

Perspectives on Coastal Ghana's Musical and Social Patterns: "One" Is Not Where We Think It Is But It Is Always Where It Should Be

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Abstract

As the popularity of world music continues to grow in the United States, more West African drumming and dance ensembles are making their way into public and academic performing venues. Such groups often showcase Ghanaian music as a representation of West Africa. For many groups, transcriptions and recordings of Ghanaian dance rhythms help to achieve a higher standard in performance. In spite of the available sources about performing, Ghanaian master-drummers emphasize the importance of understanding how their music reflects their society. Many studies stress the differences in the way Western and African cultures approach rhythm. One area where a difference is encountered is in the perception of rhythmic structure. The concept of an emphasized down beat (commonly referred to in Western music as "one") may or may not be represented in Ghanaian music.

Visitors who travel to Ghana for the purpose of learning the music will often times encounter this musical obstacle, and there are many interpretations of why this difference exists. In heeding the current call to understand the societal patterns that inform and inspire the music, this article applies the Ghanaian concept of a moveable or flexible “one” as a metaphor in understanding several significant, current, and traditional social patterns. Observations were primarily made during recent fieldwork within the fishing-community of Nungua and its Kusun Cultural Centre. It must be noted that while Nungua, as part of the greater Accra region, is often associated with Ga ethnic groups, however, the information provided here does not assume the social standards to be “Ga-specific.” Rather, the information in this article reflects a number of general social trends we witnessed throughout.

Keywords: Ghanaian music, performance practice, cultural identity in music, Kpatsa, rhythm transcriptions.

It took a trip to Ghana for me to understand and experience things I had been told in the classroom and by colleagues for many years. My first professional recording in 1978 was for an African High Life artist. He seemed good, but I had little context of the tradition he represented until the Summer of 2012 when I “got schooled” in Ghana by an eight year old on where the bell fits in a drum pattern. When I finally understood the pattern, even without the aid of finding “one,” I came to realize that if I can live without a fixed “one,” maybe so can those we educate. Perhaps it may serve their future and the future of the arts world to do so. Kevin Woelfel (Ghana, 2012)

Acknowledgements and in Memory of Professor Komla Amoaku

Regarding my (Barry Bilderback) portion of this article’s information, I extend credit and a heartfelt thanks to a number of outstanding friends, cohorts, and colleagues: co-author, Kevin Woelfel (Director, Lionel Hampton School of Music), Nii Tettey Tetteh Leno (Founder-Director of Ghana’s Kusun Cultural Centre), Togbe Hunor Gatukpe Dogah (High Priest of the Kpeve Village), Professor Alexander Agordoh (renowned Ghanaian educator, performer, and author), and Professor Komla Amoaku (renowned Ghanaian ethnomusicologist and Founder-Director of Ghana’s Institute for Music and Development). With the passing of Professor Komla Amoaku (b. 26 June 1940, d.21 July 2012) Kevin and I are dedicating this work to his remarkable talent, inspiration, and mission in sustaining and disseminating Ghana’s musical traditions.

To better understand Ghanaian music from a Ghanaian perspective, during this fifth year of conducting the Ghana study-abroad course, Kevin and I made a conscious effort to step away from our own education and cultural systems. With the support of many on-site informants, our goal was to determine some of the ways Ghanaian music and society inform one another. We concluded that in order to perform Ghanaian music at a respectable level we must not concern ourselves with controlling the rhythm, but we must let the rhythm control us; an observation made during our final discussion with Professor Amoaku, and one that he was very pleased to hear.

Foreword

As music history instructor and study-abroad faculty member in the University of Idaho's Lionel Hampton School of Music, for the past five years, I have led students to Ghana; a country that strives to retain indigenous, traditional practices under the weight of developing Euro-USA standards. The character of my cultural awareness course is its emphasis on drumming and dance. As in previous years, this year's focus on music as a window into Ghana's culture was influenced by three factors: 1. the culture's longstanding and continued emphasis on its music and dance traditions, 2. the shared enthusiasm for music within our cultural exchange, and perhaps most noteworthy; 3. the tangibility, practicality, and retention of information as students return with an increased proficiency in drumming and dance. I raise these points to support upcoming claims related to the responsibilities held in borrowing Ghanaian musical tradition. Currently, as higher-education music programs foster cultural awareness and diversity, many rely on Ghana as a representation of West Africa. Along with interest in the country's music, the emphasis placed on Ghanaian cultural exchange seems to rely on a number of factors: 1. the country's relatively stable socio-political standing, 2. its geographic accessibility, 3. the intriguing, and hospitable ways of the cultures, and 4. the English spoken by the country's majority. All things considered, numerous accounts, studies, and publications dedicated to Ghana's music circulate academic centers of higher education.

