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The Creation of Traditional African Dance/Music Integrated Scores

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The Creation of Traditional African Dance/Music Integrated Scores

Abstract

African dances are among the oldest dance traditions in existence; their structure is uniquely different because the movement therein is inseparable from the music that governs the movements. The music is associated with the spoken language of the people, which makes it virtually impossible for outsiders to comprehend the music of different African countries. In Africa there is no dance that is not accompanied by some form of music from the voice to orchestras of different percussive instruments. For centuries the dance/music of African people has been passed between generations by a mouth to ear process. Any society that is entirely dependent upon oral communication to transfer their culture between generations is doomed to failure because of the breakdown of the human memory and outside interpretation. The best way to rectify this dilemma is to provide written documentation for these dances. Because the dances are inseparable from the music, I have dedicated my life to creating written documentation for the music that parallels Labanotation, a system for writing movement. This system is called Greenotation, after me its creator. In this manner not only can the music and dances throughout Africa can be preserved, and given perpetuity, but also comprehensive thesis and dissertation can now be written whereas previously, this could not be accomplished because African dance/music lacked a written format.

Keywords

African Music/Dance, dance notation, pedagogy, Agbadza, Makwaya, Tokoe

The subject of writing African music together with its accompanying dance movements is a long-term goal that has eluded Africans for centuries. In the late sixties, Africans would learn that it was possible to write music for drums and other percussive instruments and align it with Labanotation, that is, the system for writing movements. They began to gravitate towards my work and me. I received my first assignment from the Late Timi of Ede of Nigeria, Oba Adetoyese Laoye 1, to come to Nigeria to apply my system of notation to the Igbin set of Yoruba drums.

Professor Albert Mawere Opoku,¹ while on a Rockefeller fellowship 1959-1962, witnessed Labanotation. He deemed it as a tool for the preservation of African dance, thus Odette Blum² was brought to the campus at Legon to teach Labanotation

The goal was to apply Labanotation to the dances of Ghana. This was a project wherein the students would be able to write Ghanaian dances on paper. Unfortunately Labanotation was not able to write the accompanying music of the dance. Because the music is inseparable from the dance, another system was needed to be able to write both the music and dance as an integrated score. This is when and where I enter.

I only know of one written African dance score that was done in the early seventies and presented at Ohio State University by a Masters degree candidate. But this notated score did **not** contain the accompanying music that governs the movement. As the creator of a system for writing music of percussion instruments, I am able to write not only the music, but align it to the accompanying dance movements. As the voice of a notator, who specializes in the creation of notated scores for traditional African dances, I use approaches and processes that are relevant especially to African dances and the music that governs the movement within.

In this article, I discuss Greenotation, a system for notating percussion instruments for African dance, focusing on its history of its development presenting personal and cultural histories, and cultural constructs, and potential uses. Before I delve into this topic, I will dispel the facile notion that African dance is intuitive without form or structure. In the final analysis, I will teach the readers to view/hear African dance/music almost as if they were seeing, hearing, and performing it through African eyes and ears and not through a Western

1. Professor Albert Mawere Opoku, head of dance division at University of Ghana at Legon. The first person to teach African dance in a classroom setting. Creator of the Ghana National Dance Ensemble, 1962.

2. Odette Blum, dance notator from the Dance Notation Bureau and The Ohio State University, taught Labanotation from 1966 to 1968 in Dance Division of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana at Legon.

approach. After this foundation is established, hopefully readers will be prepared to explore the dance using this same approach.

African Dance and music are inseparable, and the music governs the movement of the dance. The music is largely percussive in nature, whereas Western dance forms are more likely to be organized around melodies, harmonies, and counterpoint common to Western music. For example, the dance form of ballet began during the Renaissance period in Europe. The Renaissance period occurred in Europe between 1300 and 1500. We know that modern dance developed later in an effort to free the dancer from the rigidity of movements of ballet.

