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The Rhythmic Structure of West African Music*

V. KOFI AGAWU

The music of Africa has long intrigued many Westerners. From scattered comments in the accounts of explorers of the so-called *Afrique Noire* to the full-fledged ethnomusicological studies of the last fifty years, the constant theme has been the fundamental role of music-making in African life and society. And of all the elements of that music, rhythm has received the most attention.¹

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*This essay is based on a paper read at the Spring Meeting of the American Musicological Society—Southwest Chapter, Durham, North Carolina, April, 1985.

¹ Although the literature on African rhythm is fairly extensive, only a handful of studies confront the fundamental issues of rhythmic organization. The most important early study is W. E. Ward, "Music in the Gold Coast," *Gold Coast Review* III (1927), 199–223. In contrast to Ward's intra-musical approach, Erich von Hornbostel, in "African Negro Music," *Africa* I (1928), 30–62, develops an approach that takes into consideration the physical dimension of performance—lifting and lowering of hands and their effects on our perception of downbeats and upbeats. John Blacking seeks to provide an empirical basis for Hornbostel's more speculative ideas in "Some Notes on a Theory of Rhythm Advanced by Erich von Hornbostel," *African Music* I (1955), 12–20. A useful summary of African rhythmic devices is Richard Waterman, "Hot Rhythm in Negro Music," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* I (1948), 24–37. By far the most comprehensive treatise on African rhythm is A. M. Jones, *Studies in African Music*, 2 vols. (London, 1959), not merely for its provocative viewpoint but also for the transcriptions *in extenso* which, although based on debatable assumptions, nevertheless provide a useful introduction to the dance repertoire and the analytical issues it raises. An abbreviated statement of these ideas is A. M. Jones, "African Rhythm," *Africa* XXIV (1954), 26–47. A dependable and culturally sensitive study is S. D. Cudjoe, "The Techniques of Ewe Drumming and the Social Importance of Music in Africa," *Phylon* XIV (1953), 280–91. Among recent studies, the clearest transcriptions may be found in David Locke, "Principles of Off-beat Timing and Cross-Rhythm in Southern Ewe Dance Drumming," *Ethnomusicology* XXVI (1982), 217–46. Of interest in the development of notation are James Koetting, "Analysis and Notation of West African Drum Ensemble Music," *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology* I (1970), 115–46 and Hewitt Pantaleoni, "Toward Understanding the Play of Atsimevu in Atsia," *African Music* V (1972), 64–84. Two recent studies by Simha Arom continue the search for organizing principles in African ensemble music: "The Constituting Features of Central African Rhythmic Systems: A Tentative Typology," *The World of Music* XV (1984), 51–64 and "Structuration du temps dans les musiques d'Afriques Centrale: periodicité, metre, rythmique et polyrythmie," *Revue de musicologie* LXX (1984), 5–36. Among the more general studies of African rhythm, the most useful are Alan Merriam,

There is something to be gained from looking closely at the early writings on African music, for although they represent the work of non-specialists, and for all their ethnocentricism and anthropocentrism, these accounts touch on the fundamental questions regarding the nature of African rhythm. Thomas Bowdich, writing in 1819, remarks that the “wild music of the (Ashantee) people is scarcely to be brought within the regular rules of harmony.”² The reference, no doubt, is to the vibrant rhythmic character of African dance drumming, especially that which accompanies ceremonial occasions in Ashanti society. There are references to “irregular rhythms,”³ to the “cacophony of drums and music,”⁴ and to the “incoherence” of African music.⁵ In one report sent by a British Colonial officer to the home Government in 1899, we encounter an attitude which, although disparaging, dramatizes, rather than obscures, some of the fundamental aspects of African musical expression: “Iteration and reiteration of the same airs never seem to weary the West African. His chief musical treat, however, is the tom-tom. In season and out of season, all day and all night, he is prepared to abandon himself to the delight of a noisy demonstration on this instrument of torture, and it is more often exhaustion on the part of the performers than boredom by the audience that puts a period to the deafening and monotonous noise.”⁶ The use of repetition as an organizing principle; the importance of drumming; and the constancy of music making: these are all well-known aspects of African music.⁷ And the

“African Musical Rhythm and Concepts of Time-Reckoning,” in Thomas Noblitt (Ed.), *Music East and West: Essays in Honor of Walter Kaufmann* (New York, 1981), Gerhard Kubik, “Emica del ritmo musicale africano,” *Culture musicali: Quaderni di ethnomusicologia* XI (1983), 47–92, Robert Kauffman, “African Rhythm: a Reassessment,” *Ethnomusicology* XXIV (1980), 393–415 and V. Kofi Agawu, “‘Gi Dunu,’ ‘Nyekpadudo,’ and the Study of West African Rhythm,” *Ethnomusicology* XXX (1986), 64–83. A most valuable contribution to ethno-aesthetics is John Miller Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility* (Chicago, 1979). Although scattered throughout his various writings on African music, the views of J. H. Kwabena Nketia on rhythm are most illuminating. See especially *African Music in Ghana* (Evanston, 1962), pp. 64–93 and *The Music of Africa* (New York, 1974), pp. 125–38 and 169–74.

