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Fondling Breasts and Playing Guitar

Textual and Contextual Expressions of a Sociomusical Conflict in Accra

Tobias Robert Klein

The Ga religious authorities in Accra traditionally impose a ban on drumming and noise-making in advance of the annual Homowo festival. Its violation by charismatic churches sparked off a fierce debate on the freedom of worship, in which traditional religion quarrels with Africanised congregations, for whom electric guitars, dances and tongue-speaking form part and parcel of their services. A satirical La Kpa song translates this tension into a socio-(e)motional system of movement, mimics and gestures. Its association of guitar-plucking with the fondling of female breasts establishes an acerbic acoustical allusion to charismatic worshipping practices. The wider aim of this article is to emphasise the need for a combination of cultural, historical and scientific competences in bridging the gap between a contextually inclined ethnomusicology and text-based music theory. The song's musical and textual variations will thus – with due attention to its dense textual and performative strategies – simultaneously be described as social, cognitive, bodily and structural entities.

Dem jährlichen Homowo-Festival der Ga geht traditionell ein mehrwöchiges Verbot, in Accra zu lärmern und zu trommeln voraus. Die Missachtung dieses Verbots durch christlich-charismatische Gemeinden, die in ihren Gottesdiensten Tänze, Zungensprechen und elektrische Gitarren verwendenden, resultierte in heftigen Auseinandersetzungen zwischen Anhängern der traditionellen Religion und Mitgliedern dieser afrikanisierten Freikirchen. Ein satirischer La Kpa Song übersetzt diese Spannung in eine gestische und mimische Elemente einbeziehende sozio-(e)motionale Performance, deren Assoziation des Gitarrenspiels mit der Berührung weiblicher Brüste zugleich eine spöttische Anspielung auf charismatische Gottesdienstpraktiken etabliert. Ein generelles Anliegen des Artikels besteht darin, die Notwendigkeit der Verbindung kultureller, historischer und (natur)wissenschaftlicher Kompetenzen zur Überwindung einer zwischen kontextorientierter Ethnomusikologie und textbasierter Musiktheorie klaffenden Lücke aufzuzeigen. Die textlichen und musikalischen Variationen des Liedes werden – unter besonderer Beachtung seiner dichten textuellen und performativen Strategien – als soziale, kognitive, körperliche und strukturelle Gebilde beschrieben.

1

The agitated gang that rushed towards the premises of Victory Bible Church in the late morning hours of Sunday, May 9, 1999 definitely meant business. Armed with sticks, stones and broken bottles the mob stormed the church building in Awoshie, a North-Western suburb of Accra, and proceeded to seize loud-speakers and other equipment while engaging worshippers in a fierce exchange of menacing postures and arguments.¹ The background of this and various similar incidents is a ban on drumming and noise-

1 This description is based on the account of Bamfo 1999.

making which the Ga Traditional Council imposes in advance of Homowo, the annual harvest festival, from early May to early June of each year.² It is customarily believed that granting the gods a period of rest and silence will yield an abundance of food in the following harvest season.³ About a decade ago the refusal of various Charismatic churches to comply with the ban sparked off a fierce debate on the freedom of religion in Ghana's Fourth Republic. Obviously, the role of music and sound in such a conflict is not restricted to the excitation of heroic emotions or its well known function as a performative signifier of cultural difference. In an area where the maintenance of power is immediately linked to the temporal control over its soundscape, the churches' copious use of electric guitars, speakers and popular religious songs turned into the central focus of a hotly contested political and cultural controversy.

This article seeks to address this intricate *mélange* of social, legal and religious disputes as part of a multidimensional contemporary music history. Such a holistic perspective requires a linkage of political, cultural and psychological contexts to the analysis of musical structures – with the latter all too often dismissed by many Africanists as an epistemological prerogative of the Western academy. Already J. E. Kwegyir Aggrey, Ghana's great Pan-Africanist insisted against such a self-imposed parochialism that "only the best is good enough for Africa."⁴ And in (t)his vein an analysis of music and dance should neither unduly centre on abstract musical structures or their bio-physical foundations nor wilfully ignore their methodological advances. There has been a longstanding tendency to describe the transcription and structural analysis of African music as a culturally neutral (*etic*) complement to the *emic* study of its cultural content. In the course of this article I will argue, however, that not only the increasingly dynamic and fluid character of the relation between self and other, intra- and extra-cultural knowledge,⁵ but also the emergence (and ubiquitous presence) of a new scholarly discourse such as neuroscience might occasionally prompt us to reconsider the epistemological position of structural observations as a whole. With this methodological premise in place it might then be possible to preserve undeniable merits of the study of music 'as' and 'in' culture,⁶ while at the same time ridding the ethnomusicological discourse of the questionable desire to study African performances under the pretence of exploring differences, rather than recognising similarities.⁷ But there is a lesson to learn from these conceptual ramblings for prospective theorists of African music as well. Already back in 1971 John Blacking argued that "cognitive systems underlying different styles of music will be better under-

2 See the uncompromising announcement of the ban by the acting President of the Ga Traditional Council in the year 2002: "This year's ban on drumming and noisemaking, which precedes the annual Homowo celebrations, of the Ga state, begins May 6. Nii Adote Obuor the acting President of the Ga Traditional Council ... who is also the Sempe Mantse, said any resident who is not ready to comply with the ban should move elsewhere and return after the directive." (Baneseh 2002)

3 Field 1937, 44. Similar restrictions exist in connection with agricultural and non-agricultural rites in other parts of Ghana such as the Kundum-Festival in the Western Region (see Anshah 1999, 27–28) or the seasonal healing rituals in the Volta Region of Ghana (see Avorgbedor 2004).

