DDD Music Analysis, Group Dances, *Tora*

Overview

Cultural Significance

Tora is older than Takai and Baamaaya, the other Group Dances presented on this site.
Tora started when the kingdom of Dagbon was in its early stages, before most of its
social, economic and cultural institutions were formed. Because of its great time depth,
drummers accord Tora great respect. As the History Story reveals, the origin of Tora is
tragic and deadly. In contemporary Dagbon, Tora is performed during funeral
ceremonials that last for several days. In the evenings women from the funeral house
dance it as a way to make the event energetic and full of action. While Tora is done with
passionate feeling sparked by memory of the deceased, few people know the serious
origins of Tora. It is performed with a spirit of play and exuberance.

As forms of music and dance, Tora and Takai are like sister and brother--Tora is for
women and Takai is for men. Both dances feature a percussive knocking between
dancers. Whereas the male dancers of Takai strike rods held in their right hands, the
female dancers of Tora knock buttocks. In both cases, drumming dramatizes the
recurring moments when dancers connect.

Instrumentation

Unlike Takai, there is no answer guŋ-gɔŋ part in Tora. The two guŋ-gɔŋ drummers
either play in unison, or one drummer chooses to repeat basic variations while the second
drummer plays more flamboyant "solos." On the DDD site, listen to Alhaji's
performance on the Multi-track Sessions to hear this sort of improvisation.

Unique Features

Two features of Tora's music make it unique among Dagomba Group Dances and more
like the music of ethnic groups living to the south: (1) a time line, and (2) group singing
in call-and-response style. Because Alhaji did not demonstrate the hand-clapped time
line, I discuss it only in the section on the dance. My unpublished manuscript "Tora"
discusses the time line part and includes extensive documentation and analysis of Tora
drumming (see link). For information on Tora songs see "Dagomba Voices: Tora Songs

Through Field World and Analysis" by Katie Stuffelbeam (Masters Thesis, Tufts University).

Form

Like other Dagomba Group Dances, Tora is performed as a medley or suite. After the section called "Tora" other pieces such as Nyaɣboli are used as bumping music. This site presents only Tora itself.

Dance and Musical Material

Dancers line up along the edge of an open area, clapping hands and singing. Each dancer takes two turns of bumping and then goes to the end of the line. Gradually while clapping and singing each dancer moves forward toward the front of the line. When a dancer is first in line, she launches herself out into the dance space for her two bumps before returning to the queue. The performance often continues for an hour or more with each dancer taking many turns.

The Tora dance is spectacular. Dancers fly towards each other with astonishing speed yet manage to bump without hurting each other or causing their partners to fall down. The drumming phrases add musical excitement to the visual and kinesthetic adventure.

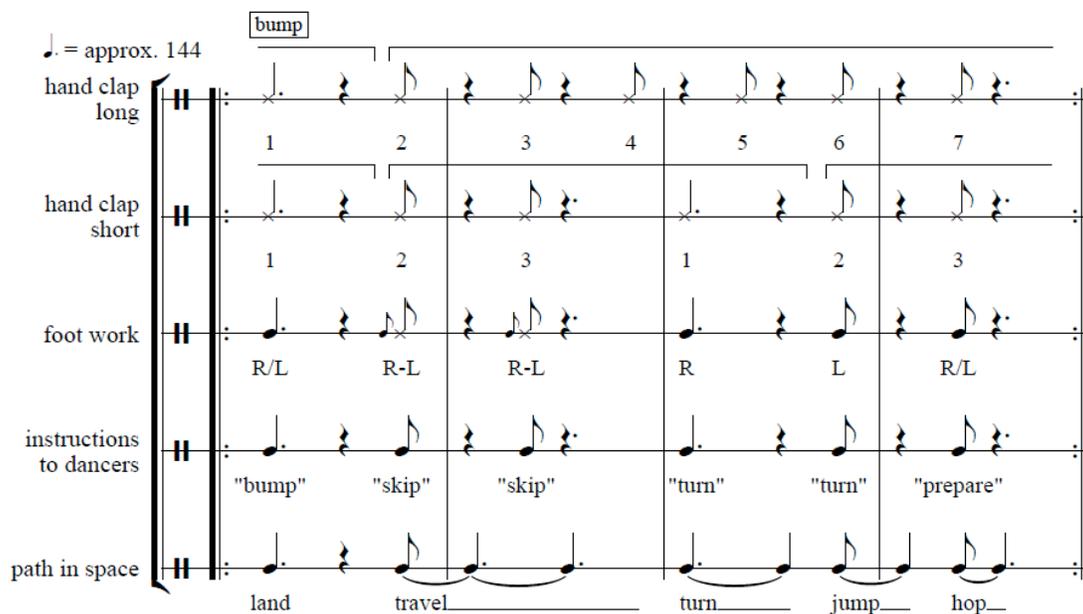The dance sequence and the hand clap pattern taught by Alhaji Abubakari are as follows (see Figure 1)

