

Reconstructing African music history: methods and results

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SUMMARY

Both African musical instruments and musical structures form continent-wide patterns, although there have been few attempts to link to these to reconstructions of prehistory. A large database of information on present-day societies and a new appreciation of linguistic evolution makes it possible to correlate these with other sources of prehistory. The paper examines two examples in detail: the history of the arched harp, typical of Uganda and the Nile region, and the polyphonic wind ensembles found from Burkina Faso to Mozambique. It builds on ethnographic results to show how models of music history may be linked to linguistic groupings and archaeological cultures.

1. Introduction

African music has probably never been so popular in Europe and America as at present. Its instruments and musical structures are influencing popular music directly, in much the same way the blues, a highly selective version of Africa, influenced American music from 1900 onwards. Ironically, however, globalisation is destroying traditional African music rapidly through homogenisation and the spread of profit-driven global forms and recording artists. Africa's rich heritage of traditional music is only gradually being discovered and documented; ironically, just as it is simultaneously disappearing. The recent enthusiasm for 'world music' and African urban pop has actually had the effect of downplaying interest in older forms and well-annotated recordings of village music are actually less common than in the 1970s.

The history of African music has always been of some interest and at least one book has been published to try and capture some of its major themes (Wachsmann 1971a). The absence of any follow-up volumes says much about the interests of ethnomusicologists and the lack of interaction with other disciplinary scholars in African history. Nonetheless, the sheer growth of data in the last decades suggests that a further approach is justified.

Obviously, no amount of archaeology or other types of reconstruction are going to recover the music in Africa's past. However, this is not really the point; the structures of African music in the present can teach us a great deal about the way cultural patterns become distributed over large areas. Indeed one intriguing aspect of broader categories of musical forms is their relative conservatism over extensive regions of the world. The heterophonic ensembles that characterise SE Asia and the monody that is found all the way from NE India to the edges of Europe are quite distinctive and admit of no real exceptions. Entire continents can lack whole classes of instruments, such as stringed instruments in the New World.

African music history can be broadly divided into three areas;

- a. Use of oral traditions and revisits by the ethnographer to reconstruct change in the recent past
- b. Interpretation of artefacts and archaeological finds to illuminate the existence of instruments in a specific time and place
- c. The mapping and interpretation of large-scale geographical and ethnographic data to develop hypotheses about historical trends within the continent

The tools usually available to musicologists in Europe, notably written sources¹, are absent, except in the case of Ancient Egypt, which also has the advantage that many actual instruments survive (Hickmann 1962; Krah 1991). In specific cases, the Egyptian data is illuminating, but it has sometimes tended to obscure the larger patterns by placing undue emphasis on a particular data point. Typically, the ancient presence of an instrument in Egypt was taken to show that it 'spread out from' Egypt. Ethiopia also has a number of valuable iconographic sources, notably in religious paintings, although these mostly serve to show that the instruments we know form the ethnographic present were also used in the past.

Examples of music history drawn from oral tradition are relatively abundant and papers in Wachsmann (1971a) provide useful case studies. The interpretation of actual archaeological or ethnographic objects such as the Benin plaques (Dark & Hill 1971) or *aulos*-playing statuettes (Dixon & Wachsmann 1964) or fragments of African iron gongs (xx) or bronze bells (Neaher 1979) make valuable if small-scale contributions. But even a cursory survey of African traditional music reveals large-scale patterns and continent-wide forms and it is tempting to link these with other types of history. It is tempting to draw with a broader brush and to link up with other types of cultural history. Wachsmann (1971b) represents an interesting attempt to do this with the instrumental repertoire of the Ganda, tying various instruments to different traditions of origin and assuming a variety of migration routes.

¹ There is some information to be derived from the accounts of Arab geographers and early travellers which has yet to be fully exploited. Generally, though these accounts so imprecise that the relation between scholarly ink spilled and useful data is highly disproportionate.

Reconstructing African cultural history through the distribution of material culture or related practices such as musical forms is of course deeply unfashionable. Its real exponents were the German ethnologists of the *Kulturkreislehre* school (e.g. Ankermann 1901; Sachs 1927) and their Swedish successors, notably Lagercrantz. Detailed and painstaking as much of this work was, it made little real impression of scholars from other disciplines, largely because of their lack of an interpretative framework. One exception to this was A.M. Jones, a highly individualistic scholar who contributed significantly to the study of African drumming, but whose major scholarly obsession was the notion that African xylophone culture was of SE Asian origin (Jones 1971). Apart from the fact that Jones was almost certainly wrong (Blench 1982), his approach, the haphazard compilation of cultural traits based on shaky ethnography was probably significant in deterring other scholars.

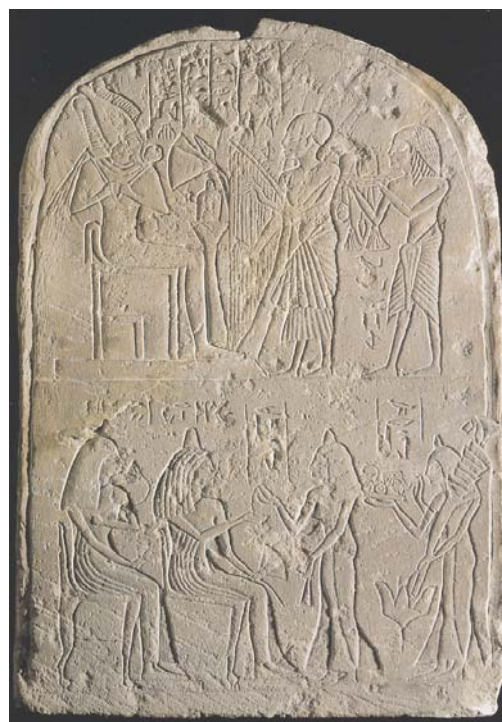
This paper² proposes that this tradition is worth reinventing in the light of a much better grounding in the prehistory of Africa and in particular a more comprehensive framework of language distribution to which it can be affixed. It will assume that sometimes diffusion does occur and that this is not necessarily an affront to the dignity of a people who borrow an instrument from their neighbours³. To do this, it will look at two examples; the arched harp and polyphonic wind ensembles. The arched harp is a very specific instrument, with a restricted distribution and an Egyptian antecedent that clearly has a very specific history. Polyphonic wind ensembles resemble an underlying pattern the surfaces in different forms across the continent but which is sufficiently specific musically to suppose that it is very ancient and is perhaps associated with the language phyla of Africa.

