

The traditional music of the Jos Plateau in Central Nigeria: an overview

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1. Introduction

Nigeria is one of the most musically diverse countries in Africa, and generalisations about 'Nigerian music' should therefore be treated with appropriate scepticism. Perhaps one quarter of all the some 2000 African languages are spoken in Nigeria, but there are virtually no published materials of any type on more than half of its peoples and cultures and descriptions of their music, even cursory, exist for less than 10% of these. The high profile of the music of a few groups, and the relative familiarity of certain heavily promoted urban sub-genres, serves to further obscure the picture. The earliest record of Nigerian music appears to be Day (1892) who analysed some musical instruments and transcriptions brought back by the Mockler-Ferryman expedition up the Niger. Some of his material is clearly from the Igbo areas, but instruments such as the arched harp are typical of Central Nigeria, along with the cruciform whistle and the transverse horn.

Traditional music in Nigeria is strongly associated with its oral culture and with the subsistence agriculture typical of village communities. In larger ethnic groups such as the Hausa and Yoruba, a thriving urban culture has allowed various musical genres to make the transition to cities and to be taken up by radio and television. However, for minority ethnic groups, this division does not exist; when households migrate to towns they find it difficult to maintain their language and still more village music. At present, most types of rural music are still quite lively, although they are under threat. However, documentation of this type of music is very limited and much of it is likely to disappear before it is recorded or filmed. Academic interest in this music both within and outside Nigeria can be safely summarised as vanishingly low. In the light of this, a project has begun to document the music of the Plateau peoples using digital video. Broadly speaking, much of this music is highly endangered and the survey has regularly encountered the last performer or group with a particular instrument or repertoire. This paper describes some of the traditional music of the peoples of the Jos Plateau and adjacent regions in the context of a recent project to document their music¹. A short case study explores some of the reasons why this music is threatened and the changes that are occurring.

The Jos Plateau is a highly multi-ethnic region, with a complex history. Apart from the intrinsic interest of the music and dance, musical practice provides an intriguing correlate of ethnic and cultural history. The indigenous populations are speakers of Plateau, East Kainji and Chadic languages, which also cover large regions of Central Nigeria. Linguistic evidence shows that these populations have been interacting for a long time and now share many features of their languages; this is also more broadly true for the cultures and the musical types show many similarities across linguistic boundaries. The later history of the Plateau and the colonial era have also changed musical and social practice and the correlation between these can be established in broad outlines. It should be emphasised, that only a very few ethnic groups have been satisfactorily described and such linkages remain speculative.

2. Jos and its background

The Jos Plateau is an area of about 7,770 km² and rises to a height of 1280 m in Plateau State, Central Nigeria. Jos, its capital, was originally established in 1915 as a tin transportation camp. In 1976 it became the capital of Benue-Plateau State and, later, Plateau State of Nigeria and has become an important administrative and commercial centre, with a population of about 800,000. The plateau, composed mainly of granite, slopes gently to the north and is covered by grasslands; the Gongola River rises there. It is now virtually treeless, and marked by inselbergs and tumbles of split rock; there is some reason to think that deforestation is a result of human activity. Agriculture is very dense and there is competition for land.

¹ Initial funding was part of a project conducted under the auspices of the UNESCO Chair of Cultural Heritage at the University of Port Harcourt and the survey began in December 2002. I would like to thank Kay Williamson (†) for both making this possible and providing initial funding. Two VCDs have been produced, of the music of the Eten and Mada peoples. Extensive musical documents of the Berom and Boze exist as well as shorter materials on Tarok and Mwaghavul. Eventually, I hope to burn a series of DVDs illustrating some of the main musical types found on the Plateau. Interview materials on many other musical cultures exist but are yet to be published. I would like to thank John Nengel, Bitrus Kaze, Deme Dang, Barau Kato and Selbut Longtau for their interest and assistance in making these recordings, as well as the many musicians who gathered to play for the team.

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A powerful influence on the peoples of the Jos Plateau was the incursions of the Hausa slave-raiders during the 18th and 19th centuries. Populations such as the Berom were entirely antagonistic, and as a result, there has been only a limited impact on their society. However, many of the East Kainji peoples adapted to Hausa culture, learning the language and borrowing many words and cultural practices. Their music reflects these practices very strongly. In the colonial era, Hausa was promoted very strongly as a language of inter-communication and administration, and this exacerbated the process of cultural change. Following the Hausa incursions, the Fulbe pastoralists typical of the more northerly regions discovered that the Plateau was largely disease-free zone and moved in with their cattle in large numbers. Some ethnic groups regarded this as an invasion, but others developed exchange relationships with herders, sending their sons to herd livestock in exchange for animals.

