

METER, FEEL, AND PHRASING IN WEST AFRICAN BELL PATTERNS: THE EXAMPLE OF ASANTE *KETE* FROM GHANA

by

BEN PAULDING

Abstract: This article offers an analysis of west African bell patterns, positioning them as an entry to musical analysis of west African drumming. How can bell patterns be used as a tool by researchers to establish meter? What information do they provide about the “feel” of the music? And finally, how do these patterns interact with the underlying meter and feel, and what does this reveal about phrasing in west African music? To answer these questions, this article examines the case of the *dawuro* iron bell in Asante *Kete* drumming from Ghana. A close analysis of the *Kete dawuro* bell pattern reveals that the *Kete* pattern may be represented in an “African 12/8” or ternary-quadruple meter, emphasizes the importance of the half-time 2-feel embodying the Asante maxim of “not hurrying”, and demonstrates the highly motile and “goal-oriented” phrasing exemplified in *Kete’s* timeline patterns. To the broader west African and diasporic scholarly communities, this article presents a model for inferring meter, feel, and phrasing through close analysis of west African bell patterns.

Keywords: West African music, timeline, bell pattern, music theory, meter, feel, phrasing, Ghana.

Introduction

“All the time, you have to study the bell. The person who knows how to dance well, they study the bell. The person who knows how to play well, they study the bell. Because the bell is the most important. Even the master drum, *kwadum*, can mix up the rhythm, and the person who is dancing won’t go off. But when the bell goes off, everything will mix up. *Kete, Adowa, Nnwonkoro* – when the bell mixes up, the whole thing will mix up.”
(K. Owusu interview 17 April 2015)

One of the single most important instruments in many west African drum ensembles is the bell. Responsible for helping drummers, dancers, and other instrumentalists maintain steady tempo, the unique timbre of the bell articulates the timeline, defined as “a constant point of reference by which the phrase structure of a song as well as the linear metrical organisation of phrases are guided” (Nketia 1963a: 78). Closely related to the concept of *clave* in Afro-Latin music, bell patterns provide a window into the musical analysis of west African drumming, offering insight into theoretical topics such as meter, feel, and phrasing.¹

¹ I wish to acknowledge and thank my Ghanaian teachers, musical collaborators, and friends who taught me much of the source material used in this analysis: Emmanuel Attah Poku, renowned lead drummer at the Centre for National Culture in Kumasi; Stephen Osei Opoku, *Kete* oral history specialist; and Michael Ofori, versatile Ghanaian performing artist and Twi translation

Positing bell patterns as a gateway to theoretical analysis, this paper asks several questions on the relationship between timeline patterns and music theory. First, how can bell patterns help researchers shed light on metric organization in west African dance-drumming music? Second, what information does a study of bell patterns offer about the “feel” of the music, that is, the perceptual framework of a recurring beat structure?² Finally, how are instrumental phrases structured in relation to the underlying meter and feel, and what understanding does that provide of phrasing in west African music?

This analytical examination of west African bell patterns attempts to answer the above questions with a study focused on the example of Asante *Kete* drumming from Ghana. I learned the *Kete* material presented in this paper during twelve years of fieldwork on Ghanaian dance-drumming in Ghana and the United States; the gifted *Kete* musicians who generously taught me much of the musical material analyzed in this paper include Tufts University *Kiniwe* ensemble director Attah Poku, *Nsuase Kete* senior drummer Stephen Opoku, and Boston-based *Kete* drummer Michael Ofori.

While the *Kete* literature is more comprehensive than many other idioms of Ghanaian dance-drumming, it displays no consensus on meter, scant analysis of phrasing, and virtually no information about feel. Contributing towards the Ghanaian dance-drumming literature and African music theory as a whole, I present arguments for an “African 12/8” (also called ternary-quadruple meter), for the half-time 2-feel reflecting the Asante maxim of ‘not hurrying,’ and finally, for the *Kete dawuro* bell pattern as an example of highly motile, goal-oriented phrasing.³

A brief primer on Asante *Kete*

United by closely related culture, language, and history, the *Akan* people live primarily in Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire, and include the *Asante*, *Akwapim*, *Akyem*, *Bono*, *Denkyira*, *Fante*, *Kwahu*, and others (Kwadwo 2002: iv). The Asante people mainly reside in the Ashanti Region of Ghana (the geographic center of the broader Akan area), and speak the Asante dialect of the *Twi* language.⁴ The Asante are known for their robust traditional governing system headed by the *Asantehene* (Asante King) and *Asantehemma* (Asante Queen Mother) from *Manhyia* Palace in Kumasi, the capital of the Ashanti Region.

The term *Kete* simultaneously refers to a specific set of instruments, the music played by those instruments, and the dance performed to that music. Originally existing exclusively within the Asante royal court, *Kete* is now heard at funerals, weddings, and

expert. I also would like to thank my mentor David Locke for his editing and encouragement with this paper. *Meda mo ase paa*.

² Following the precedent of Locke (2010) and Pressing (2002), this article uses the term “feel” to describe the framework for beat perception in African and diasporic dance-drumming music.

³ Locke (2010) analyzes west African drum parts on an axis of stability and motility: stability defined as “in stasis” or “at rest”, and motile defined as “in motion”.

⁴ “Asante” is the correct and original spelling, translating to “because of war” (Kwadwo 2002: iv). “Ashanti” is a corruption of the original spelling, and is currently used as the official name of the Ashanti Region, one of Ghana’s ten administrative regions. This article uses “Asante” throughout, except when referring specifically to the “Ashanti Region”.