2. The arched harp and its history

Two inter-related harps were used in the Ancient Near East and both have descendants in Africa; the arched harp and the angle harp.

2.1 The arched harp

The arched harp is probably most familiar to non-specialists as the Burmese harp; it has a boat-shaped resonator, an arched neck and a series of strings stretching from the neck to a bar that runs down the middle of the soundboard. The neck is usually of the same piece of wood as the central bar. It first became known to a European audience through an illustration in Michael Praetorius' *Syntagma Musicum* (1618) although the origin of the illustrated specimen is unclear. The arched harp was probably first heard in London in 1879, when the envoys of the Kabaka of Uganda to Queen Victoria brought their harps and played them until late in the night in their hotel rooms (Felkin 1886). Sachs (1927) is probably the first author to analyse the Old World distribution of this instrument. The arched harp was well-known in Ancient Egypt and has been the subject of a monograph (Krah 1991). At least one illustration from Pompeii shows such an instrument was also known in Ancient Rome, although its rarity suggests it was no more than a curiosity. Arched harps are found in a band across sub-Saharan Africa from Uganda around the source of the Nile and adjacent parts of Kenya and to Central Nigeria, with an extension southwards into Gabon. Iconographic evidence suggests that arched harps were known to the Arabs, but died out in the Medieval period. Intriguing traces of the

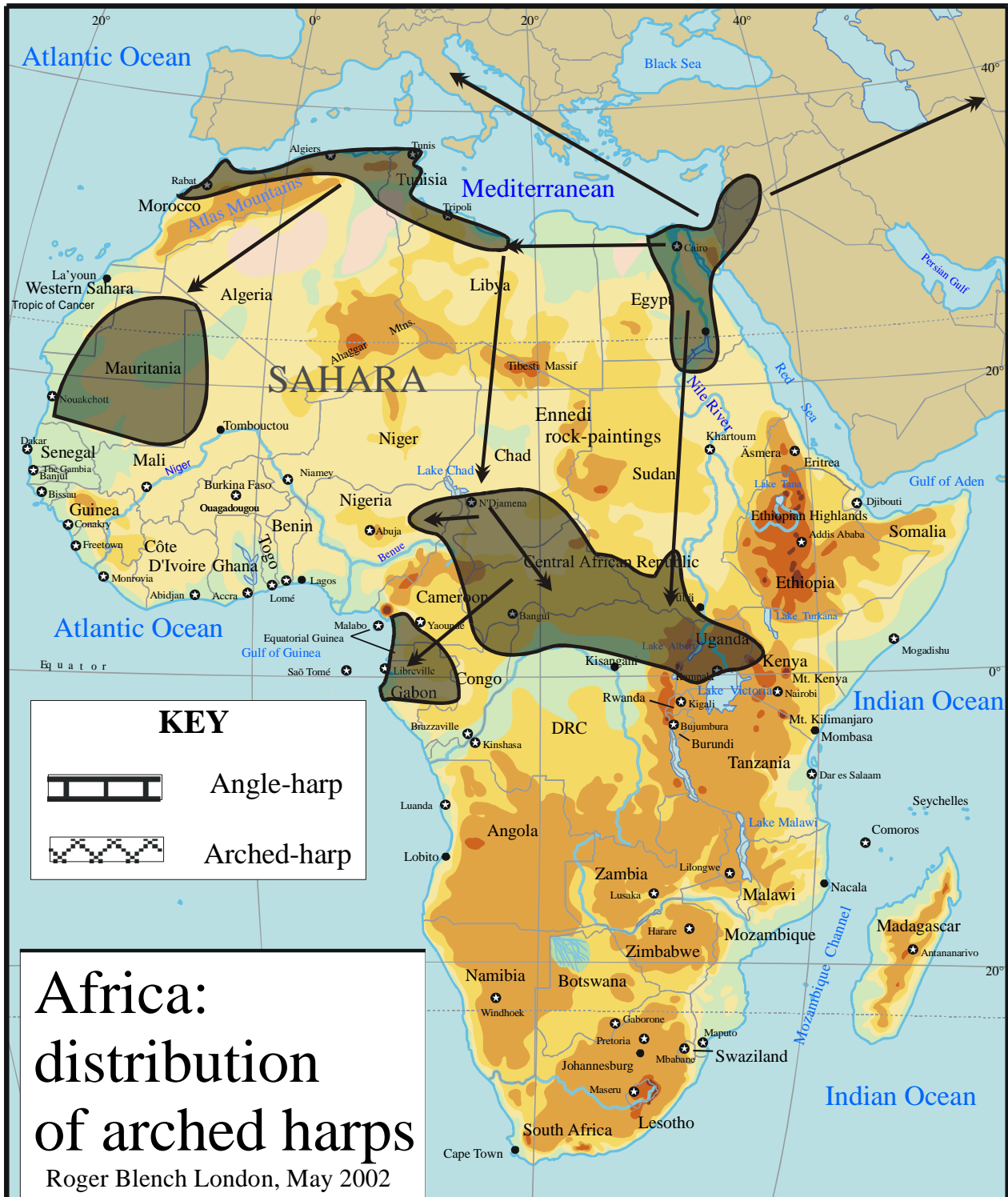


² I would like to thank the many scholars who have drawn my attention to recordings and obscure or unpublished literature over the last thirty years and the musicians who have kindly discussed their music and allowed me to inspect their instruments. Fieldwork data derives from numerous field trips to various countries in Africa from 1971 to the present (2002).