Many case studies examine Ghanaian music through the unique characteristics of rhythm and dance. Yet, additional insight can be revealed by examining the social patterns that have contributed to the way Ghanaian cultures view and approach its music and dance forms. This is especially important as the popularity of world music continues to grow and numerous West African drumming ensembles emphasize Ghanaian music.

Introduction

Under current systems in the USA, many instructors, when teaching the music, spend a considerable amount of time developing methods related to drum strokes, aligning parts, and keeping everyone on track. In so doing, full rhythmic cycles are subdivided using common Western practices. While this is a practical and controlled method in teaching the music, it does present a complication as it seems to misrepresent the way that Ghanaian cultures view and approach their own musical traditions. In observing the way we are taught by Ghanaian master drummers, it becomes obvious that there is merit to understanding the way music functions and reflects Ghanaian social patterns. Their message indicates that in order to perform the music as accurately as possible – and do justice to the traditions – it is important to understand the social structures and the spirit of the people who create the music. It is not enough to simply intellectualize the “count” and impose preconceived ideas of polyrhythm, improvisation, and call-and-response. In support of this position, the observation has been that non-percussion students returning from Ghana with only a few weeks of training and experiencing social contexts will often have a command over the style that exceeds percussion majors with years of academic training. In the efforts of transplanting and performing the music, awareness of the music’s context can do a great deal for performance practice.

For many first-time listeners, Ghana’s traditional music seems to be a form of unbridled improvisation and energy. Yet, upon closer inspection, much the same way that traditional Ghanaian marketplaces, land travel, and time-keeping appear to be erratic, close examination reveals a full functioning and meaningful ordering. This ordering is based on a community’s ability to adapt to immediate, and in many respects, unforeseeable and uncontrollable conditions. Expressed by Robert W. Nicholls in his account of transition and continuity in African dance, traditional African cultures recognize this continuity of experience as surpassing the significance of an isolated moment, just as the community’s needs surpass the individual’s.¹ When considering Ghanaian music, Nicholls’ expression of continuity is not only observable in the interlock of multiple and simultaneous rhythmic patterns, but is also apparent in the persistent drive of the cycles; cycles that provide the momentum for hours of dancing, and, in the case of spiritually imbued practices, heightened levels of consciousness. As unceasing cycles often provide the foundation for the music and dance, continuity does not rely on accented beats, namely “one.” Rather, the music’s foundation is propelled by a unity of non-hierarchical pulses that sets the grounding for the layer of improvisation. It is far more important to feel the full effect of the pulse and drive rather than trying to determine your place in the cycle.

While repetition and sequence guides the music, as we shall see, to define each instance of the cycle by a fixed “one” count is problematic in grasping the relationship between the parts and the overall structure. While it is well documented in the fieldwork and scholarship on Ghanaian music that the cyclical nature of the music lends itself to various interpretations in counting, this article provides an example of contextualizing the music in a way that instructors can convey the spirit behind the structures as much as the rudiments of the rhythms.

As traditional drum patterns morph through a dance rhythm, unlike the conservatory-based Western standard of identical reenactment, it is doubtful -- and perhaps undesirable -- for a dance rhythm to be performed the exact same way twice. To drum at a respectable level, one needs to have one foot in tradition, one in the moment, and be comfortable shifting between the two. It is in this adaptable approach and spirit where we find conceptual parallels to some of the most crucial social patterns sustaining the country before, throughout, and after Euro-US occupation.

With the rise of Western standards in Ghana-- standards that are in stark contrast to time-honored ways -- seemingly, there would be a major threat to the country's customary value systems. Yet, within the country's progressive state there remains a measure of tradition that reflects adaptability in the wake of such Westernized occupation. As Ghanaian sociologist Bethwell Ogat points out, sustaining the culture through the means of adaptability is not a new theme in the country's cultural fabric.³ Whether the focus is on the ethnic groups of the Northern