“cultural” displays.⁵ *Kete* performances maintain a strict dress code signifying social hierarchies. Only chiefs and queen mothers, for example, can dance *Kete* while wearing sandals; other dancers should dance barefooted.

While *Kete* is performed throughout Akan, this article focuses on *Kete* in Asante with a focus on the regional capital, Kumasi: the current centre of the *Kete* tradition. *Kete* constitutes one part of the broader Asante dance-drumming repertoire, which includes *Adowa*, *Akɔm*, *Apirede*, *Fentemfrem*, *Mpintin*, *Nnwonkoro*, *Sikiyi*, and others.

The *Kete* ensemble uses seven instruments: *kwadum* lead drum, *apentema* hand drum, *petia* stick drum, *aburukuwa* stick drum, *donno* hourglass-shaped tension drum, *dawuro* iron bell, and *ntorowa* gourd rattle (Paulding 2015: 163-165).⁶ Four of the drums, the *kwadum*, *apentema*, *petia*, and *aburukuwa*, are traditionally covered in red and black-checked cloth (see Figure 1). While the music of *Kete* once included



Figure 1. The instruments of the *Kete* ensemble. Image by author.

⁵ Many Asantes use the English term “culture” to designate so-called “traditional” dance-drumming, such as *Kete* and *Fentemfrem*, from relatively newer musical styles such as highlife, Azonto, and hiplife, which exemplify increased influence from the Americas and Europe. Kwasi Ampene also provides a word of caution on the term “traditional”, noting that Asante musical tradition is “dynamic and not static” (2005: 10).

⁶ In performance settings, the *dawuro*, *ntorowa*, and *donno* are placed behind the red and black-checked *Kete* drums.

drums, vocal preludes, and reed pipes, vocal preludes have now become rare, and reed pipes appear to have gone extinct.

Standard *Kete dawuro*

The standard *Kete dawuro* pattern as taught by my primary teacher, Attah Poku, exists in the literature as early as 1963 (see Figure 2).⁷ As in Nketia's transcription (1963b: 36), Poku's pattern contains seven strokes of two relative durations in the following pattern: long, short, long, long, short, long, long. Similar to James Koetting's TUBS transcription (1970: 24),⁸ Poku's *dawuro* pattern for Kwekwe Nisuo utilizes two different types of sounds; but while Koetting's strokes differ in playing technique, open and damped, Poku's pattern differs in its dynamic levels: loud (*keseɛ*) and quiet (*ketewa*) (Poku lesson Sep. 2011).⁹

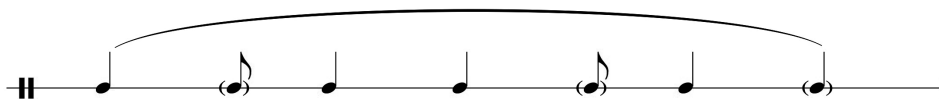


Figure 2. Standard *Kete dawuro* pattern. Transcription by author.

In an interview in August 2015, in the Asafo neighborhood of Kumasi, a senior drummer of the *Nsuase Kete* Group, Stephen Osei Opoku (commonly known in the *Kete* drumming community by the name Pala), presented a Twi text that is used as a pedagogical tool to teach the standard *Kete dawuro* (S. Opoku interview 3 Aug. 2015).¹⁰ The full Twi phrase, a lighthearted saying primarily used to teach children the *dawuro* and the dance, says “*Opolisini atia me nan so*”, which translates to “the police officer stepped on my foot”. In its musical incarnation, the full phrase becomes shortened to “*Posini atia me nan so*” (see Figure 3).¹¹

⁷ With slight variations: Nketia (1963b) presented the *dawuro* pattern at one uniform dynamic level; Koetting (1970) presented it with ‘open’ and ‘damped’ strokes instead of Poku’s loud and quiet strokes.

⁸ The Time Unit Box System (TUBS) is an alternative system of musical notation utilized by James Koetting to transcribe African drum music. While traditional staff notation best displays pitch and duration, TUBS is designed to represent the point of onset or attack for any given note.

⁹ Throughout this paper, two Twi terms suggested by my teacher, Attah Poku, are used to describe musical dynamic levels: *keseɛ*, meaning loud, and *ketewa*, meaning soft or quiet. *Keseɛ* loud strokes are the default dynamic level throughout the entire *Kete* drumming repertoire, and are therefore shown as normal noteheads. *Ketewa* quiet strokes, rarely used in Poku’s pedagogical version of *Kete*, are written in parentheses.

¹⁰ Since my interview with Opoku in 2015, I have been fortunate to have illuminating follow-up conversations on the linguistic and musical structure of the Twi language for the standard *Kete Dawuro* with Michael Ofori, Philip Agyeman, senior drummer at the Centre for National Culture in Kumasi, and Prince Obiri-Mainoo, Professor of Akan Twi at Boston University.

¹¹ My notation reflects the musically spoken version.

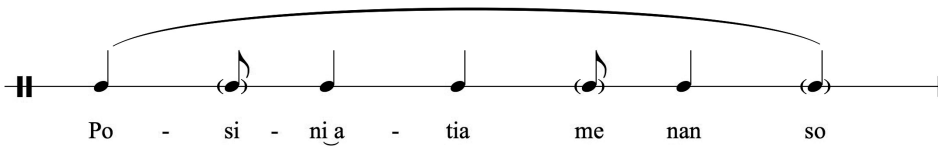


Figure 3. Twi text for standard *Kete dawuro*. Transcription by author.

