

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Performance Roles in *AGBLEHA* Dance – Drumming among the Northern Ewe of Ghana

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Abstract:

The success, appreciation and enjoyment of indigenous music performance in many African societies largely depend on certain factors, among which are versatility, sound knowledge, efficient performance skills and roles assigned each member or some members of the performing group. In northern Ewe societies, an occupational music genre that employs specific performance roles to depict dramatic work scenes both at the farm and at home during recreational, festival and funeral celebrations of subsistence farmers is agblehawo. This paper therefore identifies these performance roles and describes how they are co-ordinated by the practitioners to make this genre of folk performance, a complete and successful one.

Keywords: *Differential roles, indigenous music, agblehawo, social activities.*

1. Introduction

Amenumey (1997; 1986) refers to northern Ewes as majority of the people generally called *Udometwo* or *Ewemeawo* and who speak Ewe as a mother tongue, have a common migration and settlement history and are located in the Ho, Hohoe, Anfoega, Kpando, Kpeve and Jasikan districts of the Volta Region.

The second category of Northern Ewes speaks a variety of Guan, Buem and Akan dialects in addition to Ewe as a second language. Examples of the Guan-ethnic groups include the people of Akpafu, Avatime, Krachie, Logba, Nkonya and Nyagbo. While Buem-speaking areas include Jasikan and its adjoining settlements like Bodada, Baglo, Okadjakrom and Teteman, the Akan-speaking areas include towns like Ahamansu, Dodi-Papase and Kadjebi.

2. Definition of *agblehawo*

The term, *agblehawo* (singular-*agbleha*) which is a short form of *agbledehawo*, literally means ‘farming songs’, and it is derived from two Ewe words, *agbledede* (farming) and *hawo* (songs). By definition, *agblehawo* are a type of work songs sung by farmers as accompaniment to their farming activities to motivate and ensure their welfare and survival; when performed at home, they serve other specific purposes.

3. *Agbleha* Performance at Home

Besides the performance of this folk genre at the farm, it is performed at home for sheer entertainment and also upon invitations from individuals and government dignitaries to perform during national farmers’ day celebrations at the district and regional levels. The music also constitutes an integral part of ritual performances in festival and funeral celebrations of the people. For these reasons, *agbleha* performance is never deemed complete and successful without proper execution of individual or group roles assigned to members of the group.

4. Performance Roles

A performance role can be explained as specific responsibility that is assigned and carried out by individuals or groups that differ from those of others. According to my informants, a successful *agbleha* performance that satisfies the needs and purposes of the people at home, be it recreational or ceremonial, depends on differential roles played by four categories of *agbleha* performers: *vufolawo* (instrumentalists), *henɔ*(soloist), *haxelawo* (chorus singers) and *Yequlawo* (dancers).

4.1. *Henɔ/hesinɔ*(wo)

Two important personalities that *dɔwɔlawo*(workers) deem very vital to the group are the male and female *henɔ/hesinɔwo* (cantors/soloists). They are generally excused from work and, with assistance from the elderly heads of families (who lack working energy due to old age), they devote their energies to singing and playing light instrumental accompaniment usually on their work tools, empty bottles, and water containers to sustain the working spirit of the workers.

Contrary to Nketia's view about good tonal quality of a soloist, Cong-Huyen, in his collection of Vietnamese occupational folk songs, comments that "a good song leader is not known for the possession of lovely voice tones, but rather, by his ability to be heard over the noise of the work going on and by the gift of singing improvised verses of songs" (1979:142). Cong-Huyen's description of voice tones of cantors of Vietnamese work songs equally suits some of the characteristics of some song leaders I listened to in the rendition of *agblehawo*.

Among his/her roles at the farm or home, the *henɔ*, during intermissions during performance, draws the attention of workers/performers to a pending job activity by warming them up with short and repetitive vocal pieces in free recitative style.

