlap between the various groups. Because of the versatility of drumming, it is widely used as a therapeutic intervention in music therapy. Understanding the uses and intentions of drumming in other cultures can help music therapists to broaden their understanding of drumming. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the value of African drumming and to see how it relates to the use and intent of drumming in music therapy practice. While participating in the International Student Exchange Program through Utah State University, I attended the University of Ghana for the Fall 2012 semester. Research on African drumming was collected through enrollment in classes such as: drumming, dance, traditional African ensemble, music academic courses, and private drumming instruction. Other information was also collected through cultural observations, interviews, and educational material. There were three main overlaps that were found between drumming as it is used for therapeutic purposes in music therapy and African drumming as it is found in Ghana: non-verbal communication, self-expression and improvisation, and group support and unity. An exploration of these commonalities may further enable music therapists to bridge the gap between cultures and gain understanding of how multicultural music is incorporated in a therapeutic setting.

Introduction

The healing power of music has been documented for thousands of years. Merrian (1975) stated that "Egyptians called music the 'physic for the soul'... the Ancient Hebrews used music in cases both of physical and mental disturbance... Pythagoras directed that music be used to cure mental disorders" (p. 111). The use of music for healing has also been documented to help people with mental or psychological disorders in the devil-dancing ceremonies of the Asian countries such as Sri Lanka. Music used in the dramatic stage performances in Bali was found to help the "unnatural psychological cravings of a pregnant woman" (Mendis, 1981, p. 10-11). These are just a few examples of many throughout history of the use of music for therapeutic purposes.

As this idea of musical healing developed throughout history, another musical practice was developing right alongside it – drumming. The use of drumming, along with its varying performance techniques and purposes, can be found in cultures throughout the world. In the history of the Sioux Native American tribe they used the drum for "dance, song, and story-telling... to help unite the people... reinforce group identity... sound the call for war... and relay messages from tribe to tribe" (Ash, 2001, p. 13). Those who participate in the practices of shamanism, a historically developed belief that involves a practitioner reaching altered states of consciousness in order to encounter and interact with the spirit world, are able to reach the trance state through the sound that is produced by frame drums (Redmond, 1997).

In the twentieth century more documented research has been accumulated to show the effects of music on an individual's physical and emotional health. Diserens (1926) showed that music had an influence on respiration and blood circulation and pressure in the brain. In Great Britian, Nordoff and Robbins (1971) found that group music therapy and "active participation or

involvement in musical performances or musical dramas" (p. 239-240) was effective in helping children with disabilities to reduce their feelings of isolation and failure.

Eventually the interest grew in the formalized practice of using music as a therapeutic medium. This growth led to the development of music therapy as a profession-degreed program. Music therapy is the use of music to achieve non-musical goals within a therapeutic setting. As with other models of therapy, music therapists have goals and objectives and use music to accomplish those objectives. For example, singing familiar music can be used to maintain cognitive functioning in clients with Alzheimer's disease. Musical activities can also be used in helping children with behavior problems to teach them social skills such as sharing and taking turns.

Drumming, like other percussion styles, has its place and purpose within music therapy. The idea of intentional drumming, or using the drum to achieve an underlying purpose, is very evident in the practice of music therapy today. The idea of having an underlying intention behind drumming is not a new concept. When examined at a closer level, the purposes of drumming can be identified within each cultural group where drumming is found. Those purposes have ties with that culture's historical and present practices.

Current Research of Drumming in Music Therapy

One class of instruments that is used in music therapy is drums. The types of drums that are most commonly used in a music therapy setting include: djembes, paddle drums, bongos, and frame drums. Drumming can be used to promote non-verbal communication, self-expression and improvisation, and group unity and support. These goals, along with the wide variety of drumming techniques, can be implemented in the therapeutic setting through the use of individual and group drumming.

Drumming, because of its versatility, has been shown to be an effective medium for music therapists in a variety of settings. Drumming can be used in addressing many goals. Within special education setting where students have a variety of capabilities and needs, drumming can be adapted to meet their specific situation so that the student can feel successful (Fidyk, 2010). A large amount of stress can be found in substance abuse rehabilitation programs and the use of drumming has been found to reduce tension and anxiety and induce relaxation (Winkelman, 2003).