³ Indeed it is curious that archaeologists have such a tradition of opposing diffusion of material culture, while living in a society whose principle motor is the appropriation of resources from other cultures.

instrument survive east of the Arab area; the Burmese harp and its Karen analogue, the arched harps of the Ostyak and Abkhaz, a folk instrument in India (Knight xx) and the Nuristani *waj*, an arched harp where the neck has 'slipped' so that the strings are now parallel to the soundboard (). Carvings confirm that the harp was once more widespread in India (Deva 1978) and Java; why it should so comprehensively have disappeared from both South Asia and the Arab world is hard to fathom.

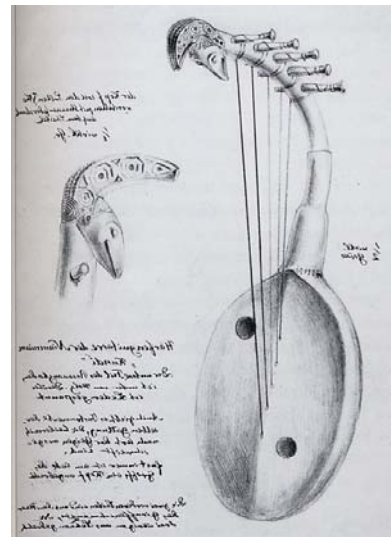
Map 1. African distribution of arched and angle harps



Whatever, the case, the instrument still flourishes in Sub-Saharan Africa. Map 1 shows its probable distribution; the most important lacunae are in Chad and the Sudan where organological accounts are few and far between and it may well be more widespread than we presently know (see Al-Daw & Abd-Alla 1985). Wegner (1984) is an important preliminary survey of African arched harp traditions. Bruguière & Grootaers (1999) represent a recent attempt to gather together distributional information in the context of an exhibition catalogue, somewhat marred by a relentless emphasis on the material from Francophone countries and thereby the virtual exclusion of Nigeria. This volume also represents another important aspect of the African arched harp; its often anthropomorphic carved necks are highly collectible and are often traded as art objects irrespective of their musical context.



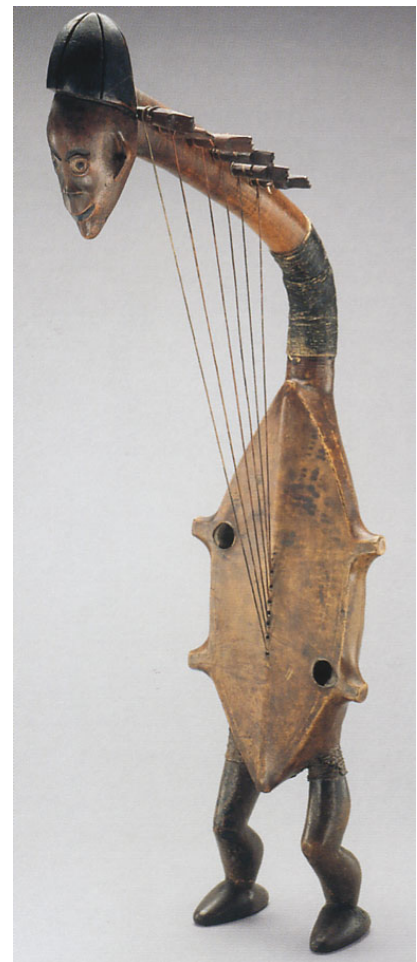
Wachsmann (1964) appears to be the only author to attempt to link this pattern with human migrations. Wachsmann proposed an initial division into arched and angle harps and that all these harps came directly from Egypt via two routes, the Nile and directly to the Western Sahara in the case of the angle-harp. The Lake Chad harps are a branch of the Nile harps and spread thence both to Gabon and back eastwards to Uganda across Central Uganda. Cloarec-Heiss (1999) has collated the vernacular names of the harp in a large number of African languages and she argues that the diversity of names and their links with different language phyla suggest considerable antiquity.



It seems most likely that the harp was widespread in both North Africa and the Near East some 5000 years ago and that it spread southwards, both down the Nile corridor and directly across the desert from North Africa. One reason for thinking this is that arched harps are regularly



illustrated in rock-paintings from the Ennedi in Chad (Bailloud 1997, ill. 109⁴, 155). The Ennedi is in the central Sahara, where no arched harps are played today, providing directly from North Africa. The directly dated and must be assigned content. the earliest illustration of an period which can be assigned to



strong evidence for its transmission Ennedi rock-paintings are not to phases based on style and arched harp is in the pre-cameline prior to 2000 BP.

⁴ This rock-painting was judged sufficiently iconic to be reproduced on a Chadian postage stamp

The distribution south of the Nile is unproblematic; many cultural items moved up and down this corridor, including cattle breeds, the lyre, and a whole spectrum of crops. In this case, it is likely that the harp moved southwards, because its distribution makes it seem intrusive. Cloarec-Heiss (1997 Carte 1) shows that there is a single term, *-dòmo which occurs in a neat north-south distribution, associated with Nilo-Saharan languages and looks like the trace of an instrument spread along the Nile corridor. Moreover, as Wachsmann (1971b) points out, the name by which it is known among the Ganda, *enanga*, was originally the name for the trough-zither, an instrument not found outside Sub-Saharan Africa and undoubtedly indigenous to this region.

