

The Interaction of Rhythmical and Lyrical Features of African and Caribbean Folk Songs

Robert Wyndham Nicholls, Ph.D

Professor (retired)

University of the Virgin Islands

College of Liberal Arts & Social Sciences

1902 Ninth Street, PMB 129

St Thomas, VI 00802, USA.

Abstract

This paper explores how Melo-rhythms and pentatonic scales combine in songs that critique individuals, for example among the Igede of Nigeria and others. It shows how West African musical prototypes have influenced their Caribbean counterparts particularly in terms of rhythmic processes and choral structure. A Melo-rhythm and its manifestation in tempo, is “the melodic implications of rhythm essence” provided by speech reproducing instruments. The momentum and metrical complexity of African music and offshoots are inherently danceable. Moreover, within the context of a dance performance, songs take the liberty of praising or ridiculing individuals and this technique is similarly used on both sides of the Atlantic. The article focuses on elucidatory songs, songs of social commentary, and songs that praise or critique particular persons. A Cross-Atlantic comparison is made including the Caribbean Calypso.

Throughout my academic career I have pondered the complexity of African and Diasporan music and the manner in which its rhythmical orientation encourages physical responses and dance interpretation among lay audiences. Moreover, the communal dance context encourages songs of social commentary and advice is freely given. This paper explores how Melo-rhythms and pentatonic scales combine in songs that critique individuals among, for example, the Igede of Nigeria. Folk traits crossed the Atlantic with enslaved Africans and remerged in a neo-African or Creolized form in the Caribbean (Endnote#1). An example is Southern blues music which consists of a bard accompanying himself on a guitar while performing disclaiming and lamenting songs. The notorious blues scales of USA’s southern states features whining notes and intervals of a half- and quarter-tones. In Africa, musical scales with such semitones and sliding notes only really appear in the Upper Guinea region (and today is typical of Islamic music). In his book Savannah Syncopators (1970), Paul Oliver not only proposed that the rhythmic orientation of jazz syncopation originated in the savannah regions of West Africa, but also that the half- and quarter-tones and bending note techniques that provide the whining or crying sound of the blues also emanated there. Oliver based his conclusions on his fieldwork in Northern Ghana and he suggested that the affinity in musical structure between the blues and African musical traditions should be sought in the broad savanna hinterland of West Africa, from Senegal and Gambia, across Mali, northern Ghana, and Burkina Faso, to northern Nigeria, rather than along the Guinea Coast where previous researchers such as Samuel Charters had sought it. Even though the musical structure of other African (and New World) music might vary; instances of comparable bardic performances are found throughout the three regions, West Africa, Caribbean, and USA’s Southern states; but a banjo or calabash lute may substitute for a guitar. Cecelia Conway (1995) emphasizes the link:

Not only that banjo music preceded the blues but that banjo song, music, and ensemble types were highly influential upon the formation of the blues [She states that] When Oliver met two griots who were part of the tradition that extends ‘across the sub Saharan savannah regions,’ he saw for the first time ‘the combination of vocal, rhythm, and stringed instruments which hinted at a link with the blues’ (p. 26).

Early descriptions of the banjo are found in the Virgin Islands, Antigua, Jamaica and Surinam, but goes unnamed in the earliest reports, for example, that of Sloane c. 1688 in Jamaica. Instead he glosses: “instruments in imitation of lutes ... [which are] made of small gourds fitted with necks, strung with horse hair, or the peeled stalks of climbing plants....These instruments are sometimes made of hollow'd timber covered with parchment or other skin” (Sloane 1707).

Leslie (1740:326-27) describes a "Bangil" in Jamaica which is "not unlike our lute." Carstens (1997:78,132) describes stringed instruments in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, during the 1730s, including the "Asen-kiefter ...the jawbones of donkeys strung with horse hairs." Later, Oldendorp (1770:249) describes Virgin Islands instruments ca. 1768. He observes that "quite early the children make a kind of fiddle for themselves, constructed by stretching several horse hairs over a shingle and then stroking them with a bow or plucking them with their fingers." On his sixteenth century plantation in Jamaica, Thomas Thistlewood “broke Job's banjar to pieces in the mill house.” Stedman c 1775 describes an instrument called "Creole-bania" in Surinam, “The Creole-bania ... is like a mandoline or guitar, being made of a half gourd covered with sheepskin to which is fixed a very long neck. . . . This instrument has but four strings ... it is played by the fingers” (1971:375-80). Luffman (1789:135-36) uses the term “banjar” in a letter from Antigua dated March 14, 1788. He states:

Negroes are very fond of the discordant notes of the banjar. . . . The banjar is somewhat similar to the guitarr [sic], the bottom, or underpart, is formed of one half of a large calabash, to which is fixed a wooden neck, and is strung with cat-gut and wire. This instrument is the invention of, and was brought here by the African Negroes, who are most expert in the performance thereon which are principally their own country tunes. I do not remember ever to have heard anything like European numbers from its touch.