Dagomba, the Coastal *Ga*, the Central *As(h)ante*, or the Volta *Ewe*,⁴ music and dance practices related to daily life are not merely a hallmark reflecting the country's traditional past, but rather they remain as standards within the community values of cooperation and communication. Well beyond the arduous 17th century trans-Atlantic Anglo/Dutch occupation, the Trans-Atlantic sphere of impact, and the 19th century Asante-British conflicts, reliance on music and dance has remained a constant and life-affirming practice throughout the politically-charged periods of the 20th and early 21st centuries. Even within the post-Kwame Nkrumah contemporary period, where Westernized socio-political organizations such as the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC), the Convention People's Party (CPP), the National Liberation Movement (NLM), and the United Party (UP), have generated --paradoxically --a degree of political instability, the country's dependence on music and dance remains a primary focal point in ceremonial, festival, and institutional activities.⁵ They also serve as a deliberate statement on the country's ability to maintain tradition. Within this socio-political environ, musically speaking, when Euro-US culture, versed in rewarding rhythmic competence based on strict counting and subdividing, encounters a culture -- Ghana -- demonstrating musical competence based on flexibility and adaptability, the musical relationship *begins* with students expecting instructors to count the beats in the same way, and *ends* with Ghanaian master drummers helping students to abandon counting that relies on the emphasis on "one."

Further Understanding of the Problem of "One"

In Western art music training, the concept of "one" is generally understood as the fixed downbeat usually on the first beat of a measure (usually given emphasis) and it provides the foundation for metered rhythm. Opposed to this principle, when learning Ghanaian traditional music, rhythm is not based on the principle of division and subdivision.

In accounting for rhythm, performers do not consciously think about an emphasized “one” as a downbeat, rather, the overall structure is established in an ongoing repeated pattern (often times performed on a struck bell). For locals, having grown up with such patterns, beats seem to function as an extension of feel and pulse and are not counted or reduced within the full cycle. Furthermore, it seems that by Ghanaian standards, such a practice would be likened to searching out the letter “a” in every sentence with the intention of emphasizing it as the most important letter. Of course, the result of such a practice not only jeopardizes the sentence structure’s fluidity, but even worse, it becomes an exercise that has no bearing on comprehension of the sentence’s meaning. Master drummers in Ghana will generally point out that the only time meter based on “one” within counts of 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, and 12 is imposed is when they are dealing with formally trained musicians. Worth noting too, and in support of this discrepancy, Ghanaian performers not versed in this type of counting will appear to err as the master drummer vocalizes the beats in the cycle. The reason for this breakdown is that ensemble drummers, in their command over the full cycle, view all the beats as equal so placing emphasis on one particular pulse is an arbitrary act, and many will follow through by emphasizing their own “one” count on the beat they see fit. Therefore, when instruction is handed over to various members of the group, depending on the particular instructor, the “one” count will shift in relationship to their perspective of the bell’s cycle and their own supporting part.

Ironically, it is in this web of multiple “ones,” where we, as students, are capable of abandoning “one” altogether and we are, for the first time, able to hear the full cycle and the related parts as a unified whole. This revelation thus enables us to (a) re-enter the cycle at any given moment, (b) not only hear, but feel, the other parts performed simultaneously (c) understand the subtleties of the master drummer’s improvisations, (d) follow the call-and-response choreography of the dancers in relationship to the solos, and (e) perform the piece with an innate rhythmic drive that Ghanaian listeners recognize as closer to genuine.

Because the downbeat established by the count of “one” is a foreign musical device for most Ghanaian drummers, its placement in the cycle varies depending on the way it is interpreted and functions.⁶ An example of this came about as our 2012 group learned the Ghanaian Ga recreational dance, *Kpatsa* (pah-chah).⁷ In *Kpatsa* the structural rhythm is played on the *gogota* (koh-kah-ta) bell and consists of a seven beat phrase based on two parts: (a) its four equal beats and (b) three beats in long-short-long formation. Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate two forms of the bell pattern where “one” is placed on (a) and (b).

Designated “ones: (a) (b)

Beats: 1 2 3 4



Figure 1: *Kpatsa's Gogota* Bell Pattern With (a) Beginning the Cycle

(b) (a)

1 2 3 4



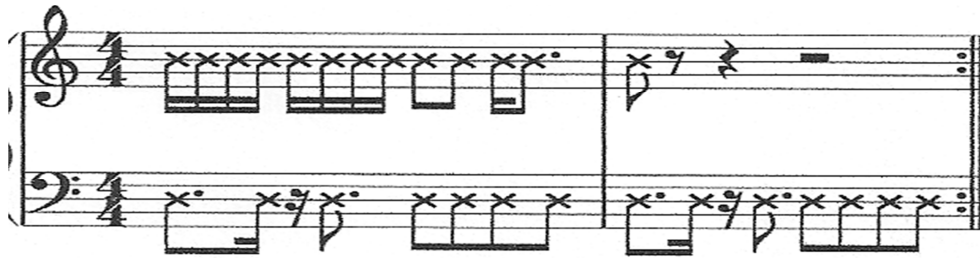
Figure 2: *Kpatsa's Gogota* Bell Pattern With (b) Beginning the Cycle

During our workshops and rehearsals with Nii Tettey and the Kusun Ensemble, it was apparent that the count of “one” would shift depending on the entrance of the following:

1. the call⁸ beginning on (b)
2. the supporting drums⁹ beginning on (b);
3. the solos¹⁰ beginning on (a).