4.2. *Haxelawo*

During musical sessions at home, the bulk of the members of an *agbleha* performing group are men and women who constitute the chorus section that responds to the call of a cantor/soloist during performances on entertainment, festival and funeral grounds. The (A) section, sung by a cantor/soloist, is always incomplete; it is complemented by the (B) section or the Chorus singers who constitute the *haxelawo*

4.3. *Ufolawo*

Drumming among northern Ewes plays a dominant role in their socio-musical life; it plays a dual role of music making and communication. Unlike the singers, the instrumentalists, who are fewer in number, are endowed with some degree of specialized knowledge of drumming skills. They include the *azagunɔ* (master drummer) and the *azagunɔkpewo* (supporting drummers). The master drummer controls the performance and monitors the *azagunɔkpewo* by assisting those who miss their points of entry with cues by tapping or drumming their basic rhythms for them to pick up. He is also noted for his skills of improvisation on the drum.

Where dance patterns have to change, he plays the necessary rhythmic motifs which enable the *azagunɔkpewo* to play their supporting drums by filling in the music with persistent contrasting rhythms. By tradition, the *azagunɔ* marshals a controlled freedom of improvisation in terms of varying his tonal and rhythmic patterns, and the *azagunɔkpewo* often look up to him for cues. During performance, priority of serving the *ufolawo* with drinks is paramount in order to maintain their high spirit of drumming throughout the entire performance.

4.4. *Ƴequlawo*

The *Ƴequlawo* include both dancers and singers. The dancers articulate different drum rhythmic patterns through their dance steps. To them, *agblehawo* provide an element of passion that correlates drum and dance patterns. However, *agbleha* performance at the farm is not as elaborate as what takes place at home where varieties of dance styles are engendered by the rhythmic patterns of the percussive instruments and drums that constitute this music ensemble.

Guided by the rhythmic patterns, the *Ƴequlawo* articulate the different rhythmic structures in body movements as well as symbolic gestures. They consider the dance as a thread that links them to their ancestors and spirits of the gods of the land. In other words, northern Ewes regard *Ƴequdu* (dancing) as an expression of deep seated spiritual connection that draws them closer, holds and binds them together with their ancestral spirits. The figure below is a diagram of an *agbleha* dance arena showing the positions of the categories of performers.

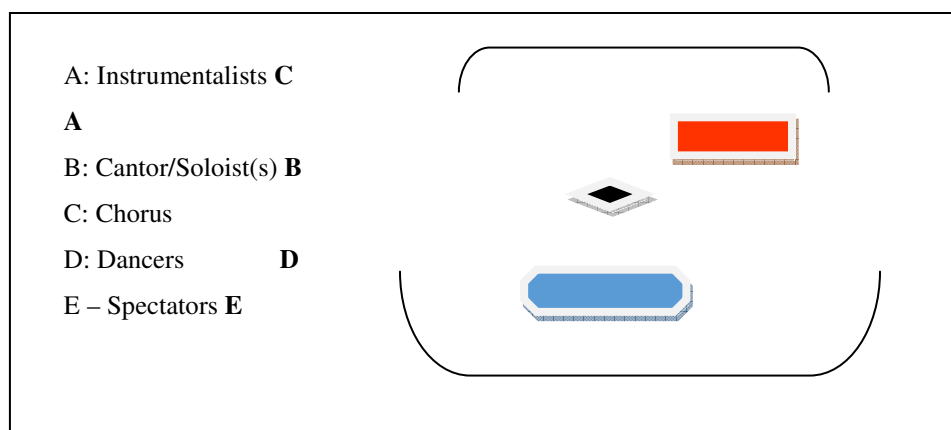


Figure 1: *Anagbleha* dance arena.

5. *Agbleha* Instrumental Ensemble

A complete and satisfactory *agbleha* performance is attributed to good instrumental accompaniment exhibited through the virtuosity and co-ordinated efforts of the instrumentalists. There are two classes of instruments that constitute an *agbleha* ensemble: idiophones and membranophones. The idiophones include *gakogui* (double bell), *fritsiwɛ* (castanet) and *atukpa* (bottle). The membranophones are two *vuwo* (drums): the *asivui* (supporting drum) and *asivuga* (master drum)

5.1. Gakogui

The *gakogui* is an instrument produced by blacksmiths who strike pieces heated metal; shaped into a pair of bells of different heights and sizes. A smaller bell is superimposed on a bigger one and welded at the handle. The low-pitched bell, often called the parent bell, and the high-pitched bell which is known as the child bell, is said to rest on the bosom of the large bell as its protective parent.