Bryan Edwards (1793) lists the "Banjo or Merriwong" among Jamaican instruments, Bayley (1833) describes a band in Barbados that consists of drums "a pipe, a gumbay or bonja," while Pinckard (1806) in the Virgin Islands describes the “Banjar” as “a course and rough kind of guitar.” Cecelia Conway elaborates in her book *African Banjo* (1995:161): “for the slaves . . . the traditional banjo provided significant and tangible continuity with Africa and its music.” She points out that the lack of trees in the savannah regions of West Africa makes wood scarce and even today calabashes are important materials for instrument construction (p. 162). They can also be used as water drums and maracas as well as banjos. Conway (1995) argues that the Wolof are an important link between the Western Sudan and the United States and she sees parallels between the two regions, “especially between a Wolof musical instrument, the *halam*, and the American banjo” (p. 28). The Wolof *halam* or *xalam* and *tidinit* of Mauritania have five strings (Coolen, p. 121), as does the Mandinka *kontingo* (p. 124). Coolen states that the Fulbe *hoDu* “is usually constructed with four playing strings, although the best musicians usually have five” (ibid). (Endnote#2)

In the Virgin Islands the banjo is still played in scratch bands and fungi bands. It is strummed rather than picked and often sounds more like a percussion instrument with fast strumming and cross rhythms. Experts include “King Derby,” and “Edgy,” the player with Stanley and the Sleepless Knights. The Igede people have an interesting calabash lute, known as *engu*, which is almost spherical in shape. On Bjorn Ranung’s (1973) album it is played by Agute Agurukpo. The *engu* has only two strings and a metal vibrator attached to the bridge. It is tuned and strummed as if it is a speech reproducing instrument of which there are many varieties among the Igede.

Pentatonic Scales. Despite some similarities such as the blues scale the musical structure of African and New World music might vary. Progressions that approximate blues scales didn’t exist among the Igede nor among neighboring ethnic groups such as the Igbo and Ibibio. Rather the music of South West Nigeria is characterized by pentatonic scales. With five notes to an octave the pentatonic scale is common in sub-Saharan Africa. A. M. Jones (1971: 199) examined African xylophones and states, “there is a clear tendency for the formula 1-1-2-1-2 to appear, that is to say two notes are omitted in the octave.” This formula refers to the space between notes. In the octave of C major, the “fa” and “te” are omitted and rendered C D E G A C (octave). The riff that opens “My Girl” by the Temptations is a good illustration of a pentatonic scale.

Melorhythms. Furthermore, Igede music is characterized by melo-rhythms, i.e. derived from indigenous tone languages and speech-reproducing instruments. Meki Nzewi (1983) coins the term “melo-rhythm” to describe “the melodic implications of rhythm essence” of speech reproducing instruments. However Nigerian talking drums such as the all-wooden slit drum or the hour-glass tension drum; were not exported and pentatonic scales are not so noticeable in New-World music.

Tone Language. Kauffman states: “Speech is probably one of the major determinants of all African music making (1980: 402). Many West Africa languages are tone languages, whereby the tone of each syllable conveys meaning and serves to distinguish words as do vowels and consonants. Words may be homonyms but differ in meaning according to their tonal pattern. Many languages are bi-tonal and Agogo (1988:95) provides an Igede example. He states, “Usually there are two tones, high and low:” and provides an illustration with the word “*Thih:*”