In the case of the call against the bell (see Figure 3), the pattern begins and ends on the three note, long, short, long (b) figure and (b) would be counted as “one.”

Call



1 2 3 4

Bell Pattern (b)

Figure 3: *Kpatsa* Call Against the *Gogota* Bell

In the next example, Figure 4, the two supporting drum parts, falling between the *gogota* (bottom line), and the call (top line), serve as the foundation linking the call and the solos to the dancers' overall groove. At various times within the lesson, "one" was placed on (b), prior to their entrances, or on (a) when the supporting drums were viewed as pickup beats to the *gogota* bell



While the repetition and drum strokes of the supporting drums are less complicated than the (upcoming) solo changes, locking the two supporting drum parts together, with their staggered entrances, poses more of a challenge than the entrances of the solo rhythms. As Figure 5 and Figure 6 demonstrate, the solo rhythms come in exclusively on the (a) entrance of the *gogota* pattern.

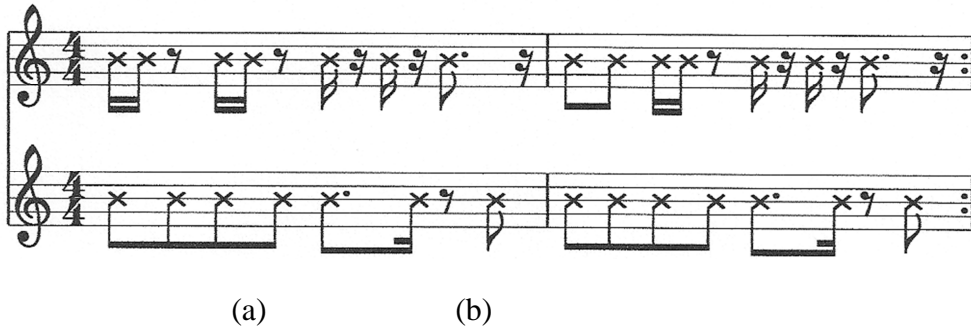


Figure 5: First Solo (top) with the *Gogota* Bell Beginning on (a)



Figure 6: Final Solo (top) with *Gogota* Bell Beginning on (a)

At another level of comparison, note that the two provided solo patterns (Figures 5 and 6) have different phrase lengths before they repeat themselves. In the case of Figure 5, it takes two full cycles of the *gogota* bell pattern to complete the first phrase, while in FIGURE 6, the phrase is complete only after two beats within the cycle. By the time this full compression in Figure 6 enters into the bell pattern (cycle), the musical momentum spikes and trying to determine “one” within the cycle becomes futile. The result is that performers are left with the enjoyable experience of locking into all of the parts and effortlessly feeling the momentum, drive, passion, and spirit of performing the music together. Again, it is worth noting that this quality in the music, when imbued with Ghanaian /religious/ceremonial/ritualistic practices, sets up the momentum for elevated levels of spiritual consciousness.

As similar as this set of *Kpatsa* notations is to other transcriptions, they provide very little in the way of conveying the groove, spirit, and relationships in the music. By Ghanaian standards, establishing a count by locating a single “one” as the downbeat is as useful as trying to take the time to determine which pulse is (pulses are) most prominent in the human heartbeat. In the spirit of the music, all pulses are significant and they contribute to the entire weave of the rhythm, music, and dance. In traditional Ghanaian, West African sensibility, it is the entire cyclical process that is to be realized, established, understood, and performed. Furthermore, as non-Ghanaians begin to feel this spirit, structure, and form of the music, like training wheels on a bicycle, “one” will be abandoned as the full cycle becomes internalized within performance.