The *gakogui* serves as a time line instrument by providing rhythmic patterns which serve as the frame of reference to other performers. The *gakogui* (bell player) is someone who does not have 'sweet ears'. That is, the group sees him during music performance, as one who is not easily distracted to stray from the rhythmic pattern assigned him; he plays his patterns steadily throughout the entire performance. The basic rhythmic pattern of the *gakogui* is illustrated as follows:

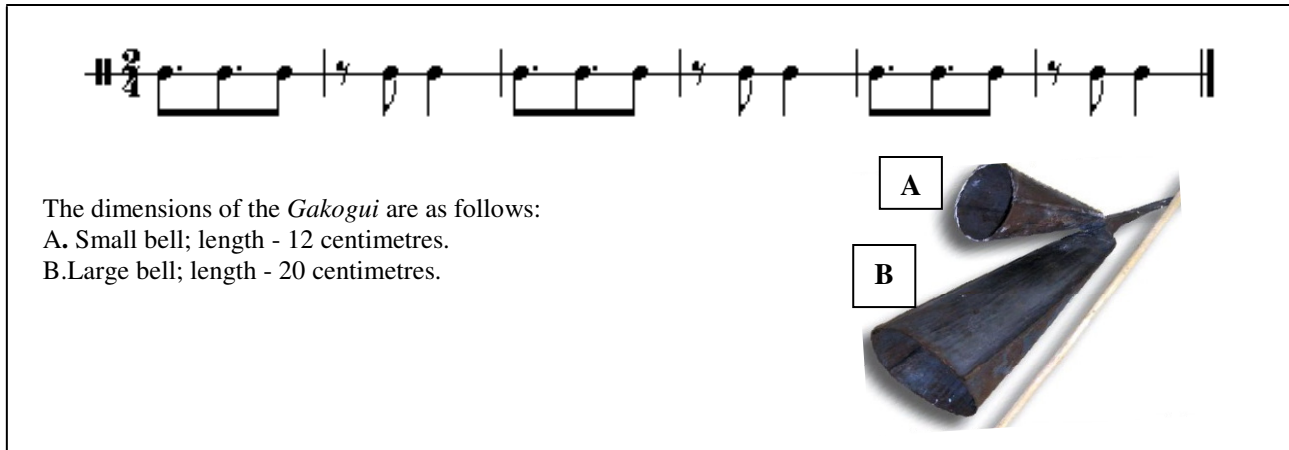


Figure 2: A picture and of *gakogui*.

5.2. Fritsiwæ

The *fritsiwæ* consists of two forged-iron bell instruments. One is shaped like a ring and worn on the thumb; the other, which is fashioned like the guava, (about 10cm in height) with a hole created in it, is played by holding it with the middle finger and striking it against the ring on the thumb. The *fritsiwæ* provides a supporting rhythm which occasionally serves as a time line instrument that reinforces the rhythmic foundation of the performance.

This pair of instruments comes in various sizes. The name is a corrupted form of the Akan idiophone, *frikyewa* which through Akan-Ewe interaction through trade, was adopted by the *Ewemeawo*. Illustrated below is the basic rhythmic pattern of the *fritsiwæ*.



Figure 3: A picture of *fritsiwæ*.

