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DRUMS OF WEST AFRICA

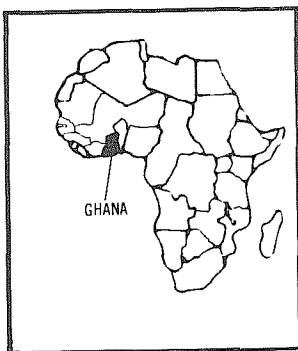
RITUAL
MUSIC
OF
GHANA





RITUAL MUSIC OF GHANA

AFRICA



The resurgence of interest in uncovering the roots of Black New World cultures has led to a refocusing of attention on the traditional cultures of West Africa. While an extensive literature has been amassed on the Yoruba of Western Nigeria and the Fon of Dohomey, relatively little attention has been paid to an equally important group, the Ewe of South Eastern Ghana. The Ewes are known throughout West Africa for their highly sophisticated traditional drum and dance styles which present polymeter and cross ("hot") rhythms in one of their most advanced forms. These recordings offer a cross section of Anlo Ewe traditional drumming, from social and recreational to ritual and cult music.

The Anlo Ewe, occupying the Guinea Coast from Anloga to Aflao, are to be distinguished from the Ewes of the Northern Volta Region (e.g. Kpando). The culture of the northern Ewes has, over the years, been deeply influenced by Akan culture (impinging from the immediate West), and many Ewes consider Anlo to be the only repository of pure Ewe tradition.

As is typical of much of West Africa, musical performance in Anlo plays a central role in nearly every aspect of traditional life and is particularly crucial in ritual and cult events. Although it is not strictly accurate to speak of the religious as opposed to the secular in West African cultures (since literally every event of traditional life is invested with a spiritual character), it is appropriate to draw a line between those ritual activities leading to direct contact with the supernatural (e.g. cult events) and those social and recreational activities where spiritual phenomena, though present, are not the central focus of the event. It is along these lines that the material on this record is divided; Side One presents the dances of a more recreational character and Side Two is devoted entirely to the ritual music of the Blekete Cult.

The recordings on Side One were made during two years (1974-76) of research and study in the Volta Region of Ghana. The cult music was recorded toward the end of that period when, after a year of friendship with the priest of the Blekete Cult in Aflao, I was invited to spend six months studying cult drumming and participating in daily cult routines and rituals.

Side One

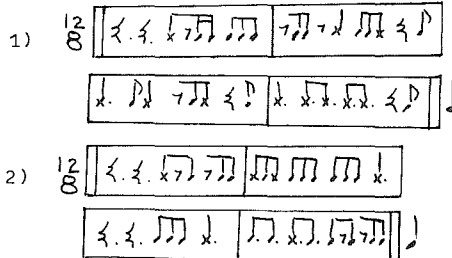
These five dances are performed on the instruments of the traditional Ewe drum orchestra, consisting of the following: *atsimevu* (master drum); *sogo* (support drum; also used as master drum in *Agbadza*); *kidi*, *kloboto* and *kagan* (support drums, played with sticks); *gankogui* (double bell); *axatse* (beaded gourd rattle). It is from the interplay between the repetitive, over-lapping patterns of the support drums (notated below) that the cross-rhythms and multiple meters emerge.

Atsiagbeko:

Originally a ritual war dance called *Atanga* (literally "great oaths"), *Atsiagbeko* has, since the end of the era of tribal war some eighty years ago, evolved into a narrative dance depicting past acts of bravery in war and the blessings of peace. It is the master drummer who dictates the form of the dance by playing a series of styles (*atsia*), drum patterns, each of which has its prescribed dance movement. These styles are broken up by "turnings", signals which inform the dancers that one style has ended and a new one is about to begin. Below is the combined pattern of the support drums which play with little or no variation throughout the performance (♩ = open tone; x' = damped stroke);

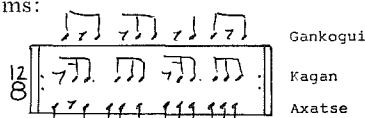


The following are two of the turnings used by the master drummer. Note that the master drummer (playing alternately with two sticks and one hand and one stick) has as many as eight strokes in his repertoire each producing a distinct sound. For the sake of readability the turnings have been transcribed using a two-tone system (♩ = high; x' = low):

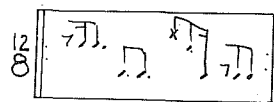


Agbadza (slow):