Following the British conquest of Nigeria also brought Christianity and the favourable climate of Jos attracted many missionaries. As a consequence, Jos and its hinterland is a strongly Christian enclave in an otherwise largely Muslim Northern Nigeria. Missions opposed the practice of traditional religion and the musical forms that accompanied it; as a consequence, many types of music have disappeared. By a perverse irony, the large churches, such as ECWA (Evangelical Church of West Africa) promote a type of music often called 'traditional', 'native' or 'indigenous', but which is entirely of Southern Nigerian origin and typically includes the use of struck pots, wooden clappers and rattles surrounded by a beaded net. Song texts are largely Hausa translations of Western hymns accompanied by a stereotyped set of 'African' instruments of southern origin. 'Traditional' music persists in a somewhat artificial form, promoted for festivals, such as the creation of chiefs, for cultural festivals and even for television. This usually consists of rather spectacular forms of music and dancing, especially with flutes, drums and ankle rattles and players dressed in flamboyant costumes.

In reality, the traditional music of the rural areas of the Jos Plateau is if anything, more threatened than the languages. The forces that are changing the nature of the music of this region very rapidly; Christianity, the proximity to Jos and in particular the gradual spread of electricity. Television, radio, recorded music and simply the perception that acoustic performances are 'old-fashioned' has led many performers to give up their instruments and to discard traditional song-repertoires. Another aspect of change is education; schools transmit a very patronising attitude to traditional music and pupils are encouraged to imitate urban, Hausaised styles and to perform on non-traditional instruments.

3. Musical instruments of the Plateau region

Quersin (1973a,b) are some of the only recordings of the music of the Jos Plateau that are commercially available. The only overview of musical instruments on the Plateau is Weingarten (1990) where they form part of a broad review of material culture, based largely on museum specimens. Weingarten (1990) also collected most of the passing references to music in ethnographic accounts but these are far from illuminating. The only account of a particular ethnic group is Bouquiaux (1961) who described the instruments of the Berom [Biom] in some detail. Muller (1994) has published a series of photographs of Ce [Rukuba] musical instruments but again they are treated as material culture without much interest on their context of use. Musical instruments of the Plateau are very diverse, especially the idiophones and drums, and those described here are only a sample of the most common types recently recorded. They are classified here according the Sachs-Hornbostel system into idiophones, membranophones, chordophones and aerophones.

3.1 Idiophones

Idiophones can be subdivided into tuned and untuned, although the only tuned idiophone is the xylophone. The Berom *kúnduy* was introduced in the 1930s by migrant Bagirmi people from Chad, spreading outwards from Gyel and Du. It has 10-20 wooden keys resonated with cowhorns and is supported around the player's neck with a large fibre loop (Bouquiaux 1962 ; Iyimoga 1982). It can sometimes be played by two players and is usually seen in beer-drinking parlours. It has recently spread to the neighbouring peoples, such as the Mwaghavul, where it is played with flutes for popular entertainment. Leg-xylophones have also been recorded from the Plateau among the Kulere Ron (Frank 1981). They are generally played by women for amusement. This is rather surprising, as the nearest leg-xylophones are recorded in the Igbo-speaking area.

Figure 1. Gourd struck with rings on fingers among the Boze



Figure 2. Struck gourd in water played by Boze man



Apart from the xylophone, idiophones are untuned. They can be broadly divided into struck objects, bells, rattles and scrapers. Struck gourds are a very common accompanying instrument for the lute; large, hemispherical gourds are placed on a cloth and struck with paired sticks, with the palms of the hands and with beringed fingers (Figure 1). They accompany various types of women's entertainment music as well as Hausa *bòdríí* possession dances. Sometimes the gourds are held against the chest and beaten with the hands. In a variant, the gourd can be upturned in a basin of water, and the pitch adjusted by the amount of air trapped under it. Sometimes, the gourd is pushed down with one hand and struck with a stick with the other, so the performer can change pitch as he is playing (Figure 2). The struck gourd is probably by origin a northern instrument since it is associated with Islam and is found across the West