² Thomas E. Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast to Ashantee* (London, 1819), pp. 278–81; quoted in J. H. Nketia, *Ethnomusicology in Ghana* (Accra, 1970), pp. 12–13.

³ Richard A. Freeman, *Travels and Life in Ashanti and Jaman* (London, 1898), pp. 257–61; quoted in Nketia, *Ethnomusicology*, p. 13.

⁴ Laura Boyle, *Diary of a Colonial Officer's Wife* (Oxford, 1968), p. 12.

⁵ Richard Freeman, *Travels*, p. 261; quoted in Nketia, *Ethnomusicology*, p. 13.

⁶ Lieutenant-Colonel H. P. Northcott, *Report on the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast* (London, 1899), p. 39; quoted in Nketia, *Ethnomusicology*, p. 12.

⁷ On the general characteristics of African music, consult Alan P. Merriam, “Characteristics of African Music,” *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* II (1959), 13–19; Gilbert Rouget, “La Musique d’Afrique Noire,” in Roland-Manuel (ed.), *Histoire de la musique* I (Paris, 1960); Klaus Wachsmann, “Africa,” *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. S. Sadie, (London, 1980); and Atta Annan Mensah, “Music South of the Sahara,” in Elizabeth May (ed.), *Musics of Many Cultures* (Berkeley, 1980).

fact that the author emphasizes the functional rather than the contemplative role of music reminds us of some of the issues addressed by later students of African music. What is the nature of the relationship between a given activity and the music that accompanies it? How can analysis of such musical cultures take into account these “extra-musical” considerations? Is there an aesthetic dimension to what is apparently a purely functional mode of expression?⁸

It may seem out of place to subject the impressions of explorers and colonial administrators to scholarly scrutiny, but because these statements embrace fundamental aspects of African musical structure and aesthetics, they have supplied a point of departure for the more consciously scholarly work of ethnomusicologists. While some of the ethnocentrism has disappeared—being now sanctioned as antithetical to the discipline—scholars have continued to devote their energies to examining those very aspects of African music that the nineteenth-century explorers commented upon. And rhythm, again, emerges as the predominant concern. According to Simha Arom, African rhythmic systems are “the most complex of all those which are known all over the world,”⁹ while A. M. Jones puts it more strongly: “The importance of rhythm in the music of Africa is an unquestioned principle; in fact, it bulks so large that African music could perhaps be set off as a musical culture area dominated by this concept and opposed to other equally large culture areas.”¹⁰ The underlying credo would seem to be that to study African music is to study its rhythmic structure.

It is significant, however, that with few exceptions,¹¹ the exclusive concern of scholars has been with a very specific aspect of West African rhythm, namely, the rhythm of instrumental dance drumming. The majority of these studies deal with a single ethnic group, the Anlo-Ewe of southeastern Ghana, whose rich heritage of dance and drumming

⁸ Attempts to expand the horizons of music analysis to take into account so-called “extra-musical” factors are becoming increasingly common in the ethnomusicological literature. John Blacking’s provocative ideas, based on his work among the Venda of Southern Africa, confront such issues. See especially his *How Musical is Man?* (Seattle, 1973) and “The Value of Music in Human Experience,” *Yearbook of the International Folk Music Council* 1 (1971), 33–71. Also of interest in this regard is a brilliant new study of the Kaluli of Papua, New Guinea by Steven Feld, *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression* (Philadelphia, 1982).

⁹ Arom, “The Constituting Features,” p. 51.

¹⁰ Jones, “African Rhythm,” p. 84.

¹¹ Gilbert Rouget, “Tons de la langue en Gun (Dahomey) et tons du tambour,” *Revue de musicologie* L (1964), 3–29; Nketia, *The Music of Africa*, pp. 180–83; and V. Kofi Agawu, “A Reconsideration of the Basic Principles of West African Rhythm,” Paper delivered at the 28th Annual Meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology, Tallahassee, October 1983 are among the studies that touch on speech rhythm as an integral part of rhythmic expression. No systematic study of this aspect of African rhythm has as yet appeared.

has fascinated scholars for years.¹² Attempts have been made to understand the organizing principles of this music, how these principles relate to those of Western music, and what kind of notational system most accurately reflects the music of an oral culture. Unlike the early explorers who, because they were amateurs, sought answers to the difficult questions regarding the status of this music, its effect, and inevitably, its aesthetic foundations, recent scholarship, motivated by an empiricist illusion, has confined its field of inquiry to what may be termed the mechanical aspects of rhythmic organization.

Thinking about rhythm in such isolated terms is quite dissonant with the traditional African view, however.¹³ This is not to deny that the dance music of the Anlo-Ewe, for example, has a unique vitality that could profit from a careful explication of its organizational premises. But I believe that the vitality of this music is best understood and appreciated in the context of a larger scheme of rhythmic expression which embraces just about all aspects of West African traditional life. Musical expression (or, essentially, rhythmic expression) is not divorced from other forms of communication—speech, gesture, greetings, and dance—but derives directly from these. To put it crudely but more to the point: Africans do not suddenly “become rhythmic” on the village arena where they do their daily dance and drumming. Rather, a unitary conception informs the variety of ways in which they express themselves rhythmically, whether this be in the form of children’s game songs, or lullabies, or music accompanying worship, or work songs, or songs of insult, or greeting formulas, or dance, or speech. It is this astonishing variety of *modes of rhythmic signification* that forms the empirical basis of the theory of rhythm developed in this essay. In such an integrated context events that are normally described as “functional” are shown to be directly linked to those that are described as “artistic.” The distinction is ultimately irrelevant in the West African context.