ihih “honor” low-high

ihih “market” low-low

ihih “damage” high-low

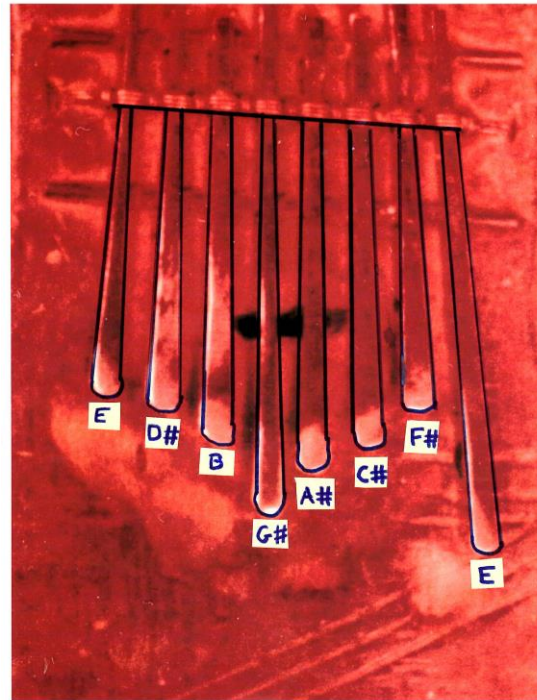
THE TUNING OF TALKING INSTRUMENTS

Slit drum. Due to this binary fluctuation between high and low tones the possibility of reproducing speech on two-toned instruments arises. The *ogirigboh* talking slit drum of the Igede, like that of the neighboring Igbo and Ibibio, is essentially a hollowed-log idiophone with a longitudinal slit and two “lips” of different tones which are beaten with wooden strikers held one in each hand. Although in Igede speech the melodic interval between the spoken tones is variable, in the surrogate language of speech reproducing instruments, the interval between the high and low tone is usually a perfect fourth or a minor third. The *ogirigbohs* of both Andibla and Oboho and warrior associations have an interval of a fourth. An *ogirigboh* can clearly be heard talking at the beginning of the Ijege music ensemble song on the *The Igede of Nigeria* CD (Track 9).

Horn Bugles. Other speech reproducing instruments of the Igede, include animals horns traditionally used in battle as military bugles. The two-foot-long *ekureh* of the Akatanka association made from buffalo horn has an interval of a minor third; while the smaller *opikeh* made from an antelope horn has more variable tones because it additionally acts as a megaphone to amplify vocalizations. However West African talking drums such as the all-wooden slit drum or the hour-glass tension drum; were not exported, although the Jamaican cow-horn bugle, “Abeng,” that featured in the Maroon battles is a noteworthy retention of the speech-reproducing tradition.

Calabash Trumpets. The four transverse trumpets of the Ogirinye Warrior Association are made from calabashes and known as Oko horns. They are not signal instruments per se; they would not be loud enough. Nevertheless, they reproduce the familiar tonal intervals of a perfect fourth and minor third and played together create a pentatonic form of the scale of E Major that corresponds to a 1-1-2-1-2 “gapped scale” formula. As a result their tunes provide a hocketing instrumental melody comprised of the interlaced sequences of each instrument’s two-note range. They can be heard on Track 5 of *The Igede of Nigeria* CD.

Ogumh thumb piano. Regarding the Igede thumb piano or *ogumh*, what David Ames (nd) say of the *ogwume* of the Obima Igbo is generally true of the *ogumh* also: “*ogwume* are usually played solo by older men in their homes after the evening meal or while walking down a path on a moonlit night to visit a neighbor.”

Fig. 1 Melodic pattern of *Ogumh* tuning

In Fig. 1 the keys of Okpo Ikogi's *ogumh* are identified. Okpo Ikogi is an elder of Anyiwogbu village and a ritual specialist—he also weaves the knitted body-stocking costume for the Ogirinye masquerade. The eight keys of the *ogumh* are tuned to a minor scale and its statements included intervals of a third and augmented fourth in addition to fourths and minor thirds. Ikogi uses it to reproduce Igede greetings.

Fig. 2. Notation and text of Igede greeting recited on thumb piano

<u>Musical notes</u>	<u>Igede text</u>	<u>English translation</u>
1. G# A# G# A#	<u>Um hawe</u>	I'm alright
2. A# E G# E E x 2	<u>Obe cho x 2</u>	Thank you x 2
3. A# A# D# A# x 2	<u>Ohe ahole x 2</u>	God has made it so x 2
4. G# A# G# E E A# E E A# G# G#	<u>Mj'gogo mwu eje nya Igede</u>	Please sing an Igede song
5. E E A# G# G# A# E	<u>Mwu eje nya Igede wee</u>	Sing an Igede song now
6. A# E A#	<u>Iyadu</u>	Okay
7. G# E A# E G#	<u>Ela juwa ka</u>	It's no problem

Following this request for an Igede song, Ikogi proceeds to play a plaintive Igede tune in a minor key which he closes with the lament "*Am okpehika la ogodogo*," "I am as poor as an *ogodogo*." An *ogodogo* is the traditional loin cloth. In modern times the loin cloth is seen as something humble and lowly.

