

## DDD Music Analysis, Praise Names, *Saṅmari Gɔŋ*

### Overview

Saṅmari Gɔŋ compares Naa Abudu-bila, grandson of Naa Alhassan (Zim Taai Kulga), to the crescent moon--a potent symbol in the strongly Muslim culture of the Dagombas.

Alhaji singled out this piece for its musical complexity and technical difficulty. He said that even in Dagbon, many aspiring lead luṅa players regard Saṅmari Gɔŋ as a challenging composition. Perhaps inspired by competitive zeal, Alhaji presented a larger set of drum talks for lead luṅa than he did for most other Praise Names in this collection.

### Form

Call and response parts in Saṅmari Gɔŋ are interlaced--(1) lead luṅa plays a phrase of modest duration, (2) the response drums give a short reply, (3) lead luṅa continues with a short motive, and (4) the response drums finish with a long phrase. Among Saṅmari Gɔŋ's factors of musical complexity is this tightly arranged alternation.

### Meter

The sophisticated call-and-response form of Saṅmari Gɔŋ fills forty-eight quick-moving pulses (eighth notes) that are primarily felt as sixteen ternary beats. In the staff notation system used on this site, Saṅmari Gɔŋ is set into eight duple measures.

### Rhythm

The rhythm of the drumming themes uses all the devices of Dagomba dance music--end-  
:2 relationships at different rates of speed, repetition with a difference, extemporaneous variation on themes, and so forth. We can call it a "tour de force." Despite Saṅmari Gɔŋ's multi-determinate rhythmic surface, the music is built securely on a stable ternary-duple foundation.

A distinguishing characteristic of Saṅmari Gɔŋ is that response theme does not end precisely on the downbeat of the cycle. Instead, the theme culminates in a two-note duplet figure whose first stroke is on ONE, putting the phrase's final note on the midpoint

within beat one. Some lead luḡa phrases begin just prior to the end of the response drums' part, creating overlap among the parts

### Phrase Length

Compared to the uninterrupted span of time for action on lead and response drums in Zim Taai Kulga, the relatively quick back-and-forth between phrases gives Saḡmari ḡḡ a choppy quality. The span between the end of one response theme and the start of the next covers six ternary beats, or three duple measures. The actual duration of the lead drum themes is variable because they start at different time points within the overall time cycle. Even the longest lead drum phrases feel somewhat short because their internal motivic structure is so clearly shaped.

### Groove

Despite the complexity of its rhythm and its formal design, Saḡmari ḡḡ generates very forceful forward motion through musical time. The response theme--an example of creative genius, in my opinion--pushes strongly towards its cadential figure.

### **Answer Luḡa**

Both response drums parts are based on the same underlying drum language, which aligns a symbol of Islam with the person being praised (see Table 1).

<i>Saḡmari ḡḡ, saḡmari ḡḡ,</i>	The crescent moon, the crescent moon,
<i>Saḡmari ḡḡ ku zini tiḡa.</i>	The crescent moon will never be on the ground.
<i>Ḳeya!</i>	Stay [in the heavens]!

### **Table 1 Saḡmari ḡḡ drum language**

The musical setting of this poem centers on the three occurrences of the words "saḡmari ḡḡ" (see Vocables Notation and Drumming Notation). In all three cases, the answer luḡa melody uses the same pitches and time values--low mid mid mid with three eighth notes ending with a longer fourth note. The third stroke is played less powerfully, sometimes so quiet as to seem like a rest. The "genius" of the rhythm lies in the metric setting of these three identical figures. The first two figures are placed so that the first

stroke is on time point 2.3 as a pickup to the second stroke on time point 1.1. The fourth stroke lands on time point 1.3, its tone slowly decaying during the second beat of that measure. Confounding the expectation that this figure would again be repeated, the third "saṅmari ɔŋ" comes in quickly on the downbeat of measure four. This time, the first and fourth strokes are onbeat, not the second.

The theme moves towards conclusion with a new four-note figure that sets the four syllables--"ku zin' ti-ŋa." Exemplifying the concept of repetition-with-a-difference, this figure is similar but not identical to the three prior "saṅmari ɔŋ" figures. Its rhythm and metric setting are like the first two instances of "saṅmari ɔŋ"--four strokes starting on time point 2.3 that lead toward time point 1.3. Difference comes in melody, pressure technique and dynamic accentuation (see accent marks in the notation graphics on the site). In the first two "saṅmari ɔŋ" figures, stroke three is struck very lightly and stroke four receives an upward after-bend from below-mid to mid pitch. In the third "saṅmari ɔŋ" figure, however, all four strokes are strongly struck. The new "ku zin' ti-ŋa" figure also gives full dynamic accent to all four strokes, but now both the second and the fourth strokes need pressure technique. To properly articulate "zin" on luja, pressure is *released* very fast--notated in sixteenth notes--after the second stroke on mid pitch; to articulate "-ŋa," after the fourth stroke on below-low pitch pressure is *increased* at a slightly slower speed--notated in eighth notes. When played well, the difference in melody and articulation between the fourth and first figures in the phrase is quite beautiful.

The phrase ends emphatically--"zeya," "Stay"-- with two strongly struck strokes with duplet timing on the downbeat of entire temporal cycle.