This cleverly composed Twi text functions as an effective pedagogical tool to instruct dancers on their timing. By showing the dancers the entrance point to start their basic stepping movement in relation to the *dawuro*, this phrase teaches the dancer to begin by stepping with their right foot on the word ‘*nan*’, which means ‘foot’ in the Twi language. The word ‘*nan*’ (the moment of the dancers’ entrance) also functions as the downbeat for the *dawuro*, the dance, and the rest of the drum ensemble (see Figure 4).¹²

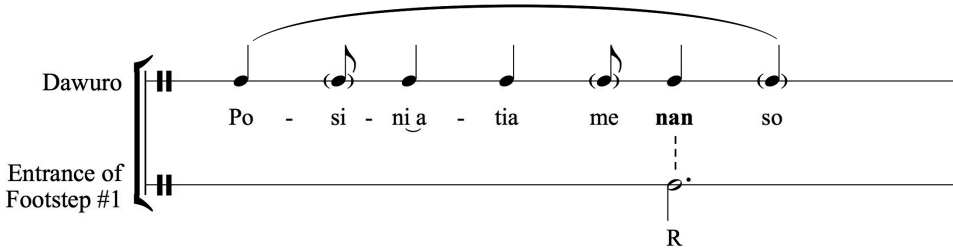


Figure 4. Twi *dawuro* text with timing of dance entrance. Transcription by author.

Presenting ethnographic evidence of the connection between *dawuro* and dance timing, I now explore the relationship of the Twi *dawuro* text to three basic *Kete* footsteps, functioning as a prelude to my subsequent arguments on meter and feel. When teaching *Kete* at institutions from the Kumasi Cultural Centre in Kumasi, Ghana, to Tufts University in Medford, MA, USA, Attah Poku teaches three basic foot movements to the *Kete* dance. The first movement consists of a half-time, 2-feel step with feet alternating between right (R) and left (L), danced with feet roughly shoulder-width apart. The dance step starts with the right foot on the word ‘*nan*’, and progresses to the left foot on the syllable ‘*si*’, the middle syllable of the word ‘*posini*’. Notice the staggered entrance points of the *dawuro* phrase with the basic 2-feel dance step (see Figure 5).

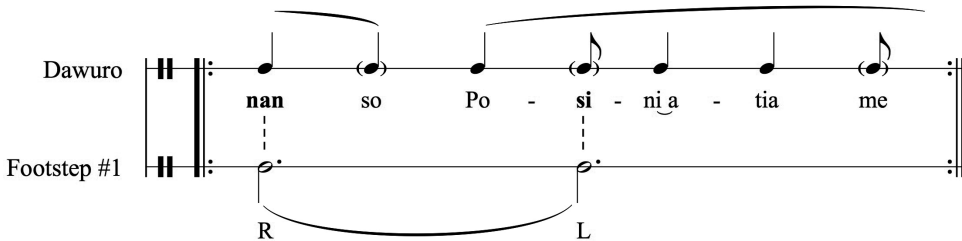


Figure 5. Twi *dawuro* text with footstep #1. Transcription by author.

¹² The term ‘downbeat’ specifically means beat 1.1. It is synonymous with ‘one’, and is similar to Willie Anku’s concept of the Regulative Time Point (1988: 11). In the context of the Twi *dawuro* text, the downbeat is the Twi word ‘*nan*’, which translates to ‘foot’.

The second and third foot movements consist of 4-feel steps, also alternating between R and L and with feet shoulder width apart, but with physical emphasis on the Twi word ‘*nan*’ of the *dawuro* text, or in other words, on the downbeat. In the second movement, the dancer steps out and to the side with the right foot on the downbeat, and in the third movement, the dancer steps backwards and diagonally to the right with the left foot on the downbeat. Note the similar phrasing of the *dawuro* and the footsteps in Figure 6.

The figure shows two musical staves. The top staff, labeled 'Dawuro', contains the text 'nan so Po - si - ni a - tia me' with notes above each word. The bottom staff, labeled 'Footsteps #2, #3', shows a sequence of steps marked with 'R' and 'L'. Brackets connect the notes in the top staff to the steps in the bottom staff. Below the bottom staff, the following movements are listed: Movement #2: R L R L; Movement #3: L R L R.

Figure 6. Twi *dawuro* text with dance footsteps #2 and #3. Transcription by author.

Meter: A case for the standard *Kete dawuro* in an “African 12/8” meter

Issues of transcription, notation, and meter have been fiercely contested for decades in the ethnomusicological literature on sub-Saharan African music; *Kete* is no exception. Koetting resisted putting *Kete* into meter altogether, stating, “traditional Western notation is an inadequate descriptive tool” for Asante drum music (1970: 22). While Koetting has legitimate concerns about staff notation’s inherent predilection for representing pitch and duration, his concerns about meter (namely that it imposes an underlying organizational structure that does not exist in most African music) have been refuted by Ghanaian ethnomusicologist and Princeton professor, Kofi Agawu. In *The African Imagination in Music*, Agawu argues for a comparative study of African rhythm focusing on its logical organization: “although no less enchanted by African rhythm, [I] conclude that the complexity of African rhythm is a *rational* complexity; that there is indeed a “one”; that there are on- and off-beats, meter, and periodicity” (2016: 156). Despite the opposition of non-African scholars such as Koetting, Agawu notes that “many born-in-the-tradition scholars continued to use staff notation”, as evidenced by the *Kete* transcriptions of Anku, Nketia, and Younge (*ibid.*: 191).