African dance is inseparable from its music. In fact, no dance is performed in Africa without some form of musical accompaniment that ranges from the voice, simple handclaps, or orchestras of percussive instruments. Throughout my research on the continent of Africa, I have not witnessed any African dances that are performed to melodic instruments unless it was a xylophone, balafone, and marimba, as part of a percussive ensemble. The Western world defines “dance” as movement performed to music. In fact the word dance, *danse*, and ballet are all terms found in Western languages such as English and French. The term music *Muziki* and *musique* are words found in the language of the colonizers, namely English, German, and French. Therefore a word for music and dance does not exist in a number of African languages.^{3,4} This difference is often unsettling when colleagues question the use of ballet in the names of African dance companies such as the National Ballet of Guinea. A word that specifically describes movement to music, such as the word “dance,” does not exist in many African languages because the Africans use the word that was taught to them by the colonizers.

When I conducted research among my cultural informants, I learned that they defined African dance, not as movement to music, but in a number of different ways, such as a spontaneous “emanation of the people”⁵ that was caused by a “happening” or event of causation. Without a happening or event of causation, there would be no subject matter of the dance.⁶ There are dances that belong to the “Cycle of Life” community. Those dances include birth, death, naming ceremonies, initiation, war, and rites of puberty. These dances are fixed and each ethnic group in Africa has their own cycle of life dances. Besides the Cycle of Life community of dances, there is the “Event of Causation” or “Happening” community of dances.

3. Personal research conducted by Doris Green in Africa from Tanzania to Senegal from 1970–73.

4. Paschal Yao Younge, *Music and Dance Traditions of Ghana: History, Performance, and Teaching*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011.

5. Keita Fodeba, The True Meaning of African Dance: *UNESCO Courier* January, 1959, 18.

6. Maurice Senghor, Private discussion about African music/dance Dakar, Senegal. 1971.

I cannot tell you exactly when African music was separated from the dance, as there were no direct lines of communication between Africa and the rest of the world. In fact, Africa was known as the “Dark Continent,” which is a derogatory term offensive to many, and the images we had of Africa and her dances were the putative images created by Hollywood. Ghana was the first country to gain independence from England. Not much was known about African dance or music. As an oral tradition, African dance remained largely in its place of origin. It is the villages and hamlets where the “happening” took place that created the dance. There is no *Waltz of the Flowers* or *March of the Tin Soldiers*: This means that African dances are based on reality, not fiction. One of the most illustrative events that led to the creation of a dance can be found in the dance called *Gahu* or *Agahu*. One day a marching band was beginning to parade when all of a sudden they heard a loud sound coming from the sky above. They looked up and shouted *Ga Hun* meaning “air vessel” or “Airplane.”⁷ This was the first time they had ever seen an airplane. The people took the first sighting of an airplane, created movement, and set it to the rhythm of their particular group. Today you can hear horns blown during the performance of this dance and view them carrying the flag of an airplane in the older groups where the dance was first created.

African music and dance is an integrated art that is tied to the spoken language of the people. In actuality, there is no dance without some form of musical accompaniment in Africa. Unfortunately drum languages that instructed the dancer as to what movement to perform have been reduced to onomatopoeia, the vocal imitation of the sound of the instruments that allows the dancer to know what movements to perform, but is void of the spoken language of the people.

As the creator of Greenotation,⁸ a system for writing music for percussion instruments, I have based it upon the onomatopoeia of the instruments. Greenotation parallels Labanotation,⁹ a system for writing movement. Thus African music and dance can be presented as a single integrated score. See [Neighborhood Journal with Doris Green](#) for a presentation of Greenotation being used by a group of dancers, etc.

Mathematics of African Dance Rhythms

Recently I saw a presentation on the Internet, which was a Library of Congress lecture about African dance as a part of interdisciplinary learning. I was stunned

7. Godwin Agbeli, Class lecture at NYU. 1972.

8. Green, Doris, Greenotation text and notes originally appeared under the title of Muziki Wa kiAfrika. (Music of the people of Africa). Brooklyn, 1970.

9. Ann Hutchinson, *Labanotation. The System of Recording and Analyzing Movement*. New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1954.

by his presentation because it displayed one of Africa's most popular rhythms. But Martin Scherzinger defined the rhythm according to Western ears. I could not let this go unchallenged. Scherzinger explores some elements of African dance music through the lens of Zimbabwean *matepe* and *mbira* music, bringing cultural and mathematical insights to bear in an engagement with this vital music.