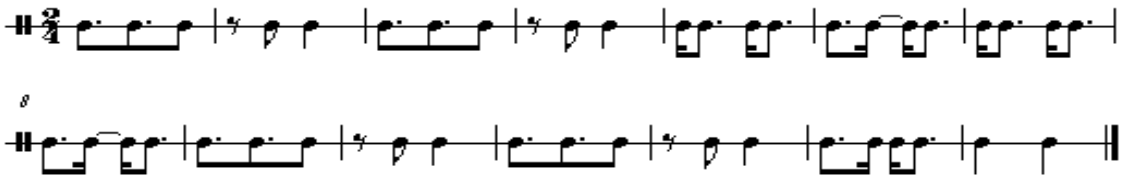
5.3. Atukpa

The use of bottle as musical instrument is characteristic of *agbleha* performances. An empty beer bottle or any other is used as a supporting instrument to accompany singing and dancing. The *atukpa* is made of glass, and it is struck gently with a coin, a stone or some light metal to generate sound. In the absence of a bottle, old farm tools like a hoe blade, cutlass, pick axe, or mattock may be used as substitutes.

5.4. Drums

Drums that are used in this folk music performance at home include the *asivui* and *asivuga*. The *asivui* is a small single-headed open drum played with two straight sticks. This membranophone is next to the *asivuga*, the master drum, and to which it plays a supporting role. At the beginning of performances, the *asivui* starts with a steady rhythmic pattern with the bell but introduces slight variations as performance gets animated. It is also responsible for providing persistent contrasting rhythmic patterns signaled from the *asivuga*. The

asivui always looks up to the master drummer for rhythmic motifs to colour the overall instrumental performance. Some varied rhythmic patterns played by the *asivui* are shown below:



The dimensions of the *asivui* are indicated below:

i. Height of drum	-50cm
ii. Circumference of drum head	- 62cm
iii. Diametre of drum head	- 19.7cm
iv. Circumference of the drum shell	- 80cm
v. Circumference of the base	-46cm
vi. Diametre of base	-14.6cm




Figure 4: A picture and measurements of *asivui*

5.4.1. *Asivuga*

The *asivuga* is a little bigger in size than the *asivui*. Also referred to as the *vuga*, it is the biggest instrument as well as the master drum that controls the entire *agbleha* ensemble. Changes in the rhythmic patterns of the *asivuga* precipitate changes in the movements of dancers. The *asivuga* plays in both speech and dance modes. In this direction, Euba (1972:76) opines: “in a drum ensemble, the potential musicality of tone language and the ease with which it can be realised on pitched musical instruments is a central factor of melodic style in African music, since tonal lines of songs and musical patterns of talking instruments usually follow the speech tones of the texts used”.

During dance performances, the *asivuga* and the *asivui* play together with the *gakogui*, *atukpa* and *fritsiwɔɛ* which are the idiophones of the ensemble. Lots of improvisations are done on the *asivuga* by the master drummer; and at the climax of performance sessions, he introduces *vugbewo* (rhythmic and drum languages) to embellish the tone colour so as to enrich the entire rhythmic colour of the supporting instruments.

Oppong, in her study of drums as speech instruments in Africa, notes that among the Dagbon society of Northern Ghana, drumming is used as a speech surrogate, that is, the tones and rhythms of speech are replicated through the tones and rhythms of different drums. Therefore, their two drums, *lunga*, a tension drum and *gunjon*, a double-headed cylindrical drum, are both used as “talking drums” (1973:54).

During dance performances, the *azagunɔ* plays lots of rhythmic improvisations on the *asivuga* in concert with the supporting instruments. He calls various *vugbewo* (rhythmic patterns) associated with different stages of activities on the farm or at home. Most of the drum patterns consist of burden texts, nonsense syllables, vocables or mnemonics. The roles of these two drums augment the complexity of the rhythmic foundation of the ensemble during performance. Indicated below, is the basic rhythm of the *asivuga*.



- | | | |
|------|----------------------------------|--------|
| i. | Circumference of drum head | 70cm |
| ii. | Diametre of drum head | 22.3cm |
| iii. | Circumference of the mid section | 82cm |
| iv. | Circumference of the base | 56cm |
| v. | Diametre of the base | 17.8cm |



Figure 5: A picture and measurements of asivuga.