With regard to beat and meter, I adopt my terminology from David Locke (2010): ‘beats’ are defined as “longer isochronous units comprised of several pulses”, and ‘pulses’ are defined as the smaller units within each ‘beat’. Meter is expressed as a hybrid of two terms: first, the number of pulses per beat (binary/two, ternary/three, or quaternary/four), and second, the number of beats per bell cycle (duple/two, triple/three, quadruple/four, or sextuple/six beats per measure).

When I write that *Kete* can be represented in a 12/8 meter, I specifically mean that *Kete* is in “ternary-quadruple” time, that is, four beats per cycle, each containing three

pulses. This terminology accurately describes the metric framework of *Kete* without the possibility of implying inherited patterns of accentuation and stress from other musical traditions. I ask readers to understand my 12/8 notation free of any patterns of accentuation or stress inherited from Western classical music.¹³ Following the precedent of Locke (1998), I label this an “African 12/8” meter.

Although ‘ternary-quadruple’ is excellently descriptive of the meter in *Kete*, I generally use the shorter label, 12/8, because it is familiar to many readers, and because the literature shows a strong precedent of notating timeline patterns of Ghana and the African diaspora in 12/8 (Burns 2010, Hartigan 1995: 68, Ladzekpo 1995, Leake 2004: 3, Locke 1979: 325, Spiro 2006: 45). Furthermore, I wish to draw attention to the structural similarities between *Kete* and other styles of Ghanaian and diasporic music.

Based on the relationship between *dawuro* and dance timing, I argue that the main body¹⁴ of *Kete* can fit into a 12/8 meter.¹⁵ The literature shows diverse approaches to placing the main body of *Kete* drumming in meter: Nketia shows no time signature but regular bar lines creating measures equivalent to 6/8, Anku uses 6/8 and designates one Regulative Time Point (RTP) every other measure, and Koetting hypothesizes 12/8 but ultimately presents scores in TUBS with no time signatures or bar lines (Nketia 1963b: 36, 43; Anku 1988: 79; Koetting 1970: 27, 226-318).¹⁶ My work seeks to confirm Koetting’s hypothesis of 12/8, citing Michael Spiro’s theory on meter in Afro-centric music, as well as an examination of the musical lessons of *Coexistence: a Ghanaian dance-drumming piece featuring multiple traditions of music performed together in time*.

Beyond the relationship between dance and *dawuro*, described above, two additional reasons support my argument for 12/8 meter: Spiro’s assertion of 12/8 as the meter of Afro-centric music and his principle of understanding meter through the timing of the dancer’s footsteps, and my own argument about the structural similarity between *Kete* and other forms of Ghanaian dance-drumming, in what I have coined the “Coexistence factor” (see Figure 7).

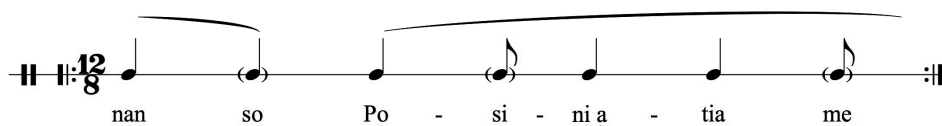


Figure 7. Standard *Kete dawuro* in 12/8. Transcription by author.

¹³ It is beyond the scope of the current article to thoroughly address the debate of time signature as opposed to meter, or the concept of timeline as meter. For a fascinating scientific investigation of the cognitive model used by Asante drummer Noah Kojo Owusu while drumming *Kete* (see Magill and Pressing 1997).

¹⁴ I use the term ‘main body’ of *Kete* drumming to refer to all *Kete* pieces except *Apente* and *Akoko* *Bete*, which exist in a distinctly different meter, as documented by Koetting (1979: 198), Nketia (1963b: 27), and Younge (2011: 343–344).

¹⁵ To emphasize the importance of the 2-feel, discussed below, my 12/8 generally beams to the dotted half-note.

¹⁶ Michael Holmes’ Masters degree thesis presents the greatest variety of time signatures for *Kete*: 6/4, 3/2, 3/4, 2/4, and 12/16 (1984: 24–37).

After decades of professionally performing, teaching, and studying the dance-drumming music of the African diaspora, percussionist Michael Spiro professes his personal philosophy of meter in Afro-centric music in his seminal hand drumming method book, *The Conga Drummer's Guidebook*. "Afro-centric music is never (O.K., almost never) a waltz (written and felt in 3/4 time). All of this music, if it is in any kind of a triplet feel, is in 12/8" (2006: 45). Spiro explains the rationale behind his claim:

[...] The dance steps that accompany these musics are danced four steps to the bar, and we must always remember that the purpose of the music we are studying is to accompany dance, not purely for listening enjoyment.¹⁷ The dancers in these cultures are paramount, and we are there to complement them. So if the dancer is moving his/her feet four pulses to the bar, we in turn must play that way in order to effectively do our job (2006: 45).¹⁸

While Spiro cites musical examples from Brazil, Cuba, Nigeria, and the Republic of Benin, I argue that his thesis about metric organization in Afro-centric music fully applies to the Asante court drumming of *Kete* (2011: 43–43). *Kete* contains twelve of what Koetting terms "fastest pulses" per *dawuro* cycle, translating into what Spiro calls a "triplet feel". These twelve "fastest pulses" should be understood, as Spiro explains, in the framework of four main beats, each with three pulses (1970: 26). Finally, as *Kete* drumming ultimately serves to accompany dance, it should be understood through the metric context of the dancers' footsteps (see Figures 5 and 6), instead of on its own terms as abstract music for the sake of music.