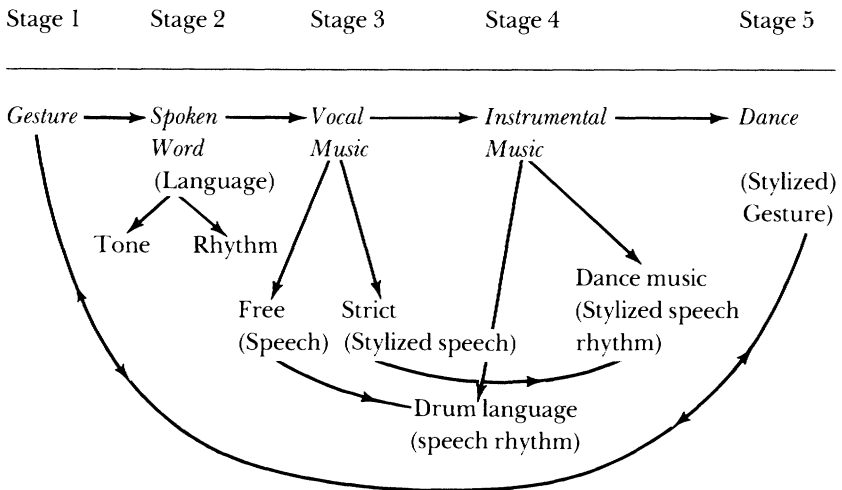
The Domain of Rhythmic Expression

To provide an orientation for this discussion of the integral nature of West African rhythm, I have developed a conceptual model for rhythmic expression in West Africa (Figure 1). This model

¹² Anlo-Ewe dance drumming is the subject of the writings of Jones, Locke, Cudjoe and Pantaleoni cited above (note 1). For a fuller account of the musical culture of the Anlo-Ewes, see Nissio Fiagbedzi, “The Music of the Anlo,” (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Los Angeles, 1977).

¹³ The sticky notion of a “traditional African view” is used here to denote those rich and elusive metaphors by which Africans, *when called upon to do so*, talk about their music.

FIGURE 1. The domain of rhythmic expression in West Africa



summarizes the major elements of rhythmic expression and suggests (by means of arrows) a causal or organic relationship between its contiguous stages. I have postulated gesture (Stage 1) as the primordial rhythmic event, gesture being a physical manifestation of a more fundamental communicative urge. Stage 2 is made up of the spoken word whose aggregates comprise language. Note that the spoken word is here conceptualized as an intensification of gesture, that is, as the result of the transformation of non-verbal into verbal communication. Language, in its active form, speech, generates vocal music (Stage 3), and vocal music in turn generates instrumental music (Stage 4). The arrows linking the two dimensions of vocal music to those of instrumental music draw attention to functional parallels between the two musics. Finally, instrumental music elicits dance or stylized gesture (Stage 5). At this point we have come full circle. Rhythmic expression may therefore be conceptualized within the framework of a continuum or circle which originates in gesture and terminates in stylized gesture. In order to understand the complexities of instrumental drumming (Stage 4), for instance, one needs to understand their origins in language and gesture. Similarly, the true meaning of dance emerges only after a consideration of its linguistic bases. In turning now to an assessment of the explanatory power of the model, it is perhaps worth pointing out that all previous work on African rhythm can be accommodated within the constraints of this model. I shall therefore focus on those aspects that have not received much attention, beginning, not with Stage 1—which must remain speculative—but with the more concrete Stage 2.

The Spoken Word

Many of the eight hundred or more languages known to exist in Africa are *tone languages*, that is, languages in which “variations in tone distinguish words of different meaning that would otherwise sound alike.”¹⁴ Tone is often conceptualized on different levels, sometimes two (as in Twi) or three (as in Ewe and Yoruba). For example, the Ewe word *to* (‘) with a high tone means “pass through” or “go through” as in the phrase *Mē to akōnta mē* (. . . .) (“I have gone through the accounts”).¹⁵ *To* also means “ear”: *Eto le venye* (. . . .) (“I have an earache”). *To* can also mean mountain: *Tokōkō* (‘ ‘) (“A high mountain”). The three different meanings can only be determined from the actual semantic context. With a shift in tone from high to low, however, a completely different meaning emerges. *To* (.) is the word for “thick,” as in *Dzōgbō la to nūtō* (. . . .) (“The porridge is very thick”). Consider another set of examples, this time from the Twi language. *Ōnkō* (· ·) means “let him go” or “he should go.” *Ōnkō* (· ·) alters the meaning to “he does not go” or “he should not go,” while *ōnkō* (· ·) transforms the meaning even further to “he will not go.” *Daadeē* (· ·) is the noun word for “iron,” while *daadeē* (· ·) refers to a large tree, just as *ōbōfōō* (· ·) denotes “hunter” while *ōbōfōō* (· ·) refers to “messenger.”¹⁶

