

## DDD Music Analysis, Festival Dance, *Damba Maᅅgli*

### Overview

#### Cultural Significance

Damba Maᅅgli, or simply "Damba" as it is usually called, is iconic of Dagomba identity.

Dagombas consider the Damba Festival to be the most joyous and important event in their annual calendar of ceremonial and ritual events. Lasting twelve days, the festival is timed according to the lunar calendar to mark the birth of the Prophet Mohammed. It is an occasion of giving homage to chiefs and reaffirming ties within extended families. In African multi-ethnic settings, non-Dagombas typically are aware of the significance of Damba for Dagombas and many Ghanaians have seen traditionally dressed Dagombas dancing to the drumming music.

As performance art, Damba has features of music and dance that appear to be deeply engrained within Dagomba culture. The rhythmic essence of the answer luᅅa part occurs in many pieces in quaternary time (equivalent to 2/4 time signature). The polyrhythmic relationships among the three drum parts are so clear as to justify being called "classic." The linear lines of leading luᅅa and guᅅ-gᅅᅅ exemplify the Dagomba approach to improvisation.

When teaching foreigners, Dagomba drummers usually begin with the two types of Damba, the slower-paced Damba Sochendi (procession Damba) and the faster-paced Damba Maᅅgli (Damba itself). Note: I often use Nantoo Nimdi as the first piece because it is musically and technically less difficult.

Ghanaian theater-type performance ensembles usually include a version of Damba in their repertory of traditional dances. Often it is paired with the Group Dance called Takai.

Responding to its cultural and musical significance, I have written an entire book on Damba. Entitled Drum Damba, the book and accompanying audio media shares with readers my experience of studying Damba with Alhaji Abubakari. In addition to an ethnographic description of the festival and many more drum talks than are presented

here, the book presents my first formulation of the rhythmic principles and cultural values in Dagomba dance drumming.

### Meter

Underlying the drumming of Damba (indeed all Dagomba dance-drumming) is a tacit flow of steady beats that listeners can feel in different durations. Depending on one's temporal referent, the music seems to move quickly or more slowly.

Like Nantoo Nimdi, Damba Manḡli provides a very clear instance of rhythm in quaternary pulsation, i.e., within each beat are two or four faster units (any multiple of two).

In staff notation I represent the implicit streams of beats as whole notes, half notes, or quarter notes. For purposes of transcription, the quarter note is the basic time value, that is, "the beat," but dancers often move on the half note pulsation. Although I wrote Damba in 4/4 meter in the book Drum Damba, the DDD site uses 2/4 so that all pieces in quaternary time may be easily compared. The slowest unit of tempo--whole note--marks a powerful moment of metric stress on every other downbeat; in cut time--half note beat--each downbeat is specially marked for consciousness; the fast feeling of tempo--motion in quarter notes--proves helpful for learners who are trying to figure out timing and to play steadily amidst the rhythmic gravity of contrasting phrases.

### Phrase Duration

As in Nantoo Nimdi the basic framework is four beats per phrase, that is, two measures of 2/4 time. This four-beat framework establishes a sense of expectation: two-beat phrases feel short, four-beat phrases feel normal, and phrases lasting eight or more beats feel long.

### Groove

Damba's groove comes from the interlock between the offbeat answer luḡa with the onbeat leading luḡa and guḡ-gḡḡ. Crucially, answer luḡa does not play on "one" (first of four beats). Instead, its syncopated phrase leads towards this crucial landmark, which is actually sounded by guḡ-gḡḡ.

Over four beats, guŋ-gɔŋ moves "one two and three four," while leading luŋa moves "three four one." Guŋ-gɔŋ accentuates the cut-time feel of half notes; from this perspective, leading luŋa accentuates the double-time feel of quarter notes.

Answer luŋa not only does not play on beat one, its notes always are offbeat. The rhythmic catalyst for Damba is the first note of answer luŋa, which hits a split second before beat two.

### Lead-Response Interplay

Like Group Dances, Damba features overlap and interlock among the three parts. Whereas most Praise Names feature alternation between lead drum and response drums--Zambalantɔŋ is an exception--all three drums play simultaneously in Damba.

Also like Group Dances, both lead luŋa and guŋ-gɔŋ have ample leeway for improvisation. In situations like this, the answer luŋa phrase functions as a time line, that is, a recurring phrase (ostinato) that molds musical time into distinctive temporal proportions.

Aside: Time lines are characteristic of the dance-drumming idioms from the forest and coast regions of West Africa. Geographically, the kingdom of Dagbon is located at the border between the savannah grasslands and the forest region and, historically, the Dagombas have interacted with polities located to their south. Dagomba dance drumming apparently shows traces of Dagbon's position on the border between vast zones of West African ecology and culture--savannah and desert to its north, forest and coast to its south.