This rhythm is popular throughout Africa from Tanzania to Senegal. The Ewe people of Ghana use this rhythm and this is the subject of Scherzinger's presentation. This viewpoint was challenged in 1959, when Arthur Morris Jones wrote his book *Studies in African Music, Volumes 1 and 2*.¹⁰ Desmond Tay, of the Ewe people of Ghana, served as cultural informant and master drummer for the study. He told Jones that his notation of the rhythm was incorrect, indicating that the first note he wrote was actually the last note of the cycle and the second note he wrote was the real first note of the cycle. But Jones ignored Tay and wrote it to suit his Western ear. Unlike Western music, a number of African percussion music is cyclic. The cycle has a definite beginning and ending according to the spoken language of the people. Therefore, the Yoruba people of Nigeria use the same rhythm, but in a different format from the Ewe people of Ghana.

By perceiving African dance and music as one, readers can better experience it from an African perspective. I will now begin sharing my approach to the creation of Greenotation, which is used to notate African integrated music/dance scores.

In examining the nine topics listed in your Journal desired for commentary using the objection of Perry Mason, the topics are incompetent, irrelevant, and immaterial. They do not define an approach or process that is specific to the notation of African dance or integrated African music/dance scores. Therefore, I will factor out some of the elements therein so I can appropriately respond to the process of notating African scores that are emic to the culture.

A Personal Experience Composing a Dance/Music Score

I will begin by describing how I approached and processed writing a score for a particular dance that was interesting and challenging to me. As a lower senior in Brooklyn College, I was contemplating creating a senior dance project to be presented in the annual dance presentation. The dance *Makwaya* was the first full-length score that I created, in which I was not only the choreographer, but also the notator. See figure 1 for the Greenotation score. I taught the students at Brooklyn College to perform this dance, and later notated it as part of my teaching assignment at the Dance Notation Bureau.

10. Arthur Morris Jones, *Studies in African Music, Volumes 1 and 2*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959.