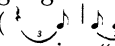
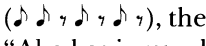

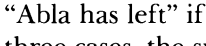
The phenomenon of tone is quite well known by both linguists and ethnomusicologists, and it has engendered a sizeable literature on the relationship between linguistic tone (also known as speech tone) and musical melody, especially the nature of the constraints imposed by speech tones on melodic structure.¹⁷ But there is another component of

¹⁴ *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, 1981), s.v. “tone language.” On the linguistic situation in Africa, see *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition (Chicago, 1974), s.v. “Africa, Languages of.” The most reliable classification of African languages is Joseph Greenberg, *The Languages of Africa* (Bloomington, 1963). Consult K. L. Pike, *Tone Languages* (Ann Arbor, 1948), for the general features of tone languages. Because the word “tone” is used by both linguists and musicologists with very different meanings, I shall follow linguists in using it as an adjective in this paper (e.g., tone language, tone structure,) rather than as a noun.

¹⁵ Letters not found in the Roman alphabet are designated as follows: $\mathfrak{f} = \tilde{f}$; $\mathfrak{g} = \tilde{g}$; $\mathfrak{d} = \tilde{d}$; $\mathfrak{v} = \tilde{v}$; $\mathfrak{a} = \tilde{a}$.

¹⁶ For further discussion of the Twi examples, see Nketia, *The Music of Africa*, pp. 184–85.

¹⁷ Analyses of the influence of linguistic tone on melodic structure, though many, have yielded signally different results. Two studies by Marius Schneider, “Phonetische und metrische Korrelationen bei gesprochene und gesungene Ewe-Texten,” in *Archiv für vergleichende Phonetik* (Berlin, 1942) and “Tone and Tune in West African Music,” *Ethnomusicology* V (1961), 204–15 tackle the issue from the viewpoint of correspondence versus non-correspondence of speech tone and melodic tone. In a critique of Schneider’s theories, A. M. Jones shows how musical factors sometimes override linguistic factors. See his *Studies in African Music*, pp. 230–51. The task of all subsequent studies has been to explain the parallels and divergences between speech tone and melodic tone. The following are the most reliable recent studies of the phenomenon: Paul Richards, “A Quantitative

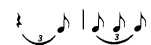




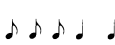





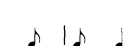
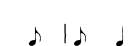
language which is rarely mentioned in these discussions, but which has a comparable defining quality: rhythm. By rhythm I mean not just the alternation between stressed and unstressed syllables—although this alternation forms the indispensable starting point for any investigation of the phenomenon—but also the resultant aspects of duration and grouping. Figure 2 demonstrates the rhythmic structure of language by presenting a list of words from Ewe, Twi, and Akpafu, together with each word's individual rhythm and tone structure. Although the extent to which changes in rhythm effect changes in meaning has not been firmly established, there is no doubt that rhythm is an active and character-defining component of language. Were we to alter the temporal rhythmic structure of *abōdzokpo* () to something like *Abō dzo kpo* (), the original meaning "nursery" would be transformed to "Abo has jumped the fence." Similarly, the phrase *Mē wō ayaa dō*, which carries the sense of a wasted effort, changes its meaning from "I have worked for nothing" to "I (habitually) work for nothing" with the lengthening of the second vowel's duration: *Mē wōō ayaa dō*. Again, the meaning of *Abladzo* () (is transformed from "plantain" to "Abla has left" if it is pronounced as *Abla dzo*) (). Note that in all three cases, the succession of speech tones remains the same while the rhythm changes. It is the changes in rhythm, therefore, that determine meaning.

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We are not yet ready to state unequivocally that rhythm in West African languages is "phonemic," or perhaps more strongly, that rhythm is phonemic to the same degree as tone. But it is clear from even the small sample presented in Figure 2 that a closer look at the rhythmic component of language may well yield important information about musical structure. For example, a recurring pattern in the rhythms encountered in Figure 2 is the triplet, which occurs in words such as *asitsalawo*, *abōdzokpo*, and *ablado*. The frequency of occurrence of triplet formations would seem to be of no consequence were it not for the fact that the surface of much purely instrumental music (Stage 4 of Figure 1) is dominated by this pattern. Most of the published transcriptions of West African music are dominated by triplet patterns expressed in both duple

Analysis of the Relationship between Language Tone and Melody in a Hausa Song," *African Language Studies* XIII (1972), 137–61; Nissio Fiagbedzi, *Religious Music Traditions in Africa: A Critical Evaluation of Contemporary Problems and Challenges* (Accra, 1979); William R. Leben, "On the Correspondence between Linguistic Tone and Musical Melody," *Proceedings of the Berkeley Linguistic Society* (1983), pp. 148–54; and V. Kofi Agawu, "The Impact of Language on Musical Composition in Ghana: An Introduction to the Musical Style of Ephraim Amu," *Ethnomusicology* XXVIII (1984), 39–53.

