Foundation Course In African Dance-Drumming

Introduction To Anlo-Ewe Culture

Structure Of The Dance-Drumming Community

The degree of participation by each individual, however, varies and reflects a hierarchy of relative importance among the performers. This hierarchy has the elders at the top representing the chiefs and the leadership of the community. The male elders are called *vumegawo* and the female elders are called *vudadawo*. Their principal role is to provide a source of authority and advice insuring an orderly and systematic performance according to the shared traditions of the community and the entire traditional state.

The second level of the hierarchy is held by the composer (*hesino*), the master arts man, who is responsible for the creation of the distinct texture that forms the characteristic dance-drumming style. He is followed directly by the lead drummer (*azaguno*), another master arts man, who guides the entire ensemble in performing the various shared traditions of good dance-drumming.

The next level of the hierarchy includes: (a) *Tonuglawo* (ring-leaders), consisting of some more experienced participants with leadership potentials, who inspire and exhort the performers along the performance arena and provide them with examples that they emulate. (b) *Haxiawo* (supporting song leaders), who assist the composer in leading and directing the singing. (c) *Kadawo*, the whips of the musical community who enforce discipline and secure the attendance of the community members at every performance.

The fifth level of the hierarchy is occupied by the supporting drummers who assist the lead drummer in the performance of the various musical guidelines. The rest of the ensemble occupies the lowest level of the hierarchy. Their main roles are to sing, dance, and at times accompany themselves with rattles and hand claps.

Drums And Drumming

*Atsimevu*

*Atsimevu* is the most visible drum among the instrumental resources of the Anlo Ewe. This is due to its traditional role as a lead drum in the organization of all basic instrumental ensemble in which it is featured.

*Atsimevu* has a carved cylindrical body of about four and one half feet tall with an expansion in the middle section of about fifteen inches in diameter and a drum head of about nine inches in diameter. The drum head or membrane is usually made out of a skin of a deer or antelope. The cylindrical body has an opening of about eight inches in diameter at the bottom to let the vibrations out.

The name *Atsimevu* was derived from the description of the manner in which the drum is tilted in a convenient playing position by the help of a functional stand called *vudetsi*.

Tonality And Performance Techniques

The initial vibration of *Atsimevu* is released by striking the membrane with a full bare hand technique, a stick technique, a technique employing the fingers and their combinations. Striking different positions of the membrane and manipulating the membrane by damping it to resonate partially in varied manners produce a series of pitches which form the basic vocabulary of *Atsimevu*.

While many things affect the pitches produced by *Atsimevu* - the quality of the carved cylindrical body, the thickness, diameter and tension of the membrane etc. - the aspect that has the most significance in the area of performance is the quality of the techniques that control the release of the various frequencies of vibration. These techniques are the primary concern of the performer and we shall discuss them in the context of the pitches they produce.
The most important attribute of a good drumming technique is, perhaps, a firm relaxation of the entire body as the hands go into motion, supported in position from the elbows and not the shoulders. The elbow is only a support mechanism for the hands held in a very relaxed but firm posture. The actual swing of the hand is done from the wrist and not from the elbows.

In a performance position, the drummer stands parallel beside *Atsimevu*, which is tilted by the help of *vudetsi*, bringing the height of the drum head below the chest for a good leverage and aiming position.

Two positions of the drum head are the most commonly used for striking: the center and the peripheral zone. Stick and full hand techniques are used at the center while the technique employing the fingers is used at the periphery.

*Atsimevu* in a playing position

**Sogo**
The next most visible drum among the indigenous instrumental resources of the *Anlo-Ewe* is called *Sogo*. *Sogo* has a dual traditional role as lead drum in some musical structures and a supporting drum in others.

*Sogo*’s carved cylindrical shape looks somewhat like *Atsimevu* cut into half, just below the expansion in the middle section, and closed at the bottom. It is roughly about twenty-six inches tall with a drum head of about (nine inches in diameter and an expansion in the middle section of about fifteen inches in diameter.

The name *Sogo* was derived from a description of the shape of the drum that looks somewhat similar to the shape of a large gourd calabash commonly used in sacrificial offerings to *So*, an *Ewe* divinity associated with thunder. (lit. *So* - Divinity associated with thunder + *go* - gourd-calabash).