Improvisatory models using drumming have been documented as being successful in teaching social and communication skills and appropriate expression of emotions to adult male sex offenders (Watson, 2002). In Slotoroff's (1994) research investigating drumming with trauma survivors, it is stated that "drums are frequently symbols of power and are thus well-suited for use with issues of assertiveness and anger" (p. 112). These are just a few examples of recent research where drumming was used as an effective intervention in music therapy. There are still many populations in which research examining the effectiveness of drumming is recommended. The many uses and purposes of drumming in the music therapy setting make it a valuable focus of study.

Need For African Drumming Research

There are many ways in which music therapy students and music therapists can increase their understanding about the intentions of drumming and drumming techniques. The idea of having an underlying intention or purpose in drumming is a global idea. One way to narrow this idea is to focus on one culture and its use of drumming and then compare the musical drumming in that culture with drumming interventions used in music therapy. There was one specific drum that I noticed was frequently used in music therapy and found throughout Africa – the *djembe*. It

was this observation that spiraled into the thought that there must be more similarities than just the type of drums that were used between the two groups. There could possibly be musical, technical, and purposeful similarities between drumming in music therapy and Africa.

Bebey (1975) encouraged readers from Western cultures to study African music more seriously:

> The Westerner who wished to understand the authentic music of Africa must be willing to reject the notion that it is 'primitive' music consisting merely of rhythmic noises. This simple act of rejection will 'open his ears' and allow him to discover gradually that African music in many respects resembles his own. Slowly, he can begin to pinpoint those differences which, if comprehended correctly, may enrich universal culture (p. 2).

Discovering the hidden overlaps between the purposes of African drumming and drumming as an effective intervention used by music therapists can be a key to uncovering more intervention techniques that can be used in the therapeutic setting. This connection can help music therapists better understand drumming and gain an awareness of how and why drumming is used in other cultures throughout the world. After spending one semester investigating and learning the different aspects of African drumming (as found in Ghana), I concluded that there are three main commonalities that African drumming has with the therapeutic uses of drumming in music therapy. These overlapping ideas have been defined in the following groups: non-verbal communication, self-expression and improvisation, and group support and unity.

Each of these overlapping ideas have been identified as goals by music therapists that can be achieved through various drumming implementations and are found in the purpose of the musical performance of African drumming. The following findings will examine each of these areas of overlap in the context of the intentions of African drumming, the historical and current

practice of drumming found in Ghana, and how an understanding of the purposes and elements of African drumming can be incorporated in the implementation of drumming in music therapy.

Non-Verbal Communication

Of the wide variety of tribal and cultural languages found throughout West Africa, many of them are characterized as being tonal languages (Carrington, 1949). These tonal languages have specific high or low pitches that are associated with the pronunciation of a word. This characteristic of tonality in speech was evident to me as I studied the Twi language spoken by the Akan people in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. The spoken word is not the only way in which people can communicate. For hundreds of years, African musicians have incorporated the natural sounds of speech into the production of music (Bebey, 1975).

Historically, and as found in some areas of West Africa today, many tribes and villages are spread far apart from one another with a great distance in between each community. Because of this great distance and the absence of technological developments, the people used musical instruments such as *aerophones* (horns, trumpets), *membranophones* (drums), and *idiophones* (metal bells and clappers) to "convey signals and verbal messages" (Nketia, 1992, p. 69, 97). These instruments are capable of multiple tones or "pitches" and have been used to imitate speech when transmitting messages across long distances where travel is often difficult (Carrington, 1949; Jones, 1959). The master drummer for the dance department in the School of Performing Arts at the University of Ghana, stated that "most drum songs have traditional words associated with the beats that convey a message" (Akotuah, personal communication, December 14, 2012). These musical messages communicate information such as: warning signals, announcing the death of an individual, calling for the people to gather, emphasizing and directing the movements of dancers, and marking certain parts of a ritual or ceremony (Nketia, 1963).