“One” in Ghanaian Socio-Musical Identity

In a global perspective, one of the richest qualities of musical expression is its ability to be treated in so many ways. In the attempt to try to understand why a culture would approach music in any particular way, a critical question to be asked is, how do societal standards influence, reflect, and promote the way people think about and create music? In our case of learning and trying to recreate Ghanaian music, the irony of arbitrarily attaching the “one” count to the cycle, only to abandon it because it was something the Ghanaians never had to begin with, is telling of a number of complicated socio-musical differences between our cultures. For our purpose, it is not as important to ask why a single “one” has such a strong hold in Euro-US musical tradition, but why would a culture/society create a style of music that lends itself to various positions of “one.” The paradigm of a “shifting one” can stand as a most suitable metaphor in decoding many of Ghana’s societal rhythms and standards.

Nii Tettey Tetteh Leno, The Kusun Cultural Centre, and Nungua: One View of Ghanaian Community

Our work at the Kusun Cultural Centre (KCC), under the direction of Nii Tettey Tetteh Leno, is similar to the wider-known Dagbe Cultural Institute, founded by Godwin Agbeli, and located in Kopeyia-Volta Region.¹¹ The Kusun Cultural Centre serves to accommodate those who wish to establish temporary residency for the purpose of learning Ghanaian culture, drumming, and dance. Located in Nungua, a fishing and coastal village outside of Accra, the group members of the Kusun Cultural Ensemble are primarily members of the coastal dwelling Ga community and ethnic group, and while they perform and instruct many Ghanaian dances, the focus is placed on their own Ga dances and rhythms.

During this year’s work and travels with Nii Tettey and the Kusun Ensemble, a significant amount of time and effort was dedicated to observing the familial and musical lifestyle within Nungua’s Kusun Cultural Center. Along with his international performance notoriety, Nii Tettey, holds a place of both power and responsibility within his community.

His mission is to help preserve the drumming techniques and social patterns of his people through education and performance. He is also a devoted family man and entrepreneur. Through his ingenuity, leadership, and strong sense of self direction, this artistically-driven businessman (or business-driven artist) manages to feed and house over thirty family members and the numerous youth he takes under his wing to teach drumming. Such industry within the family unit is common in many Ghanaian families. Nii Tettey's prominence in Nungua community is recognized as he is sought after in both the domestic and public spheres. Such a prominent position is validated as he delegates and oversees a majority of familial and community based activities.¹²

Nii Tettey Tetteh Leno and his family is part of the Ghanaian Ga community of Nungua. Nungua, as part of the Greater Accra Region, is noted primarily for its fishing industry. Also, extending from the traditional socio-economic barter systems, the direct sale of goods by individuals is the primary distribution channel for locals. Within this system, roaming street vendors are prominent and generally specialize in one particular item. As a collective, however, their goods range immeasurably. One local explained to us that a person can leave their home completely bare (naked) and by the time a third intersection is reached, all of the clothing and day's necessities can be acquired. Such goods, often carried on the roaming street vendors' heads, include easily transportable items such as perishable and non-perishable food items, cell phones, cds and dvds, shoes, clothing, children's toys, and miscellaneous household gadgets – to name only a few. With the daily heat and constant bustle of movement, the biggest sellers are refreshments including satchel water.¹³ While village street vendors base their goods on the locals' needs, within Accra's main thoroughfares, tourist items such as masks, Ghanaian flags, and knick-knacks are sold. Services are also available through roaming street vendors. For example, on one block our group observed sewing and alterations done by a roaming street vendor carrying a sewing machine on her head.

Like the flexible "one" count in the music of *Kpatsa*, street vendors are aligned by an observable, over-arching system that regulates the flow, position, and continuity among the sellers. As younger, roaming vendors individually weave in and out of traffic, the shaded roadside areas are generally occupied by the elder, seasoned generations; those whom, through the years, have built their regular clientele through their reputation of quality goods and service.

The socio-economic patterns represented by the roaming street vendor demonstrate, like *Kpatsa*, a collective mindset that articulates an organization allowing for flexibility within a solid structure. While Ghana's centralized government works at controlling the efforts of street vendors, within the group there is a mutual respect between the generations of sellers, and for commuters, their services provide many benefits.

Along with roaming street vendors, much of Nungua's roadside space is taken up by bright-colored, remodeled offshore shipping containers that serve as dwellings for businesses such as corner-store groceries, bars, chop bars (eating establishments), and homeopathic pharmacies. Various services and businesses including beauty salons, art distributors, mobile-communication providers, and casket makers are housed in such renovated shipping containers.

