GLOBAL SOUND BITES
~ A LISTENING PERSPECTIVE ON WORLD CULTURES ~
AFRICAN PYGMY MUSIC
African Pygmy – Who are they?

- Indigenous people that can be found in parts of Africa
- Characterised by their short stature and nomadic lifestyle
- Usually hunters, though they have also evolved over the years to engage in trade with their neighbours
- Dozens of pygmy groups, the more famous ones are the Aka and Mbuti groups
African *Pygmy* – Who are they?
Role of music in African *Pygmy* groups

- Music is part of their daily life

- They make music for entertainment, as part of rites to appease the spirits (animistic beliefs), in their hunting trips etc.

- Field recordings of African *Pygmy* music often involve the ambient sounds of the rainforest, distant thunder rolls etc.
Role of music in African Pygmy groups

- Absence of such “natural sounds” in the sample recording is due to the fact that in this case, it is a concert/studio recording, not a field recording and hence, not a true “aural representation” of the value of music in the culture.

- This also highlights the importance of field recording and field work in ethnomusicology.
Characteristics of African *Pygmy* Music

- Music from the *Aka* and *Mbuti* groups shares many similar characteristics
- Dense polyphonic and rhythmic texture
- Polyphonic texture – interlocking short simple melodic units to form the sound
- The seemingly complex polyphonic texture is mainly compounded by the polyrhythm
Characteristics of African Pygmy Music

• Polyrhythm – Simultaneous layering of different regular and/or irregular pulse of rhythmic/melodic lines
  • for e.g., the simplest “3-against-2” (tapping three consistent “beats” with the right hand simultaneously with two consistent “beats” with the left hand)

• Music making is spontaneous and no two performances will be similar, there seems to be an element of “trial-and-error” as each “layer of music” is added to the complex web of melodic and rhythmic units
Characteristics of African 
Pygmy Music

- Dance and handclaps are an integral and important part of their music making process

- Instruments used are usually small and highly portable, perhaps due to their nomadic lifestyle

- No written notation exists and arguably, there might be no oral tradition of teaching music
Characteristics of African *Pygmy* Music

- In fact, to them, music might just be “caught on” and so much a part of their everyday life that their children learn it just as they learn to eat, walk, hunt etc.
**Pygmy Music – Musical Essentials**

- **Western Music – Focus is on Harmony**
  - Recall 12-bar blues – Bass progression (foundation of Harmony) is the “identity” and “driving force”

- **Pygmy Music – Focus is on interlocking units** (simple melodic motifs with complex inter-rhythmic relationships) to produce a complex rhythmic web of music
  - Might be similar to *Gamelan* music
  - But, the polyrhythmic aspect of this complex web of interlocking music is definitely unique to African *Pygmy*
**Pygmy Music – An example notated using Western convention**

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