POLYPHONY

The Igede's use of polyphony is noted by Akin Euba in the *Journal of Ethnomusicology*, he states, "Igede music is rich in vocal polyphony and the musical instruments include animal horn trumpets, slit drums and hand pianos" (1976: 20). Carl Dahlhaus (1990) shows how polyphonic European music of the late Middle Ages was driven forward not by progression of chords but by the progressions of intervals.

My research finds this to be true of the music of the Igede. This essay explores the relation of the tones of Igede talking drums to the melodic scale and aptitude for a driving tempo. Generally in the Equatorial Africa the pentatonic scale that underlies most music is rooted in the tones of surrogate speech patterns as reproduced on melo-rhythm instruments. Regarding driving tempo, it is its rhythmical complexity and momentum of African music and its offshoots that makes it so danceable. The Igede people often feature communal circle dances (*ewoh ologba*) on social occasions. If the attendees are numerous, smaller circles might form within larger circle—circles within circles—sometimes rotating in the opposite direction. All the while participants sing in a call-and-response pattern and the whole enterprise embodies a conception of rotation. (Endnote#3)

The social meaning portrayed in folk songs is similar in the three regions, West Africa, Caribbean, and Southern US states. Igede song texts can be loosely categorized into three: 1) dance songs; 2) elucidatory songs; and 3) songs of social critique, and these song types are historically replicated in the Virgin Islands and the Caribbean generally. (Endnote#4) Dancing was a major preoccupation for Africans and their descendants in the Caribbean both before and after Emancipation. Many of the song texts I collected refer directly to dance. The refrain of an Igede dance song of the Aitah Ensemble recorded at a funeral held in Obohu meeting ground is simply, “*Ewoh, ewoh, ka hi chi*” – “Dance, dance, let’s do it” which is intoned *ostinato* fashion by the chorus while the lead singer interjects statements derived from the battlefield (Nicholls 2006: 142). Regarding elucidatory songs the topic-content in African and Caribbean songs are historically different. Whereas free African people crooned about daily life and guiding philosophies, enslaved people often complained about their oppressive situation. For example, discussing the eighteenth century plantation songs in the Virgin Islands, plantation manager John Christian Schmidt (1788), presents one such song in the Creole language which insists “*Di Blanco no frey,*” “The whites are no good.”

Adjo my Mester Neeger, e-Samja
Live well my master and blacks, - Oh, how unfortunate I am!
Da lob my lo lob, e-Samja
I must run away etc.
My noy kan hau di uit mer etc. Di Blanco no frey, e-Samja
The whites are no good etc.
Adjo my Syssie (sister) etc. Van Dag du Mandag etc.
Today it is [Monday] ...
Adjo my Mama etc, Da lob my etc.
Adjo my beer Maade (comrade) etc.
Adjo my gud Friende etc.
Adjo my Tata (father) etc.
Di Land no Frey etc.
Here in the countryside it is not good etc.
Adjo my Viese etc.
Let frey met my Mama etc
Dunk op my altyt etc.
My nu sae ferject jou. e-Samja.
(Tyson and Highfield 1994:115)

SOCIAL COMMENTARY

Songs that praise or critique local action and personages are directed at creating behavioral change, it is intended that listeners pay heed and emulate praiseworthy behavior or correct objectionable behavior. In “Shaming Songs,” the threat of being derided publicly is an effective means of encouraging conformity to social norms. Oge Ogede (1994:117) refers to, “the widespread phenomenon in many parts of Africa where criticism is tolerated in song where it would not be tolerated elsewhere.” Singing is often coextensive with dance, and among the Igede, women's associations, such as Imwo and Ihih make good use of this special license, “Ihih” (low-high) means “honor” and they utilize pointed and biting satire in their songs to regulate the conduct of overzealous males.

