

DDD Music Analysis, Festival Dance, Damba Sochendi

Overview

Cultural Significance

The music of the Damba Festival is iconic of Dagomba identity. It is the type of Dagomba music best known among non-Dagombas and the music that Dagombas themselves are likely to suggest as their "national" dance. Ghanaian folkloric performance ensembles usually include a version of Damba in their repertory of traditional dances. Often it is paired with the Group Dance called Takai and sometimes even given the new compound name, "Damba-Takai." 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 Manqli (Damba itself).

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.

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 (published by White Cliffs Media Company and distributed by Pathway Book Service). 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 and Tempo

The fast-paced dance music simply known as "Damba" has the quaternary type rhythmic structure within a basic time cycle of four beats (equivalent to two duple measures in 2/4 time signature). In contrast, the slower-paced music known as "Damba Sochendi" has

ternary rhythmic structure and a time span of eight beats (equivalent to four measures in 6/8 time signature).

Rhythm

Three-in-the-span-of-two is an important temporal pattern in Damba Sochendi (see Rhythm Notation). The answer luḡa part is entirely grounded in 3:2 over the span of two ternary beats (three quarter notes : two dotted quarter notes). The answer luḡa either plays eight quarter notes in succession, or breaks the longer phrase into three shorter motives, each with two quarter note time values. The drum talks on lead luḡa, on the other hand, use duplet figures within one ternary beat (two dotted eighths : three eighths). Binary motion through a ternary beat is so prevalent that the lead luḡa part can easily be analyzed within a quaternary temporal framework. In other words, we can understand the rhythm of Damba Sochendi as polymetric--the lead luḡa in the equivalent of 2/4 time and the answer luḡa in the equivalent of 6/8 or 3-4 time. The guḡ-gḡḡ part, at least as presented on this site, is much less multi-determinate than the luḡa drums--it stays firmly within the ternary temporal field.

Form, Call-and-Response and Phrase Duration

The phrases of the response drums fill sixteen of the twenty-four fast pulses in the time span of the piece, leaving eight time units for the music of the lead luḡa to clearly emerge from the ensemble texture. However, the lead luḡa usually layers its strokes on top of the response parts, creating powerful polyrhythm, or interjects short figures in brief gaps in the response phrases, creating quick back-and-forth call-and-response.

The lead luḡa phrases typically are four in duration. As shown by the brackets above the staves in the Rhythm Notation, however, the downbeats of lead and response parts are offset. From the perspective of the response parts, the lead drum enters on the third ternary beat. Counted from the lead luḡa's point of view, the response parts enter on the seventh beat. Dagomba musicians would not measure time in this way, of course, but would hear the lead and response fitting together, sometimes overlapping and sometimes exchanging phrases in call-and-response style. Alhaji also demonstrated a drum talk that spans eight beats, which would fit with two occurrences of the response parts.

Groove

The strong, clear 3:2 rhythmic motion of the response parts gives the piece its musical identity. The lead luja casts the response theme into an altered perspective through its fast duplet figures and offset position. The rhythmic motion may appear deceptively simple if one focuses on the response parts, but the listener's experience of Damba Sochendi becomes considerably more complex when the lead luja part is factored in.

Answer Luja

Alhaji showed two versions of the answer luja theme, each consisting of three short motives (see Vocations Notation and Drumming Notation). As mentioned above, in both versions the accented stick strokes are in 3:2 ratio with the ternary beats (see Rhythm Notation). In the version that sets the implicit language "Naa wum, Naa wum, Naa wum" (Chief says listen), 3:2 is phrased 1 2 3, 1 2 3, 1 2. Note: the term "phrasing" here means where the rhythm starts and how it moves through its pattern. The other version of the phrase, "Naa wum, to Naa wum, to Naa wum (Chief says listen, yes chief says listen) adds a stroke on the third quarter note count that is silent in version one. If we hear the variation's design according to the meaning of the implicit drum language, the flow of three-in-the-time-of-two becomes 1 2, 3 1 2, 3 1 2--a subtle yet musically significant change in a listener's mental gestalt.

The melodic contour of the answer luja undulates from low pitch, upward to mid pitch, and then back to low. In order to make the drum's sound closely resemble the sound of the implicit drum language, Alhaji bends the pitches in the first and third figures using pressure technique on the luja ropes. The notes in the second figure, however, are allowed to ring without after-stroke modification; this gives them a forceful effect in comparison to the graceful quality of the notes in the first and third figures.

Guŋ-gɔŋ

Alhaji demonstrated two versions of the guŋ-gɔŋ part that align very closely with the two answer luja phrases (see Vocables Notation and Drumming Notation). One version--ka ka, ka ka, ka ka (Naa wum, Naa wum, Naa wum)--accentuates the flow of binary beats in

3:2 ratio with the ternary beats. The second version--ka kaka, ka kaka, ka ka (Naa wum, to Naa wum, to Naa wum)--accentuate the flow of dotted quarter note beats.

The quiet strokes in the chahira zone of the drum head have the potential to shape the metric feeling of the phrase. Although I have notated chahira strokes in "ka ka, ka ka, ka ka" to emphasize the three-feel, a drummer may chose to place a stick stroke directly on the second ternary beat in measures 1-3, thus bringing out the "two-ness" of the rhythm (see Figure 1). The pickup-to-onbeat motion of stick strokes at time points 1.3 and 2.1 in measure four is absolutely typical of chahira play in ternary time and appears in many other pieces in this sort of temporal framework.