Figure 1 Tora dance step sequence with handclap

In Tora the dancers' counts and the musicians' beats move at the same speed (compare to Kondaliya). The bump occurs on count one, as the dancers hop backwards towards each other. [Note: "Hop" means that the dancer takes off and lands on both feet.] Then follow two skipping steps that enable the dancers to travel. On count five, mid-way through the sequence, the dancers stop their forward motion and begin turning so that they end up facing in opposite directions. Finally, they prepare for the backwards hop into another bump. This description applies only to a version of Tora that Alhaji taught at Tufts. Experienced Dagomba women execute many variations and fancy steps.

The handclap in Tora functions as a musical time line. Tora is the only Dagomba piece that has one.   Ostinato patterns, called "time lines" by scholars of African music, are typical in the music of ethnic groups like the Asante, Gã or Eʋe who live to the south of the Dagomba people. A time line shapes the rhythmic contour of the music and provides an important rhythmic partner for each part. In Tora, for example, the dancers' steps are timed in unison with the short handclap (see Figure 1).

We will regard the shorter version of the handclap phrase as "basic," with the longer one taken as a variation. The basic clapping phrase has three strokes, which I will number

starting on the bump point. In keeping with the Dagomba preference for end-point phrasing, however, Alhaji usually launched the phrase from stroke two and ended on stroke one in unison with the bump. Importantly, in the short version strokes two and three both are on third time points within beats; in the longer version, strokes two-seven all are on third time points. As we will discover when discussing the leading luŋa part, below, these equidistant offbeat strokes easily can be "turned around," that is, perceived as being onbeat (see Figure 2).
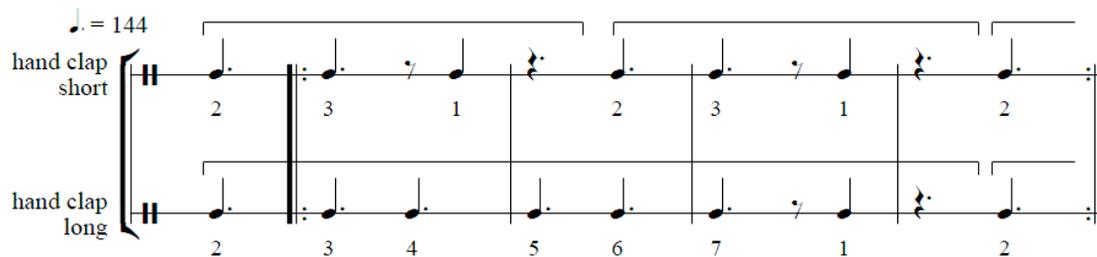

 Figure 2 Tora handclap "turned around" metrically

The placement and time span of the drum parts are organized in relation to the dance. Guŋ-gɔŋ phrases usually span eight beats and move towards their climax on the dancers' bump. Lead luŋa phrases also tend to be eight beats in duration but their motion and sense of cadence are offset from the dance and the guŋ-gɔŋ accents. The answer luŋa pumps out a steady, short two-beat phrase.

Interplay among Parts
Without the dancers' handclaps, the answer luŋa part serves as time keeper within the drum ensemble. The strokes and figures of the other drums intersect with the answer luŋa part in various ways--unison, offset, counterpoint, 3:2, etc. Guŋ-gɔŋ phrases tend to begin at the mid-point of the cycle, move to cadence on the bump and then lay back with a series of quiet chahira strokes. Lead luŋa plays continuously. Some of its phrases stretch over the full eight-beat dance cycle, while others with a shorter span must be repeated, often with slight variation, to complete the eight-beat cycle.