Furthermore, this special license extends to the teenage Ogbete association whose members are primarily girls. Ogbete is a relatively modern music originating in the 1960’s and named after a sweet intoxicating wine made from guinea corn.

The following Ogbete song criticizes a local family, which although unnamed, has a reputation for mistreating wives; it reflects the concern of a maiden about her impending marriage to a husband from this family and the singer chides her husband-to-be not to emulate his kin:

A ka yem ka, a nwum ina ka ee x 3
M'ka ka ola'kpara ki nya ka
Iya ahu pwoo ko ari oleng ee
Ahu pwoo ka ari oleng ee

If you will not marry me, don't kill me x 3
 I will not go for prostitution to their place
 Don't marry a wife and divorce her, you are a man
 The wife did not divorce him, you are a man.

(Nicholls 1992; Prostitution sometimes becomes the last recourse for a divorced wife).

The most politically contentious song collected by this author was an Ogbete song (Nicholls 1992). The Igede are an Idoma subgroup and are administered from Otukpo township, the capital of Idomaland. The position of Och' Idoma, the paramount chief of all the Idoma, rotates among the various Idoma subgroups. At the time of the study the Och' Idoma, the late Mr. Abraham Ajene Okpabi, was an Igede man, a popular figure and a source of pride. Nevertheless the following song acts as a reminder that even celebrities should not forget who they are and where they come from:

Okpobuna l'Igede
Ajene kpobuna l'Igede
Oyi lomu ki Kpoto
Ajene ye lomu li Kpoto

He comes from Igede
 Ajene comes from Igede
 He turns himself into an Idoma
 Ajene turns himself into an Idoma

(Ibid; *Akpoto* is the old term for Odoma. Here it is abbreviated to *Kpoto*)

Today in the Caribbean, topical songs are the specialty of Calypso singers but formerly they were the province of Cariso, Gombay, Belair, Calenda, and Bamboula music groups. Ken Bilby (1985) maintains, "The use of song for social commentary has been so widely reported in the Caribbean that one must consider this a pan-Caribbean phenomenon. The topical song, relying for its effect on such devices as double entendre, irony, and veiled allusions, is a Caribbean specialty" (201). In nineteenth century Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, many Europeans and local elites were perturbed to find themselves sung about during Christmas festivities and were often not sure whether they were being flattered or derided. The *St. Thomas Tidende* newspaper pointed out on November 22, 1890, that the satirical songs of the Bamboula were as likely to praise individuals as lambaste them, and the editors roundly condemned the songs: "It is not a rule, however, that individuals . . . are ridiculed or scandalized; in many cases it is just the other way, but whether the nature of the song be emulative or derogatory, it [is] an unwarrantable license that people's names be handled with such levity." Not only were the songs considered ribald and offensive; but the energetic Bamboula dance with its overt African characteristics was viewed by Europeans as explicitly sexual. By the end of the nineteenth century the St Thomas establishment clamped down and their censor resulted in the demise of Bamboula as a viable street art. (Endnote#5)

Calypso brought the social commentary genre into the modern era. In the Virgin Islands, college-educated Luis Ible, Jr., has a rare talent for composing songs which earned him the title of Calypso Monarch of Carnival four times. His calypso "For Really?" won him his first title in 1997. The song plays on the name "Farrelly," who was the Governor of the USVI from 1987 to 1995, and commemorated by the monumental Alexander A. Farrelly Justice Center building on St. Thomas.

The lyrics of “For Really?” utilize the idiomatic question “for real?” and raises issues of marital infidelity and administrative mismanagement:

Bad pronunciation has caused me strife
It has caused me understanding problems all my life
I was having some dinner in a restaurant in town
A pretty lady came and sat down,
Crying tears that weigh by the pound
She looked rich and dressed real fancy
As she cried she mentioned to me
She said “I’ve been stood up by the man, who I help to run these islands.
So I ask the sad lady to tell me the man name
She said no, it make she shame [sic]
Ah say For Really? YES, YES,
Ah say For Really? YES, YES.
She said the truth is the man is really insane
So she told him to say he got Parkinson’s
Ah say For Really? YES, YES,
Ah say For Really? YES, YES.

This article has explored ways that Caribbean music has been influenced by West African prototypes in terms of rhythmic processes and the structure of choral renditions. It is shown the momentum and metrical complexity of African music and its offshoots makes it very danceable and that within the context of a dance performance, songs take the liberty to praise and ridicule individuals and this technique is similarly used on both sides of the Atlantic.