### **Answer Luŋa**

The answer luŋa part generates terrifically powerful forward motion through musical time. Four offbeat strokes fit within four beats. Stroke one is on the fourth sixteenth within beat one--strokes two, three, and four are on the upbeat of beats two, three, and four. The phrase begins on an extreme offbeat moment and then stabilizes on three upbeats. Stroke four, however, feels rhythmically unresolved, as if hanging in musical

space like an unanswered question. Guŋ-gɔŋ provides the answer with its powerful "ka" stroke on beat one.

If the silent rest at the end of the phrase is included, the phrase has five events. Using sixteenth notes as the unit of measurement,  $16 = 3 + 4 + 4 + 2 + 3$  is the arithmetic of the answer luŋa's timing.

Pitch contributes to the structure of the answer luŋa phrase (see Vocables Notation and Drumming Notation). Alhaji's demonstration of the part in vocables closely resembles the way he plays it on the drum itself. He gives two melodies--version A is low low mid mid, version B is high low mid mid. Version A is by far the most common. In version A, pitch shapes the four strokes into two pairs with downbeats after each pair, that is, stroke one - stroke two - followed by downbeat two, and then, stroke three - stroke four - followed by downbeat one. As a consequence, the answer luŋa phrase has what might be termed "a tint of tripleness." I write the phrase as a dotted rhythm in quaternary time because I believe that strokes one and two are slightly closer together than strokes three and four, but Dagomba players sometimes exploit the "two pairs" melodic structure by shifting away from the dotted rhythm towards a quarter note triplet timing. In the real time experience of body and ear, so to speak, the difference is extremely slight. Mediating an oral tradition into writing exaggerates this very subtle rhythmic nuance.

As revealed in Alahji's presentation of vocables and on drum, pressure on the luŋa ropes is an important feature of the phrase's rhythm and melody. In version A, strokes one and two approach low pitch from the lower neighbor, while in version B stroke one is struck at high pitch and then quickly released to low pitch. In both versions, after-pressure on the first two strokes yields sixteenth note motion. The final two strokes have no such squeeze-release effect, which makes them sound strong and powerful. Pressure technique thus reinforces the "two pairs" structure of the phrase.

Strokes two, three and four also share an important characteristic--their onsets on upbeats. In Dagbon players sometimes omit stroke one, which highlights the rhythmic similarity of these three strokes. In the forest and coastal regions of West Africa, a widespread timeline pattern for quaternary music marks the upbeats of beats two, three and four.

In my opinion, the rhythm of the Damba answer luṅa phrase is deeply engrained in Dagomba dance drumming. With different sequence of pitches, the answer luṅa phrase reappears in Kondaliya (see Group Dance Takai); with different pitches and metric setting it occurs in Takai itself. The rhythm of many pieces in quaternary time shares the timing of its notes and their positioning within meter. Its musical design is a profoundly generative cultural trope, so to speak. I would go so far as to say that the rhythm is imprinted on the musical being of a Dagomba person during his or her period of childhood enculturation. It is a feature of entrainment that contributes to the cultural identity of the ethnic group.

### **Guṅ-gḳṅ**

Improvisation and variation are essential to the guṅ-gḳṅ part in Damba. In the Part-by-Part Sessions, Alhaji uses vocables and drumming to demonstrate the part's dynamic character. Although vocables and drumming are similar but not identical, the approach to the part is the same in each case. Here I will briefly discuss the phrases he uses and his style of combining them in performance.

In the staff notation on the site, my note-for-note transcriptions of these demonstrations enable close study of how he uses pre-composed "licks" to create long passages of music. The boxed letters above the staff indicate his shifting musical ideas. I also "pull the licks," so to speak, from the scores and present them one-by-one, showing in rather minute detail the subtle changes that Alhaji uses to make the part exciting

The main theme for the guṅ-gḳṅ in Damba is labeled A in the scores. Looping temporal circularity, "recycling," if you will, is built into the fabric of the part. Alhaji's demonstrations show the primary phrase as "ka kakaka ki." In this perspective, the first note fills the space left by the answer luṅa phrase, answering its musical question, so to speak. However, this is a guṅ-gḳṅ phrase with an implicit text that encourages lively performance from dancers--Dance Damba. From the perspective of the drum language, the phrase shape changes to "kakaka ki ka," making the last note in the phrase the one that responds to answer luṅa (see Table 1).

vocables	ka	ka	ka	ki	ka
drum language	to	ka	wam	Da-	mba
translation	yes	so	dance	Da-	mba

**Table 1 Damba Mahile guṅ-gṳṅ drum language**

No matter how one parses the circling phrase, its squarely onbeat and upbeat quarters and eighths create intense interlock with answer luṅa. Counterpoint with answer luṅa is guṅ-gṳṅ's most important musical contribution to the ensemble polyphony.

Like answer and lead luṅa drums, the duration of the principal guṅ-gṳṅ phrase is four beats. In its "ka kakaka ki" shape, the phrase is offset from the other two drums. Like a brick wall, the ensemble texture is built from phrases that are displaced from one another.

Alhaji varies the basic phrase by means of ornamentation with the double-stroke, leaving out the "ki" stroke, or changing the chahira strokes.