4 See Sampson 1969, 150.

5 See Agawu 2006.

6 See for instance Gregory 1997.

stood, if music is not detached from its context ... but treated as humanly organized sound whose patterns are related to the social and cognitive processes of a particular society and culture."⁸ A decidedly postcolonial and analytically discerning approach therefore not only demands the consideration of habitually neglected parameters such as gestures, movement or timbre but also needs to relate the study of musical structures to their wider social, performative and political surroundings, which might in many cases even underline their immediate relevance.

2

Considering the multiethnic layout of a densely populated postcolonial city⁹ such as the Ghanaian capital it comes as no surprise that traditionalists are encountering increasing difficulties in their bid to maintain a lingual, political and religious Ga identity. In her magisterial analysis of the multi-layered sociolingual texture of Accra Mary Kropp Dabuku observed that, even though "multilingualism in the Ga-Speaking area is not declining,"

it is generally believed that the Akan language is growing in strength, at the expense of Ga. ... Accra is growing physically and swallowing some of its smaller neighbours. Sandwiched between the wealthy suburbs of Osu and the elite North Labadi residential areas and the Trade Fair site, on land the La state has effectively lost, it is not surprising that the La traditional state feels itself under pressure in danger of marginalization. In such a situation people quite commonly look for a symbol to assert group identity.¹⁰

The "ban on drumming" clashed with modern sensibilities for the first time in the mid 1950's when proprietors of night-clubs and dance-halls complained about its adverse affect on their businesses. As Tawia Adamafio, a Ga himself and information minister in Kwame Nkrumah's post-independence government recalled, "a compromise was found and the traditional authorities agreed that whenever an important state or public function involving drumming was to take place a fee should be paid to propitiate the Ga gods."¹¹ By the 1990's the setting of the conflict however shifted from the entertainment business to the boisterous worshipping practices of mushrooming prophet healing churches.¹² After a violent raid on the premises of Lighthouse International Chapel in 1998,¹³ the debate heated considerably in 1999 when Tawia's son Nii Okaja Adamafio, the then Minister for

7 See Agawu 2003, 104, 171. See on the origins of the (postcolonial) debate over the appropriate analytical representation of African Music: Klein 2007, 227–232.

8 Blacking 1971, 92.

9 See Yeboah 2000, Gugler 1978 and for a more recent overview Freund 2007, 89–91.

10 Dabuku 1997, 11.

11 Adamafio 1962, 26–27. On the simultaneous emergence of the "Ga Shifimo Kpe" association and its clash with Nkrumah's government see Austin 1964, 373–377; Salm 2003.

12 E. Kingsley Larbi who largely avoids the term "charismatic" has rightly called for a differentiation between Aladura style prophet healing churches and the older Pentecostal congregations (Larbi 2001, 68–69). See also Gifford 1998, 33; Atta-Woode 1999.

13 See van Dijk 2001. Parallel to my interest in the musical representation of the controversy the Dutch anthropologist examined the "transnational, transcultural dimension to the use of music in the Pentecostal's politics of time." (32) Van Dijk's mingling of articles published in state-owned papers

Interior Affairs, openly declared his support for the traditionalists' cause.¹⁴ In the course of further attacks on branches of Apostolic Faith Mission, Victory Bible Church, Christ Apostolic Church and the El Shaddai Charismatic Church worshippers were harassed and keyboards, electric guitars and loudspeakers looted by irate intruders. The tense atmosphere of such an encounter is vividly captured in a newspaper report from May 2001:

Militant youth stormed the CAC church building while service was going on and resorted to smashing up the place, destroying glass windows in the just re-habilitated multi million Cedi Osu headquarters branch of the church. ... Dramatically, the assailants met with fierce resistance from church members who refused to lie down and be trampled on. They returned the violent confrontation with equal zeal and a number of people sustained injuries.¹⁵

Not only public institutions such as the Accra Metropolitan Authority and the National Commission on Culture (who endorsed the ban) and the Commission on Human Rights and Justice (who keenly opposed it),¹⁶ but also the press and media houses, internet-users and last but not least phone-in-callers to the programs of private FM-stations¹⁷ contributed to the controversy. During May 1999 the conflict stirred the emotions to such an extent that even the long awaited farewell performance of Osibisa, Ghana's most successful pop group of the 1970's and 80's had to be cancelled in spite of many protests.¹⁸ In the *Ghanaian Chronicle*, one of Ghana's most reputed private newspapers, two columnists expressed entirely different opinions on the issue. K. A. Kwarteng uncompromisingly insisted on the freedom of religion as granted by article 21 of the Ghanaian constitution:

Let nobody mention that the land on which the ban on drumming has been imposed belongs to those traditional worshippers. ... There are certainly some Ga people around who are traditional worshippers. But there are also some Ga people around who are Christians, Buddhists, Muslims etc. ... [Traditionalists] should go and present their case to the National Commission on Culture The commission would help them to bring a legislative instrument before parliament. If parliament sees that there is enough democracy and fairness in their case a statutory ban would be imposed This is not a matter between Christians and traditional worshippers. Not at all. If it were just that, I would not even have been interested in it. It is the freedom of worship granted us in our constitution which is under invasion.¹⁹

and the emerging tabloid press fails however to differentiate between Charismatic and Pentecostal Churches and does not take musical features of 'Gospel Highlife'-music into consideration.

14 Closely related to government backed efforts to preserve 'African traditions' is an article by R. B. W. Hesse (Hesse 1999), that defended the stance of the NDC-administration.

15 "Church returns 'fire' in drums war." (*Ghanaian Chronicle*, May 14, 2001)

16 See Plange 1999a, 1999b.

17 One of these calls stirred unhealthy ethnic sentiments by arguing that other than the Asante after the death of Asantehene Opoku Ware II in Kumasi the Ga Religious authorities had neither the right nor the power to impose such a ban. On the prominence of these calls in the wider context of the privatisation of Ghanaian airwaves see Yankah 2004.

18 See "Osibisa was a victim." (*Free Press*, June 2, 1999)

19 Kwarteng 1999.

Legally informed supporters of the ban however pointed to article 26 of the same constitution, which guarantees all Ghanaians the right to maintain and promote their culture and tradition.²⁰ In this vein I. K. Gyasi was not ready to see a major impact on religious freedom in the temporal suspension of drumming. Rather, he brought the churches to book for their vociferous display of power:

If the Ga Traditional Council had gone further to place a ban on worship by Christian, Muslim and other groups, to stop the reading of the various holy books or had even gone so far as to order the closure of mosques, churches, synagogues and temples and other meeting places of religion, then, to me, this would have been an intolerable infringement on freedom of religion. The ban is on drumming for one month. The Catholics, the Presbyterians, the Methodists and the Anglicans, had for a long time worshipped God without playing any drums The new church groups, generally known as charismatic churches, sprang up. Worship was (and still is) characterised by an ear-splitting frenzy of drumming, guitar-playing, loud singing, 'danceable' music, a babel of forced tongue-speaking, waving of handkerchiefs and endless collections of money.²¹

Beyond its legal dimension the controversy blatantly illustrates the rapidly fading usefulness of labels such as 'tradition' and 'modernity' in Africa, which need to be treated as constantly negotiable and dynamic entities rather than as clearly distinguishable antagonisms.²² 'Traditional' religion is not at odds with hymn-singing in European missionary churches, which for a long time strongly opposed the use of drums in their services, but quarrels with charismatic congregations for whom songs, dances and tongue-speaking constitute part and parcel of their worshipping practices.²³ What we have here then is indeed "an African mode of worship running up against another African custom" and "not quite the clash between 'foreign culture' and 'African tradition' that it appears to be at first blush."²⁴

After a permanent "Conflict Resolution Committee" to mediate between traditionalists and representatives of the churches was installed in 2002, the controversy has of late flared up only occasionally. It needs to be noted however, that the row over the ban on drumming beyond its religious dimension can fairly be regarded to be an overt expression of a latent conflict of interests between the old-established inhabitants of Accra and the increasing number of non-Ga residents. Since the late colonial period²⁵ debates on the distribution of land or the language of instruction in schools became increasingly politicised, and on more than one occasion disgruntled Ga Youth took their protest against a perceived marginalization to the streets of the Ghanaian capital.²⁶

20 On the various legal arguments see also Prempeh 1999.

21 Gyasi 1999.

22 See Gyekye 1997, in particular 270–271; Klein 2007, 208–210.

23 See also Amoah 2004.

24 Prempeh 1999.

25 On the increasing politicalization of the Homowo festival during the colonial era see Parker 2000, 130–132, 216–218.

26 See for instance Hammond 2005. One of the more recent examples is the highly politicised controversy between Ghana's two main political parties on the location of former President John Agyekum Kufour's office in Accra.