Apparent in much of the thriving energy of Ghana's socio-commercial life is a rhythm and pace that shapes and characterizes the relevant culture perspectives. Like the varied "hearings" or interpretations of the *Kpatsa* cycle – where "one" is not always placed where Western musicians might expect it – the socio-economic negotiations and business practices are filled with "flexibilities" not customary to many visitors. While all formal business transactions are subject to the country's distribution and sales tax VAT (Value Added Tax),¹⁴ most other aspects take on a less rigid form. Generally, regulations, goods, services, wares, prices, and hours kept by the local businesses will alter to meet the immediate needs of producers and consumers alike. On the one hand, if a vehicle overheats in the middle of the night within the Greater Accra Region, water, oil, and or vehicle services are usually readily available, even in the earliest a.m. hours. There is also, however, the chance that a local is unable to purchase a staple item from a particular shop during business hours because the owner is too busy gutting fish from an abundant morning catch. Yet, all locals understand these social rhythms and patterns and move in accordance to need and availability. In short, a community that approaches such bending(s) in their daily lives would have no problem bending the perspective on a musical rhythm to fit the needs of their dance.

The bustling life of the Greater Accra Region provides Nii Tettey, for example, with multiple opportunities for generating income. In addition to serving a performance-based muse, he also delegates various economic responsibilities to his family and members of his entourage. How he does this is through a command of tradition, personal abilities, available goods, and the needs of shifting markets. While the underlying objective of his efforts is to sustain the lifestyle desired by his family and group, at any given time, he manages several enterprises including his music business, a small in-house bar, accommodating guests, overseeing small-parts assembly lines or groups, and delegating family members to part-time temporary work (street vending).

As an example of the (extended) family unit, the Kusun Cultural Centre teems with activity that involves multiple tasks and responsibilities of family members; all contributing in their own way to the foundation and cycle of the family. While Nii Tettey's Kusun Ensemble troupe practices in the front patio area, relatives will concurrently manufacture TV antennas beneath the shade of the rental compound's elevated porch. All of these profitable activities take place simultaneously in the domestic outdoor space that serves as the family's kitchen, dining area, and playground.

Just as a drumming pattern may alter in phase within a Ghanaian dance rhythm, at any given time, Nii Tettey's pattern of producing income changes based on available materials and needs. Although his bedrock business is his drumming, he can improvise a new income stream as other opportunities present themselves. His family team is capable of switching directions very quickly. Every "orchestration" of the labor fits in place with his primary goal as a performer, teacher, and family leader. In this way, it might be said that Nii Tettey Tetteh lives in accordance to the principles he teaches in the flexible, yet sustained structures of *Kpatsa*. As an artist, he is capable of bending his muse to fit a market that needs his services, which then allows him to both survive and move forward with his passion. In our case, as educators who have an interest in learning about Ghanaian music, he has tailored his services to accommodate our needs and never jeopardizes the integrity of the traditions. In reference to the rhythms of the domestic sphere, he also insists that his students learn to sweep and pound *fufu* as Ghanaians do; with rhythm and purpose.¹⁵ Nii Tetteh is a natural in personifying entrepreneurship without any pretense of being trained as one, and to recognize and musically pay tribute to such an image of Ghanaian cultural identity seems to be most fitting as the music moves from the fields, training centers and institutions of Ghana to the stages, streets, and venues of the USA.

Multiple "Ones" in Ghana's Spiritual Syncretism and Gye Nyame

*By our drumming and music, we can proudly say that in the mental sphere, especially as regarding poetry and the potted philosophy called proverbs, we are entitled to claim a large share of contributions to the civilization of mankind.*¹⁶ Dr. Joseph Boakye Danquah.

In direct opposition to the instances when Ghana has experienced political instability, the country's dependence on cosmology, music, and dance remains a primary focal point in ceremonial, festival, and institutional activities. As unceasing rhythms accompany the expressive social, ceremonial, and ritualistic dances, Ghana's traditional music has a presence that transcends the position of relic or museum piece. The relationship between sound, movement, and worldview remains constant in Ghanaian life and tradition. In spite of ongoing socio-political fragmentations (partially the result of Westernization), music and dance's connection to Ghanaian spirit remains a primary form of cultural expression.

When it comes to diverse spiritual and religious beliefs, Ghana stands as a remarkable example of coexistence. Practitioners of various religions publically display many belief-related statements. While exploring the labyrinths of villages and metropolitan areas of Ghana, it is common to see messages on attire, public venues, public transportation vehicles, walls, and roadside shops and benches. These messages, while individualistic, represent a level of Ghana's open-mindedness, focus on community, and personal faith.