FIGURE 2. Language rhythm in Ewe, Twi and Akpafu

Language	Word/Phrase (with rhythm)	Speech tones	English equivalent
Ewe	Abōdzokpo 	- - - -	Nursery
Ewe	Asitsalawo 	- - - -	Traders
Ewe	Futōwo 	- - -	Enemies
Ewe	Nyatefē 	- - -	Truth
Ewe	Nublanui 	- - -	Mercy/pity
Ewe	Mē wō ayaa dō 	- - - -	I've worked for nothing
	Mēwōō ayaa dō 	- - - -	I work for nothing
Ewe	Tatanyē 	- - -	My father
Ewe	Alegbegbe 	- - - -	How much
Twi	Ma men - san nkō 	- - - -	Let me go back
Twi	Asomdwoe 	- - - -	Peace
Twi	Fa si hō 	- - -	Put it down
Akpafu	Ikaḍe 	- - -	Conversation
Akpafu	Karabra 	- - -	Work (job)
Ewe	Abladzo 	- - -	Plantain

Note on translations: Certain words are difficult to render into English. For example; the word "alegbegbe" is an adjective which carries the sense of "the great extent to which." Thus the Biblical phrase "For God so loved the world . . ." (John 3:16) can be translated as "alegbegbe Mawu lō xexeamē." If this phrase were re-translated into English, it would come out as "The great extent to which God loved the world. . . ." (It might be interesting to follow this procedure of translation and re-translation to see how far it goes before the original meaning is entirely lost.) Similarly, the phrase *Ma men-san nkō* means not only "let me go back" but also "let me go back again," as one might say if one had to re-run the same errand for the third or fourth time.

and, more commonly, compound meters.¹⁸ This is only one example of the close relationship between the spoken word and instrumental music. Although the exact nature of the intermediary processes between Stages 2 and 4 of Figure 1 remains to be clarified, the fact that a particular linguistic formation—the triplet—has found its way into pure instrumental music—music which would seem to have little to do with the structure of words—is most significant. The rhythm of the spoken word therefore stands as a fundamental manifestation of a larger scheme of rhythmic expression in West Africa.

Vocal Music

Rhythm is not only an essential component of the spoken word, but is also the crucial agent in the transformation of speech into song. It was mentioned earlier that the succession of linguistic tones influences—sometimes determines—the succession of musical tones. Thus, if one were to utter the Ewe words, *Mē wō ayaa dō* (...·, ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪), one's behaviour would properly be described as "speaking." If, on the other hand, one were to regulate the larger rhythmic patterns and make one's pitch only slightly more definite, one would no longer be speaking but singing (see Example 1 for a full transcription of the Ewe lament of which this is the opening line).¹⁹ It is important to stress that the transformational process that has taken place is primarily a rhythmic-metric one, and only secondarily a tonal one. That is, since the words of the lament have their "natural melody" (which includes both rhythm and tone), it is the regularization of rhythm as meter that ultimately indicates song, not speech.

Before considering other examples of this transformational process, it will be useful to clarify one aspect of terminology as it applies to Stage 3 of the model (Figure 1). Ethnomusicologists often distinguish between "free rhythm" and "strict rhythm," the former being a-metric or recitative-like while the latter is metric.²⁰ A much better way of characterizing this distinction is in terms of speech rhythm (which is the rough equivalent of free rhythm) and stylized speech rhythm (which is the equivalent of strict rhythm). When, for example, a cantor, at the beginning of a ritual ceremony, intones a recitative-like prayer, what he is

¹⁸ Cf. the transcriptions of Ewe drum music in David Locke with Godwin Agbeli, "Drum Language in Adzogbo," *The Black Perspective in Music* IX (1981), 25–50, and David Locke, "Principles of Offbeat Timing," those of West African music that appear throughout Nketia, *The Music of Africa*, and those of Ghanaian music in J. H. Nketia, *Preparatory Exercises in African Rhythm* (Legon, 1963).

¹⁹ The relationship between speech tone and melody in this lament is discussed in Agawu, "The Impact of Language on Musical Composition in Ghana," pp. 43–45.

²⁰ See, for example, Nketia, *African Music in Ghana*, p. 64.

EXAMPLE 1. Ewe Lament

Mē wō aya dō, 'ya dō, 'ya dō, ——— Mē wō aya dō, 'ya

dō, 'ya dō ——— Mē wō aya dō l'a- gbe me Ken- Ken- Ken Ken!

Mē wō aya dō,

I have worked for nothing

Mē wō aya dō l'agbeme kenken kenken!
kenken!

My life's work amounts to nothing!

doing is maintaining the rhythms of speech in his oratory. These are not “free rhythms”; rather, they are rhythms that are delivered within the constraints of speech. When, however, the group of participants responds with a praise song, they do so by means of stylized speech, that is, speech that is forced to accommodate metric constraints (strict rhythm). That the two types of rhythmic expression depend on the spoken word is important. To speak of “free rhythm” is to distort this sense of dependence.