African Sahel (Surugue 1972). It may originally have spread with possession dances, although it has now become adapted both for children's music in schools and for secular events such as marriages. Rectangular wooden clappers are used, normally by women, to keep time and accompany other musical instruments (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Wooden clappers used by the Tarok



Figure 4. Tin can rattles among the Boze



Another major category of idiophone are the rattles. Gourd rattles containing seeds or pebbles are common almost everywhere, but can often be replaced today by tin-cans on sticks filled with pebbles (Figure 4). A more elaborate type is the net-rattle, which has a string network of fruit-shells or beads loosely

enclosing a dried gourd. The net is held by the performer and slapped rhythmically against the gourd. The net-rattle is probably not traditional in the Plateau area, but has become central to church ensembles. Another important type is the

Figure 5. Eten iron ankle rattles



Figure 6. Palm-leaf ankle rattles played by Eten women

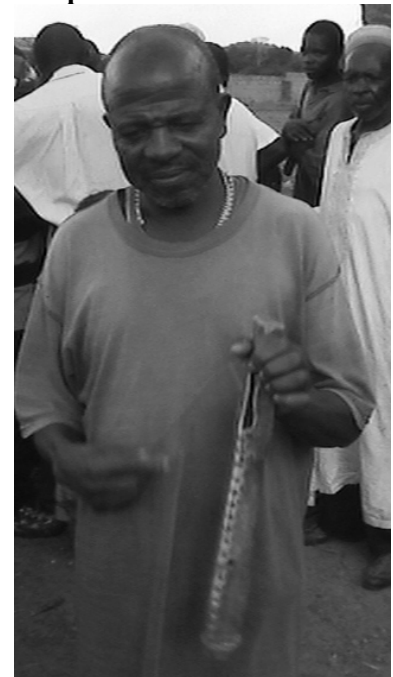


ankle rattle. Throughout much of the North and Middle Belt, small boxes are woven of fan-palm leaves and filled with rattling seeds. These are then tied in strings around the ankle to keep time in dance (Figure 6). In many societies these tend to be used by women. The other common type of ankle rattles are made of iron and are usually pod-shaped, with jingling rings at either end and are most commonly worn by men (Figure 5).

Notched scrapers, or guiros, are not common in Nigeria, but an unusual type is made by the Berom people from the dried internode of the *Euphorbia* cactus plant, which is naturally ridged (Figure 7). The outer surface is scraped with a small stick to accompany an ensemble of lute and rattles.

Iron bells, usually without an internal clapper, and struck with a short stick, are now very common, both in churches and in secular music. These may well not be traditional in the Plateau area, but reflect trade and the falling price of iron artefacts in the early twentieth century.

Figure 7. Berom gwàshák scraper



3.2 Membranophones or skin drums

Drums are a common element in the musical ensembles of the Plateau region and show a considerable variety of shapes and construction methods. Drums are usually made of single pieces of wood (and recently, salvaged oil-drums) but can also be made from spherical or hemispherical calabashes. One of the most common drum types is the hourglass-drum (*kàlàngúú*²) a double-headed drum with laces connecting the heads, held under the arm. The laces are squeezed to alter the pitch of the drum-head during performance and beaten with a distinctive curved stick. Often referred to as a ‘talking drum’ it is common among Hausa, Yoruba and other Islamic peoples and is used by praise-singers to imitate speech-tones. It was probably introduced into this region by the Hausa, but it has now been absorbed into many ensembles of otherwise indigenous drums. Single-headed hourglass drums are also used as accompanying rhythm instruments.

Figure 8. Tarok barrel-drum, *igangan*



Figure 9. *Ìbàràkádìṅ* drum played by the Eten people



The double-headed barrel-drum (*gàngáá*), with two heads laced together, is slung from the performer’s shoulder and beaten with sticks or hands (Figure 8). The performer may damp the second skin with his hand to alter the pitch of the struck head. It is used to accompany dancing, praise-singing and various types of secular performance. Instruments in this region have names that closely resemble the Hausa; possibly this was borrowed into Hausa from Plateau languages.