Groove

In terms of the overall flow of its music Tora is best compared to Takai. Like Takai, the permanently offset position of lead luŋa creates a multideterminant metric condition that is likely to be unfamiliar to most non-Dagombas. Unlike Takai, Tora lacks the strong bass sound and reassuring steady repetition of an answer guŋ-gɔŋ part, so the answer luŋa drums are the main steady force. As we will discuss, however, the answer luŋa part itself can be varied and interpreted in several ways. This means that the "musical house of Tora," so to speak, is built on a dynamic foundation.

The guŋ-gɔŋ phrases propel the music forward with clear design and strong sense of end-point cadence. An interesting feature of Tora is that the guŋ-gɔŋ themes in Tora can be played "straight"--with binary or duplet timing--or "swung"--with ternary or triplet feel. Not only does lead luŋa accentuate time points that are offset from guŋ-gɔŋ and the dance, but it engages in 3:2 rhythmic patterning, as well. Thus, Tora does not groove in a easy-to-grasp manner like some other Dagomba dance drumming.

Luŋa
Answer Luŋa
The basic way of playing the answer luŋa part is with three strokes whose timing is long-short-long and whose pitch classes are mid-mid-low. In staff notation the time values describe a ternary-duple temporal framework--quarter-eighth-dotted quarter. Stroke one is on the onbeat, stroke two is a pickup to beat two and stroke three lands right on the backbeat (see Vocables Notation, version B). The basic rhythm of answer luŋa is like the ride cymbal in jazz--SPANG a LANG, SPANG a LANG. Unlike the backbeat orientation in jazz, in Tora this figures moves from beat one towards beat two.

Alhaji preferred his students to render the melody with notes produced by pressure technique on the ropes that connect the two drumheads. He taught that after striking the third stroke, drummers should reduce the pressure on the ropes so that the mid-pitch slides downward to a low-pitch note. In vocables, this melody sounds, "den de deyan." Playing the part with this technique changes its rhythm to a four note figure that fits on the time points in a measure as follows--1.1 1.3 2.1 2.2 (see Vocables Notation). The

gestalt of this set of time values easily can be "flipped" from ternary-duple to binary-triple meter (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 Tora answer luŋa figure in ternary-duple and binary-triple meter

When demonstrating the answer luŋa part on the drum itself, Alhaji displayed his virtuosic control of the luŋa (see Drumming Notation). In version B, he uses pressure technique to articulate five, rather than three notes. First, we notice that after the third stroke his release of the pressure ropes is very fast--better indicated with a sixteenth note rather than an eighth note--and brings the melody down to the lower neighbor note below the standard low-pitch (notated as A sharp). A gentle squeeze on the ropes articulates a fifth note right on low pitch. Alhaji's purpose was to show the close resemblance of the drum sound to the implicit drum language "Gbaŋ bi yɛli o" (see Drum Language). Although he did not demonstrate it, Alhaji also would sometimes play the part with four strokes--den de da dan--that mark the four initial consonants in the drum language--gb-, b-, y-, and -l (see Vocables Notation, staff five).

At the opposite end of the virtuosity spectrum, is a spare two-note version of the answer luŋa part--den dan--with an accented stroke at mid-pitch on beat one and a pressure release to low-pitch on beat two (see Vocables Notation, variation C). Alhaji demonstrated this version to show how some drummers play the part but refused to allow his students to play it, condemning it as "Lazy drumming!" To him, playing the part in this way reveals ignorance of the drum language or disrespect of tradition. In my

opinion, however, the two-note version with emphasis on downbeats sounds good. I like its spare texture and the way the notes on the downbeats gradually fade away.

