“I can recall musical moments in my life that have been just exquisite—the epitome of emotional involvement and commitment and pleasure from performing.”
Ark Sunkett’s drumming began on the floor of his family’s kitchen. He liked to bang away on pots and pans. Unlike most early pot and pan pounders, Sunkett decided to make a career of it—drumming, that is. The elder Sunkett recognized his son’s potential as a percussionist. A would-be jazz pianist himself, he realized that with Mark and his brother, Warren, the Sunkett family had the makings of a jazz trio.

The younger Sunkett’s familial approach to music continues today. An associate professor of music at Arizona State University, he immerses himself in the study and performance of African drumming. He says it is music that comes from and unites its community.

“Growing up in Pennsylvania, I was interested in African drumming. But there were not any outlets or ways to study this music academically,” Sunkett says. Instead, he headed to the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia to earn an orchestral percussion performance degree. This classical music background eventually led him to ASU where he teaches music, and later to perform as principal timpanist with the Phoenix Symphony.

“I’ve always been intrigued with African drumming and by the fact that all the material I could find on the subject was produced by non-Africans and non-African Americans,” Sunkett says. “This isn’t bad, but I always thought there had to be another perspective.”

Sunkett provides that perspective. His curiosity and interest in African drumming became the focus of a doctoral dissertation, a video, and numerous recordings. For 10 years he has reveled in the accessibility of African music, especially from a performance perspective.

“If you want to study classical music, you must use the European system of notation, theory, harmony,” Sunkett explains. African music is more intrinsic.

Western jazz and rock music, both only recently studied from an academic perspective, may be more approachable. However, Sunkett says these forms of music are largely entertainment offered through concert events which people attend and then leave.

“It is something that you turn on and turn off,” he says. African music, on the other hand, is integrated into the lives of the people it represents.

Sunkett has traveled to the West African country of Senegal five times in the past decade. There he discovered the difference between timpani and African drumming is not merely the change from one instrument to another; it is part of an expansion of the overall musical experience.

“African music is so much a part of social involvement in the community. When there, I am in fact a part of that community,” Sunkett says. “This really appeals to me because it addresses things that go beyond African music and links me more directly to what I consider a part of my African heritage.”

One of Sunkett’s first and more painful adjustments were the bleeding hands and calluses needed to play African drums. “The sound is better if I have calluses on my fingers,” he says. “You must fight to maintain the right balance. Just enough callous and the sound is good; too much and your fingers crack and bleed.”

A second obstacle was Sunkett’s African-American birthright, which equipped him with Western sensibilities and perceptions of intangibles such as rhythm.

“There are many more absolutes, more concrete components to music in Western study,” he explains. “If you know the rules, you can pretty much understand exactly what’s supposed to happen. But in African music there’s a lot more fluidity, more variability in what can happen.”

Much depends on the “master drummer” who leads an African drum ensemble. In Western terms, this lead drummer is much like the conductor and featured soloist.

Other qualities are intrinsic to the culture. For drummers of the community, the music and rhythms become second nature. Not hearing them daily, Sunkett must learn to academically process the rhythms.

“I’m getting better at just being able to feel them, but that hasn’t completely happened yet,” he laughs.

The African drum ensemble itself is not unlike a string quartet. Members have some latitude to go beyond a prescribed musical part, but they always are aware of their roles in the group. The larger the ensemble, the less the opportunity for variation in parts. In Senegal, ensemble sizes usually range from three to seven drummers.

Sunkett’s African aesthetic is flourishing. During a 1995 visit to Senegal, he was allowed to be the master drummer in a few ensembles.

“Part of it fortunately is part of me,” Sunkett says. “There are some things that have been retained or maintained in the African-American culture that directly address the African aesthetic. These are the things I write about.”
Drum Families

West African folklore tells of two sisters traveling on the Senegal River. Their boat hit an object and was split in half. One sister, Aguene, drifted south to become the “mother” of the Jola people. The other sister, Anecho, drifted north to become the “mother” of the Serer people.

Such stories, passed down through generations, recount the origination myths of Senegalese ethnic groups. The stories hint at the relationships of these groups, some derived from others, some developing in tandem. Distinctive music types, rhythms, drums, and ensemble configurations likewise follow these cultural transformations.