In performance, the player sits on a short stool behind *sogo* with a firm relaxed body as the hands go into motion supported in position form the elbows. The actual swing of the hand is done from the wrist.
The drum called Sogo

**Tonality And Performance Techniques**

As a lead drum, the tonality and performance techniques of *sogo* are exactly like that of *atsimevu*. As a supporting drum the most common method of releasing the initial vibration of *sogo* is by striking the membrane with a stick technique.

**Kidi**

Kidi is the next drum among the indigenous instrumental resources of the Anlo-Ewe.

Kidi is carved in a shape just like *sogo* but smaller in size and higher in pitch. It is roughly about twenty-three inches tall with a drum head of about eight inches in diameter and expansion in the middle section of about fourteen inches in diameter.

The drum called *Kidi*

**Tonality And Performance Techniques**

Kidi functions mostly as a supporting drum in the basic ensemble and shares the same support drum performance techniques as *sogo*. But since it has a higher pitch than *sogo* difference vocal syllables are used to indicated its pitches.

**Kagan**

Kagan is the smallest drum among the indigenous instrumental resources of the *Anlo-Ewe*. It's carved cylindrical body is like a copy of *Atsimevu* on a much reduced scale, about twenty inches tall with a drum head of about six inches in diameter, an expansion in the middle section of about nine inches in diameter and an opening of about six inches in diameter at the bottom to let the vibrations out.
Kagan is held diagonally between the legs of the drummer seated on a stool for a convenient playing angle. A technique of slapping the membrane with a slightly flexible stick is the most common means of playing kagan, which is tuned to produce the highest pitch of the entire drum ensemble.

The drum called *Kagan*

**Gankogui**

Gankogui is a vibrating iron bell hand forged in a distinct traditional shape by blacksmiths. Popularly referred to as *gakpevi* (ga - forged iron + kpe - carrying + vi - child) "the forged iron carrying a child," the structure of gankogui consists of a larger low pitch forged iron and a smaller high pitch one permanently stacked together. The larger forged iron bell is considered as the parent and smaller high pitch one is considered the child in the protective bosom of the parent.

Gankogui is the foundation of the entire ensemble. Its voice provides the metronomic background around which most Anlo-Ewe music is structured. A performer is often described as blind if he or she lacks a good sense of the guiding patterns of gankogui.

Gankogui, just like drums, is conceived as a surrogate for the human voice and imitates the manner in which the mouth produces speech. It is played with a stick technique while held in one hand and resting on the thigh of the performer who sits on a short stool with a firm relaxed body. The stick is swung as the hands go into motion supported from the elbows. The actual swing of the hand is done from the wrist. The stick is struck on the full rounded portion of the bell to achieve the best resonance. When the top high pitch is in use the forged-iron structure rests on the thigh and when the larger low pitch is in use it is raised slightly above the thigh. Stopping the resonance of the lower pitch after is is articulated by damping it on the thigh is equivalent to closing the mouth and provides the means of indicating the basic motives, phrases and periods out of which gankogui music is made.
Tonality And Performance Techniques

Two types of stick techniques are used in the art of playing gankogui, a bounced stick technique and a pressed stick technique. A bounced stick technique allows the stick to rebound after striking gankogui, and a pressed stick technique releases a partial vibration by pressing the stick firmly on gankogui to prevent it from bouncing after the stroke is delivered.

Atoke

Atoke is another instrument of the forged-iron family that produces a bell-like tone when struck. Its traditional form is similar to a miniature boat. A thin forged iron rod is used to play it. Atoke is held in a partially open palm of the performer's weak hand, resting diagonally across from the fore finger to the heel. The iron rod beater is carried in the strong hand and rebounds as it strikes the rim of atoke producing a high ringing pitch. A pair of atoke, tuned about a fourth apart, always play together and function in a similar manner as gankogui.

Axatse

Axatse falls in the instrument category of vibrating gourd. It is made out of a gourd, hollowed out by removing the seeds, and covered with a net of beads or seeds. The sound of axatse is produced by striking it
lightly on the thigh and the palm. When struck to rebound off the thigh a dry rattling sound is produced and described in the vocal syllable as "Pa." Struck in a clap-like manner by the palm it produces a rattling sound combined with a tonal component from the vibration of the air inside the gourd. This is described as "Ti" in vocal syllable.