The second major focus seems to be the region of Lake Chad and southwards through the Mandara mountains, and west into Nigeria. The Nigerian extension is generally ignored in the literature and omitted from the few maps published (e.g. Cloarec-Heiss 1999 Carte 1) but it represents an important additional area of distribution. A distinctive feature of the Mandara mountains area of harp playing is a strong although not exclusive association with blacksmiths, death and pollution. Among the Hèba [Kilba], of northeast Nigeria, blacksmiths make and play the harp and also use it to provide music for funerals. Still further west, the link is broken and among the Tarok of the Langtang areas, which may represent the furthest westward extension of the harp, it has become a vehicle for popular songs and well-known performers are heard on the radio.



Between Lake Chad and Sudan are the harp-playing cultures of the CAR, notably the Banda and Zande. Cloarec-Heiss (1997 Carte 1) identifies two terms, *kundi and *ngombi, common through this region. *kundi is also found south of Lake Chad, suggesting the harp moved from this region to the Banda area. *ngombi is also typical of Gabon, suggesting that the harp moved south and west into this area.

More puzzling is the disjunct distribution, centred in Gabon, but extending into Equatorial Guinea and southern Cameroun. This is so close to the earliest nucleus of Bantu expansion that it is worth speculating that the harp was indeed already in the hands of the Bantu as they expanded south into the Equatorial forest. If so, then it is likely they originally had the instrument following contact with the Adamawa-Ubangian speakers and that this link was broken by later population movements and its disappearance in the central zone.

A curious technical aspect of the harp may well be an indication of its relatively late movement southwards from North Africa. African harps all have tuning pegs, like the surviving Egyptian harps illustrated in paintings but unlike the ethnographic examples further East, such as the Burmese harp. These instruments have tuning-nooses, loops of leather or fibre which hold the strings in place by friction, similar to those that occur on the West African *kora* and its relatives. Wachsmann (1971b) shows a Ganda harp that is clearly transitional with vestigial tuning nooses as well as tuning-pegs. Intriguingly, the earliest picture of a harp in the Ennedi rock-paintings shows no tuning pegs, whereas these are extremely prominent in the later images (Bailloud op. cit.).

If we have a possible historical scenario for the spread of the arched harp, then it is worth attaching some plausible dates to it, based on what evidence there is from North Africa and Egypt. The following is a highly tentative historical scenario for the arched harp;

1. Evolution in Egypt/ Near East/ North Africa 5000 BP.
2. Spread eastwards shortly afterwards
3. Spread along North African coast by 4000 BP
4. Spread through the Central Sahara 3000 BP onwards
5. Spread down the Nile 3000 BP onwards
6. Nucleus area forms in Mandara mountains 2500 BP onwards
7. Spread to Central Africa 2000 BP onwards
8. Spread to Southern Cameroun/Gabon after 1500 BP
9. Spread to source of Nile region 1000 BP

2.2 The angle harp

The angle harp (*Winkelharfe*) is made of two pieces of wood set roughly perpendicular to one another and the strings are stretched across the two arms. There is often no separate resonator, and the wood of one arm may be hollowed to increase the sound. A distinctive feature of this harp is that tuning pegs are not used; all the illustrations appear to show tuning nooses. Such harps were common in Egypt (Krah 1991) and the Ancient Near East and are often illustrated in Assyrian reliefs (e.g. Rimmer 1969). It is probable that harps of this type are the source of the European harp tradition.

As with the arched harp, the angle harp was part of the medieval Arab instrumentarium. Its exact antiquity in North Africa is unknown for lack of iconographic evidence. However, although it is completely absent there now, it survives in Mauretania as the *ardin*, a calabash-resonated angle-harp which has clearly undergone some convergence with the more well-known *kora* used by neighbouring populations (Guignard 1975: 111 ff.). As with the Tuareg, where the most prestigious instrument the *imzad* fiddle is played by women, so it the *ardin*. It would be pleasant to see in this a survival of the much-illustrated female harpists of Egypt, but since the instrument came through North African intermediaries, this is probably just coincidence. Unlike the Egyptian harps, the *ardin* has tuning pegs, presumably a later development.

3. Polyphonic wind ensembles

3.1 Introduction

One of the most distinctive forms that characterizes 'African' music is the polyphonic wind ensemble. From Eastern Mali across to Ethiopia and down to South Africa, ensembles of wind instruments, similar in structure but graduated in size constitute some of the most distinctive and involving types of music. Paradoxically they are also the forms of music most under threat, because they tend to spring from the broadly egalitarian nature of African village life; for performances to occur they require a large number of players of similar status to be present regularly within the village. As labour migration, radio music and world religions make an increasing impact on village communities, so these types of co-operative music are often the first to disappear. Ironically, its rich sounds have influenced twentieth century composers and both Gyorgy Ligeti and Steve Reich have acknowledged its influence on their work.

Figure 1. Flute and horn ensemble, Chad



However, this remarkable music is still very much alive in many parts of the continent, and new evidence about its distribution and forms is constantly coming to light. This synthesis of the available information about the types and distribution of such ensembles has an explicitly historical goal, interpret this information in terms of African prehistory. No previous literature treats this type of music synthetically on a continent-wide basis, though there have been a number of studies of individual musical forms (e.g. Kirby 1933). Most notable of these is the work of Simha Arom (1991) on the polyphonic ensembles of Central Africa. Arom has probably made the single most important set of contributions to knowledge of this topic through a series of recordings (see discography in Dehoux et al. 1995) and has also carried out experimental work with performers to understand how the musical parts are fitted together.