Arranged by Willie Anku in the early 2000s, "Coexistence" is a neo-traditional Ghanaian piece that attempts to display national unity through the simultaneous performance of dance-drumming traditions from various regions of Ghana. In its original inception at the University of Ghana, Coexistence featured the concurrent performance of *Adowa* (Asante), *Agbadza* (Ewe), *Adowa* (Ga), and *Takai* (Dagomba), united in time by what Michael Ofori calls a "shared underlying beat" as well as a common metric structure of "four beats per bell cycle" (M. Ofori pers. comm. 4 Jun. 2017).¹⁹

When I performed Coexistence with *Amamreso Agofomma*, the resident folkloric troupe of the Centre for National Culture in Kumasi on October 1, 2012, our rendition included *Atsiagbekor* and *Kete* performed together in time.²⁰ As performed together at the Centre for National Culture, the *Atsiagbekor gankogui* and *Kete dawuro* timeline patterns lock together tightly, sharing six out of seven strokes (see Figure 8). Their similarity, however, is disguised by the offset starting points (*Atsiagbekor* begins on 1.3, *Kete* on 2.2) and ending points (*Atsiagbekor* ends on 1.1, *Kete* on 1.3) of their phrase shapes.²¹

¹⁷ *Kete* is danced either two or four steps to the measure (see Figures 5 and 6).

¹⁸ In Locke's terminology, employed in this paper, Spiro's claim would read "four beats to the measure".

¹⁹ Ofori played *dawuro* for Asante *Adowa* during the premiere of Anku's Coexistence at the 50-year anniversary of Ghana's independence.

²⁰ The CNC version of Coexistence also included Fentemfrem and gyil.

²¹ In the timepoint system, as utilized by Locke (2010) and Burns (2010), the twelve eighth-notes in a measure of ternary-quadruple meter (12/8) are numbered according to beat (first number), and pulse within given beat (second number): 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3.

Figure 8. *Kete dawuro* with Atsiagbekor Gankogui. Transcription by author.

Scholars and percussionists have long transcribed *Atsiagbekor* in 12/8, as well as the standard bell played for *Atsiagbekor* and other Ewe dances (Burns 2010, Chernoff 1979: 85, Hartigan 1995: 68, Ladzekpo 1995, Leake 2004: 3, Locke 1979: 325). If *Atsiagbekor* is often transcribed in 12/8 meter, and Coexistence demonstrates that *Atsiagbekor* and *Kete* share the same metric organization, then I propose Coexistence as further evidence for representing *Kete* in 12/8 meter.²²

“The chief walks, he is not in a hurry”: The 2-feel in *Kete* drumming

In his 2002 article, Jeff Pressing unpacks the definition of the term ‘feel’ in regards to its usage in the music and dance of Africa and the African diaspora. Pressing defines ‘feel’ as “a cognitive temporal phenomenon emerging from one or more carefully aligned concurrent rhythmic patterns” (2002: 288). Furthermore, Pressing argues that the cognitive phenomenon of ‘feel’ should be characterized by three factors: the perception of beats, each subdivided into smaller pulses; the perception of a recurring cycle of time; and, the capability to engage “synchronizing body responses” (2002: 288).²³ Pressing, whose definition I adopt in this paper, uses the term ‘feel’ to describe the mental sensation of perceiving beats (subdivided into pulses) and meter in African and African diasporic music designed to inspire dance.

In his recent writings, Locke (2009, 2010, 2012) uses the term ‘feel’ preceded by a number to establish a framework for the perception of any given drum part, song, or dance movement. For example, he writes that the *Atsiagbekor* bell can be felt in the 4-feel, with perception grounded in the flow of four dotted quarter-notes, or in the 6-feel, with perception grounded in the flow of six quarter-notes (2009: 98-99). My current writing adopts Locke’s conventions on ‘feel’, and uses the term preceded by a number to show the perceived framework for any given part.

The primary feel of *Kete*, I argue, is the 2-feel (see Figure 9). Expressed by the timing of the dancers’ footsteps in the basic foot movement of *Kete*, the 2-feel describes the half-

²² Inferring meter of *Kete* based on Ewe gankogui mirrors performance practice of both the aforementioned Accra and Kumasi versions of Coexistence. Ewe gankogui starts first, and then other ensembles deduce their timing, tempo, and metric orientation from the “easily recognizable” temporal structures of the standard Agbadza bell pattern (M. Ofori pers. comm. 4 June 2017).

²³ For consistency I describe Pressing’s passage on feel in Locke’s terminology. Pressing’s original quote reads “perception of recurring pulses” (2002: 288).

time feeling prevalent in *Kete* dance-drumming. The 2-feel aligns with the *dawuro* on both of its two dotted half-notes: beat 1 of the 2-feel lines up with ‘*nan*’ (the downbeat, Anku’s RTP and the entrance point of the dancers footsteps), and beat 2 of the 2-feel lines up with the syllable “*si*”, the middle syllable of the Twi word “*posini*” (1988: 44).

