

Way Out West

Part 2



English-African drum master Nana Telboe in action in a more English setting

Resident ethnomusicologist Peter Lockett concludes his examination of the deep-rooted drumming traditions of Ghana, west Africa

As is the case with a lot of African drumming setups, the Ewe drumming group is made up of a number of percussionists all playing simple parts on different drums and bells. Before we go on to look at some of the rhythmic structures involved in this style of ensemble percussion music, we'll briefly recap on the set of drums involved (which was explained in detail last month).

The basic set of Ewe drums consists of six different shapes and sizes. The main drum is the *astimaya*, or the master drum. This really is a monster, standing over 52 inches tall with a head diameter of between nine and ten inches.

The *kan kan* is the tiniest drum in the set, generally around 21 inches tall with a seven-inch head diameter. The belly of the drum is slightly wider in the centre of the shell. The *kidi* is the next size up from this and has a slightly bigger head – by two inches or so. The drum tapers out into a much fatter belly than the *kan kan*.

Next we have the *don don*. This drum is usually around twelve-and-a-half inches tall with a head diameter of around fifteen inches. It's a bit like the floor tom of the set.

The *soyo* drum has a head diameter of approximately nine inches. The shell is about 26 inches tall and, like the *kidi*, *kan kan* and *don don*, it sits on the floor between the players' legs.

Last but not least, we have the *kpun logo* drums. These are basically the same as congas, with head sizes varying from ten inches up to thirteen and a shell depth of around 30 inches.

Alongside the drums are two other percussion instruments, the first of which is the *shekere*. This is a shaker made from dried hollow gourds and covered with nets of beads.

Also found in the instrumentation is a metal bell-type instrument called *atoke* (or *gankogui*). This is best described as a metal clave equivalent and looks like a metal seed pod, hollow in the middle and curled up at the edges. It's held in the palm of the hand in much the same way as a clave, and is struck with a metal beater.

When the drummers change into the unison section, the impact is enormous

We're going to look at a couple of basic rhythmic structures and see how all the components fit together. The main rhythm we'll be looking at will be the 4/4 rhythm called Gaho.

The real skeletal base for these rhythms is implied by the atoke. This acts as the framework on which the rest of the rhythm sits. Quite often, this part will be reinforced by the shekere. Here are the atoke and shekere parts for the Gaho rhythm. (African metal bells are also sometimes used instead of the metal clave.) The shekere is held vertically by the neck in one hand and shaken, while the other hand sometimes gets involved by hitting the bottom of the instrument.

Atoke and shekere parts for Gaho

Ex 1

ATOKE

SHEKERE

N.B. | indicates hitting Shekere on the player's leg
 | indicates hitting on palm of hand held above the instrument
 The Shekere should move between the two surfaces

The basic fabric of the drums is built up behind this by using simple, repeating patterns layered on top of each other to build up a larger whole. Apart from the astimava (the master drum), all the other drums are nearly always played with two sticks. Different tones are produced by playing into the drum and by pushing the stick into the head to generate a closed, muted tone. These can be either accented or unaccented strokes. The open tone is articulated by hitting the drum and allowing it to resonate. It is the combination of these three strokes which goes to make up most of the parts of the smaller, more supportive drums of the ensemble.

Here are some examples of typical patterns which these supportive drums might play.

Kan kan, kidi and sogo parts for Gaho

Ex 2

KAN KAN

KIDI

SOGO

o = Open
 + = Closed / Muted

The astimava is the lead drum in the whole ensemble and is responsible for the improvisational elements as well as all the cues and changes in the rhythmic patterns.

The drum is usually played using a combination of stick and hand techniques. There are a number of basic strokes that are pressed into use, such as mutes, slaps and open tones with the bare left hand, and stick open tones, mutes and pressed notes with the right hand.

Most of the time, the master drummer will play with a stick in his right hand while the weaker hand plays muted, open and

slap strokes. The hand with the stick strikes the drum head and the side of the shell during rhythms and cues. There are times, however, when the master drummer will want to play with two sticks. For this reason, a second stick is generally held between the teeth, ready to be plucked into the fray at an opportune moment. The drum rests on a stand at an angle, with the player reaching over from behind, slightly to one side.