Many variations make the phrase longer--for example, "ka kakaka kakaka kakaka ki--but some shorten it as when the "kakaka" figure is played repeatedly. By combining these dynamic concepts-- (1) shifting a phrase's beginning and end, (2) modifying notes within a phrase, and (3) changing the duration of a phrase--a drummer may produce many variants of the basic phrase.

The second theme for guṅ-gṳṅ is marked B in the scores. Alhaji teaches that Dagomba musicians borrowed this phrase from a neighboring ethnic group, the Gonja. He says that drummers find that the rhythm particularly suits the female style of the Damba dance because it goes nicely with women's graceful neck movements.

Theme B has only three strokes over two implicit beats--"ka ka ki"--followed by two beats of chahira. Compared to theme A, theme B feels short and its lack of bounce strokes over beats three and four enable the third and fourth answer luṅa notes to be more audible in the polyphonic texture.

Theme B creates moments of unison between guŋ-gɔŋ and answer luŋa, rather than interlock. The second "ka" stroke occurs together with the first stroke in the answer luŋa phrase on the crucial fourth pulse within beat one. The "ki" stroke is in unison with the second stroke of answer luŋa. Thus, in comparison to the dense interlock created by theme A, the synchrony made by theme B yields a sparser texture.

A favored variation of theme A--leading into the phrase with an eighth note pick-up (kaKAka ki)--adds another moment of unison between the two parts. Now, only the third stroke on answer luŋa is not doubled by a guŋ-gɔŋ stroke. Drummers are aware and attuned to interactive effects like this.

Theme C is much longer than themes A and B--it stretches over four answer luŋa phrases (eight measures, sixteen beats). To my ear, three factors contribute to the beauty and force of theme C.

- (1) Delayed fulfillment of expectation-- theme C delays strong "ka" stroke that provides closure to the answer luŋa rhythm.
- (2) New polyrhythmic fit with answer luŋa--"ka" strokes match second and third strokes of answer luŋa.
- (3) Syncopation--theme C has chahira notes within beat one, which is highly unexpected, and then places "ka" strokes before and after beat three (downbeat two, if you will).

As shown in the inventory of licks extracted from the scores, each of these three themes provides the material for subtle variations.

### **Lead Luŋa**

If we consider the two roles of the luŋa drums in Damba, the leading luŋa is the onbeat partner to the offbeat answer luŋa--every stroke of answer luŋa is offbeat, while every stroke of leading luŋa is onbeat. The two roles intertwine to make a throbbing, propulsive groove.

Alhaji shows two "talks" for the lead luŋa part--"Wama, wama, wam' Damba," and "Wam' Damba, to ka wam' Damba"--that carry the same meaning, "Dance Damba!" The accented notes move "three four one" on the implicit flow of quarter note beats (see

Vocables Notation and Drumming Notation). During the beat without drum talk (beat two) Alhaji keeps his stick busy with two filler notes, either very low in pitch (tata) or on high pitch (titi).

The two phrases, while quite similar in most respects, are different enough that alternating between them creates a pleasing musical contrast. Both have short arch-shaped melodies. "Wama, wama, wam' Damba," which covers two answer luŋa phrases (eight beats, four measures), lingers at mid-pitch with three strongly accented notes on backbeats. The phrase duration of "Wam' Damba, to ka wam' Damba" is four beats but two of these short phrases combine into a longer tune--low high mid, low mid low. "Wama, wama, wam' Damba" emphasizes the backbeats and delays rhythmic closure on the downbeat. "Wam' Damba, to ka wam' Damba" moves more decisively toward downbeats, but still puts pressure on every second backbeat.

After-pressure on the luŋa ropes makes the part more musically effective, in addition to enabling the drum to more closely replicate the implicit Dagbani text. In "Wama, wama, wam' Damba," the drummer creates a low-pitched humming effect by releasing the high- and mid-pitch notes down to low. The notes on the backbeats have no after-pressure effects, which increases the power of accentuation. Rising from low pitch, the drummer can impart a whooshing sound effect to the mid-pitch notes, thus adding to their impact. Contrast between low and high pitches is an important dimension of "Wam' Damba, to ka wam' Damba."

The introductory "call," which advises the dancer to "Be cool" (balim), simply is many un-timed low-pitched strokes followed by after-pressure squeezing. The drummer locks in the groove when he plays the phrase that cues the other players to start--"To naa wama" or "Wama Damba" ("Listen! Chief says to dance," or more simply, "Dance Damba!"). This is a more offbeat, syncopated rhythm that moves from the "and of two" to "four one" cadence on the downbeat.

After the full ensemble kicks in, the lead drum stays with the two main phrases. Alhaji says it is not typical to return to the cue phrase.



The two talks that Alhaji presents are but a small sample of the richness of the lead luja part. In addition to other drum talks that are traditional to the Damba Festival, in a real performance in Dagbon the lead drummer would play phrases that relate to the particular person who is dancing. See Drum Damba for more lead drum licks.

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