Three examples of vocal music—a lullaby, a funeral dirge, and a lament—will serve to illustrate the relationship between Stages 2 and 3 of the model. Let us first examine an Ewe lullaby (Example 2).²¹ The argument that rhythm, rather than tone, exerts the more fundamental effect on structural procedure rests on the attributes that this song acquires by virtue of its social function. Lullabies are for children. They are normally sung by adult women—usually mothers or other females performing motherly functions. In order for the child to be lulled to sleep, s/he must understand the lullaby on at least two levels: as a verbal

²¹ A slightly different transcription of this lullaby, together with a discussion of the relationship between speech tone and melody appears in Agawu, “The Impact of Language on Musical Composition in Ghana,” pp. 49–50. For a different transcription of the text and a sensitive discussion of the social significance of its themes, see E. Y. Egbelwogbe, *Games and Songs as Education Media* (Accra, 1975). The transcription appears on p. 74, but the discussion throughout the book is pertinent.

EXAMPLE 2. Ewe Lullaby

Nyeñu-tō fē dze-dze- vi ye loo, To- bo- li! Nyeñu-tō fē
 dze-dze- vi ye loo, To-bo- li, M' gba f'a- vi le zā mē nam oo, M' gba
 f'a- vi le zā mē nam oo, Sa- ka- bo n'a xōagbe f'a siwo nam oo, Dze dze
 vi- nye loo To- bo- li! Newo kpuie hā loo To- bo- li, Newo
 kō hā loo To- bo- li, Nō- ti le gbadzaa nē loo To- bo- li

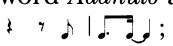
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Nye ñutō fē dzedzevi ye loo,
 toboli!
 M'gba f'avi le zāme nam oo,
 Sakabo na xōagbe f'asiwo nam
 loo,
 Dzedzevinye loo, toboli!
 Newo kpuie hā loo, toboli!
 Newo kō hā loo, toboli
 Ñōti le gbadzaa nē loo, toboli!

It is my own dear child,
 toboli!
 Do not cry during the night for me
 The evil woman will take your life
 away
 My own dear child, toboli!
 Whether s/he be short, toboli!
 Whether s/he be tall, toboli!
 S/he has a wide nose, toboli!

expression and also as a musical expression. The first of the two parts of the lullaby text is addressed to the child, and its message can be understood directly: "Do not cry during the night (for me) or else an evil woman will come and take you away." The second part of the text is also accessible even though it now addresses a larger, imagined audience (an

audience that may or may not include the child): “I don’t care whether s/he is tall or short, whether s/he has a wide nose; s/he is still my own dear child.” On the level of musical expression, the lullaby is equally accessible to the child. It uses a simple, memorable basic rhythm to express the text, and it sacrifices the constraints imposed by the succession of speech tones for directness and simplicity of rhythmic gesture. In addition, triplet groupings, shown to be characteristic of spoken language, serve as a unifying feature, as does the recurring word *Toboli*, which has no specific meaning and is used here as a vehicle for conveying a certain euphonious effect while delivering the basic triplet rhythm. All these features point to the elevation of rhythm to a position of prominence among the lullaby’s parameters. And the reason for this elevation may well be that the African child’s universe is more accessible through rhythm than through pitch.²²

A lullaby is, of course, sung by adults to children, so we might say that there is a conscious simplifying process at work, but even those genres in which these constraints are absent are marked by the same structuring influence of rhythm. Consider, next, the Ewe funeral dirge “*Adañutō*” (Example 3). The repetitive text develops a single, tragic theme: death. The singer, overcome by grief as a result of a terrible calamity—most probably the death of a close relative—calls out for a counsellor to come and witness the event. The most important feature of this dirge is the remarkably close relationship between the spoken text and its musical setting. In the opening measures, for example, the word *Adañutō* appears as a rising major second clothed in the rhythm ; both of these elements mirror the pre-compositional tonal and rhythmic domains. Similarly, the imperative *Miyōe!* (Call him!), which first appears in measures 5–7, is a perfect translation of speech into song (see also measures 9–11, 15–17, and 19–21). The most striking instance of this relationship between spoken text and melody occurs with the phrase *Miyō adañutō ne va kpō da* (measures 13–15 and, later, measures 27–29). Here, both the tone and in particular the rhythmic setting are so speech-like that the effect of the phrase practically dwarfs that of the other phrases in the dirge. If tone and rhythm seemed hitherto to be engaged in a tug-of-war, it is rhythm that emerges as the winner in the pair of closing phrases. It is like the sudden intrusion of a perfectly-formed rhythmic utterance devoid of its tonal constraints.

²² This is an admittedly speculative observation, although it is not without some support from the nature of African lullabies. These tend to attach a great deal of importance to rhythm while underplaying pitch procedures—melodies occur within a limited compass of a sixth or an octave and are motivically repetitive. Only further research—based presumably in psycho-acoustics and child psychology—will shed further light on this issue. Both Egblewogbe, *Games and Songs as Education Media* and Cudjoe, “The Techniques of Ewe Drumming” discuss aspects of the African child’s universe.