Figure 2. Gourd horn ensemble, Chad



3.2 Characterisation of the ensemble

The main musicological characteristics of polyphonic wind ensembles are;

- a) Ensembles consist principally of wind instruments, with some added percussion, either drums or untuned idiophones. Chordophones are very rarely included. Especially in Ethiopia, some vocal ensembles seem to structural copies of wind ensembles.
- b) The wind instruments are of the same type, organologically. Occasionally the base instrument in the ensemble is different, for example a horn is added to an ensemble of flutes, but instruments operating on radically different principles are rarely mixed.
- c) The principal organological types are trumpets and horns (labrosones) and flutes (edge-instruments); reed instruments of any type are extremely rare.
- d) The tuning of such ensembles is almost invariably pentatonic or heptatonic⁵. In most cases, instruments produce a single note. One instrument is assigned to each degree of the scale, even where the instruments are capable of producing a wide variety of notes, for example, notch-flutes.
- e) The minimum range represented in such ensembles is an octave, although a tessitura of more than three octaves has been recorded. Additional octaves always double the main melody-line and do not seem to be given independent lines.
- f) Each musical part is of approximately equal importance; canon or hocket-like structures are usual.

However, such ensembles invariably reflect a rather specific social context and some sociological generalizations can also be made;

⁵ One exception to this is the calabash horn ensembles found between eastern Nigeria and Chad where tuning is fairly aleatory and players look for a graduation in size and contrasts in timbre

- a) Instruments are almost invariably played by men; women sing in polyphonic vocal ensembles, sometimes in association with the wind instruments, but do not play the instruments themselves.
- b) Such ensembles are rarely if ever found in highly stratified societies, and do not play for courts, chiefs or other authority figures.
- c) Polyphonic wind music is rarely found where the world religions are predominant, whether Islam or Ethiopian Christianity. Indeed, where European Christianity is spreading, such ensembles tend to disappear, except where they are preserved through conscious cultural revival.
- d) Polyphonic wind ensembles do not usually exist in societies with a class of professional musicians.
- e) These ensembles are not usually found where named compositions are attributed to individual composers.
- f) They are rarely associated with the central ceremonies of a particular society, and indeed have a strong, though by no means exclusive association with beer-drinking or other entertainment.

An apparent exception, both in terms of associations with authority and distribution might be the groups of transverse ivory horns blown at African courts, described by many the travellers (see references in Arom 1991). These ivory horn ensembles were common from Senegambia to Mombasa, which does not coincide with the usual distribution of the ensembles described here. What remains of this chiefly music suggests that it was structurally quite distinct from the other instruments, as are the long trumpet groups of Islamic West Africa.

Figure 3. Gumuz flute ensemble, Sudan



3.3 African distribution

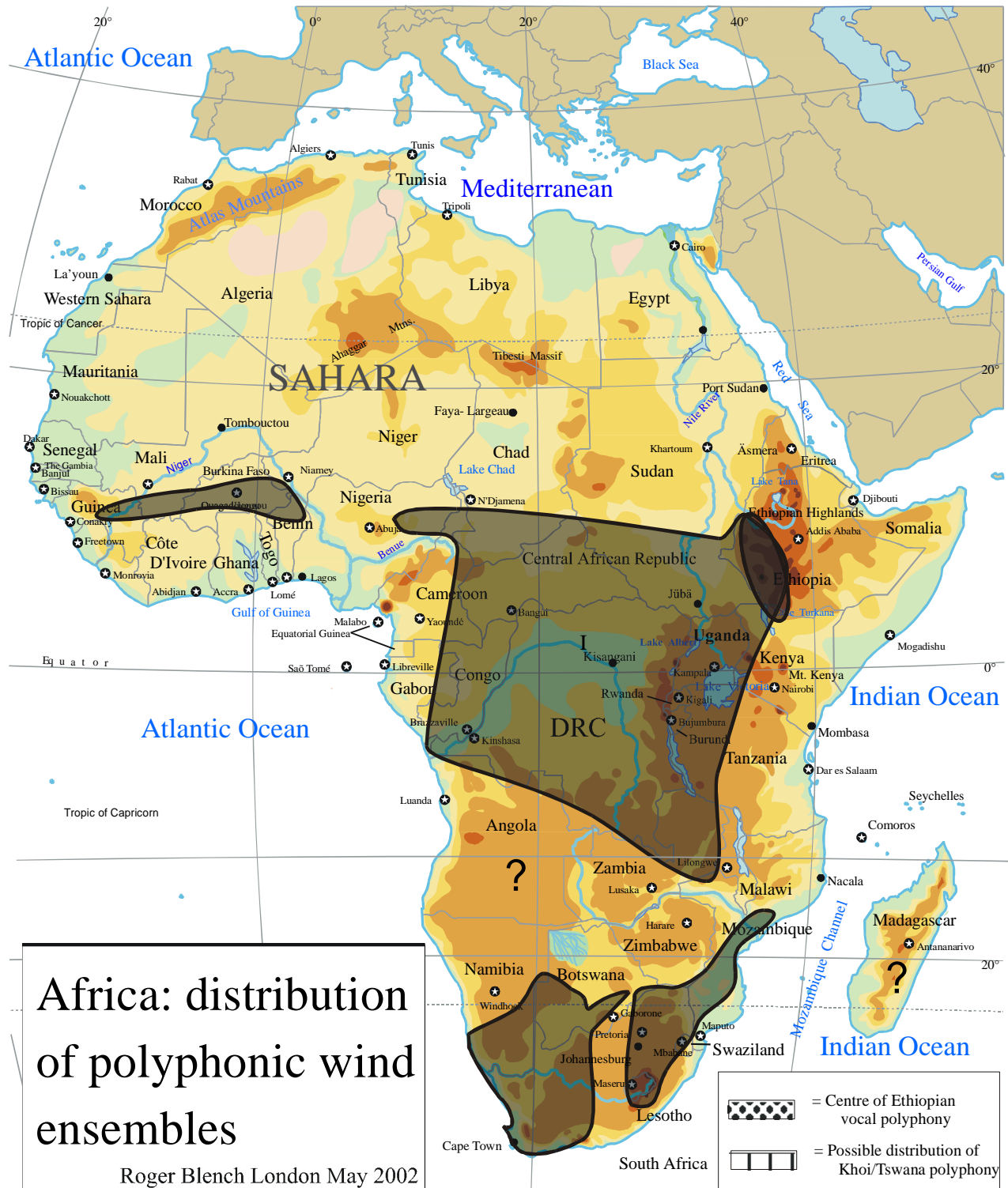
The earliest likely record of this type of music is recorded in the journals of Vasco da Gama who saw Khoikhoi people performing wind music at Mossel Bay, East of the Cape of Good hope in 1497;