Single-headed drums, open at the base, with the skins either pegged or laced and wedged, are found throughout the country in a great variety of shapes, sizes and designs. Most commonly played with the palm of the hand, they can occasionally be played with sticks or even ropes. A particularly striking type of drum is the tall, ground-standing drum shown in Figure 9. Instead of wood, the body of the drum is made from the hollowed trunk of a fan-palm. The players, who are women among the Eten people, dance around the drum, taking turns to beat with the palm of the hand. Among the Eten, the *Ìbàràkádìṅ* is used for secular dances, but further south this type of drum is the drum beaten for chiefs.

Figure 10. *Samba* frame-drums of the Eten



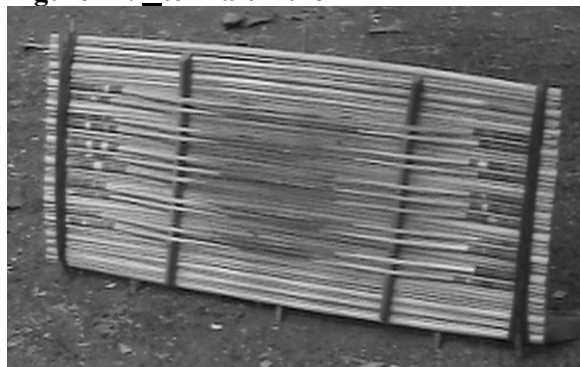
Frame-drums are probably not indigenous to the region, but a distinctive type that may originally have come from Brazil is now used in churches and some types of secular music. The *samba* rectangular frame-drum has a second, interior frame with wedges that are used to tighten the head and snares are sometimes added (Figure 10). It is usually placed against the knees of the player and struck with paired sticks or the palm of the hand.

² Hausa names are given where these are in widespread use.

3.3 Chordophones

The Plateau region of Nigeria has many of the most common types of African chordophone, the lute, the musical bow and the arched harp. However, the instrument that is considered most typical is the raft-zither (Figure 11). Raft-zithers are made from dried cereal-stalks laid parallel and bound together; the strings are made from the raised epidermis supported by two bridges, and tuned by over-wound vegetable fibres. The tuning is usually pentatonic, with the strings arranged in threes and the main string doubled on each side at the octave. The raft-zither is played with the thumbs, using a strumming technique, and is found through much of central Nigeria. It is commonly played solo, usually for beer-drinking or other entertainment music. Children make untuned replica raft-zithers at harvest-time.

Figure 11. Eten raft-zither



Lutes are of two main types, those with trough-shaped resonators usually carved from a block of wood, and those with ovoid or circular resonators made from gourds (Figure 12). These are typically spike-lutes, in other words the neck is a stick that passes into the body of the resonator and the strings are looped over it once they pass the bridge, which is held to the skin soundboard by the pressure of the strings. More recently, small instruments with resonators from sardine tins or even plastic bottles can be seen. The strings were typically gut or tendons, but are now usually made of nylon. Historically, these instruments seem to be associated with the northern regions and are typical of Hausa and Kanuri, but it seems they were long ago absorbed into the traditional music of many peoples of the Plateau.

Figure 12. Berom lute, *yòm shǐ*



The musical bow is found west of the Plateau proper, in the region of Southern Zaria. Shaped like a hunting bow, the string is held between the open lips so that the mouth acts as a resonant cavity. The performer holds a short stick in one hand and presses it against the string to divide it at intervals to produce different harmonic series. Another longer and thinner stick then strikes the string directly; by altering the shape of the mouth cavity, the different harmonic can be emphasised in the same manner as a Jew's harp. The musical bow is associated with the agricultural year and can be played together with a singer for songs of social comment. For example, among the Eten it is called *ingangoŋ* and may only be played from June to January, when the crops are growing and up to harvest.

The arched harp is found across a wide swathe of east-central Nigeria, becoming a dominant prestige instrument along the border with Cameroun, where it is frequently associated with the blacksmith caste. On the Jos Plateau, the Berom call it *yòm wáyá*, i.e. the 'wire zither', suggesting it is a post-colonial introduction. Among the Tarok, the arched harp is associated with some of the major Tarok composers of songs of social criticism. The harp almost always has 5-6 strings and pentatonic tuning.