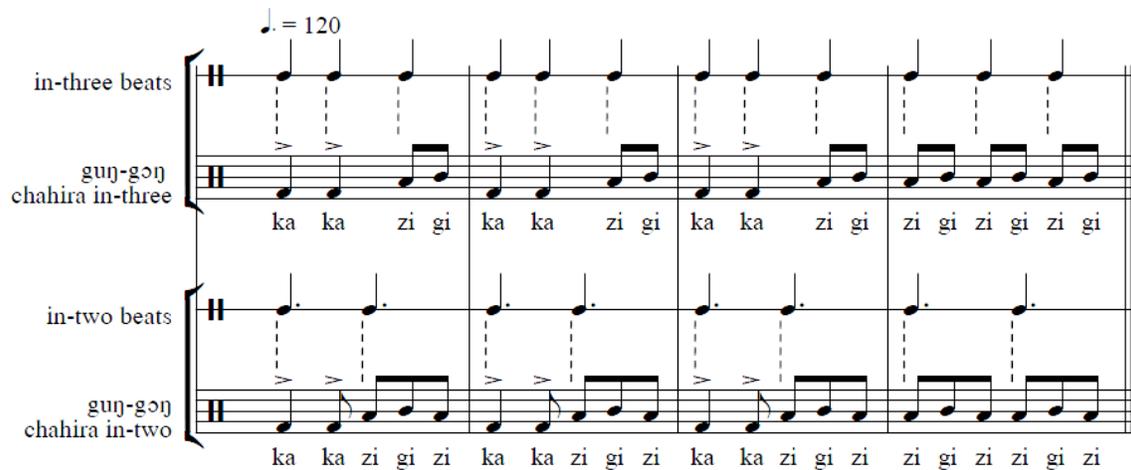


Figure 1 Damba Sochendi, guṅ-gṳṅ theme in-three and in-two

The in-two version of the guṅ-gṳṅ theme shown in Figure 1 enables me to make an important point about the way kinesthetic patterns with the drummer's hands have an impact on musical phrases. From the player's perspective, the other guṅ-gṳṅ variation--ka kaka, ka kaka, ka ka--is made by moving the head of the drum stick down from the chahira zone into the very center spot on the drum head. In other words, the body movements of the player do not change but the musical outcome of the strokes changes significantly because a quiet chahira stroke has been converted into a loud center stroke. This is standard operating procedure on the guṅ-gṳṅ drum.

Lead Luḡa

For this site, Alhaji disciplined himself to present a very minimal amount of musical material. Please see [Drum Damba](#) for a much more extensive collection of lead drum "talks" and an in-depth analytic discussion of the lead drum part.

Opening Call

For this very abbreviated way to begin the piece, Alhaji invokes the power of two deceased Dagomba kings (Yaa Naa) by alluding to their praise names. As is usually the case, he begins with a series of ringing tones in unmetred, unpulsed time that serve to bring the group to attention in readiness to start. Alhaji uses after-stroke pressure technique to prolong the ringing sound of the luḡa.

Drum Talks

Alhaji gave three drum talks for Damba Sochendi. Two of the talks have almost identical stroking rhythms but different melodies (see Figure 2). The design of sound and silence in these themes result in both overlap and call-and-response between the lead and answer luḡa drum parts. Their simultaneous play creates 4:3 rhythmic relationships.

♩. = 108

answer luḡa
Naa wum to Naa wum to Naawum

lead luḡa
"Damba m-bɔŋɔ"
Da-mba mbo-ŋɔ zu - ŋɔ Da-mba mbo-ŋɔ

lead luḡa
"Nyema nyema"
Nye-ma nye-ma nye-ma to nye-ma

Figure 2 Damba Sochendi, rhythmic similarity of two lead luḡa themes

When staff notation shows the pressure technique, the rhythmic essence of these talks likely is less immediately visible (see [Vocables and Drumming Notation](#)). Without those subtle melodic bending effects, however, Alhaji would not be satisfied with the sound of the lead drum part because the drum would not adequately resemble the sound of the Dagbani text.

Alhaji surprised me with the third drum talk that he demonstrated for the site, since it had not been a theme I had previously known. Very much aware that it would be a new theme for me, he was pleased to remind me of the depth of his expertise. The theme, which spans sixteen beats, makes full use of the luḡa's melodic capability and mixes duplet and triplet time values to make a lovely rhythmic line. This theme combines with the response themes in a sophisticated manner over two cycles of the response part (see Figure 3).

The musical score is presented in two systems, each with three staves. The top staff is labeled "guḡ-gḡḡ", the middle "answer luḡa", and the bottom "lead luḡa". The tempo is marked as ♩ = 108. The first system includes the lyrics "Da_ -mba dali mbḡ-ḡḡ Ni-ri ḡu - ni niḡ ti - ma_". The second system includes the lyrics "Ka n- di_ m -bune_ ro Zu-ḡḡ Da-mba ba - la_ Da_". The lead luḡa part features complex rhythmic patterns with duplet and triplet values, indicated by slurs and accents.

Figure 3 Damba Sochendi, lead luḡa theme 3 and response parts

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