Analysis of the rhythm of accented strokes helps convey the depth of this phrase. The accents align with ternary and binary beats in a very clever manner (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1 Saḡmari Gəḡ, response theme in many meters**

Figure 1 shows three meters--binary-triple (equivalent to 3-4 time signature), ternary-duple (equivalent to 6-8 time signature) and 1 2 3-1 2 (equivalent to one measure on 3-4 followed by one measure of 6-8)--and two ways to beam and tie the strokes in the response theme of Saḡmari Gəḡ. In mm. 1 and 5 the second stroke can be felt either as onbeat with the flow of quarter notes, or on the third offbeat time point with the flow of dotted quarter notes. In m. 4 the strokes are syncopated when felt "in three" but much more onbeat when felt "in two." In the climactic measure six, the second duplet stroke is what I would dub more "slippery" against the binary beats and more "spacious" against the ternary beats. I hear the theme's motives acting to group the 1 2 3-1 2 meter into five units--1 2 3, 1 2 / 1 2 3 / 1 2, 1 2 3 / 1 2 3, 1 2.

This discussion suggests that meter and rhythm exert a reciprocal impact of on musical perception--the phrase implies different meters but, at the same time, the different meters confer different feeling to the phrase.

### **Gəḡ-gəḡ**

Since the rhythm of the gəḡ-gəḡ is virtually identical to the drum strokes of answer luḡa, little more need be said. Alhaji's rendition of the theme in vocables shows variability in accentuation (see accent marks in Vocables Notation). In the third "saḡmari gəḡ" figure, the "ra" of "ka ka ra ka" signifies an unaccented drum stroke. In his drumming demonstration Alhaji consistently played the first stroke of the "ku zin' tiḡa" in the chahira zone of the drum head, not its center, and in version B he further reduced the bounce stroke action in this figure.

The pattern of chahira stroking is typical of music in ternary time--the stick articulates a pickup-to-onbeat figure, with the bare hand on the second time point.

### **Lead Luṇa**

Compared to other Praise Names in this collection, Alhaji gave a lot of lead drum talks--six plus the opening call.

#### Opening Call

Like all Praise Names, Saṅmari Gɔŋ begins with solo drumming from the lead luṇa. Drummers with extensive historical knowledge play for a long time--calling the names of ancestors--before arriving at the praises of particular chief for whom the piece is played. However, in these demonstrations, Alhaji reduced the opening call to its essential minimum, what he called "short play."

After invoking the appellation of Naa Abudu-bila's father, Naa Mahama, the call invokes the drum talk "Ninsalini zayisi sheli" to cue in the ensemble (see Drum Notation). Because the lead drum's final figure--"pihi maanda"--ends just one eighth note prior to the first note of the response phrase the members of the ensemble must be ready for quick action.

#### Drum Talks

Lead drum phrases fit into the quiet portions of the response theme, that is, when answer luṇa does not play or when guṇ-gɔŋ plays chahira strokes (see Rhythm Notation). Since some lead drum talks overlap with response drum the precise duration of its phrases is variable but, roughly, the lead drum has six ternary beats for its first longer phrase and then three ternary beats for its second shorter phrase.

With the noticeable exception of "Saṅmari gɔŋ, Naawuni ni kulsa," the entrance of the lead luṇa part either overlaps with the ending of the response theme or is immediately after its last note. This temporal aspect of the call-and-response creates an exciting effect.

Alhaji presented two versions of the "Kurigu dapala" drum talk. Version A starts on time point 1.2, which is right in the middle of the response theme's final duplet strokes. Version B intensifies this overlapping sensation by prefixing a "kurigu" figure one beat earlier within the temporal cycle. The first motive moves over two beats to reach a temporal pause on the downbeat of measure 2 (see Drum Notation). Then come two motives in duplet timing that make the rhythmic motion feel slower and relatively spacious in comparison to the way the phrase begins. We notice that the response theme enters in between the two "Abulai bila" figures, giving this talk the characteristic back-and-forth quality between call and response.

Alhaji showed two ways of playing "Ɔiri layim kɔbiga, yelimaŋli n-daagari" (see Drum Language). As demonstrated in drumming, versions A and B have slight differences in melodic path as well as time values. Both versions fully fill the three measure gap between response themes, coming to their conclusion with a rising low-to-mid melodic motive in the beat prior to the entrance of the response. Version A starts precisely on the final stroke of the response, which gives the music as strong sense of continuity.

"Abulai, Naawuni kuli sa" starts squarely on beat two in the first measure of the temporal span. Moving in duplet time values, this phrase serves to slow down the music's pace and give it a quality of spaciousness (see Drumming Notation). Closely related in meaning, "Saŋmari gɔŋ Naawuni kuli sa" leaves one beat silent and then enters on the downbeat of the second measure in the time span. For a listener whose sense of musical time is calibrated to the intensity of Dagomba drumming, that one beat of silence feels noticeably long. This drum talk overlaps with the response theme when it repeats its motive, making the overall musical texture more active than in "Abulai, Naawuni kuli sa." Both phrases move to end-point cadence on time point 2.1, prior to the response entrance on time point 2.3.

Like "Ɔiri layim kɔbiga," "Tikuma puhivari" enters on time point 1.1, that is, right between the last duplet figure in the response theme. The phrase fills the lead drum's three measure gap with two motives of roughly equal duration that move to cadence on time point 2.1, just like "Abulai, Naawuni kuli sa" and "Saŋmari gɔŋ Naawuni kuli sa." After the response drums play their first "Saŋmari gɔŋ" figure, the lead luŋa comes back with a second iteration of "n-libgi dakabiriba."

Finally, in "Ninsalini zayisi sheli" the lead luṅa enters right on the downbeat of the cycle, overlapping the culminating "Zeya" duplet figure of the response drums. Like "Tikuma puhivari," the phrase has two motives of roughly equal duration with the second repeated in the short gap within the response. The second motive--"Naawuni pihi maanda"--is also found within the opening call. Its memorable feature is a dramatic melodic leap from low to high pitch in quarter note time values.

END