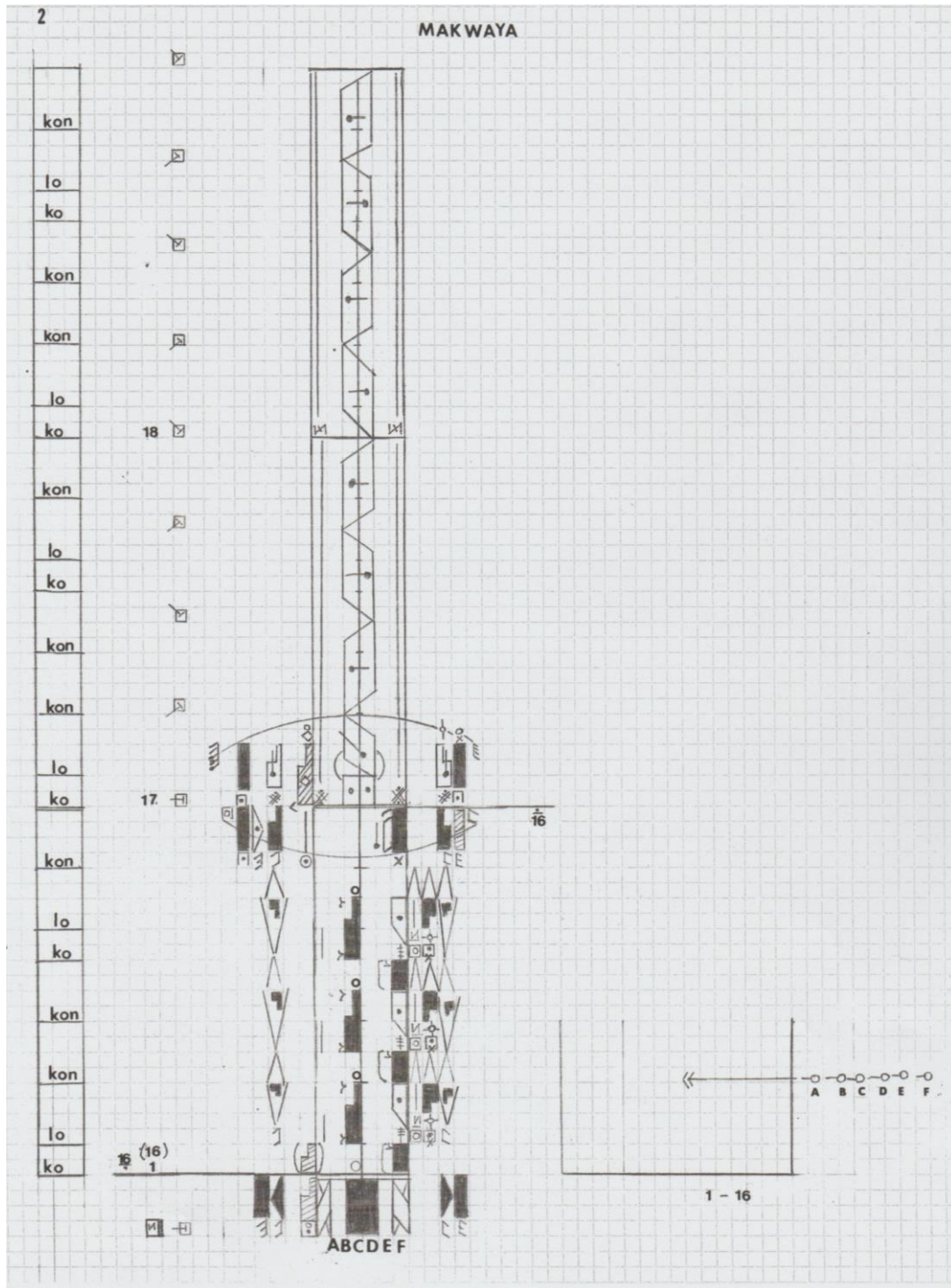


Figure 1. Makwaya, an activity found in games and street activities in Bekor rhythm, notation by the author.

This dance score of *Makwaya* was challenging for me because I knew that I had to provide cues to coincide with the movement of the dance. I literally wrote the cues in words along the left hand margin of the dance score. These were “word cues” that uttered the rhythm of the selected movement. At that time, there was no computer program to write the dance, so I had to write the movements by hand using “press type” of dots, dashes, and lines using a sheet of black press type paper, upon which I used a burner to rub or press the symbols onto the graph paper. It was time consuming, but the images were clean and precise. I used an Exacto knife to carve out the design of the movement symbols. All other drawings were accomplished with pen and ink.

The subject of the dance *Makwaya* was an activity found in games and street activities that I played as a child. The beginning step is the stylized action of riding a scooter. The right foot pushes against the ground (floor) three times causing the scooter to glide, and then the right foot is rested on the scooter board indicated by the heel at rest. This was challenging for me, as it was the first score that presented African movement together with verbal cues that reflected the rhythm of the dance. Please note that I chose *Makwaya* because it uses the same (*Bekor*) rhythm previously referred to in the article in which the application of mathematics was used to describe the African dance rhythm. You will also note that I used the rhythm as we first heard it. In other words, I began the cycle with the second note of the seven-note phrase as I defined it. This is the way we first heard this rhythm among the Latin players and the Congo drummers. The rhythm reads as “Ko-Lo-Kon-Kon-Ko-Lo-Kon.” By ending on the long note of the phrase, it gives a sense of cadence.

I created *Makwaya* in the late sixties using my knowledge and innate capacity to reveal the music/dance in writing. There were no existing models of how to write a score of an African dance. In fact, I only know of one written African dance score that was created in the early seventies and presented at Ohio State University for which a Masters degree was awarded.¹¹ Benissan’s thesis did not have an accompanying integrated musical score. I do not know of any integrated African music and dance scores except for the ones I have created, and that the students created when I was cultural specialist to Ghana at the University of Legon, where I taught students and performers how to write dance on the computer. The students completed the dance *Tokoe*, a puberty dance of the Ga people. They performed this dance on Ghana National Television. When the archives at the university are erected, this score will likely be the first in the Archives of written music/dance scores.

I have often written that Africans pass their music and dance knowledge between generations using an aural-oral process. Any society that is entirely

11. John K. Benissan, “Ghanaian Dances.” Masters Thesis, The Ohio State University, 1972.

dependent upon oral communication to transfer their culture between generations is doomed to fail because of outside misinterpretation and/or the breakdown of human memory. Of these two factors, outside misinterpretation can be the most detrimental. I believe this because music of the Western world is oriented toward melody, harmony, and counterpoint, not cyclic percussion rhythms. Westerners have a tendency to superimpose Western theories upon African music and it does not accurately represent the components or the whole of African music. Westerners fail to recognize that African music/dance is tied to the spoken language of the people as well as to the dance movements. The article “Mathematics of African Dance Rhythm” reveals that the application of mathematics to African music is attuned to the Western ear. It is not related to the manner in which Africans employ this rhythm. Firstly, the African hears the rhythm as it relates to dance. In this case, it is the main rhythm used by the Ewe people of Ghana in their *Bekor* dances. When this rhythm relates to the accompanying dance, the error is clearly seen in notation. This information reveals that the dancer’s right foot would be suspended in mid-air at the end of the cycle according to the Western interpretation or Western ears. Dances do not begin in the air, nor do they end in the air.

