

African Drumming Becomes a World-wide Phenomenon

In many Western societies, institutions are adopted from pagan cultures by isolating them from their original cultural context and practising them as social amusement or even to promote a mystical experience. The recipient community regards such institutions, e.g. African drumming, as a form of cultural enrichment without considering the religious compromise that is inevitably involved in the process.

It is important to grasp the principle that in pagan religions, such as the African religions, cultural dances, music, the ritual beating of drums and the use of masks to identify with mystical persons, spirits or gods, all form part of their religion. Even the narration of stories often dwells upon religious themes such as myths of origin and the animistic belief that material objects are infested with spirits or supernatural powers that can positively or negatively influence people's lives.

According to traditional African beliefs, human life is actively and frequently influenced by the following two types of supernatural powers:

Personal supernatural powers as represented by people's ancestral spirits. These spirits demand obedience to tribal traditions by their living kin and also acts of devotion to deceased relatives through prayers, dances and sacrifices. Compliance to their demands leads to blessings while non-compliance evokes the anger of the ancestors which manifests as diseases or various other misfortunes. Some people are chosen by the spirits to become diviners and traditional healers. This leads to a more active association with the spirits, in which the latter act as divining spirits. The spirits are often invoked to possess a learner-diviner through ritual dances and the beating of drums.

Impersonal supernatural powers of witchcraft and healing. These powers are used by people who have been trained in the dark secrets of witchcraft aimed at harming others ("black magic" or "magic of the night") or in the socially acceptable practising of occult powers to counter and break the malevolent

powers of witchcraft and sorcery (“white magic” or “magic of the day”). The diviners and traditional healers who practise the latter rely on their ancestral spirits to guide them in the process of divination. The spirits are often summoned by the beating of drums.

Modern interest in traditional religions

One of the characteristics of the emerging postmodern culture in many countries is a keen interest in and commitment to reviving aspects of premodern cultures and religions. The ideologies of modern times, notably secular humanism, socialism, and capitalism, have, by their secular approaches, deprived humanity of true spirituality. Even Christianity has been adapted to suit modern man, with some theologians shamelessly stating that you do not need to be a believer when making a study of the Bible. Theology was reduced to a mere social science, and many churches ended up as social clubs for nominal Christians – those who only have a form of godliness but denying its spiritual power (2 Tim. 3:5).

In postmodern society, various methods are applied to fill this spiritual void. Some churches have adopted a “new spirituality” based upon dreams, visions, signs, wonders and prophecies by specially “anointed” prophets. Others have turned to psychological techniques of personal transformation, while some have taken their refuge in the revival of mystical techniques such as medieval contemplative prayer. But there is also a growing number of “believers” who borrow techniques of spiritual expression from pagan religions.

Educationists are also following suit by adopting ideas and practices from the primal religions to give spiritual content to multireligious studies. The University of South Africa published a book (*Primal Religions Worldwide*, 1992) in which the author, S.A. Thorpe, says:

“It was my desire to utilise such a book as prescribed material for undergraduate students enrolled for the descriptive division of primal religions in a religious studies course... I believe that those of us who come from a western Christian background have impoverished ourselves by a refusal to acknowledge the enrichment which primal religious traditions could give our own religious

perspectives... It is not uncommon for prayer to take forms beyond mere verbal expressions. Since prayer is a means of maintaining communication with the spiritual realm, actions as well as speech may be viewed as prayer forms. Dancing for example, is commonly practised in this way in many world areas... The practising of various art forms, such as painting or carving wooden objects such as masks, can also be viewed as a means of maintaining communication with the divine and thus as forms of prayer. Music, often highly rhythmic drumming or clapping, can be viewed in the same light."

Mystical theories and practices of the New Age Movement are to a large extent responsible for introducing a new kind of spirituality to educational systems *and* many churches. There are clear efforts in many schools to re-establish our unity with earth and spirit. Multicultural, global, environmental, and arts education teach children the occult formulas that once linked the world's shamans, voodoo priests and medicine men to their respective spirit guides. While words will differ from culture to culture, the pagan practices within earth-centered traditions are similar around the world.