6. Materials of Construction of the *vuwo*

Procedures used in carving the *asivui* and the *asivuga* are the same but fall into two phases; *vukpakpa* (drum carving) and *vusisi* (covering the drum head). The drum shells are carved from local trees called *Nyamedua* (*Alstsonia Boonei*) and *Atidze/Ɖɔkɔ* (*Berchimia Zeyheri*) because of the quality and durability of the woods of these trees. Besides, these species of wood are not prone to destruction by white ants, borer beetles or other insects. *Ɖɔkɔ*, a species of the West African cedar, is regarded as strong and powerful. Others refer to this tree as *adzoblɛ* or *konobua*; the adulterated form of the Akan name, *Twenebua*.

6.1. *Uukpakpa* and *Uusisi* (Drum construction/fixing of parchment heads)

According to a respondent, Mr. Kofi Amemakuse, a singer and master drummer of an agbleha performing group, tradition requires that before a tree is felled for carving drums, prayer must be said and libation poured to appease the spirits that occupy the tree. Drinks offered for the libation include foreign drinks like schnapps, gin, local *akpeteshie* or *deha* (palm wine). Like their Akan counterparts, the people believe that trees used in carving drums are the habitats of spirits. Ritual performances are meant to appease the spirits for being forced out of their abodes in as a way of ensuring the safety of the drum carvers.

In a similar context, Sowande (1972:65) examines the construction of traditional instruments among the Yoruba of southern Nigeria and comments that the customs and traditions associated with musical instruments extend to the materials, methods of construction and thus reflecting not only their use and function but also the worldview of their makers. Nketia stresses that Akan (a Ghanaian indigenous dialect), speaking societies attach religious importance to their traditional instruments. Like a feature quite characteristic of many societies in Africa, Nketia throws light on rituals associated with the construction of the Akan *atumpan* drums:

“The customs and traditions associated with musical instruments in Africa extend to the materials and processes of construction and may reflect not only their use and function but also the world view of their makers. Accordingly, before a tree is felled in the Akan society, libation is poured on it as the carver prays for success and protection from harm. Before the drum is played, libation is poured by the drummer to the spirit of the *atumpan*, an Akan talking drum” (1959:190).

In providing parchment heads for the *asivui* and *asivuga*, the skin of a goat, deer or antelope is soaked in water until it is very pliable. After that the wet skin is put on the head of the drum and stretched over circular hoops made of cane or wood and left to dry for some time. The skin is later fixed to the hoops and sewn with a thick twine, metal string or nylon rope. The metal string or nylon rope which fixes and tightens the animal skin onto the drum heads are tied into a series of double loops hanging all around the drum shells. Through these loops, pegs with notches near the heads are fixed into holes bored round the heads of the drum shells to keep the drum head in place.

6.2. Tuning of *asivui* and *asivuga*

The African traditional instrument carver has in him, some degree of sense of pitch which he applies to assess and adjust the sound of the instruments that he constructs to be high, low, nasal or harsh. This sense of pitch on the whole, guides the drum carver, performers

of the *agbleha* dance as well as the audience to appreciate and also identify the sound of *agbleha* dance music anytime it is heard from afar.

Two methods of tuning are used for the *asivui* and the *asivuga*. These are; wetting and hitting the rim of the drum head. In the wetting process, the drums are turned upside down, and some amount of water is poured into them and left for few minutes to soak the parchment heads to make them stretchable.

The second method of tuning the *asivui* and the *asivuga* is by using a stick or a stone to hit the rims of the drum heads. To get a desired tuning, the tuner applies equal force every time he keeps on hitting the drum head. This is followed by striking the top of the pegs (that hold and fasten the parchments heads) one after the other. The tip of the palm is used in hitting the drum heads until the tuner ensures that the exact sound or pitch level of the instrument is obtained. However, in tuning the drums, care is taken to avoid damaging the membranes. The aesthetic value of the drums is largely determined by their perceived attributes of the *gbediqiwo* (sounds) that come from the inside of the drum or produced on the outside (shells) of the drums.