EXAMPLE 3. Ewe Funeral Dirge

$\text{♩} = 90$



A—dañu tō— Mi—yō A—dañu tō— Mi—yoe!—Mi—
yoe!— A—dañu tō— Mi—yōe! Mi—yōe— A—dañu tō—
— Mi—yō A—dañu tō ne va Kpō dā! Mi—yōe! Mi—yōe!—A—
dañu tō— ee— Mi—yōe! Mi—yōe! A—dañu tō— Nu—
ve-ve wō-m 'gbe A—dañu tō— Mi—yō A—dañu tō ne va Kpō dā!

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Ađañutō
Miyō Ađañutō
Miyō Ađañutō ne va kpō dā!

Nuveve wōm egbe

Miyō ađañutō neva kpō dā!

Counsellor
Call the Counsellor
Call the counsellor to come and see
(bear witness)
Something very painful has hap-
pened to me today
Call the counsellor to come and see!

Rhythm, we might say, is “foregrounded” at these points in the musical discourse. The overall structure of the dirge, then, is similar to that of the lullaby in that it consists of a background metricization of speech rhythms (accommodated within the constraints of a duple meter), an activation of the rhythms of individual words (such as *ađañutō* and *miyōe*), and two prominent excursions into the domain of speech.

EXAMPLE 4. Akan Folk Song

♩ = 78
clap

Yee — yēa-wie me yō. Yēa-wie me yō Fo-ri Gyaa-

-ma'ee Ee — Ee — ee — O — fo — ri Gyaa- ma ee —

Chorus

Yee — yēa wie me yō o yēa wie me yō fo-ri Gyaa-

ma'ee, Ee — Ee — ee — O — fo — ri Gyaa- ma ee —

Yee! yea wie me yō
Yeawie me yō Fori Gyaama ee
Yea wie me yō!

Yee! I am done for
Fori Gyaama, I am done for
I am done for

The third and last example of Stage 3 of the model is an Akan folk song of the variety known as *Nwonkoro*, entertainment songs performed by adult women in the Ashanti region of Ghana (Example 4).²³ Despite its subject—divorce—the mood of the song is optimistic, and the ultimate aim of performance is to simulate the achievement of catharsis as would be the case if the song were used contextually. We are told that an older woman—presumably one who has been married for many years—speculates on divorce and acts out her response. First, she calls on a male

²³ For an account of the development of *Nwonkoro*, see Nketia, *Folk Songs of Ghana* (Legon, 1963), pp. 16–65, from which Example 4 is taken.

figure, Fori Gyamaa (probably an uncle), to take her in and comfort her. Then she speaks of “going home,” that is, returning to the house of her parents where she had grown up. The role of rhythm in the musical setting is immediately apparent from the highly syllabic nature of the vocal line, a feature typical of genres such as *Nwonkoro* in which a high premium is placed on the proper enunciation of text. Rhythm and tempo also function importantly in creating the lively musical surface that captures the mood of optimism. I stress the structuring role of rhythm here because although the constraints of linguistic tone are met—the words *aware* (. . .), *fidie* (. . .), *Ofori* (. . .) and *Gyamaa* (. . .) are set with due regard for the contour mapped out by the succession of speech tones—rhythm dominates the musical surface, maintaining a near-independent existence in the hierarchy of the song’s parameters. It would seem that pre-compositional constraints recede into the background, making room for compositional ones, as for example in the use of the interjectory particle *ee* (measures 5–7 and 9). When the balance between composition and precomposition tilts in favor of the former, rhythm more than anything else assumes a primary function.

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All three of the songs chosen to illustrate Stage 3 of Figure 1 are functional songs whose structure is determined, even generated, by the physical constraints of the activity for which the songs were developed in the first place. A lullaby is sung by adult women to put their children to sleep; a funeral lament is intoned only when someone has passed away and there is a clear context of mourning. Even the song of a divorced woman is to be performed contextually, except where the theme is being simulated in a more consciously artistic setting. Note that these functional constraints are operative in many of the other West African vocal genres that we have not considered here. We can therefore conclude that song (vocal music) is a heightened or intensified form of the spoken word and that the fundamentality of rhythm in structuring speech is equally characteristic of song.

Instrumental Music

West African instrumental music, expressed in a wide variety of dance forms, is the best known aspect of the musical culture. Because its chief vehicle is drumming, many a commentator has concluded that West African music is synonymous with West African instrumental music. This is certainly the aspect of this music that the accounts of the early explorers (noted at the beginning of this essay) referred to. It has further led to the view that “African music is ultimately founded on drumming.”²⁴ It is true that drumming and dancing consti-

²⁴ Hornbostel, “African Negro Music,” p. 52.

tute the most prevalent forms of recreation in traditional West African society, but music is founded on language, not on drumming, for unless one understands the rhythmic formations that stem from language, one misses a crucial dimension in what would appear to be a purely instrumental genre. To the West African, the idea that an instrumental genre exists outside the functional domain of words and their meanings is simply absurd.