The image shows two musical staves. The top staff, labeled 'Dawuro', is in 12/8 time and contains a melody with lyrics: 'nan so Po - si - ni a - tia me'. The bottom staff, labeled '2-Feel', is in 2/4 time and shows a simple two-beat pattern with notes labeled '1' and '2'. Vertical dashed lines connect the first and second beats of the 2-Feel staff to the corresponding notes in the Dawuro staff.

Figure 9. *Dawuro* with 2-feel. Transcription by author.

The 2-feel, I argue, embodies the Asante maxim of ‘not hurrying’, an aesthetic and cultural value placed on dignified, deliberate, and measured movements. According to the literature, *Kete* originally existed strictly as royal palace music, often providing chiefs with music for dancing (Ampene 2016: 140, Koetting 1970: 7-8, Nketia 1963b: 129-133, Rattray 1927: 282).²⁴ Dressed in their elaborate kente cloth and golden jewelry, chiefs are expected to move slowly and regally. Exerting themselves to dance to the faster 4-feel would defy the expectation of slow, regal movement from royalty. The half time, 2-feel, however, appropriately suits their dignified movements.

Nketia (1963b) documents the importance of ‘not hurrying’ in *Kete*. In the “old tradition” where *Kete* vocal preludes explicitly described meaning embodied in the drumming, “the idea of ‘not hurrying’ [was] dwelt on in some of the vocal preludes” (1963b: 129, 130).²⁵ Nketia discusses the vocal prelude to the *Kete* piece, *Apente*, which says “a wasp does not sting unless provoked”, and as Nketia explains, symbolically it means that “a chief does not hurry, unless there is a matter of urgency, nor would he as war leader hurry to overrun people without cause”. Nketia also discusses Twi text for the “general rhythmic character” of *Apente*, which translates to “the chief walks; he is not in a hurry” (1963b: 130).²⁶

The idea of ‘not hurrying’, as explained by Nketia, resonates with Robert Farris Thompson’s 1973 article on the widespread west African and diasporic aesthetic value of ‘cool’. The metaphorical meaning behind the term ‘cool’, Thompson writes, “seems

²⁴ Adinku describes the relatively recent spread of *Kete* into the public sphere, telling the story of Nketia and Mawere Opoku receiving permission from the Asantehene to stage *Kete* for the Ghana Dance Ensemble (2000: 351–352). Kaminski writes on the relatively recent professionalization of *Kete*, asserting that “the *Kete* genre is no longer limited to chiefs but is available to anyone who will pay for a group” (2007: 5).

²⁵ As far back as 1963, Nketia described the vocal preludes to *Kete* drumming as a declining practice: “in many states, [...] voice parts are no longer used” (Nketia 1963b: 129).

²⁶ Nketia’s term, “general rhythmic character”, describes what Nigerian ethnomusicologist Meki Nzewi calls the “Essential Unilineal Theme”, the melodic essence of an African drum piece (1997: 39).

to be *control*, having the values of *composure* in the individual context, *social stability* in the context of the group” (1973: 41). Thompson cites the prevalence of the aesthetic value of ‘cool’ not only during times of difficulty, but also during enjoyable acts such as dance and other performing arts. In light of the west African aesthetic sensibility that it is “particularly admirable to do difficult tasks with an air of ease”, it is no wonder that Asantes generally prefer to dance to the complex drum music of *Kete* with the “cool”, “calm”, and “relaxed” beat of the 2-feel (*ibid.*).²⁷

The importance of the 2-feel warrants a discussion of a less conventional time signature. Locke’s *Worlds of Music* chapter uses time signatures where “a number in the numerator shows the number of beats per measure, and a musical note in the denominator shows the time-value of these beats” (2009: 98). In the case of *Kete*, the time signature of 2 over a dotted half-note accurately displays the significance of the 2-feel (see Figure 10).



Figure 10. Experimental time signature for *Kete*. By author.

Although this time signature is excellently descriptive of *Kete*’s signature half-time feel, this article ultimately uses 12/8. Agawu professes that “the most penetrating studies [of African music] have come from scholars who have proceeded comparatively” and who work to show commonality between African and other global musics (2016: 156–157). Considering the strong presence of 12/8 in Ghanaian and Afro-diasporic dance-drumming, I use 12/8 to foreground the similarity between *Kete* and other well-studied Ghanaian dance-drumming styles such as *Atsiagbekor*.

Standard *Kete dawuro* and *ntwamu*: Over-the-barline phrasing in the *Kete* timeline
Nigerian scholar Meki Nzewi discusses the function of the bell in African music as the ‘phrasing referent’. More than simply keeping time, the bell provides a “creatively static” layer of the Ensemble Thematic Cycle that is generally “reiterated without variation”,²⁸ and functions as a reference point for the other instruments to draw upon for their own melorhythmic phrases (1997: 35).²⁹ In *Kete*, the *dawuro* functions as a phrasing referent, providing a relatively steady theme upon which the other drums and rattles may base the phrasing of their parts.

²⁷ Citing Johann Gottlieb Christaller’s 1933 Asante Twi dictionary, Thompson lists ‘cool’, ‘calmed’, and ‘relaxed’ as definitions for the Twi word ‘*dwo*’, meaning ‘to cool’ (1973: 91).

²⁸ Nzewi’s term, Ensemble Thematic Cycle, describes “the aggregate sound of the layers of role-themes in an ensemble” of African music (1997: 44).

²⁹ Nzewi resists the term “rhythm” in the description of African drum music, saying Africans do not conceive of percussion in isolation as in the West. The term ‘melorhythm’, he argues, more accurately describes the African aesthetic of using drums in an ensemble setting to create emotive, melodic themes (1997: 34-35).

