

A POSSIBLE NOTATION FOR AFRICAN DANCE DRUMMING

by

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It has long been recognized that Western musical notation is less than a satisfactory vehicle for recording African dance drumming. The symbols impose a fairly standardized Western interpretation that cannot be avoided, and they are incapable of expressing the life blood of African drumming, which is its timbre. A new system is needed, one without Western connotations and capable of indicating the quality of the sound, at least approximately.

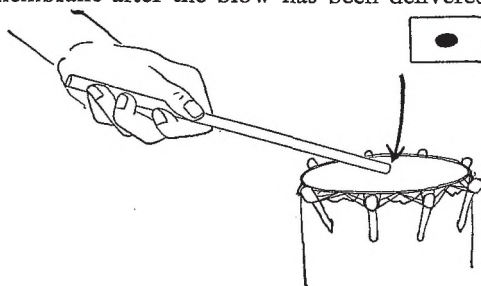
Western notation implies a stressed beat. Wherever a bar line appears, it announces the coming of the stress no matter how many protestations to the contrary may be made by the sincere transcriber. Widely spaced bar lines lessen this stress effect, but do not eliminate it. A light underlay of graph squares has often been used to maintain visual clarity and accurate durational spacing, and this combined with the elimination of bar lines is perhaps the best solution in sight for many kinds of non-Western music, especially if the need for visually grouping the symbols — assuming the need arises from the nature of the music — is met with something rhythmically neutral such as brackets.

Without bar lines, however, Western notation is still no solution for the recording of African dance drumming. It shows when things happen, but not the quality of their sound. To us the organization of music is a matter of stress and duration, while the various timbres produced on any one occasion remain, as it were, frosting on the cake. We distinguish between “technical virtuosity” and “good tone.” The African drummer does not. He understands a drum pattern as a sequence of timbres, and faulty timbre is not just unpleasant or not to one’s personal taste, it is wrong.

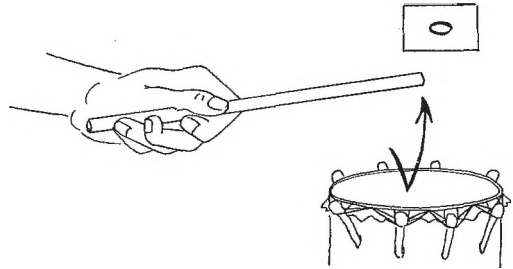
The system outlined below came about by chance. A Muganda drummer, dancer, folklorist and teacher from Uganda happened to be pursuing Western theoretical studies in music and African dance forms at the Institute of African Studies in the University of Ghana. A Western musician and musicologist from the United States happened to join a study group in African music organized by the University of California at Berkeley which spent two and a half weeks at the same Institute of African Studies. The drummer was looking for a practical written guide his school pupils in Uganda could use as they practiced their drum lessons in between his weekly visits. The musicologist was trying to understand African rhythm. We sat down with a drum between us, suggesting, challenging and exploring.

Our notation is a tablature, because drum timbre results from how and where it is struck. For sounds made with a stick, we chose stemless Western note-heads, filled in if the stick remains in contact with the membrane after the blow has been delivered. Thus:

the stick strikes and remains
against the drum head after
contact is made;



the stick strikes and leaves the drum head immediately after contact is made.



There is some correspondence here between the relative length of these note heads in Western music and the stopping or prolongation of the sound on the African drum, and if this proves helpful, so much the better. We had in mind, however, the standard dance notation by Laban, in which the setting of weight downwards onto the ground is shown by symbols that are filled in.

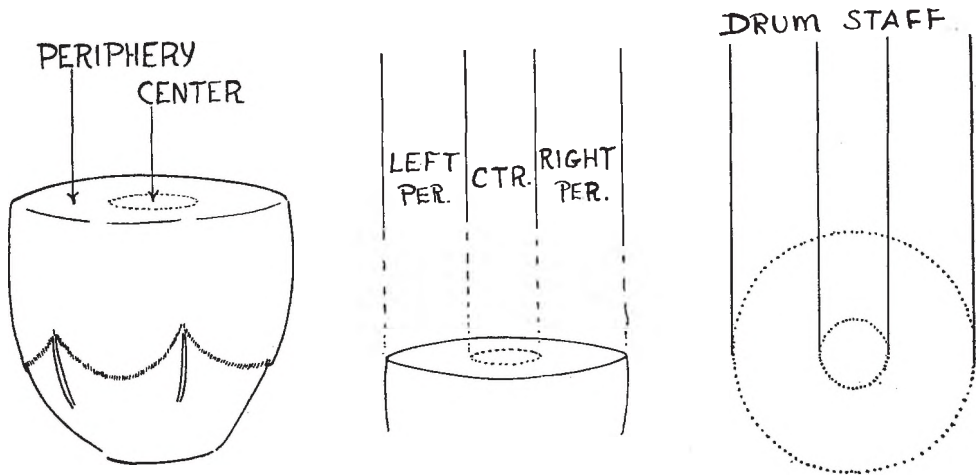
For sounds made with the hands we used standardized hands as the drummer would see them, only in profile for the sake of simplicity and speed. Thus:

	<i>left</i>	<i>right</i>
the full flat of the hand, fingers joined;		
the full hand, fingers joined, but cupped;	C	C
the pads of the fingers, fingers joined;	C	C
the sign for open fingers can be added;	Y C	C Y
the tips of the fingers is derived from the sign for the pads of the fingers	C	C
the heel of the hand only, or when it acts differently than the rest of the hand	—	—
stopped sounds made by the hands use the same symbols as above, only heavier	- C	C C
thus the heel and front of the hand can act differently, one staying against the playing membrane, one leaving it	- C	C C
the hand against the playing membrane may move; here: toward the drummer	C	C
here: away from the drummer	C	C

Frequently a hand shot uses only some of the fingers. We numbered them as in piano music, 1 to 5 starting with the thumb. Sometimes it is more meaningful as well as quicker to indicate what fingers are *not* used, in which case the number (or numbers) goes at the bottom of the hand symbol. At other times it may be more convenient to indicate what fingers *are* used, in which case the number (or numbers) goes at the top of the symbol:



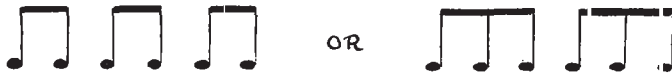
The vibrating membrane of a drum has two principal areas: the centre and the peripheral doughnut. We drew four lines that would create between themselves three spaces corresponding to the centre area and that portion of the periphery available to each hand:



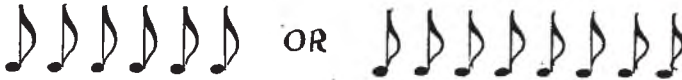
The outer lines become the left and right rim edges, and the space outside each becomes that side of the drum body. With such a direct orientation to the left and right sides of the drummer, it is only natural for the staff to run vertically from the bottom of the page to the top, so that the student may relate immediately to the notation, either with the drum between himself and the page, or with the page to one side.

None of the symbols proposed above carry any indication of duration. It is necessary in a tablature to distinguish between prolonged sound and silence only when the prolongation required a continued human effort, as is the case with aerophones and bowed chordophones. In the case of drums, gongs, bells and plucked chordophones, prolongation is determined by either the initial action of the player or his initial action plus a later muting. These events can be recorded by tablature, and the sound will take care of itself. All that is needed is a measuring off of the paper similar to the light graph underlay often used for the transcription of non-Western melodies, and this will be discussed here to complete the system we propose.

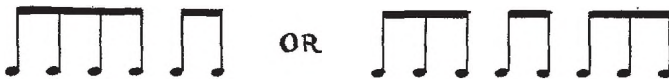
First, however, it seems appropriate to call the reader's attention to the way standard durational note symbols go beyond the mere recording of sound, imposing an organization upon that sound which may or may not be the organization of the original music. When we hear hemiola, for example, we tie our flags together to show more than just the occurrence of six equidistant events in time:



This is very handy, if in fact hemiola has occurred. The trouble begins if the field worker suspects there may be no such intention in the music, because six quavers in a row needs some sort of visual aid. It is a bothersome sight to the Western musician, and eight in a row is even worse:

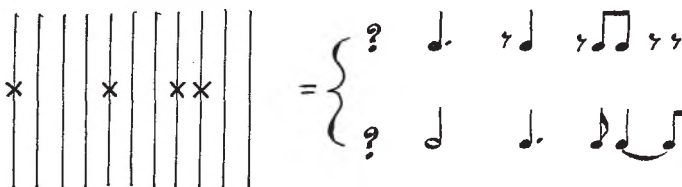
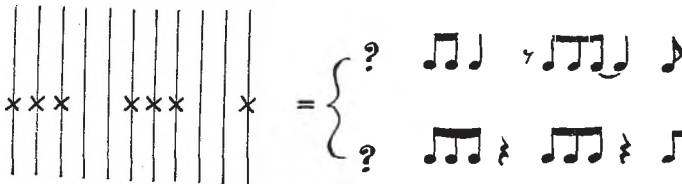


