

DDD Music Analysis, Group Dances, *Takai* Medley

Cultural Context

Takai is the most prestigious Group Dance of the Dagomba people. As the History Story reveals, Takai is linked to the institution of chieftaincy and the polity of Dagbon. The story of the dance's origin connects to the earliest period of kingdom's formation, as well as an important episode in Dagbon's relationships with the neighboring Mossi people.

Strongly associated with warriors and princes, Takai is a site for the cultural construction of gender identity and its physical enactment in public performance.

According to Alhaji, at first the dance had only one section--Takai. Once it became a popular dance for the community, more sections were added. The five sections presented here have been in the medley since long before Alhaji was born. During his lifetime, more sections were added.

Musically, the five sections of the Takai medley present core features of Dagomba musical style. By studying Takai we are introduced to fundamental principles of Dagomba dance drumming.

Note

In the 1960s when Dagomba dances were arranged for stage performances by the professional troupes such as the state-sponsored Ghana National Dance Ensemble, creative choreographers decided to conjoin the Festival Dance known as "Damba" with Takai, giving it a new compound name--"Damba-Takai." As made clear on this site, there is no such item of repertory in the received Dagomba tradition that has been inherited from the past.

General Overview of the Music

Form

Like other Dagomba Group Dances, Takai is a medley or suite. Dancers move onto the performance area to slow-paced music such as Damba So Chendi, the processional part of Damba (see Festival Dance) or a Praise Name Dance such as Zim Taai Kulga. When the line of dancers has achieved a large circular formation, drummers begin the first

section, which is called "Takai." In other words, Takai always comes first and usually is played for a longer period of time than any other section.

After Takai, the other sections can be done in any order. At Tufts, I usually arrange the sections in the following order: (1) Takai, (2) Nyayboli, (3) Tanchili Gօղ, (4) Nunda Nyuli, and (5) Kondaliya. This order provides students with memorable patterns of dance style: sections 1 and 5 are alike, sections 2 and 4 are alike, and section 3 is distinguished because the dancer partners hit three times.

Music-Dance Relationship

Dancers hold wooden sticks or metal rods in their right hands, which they strike together on the cadential time point of the re-cycling music. Arranged in a circle, dancers wheel about, striking first with the dancer to their front and then to the dancer at their back. As they turn about, the dancers costumes flair out gorgeously and their fancy knee high boots call attention to steps that are reminiscent of tap dancing or clogging. The sharp sound of the strike contributes to the overall percussive music.

When transcribing the music of Takai, I set the moment of strike on the first onbeat in the cycle. The music and dance phrases have motion toward and arrival on the moment when dancers hit their rods together. Because this cadential arc is so well known among Dagomba musicians, sometimes they enjoy avoiding the normal moment of strike, choosing instead to play a split second after the cadence point in a sort of ironic musical in-joke.

Interplay Among Drums

In the Takai sections, we find the richest array of musical roles within the drum ensemble--(1) lead luḡa, (2) answer luḡa, (3) lead guḡ-gօղ, and (4) answer guḡ-gօղ. Not every section has this full array, however. In Tanchili Gօղ and Nunda Nyuli there is no formal division of the guḡ-gօղ part into lead and answer roles. If the drummers are well-matched in seniority and ability, they play in unison but if one drummer is older or regarded as better, the junior drummer supports the senior drummer's more flamboyant improvisation by repeating the basic theme and its common variations.

Taken as a full ensemble, the texture of the Takai dances is complex and dense. Many people find it challenging to maintain temporal orientation amidst the interplay of phrases that each exerts powerful forces. It is easy to become re-oriented, as we will discuss when going through each piece. When teaching beginners, Alhaji advised listening to the answer guṅ-gṅ as the best way to keep rhythmic orientation. As found in Takai, Nyayboli and Kondoliya, the answer guṅ-gṅ part is short and simple (at least on its surface), which makes it well suited to the time line role. The answer luṅa part also is short--just one beat in duration in Nyayboli, Tanchili Gṅ and Nunda Nyuli. Trying to orient oneself to the answer luṅa part is risky, however, because its setting on the flow of implicit beats can be deceptive. The blend of the two answering drums phrases gives the overall music its basic driving force.

Dancers tune in to the leading guṅ-gṅ for inspiration. The lead guṅ-gṅ player must know a lot of traditional variations and be able to spontaneously invent new phrases while working with dancers. In these demonstrations, Alhaji disciplined himself only to play the most traditional lead guṅ-gṅ variations. He did not improvise, which would have entailed longer lines that are not closely derived from the basic phrases.

Although the role of leading luṅa is to direct the ensemble, the part has less impact on the dancers' movements than the leading guṅ-gṅ. In the hands of an expert player who knows the dancers, the leading luṅa part will include plenty of language-based "talks" that mention family heritage, personal and community nicknames, or references to current events.

Musically, the leading luṅa part creates very strong rhythmic pressure against the three other drums. Especially in Takai and Kondoliya, the timing of strokes in the leading luṅa phrases suggests a flow of onbeats that is permanently offset from the onbeats of the dance and the other three drums. For inexperienced learners, this is a very challenging musical condition.

Meter

Temporal structure in these five pieces is a complex issue. Two dimensions are especially elusive to pin down with certainty: (1) the flow of onbeats, and (2) the internal design of onbeats.

Although the dancers' strike point would seem to indicate the temporal location of the first onbeat in a cycle, the accentuation in drumming phrases often is permanently offset from it. In terms of musical theory, an argument can be made that there are two slots for the flow of onbeats, especially in Takai and Kondaliya. Still, the number of beats between hits of the dancers' sticks is clear and obvious. In Takai and Kondaliya hits come every four beats, in Nyayboli, Nunda Nyuli hits come every eight beats, and in Tanchili Gօղ hits come on counts five, seven and one of an eight-beat cycle.

Only in Nyayboli is the internal structure of beats quite clear--it partakes of binary or quaternary time. Kondaliya also largely feels to be in quaternary time, especially in its answer guղ-ցօղ part. Both leading luղa and leading guղ-ցօղ also use quaternary timing, although each drum has triplet figures over the span of two beats (notated as quarter note triplets). In Nunda Nyuli and Tanchili Gօղ most of the drum phrases suggest a ternary structure to the beats, although some figures in leading luղa and leading guղ-ցօղ use duplet timing within the basically ternary temporal frame. As mentioned in the analytic discussion of each piece, the answer luղa part in these two sections is elusive. Consisting of two strokes within one beat, with the first stroke right on the onbeat, it seems ternary but a slight delay on the second stroke can suggest a binary feel.

It is Takai itself that presents an enigmatic metric field. As mentioned above, lead luղa seems offset from the dance and lead guղ-ցօղ putting in question the location of the onbeats. The basic phrases of answer guղ-ցօղ and answer luղa are subject to subtle timing nuances by players that enable them to be heard as quaternary, ternary or something in-between. The variations of lead luղa and lead guղ-ցօղ are all over this multidimensional metric field. Some variations are clearly quaternary, others are clearly ternary, while others can be timed and heard as either, both, or neither.

Having struggled to hear Takai "correctly" for many years, at last I have decided that it should be regarded as metrically dynamic. It need not be fixed as being in one and only one temporal design or with only one position for its onbeats. I suggest comparing the rhythm of Takai to a Zen riddle. The goal is not to solve it, but to gain wisdom through its contemplation.

END