“YOU CALL ME ROKO” E. T. MENSAH AND THE TEMPOS

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Although the origins of African highlife music can be traced back to the 19th century with the introduction of European military band instruments to the coastal forts of southern Ghana, by the 1920s “highlife was considered to be the music of the African elite.” A combination of indigenous traditions and outside influences as a result of colonialism, new technologies (e.g., recordings, motorized transportation, and the telegraph), and emerging globalization, highlife is a “gradual fusion of diverse local and imported musical elements including church music, Latin ballroom music, British military band music, American jazz, and Ghanaian traditional music, creating a distinctive musical style.” In 1947 E. T. Mensah joined, and eventually became leader of one of the most influential highlife bands during the World War II era, The Tempos. With a repertoire that included swing, highlife, calypsos, and cha chas, Mensah soon became known as the “King of Highlife.” In this paper, I shall perform a structural analysis of the song “You Call Me Roko” and illustrate some of the many musical genres from which highlife and this song draw their influences.

The overall structure of “You Call Me Roko” (see fig. 1) features an essential 12-bar form that is repeated as eight verses. The first and last verses feature an instrumental statement of the basic melody, which functions as both an introduction and final reprise of the song. Verses two, three, and seven are sung, and verses four, five, and six feature a trumpet, alto sax, and tenor sax solo respectively. The 12-bar verse may be described as a variation of a simple binary form and expressed as | A ||: B :||. The harmonic structure employs typical I, IV, and V chords in

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3 Ibid.
the key of Eb major, and the essential melodic content remains entirely diatonic to the key throughout.

![You Call Me Roko Sheet Music](image)

Figure 1. “You Call Me Roko” as performed by E.T. Mensah and the Tempos

The personnel performing on this recording (as best as I can hear) include, vocalist, trumpet, tenor and alto saxophone, double bass, guitar, drum kit, and percussion instruments including clave, bongos, and cowbell. All instruments referred to are indicative of foreign influence and adoption. Trumpet and saxophones may be traced to British military band implementation. The double bass, drum kit, and even guitar were employed in American jazz ensembles since the 1930s and earlier; and clave, bongos and cowbell are indicative of Latin and Afro-Cuban influence (introduced into the band partly as a result of early band member Guy Warren’s travels to England to perform with Kenny Graham’s Afro-Cubists⁵).

Although the completely diatonic melody of the song is perhaps unremarkable in this regard, its rhythm and cadential phrase qualities are particularly indicative of its African lineage. Unlike tonal classical Western music and composition, this highlife melody leaves the listener in a perpetual state of tension as no melodic cadence to the tonic is offered until the seventh verse (see fig. 2). Even the instrumental reprise offers no definitive sense of melodic resolution as it concludes on the dominant, arguably the least resolute degree of the tonic triad. Addressing such qualities, Agawu writes:

Such long-term suspension of resolution and modal treatment can indeed be most reminiscent of traditional African cyclic conceptions. What some listeners hear as less than complete control of tonal-cadencing is in fact a more complex outcome of the attempt to balance indigenous melodic and multipart tendencies against the goal-oriented, cadence-based harmony of Bach and Beethoven.  


![Figure 2. Verse / Scale Degree Melodic Cadence chart](image)

Rhythmically too, one can observe phrases of a seemingly fragmented nature forming what may be described as “irregular asymmetrical structures presented within regular cycles”  

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description applied to traditional African rhythm principles). Melodically throughout the first four bars, beat one of each measure is avoided completely, and during the ensuing B section the downbeat is obscured within the body of each repeated phrase (see fig. 1). It may be observed that such rhythms are indicative of American jazz-based syncopated phrasing, but such musical qualities are often conversely traced to the African heritage of jazz as well.8

The percussion pattern played consistently throughout the song by the clave (see fig. 3) may be viewed as an African time-line pattern “said to be derived from the Akan dance Sikyi”9 and is representative of characteristic rhythm patterns found in highlife.10 The bongo performance on the recording however exhibits a much more improvisational quality not unlike the kind of invention and spontaneity found in many traditional African musical forms.11

![Clave Rhythm](image)

**Figure 3. Rhythm played by the clave**

It is perhaps the qualities of the three instrumental solos in the middle of the song that are most attributable to the influence of American jazz on highlife. Here, one can clearly identify echoes of Louis Armstrong in the trumpet solo (with whom Mensah performed in 195612), as

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11 Gerhard Kubik, "Africa," In Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online
well as the incorporation of blues (e.g., the prominent use of the flat-third and flat-seventh in the alto sax solo) and the influences of other such jazz giants of the time as Charlie Parker and Lester Young. This is perchance not surprising. Besides the characteristic syncopations of jazz, it is often the improvised qualities of this music that indeed define its very nature.

Lyrically, the text tells the story of a protagonist who by night is treated sweetly and perhaps intimately by his lover, but by day is regarded as a commoner as indicated by the terms “Alura” (day laborer) and “Kaya” (laborer or porter). As is characteristic of highlife, the lyrics may speak to pertinent social issues but do not necessarily address them directly. The melody with which the lyrics are sung is also not text-bound, but rather takes is shape “from certain melodic archetypes that are diatonic at the core” and therefore may at times seem awkward to the Western listener.

Highlife indeed incorporates a great many influences into its fold. With regard to American jazz it is interesting to note that just as jazz credits traditional African music as a major influence, so too does highlife in turn credit jazz. Regardless of such specific analysis, the infectious rhythms and melodies of highlife are compelling, and the close traditional African link between music, dance, and society is quite indelibly woven into its fabric. Perhaps with its studied elegance and aesthetic of restraint and modesty, it is the fact that highlife draws its essence from so many influences from around the world that has made it such a universally accessible musical form, and thus a timeless joy for all.

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13 Kofi Agawu, Representing African Music, 140-142.
14 Ibid., 131.
15 Ibid., 130.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