Derived from an old ritual after-war dance *Atrikpui*, *Agbadza* is perhaps the most popular of all traditional Ewe dances. Nowadays it is most often performed at wake-keepings but it is by no means restricted to those occasions. The *Agbadza* ensemble is comprised of *sogo*, *kidi*, *kagan*, *axatse* and *gankogui* with *sogo*, played without sticks, as master drum. *Kagan*, *axatse* and *gankogui* repeat the same pattern throughout, but *kidi* changes with the master drum, providing the prescribed response to the *sogo*'s rhythmic phrase. While the sixteenth-note variations of the drums cross to create the illusion of rapid meter, the dancers move to the slow "4" pulse with vigorous contraction and release of the shoulders. Below is the combined pattern of the support drums:



The *sogo* plays the following signal to alert the *kidi* player that a new style is about to begin (note the use of 3 tones; x' = damped stroke):



Adzida:

Though recreational in character, *Adzida*, one of the many club dances of the Ewe, is not without its spiritual elements. When a new dance club is formed its first performance is preceded by a lengthy pre-dawn procession after which libation is poured to the gods and ancestors and divine blessings sought. The music adheres to the basic 12/8 structure described above with *atsimevu* as master drum. Note the distinct "answering" phrase provided by the *kidi* to the master drum pattern in the second selection on this band.

Slow Atsiagbeko:

This is the slow version of *Atsiagbeko* and it resembles it in form and structure. The support drums (with the exception of *kagan*) are the same as above and many of the master drum styles, including the turnings, are derived from fast *Atsiagbeko* patterns. Here, too, the dancers take their cues from the master drummer, answering his drum styles with the appropriate dance movements.

Fast Agbadza:

This version of *Agbadza* is preferred by the young men and women who use its more rapid tempo as a means of exhibiting virtuoso dancing and drumming. It is a relatively modern dance to which new drum styles are continually being added. It is more recreational in character than slow *Agbadza* and is less likely to be performed in a situation calling for great dignity and decorum, such as the wake-keeping of an important elder.

SIDE 2

The Blekete Cult arrived in Anlo around 1932 as part of the wave of cults imported from Northern Ghana (particularly Dagarti) to combat witchcraft activities. It is built around the propitiation of five principal gods of northern origin and though it falls into the category of what the Ewes refer to as *amedzro trowo* (literally "stranger

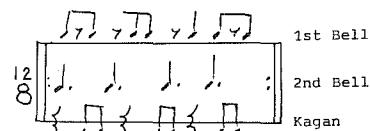
spirits"), it bears all the characteristics of an indigenous cult, namely spirit mediumship, typical initial divination, and ceremonial drumming and dance in the Anlo style. It is interesting to note that the Ewes use of the Blekete drum (native to Northern Ghana) which the cult takes its name. The selections are in the order in which they normally occur during ceremony.

Cult Songs:

Blekete cult songs, of which there are over several functions. In addition to declaring the possession of the cult, they voice praise for cult gods and invite those who are thought to be fond of music, to make their presence manifest at the ceremony via spirit-possession. In some exceptions, however, it is not until the master drummer and full ensemble are playing that possession-trance occurs.

Ceremony proper:

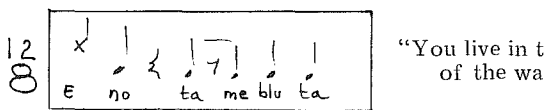
With the full ensemble playing, the ceremony begins earnestly. The master drummer plays the Blekete drum alternately in song, dance, and speech mode in order to bring on possession-trance in the initiates. Such drumming, exemplified by the first song on this record, occurs when the drummer plays a pattern which conforms to the phrasing and tone pattern of the lyrics. Note that the music is structured in similar to *Atsiagbeko*, except that in this case there are playing a crossing pattern which emphasizes the "3" pattern. *Kagan* sometimes plays a crossing pattern in "3" its usual "4" pattern:



There is a second support drum, *adevu*, in the form of a rattle and the wooden stick clappers played by the dancers as they sing.

Possession sequence:

In this short sequence we witness the arrival of one of the five gods of the cult. The first indication of possession is the high-pitched scream emitted by the initiate at the instant she becomes possessed. Slowly, through the use of the highly intricate patterns characteristic of possession mode drumming, the master drummer lures the possessed medium across the dance ring until she is just in front of the drummers. Abruptly, the master drummer shifts to speech mode and plays the phrase of *Oango* (speech mode is usually played slightly faster than the established tempo):



To which the final shriek is the emphatic reply.