Along with direct quotes from religious texts, unique messages such as “Free from Evil Taxi,” “Hold Close to Your Brother and Your Sister,” “Jah Comes for Your Time,” “Sweet Jesus Fresh Eggs,” “Embrace Good News,” “Who is Free,” “Before Before,” and “God’s Homeopathic Shop” are transmitted and seen through the course of a given day. Like *Kpatsa*’s cycle and interlocking parts, these creative and individual expressions, mostly based on monotheistic views, reflect community-based solidarity in a way that allows for a measure of flexibility. Like the many ways of viewing “one” within the rhythmic cycle, there are multiple ways of viewing a single Creator of life.¹⁷

Side-by-side with the global religions, most of Ghana’s noted indigenous religions also hold a monotheistic perspective that guides the ancestral and animistic levels of spiritual presence (*Mawu* in Ewe and Ga language, *Onyame* in Akan).¹⁸ One telling example of this cosmological view is the primary icon found in Ghana’s *Adinkra* system. The *Adinkra* system is a series of visual symbols that express guiding aphorisms. Attributed to Ghana’s *As(h)ante* ethnic group, these symbols can be seen throughout the various regions. Considered to be the most significant and ubiquitous of the symbols is the symbol of supremacy, “*Gye Nyame*” (see FIGURE 7), pronounced “jee-nee-ah-me.” This symbol translates directly as “Except God.” In full, according to *Asante* scholar Adolph Hilary Agbo, the meaning stands as, “the great creation originated from the unknown past; no one lives who saw its beginning. No one lives who will see its end, except God.”¹⁹



Figure 7: *Gye Nyame* Symbol²⁰

Along with the literal translation embracing the physical and spiritual past, present, and future, the most salient visual feature of the symbol is the symmetry found in the connectedness from the center to the end “spikes.” This ying-yang quality, reflecting cooperation among opposing forces, is supported by the seemingly solid yet malleable spine-and- joint hinge connecting the end spikes. Extending from its center, the palindrome-like image, with its up-and-down, left-and-right, and in-and-out features, reflects a spirit of cycle and cooperation. The simultaneous solid and pliable features are likened to *Kpatsa*’s solid and sustained cycle that supports multiple placements of “one.” As the cosmological beliefs, centered on community and cooperation, guide Ghanaian social practices, social practices are reflected in the musical arts. In this way, the solid yet flexible nature of *Gye Nyame* stands as another example of the multiplicity embedded within the socio-musical patterns of Ghana.

Conclusion

Assisted by numerous and an increasing amount of source materials, more United States (palm/hand) drumming ensembles are performing Ghanaian music. With a growing interest in the music of Ghana, the country's master-drummers and culture bearers are now, more than ever, concerned that others maintain the integrity of their traditions. To that end, they wish to instill a sense of responsibility in the visiting groups they teach. To accomplish this, the challenge of looking beyond the music's fundamentals and gaining an understanding of the society that creates the music is the preferred objective.

The desire to understand Ghanaian musical cycles requires a fundamental understanding of Ghanaian social patterns. For Euro-US learners of Ghanaian music, the cycle can be regulated by a single emphasized beat that announces each repeated rhythmic phrase. In Ghanaian rhythmic perspective, the cycle is just that – a cycle. It is a continuous flow that provides flexibility in the multiple rhythms it supports. At the heart of the messages laid before us during our work with Ghanaian master-drummers, is the understanding that Ghanaian treatment of rhythm parallels the same mindset that creates the social patterns.

Within the process of borrowing the music of Ghana, United States directors of West African music and dance troupes should strive to perform in a spirit whereby the music goes beyond the novelty of presenting complicated rhythms on instruments that look and sound "distant." Rather, it is as important to perform in such a way that is true to the culture from which it comes. Evidenced by the observations outlined in this study, when learners understand the context, spirit, and community behind the practice, the performance of a musical cycle is more in keeping with Ghanaian tradition.