Contrast in tones of the supporting and the master drums also has local descriptive terms as *nytsu* (male) and *nyonu* (female) tones to denote low and high pitches of the *asivuga* and the *asivui* respectively. The *asivui* and the *asivuga* are held in similar positions. The players sit on low stools and take full grip of the drums in between their thighs and legs. While the *asivuga* employs the hand technique of muting and releasing the palm as a way of producing a bi-tonal pattern (high and low), the *asivui* produces sound when it is struck alternately with two sticks.

7. *Agbleha* Dance Performance

Dancing is incorporated into *agbleha* performance at home during entertainment, national celebrations, yam festival and funeral celebrations of deceased farmers. In the African context, dance is readily seen as a running commentary on the social life of Africans. Radcliffe Brown (1948:251) describes dance as the state of elation in which the feeling of increased self importance in the dancer engenders in him a feeling of geniality and goodwill towards his companions.

Dance in *agbleha* performance serves a complex diversity of social purposes. It provides emotional satisfaction which impacts deeply on the people and enhances two vital and natural aspects of life; speaking and body movements. In an answer to a question about why elaborate dance is not performed at the farm, Madam Philomena Adenku, a female soloist and a member of the *agbleha* performing group and a respondent, explains that elaborate dance performance on the farm will seriously obstruct their plan of work, targeted for the day. However, intermittent body movements to the rhythms of songs that accompany work sessions at the farm are at times unavoidable.

Yedudu as a dramatic aspect of the people's farming experiences is never considered as mere movement at random or as an emotional response to the rhythm of the musical instruments. The dance forms may be linear, circular, serpentine, or columns of two or more rows. The style of the dance movements involves the use of the hips in addition to intricate and gliding foot works that move and alternate from side to side with the arms swinging in the direction of the alternating footsteps.

Besides, the basic movements of the dance may be simple, emphasizing the upper body, hips, or feet; or they may be complex, involving coordination of different body parts and intricate actions such as fast rotation, ripples of the body, contraction and release, as well as variations in dynamics levels and use of space. Three types of dance forms executed are solo dance in which an individual executes basic styles of the dance alone and the form in which two, three or four individuals take turns in the dancing ring. There is also communal dance which takes place during festival and funeral celebrations where both farmers and non-farmers exhibit their skills in non-rehearsed or organised form.

Agbleha performance takes place at home during farmers' leisure periods, national celebrations, festival and funeral celebrations or on special invitations received from prominent members of the society to perform. These occasions are opportune times for farmers to express joy, sorrow and anger as a way of making known to the public, their positive and negative experiences faced during farming seasons.



Figure 6: Members of an *agbleha* performing group in a dance performance.

Since the performance of *agblehawo* is open to all, the elderly always check the dancing behaviour of adolescent boys and girls who take part in the performance. Decent songs and dance patterns are encouraged while vulgar dancing is condemned.

The dynamism of the dance styles is often influenced by the geographical terrain in which the practitioners are located. Unlike the southern coastal Ewes who perform dance activities on soft and sandy beach, the people on the other hand, inhabit a forest zone that has a hard and a thorny terrain that makes it impossible for them to execute dance types as their southern counterparts. The daily working habits of the people largely influence the use of their dance forms, movements, gestures and costumes. On the whole, *agbleha* dance is seen as an activity that requires obligatory participation, co-operation and coordination, unity and group solidarity of every community member towards one another.

8. Conclusion

The term *agblehawo*, which is a short form of *agbledehawo*, literally means ‘farming songs, and it is derived from two Ewe words, *agbledede* (farming) and *hawo* (songs). By definition, *agblehawo* are a type of work songs sung by farmers as accompaniment to their farming activities to motivate them to increase productivity and, as well, ensure their welfare and survival; when performed at home, they serve other specific purposes. The music, according to the natives, yields lot of energy and power in the workers and sedates boredom, tiredness and eliminates all forms of lazy attitude in workers.

A successful and enjoyable *agbleha* dance performance according to the practitioners, is attributed to the co-ordinated efforts, proper and efficient execution of skills and performance roles by four categories of people who are members of *agbleha* dance performing groups: *dzenowo* (cantors/soloists), *hadzilawo* (singers), *Ʋequlawo* (dancers) and *vufolawo* (drummers).

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