Locke (2012) examines the aesthetic value of ‘goal-oriented phrasing’, where phrases lead up to moments of musical resolution. “Musical phrases”, Locke writes, “tend to begin in a musically unresolved condition and move towards tonal and rhythmic resolution at their conclusion” (*ibid.*: 46). In the case of the Agbadza bell, Locke describes the ‘goal’ as the downbeat. “The [Standard 12/8 Bell] phrase moves like an arrow towards its target on stroke 1, which is the ONE of the next measure (phrasing forward over the bar line)” (*ibid.*).

John Miller Chernoff (1979) also discusses goal-oriented phrasing in his influential book, exploring the differences between phrasing in African and Western classical musics. Chernoff writes, “in Western music, the lead singer or instrumentalist starts on the main beat; in African music the situation is reversed: *the musician unifies his time with the last beat he plays rather than the first one*” (*ibid.*: 56, emphasis in original). In this article, goal-oriented phrasing is found in the way *dawuro* phrases lead to the downbeat.

The standard *Kete dawuro* phrase shape may be considered an extreme case of goal-oriented-phrasing. Not only does the phrase start in a “musically unresolved” (Locke 2012: 46) metric position and move towards a moment of resolution at the downbeat of the next measure; it then moves *beyond* the downbeat of the next measure to connect with the beginning of the phrase. The standard *Kete dawuro* starts on beat 2.2, a timepoint characterized by a high motility.³⁰ The phrase contains loud (*keseɛ*) strokes on 3.2 and 4.1 before arriving at a brief “sense of stability and stasis” (Locke 2012: 41) on the downbeat, an important structural point in both the *dawuro* pattern itself and the Twi words that accompany it. While many Ghanaian musical phrases end or resolve at the goal of the downbeat, the standard *Kete dawuro* phrase moves past the downbeat to 1.3, creating a smooth transition between the end of one phrase and the beginning of its next iteration. To clearly see beginning and ending points, in Figure 11 below is notation of one cycle of the *dawuro* pattern over two measures of 12/8. Any phrase that starts on 2.2 and follows the same general contour as the *dawuro* can be said to align with the standard *Kete dawuro* phrase shape.

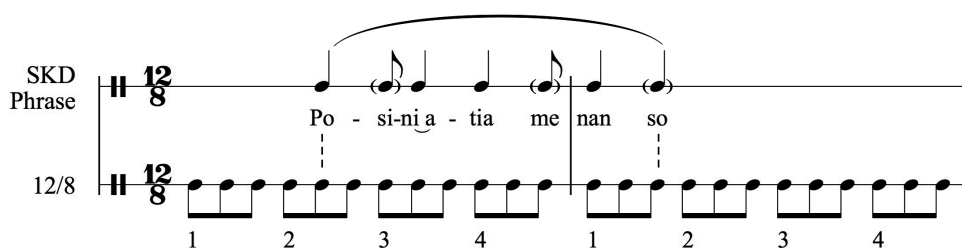


Figure 11. Standard *Kete dawuro* phrase shape. Transcription by author.

Beginning and ending at points other than the main beats, the design of the *dawuro* phrase shape is a significant source of aesthetic satisfaction. Anku’s (1988) doctoral

³⁰ In Locke’s “axis of stability-motility”, beat two is the most motile beat (2010).

dissertation describes the aesthetic pleasure of beat internalization and musical phrases that play around the beat. Anku first describes the musical enculturation of Ghanaian youth, saying children's songs have hand-clapping parts that externalize the beat. As children grow and their sense of beat develops, the beat becomes more internalized, and there is less need to overtly articulate it. Anku describes the aesthetic process of beat internalization in mature drummers: "from my personal experience as a drummer, rhythm becomes more aesthetically exciting, complex and mature when the beat is internalized from time to time, resulting in less suggestive articulation of the rhythm above an undercurrent of strongly felt beats" (1988: 39).

In addition to the standard *Kete dawuro*, there is a second bell pattern that is often played for *Kete*, often referred to in Twi as "*ntwamu*". I first learned the Twi term *ntwamu* from Michael Ofori, who explained that *ntwamu* translates from Twi to English as "the one that cuts inside" (M. Ofori pers. comm. 4 June 2017). In Ofori's teachings, *ntwamu* is the name for the *dawuro* pattern as presented, transcribed, and analyzed in this section. Upon further research, I saw the term was well documented in the literature: Nketia defines *ntwamu* as an instrument that "crosses the beats of other drums", adding that the purpose of these instruments lies in "adding to the richness of the rhythmic design" (1963b: 27). While *ntwamu* refers to the second *dawuro* pattern in *Kete*, Kwasi Ampene also refers to the second *dawuro* pattern in *Nnwonkoro* as *ntwamu* (2005: 35).

Ntwamu lives up to its name and 'cuts inside' the standard phrase shape, starting halfway through the standard *Kete dawuro* phrase, on beat 4.2 (see Figure 12). Starting on a point of high motility like the standard *Kete dawuro*, *ntwamu* plays three open strokes around the downbeat, effectively injecting a strong sense of motion into what would normally function as a moment of resolution. *Ntwamu* then works its way to an end on beat 3.2, another highly motile timepoint. *Ntwamu* never reaches any significant point of resolution; it is always in motion. In this paper, any phrase that starts on 4.2 and ends on 3.2 can be said to align with the *ntwamu* phrase shape.