Notes

1. Robert W. Nicholls, "African Dance: Transition and Continuity," in *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical, and Philosophical Inquiry*, ed. Kariamuwelsh Asante (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 1998), 44.
2. Many historians, especially those without any background or training in African historiography, have assumed, incorrectly, that prior to European contact with Africa, indigenous 'traditions' were ancient, permanent, and reproduced from generation to generation without change. This is the false image of cultural isolation and temporal stagnation that has been assiduously disseminated in many parts of the world. Bethwell A. Ogat, "Rereading the History and Historiography of Epistemic Domination and Resistance in Africa," in *African Studies Review*, Volume 52, Number 1 (April 2009).
3. D.E.K. Amenumey, "Major Peoples of Ghana" in *Ghana: A Concise History from Pre-Colonial Times to the 20th Century*, (Accra: Woeli Publishing Services, 2008), pp.5-22.
4. Information referenced throughout the biographical history of "The Ghana Six" (Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, Dr. Edward Addo Akufo, Dr. J.B. Danquah, Dr. Ako Adjei, William Oforiattat, and Emmanuel Odarkwei Obetsebi-Lampsey. Timothy Tsifokpor Kumor, *Gold Coast Now Ghana: The Early Flagbearers of Ghana, The True Selfless Warriors*. (Kaneshi-Accra, Juventus Letters, date unspecified).
5. While this article focuses on the dance *Kpatsa*, the point of a flexible "one" has been an area of interest in our previous lessons on popular dance rhythms such as *Gahu*, *Kpanlogo*, *Oge*, and *FumeFume*.
6. *Kpatsa* is said to be associated with the limping gait peculiar to abodo-dwarfs. The Ad-Dangme, the home of the musical type, believes it emanated from the music and dance of dwarfs which depict this uneven manner of walking, hence the name, *Kpatsa*. Tradition has it that *Kpatsa* was first seen to have been performed by dwarfs at Okongmleku, a settlement in Ada, by either children or hunters. Principally, *Kpatsa* is a recreational dance for both sexes. Alexander Agordoh, *Studies in African Music*, (Ho: New Age Publications, 1994), 134.
7. The call is the recurring structural drum pattern that will announce that a change/variation will be occurring in the dance and rhythms.
8. The supporting drum parts are the continual accompanimental rhythmic patterns that lock in with the bell pattern. They remain constant throughout the dance.

9. Solos in this context are not defined as the master drummer's improvisations but the varied patterns that regulate the dance steps and changes.

10. Steven Cornelius, "They Just Need Money: Goods and Gods, Power and Truth in a West African Village," in *The African Diaspora: A Musical Perspective*, Ingrid Monson, ed. New York: Routledge Press: 2003.

11. The successful West African tends to symbolize his achievement by conspicuous leisure. The wealthy farmer sits in his compound, directing activities at his farm but mainly occupying himself with involvement in the public affairs of his community. Younger or less affluent men consider it an honour to carry the loads of one whose eminence has brought so much prestige to the descent group. Dr. Robert Addo-Fanning, "Stratification and Achievement" in *Topics in West African History Lecture Series*, (Accra: University of Ghana Press, 1995), 45.

12. For the locals, satchel waters are small plastic packets of potable water. Such refreshments help to ease the commuters' burden within coastal Ghana's densely populated traffic ways. Those not accustomed to Ghana's food and water are discouraged from purchasing and drinking from this source. In general, visitors are generally discouraged from consuming street vendor foods and water.

13. VAT (Value Added Tax) is Ghana's sales tax system. The tax is applied to goods and services at each stage in the production and distribution chain. It forms part of the final price the consumer pays for goods or services. Explanation provided by the *Program for the 12th Ghana International Trade Fair, "50 Years of Harnessing Ghana's Trade and Industrial Opportunity,"* February 20th to March 9th, 2008.

14. *Fufu*, a starchy, pulled dough made from cassava and plantains, is traditionally prepared by one person pounding the vegetables with a large staff and another flipping the contents in a bowl until the dense-dough is formed. Without full rhythmic precision, the individual flipping the dough may have their hand and fingers crushed under the weight and pressure of the staff. Therefore, it is important for the two to remain consistent and synchronized.

15. Joseph Boakye Danquah, "Cultural Elements in Ghana," in *The Ghanaian Establishment*, p. 302. Cited in Kwame Bediako, *Religion, Culture and Language: An Appreciation of the Intellectual Legacy of Dr. J.B. Danquah: J.B. Danquah Memorial Lecture Series 37, 2004, 2-4* February 2004 (Accra: Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2006), p. 31.

16. While a full discourse on the complexities around the question of monotheism and polytheism in Ghana is beyond the scope of this study, two valuable sources that lays the groundwork for understanding from an insiders' perspective is *Traditional Religion in West Africa*, E.A. Ade. Adegbola, ed. (Ibaden, Nigeria: Oluseyi Press, 1998), and T.N.O. Quarcoopome's *West African Traditional Religion*, (Ibaden, Nigeria: African Universities Press, 1987).
17. C.A. Akrofi, ed, *An English, Akan, Ewe, and Ga Dictionary* (Accra: Waterville Publishing House, 1996), pg. 110.
18. Adolph Hilary Agbo, *Values of Adinkra and Agama Symbols*, (Kumasi-Ghana: Bigshy Publications, 2006), p. 22.
19. Ibid., 22.

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