AGBADZA

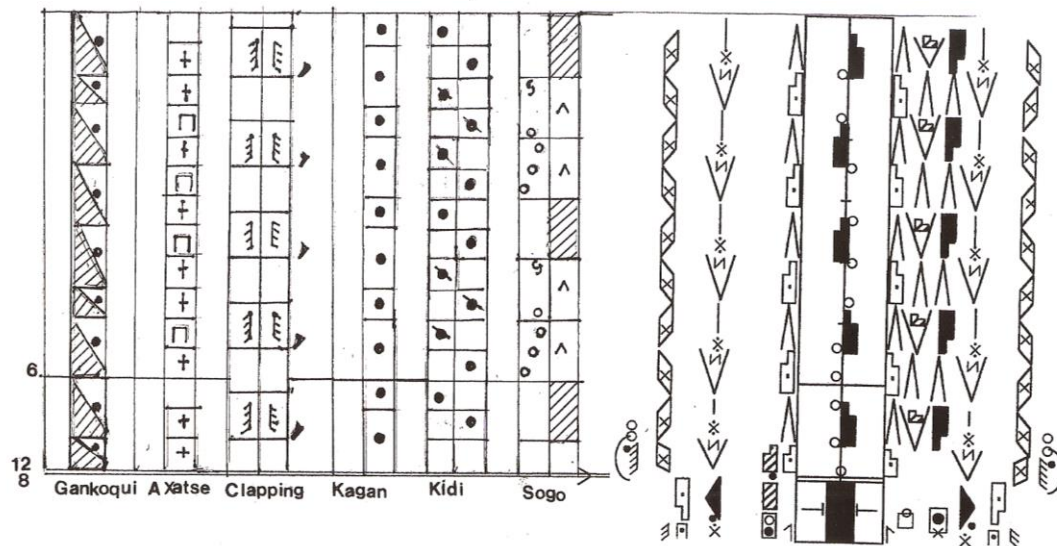


Figure 2. Agbadza, from the Ewe people of Ghana, notation by the author.

The sixties was a turbulent time in the United States. There were complaints from all groups of people including women who were protesting for equal rights and young men who argued against the draft and war. Black people were arguing that the history of the country virtually excluded them from the history books. The passage of the Civil Rights Act decreed that courses on Black and Minority Studies must be included in the schools throughout the nation. Those institutions that did not comply would lose federal funding. African dance was the course most requested, so, schools throughout the nation began to focus on African dance. But there weren't enough trained people who could fulfill the role of teacher of the subject. Fortunately, I had been studying African music and dance for years. Therefore, I was appointed to teach the subject at Brooklyn College in 1969.

From the notation of *Agbadza*, one can view the relationship between the music and the movement of the dance. See figure 2 for the Greenotation. Different ethnic groups in Africa use this *Agbadza* rhythm differently. The following is an example of how this rhythm relates to the spoken language. The Yoruba people of Nigeria use this rhythm in the following manner: Kon-Kon-Ko-Lo-Kon-Ko-Lo. Note that the cycle ends on the long note giving it a sense of conclusion. In the Yoruba language, the rhythmic phrase says, “*Afe kuri j’eko oyin mo-mo.*” As Duro Ladipo¹² explained it, the sentence in the Yoruba language describes a person who eats two foods that do not go together. In the fifties when I took Yoruba lessons with Babatunde Olatunji, I recall that the word *oyin mo mo* meant “honey.”¹³ Therefore we have the cyclic phrase as it relates to movements of the dance and how it relates to the spoken language. In both cases, it ends on the long note.

To help make a smooth transition to the way Africans interpret their rhythms, I offer a sample lesson plan for exploring the *Agbadza*. See table 1. American students often learn from K-12 using a developmental lesson plan. At the college level, this process is often viewed through a lecture process. In the following lesson plan, I provide a guide for learning that represents the interactive experience of learning music and dance that is guided by a leader, with an approach that uses a community process to engage learning.