Training and workshops

The interest in African drumming has exploded into a modern fad in many countries of the Western World. A Google search on "African drumming" would reveal the multiple organisations that offer training courses and workshops on this subject. From these sources, various applications of African drumming are evident. The following are the major categories, formulated in the way in which they are usually presented:

Spirit Drum – Drum Spirit: We will explore the spiritual aspect of drumming by getting in touch with our soul. We will learn to play rhythms for ritual and meditation from different traditions world-wide and will also explore our personal rhythms within our souls. This workshop is suitable for total beginners as well as for drummers with some experience. Drums available.

Playing with Time – a Drumming Meditation: Take your time to discover and feel the magic of slow and healing rhythms within you as well as to learn ritual

drumming from different traditions. Listen to your heartbeat and breath. Become one with your drum, playing meditative rhythms. Relax and enjoy!

Trance and Ritual Drumming: Truly beyond words, to be experienced! We will play rhythms from different spiritual traditions, suitable for total beginners and drummers on the spiritual path. Drums available.

Shamanic Journey: Shamanism is the oldest belief system on earth practised by tribal people who live(d) in harmony with nature. In this workshop we will use drumming, chanting, movement and safe trance-techniques to communicate with the spirit-world and the invisible forces to bring about positive change, healing and well-being.

Tibetan Singing Bowls and Sound Healing: The ancient Tibetan Singing Bowls produce soft sounds and powerful vibrations, which we will use for meditation, healing and sound massage to restore harmony in ourselves.

One of the many training programmes is discussed by Audrey Pia. She says:

SOUL (an acronym for Spirit Of Universal Love) is an Evanston based educational agency, which provides enrichment programmes to schools to promote life skills, creative expression and cultural fluency through the arts. SOUL's Executive Director, Gilo Kwesi Logan, is a native Evanstonian who earned an M.A. from National-Louis University. He founded SOUL after travelling for more than five years across four continents and more than twenty countries exploring the world's diverse cultures and lifestyles. The programme introduces students to the fundamentals of African musical concepts and provides an exciting multi-cultural experience.

Gilo and fellow instructor Yahkwob Kouyate met with students in grades second through fifth in one hour workshops. Each student was provided with an authentic African drum, called a Djembe. "Baba Gilo" and "Baba Yahkwob," as they asked the children to call them (Baba means father), began each drumming session with a brief lesson in African musical and cultural history. Students learned that the Djembe is carved from a single block of wood with a goatskin

drum head and is used as a musical instrument, a ceremonial object and a means of communication. During the workshops students learned the fundamentals of African drumming – slapping and tapping the Djembe to produce “the slap”, “the tone” and “the bass” sounds.

As Baba Gilo noted, playing the Djembe is not as easy as it looks. Students called upon a number of skills including concentration, listening and teamwork. Each class went on to learn a particular percussion rhythm, each with a specific meaning. For example, Ms. Wood's fourth grade learned a rhythm called “Kasunde” (Rites of Passage), used to celebrate life-stage rituals. Ms. Cucinotta's class learned a rhythm called “Bass Bass Tone Tone” (Simplicity). Other rhythms expressed emotions as Ms. Rappin's class performed “Forokaba” (Happy Time), and Ms. Astor's class learned “Heartbeat” (Feeling).

The residency culminated with a performance in the Weinstein Auditorium. Students entered the auditorium chanting “Egun Alafia” (“Thanks be to our ancestors... may they live on through us”). Each class in turn took to the stage to show off their drumming skills. The rhythm of the drums was irresistible, and the audience of parents, relatives and students was soon clapping along. Given that each class had only 3-4 total hours of instruction, the level of precision they achieved was remarkable.

Internet resources

There are many organisations with websites, magazines and workshops that are promoting various aspects of the art of African drumming. On the website www.experienceafrica.co.uk the cultural significance of the Djembe and Ngoma drums is explained:

“Drums in Africa are used as sacred instruments and there is a lot of importance attached to them. They are used in healing ceremonies, in rites of passage, in naming ceremonies, on social occasions like weddings, on harvest parties and the celebration of seasons like rain after a period of drought. Drums are also used as tools for communication.” Drumming always has cultural significance in the context in which it is practised.