3

Part of the Homowo celebration in La, a coastal suburb of Accra, is the performance of Kpa songs, which – similarly to the Kpashimo street processions in the neighbouring town of Teshie²⁷ – fall into two basic categories. The first one can best be described as a proliferation of tales on the settlement of the Ga-people in the Greater Accra Region, whereas the second one (*Kpa-Sokpa*) brings current political and social issues to public attention. Margaret Field already in the 1930's described their performance as a parade of groups "of about ten young men ... stamping and chanting" whose songs are "essentially scurrilous and consist of all the pieces of scandal whispered in the town during the year but not hitherto spoken openly."²⁸ Unpopular politicians, misbehaving members of the community and social miscreants are openly castigated, which in a sort of carnevalistic manner can however only be done during the annual festival:

In dealing with situations of this nature, all niceties are thrown overboard. Some of the things mentioned in the songs are outrageous and worthy of condemnation under any normal circumstances; on this occasion any one who feels like expressing himself and has somebody in mind uses the occasion as a licence. ... A woman who did not go steady with one man had the habit of bedwetting; any man who enjoyed her graces had to experience this disgraceful habit of hers. Some people got to know of it and they felt it was their duty to make the public aware of it.²⁹

Due to an ongoing dispute within the La-community, in the year 2000 no public performance of the already rehearsed songs took place. One of these privately recorded pieces,³⁰ composed and performed by members of the "La Amoaku Mbii," however, translates the tension between Ga traditionalists and charismatic Christians into the mode of music and performance by referring to widespread criticism against the latter's worshipping practices.³¹ In continuing musical and textual variations a pastor is accused of embezzling collection proceeds while simultaneously engaging into sexual intercourse with women attending his "unwanted spiritual church." The song thus denigrates the 'os- ofo' (pastor) as well as the female worshippers – disparagingly referred to as promiscuous old ladies – who are providing the financial means for miracles, prayer sessions and the excessive use of candles and "floda water"³² (holy water):³³

27 The author is currently preparing a separate study on the musical significance of gestures in the performance of Teshie Kpashimo.

28 Field 1937, 48.

29 See Amoah 1979, 101.

30 Performed by members of the "La Amoaku Mbii" during an improptu recording session in La/Accra on September 9th, 2000. The name of the group points to an Akan lineage which in the course of time became integrated into the La society.

31 See Gyasi 1999: "Financial and sexual scandals have hit the orthodox churches. But I believe that this is nothing compared to what happens in these so-called 'Jesus-has-come-into-my-heart' mushroom churches ..., [which are promising] easy procurement of visa, easy smuggling of illegal drugs like cocaine, abroad, easy money and even instant cures."

32 "Florida Water" – a hybrid of perfume and scented water used by local magicians and some shrines. See Dako 2003, 91.

- L: Agoo amɛɛ, nyeboa wo toi lɛɛlɛŋ musua
sane mba La, Okomfo!
- C: Agoo amɛɛ, nyeboa wo toi musua sane
mba La
- L: Oboade!
- C: Agoo amɛɛ, nyeboa wo toi musua sane
mba La
- L: Lɛɛlɛn mumo
- C: Agoo amɛɛ, nyeboa wo toi musua sane
mba La
- L: Lɛɛlɛn mumo sɔmɔ
- C: Ni atse ye La man hee edzwa wɔ man
- L: Mumo sɔmɔ
- C: Ni atse ye La man hee edzwa wɔ man
- L: Lɛɛlɛŋ mumo sɔmɔ
- C: Ni atse ye La man hee edzwa wɔ man
- L: Nakan sɔmɔ!
- C: Ni atse ye La man hee edzwa wɔ man
- L: Klala³⁴ ee oblayei
- C: Kɛ oblayei akɛ amɛ jo bɛɛ amɛ jo
- L: Mumo oblayei
- C: Kɛ klala afi amɛ yitso bɛ amɛ jo
- L: Mumo sɔlɛmɔ oblayei!
- C: Kɛ klala afi amɛ yitso bɛ amɛ jo
- L: Mumo sɔlɛmɔ oblayei!
- C: Kɛ klala afi amɛ yitso bɛ amɛ gba
- L: Lɛɛlɛn amii yaimeji!
- C: Kɛ klala afi amɛ yitso bɛ amɛ jo
- L: Emii yaimeji!
- C: Kɛ klala afi amɛ yitso bɛ amɛ jo
- L: Mumo sɔlɛmɔ yaimeji!
- C: Kɛ klala bɛɛ amɛ jo amɛ jo
- L: Yaimej shika hɛwɔ
- C: Aya fee sɔmɔ hee kɛ tswa, ojo
- L: Attention, truly, there is something abnormal and unacceptable coming to La.
Priest!
- C: Attention, there is something abnormal and unacceptable coming to La
- L: Creator!
- C: Attention ...
- L: Truly, undesirable and unfortunate
- C: Attention ...
- L: Truly, unacceptable, unwanted spiritual church
- C: The church they established in La is dividing the community
- L: Unacceptable, unwanted church
- C: The church ...
- L: Truly, unacceptable and unwanted church
- C: The church ...
- L: That church!
- C: The church ...
- L: White clothed young ladies
- C: The young women have been told to dance every day
- L: Unacceptable young ladies
- C: The white cloth is covering the head while they are coming to dance
- L: Unacceptable church of young ladies
- C: The white cloth ...
- L: Unacceptable church ...
- C: The white cloth is tied around their head, but they are practising prostitution
- L: Truly, old church women
- C: The white cloth ...
- L: The old women within the church
- C: The white cloth ...
- L: Unacceptable church of old women
- C: The white cloth ...
- L: Because of the old-women's money
- C: They established a church to embezzle the collection

33 The transcription and translation has been undertaken with the assistance of Emmanuel Tagoe, Isaac Asiedu-Gyebi and Benjamin Okutu Mensah. In various instances the *Ga-English Dictionary* (Kropp Dabuku [Ed.] 2009) has also been consulted. Both the original text and the translation consist of phrases initiated by the lead-singer (L) and the – occasionally intersecting – responses of the chorus (C). The repetition of text is indicated by a set of three dots.