‘and they began to play upon four or five flutes, some of which were high and some low, so well in fact that the played harmoniously...’

trans. from Morelet (1864)

Kirby (1933) has collected a number of other early records of polyphonic wind ensembles, some of which involve very large numbers of players, such as the Nama performers witnessed in 1661 who included ‘one to two hundred strong men’. These references are of particular value because the Nama Khoi have long been displaced from South Africa proper and the present day populations no longer play polyphonic wind music.

Map 2. African distribution of polyphonic wind ensembles



Map 2 shows the present-day Africa-wide distribution of polyphonic wind ensembles, the likely distribution of Khoi ensembles at the time of Portuguese contact and the nucleus of vocal polyphony in Ethiopia. There are many uncertainties in such a map, both because of the inadequate descriptions in many texts and because some areas remain unreported. Even in the area marked, the presence of the ensembles is highly variable, and found among one group, but absent among its neighbours. Some regions, Angola for example, remains largely unknown ethnomusicologically, and may or may not fall within this region. Pictures from Madagascar, for example from the Tanala area, show several flautists playing together, but the type of music they play is unclear (Sachs 1939). It is assumed that the areas which are now disjunct were once connected

in a continuous zone. It is likely that the spread of Islam in NW Nigeria is responsible for breaking the link with the ensembles found across Burkina Faso.

Figure 4. Waza trumpets, Berta, Sudan



One of the most complex areas and most difficult to interpret is the Ethio-Sudan borderland where Omotic and Cushitic-speakers are adjacent to Nilo-Saharan speakers. Many groups in this region practise a variety of types of vocal and instrumental polyphony (Jenkins n.d, 1994). The Maji, for example, use ensembles of single-note pipes, sometimes in combination with panpipes, in the classic African style. They also imitate instrumental polyphony by cupping their hand into aerophones, and they have a type of vocal polyphony with a restricted tessitura and use of falsetto that strongly resembles the rainforest Pygmies.

San speakers also have polyphonic music but it is essentially vocal. Structurally, it appears quite unlike the wind polyphony recorded from elsewhere in Africa, although it has been argued that it resembles the vocal polyphony of the Pygmies. There are important structural differences between this type of

two- and three-part polyphony and the multi-octave ensembles characterised here. Nonetheless, the link may be found in southwest Ethiopia. Omotic and Nilo-Saharan speakers in this area retain polyphonic styles reminiscent of the Pygmies as well as more complex styles and it seems likely enough that from this centre of diversity emerged the characteristic one-note-to-a-part wind polyphony.