Invocation:

After over an hour of uninterrupted drumming, the master drummer stops the proceedings and, with the cantor kneeling, begins a series of free-rhythm songs with the cantor substituting a ritualized group invocation to the cult gods. The ceremony within the larger ceremony is said to "bring the spirits closer" in the hope that those gods who have been holding back will make their appearance when the master drummer resumes. Also audible here are the shrieks of those already in trance.

Drum calls:

Now the master drummer begins a series of drum calls which serve the dual function of entertaining the gods already present and bringing those who have not yet arrived. Many possessions occur during these virtuoso pieces (note the screams of mediums becoming possessed) and those already in trance dance with joyful abandon.

Finale:

The final hour or so of the ceremony is devoted to drumming and dancing for the general enjoyment and congregation. Some mediums, who by this time are dressed in the clothing appropriate to the possession, continue to dance and mingle with the congregation inside the cult house in consultation with the *Bosomfo* (priest) and attending to those cult members seeking supernatural advice and blessings.

Recording by Ric

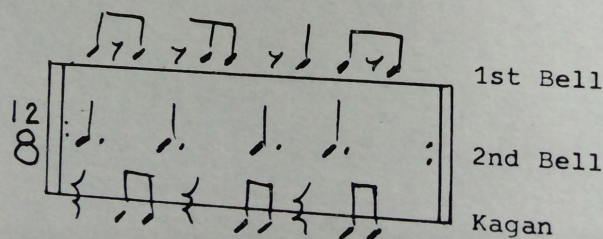
spirits”), it bears all the characteristics of an indigenous cult, namely spirit mediumship, typical initiation rites, divination, and ceremonial drumming and dancing in the Anlo style. It is interesting to note that the Ewes retain the use of the Blekete drum (native to Northern Ghana) from which the cult takes its name. The selections are arranged in the order in which they normally occur during an actual ceremony.

Cult Songs:

Blekete cult songs, of which there are over 200, have several functions. In addition to declaring the power of the cult, they voice praise for cult gods and invite the gods, who are thought to be fond of music, to make themselves manifest at the ceremony via spirit-possession. With rare exceptions, however, it is not until the master drummer and full ensemble are playing that possession-trance occurs.

Ceremony proper:

With the full ensemble playing, the ceremony begins in earnest. The master drummer plays the Blekete drum alternately in song, dance, and speech mode in an attempt to bring on possession-trance in the initiates. Song mode drumming, exemplified by the first song on this band, occurs when the drummer plays a pattern which closely conforms to the phrasing and tone pattern of the song lyrics. Note that the music is structured in similar fashion to Atsiagbeko, except that in this case there are two bells playing a crossing pattern which emphasizes the “4” meter. *Kagan* sometimes plays a crossing pattern in “3” instead of its usual “4” pattern:



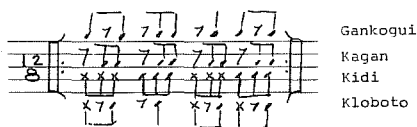
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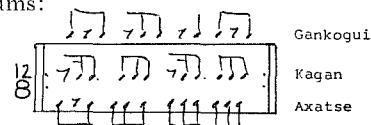
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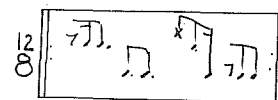
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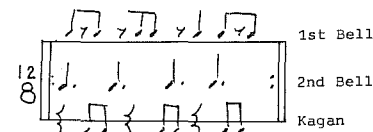
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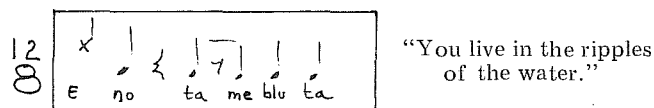
its usual "4" pattern:



There is a second support drum, *adevu*, in addition to rattle and the wooden stick clappers played by the women as they sing.

Possession sequence:

In this short sequence we witness the arrival of Oango, one of the five gods of the cult. The first indication of his presence is the high-pitched scream emitted by the medium at the instant she becomes possessed. Slowly, through the use of the highly intricate patterns characteristic of dance mode drumming, the master drummer lures the newly-possessed medium across the dance ring until she is standing just in front of the drummers. Abruptly, the master drummer shifts to speech mode and plays the praise name of Oango (speech mode is usually played slightly faster than the established tempo):



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Invocation:

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Recording and Notes
by Richard Hill

Made in U.S.A.