34 Klala (see *Ga-English Dictionary*, 108), refers to a white piece of linen, that female church-goers are tying around their head.

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| L: Shika hewo | L: Because of money |
| C: Aya fee sɔɔmɔ hee ke tswa, ojo | C: They established ... |
| L: Ame hemona hewo | L: Because of the profit |
| C: Aya fee sɔɔmɔ hee ke tswa, ojo | C: They established ... |
| L: Miidza nyɔɔma hewo | L: Because of the tithe |
| C: Aya fee sɔɔmɔ hee ke tswa, ojo | C: They established ... |
| L: Kofi ne Ama hewo | L: Because of Kofi and Ama ³⁵ |
| C: Aya fee sɔɔmɔ hee ke tswa, ojo | C: They established ... |
| L: Miidza nyɔɔma hewo | L: Because of the tithe |
| C: Aya fee sɔɔmɔ hee ke tswa, ojo | C: They established ... |
| L: Lɛɛɛɛɛ ame sɔɔlemo! | L: Truly, their church! |

After imitating the common practice of ‘spiritual tongue-speaking’ through an glossolalic rendition of so called nonsense-syllables (“alabalaba”) the song puts a dubious prophecy (“a witch in your house, because of her you don’t succeed in life”) into the mouth of the pastor. At this stage a conspicuous shift from Ga to the widely understood Akan language (Twi), whose various dialects are the mother-tongue of some 50% of the Ghanaian population, occurs. Such kind of code-switching – though admittedly widespread in the Ga musical repertoire³⁶ – here however underlines the perception of Charismatic churches as enterprises of intruders, who refuse to assume their traditional role as clients of the old-established inhabitants of Accra.³⁷

- | | |
|--|--|
| C: Alaba laba alaba logologo ³⁸ | C: Alaba laba alaba logologo |
| L: Haoo | L: Haoo |
| C: Alaba laba meni wuemɔ ne? | C: Alaba laba, what kind of language is this? |
| L: Mumo sɔmɔ ke wɔ ake: | L: The unwanted church is saying: |
| C: Alaba laba alaba logologo | C: Alaba laba lolologo |
| L: Haoo | L: Haoo |
| C: Alaba laba meni wiamɔ ke? | C: Alaba laba, what kind of language is this? |
| L: Alaba, ke wɔ ake: | L: The spiritual tongue is saying: |
| C: “Anyie wɔ wɔ fie ɔno na ɔyewo saa na wɔnye adwuma?” | C: “A witch in your house, because of her you don’t succeed” ³⁹ |
| L: Alaba, ke wɔ ake: C: “Anyie ...” | L: Alaba says: C: “A witch ...” |
| L: Mumɔ wuemɔ ke wɔ ake: | L: The unacceptable language is saying: |
| C: “Anyie ...” | C: “A witch ...” |
| L: Osofo meni nke ba? | L: Pastor, what do I bring? |

The final section of the song in which the density of textual references is deliberately reduced in favour of repeated references to female breasts and the corresponding “tso”

- 35 It is a well-known practice in Ghanaian churches to ask for contributions by dividing the congregation into groups according to their day of birth. The names Kofi and Ama here refer to a male Friday-born and a female Saturday-born respectively.
- 36 See Nketia 1958, 27. The funeral music Adowa is – as its name already indicates – almost entirely based on song-texts in Akan language. See Hampton 1978, 1982.
- 37 Kropp Dabuku 1997, 9–10, 166–167.
- 38 Onomatopoeic rendition of tongue-speaking.
- 39 Akan-language.

(literally a stick or small tree, and here the erected male sexual organ) subtly refers us back to the controversy over the ban on drumming and noisemaking. The pastor leads the women to the nearby beach and – in the presence of the arch-angel Gabriel – begins to remove his attire. His fondling of the women’s breasts is mischievously associated with the striking of chords on an electric guitar. Characteristic syllables (“timitirii” etc.) imitate the sound of these instruments which have become an indispensable part of services in Ghanaian prophet healing churches. In this way, the final climax of the piece establishes nothing but an acerbic acoustical metaphor of charismatic worshipping practices:

- | | |
|---|---|
| C: Kε yaa he kanle yeŋ ke floda water fio
ke ooyaa ŋsho naa | C: Go and buy a candle, a small portion of
floda water and take it to the beach. |
| L: meni nke ba? | L: What do I bring? |
| C: Kε yaa he ... | C: Go and buy ... |
| L: Osofo meni nke ba? | L: Pastor, what should I bring? |
| C: Kε yaa he ... | C: Go and buy ... |
| L: Kεke wo ŋsho naa shee pe: | L: Immediately they reach the beach: |
| C: Kε jiemo otaade ni ojia omama, ni ashwe
proto fro Gabriel mba | C: Remove your attire, the ties and leave
your pants only – the angel Gabriel is
coming |
| L: ŋsho naa shee pe: | L: Reaching the beach: |
| C: Kε jiemo otaade ni ojia omama, ni ashwe
proto fro Gabriel mba | C: Remove your attire the ties and leave
your pants only – the angel Gabriel is
coming |
| L: ŋmene atopa bom | L: Today, moving the waist up and down |
| C: Gabriel mba – ekebo baagba sane | C: Arch-angel Gabriel is coming –
to discuss the matter |
| L: Atopa | L: Moving |
| C: Gabriel mba – ekebo baagba sane | C: Arch-angel Gabriel is coming –
to discuss the matter |
| L: ŋmene atopa bom | L: Today, moving the waist up and down |
| C: Gabriel mba – ekebo baagba sane | C: Arch-angel Gabriel is coming –
to discuss the matter |
| L: ŋmene atadee dziemo! | L: Today, removal of dress! |
| C: Ni εbamo efufo ni eke fee guitar – be
etswa | C: The pastor begins to holds the breast,
playing on it like on a guitar |
| L: ŋmene atadee dziemo | L: Today, removal of dress |
| C: Ni abamo efufo ni eke fee guitar – be
etswa | C: The pastor begins to holds the breast,
playing on it like on a guitar |
| L: Timitirii ⁴⁰ | L: Timitirii |
| C: Be etswa | C: Playing on it |
| L: Timitirii | L: Timitirii |
| C: Be etswa | C: Playing on it |
| L: Dinidin | L: Dinidin |
| C: Be etswa | C: Playing on it |
| L: Osofo mini sane? | L: Pastor, what is the matter? |

40 Onomatopoeic rendition of guitar sound.

C: Kε oshinao yε fεo ni odukui he tse tso gbemi	C: The women's beads are beautiful and the hips are very neat ⁴¹
L: Mini sane?	L: What is the matter?
C: Kε oshinao ...	C: The women's beads ...
L: Ameley fufɔ	L: Ameley breast
C: Tso gbemi	C: The stick is killing me
L: Emɔ fufɔ	L: The breasts, the breasts
C: Tso gbemi	C: The stick is killing me
L: Emɔ fufɔ	L: The breasts, the breasts
C: Tso gbemi	C: The stick is killing me
L: Fufɔ fufɔ	L: The breasts, the breasts
C: Tso gbemi	C: The stick is killing me
L: Emɔ fufɔ	L: The breasts, the breasts
C: Tso gbemi	C: The stick is killing me
L: Emɔ fufɔ	L: The breasts, the breasts
C: Tso gbemi	C: The stick is killing me
L: Fufɔ fufɔ	L: The breasts, the breasts
C: Tso gbemi	C: The stick is killing me
L: n̄mɛnɛ tso gbemi	L: Today, the stick is killing me
Agoro ε beyeyie afri anopa tutu	For the performance to be successful, it must start from the beginning (early morning)
Tswa omanya aba ⁴²	You are welcome

4

Like many other African performances the musical structure of this satirical song is closely interrelated with aspects of bodily motion, a socio-(e)motional system of distancing and approaching spectators,⁴³ gestures, mimics, stomping and feet-tapping.⁴⁴ In order to arrive at the initially advocated holistic perspective some remarks on the current scientific assessment of the temporal and spatial coordination of movement⁴⁵ and the interaction between lead-singer and chorus thus appears to be appropriate here. Neuroscientists have for some time now studied a sensorimotor loop, which includes the posterior parietal lobe, premotor cortex, cerebrocerebellum, basal ganglia and transforms sensory

41 I am indebted to Daniel K. Avorgbedor for referring me to the practice of older women to wear strings of beads around their waist together with red-cloth underwear or padding on occasions that combine a comedic and concert-party-like playfulness with ritualistic traditions. When worn by young females, male suitors may rub their hands on the beads, both as foreplay and in appreciation of the woman's beauty.

42 The last lines of the song gradually switch from sung to spoken language. A comment on the success of the performance, followed by the exchange of the greeting formula "Tswa omanya aba" signals the imminent close of the musical event.

43 See Avorgbedor 1990.

44 No drum or any other musical instruments apart from the human body is used in the performance of Kpa-songs.

45 See Bispham 2006. For an overview on the relation of motion and (European) music see Clarke 2001 and for mathematical modelizations of musical motion and expression Friberg/Sundberg 1999.