3.4 Aerophones

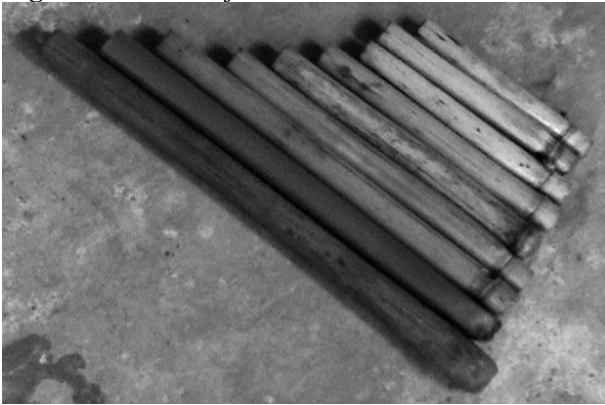
The main aerophones found in the Plateau region are flutes and whistles, horns and clarinets as well as the percussion pot. A very characteristic feature of this region is the playing of flutes and horns in tuned sets of single-note instruments, usually sized to produce pentatonic or heptatonic scales. This involves the well-known African 'hocket' technique, where players repeat short melodic fragments which are designed to harmonise with one another and which produce a rich polyphony (see Arom 1991 for a description of these musical techniques).

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One of the most typical ensembles is the set of single-note end-blown *ju* flutes played by the Berom (Figure 13). The reeds are cut to form a two-octave set with a pentatonic scale and each player takes a single pipe and blows a short rhythmic pattern. The notes are designed to interlock and form an underlying melody. A drummer usually sits in the centre of a circle and the players dance slowly round, facing inwards. The players are always young men and in recent times they have developed costumes to distinguish one group from another.

Further south, in the Mada-speaking area, these single-note flutes have been developed into four-note panpipes (Figure 14). Panpipes are made in a variety of sizes, but the organisational principle is very different from the Berom, where each pipe has a single player. In some Mada villages, all adult males have a panpipe, made in one of four sizes. During festivals, they bring their panpipe and play along with as many as participate. Needless to say, the resulting music is significantly less structured than when it is co-ordinated

Figure 13. Berom *ju* reed end-blown flute set



by a single lead musician. The other important type of flute is the vertical notch-flute. Usually with four fingerholes it is made of a length of cane and has a V-shaped notch at the top (Figure 15). Interestingly, these are known in most local languages as *sharuwa*, a transparent borrowing from Hausa, although the Hausa *sàreewà* is usually a vertical edge-flute, without a notch (Ames & King 1971). Although it can be played solo, Plateau peoples usually play this flute in large ensembles of up to twenty players, using the same hocket techniques as the Berom single-note flutes. The resulting polyphony makes it impossible for the ear to disentangle individual lines and it is unsurprising that modern the ‘micro-polyphony’ of twentieth century composers such as Ligeti has been influenced by ensembles of this type.

Figure 15. Izere sharuwa player



Another type of flute is the spherical fruit-shell ocarina, made from the fruit of the tree *Oncoba spinosa* (Figure 16). The player blows across the top and can produce three or four notes by the use of the fingerholes. Although the notes are different in pitch the intervals are not precise and the instrument is usually played solo, either with specific tunes of its own or approximations of tunes played on other instruments. The ocarina is commonly associated with hunters and is still sometimes used for signals or to make music in the bush. An adapted version of this instrument has a hole in the outer shell covered with a spider-web

Figure 14. Mada panpipe, *mgba*

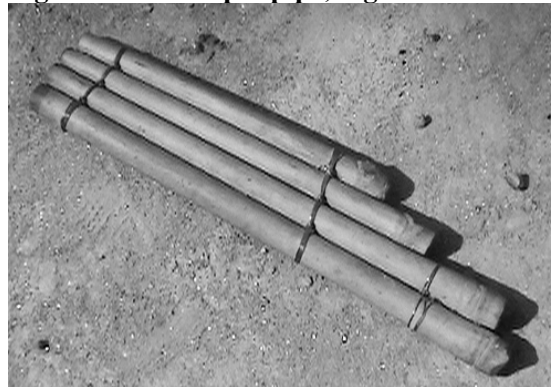
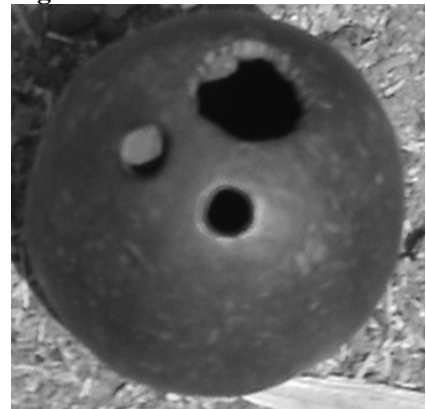


Figure 16. Eten fruit-shell ocarina



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that acts as a vibrating membrane like a kazoo or mirliton. It is blown or spoken into and the resulting unearthly sounds represent the voices of masquerades.