“There is a connection in the music that these ethnic groups play,” says ASU music professor Mark Sunkett. The drums differ in pitch and shape. However, most follow a consistent playing style: one stick and one hand. “In Senegal, the Bamana people play the same or similar rhythms played by the Wolof, Lebu, or Jola, but they will play them on their own drums."

In Senegal, there are many types of drums. The Djembe is played with two hands. It is the drum of the Bamana people. The Sabar is the drum of the Wolof, Serer, and Lebu peoples. The Sowruba is the drum of the Jola. The Diun Diun is the drum of the Serer. The Tama is a drum used by all of the ethnic groups. The Khin is a drum used in contemporary culture by the Bey Faal people.

Sunkett’s book, Mandani Drum and Dance: Djembe Performance and Black Aesthetics from Africa to the New World (White Cliffs Media, Inc., Tempe, AZ, 1995), is based on the Mande dance and drumming practices. Originally of Guinea, the Mande people play the Djembe (jim-bay). The Djembe has been a popular drum in the United States since the 1950s. Sunkett’s book grew from his doctoral dissertation. In it, he connects the music and dance traditions of the Djembe with the African-American community and Senegalese culture.

“I wanted to be as complete and holistic as I could possibly be when looking at a drum, dance, and a music culture,” Sunkett says. During his research, he made field recordings of the music as performed in Africa and the United States. He then conducted a comparative analysis on the methods and styles of both the music and the dance.

Sunkett has since released a compact disk, “Mandani Drum and Dance,” and in early 1997, completed a video of the same title.

“There are things that you can describe with words and things you can hear in the music, but sometimes an image is needed to fully realize the whole impact,” Sunkett says. “I can recall musical moments in my life that have been just exquisite—the epitome of emotional involvement and commitment and pleasure from performing. I now have a new area that provides the same kind of satisfaction, plus the pure physicality of playing African drums.”

The asu professor has yet to satisfy his thirst for new rhythms. Journeys to Africa introduced him to new friends, fellow drummers, and different instruments. The Djembe book, compact disk, and video are part of a process Sunkett plans to continue.

In early 1997, he produced and released a second compact disk, “Sabar: The Soul of Senegal.” Eventually, Sunkett plans to write about other drums, which have captured his attention—the Sowruba, Diun, Anecho, and Khin.

Research for the Mandani Drum and Dance book, compact disk, and video was supported in part by Earthwatch. For more information, contact Mark E. Sunkett, Ph.D., School of Music, College of Fine Arts, 602.965.5508.
Learning the Language of Drums

Mark Sunkett studies the interconnections between Senegalese ethnic groups and their representative instruments. He has been recording and writing about this quest to document the preservation and distribution of rhythms in different drum families. Through interviewing sources, such as the international language of music, Senegalese, and Wolof, a tongue native to the region of Senegal, Sunkett finds that contemporary and folkloric ensembles often represent a mix of drum families, and that they do not perform the rhythms of various ethnic groups by simply bringing out the sound of one drum or another.

The task is difficult. Wolof is so area-specific that Sunkett's only textbook on the area has concrete methods of recording and archiving information, so things can get very specific depending on where you are. Nevertheless, Sunkett's quest for tradition continues. "I'm looking for the old, pure rhythms that typically only the drums of each ensemble used to play. When they were configured a hundred years ago, "The group may not have a complete Sabar ensemble, they will use a couple of Djembes and a couple of Sowrubas, rather than all of them."

Sunkett explains. "Documenting the rhythms and performance traditions preserves them for future generations of local drummers, ethnomusicologists, and researchers."

Sunkett tries to apply the teaching of one of his college professors. "As an explorer," he said, "if you can't discover things in the area, then you can use the stories tucked away in the memories of the elders, some of whom refuse to speak anything but their own tongue."

In search of such stories, Sunkett leaves the comfortable language of rhythms behind. He begins to interact with foreign figures, such as Francophone and Berber-speaking groups, which are represented in the Senegalese Arab world through music. In the 1950s, areas known as Wolof and Senegalese pygmy and written language, it is an important part of their lifestyle. Wolof, a tongue native to the region of Senegal, is represented in the Senegalese language, locally called "Senegalese."

"I'm trying to develop my skills in the Wolof language," Sunkett says. "The task is difficult. Wolof is a very specific language that Sunkett's only textbook comes from the Peace Corps. It's a way to use Wolof, a language intended to learn the rhythms and performance traditions of various ethnic groups."