Figure 1. Members of the La Amoaku Mbii-group during a recording session in September 2000

information into motor output.⁴⁶ Of late particular attention has been paid to the function of the ventral premotor cortex, a section of the frontal brain lobe which in humans largely overlaps with Broca's language processing area, that controls our oro-laryngeal, oro-facial and brachio-manual actions (the movements of mouth, face and hands) and thus appears to be simultaneously involved in the processing of gestures, language and music.⁴⁷ Musical sound as a result of neuronal processes might then – as Overy and Molnar-Szakacs propose – be “perceived not only in terms of the auditory signal, but also in terms of the intentional, hierarchically organized sequences of expressive motor acts behind the signal.”⁴⁸ (It is perhaps worth mentioning here that already the musicians of ancient Egypt, Africa's first civilization, referred to the act of singing in the context of a chironomic system of signifying musical gestures quite literally as “making music with the hands”⁴⁹).

Motor action however results in distinctive, interpretable gestures only within a culturally and socially determined context. Proponents of a more or less unmediated transfer of evolutionary theory to the realm of aesthetic and cultural expression dwell exten-

46 See Neuweiler/Ligeti 2007, 32–35; Iyer, 392. The role of the cerebellum and the basal ganglia is discussed in Penhune/Zatorre/Evans 1998.

47 See Rizzolatti/Arbib 1998, Nishitani/Schürmann/Amunts/Hari 2005, Koelsch 2006.

48 Overy/Molnar-Szakacs 2009, 492.

49 See for instance Sachs 1924, 8–9; Hickmann 1958; Manniche 1991, 30.

sively on hard wired evolutionary traits of the human body,⁵⁰ but tend to underrate the highly flexible and environmentally adaptive nature of our cognitive capacities, which “are tempered by the cultural specificity that constructs the role of the body in musical performance.”⁵¹ It might in this vein also be useful to reconsider Todd’s differentiation between a primarily gestural and a tempo-associated locomotive musical motion, which in analogy to the motor theory of speech presumes a virtual image or representation of motion.⁵² In order to acquire a distinctive cultural meaning, a signifying gesture (such as a finger pointing or the waving of a handkerchief, a common practice also in Ghanaian churches) needs to be distinguishable from a continuum of instrumental or rhythmically supportive movements. The ostentatious imitation of breast fondling and guitar plucking for instance is linked with the musical time flow mainly through the vocal imitation of the instrumental sound. The most obviously musically determined movements on the other hand are carried out with the least expressive parts of the body: Feet-tapping and stamping occurs in repetitive sections and at (cross-rhythmic) points of interchange between the lead singer and chorus within the individual melodic phrases, each of which contains 32, 48 or 64 basic pulses (smallest rhythmic units).⁵³ The function of tapping-movements (including its variability, perturbation and models of error correction with respect to phase and period) may thus be described as a sensorimotor synchronization of perception and action, and neural representation through the basal ganglia, cerebellum, and a cerebellar-cortical loop.⁵⁴

C	x	x	x	x	x							x	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	x	x									
L																																
F			x			x											x										x					
						12												12														

Figure 2. Rhythmic interchange between Chorus (C) and Lead-Singer (L) in a melodic phrase, which contains 48 basic pulses (smallest rhythmic units) and is supported by regular (and partly cross-rhythmic) feet taps (F)

5

The performance of Kpa songs as part of a crowded and tumultuous street procession naturally requires a close coordination between the motor actions of individual participants. The continuous physical movement of the performers thus coincides with the perceptual and apparent one of the sonic structure.⁵⁵ Exactly this important conceptual analogy however makes a strong case for the claim that African songs deserve a

50 See Tolbert 2001, Bispham 2006a.

51 See Iyer 2002, 387, 392.

52 McAngus Todd 1995, 1999. See also Brown/Martinez/Parsons 2006.

53 See for the concept of “fastest pulse“ Kaufman 1980, Kubik 1988, 71–87.

54 Repp 2005.

55 Gjerdingen 1999; Clarke 2001, 218, 221–223; Eitan/Granot 2006.

micro-analytical approach and should not merely be regarded as specimens of socially defined genres such as cradle, work or protest songs.⁵⁶ Just like the song-text ridicules a couple of unnamed characters in an entelechic tale of religious fraud and sexual harassment, its sonic realisation establishes a structured network of temporarily altered, reshaped and finally abandoned patterns and melodic formulas, which become implicitly loaded with dramatic meaning: Part of this sonic narrative are the slight intonation and timbre differences⁵⁷ of the alternating lead singers as well as the diastematic relation between the phrase that defames worshippers as prostitutes and the melodic formulas since the crucial entry of the earlier mentioned witchcraft-prophecy. It would thus be worthwhile to extend the aesthetics of embellishment and playful variation which Kofi Agawu employs to confront a generic and rotational reading of Ghanaian time-line patterns with an African mode of discourse into the realm of verbal creativity and melodic development:⁵⁸ Each of the following variations fills the tonal space between E-Flat and B-Flat at the outset of the phrases in a slightly different manner and thus acts – similar to Baudrillard’s quite differently contextualized description of simulacra as continuous production of copies without an original – as a diastematic derivation of a virtual model, which is realised in numerous peculiar occurrences, but never appears as such⁵⁹ (see musical examples below). It is thus perfectly possible to describe this musical feature as a sort of “interversion,” a term that according to Rudolph Réti signifies the “interchanging [of] the notes of a thematic shape in order to produce a new one.”⁶⁰ Even though a staunch postcolonialist might dismiss this conceptual analogy as a feeble eurocentric misrepresentation of African performances, it could equally be perceived as an overdue shoulder-rubbing with an established discourse, that exactly through its intercultural extension ceases to be the sole intellectual property of ‘Western’ theorists. Be that as it may, one can nevertheless fairly regard this tonal variability as a direct aural equivalent of the verbal creativity which the text displays in the continuously refined innuendos of the lead singer:

56 Agawu 1995, 83–84. See also Kidula 2006, 101–102.

57 Since timbre depends upon different factors such as the temporal characteristics and frequency location of a spectrum, as well as the stimulus, waveform, attack time and sound pressure, it can hardly be pinned down in the same way that pitch and loudness can (see also Krumhansl 1989). A computer based Fast Fourier Transformation however easily confirms the audible difference between the two alternating song leaders. See for some recent observations on the importance of varying timbre in West-African performance Stone 2005, 47–63.

58 See Agawu 2006. Agawu argues that structural observations need not necessarily be confined to intra-cultural conceptualisations, but in order to be heuristically useful their cultural compatibility has to be taken into critical consideration. “The realm of culture can and does incorporate structure, while structure itself inevitably has a cultural history.” (7) Even though several generations of scholars (see Baily 1985, 238–242 and for a partly dissenting view Agawu 2003, 105–106) duly stressed the importance of non-audible elements in African performance, this observation does not relieve musicologists of their fundamental duty to consider the audible results of these movement patterns.

59 In order to issue an almost ritually expected caveat here it need to be noted, that the (European) notation system can only serve as a (pragmatically albeit useful) approximation to the musical structures and actual pitches employed and should not be understood as a fully adequate representation of the timbral and temporal qualities of African music.

60 Réti 1961, 72.

Mumo sɔmɔ → Mumo oblayei → Mumo sɔmɔ oblayei → Mumo sɔlemɔ yaimeji or Shika hɛwɔ → Ame hemona hɛwɔ → Miidza nyonma hɛwɔ → Kofi ne Ama hɛwɔ.

An - yie wo wo fie o - no na o - ye wo saa na won - ye a - dwu - ma

Ke yaa he kan - le yen ke flo - da wa - ter fio ke oo - yaa nsho naa

Ke jie - mo o - taa - de ni O - jia o - ma - ma ni as - hwe pro - to fro Ga - briel m ba

Ni e - ba - me e fu - fo Ni e - ke fee gui - tar be e - tswa

Figure 3. Four variations of the same (virtual) melodic model in four different sections of the song⁶¹

In stark contrast to such micro-motivic developments the song closes off with the climactic repetition of the profane and ambiguous expressions “be etswa” and “tso gbemi.” Detached from a purely textual and verbal function these final motivic split-offs thus acquire – similar to the imitation of guitar sound and other innuendos of the alternating lead singers (their rhythmic shape nevertheless betraying their former role as a bridge between two text phrases) – an almost gestural character themselves. Such structural consideration may admittedly lie beyond the reach and disciplinary interest of both neuroscientists and social anthropologists convinced that with either an appraisal of coordinated movements or its social function music’s essential *raison d’être* has already been aptly understood.⁶² In the light of current trends in music research, exactly the critically bemoaned investigation of abstract tonal structure can however assume the important role of a mediating link between an inner bodily neuroscientific perspective and the (event-centered) performative perception and organisation of music and sound in society.

In addition to its discussion of the performative transition of a conflict over the proliferation of music and sound into the realm of song and performance, another aim of this article has thus been to question the epistemological barrier which separates the discourse of “ethnomusicology” from ‘Western’ musicological and music-theoretical

61 A full transcription of the entire song had to be omitted for the sake of legibility and comprehension and must therefore be left to a further study of La Kpa and Teshie Kpashimo performances.

62 See Moisola 1995. For some earlier remarks on the strain between sound-based and context-oriented approaches see already Nketia 1962.

knowledge production.⁶³ Both the (to a large extent universal) neurobiological premises of bodily motion and the examination of the inherent structure of its sonic representation situate the socio-cultural contexts of African performances within an intellectual framework that moves beyond its (pejorative or idealised) perception as a complementary 'other' to the music of the 'West.' The emerging cracks in this crumbling disciplinary wall may in addition to that however task a more malleable, interdisciplinary and culturally open-minded theory of music to bridge the widening gap between the study of cultural content and the plain bio-musical foundations of music making. In order to attain a truly comprehensive and impartial picture of African Music, then, its 21st-century analysis needs to combine cultural, scientific and historical competences with the necessary attention to the dense textual strategies of performative action, a vast and enduring challenge which makes an emphatically holistic musicology not only one of the most exciting, but also intellectually most challenging fields among the humanistic disciplines.

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63 For a recent attempt to address these persistent (sub)disciplinary barriers see also the contributions of Phillip Bohlman, John Baily, Jim Samson, Nicholas Cook, Martin Clayton, Martin Stokes und Jonathan Stock in Stobbert 2008.

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