Figure 17. Tarok player of *ngapak* cruciform whistle



Apart from flutes, which are tuned, either in relation to themselves or a set of instruments, whistles, which produce indeterminate pitches, are also common. The most common type is the cruciform whistle, a conical wooden whistle blown across the top, with two finger-holes in either side of the body, often on projections. The embouchure is usually notched, and the technique is thus like the notch-flute described above (Figure 17). Usually untuned, they may have developed from signal instruments, since they are still common among hunters for communicating without disturbing animals. Among the Tarok people, they are used on market days, between people converging on a central place, to transmit information about the state of the market and who is present.

Horns are usually side-blown and made of antelope, although these are being replaced by either cow-horn or wood. The distal end may be open or closed, producing either one or two notes. Most transverse horns are unpitched, and used as a ceremonial or signal instrument (Figure 18). On the Jos Plateau, among the Ngas and Izere, they are played polyphonically in tuned sets, the largest ensemble spanning three octaves. Figure 19 shows the set of seven transverse horns

Figure 18. Transverse antelope horn, *igbá*, among the Eten



Figure 19. Izere transverse horn ensemble



played for traditional rulers among the Izere.

Transverse clarinets made from cereal-stalk internodes open at the distal end with the reed cut directly from the stem are found throughout the north-central regions. Children blow them after the sorghum harvest, although more elaborate instruments have resonators of bush-orange (*Oncoba spinosa*) or animal horn at one or both ends and are used for speech imitation.

4. Music of the Plateau in the modern world: a case study of Eten

The impact of modern national, commercial and global music depends very strongly on electricity. Until recently, few settlements outside Jos had power, and although generators have been used since the 1970s for occasional events, without mains electricity, acoustic music was the norm. But the collapse of musical performance can be very rapid, once power lines begin to function. In Ganawuri, a large rural settlement of the Eten people just off the southern edge of the Plateau, electric power began to flow in 2002. Since the introduction of electricity, a video shop has opened up in the village and it plays continuous urban pop music at extremely loud volumes, often on a 24-hour schedule. On Wednesdays and Saturdays there are large-scale parties with drinking, dancing and recorded music. Many houses and beer-drinking places have ghetto-blasters; the moonlit dances of a few years ago are rapidly being replaced with amorphous shuffling to

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Nigerian pop or American rap. Even less enlivening is the silence of households enraptured by Nollywood films. As a consequence, all types of traditional Eten music have been very rapidly sidelined. When there are 'cultural festivals' such as the New Year Festival, following the horse races, there are displays of 'cultural dancing'. These are usually managed by the police, who control the crowd with whips and threaten performers who overstep their two-minute allotted slot. The chief performers are given microphones with highly distorted amplification. As a consequence, the experience is highly unsatisfactory to many groups and 'traditional' performers have begun to boycott these events. It is grievous enough when rich musical repertoires die through neglect or religious change; intentional slaughter of this type seems highly undesirable.

5. Conclusions

Recent years have seen considerable international concern about language death and resources are now invested to allow middle-class Europeans to study issues of theoretical interest in relation to dying languages. This has so far had a minimal impact on the languages themselves but perhaps the two goals are incompatible. Language death usually occurs slowly, because communities of speakers only gradually disperse, fragment or assimilate; even then individuals can recall a language long after they cease using it. But music dies rapidly, as instruments are destroyed and not replaced, traditional religions are supplanted by Christianity and Islam and the boom of global music drowns out the weaker timbre of a grass-stem zither. The social structures necessary to mobilise groups of a dozen individuals to play complex interlocking wind music are crumbling. Acoustic music is still lively in many Plateau communities at present, but its future is hardly assured. Given that enthusiasm for world music has never been greater, it seems ironic that so much should be disappearing without even a requiem. Nigerians will probably not take great interest in this music for some time to come; too much of it is redolent of a rural past they are anxious to leave behind. But it is a sorry reflection on broader attitudes to cultural heritage that no-one is taking care to record these rich musical repertoires.

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