12. Duro Ladipo, Private discussion and demonstration of Greenotation and the talking drum of the Yoruba people, 1975.

13. Babatunji Olatunji, Yoruba language classes. NYC 1958–59.

Table 1. Sample lesson plan for Agbadza, by the author.

Learning Agbadza using Greenotation
By Doris Green

Aim:
Using a teaching method to teach African dance to non-Africans as well as Africans, who are not from the dance regions.

Points to consider:
Rhythm of *Agbadza*.
Rhythm structure of principal instruments.
Rhythm structure of supporting instruments.

Objectives:

1. To learn The “Kon-ko-Lo” rhythm in relation to *Agbadza*.
2. To learn the dancers pulse within the rhythm.

Questions:

1. **How is the rhythm expressed in terms of *Agbadza*?**
It is expressed or defined by Desmond Tay with the value of Western notes as quarter, eighth, quarter, quarter, quarter, eighth, quarter.
2. **What does this essentially provide for the music?**
It provides a sense of cadence to the cycle so people know where the beginning and ending are.
3. **In the Ewe community which instrument plays the primary rhythm?**
The double bell.
4. **What instrument of the ensemble does the bell act as a guide for?**
The master drummer on the *Atimevu* drum.
5. **How are the supporting instruments used in the cycle to maintain their relationship?**
They have shorter parts, and each part is played twice to the cycle.

Objective 1

Introduce the Kon-Ko-Lo rhythm. **Kon-Ko-Lo-Kon-Kon-Ko-Lo** is the full expression of Africa's most popular rhythm. **Kon** is a long note. **Ko** is a short note that follows a long note. **Lo** is a long note that follows a short note. There are seven tones in the phrase. When played the seven tones sound the same when played forward or backwards.

1. What is it called when a rhythm sounds the same when played forward and backward?

It is known as a palindrome.

Each student is asked to speak the Kon-Ko-Lo rhythm. In this manner you can see where the student might falter. Each student is then asked to clap the Kon-Ko-Lo expression.

Objective 2

Guide students through a movement experience to experience the cycle of the rhythm.

1. How does the dancer move to this cycle?

The dancer will step four times in the cycle of the rhythm.

The students will be given a drill to reinforce the rhythm. They will use their hands by striking them on the floor. The right hand will represent the rhythm of the bell playing Kon-Ko-Lo. **R = right hand**. The left hand will represent the dancer's step in conjunction to the music. The phrase will be read as R-L-R-R-L-R-B-R-B. The **B** indicates that both the bell and the foot action occur together in time. The teacher can employ other phrases to re-enforce the rhythm, such as Hand-**foot**-hand-hand-**foot**-hand-**Both**-hand-**Both**.¹⁴ Normally the music begins before the dance movements. The dancer's entry point into the rhythmic cycle is on the **last** beat, therefore the dancer steps on the last beat of the cycle. As the cycle begins the dancer will step four times ending on the last beat of the cycle.

1. How does this re-enforce the dance in conjunction to the music?

The dancer will learn where the beat is and how to maintain the beat.

2. What other clues does the dancer have to re-enforce accuracy in maintaining the beat?

As each instrument of the ensemble has a different entry point into the rhythm, the dancer can listen to the first drum. After each two beats on this drum, the dancer steps. This is clearly seen in the dance *Agbadza* when the *Kagan* drum rhythm is expressed as two eighth notes followed by a rest.

3. Why is this practice important?

It is important because that is where the dancer's movement occurs each and every time. It is consistent in each of the *Bekor* dances.

Conclusion:

Reinforce to students that when learning traditional African dances, it is important that one studies the music, as it is the music that governs the movements of the dance. In Africa, there is no dance without musical accompaniment.

14. Some may disagree with the notation of this rhythm, but this is the way it was taught to me in Ghana and the way it was taught to the students by a Ghanaian at NYU. I first heard this rhythm played by Latin drummers and they began it from a different starting point perhaps because it was easier to join the rhythm.