Of the numerous forms and styles of drumming found in West Africa, three principal modes may be distinguished: the speech mode, the signal mode, and the dance mode.²⁵ Example 5a illustrates the speech mode. Here the drummer merely reproduces the rhythms of speech on the drums—hence the familiar phenomenon of “talking drums.”²⁶ The signal mode (Example 5b) is similar to the speech mode, but there are fewer words, and the rhythms are somewhat stylized. This means that a certain coding is involved, and therefore that a certain amount of reading between the lines is demanded of the listener.²⁷ It should be emphasized, however, that there is nothing arbitrary about this mode of drumming. Signal drumming is based on the concrete words of language, whose tone and rhythmic elements it exploits. The dance mode is marked by the regularization of rhythmic patterns to create meter (recall a similar transformational process in the earlier discussion of the spoken word and song). Dances such as Kete, Adowa, Gahu, Fōntōnfrōm, and Atsiagbekō are all characterized by clear metric constraints, whether or not the meter stays the same throughout the dance or changes sectionally. Because of this regularization, dance drumming has often seemed abstract, having more to do with the cultivation of complex rhythmic patterns than with communication by means of speech rhythms. This, however, is a misleading notion, as a look at one of the best-known Ewe dances, Atsiagbekō, will reveal. Atsiagbekō is a war dance in which a variety of stylized rhythms is used to convey a set of complementary responses to the subject of war. As Chernoff has shown,²⁸ the organization of the ensemble corresponds roughly to that

²⁵ Nketia, *Drumming in the Akan Communities of Ghana* (London, 1963) is a comprehensive treatise on drumming—the only one of its kind. Examples 5a and 5b are drawn from pp. 25 and 28 respectively of this volume.

²⁶ For a lucid discussion of the phenomenon of talking drums in Africa, see John Carrington, *Talking Drums of Africa* (London, 1949). Also of interest is Georg Herzog, “Drum Signalling in a West African Tribe,” *Word* 1 (1945), 217–38.

²⁷ Such complexities in the communicative process are discussed by Walter Ong in a highly provocative article that uses John Carrington’s study of the Lokele of Zaire (cited in note 26) as empirical foundation: “African Talking Drums and Oral Noetics,” in *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (Ithaca, 1977), pp. 92–120.

²⁸ Chernoff, *African Rhythm*, pp. 83–87. Example 6 is taken from p. 85 of Chernoff’s study, and the ensuing description closely follows his. *Atsiagbeko* has been the subject of a complete study, David Locke, “The Music of Atsiagbeko,” (Ph.D. diss., Wesleyan Univer-

EXAMPLE 5a. Akan Drum Speech

EXAMPLE 5b. Akan Drum Signals

of a human family, and the specific utterances of the individual drums are linguistically based. Kagan, the baby, says “You stand up.” Kidi, the mother, says “Look towards home.” Kroboto says “I shall die at the battlefield,” while Totogi, his twin brother, agrees with him: “For sure.” There is one other drummer whose utterances are not transcribed in Example 6, but who is the best-known of the “speakers”: the lead drummer. It is he who directs the larger shape of the dance by giving instructions to the dancers and thereby indirectly informing the audience of the progress of each dance.

The communicative process inherent in Atsiagbekō is multi-faceted and complex, but one thing stands out: the entire rhythmic texture is linguistically based. Kroboto’s phrase, “Gbedzi ko madō” (. . . .), for ex-

city, 1978). See also Locke, “Atsiagbekō: The Polyrhythmic Texture,” *Sonus* IV (1983), 16–38 for a technical discussion of the dance’s organizing principles.

EXAMPLE 6. Ewe Dance (*Atsiagbekō*)

Bell

Kagan

Mi- tso, mi- tso, mi- tso, mi- tso

Kidi

Kpo afe go- dzi, kpo afe go- dzi

Kroboto

Gbe- dzi ko ma do, gbe- dzi ko ma do

Totogi

Ko- ko dzi, dzi, dzi

ample, mirrors the inflections of the spoken text in matters of tone and rhythm. This kind of direct transfer is more typical of speech drumming than of dance drumming. On the other hand, Kagan's phrase, "Mitso," captures only the rhythm, and not the tone pattern of the spoken word. When one considers the fact that the entire polyrhythmic texture is saturated with various levels of word-dependency, all of which unfold simultaneously, one gains a sense of the breadth and complexity of the communicative process in pure instrumental music. In spite of the stylization of rhythms, therefore, dance drumming does not sever its bonds with the spoken word; it only makes them less apparent.

The true significance of the rhythmic structure of West African music, then, lies in its remarkable integration with the various forms of rhythmic expression that characterize West African life: gesture, the spoken word, vocal music, instrumental music, and finally, dance or stylized gesture. Accordingly, the conceptual model (Figure 2)

and the subsequent discussion in this essay have given pride of place to the rhythms of language, the premise being that language, as an intensification of gesture, is the generator of *all* music. Like all models, the one presented here smooths over certain problematic relationships. It does not fully explain, for example, the specific nature of the transformational processes that link its various stages, a problem that is particularly acute in the case of Stage 4 which, because of its distance from Stage 2, seems to resist the kind of direct generation that characterizes the transformation of Stages 1 into 2, 2 into 3, or even 4 into 5. But to the extent that it places these relationships within an understandable conceptual framework, the model may be regarded as having tremendous explanatory potential. I hope to have shown that the way forward in our attempts to understand African rhythm does not lie in the production of more analyses of the mechanical aspects of its organization, but rather in a careful investigation of its basis in the various modes of signification that characterize West African life itself.

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