A lot of astimava phrases are improvised and involve closely following the rhythmic work of the dancers. There are, however, basic rhythms that the master drummer will commonly use in a piece. This is a typical pattern that might be used in the Gaho rhythm:

Typical astimava pattern for Gaho

Ex 3

ASTIMAVA

Just as with many other percussive traditions, the rhythms played on the live drum are represented phonetically. On the astimava, there are a number of syllables which represent the sounds of the drum, be they produced with hand or stick. As with the north Indian tabla, there are phonetics for single strokes, compound strokes and various flammed strokes. I've listed the phonetics I've learnt below.

Even if you don't intend to learn an ethnic drumming system, the advantage of learning a set of phonetics and applying it to your playing is invaluable. With just basic syllables for a right hand stroke, a left hand stroke and a stroke with both hands, you instantly have a very useful tool for brushing up on your hand independence.

Left hand phonetics

- 'Ga': LEFT HAND PALM IN CENTRE
- 'Gi': LEFT HAND STICK or BARE HAND
- OPEN TONE
- 'Dzi': LEFT HAND SOFT SLAP

Right hand phonetics

- 'De': RIGHT HAND STICK - OPEN
- 'Tsi': RIGHT HAND STICK - PRESS
- 'Kpa': STICK ON SIDE OF DRUM
- 'To': MUTED STICK - LEFT HAND MUTES,
RIGHT HAND STICK STRIKES

Compound phonetics

- 'Dza': 'GA'+ 'KPA'

Flam phonetics

- 'Kre': 'DE' FOLLOWED BY 'GI'
- 'Gre': 'GI' FOLLOWED BY 'DE'
- 'Vlo': 'DZI' FOLLOWED BY 'TO'

As a piece develops, the master drummer will play particular set patterns which act as cues for some members of the ensemble to change the pattern they are playing. In the version of Gaho that I was shown, it was the sogo and the kidi drums which changed their parts. If you refer to the score for the basic parts of Gaho, you will see that these two drums have distinctly different parts which interlock into one 'drum melody'. After the first cue, both drums go into a unison pattern together, until the next cue when they go back to the interlocking patterns. Then, after some time, another cue will

➤ come from the master drummer, and the sogo and kidi players will go into another unison pattern different from the first one. Then there's another cue and they go back to the interlocking pattern. All the interlocking and unison patterns may be learnt before the piece is played, but with more experienced groups it may well be that the master drummer leads with a pattern and expects the sogo and kidi players to follow.


It is up to the discretion of the master drummer to choose when and where to give cues for change. His inspiration for this could either come from what the dancers are doing, or it could be to give a lift to the dynamics at a certain moment. Either way, the junior drummers have to be well on their toes to be aware of when a cue is about to happen.


When the drummers do change into the unison section, the impact is enormous. It's amazing how effective the two sections are when juxtaposed in this fashion.


Here is a circle of possible variations for the unison pattern:

Unison variations


Ex 4

A 


B 


C 

(OVER 2 BARS)

D 

(REPEAT OF A)

E 

F 

Another important philosophy behind the feel of the rhythm is how some of the junior drums can improvise. Let's take the kidi pattern from a 6/8 rhythm called Agbadza as an example. This is the basic pattern:

Kidi pattern from Agbadza

Ex 5



Basically, the kidi player is allowed to produce slight variations with the groups of open tones only, leaving the muted sections as they are. For example, here are two possible variations:

Kidi variations

Ex 6

A 

B 

If we now involve another drummer playing an interlocking pattern which has the open tones falling in between the open tones of their partner, we can see that the consequential improvisations within these parameters would necessitate an end result which had very few clashes of interest, because both players would be improvising at different places in the bar.

The actual system of this drumming tradition is very complete indeed and has a great deal of potential for extrapolation outside its cultural idiom. I for one am very excited by its possibilities.

If you're interested and want to take it further, there are people in the UK who can help you. One is Barak Schmoor, who runs an Ewe drumming group in north London and can be contacted on 0181 458 5731. There is a very accomplished African drummer resident in the south of England, called Nana Tsiboe. Nana runs the West African Quartet and has worked with greats like Ali Farka Toure, Dudu Pukuwana and Nick Mason. He can be contacted on 01424 438134.

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Talking drums: Tsiboe can help with Ghanaian rhythms