Why More Research is Needed

It takes research and analysis to be able to commit dance movement to the page where it can be read, preserved, and later reproduced from a print source. When I served as a U.S. State Department Cultural Specialist to Ghana, I taught students and performers at the University of Ghana at Legon and the Ghanaian National Theater how to write dance on the computer. The task was to take a dance that was preformed frequently in the seventies, but was not being performed as frequently in later years. I chose the dance *Tokoe* because it followed a format where each step was followed by a turn.

I had researched this dance in the early seventies and it was taught and performed in New York to graduate students at Brooklyn College and New York University (NYU) by a group of Ghanaians headed by G. Agbeli, who I brought to NYU to teach traditional dance. Although I had learned the dance in Ghana, recorded the music, I gleaned that a number of faculty members, who performed and taught this dance, did not know the origin of the dance. Therefore, I conducted research to learn the origin and actual meaning of this dance. It is a puberty dance originating among the Ga people, who shared it with the Ewe people.¹⁵ During the class, I played the music I had recorded in the early seventies, and the students began to perform the dance. I noticed that they were including movements that were not in the dance in the seventies when I learned it. This goes to support the theory that documentation should be made, and it is better to make the documentation early in the research. I later showed them how the dance was performed in the seventies. They could readily see that they were incorporating movements from other dances that were popular, but did not exist in the original performance of the dance, *Tokoe*. I also chose *Tokoe* because the rhythmic cycle was different from the *Bekor* rhythm. It was also in common time, which is easier for students to work. This process of viewing and listening with a more African approach results in an integrated African art form in which the dance is inseparable from its music.

In the playing of *Tokoe*, the rhythm of the Sogo drummer was taught to us as “Ga, Dzi, de, Dzit, Dzit, de, Dzit (Ka). See the 5th column in figure 3. But in my research, it was revealed that the phrase needs to be stronger to support the bell and the rattle. At this point, the (Ka) stroke should be played twice. Therefore the rhythm should be “Ga, dzi, de, ki, ki, te, ki (Ka-ka). For notation purposes, I do **not** get involved in different sounds for the same stroke according to the timbre of the drum played. This would cause the creation of numerous symbols for the same action.¹⁶ See figure 3 for the Greenotation of *Tokoe*.

15. Private communication on the dance *Tokoe* with cultural informant, C. K. Ladzekpo.

16. Again, some may disagree with the notation of this rhythm, but this is the way it was taught to me in Ghana and the way it was taught to the students by a Ghanaian at NYU.

TOKOE

Figure 3. Tokoe, a puberty dance originating among the Ga people, who shared it with the Ewe people, notation by the author.

As the creator of Greenotation, it is my task to make sure that the relationship between the music and dance is maintained. Having said that, we need to examine the concept of “Action time vs. Metered time.” In “Action time,” which I term “Percussive time” that relates the sounds of the rhythm as heard in the playing of the cycle and in metered time, the cycle is not expressed, but has to be factored out. This is important when dealing with cycles identified as having a 12/8-meter, bearing in mind that the rhythm relates to the movement of the dance as well as language and is used differently by different people in Africa. This is critical because of the number of different languages that exist in Africa. Therefore, it is best to view and to notate African dance as integrated components wherein both music and dance are viewed as an integrated score.

Conclusion

I notate African dances as integrated scores in combination with the accompanying music because the practices results in providing the reader with a score that reveals the relationship between the music and movement of the dance. It also provides written notation for the field of African music and dance that has been without a written format that accurately captures the connection between music and dance for more than half a century. The integrated score definitely reveals the relationship between the music and the dance movements, thus ensuring greater accuracy in performance. Without a written format, although the subject is taught in numerous schools across the country and in the Diaspora, comprehensive research could not be written on this subject. Without written documentation, this vital history of the cultures of African peoples will ultimately deteriorate. It is my fervent hope that Greenotation will breathe new life into African music and dance to give its heritage perpetual existence and clarity. This is a serious issue whose time has come.

African dance is an integrated art form that is always accompanied by some form of musical accompaniment. Therefore, it is best to present them in notation as an integrated score that contains the musical score in Greenotation and the dance movements in Labanotation.

Having an integrated music and dance score is the greatest tool bestowed upon African music and dance as it permits comprehensive masters thesis and doctoral dissertations to be written. In this manner, African music and dance take their rightful place in academia, whereas previously it could not because it did not have a written format. The integrated music and dance score grants perpetuity to an ancient tradition that was on the fast track to deterioration because of the breakdown of the human memory and outside interpretation.

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