3.4 Historical interpretation

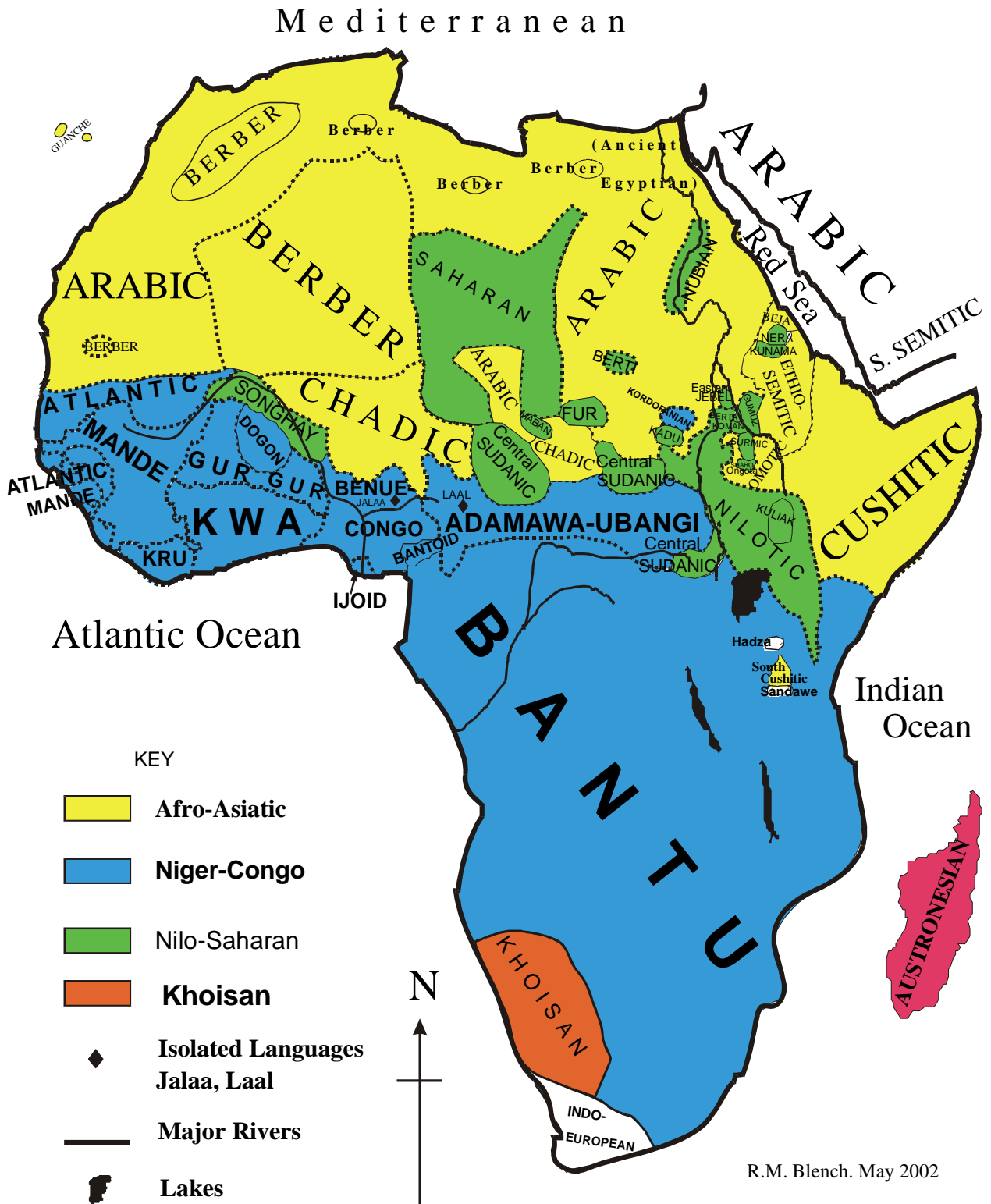
If the distribution of these ensembles is plotted against the linguistic map of the continent, it becomes clear that there is a strong association with Niger-Congo and Nilo-Saharan languages. Map 3 shows the distribution of Africa's language phyla. If it is compared with Map 2 then it shows that the area of polyphonic wind ensembles only touches the Afroasiatic languages Ethiopia at its very edge. What is proposed here is very simple, that the polyphonic wind ensemble developed in the early period of the genesis of Nilo-Saharan in the Ethio-Sudan borderlands and then spread westwards to become part of the cultural repertoire of Niger-Congo in the early period of its expansion.

There is now a body of scholarly opinion that Nilo-Saharan and Niger-Congo are in fact part of the same macrophylum, tentatively named Niger-Saharan (Blench 1996). Whatever the case, it is clear that Nilo-Saharan is significantly older than Niger-Congo, if its high levels of internal diversity are anything to go by. I have argued elsewhere that the expansion of Niger-Congo can be assigned to the early Holocene in West Africa, which corresponded to an improvement in the climate and the appearance of microliths, interpreted as the introduction of bow and arrow hunting. Nilo-Saharan would then be several millennia older, appearing in the terminal Pleistocene, perhaps as much as 18,000 BP (Blench 19xx; Macdonald 1998).

Usefully, we have well-documented evidence for highly developed polyphonic wind ensembles among the Nilo-Saharan speakers along the Ethio-Sudan border. The Gumuz, Ingessana and Berta have multi-octave ensembles of single-note whistles and long trumpets, *waza*, made from gourd rings playing in rich canonic ensembles, resembling strongly those of Ethiopia (Gottlieb n.d. a,b). Similarly, the Nuba of Kordofan play ensembles of gourd trumpets. The Nuba represent the most ancient branching of the Niger-Congo phylum and are now entirely isolated among Nilo-Saharan and Arabic speakers so this provides some evidence for the antiquity of this musical form.

Map 3. African language phyla

OUTLINE MAP OF AFRICAN LANGUAGE FAMILIES



R.M. Blench. May 2002

How to account for the pattern visible today? If the above hypothesis is accepted then these ensembles were part of the cultural repertoire of Nilo-Saharan speakers as they spread westwards across the Sudan in the Pleistocene. As Niger-Congo evolved it also spread with Niger-Congo speakers and the West African zone was much more extensive than at present. The southward spread of Islam would have been responsible for isolating the ensembles in Burkina Faso but also eliminating this type of music further westward. The

absence of this type of music in the Bantu heartland, Cameroun, Gabon and southwards, strongly suggests that it had been dropped from the Niger-Congo cultural repertoire by the period of the Bantu expansion (4000 BP?). However, it is common among much of the Eastern Bantu and clearly spread down to South Africa, being borrowed by the resident Khoi populations. This suggests that the Bantu borrowed these ensembles from their northern neighbours, Adamawa-Ubangian and Central Sudanic speakers, both of whom have very rich ensembles music. This must have been as the Bantu crossed the northern equatorial forest and re-emerged in the savannas, since they then presumably moved on towards the southern reaches of the continent. The break in distribution represented by Zimbabwe probably argues that the Shona had stopped playing this type of music before their expansion.

The most puzzling feature of this is the apparent presence of Khoi wind ensembles in southwest Africa, such as those described by Vasco da Gama. If these are truly ancient then the picture is much more perplexing, as it would be hard to see how these were linked with the centre of diversity in the northeast. But the Khoikhoi borrowed a great deal from their incoming Bantu neighbours including the culture of cattle and it seems more probable that they also borrowed this type of polyphony. Kirby (1934) notes that the Tswana reed flute ensembles were borrowed from the

3.5 Sociological interpretation

The fact that it is possible to make sociological generalisations across hundreds of otherwise highly varied societies, suggest that the links between musical and social structures have considerable time depth.