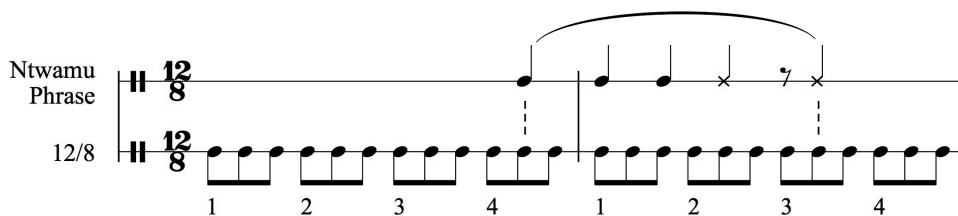


Figure 12. *Ntwamu* phrase shape. Transcription by author.

In what has become a popular contemporary practice in *Kete* drumming, two *dawuro* (*nawuro mmienu* in Twi) play two interlocking parts.³¹ The larger, lower pitched *dawuro* (*dawuro barima*, or male *dawuro*) plays the standard *Kete dawuro*, and the smaller, higher pitched *dawuro* (*dawuro obaa*, or female *dawuro*) plays the *ntwamu*

³¹ Whenever discussing the practice of using two *dawuro* for *Kete*, Attah Poku reminds his students that *Kete* is originally played with one *dawuro*. Two is a recent innovation.

pattern.³² In the ‘big four’ of Asante dance-drumming (*Kete*, *Fentemfrem*, *Adowa*, and *Nnwonkoro*), all but *Kete* use two *dawuro* as their standard instrumentation.³³ Importing the *nawuro mmienu* style into *Kete* effectively puts *Kete* into context with the majority of the Asante dance-drumming repertoire.

With the standard *Kete dawuro* phrase starting on 2.2 and *ntwamu* starting a dotted half-note later on beat 4.2, the two phrase shapes are in continuous motion. Figure 13 highlights the beginning and ending points of the two interlocking phrase shapes, notated over two measures of 12/8. Figure 14 shows the motile and cyclical nature of the two interlocking *dawuro* parts, as notated in one measure of 12/8.

Figure 13. *Nnawuro mmienu* phrase shapes. Transcription by author.

Figure 14. Interlocking *Nnawuro mmienu* phrase shapes in motion. Transcription by author.

Conclusion

Through the example of the Asante *Kete dawuro*, this article examines the link between west African bell patterns and theoretical issues of meter, feel, and phrasing. Previous scholarship on *Kete* proves inconclusive on meter, and is generally lacking in the areas of feel and phrasing. This article seeks to further the existing literature on *Kete* while making broader contributions to African music theory.

Through the example of Asante *Kete*, this article demonstrates a model for inferring meter through a study of a west African bell pattern. First, view the pattern on its own terms, and if available, as transcribed in the literature. If any pedagogical texts

³² Labels “*dawuro barima*” and “*dawuro oɔbaa*” are borrowed from *Fentemfrem*.

³³ In my 2012–2016 fieldwork in Ghana, by far the four most common styles of dance-drumming in Asante were *Kete*, *Fentemfrem*, *Adowa*, and *Nnwonkoro*.

are available, these teaching tools can often be helpful in the location of periodicity and downbeat.³⁴ As dance often indicates the location of the beat, an examination of the relationship between the bell pattern and the rhythm of the basic dance footsteps should offer enough information about repeating beat structure to make a preliminary hypothesis about meter. If the pattern studied contains twelve “fastest pulses” per cycle, check that the hypothesized meter aligns with Spiro’s philosophy of meter in Afro-centric music. Finally, for corroboration, search for examples of the given pattern played simultaneously with well-studied timeline patterns, and check that their alignment demonstrates a shared downbeat and beat structure.

This article also seeks to understand what information a bell pattern offers about a given style of west African dance-drumming music. While the feel may often be equivalent to the primary beat structure as expressed in the meter, there can be a difference in some cases. In Asante *Kete*, for example, the basic underlying beat as expressed in the “African 12/8” meter is the dotted quarter-note, but the dance shows a clear preference for the dotted half-note. A search of the literature readily offers explanation: Asantes in particular, and west Africans in general, place aesthetic value on cool, calm, and collected artistic expression (Nketia 1963b: 130, Thompson 1973: 41). In the dance-drumming of *Kete*, this aesthetic manifests in the slower, cooler, 2-feel perceived by dancers and drummers alike.

Finally, this article explores the example of *Kete* to explore concepts of phrasing in west African music. An examination of the relationship between specific bell patterns and their underlying meter and feel offers insight on the way phrases are constructed in any given tradition of west African dance-drumming music. The example of *Kete* highlights two structures common throughout the percussive music of the continent: goal-oriented phrasing, and motile instrumental parts that require deep internalization of the underlying meter and feel.

Specific to Asante *Kete*, future studies could utilize the pedagogical Twi *dawuro* text, the “African 12/8” meter, the half-time 2-feel, and the standard and *ntwamu dawuro* phrases as frameworks upon which to analyze *Kete* drumming and other traditions of Asante music. More broadly, this paper demonstrates that west African bell patterns offer insight into analytical issues of meter, feel and phrasing, and invites scholars to replicate this approach with other African dance-drumming traditions.

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³⁴ See Locke (2009) for another example of a bell pattern’s pedagogical text utilized to help locate the downbeat in African dance-drumming.

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