Specifically focusing on the purpose of drums, the sounds made by these instruments can take the place of speech as a form of non-verbal communication within a society. This musical quality gives the drum a "symbolic and representational purpose" (Nketia, 1992, p. 90). Two specific examples of drums that are used in African music as a form of non-verbal communication are the *atumpan* (talking drums) and the *dunno* (hourglass drum). The *atumpan* are drums played by the Akan, Asante, and Ewe people in Ghana. The *atumpan* is a set of two large drums that are slanted and supported so that the sound can resonate out of the open-ended bottom. The first is the high-pitched female drum called *atumpan* and the second is the low-pitched male drum called the *akasaa* (Carrington, 1949). These drums are played by one musician with two sticks that have a sharp bend on the end (looks like the number 7). Because this set of drums has two pitches, there can be many different combinations of tone sets created when playing these drums (Nketia, 1963). The main purpose and use of the *atumpan* drums is for long distance communication between differing villages and areas.

The *dunno* is an hourglass shaped drum found in many countries throughout East and West Africa (Nketia, 1992). It is hollow on the inside and covered with a membrane on both ends. It is played with a stick that is slightly curved and has a flat nob on the end. The *dunno* is a tension drum that has tight strings surrounding the hourglass-shaped wood. Because the strings are attached to the stretched membrane, the musician is able to change the pitch of the drum as tension is added to the strings (Nketia, 1963). I first learned how to play the *dunno* drum during my studies abroad at the University of Ghana. Our instructor asked us to communicate our first name by playing the drum with the appropriate tension. My name, *Marti*, contains two tones. The first tone, low-high, can be played by increasing tension on the drum gradually as it is sounded. Then the second tone, low, is played by releasing the tension on the strings. Because of

the versatile sounds that the *dunno* can make, it is a perfect instrument for both imitating the tones of speech and for the method of non-verbal communication.

Even beyond speech, drumming can have the intent of taking the place of words and expressing ideas when words are not necessary. Bebey (1975) truly understood this concept when he wrote:

> A real conversation takes place between the musical instruments and the men who made them, a dialogue between music and its creator – man. This intimate union between man and art is rare outside of Africa. It amounts to a total communion that is shared by the whole community (p. 12).

Self-Expression and Improvisation

The aim of an African musician "is simply to express life in all of its aspects through the medium of sound" (Bebey, 1975, p. 3). As will be discussed in greater detail in the next section, music within African communities finds it place within social events. Because of the place that music has in the community, the text or style of the music reflects both personal and social experiences (Nketia, 1992). These expressions are evident and can be seen in music, singing, and dancing.

Drumming is one way in which a musician can employ many different improvised and expressive rhythms. These variations can come in the form of rhythm, tone, or a combination of both. As for the tone of the drum, "a drummer can achieve a variety (of tones) by simply changing the patterns of tone he is using while keeping to one rhythmic figure, and vice versa" (Nketia, 1963, p. 99). The change in rhythms comes as a "set of free variations which are the spontaneous creation of the master drummer" (Jones, 1959, p. 9). For most of the patterns found in drum ensembles, there is a basic rhythm that each drummer learns at the beginning of his

musical education. When a drummer becomes more experienced, he can integrate the variations of rhythm or tone as a form of improvisation while still maintaining the foundational patterns that hold the ensemble group together.

Another instrument that I was introduced to during my studies is the *djembe*. This instrument, natively found in Senegal, has been integrated into drumming instruments used by Ghanaians and is mainly used for improvisation. As discussed in the previous paragraph, there is a basic rhythm foundation on which an ensemble of *djembe* drumming can begin. Once these basic rhythms have been mastered, the drummer is free to improvise within the bounds of the ensemble. In our class, we learned many different variations of rhythms that we can mix-and-match as we each improvised on our own drum rhythms. We were able to feel like an important part of the ensemble group as well as experience individuality through improvisation.

Group Support and Unity

Within traditional African societies, the process of music making is usually structured as a social event. According to Nketia (1992), these social events such as games, sports, feasts, festivals, social ceremonies, and religious rites have the following intent:

> To bring the members of a community together to provide an important means of encouraging involvement in collective behavior, a means of strengthening the social bonds that bind them and the values that inspire their corporate life. The degree of social cohesion in such communities is usually very strong (p. 21-22).

Although individuals can make and create music, it is more emphasized as a group activity. Members of the same tribe, village, or ethnic group come together to participate in different social events in which music is an integral part of the experience.