There is one more way of playing the answer luŋa part that needs discussing (see Drumming Notation, version A, Vocables Notation, staff four). Sometimes, whether from fatigue or by rhythmic intention, drummers time the first two strokes as a duplet. When played like this, the first beat is binary and the second beat is ternary. Because many guŋ-gɔŋ phrases juxtapose binary and ternary figures, this way of playing answer luŋa enhances the rhythmic blend between the two drumming parts. This version of the answer luŋa phrase resembles rhythms of other drumming styles in his part of West Africa. Specifically, this four note figure is a popular time line in music of the Akan people whose territory lies to the south of Dagbon (see Figure 4). This musical similarity is not surprising because the Dagomba and the Akan have had extensive contact through trade, military conflict, and politics.
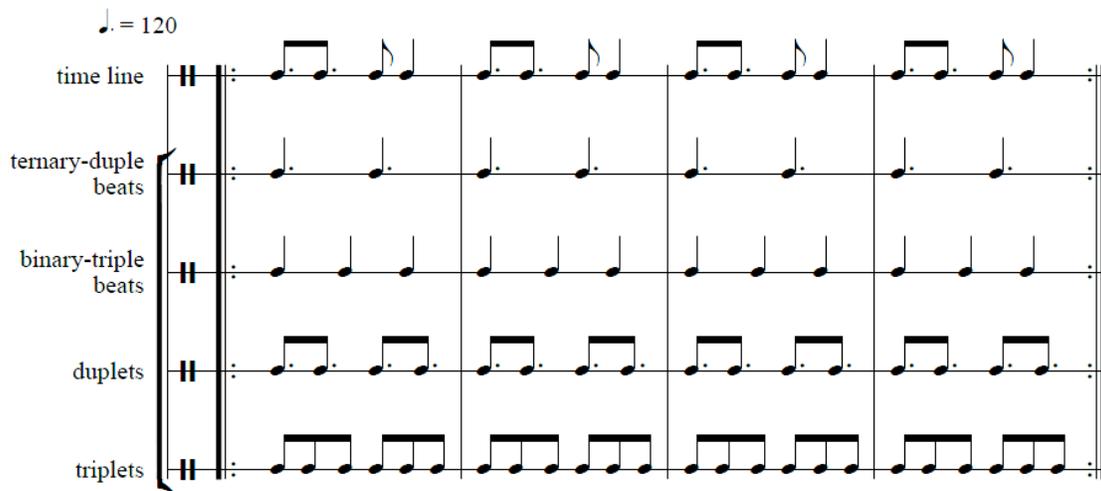

Figure 4 Tora answer luŋa rhythm as a four-note time line part

This sounded time line figure implies an unsounded set of steady pulses in 3:2 temporal relationships--quarter notes with dotted quarter notes, eighth notes with dotted eighth notes. The phrases of leading luŋa and guŋ-gɔŋ draw power from this implicit metric matrix.

Lead Luŋa

Alhaji demonstrated a talk for cueing in the other drummers "Ŋun' jɛ ma ka man' jɛ, Kurigu gba yɛbila" and a small number of phrases whose implicit drum language exhorts the dancers to perform with gusto--"Tom Tora," or "Bump Tora." He explained that Tora does not have many drum talks because at a funeral performance the lead drummer would play phrases that are specific to each dancer. For example, the phrases would incorporate her many names or make reference to situations in her life. Names are a highly elaborated social institution in Dagbon. Each person is likely to have a day name, a nickname, a personal praise name, a residence name, and family praise names.

The organization of beats, beams and barlines in the staff notation of the lead luŋa phrases is based on the part's own pattern of accentuation. The boxed text above the staff marks the moment when dancers bump. We see that the internal pattern of accentuation in the leading luŋa part is permanently offset from the dance and the accentuation of the other two drum parts. Time point 1.1 for the dance, answer luŋa and guŋ-gɔŋ is time point 2.2 for the lead luŋa. To understand the lead drum part from the metric vantage of the other parts, I re-barred the transcription of the drum demonstration (see Drum Transcription B). In this discussion, we will focus on the lead drum part on its own terms.

From Alhaji's point of view, meter was not all that important. He was able to keep steady time without need of other parts or following a steady flow of beats. When he did tap his foot, sometimes he placed in on the onbeats of guŋ-gɔŋ but sometimes he would mark time on the luŋa's onbeats. I concluded that for him, the two beat streams were complementary aspects of a unity. He was aware that his non-Dagomba students struggled to find and maintain their rhythmic balance in pieces like Tora and Takai but because he himself never had the experience, our problems were alien to him. He taught us to forget about counting our parts to a steady beat but rather to fit phrases together into a composite or to think of the musical relationship as a conversation.