3.5.1 Gender restrictions

The exclusion of female performers is hard to explain given the general association with less stratified societies. However, it is more broadly true that women are often excluded from performance on melody instruments in Sub-Saharan Africa. Typically, women are highly prestigious singers and may play percussion to accompany their singing, but hardly ever play flutes, xylophones or stringed instruments.

3.5.2 Absence from stratified societies

Merriam (19xx) once developed an argument for a worldwide correlation between egalitarian societies and vocal or instrumental polyphony. At a rather basic level this makes sense; societies where everyone is conceptualised as of equal status might well develop a music where the parts are of equal value. But polyphony can have many realisations, and Western polyphony is clearly not a reflection of egalitarian social structures; indeed it developed to express stratification and the apartness of the medieval church. Similarly, there are many acephalous societies, including those in West Africa, where polyphonic forms do not occur.

3.5.3 Absence from societies which have adopted world religions

With few exceptions, this type of polyphonic ensemble does not occur in societies which have adopted either Islam or Orthodox Christianity. The underlying reason is a profound connection between the world religions and emergent social stratification. That is, world religions co-occur with a pluralistic array of social and economic niches, which in turn probably reflect increases in population densities. As different social groupings develop, the tenets of a 'universal' religion can be manipulated to further their local interests. Egalitarian ideologies are typically discarded and with them music that might be reflective of those ideologies.

3.5.4 Absence from societies with professional musicians

Professional musicians are rare in Africa overall, probably because most agricultural societies simply did not have enough surplus to support individual professionals. But there is a strong association with the presence of world religions; professional musicians are found in the Islamised societies of the West African Sahel and on the East Coast, as also in Ethiopia. Elsewhere, even where musicians are casted, as in parts of West Central Africa, they engage in other productive activities. So it is likely that world religions and professionalisation of music are part of the same nexus, as also the presence of named composers.

Musical consequences also develop from the establishment of expert musicians. Specialised professionals develop to serve the interests and needs of particular classes, typical of stratified societies. The more effectively they serve powerful individuals and class values the more status they themselves gain. It is therefore in their interest to discourage the notion that all individuals have equal musical skills and can contribute equally to performance. Rather, it is valuable to create a mystique that there are specialised, hereditary skills that only certain families can possess. It is also probably no accident that professional musicians tend to play stringed instruments (in Senegambia, the *kora*, in Hausaland the lute and in Ethiopia the *masenqo* fiddle) because they can sing and play without depending on others. Although such societies often mobilise large groups of musicians, allocation of musical responsibility is uneven, reflecting the divisions in the larger society.

3.5.5 Absence from societies which have named composers for musical compositions

Most folk traditions across the world have no ossified compositional tradition similar to the West, except perhaps for parts of East Asia. The idea of a fixed composition which must somehow be respected and ascribed to a named composer may have arisen in the 12th century, but until composition began to be associated with earning an income composers seem to have been fairly casual about ascription and claiming credit. In a way, the situation is similar across Africa; most societies have no tradition of ascribing things to a named composer, with the exception of stratified societies with professional musicians. The emphasis is rather placed on the performer; great performers are remembered and sometimes their ability to produce memorable words. New melodies or arrangements or dispositions of instruments are rapidly absorbed and indeed their origin soon forgotten. In recent times this has begun to change as radio performance makes possible an income from songs.

3.5.6 Disjunction from central rituals

This probably the shakiest generalisation; what counts as a central ritual will vary from one anthropologist to another. There is at least one highly prominent exception, the Venda of South Africa, whose *tsikona* ritual is accompanied by reed flutes. Nonetheless, it is broadly true. Across a sample of such groups in East-Central Nigeria, the most common association appeared to be with beer-drinking and life-cycle festivals such as marriage.

Why might this be? One possibility is that association of key ceremonies with age. Acephalous societies, for all their absence of stratification by social group very commonly practice age stratification, the attribution to an elder generation of authority and ritual power that cannot be attained by the next generation down. The age-grade systems of East Africa are perhaps the most well-known and concrete realisation of this, but it is true across much of Africa. If so, then a type of mirror of stratification occurs in acephalous societies, where the older exclude the younger. If so, this would provide a motive for excluding 'democratic' musics.

4. Conclusions

This paper has exemplified two patterns in African music history; the slow spread and diversification of underlying structures, and the comparatively recent spread of a new instrument type that rapidly crosses linguistic and cultural boundaries. The polyphonic and canonic styles that characterise wind ensembles also

typify certain social structural features and may link with the distribution of language phyla, arguing for their great antiquity. No iconographic or terminological evidence can assist in the reconstruction of this musical form and the argument is based entirely on recent ethnography. The arched harp has a distinctive morphology which has been largely retained and is much less strongly associated with specific roles in society or musical forms. Iconography is a valuable aid in putting dates on the spread of the instrument and vernacular terminology can help in mapping the spread of the instrument.

These two examples are intended to illuminate the sorts of methods that might be available for reconstructing something as intangible as music, and by analogy, other aspects of culture that are not available for direct inspection. Material culture studies are often used by archaeologists as exemplars of possible past contexts of use, but less often as phenotypes that can be used to reconstruct the past more directly.

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Discography

Some of the best evidence for the composition and form of these ensembles are found not in published articles but on the notes of recordings, some of which are extensive and scholarly. Unfortunately, especially in the case of LPs, these are hard to find and are not necessarily kept in institutions of record. CD re-issues often omit some of the illustrations accompanying the original LP releases due to the difference in format.

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