Music is not just an accompaniment to the main event that is taking place; without the music provided, the community event would not be complete (Bebey, 1975). Nketia (1992) gives three purposes of the performance of music within the community: (1) provide an opportunity for sharing in creative experience; (2) participate in music as a form of community experience; (3) avenue for expression of group sentiments (p. 22). These three purposes focus on group cohesion and unity. The music has the power to bring people together and to provide an experience where they can feel one another's support. The art of music making has been described as an event in a community where "a shared joy is doubled, a shared sorrow is halved" (Fiagbedzi, personal communication, August 27, 2012). Whether it be a celebration of the youth going through the puberty rites or the grieving of a chief who has recently died, both the joy and sorrow is experienced by the members of the community, bonding them together as they create the music for the various events.

When looking specifically at drumming within the various African social events, an ensemble of drummers is often used to provide the supporting music. The ensemble performers themselves need to exhibit the same type of group unity and support that is seen within the community. "Unity within the (drum) group is essential and crucial" (Akotuah, personal communication, December 14, 2012). Each rhythmic pattern found in the drum ensemble is one part of the whole. In the drum ensembles found in Ghana, the foundation is established by the bell instrument. This *idiophone* provides a constant unchanging beat that all of the other parts reference. There may also be a *rattle* that is played that matches the rhythm of the bell to reinforce the foundational beat pattern. Then the lesser and intermediate drums play their own set of rhythms that compliment and interlock with one another. In the ensembles that I witnessed, there were usually two supporting drum parts that were employed, each one having its own

unique rhythm that interconnected with the rhythm of the bell. The final piece of the ensemble is the master drum. The master drum is the most important part of the ensemble. It is the most elaborate and "carries the main rhythms that characterize the particular music or dance" (Nketia, 1963, p. 101).

"Though when viewed individually the parts of a drum ensemble may appear to be independent, they are in fact like the parts of a mosaic. Each one contributes to the complex whole" (Nketia, 1963, p. 101). All of the parts of the drum ensemble are intertwined. They cannot be separated from one another. Initially a musician might learn one part of the ensemble separately in order to know how to play each of the different rhythms on its own. This will help the performer come to understand the aspects about each rhythmic part and how they fit together. The drummers in the ensemble are unified because they must relate to and reference the other performers and their drumming parts during the entire musical performance.

Implications For Use of African Drumming in Music Therapy Practice

The research has indicated that there is a definite overlap between the purposes of drumming in Africa and the purposes of drumming in music therapy. Now that this connection has been discovered, it is important to understand what implications this has for music therapy and the use of drumming in sessions. Three main recommendations are given for how music therapists can increase their learning and awareness about African drumming and about its importance and relation to the field of music therapy.

One recommendation that is currently being implemented is for national, region, and state music therapy organizations and associations to continue to provide opportunities for music therapists to learn about African drumming. This can be done during the various conferences that are held throughout the year. There are many performing groups, professors, or musicians

throughout the country who have knowledge about drumming in Africa as well as other drumming techniques. These individuals should be sought out and involved within the networking circles of music therapy professionals. The more opportunities that music therapists have to be exposed to African drumming, the more it will help in building a stronger connection between the two groups of people. This would also provide a way for music therapists to continue to increase their education and knowledge about multi-cultural music and the place that it has within the field of music therapy.

Another recommendation that can be drawn from this research is that music therapy undergraduate or graduate programs need to offer a percussion techniques class that is dedicated specifically to more eclectic and multi-cultural forms of drumming. Although I have had extensive musical instruction, my former lack of percussion training added to my anxiety about performing in or leading drumming interventions. I now feel comfortable and confident in my ability to play a drum correctly and teach others how to play in a therapeutic setting because of the drumming courses in which I participated. Adding a multi-cultural percussion course to the music therapy curriculum can dramatically increase the students' level of their percussion skills.

Finally, the last recommendation that can be made is that the research on multi-cultural music must continue and extend beyond what has been investigated here. As more exploration and discoveries are made about multi-cultural music, music therapists can become more informed concerning how to implement it in a therapeutic setting. This cultural awareness can be a key in moving forward towards an understanding about music around the world, its intentions, and the applications that it has in music therapy practice.

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