ENDNOTES

Endnote#1 In the case of Calypso music in the Caribbean that went on to generate Highlife in West Africa a reverse passage is more likely.

Endnote#2 Early descriptions of the banjo as derived from the African calabash lute include the Virgin Islands, Antigua, Barbados, Jamaica, Martinique, and Surinam. A banjo may have four or five strings and the tradition of singing to lute accompaniment is widespread in the Western Sudan where both four string and five string lutes are found. In his article, “Senegambian Archetypes for the American Folk Banjo,” Michael Coolen says that, the *kôla-lemmé* of the Diawara of Mali which “looks much like an early folk banjo,” has four strings, as does the *gambaré* of the Soninké (Coolen 1984: 123).

Endnote#3 The circle dance helps to cement community bonds. The music ensemble situates their drums at the foot of a big tree in the *ojiya*, meeting ground. The participants dance slowly around the arena responding to a refrain initiated by the musicians. Dancers normally rotate in a counterclockwise direction but reverse circles are sometimes formed within a larger circle. Within the circles, solo dance displays can occur.

Endnote#4 It is not suggested here that there is any special link between the Igede and the peoples of the USVI. Instead the evidence indicates the existence throughout the Caribbean of musical features that typify the songs of, not only the Igede, but the majority of peoples belonging to hundreds of ethnic groups who inhabit a broad swath of territory across West Africa.

Endnote#5 Mary Ann Christopher and Ayesha Morris have been active in reviving the Bamboula in the Virgin Islands. In 2009 and 2010 reenactments of Bamboula Queen Coziah’s historic march through Charlotte Amalie were performed.

References

- Ames, David. No date. *The Music of Nigeria III: Igbo Music*. Long playing record album with liner notes by Cynthia Tse Kimberlin. UNESCO Anthology, Barenreiter-Musicaphon 30L2311
- Bilby, Kenneth M. 1985. “The Caribbean as a Musical Region.” In *Caribbean Contours*, ed. Sidney W. Mintz and Sally Price.
- Conway, Cecelia. 1995. *African Banjo: Echoes in Appalachia*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press.

- Dahlhaus, Carl. 1990. *Studies on the Origin of Harmonic Tonality*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Euba, Akin. 1976. "Review of Music of Dawn and Day: Music Associations of the Igede of Nigeria." *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 20. No 2. pp 397-398.
- Nicholls, Robert W. 1991. *The Igede of Nigeria*. CD of traditional music. Chapel Hill, NC: Music of the World, CDT-117
- Nicholls, Robert W. 1992. "Timing in West African Dance Performance: The Influence of Extra-musical Factors on Rhythm." *Dance: Current Selected Research*. Vol. 3. N.Y.: AMS Press: 145-182.
- Nicholls, Robert W. 2016. "The West African Origins of the Caribbean Banjo" in *Celebrating Multiple Identities*. Univ. of Curacao. Ed: Nicholas Faraclas et al. Curacao : University of Curacao Press: 253-260.
- Nicholls, Robert. W. 2017. "Social Meaning in the Folk Songs of the Eastern Caribbean and West Africa," *Memories of Caribbean Futures*. Ed: Nicholas Faraclas et al. Curacao : University of Curacao Press: 129-143.
- Ogede, Ode S. 1994. "Oral performance as instruction: aesthetic strategies in children's play songs from a Nigerian community." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 19, 3, 113-117.
- Nzewi, Meki. 1983. "Philological Derivations of Melo-Rhythm Improvisation," *African Musicology*, Vol 1, No 1.
- Ranung, Bjorn. (1973). *Music of dawn and day: music and dance associations of the Igede of Nigeria*. Music album with notes. Helsinki: Love Records.
- Sloane, Hans. 1707. *A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers, and Jamaica*. Vol. 1. London: B.M.
- Tyson, George F., and Highfield, Arnold R. 1994. *The Kamina Folk: Slavery and Slave Life in the Danish West Indies*. USVI: VI Humanities Council.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR. While working in Nigeria, Robert Nicholls recorded Igede music, analyzing it, publishing journal articles and chapters, and releasing sixteen selection of Igede traditional music on a CD on the Music of the World (Nicholls 1991). Articles that examine Caribbean cultural models based on African prototypes include Nicholls 2016 and 2017.