Lead luŋa's cueing phrase has two balanced motives, each spanning two duple measures. Starting from an offbeat moment within beat two, the rhythmic motion moves beat-by-beat in three-beat units--"and one two one pause, and one two one." The bump occurs in the pause between the two motives, on the time point 2.2. As I hear it, Alhaji used duplet

time values when demonstrating the phrase in vocables--notated in dotted eighth notes--but he used triplet short-then-long time values on the drum--notated in eighths and quarters. To make the drum sound like the spoken language, Alhaji used a multi-stroke ornament for the two quick syllables "-rigu" of the words "kurigu" (iron).

As seen in the transcription scores of his demonstration in vocables and drumming (see passages marked A), after repeating the cueing phrase for some time Alhaji switched to "Tom Tora," the drum talk that supports the dancing (see passages marked B). Spanning eight ternary beats (four duple measures) the phrase mixes and matches two-beat figures in pleasing combinations. A standardized version of the phrase would begin with two occurrences of a three-note figure in duple, then one contrasting bar in triple time, and finally a return to the three-note figure--aaba (see Drumming Notation "Tom Tora" version A). We note that the lead luŋa's three-note figure uses the same time values as answer luŋa but places them in a different metric position (see Figure 5)

Figure 5 Tora offset three-note figures in luŋa drum parts

Alhaji had a wonderful creative knack for making attractive phrases with limited musical material. These demonstrations of vocables and drumming show how he created variations on the "Tom Tora" theme by recombining familiar figures, changing the melody slightly, and adding or omitting notes.

Towards the end of his demonstration on the drum, Alhaji introduced a passage with 3:2 accentuation--three quarters in-the-time-of two dotted quarters (see Drum Transcription Notation, m. 61, passage marked C). After three phrases, he shot me a knowing look and then stopped, saying, "You want me only to play the basic talks." Alhaji could improvise

a seemingly endless supply of new variations and new themes derived from these variations.

Guŋ-gɔŋ

As is true of Takai, Tora has a huge collection of themes for guŋ-gɔŋ as well as a systematic way to develop stylistically appropriate variations from the thematic ideas. On this site, the part is represented by an essential foundation of material (see Tora Folio for a much larger collection of guŋ-gɔŋ phrases).

Typically, guŋ-gɔŋ themes span four measures. Two measures of action with bounces and presses in the center of the drum skin that culminate with a cadence on the dancers' bump are followed by two measures of quiet chahira strokes. A salient feature of the rhythm of these phrases is their playful way of treating beats as either duplets or triplets. Other devices include 3:2 accentuation and contrasts between two-note figures that (1) move from an offbeat pickup towards onbeat accent on the second note, or (2) begin with an onbeat note and move towards an offbeat accent on the second note.

The principal theme has the underlying drum language, "To bi yɛli o kul saɣiri si ka nya" (The elders advised him but he refused to listen), which refers to the elders' unheeded warning to the chief (see History Story). In his drumming demonstration, Alhaji used duplet time values for center strokes but he often would use ternary values or "swing timing" (see Vocables Transcription, mm. 25-28). Note that in ternary timing the two press strokes (notated with x-shaped noteheads) precisely match the handclaps (see Figure 6).

Figure 6 Tora guŋ-gɔŋ basic phrase in "swing" and "straight" time feels

All the other material that Alhaji presented derives from musical ideas embedded within the main theme. The two-note cadential figure from pickup to onbeat that connects to the dancers' bump becomes the seed for "Ka nya, ka nya, ka nya" (see Drumming Transcription 1, passages marked B). Moving further from the principal theme, "Ka nya ka nya, ka nya" shifts the first stroke of two-note figure to the onbeats (see Drumming Transcription 1, passages marked C). This results in a drum stroke sounding *after*, not *on* the bump, a deviation from the norm that is much enjoyed by performers who are totally familiar with the fundamental concepts of Dagomba dancing and drumming.

During his drumming demonstration Alhaji did not play one of my favorite themes, so I asked him to do a second "take" (see Drumming Transcription 2, passages marked D). Using 3:2 timing, this theme inserts two quarter note bounce strokes into the usual ternary flow of chahira strokes, then continues the triple feeling for another bar before closing the phrase with duplet and triplet figures material taken directly from the main theme (see Drumming Notation, staff six "Ka nya, ka nya, to ka nya"). In four measures the rhythm has many of the basic musical ideas found in all Dagomba dance-drumming! END