BECOME



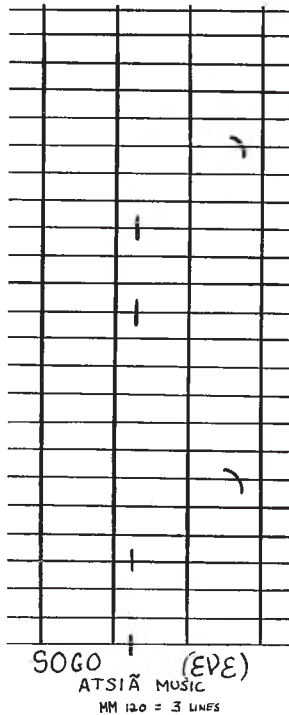
Thus, despite whatever doubts there may be, the music is not only published but edited as well. In the case of African music, however, it may just turn out that we have taken a walk down the garden path: the *intended* effect may be that of *ambiguity* as far as grouping goes — or the very need to group may be inappropriate. In any case, it seems clear that the traditional visual arrangement of Western notation demands a musical interpretation, and the transcriber is not always justified in providing it. Certainly one must at least look further than one's own impression of stresses, or relegate these impressions to a very subordinate role until it can be conclusively shown that stress is in fact an organizing principle in the music observed.

If joining the flags on a set of quavers seems a trifling matter to worry about, we should point out that there are also assumptions imposed by durational symbols themselves. Take for example the occurrence of a brief sound in the pattern shown to the left in the figure below (read time from left to right, and let the spacing of the vertical lines represent equal spans of time).



Obviously, the feel of the music is being interpreted visually by the manner in which the distance between sounds has been shown. This is a very helpful aspect of Western notation when it reflects the actual feel of the music. A Western musician transcribing Western music is on the inside of this "feel", and can use the Western notational system meaningfully. When he stands quite outside a culture, however, and carries with him a strong orientation towards stress continually reinforced by the nature of his own language, it seems reasonable to question the validity of the notational decisions he has made. Perhaps they are valid for the particular culture under observation, and perhaps not. The point is that the issue is in doubt and must be settled persuasively.

Our tablature avoids this issue not because it is problematical, but because the lack of a clearly defined rhythmic grouping may well be precisely what the nature of the music demands, while if definition is required, it can be added. In our system time moves, as we have said, vertically from the bottom of the page to the top. Horizontal lines mark off the passage of equal spans of time. For tempo we apply a metronome setting to any total of lines convenient for the particular example. Thus the *sogo* drum of the Ewe of south-eastern Ghana uses the following pattern:



A drummer, at least among the Asante and Ewe of Ghana and the Baganda of Uganda, does not seem to hear a drum pattern in isolation when in fact it is part of an ensemble, but rather as an integral part of that ensemble. There would seem to be some unnaturalness and even difficulty attached to rendering absolutely accurately the time values of a single pattern isolated from its context. Thus the *sogo* pattern above should properly be shown in combination with at least the pattern played by the double bell and the responsorial effect of the small *kidi* drum:

High | Low

DOUBLE BELL (R. HAND ONLY)

KIDI (STRAIGHT STICKS 1 cm. x 32 cm.)

SOGO

PORTION OF EVE ATSIÄ RHYTHM ENSEMBLE (MM 216 = 2 LINES)

The dance figuration is also an integral part of the total complex. In fact a drummer will indicate the dance motions sometimes as a way of explaining and teaching a pattern. Laban notation, as it happens, runs vertically from the bottom of the page to the top, so there should be little trouble co-ordinating it with the drum tablature we are suggesting here.

Unfortunately, one drawback of Western notation remains inherent in our tablature, and that is the unavoidable fractionating of the total ensemble into its component parts. For instructional purposes this is undeniably useful, but it is a Western instruction. The African learns the whole simultaneously with the parts, which is why he has never depended upon stress for rhythmical precision. He is not "thrown off" by hearing mis-accentuation, but by the failure of some other part of the ensemble to occur at the right time. The Westerner taps his foot to give himself a regular stress on which to hang his part; the African taps his foot to mime the motion of the dancers, or any other part of the ensemble he wishes to add particularly strongly to his own.

We offer this tablature for trial and challenge, in the hope that it may be developed into a useful teaching aid and become a help in the scholarly investigation of African dance drumming.