On the website, www.alternativeculture.com the phenomenon of drumming is explained as something which harmonises with the rhythms of nature and helps us to attune to the cosmic world and its flow of creative and healing energy:

"The drum is a heartbeat of creation, and represents our connection with mother earth and the beat of the sea, the pounding surf, the wing-beats of migrating birds, the turning of the seasons, and the sound of our own breath... The drum heals our connection with each other when we play it together. It brings to our attention to what works between us and what doesn't. It shows us exactly where and how we harmonize and where we don't. It makes us attune to the invisible world of the energy between us: this becomes more important than what we think we see, what we wish for or regret. What's real is happening right now, in the moving moment. And when it's gone, we have only to look for the next moment to get back on; this time we ride."

Directives are also given for a trance dance: "It is intended as a community ritual. We need to do this every three months at each midpoint between solstice and equinox. The key for both dancers and drummers is consistency: to go all night with the same steps, the same rhythms. In this repetition and commitment comes the opportunity for trance, forgetting oneself in the power of the whole." The rhythm of drumming is thus also a meditative tool which assists transcendence to a cosmic consciousness, or trance experience, in which people enter a different consciousness.

From the many workshops on African drumming it is obvious that the esoteric and religious significance of this practice is consistently explained and encouraged by instructors. Because drumming always promotes a mystical experience of some nature it is now commonly used as a method to unite the diverse peoples of our planet on a spiritual level.

Unity and prosperity

During the past few years, drumming is increasingly practised on a global scale to promote unity, peace and prosperity on earth. The South African organisation, *One World Beat*, organised an event on Saturday 6th May 2006, which was advertised as follows: "*Drumming in One World Beat* is an event where we are

uniting people around the world in one hour of drumming in unison – getting together in a true global village of drumming! It is the first time the drumming event is this big in our country. To imagine the whole world beating the drums at the same hour, for one hour! Bring your own drum. We trust the Lord for a breakthrough – not in our own lives alone, but also in our prayers for a prosperous Africa.” The drumming itself is meant to be the prayer for unity and prosperity in the global village. This is an extreme form of religious syncretism!

Wild passions

However, in many societies across the world drumming in general – including African drumming – is also used to stir up wild passions, even to the extent of causing chaos and corrupting society under the influence a false god. Babatunde Olatunji (www.alternativeculture.com) says, “The Creator wants us to drum. He wants us to corrupt the world with drum, dance and chants. After all, we have already corrupted the world with power and greed – which hasn’t gotten us anywhere – now’s the time to corrupt the world with drum, dance and chants.”

A number of experts who investigated the origins of rock music have often expressed the view that there is a connection between the “evil beat” of rock music and certain forms of African drumming. They both have a psychological effect of brainwashing on people, as well as the arousing of strange feelings and wild passions. African slaves introduced this kind of drumming to North America. Their religious worship was based on drums and dancing, a practice which was continued in their host countries.

Conclusions

African drumming can hardly be estranged from its cultural context and practised merely as a kind of amusement. This fact is borne out by the many workshops and training programmes in which the deeper significance of drumming in the various African cultures are fully explained to students. Its wide range of functions include the promotion of harmony with your inner self, with other people and with nature, relaxation and healing from stress, the invoking of spirit guides and the promotion of cosmic energy flow, an aid to meditation and the attaining of trances, and also, in more aggressive styles of drumming, the

arousing of various wild passions. The latter may even take the form of revolt against society and its norms.

It may still prove to be a very costly exercise in traditional Christian societies of the West to experiment with alternative lifestyles rooted in cultures which are not embedded in Christian civilisation. The alternative healing, alternative medicine, alternative spirituality and alternative musical forms of these "other" cultures are all expressions of a mystical, pagan spirituality which is distinctly antichristian, emerging from camouflaged occult influences of the kingdom of darkness.

Only people who are not truly committed to biblical Christianity would dare to venture on the wicked ways of pagan cultures. But in doing so, strong delusion will come upon them, which will blind them to the light of the gospel (2 Cor. 4:3-4).

Prof. Johan Malan