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My Mother Has A Television, Does Yours? Transformation and Secularization in an Ewe Funeral Drum Tradition

**eCompanion at www.oraltradition.org*

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This study addresses tradition and change within the funeral music and funeral culture in the town of Dzodze located in southeastern Ghana. Dzodze is located in the heart of the southern Ewe cultural area in Ghana, an area extending approximately east to west from the Volta Lake to Aflao on the Togo boarder, and north from the coast to Avenor and Hevi. Dzodze is an autonomous *duko* (city/state), located to the north of the Anlo, the largest *duko* in the region, with whom they share many cultural features.

In 1995, I was introduced to the Tagborlo family, an important family of drummers, singers, and dancers in Dzodze. I apprenticed with them as a drummer, joining them in playing at numerous funerals as well as ceremonies for the Yeye religious shrine for a period of nearly three years.¹ It was with this family that I learned the music of Agbadza-Ageshe, an important genre of funeral music. As I began studying the *yugbewo*² (drum language patterns) of the master drum, I was surprised to find that many of the phrases referred to things or events from contemporary life. Several of the *yugbewo* referred to really vulgar sexual rhymes/sayings, causing shock or embarrassment when I asked the meanings from the Western-educated Ewe who were assisting me with the translations. Looking at all of this, I

¹ The initial research for this project was carried out from 1995-97 and again from 2000-01.

² *Yugbe* (plural *yugbewo*) literally means drum language or drum voice. It refers to the patterns played on the master drum and “answered” by the supporting drums. Some of these patterns correspond to phrases in the Ewe language; however, some of them have no meaning and yet are still called *yugbe*. See further the note on orthography at the end of this article.

became interested in the ways in which Ewe drummers had modified the traditional drumming handed down to them from their forefathers.

With these questions in mind, I embarked upon a three-month period of fieldwork in Dzodze during the summer of 2003.³ I interviewed several members of the Tagborlo family as well as respected drummers and elders from several areas within Dzodze. My findings reveal new aspects of transformations that occur within a tradition that have not yet been given much attention by scholars. One article that has been useful as a starting place for my research concerns aspects of tradition and change in Yoruba culture. In a study of continuities and changes between Yoruba Fuji music and Oriki praise poetry, Karin Barber and Christopher Waterman (1995) provide a framework for looking at how globalization has influenced contemporary Fuji music by positing the traditional Oriki as a representation of “deep” Yoruba tradition. They propose that Yoruba artists have attempted to broaden their horizons and bring foreign influences into their work by transforming the meanings to suit local styles, all for the purpose of increasing their prestige as artists through the introduction of innovative stylistic devices. I have made some connections with their study, but have also tried to emphasize connections with African-American musical and cultural practices to demonstrate that while surface features like drum language texts may change through time, certain structural principles remain constant. Additionally, the Ewe have not transferred their music to Western instruments nor evolved neo-traditional music forms like *Fuji*, a genre that relies on the new sound created by using microphones to amplify or distort acoustic percussion for the production of new rhythmic patterns. Ewe music continues to use acoustic drums accompanied by a chorus of bells, shakers, and hand claps, and, while new *yugbe* are constantly being developed, the underlying rhythmical framework has remained the same.

This study begins by looking at the nature of change in Ewe society and how recent changes have affected the musical culture of Dzodze. The Tagborlo family is then introduced so that the reader can conceptualize the ways in which tradition is passed down and maintained as well as changed. Then it looks in detail at the evolution of *Agbadza-Ageshe* from earlier styles of *Agbadza* with the aim of setting the stage for specific developments brought by Kodzo Tagborlo in the *Ageshe* style of *Agbadza*. Finally, by looking at examples from the drum language texts that Kodzo Tagborlo

³ The research carried out during the summer of 2003 was partially supported with the generous assistance of an AHRB (Arts and Humanities Research Board) fieldwork grant. The results were presented at an AHRB conference on Literature and Performance entitled “Exporting and Recreating Performance,” held May 12-14, 2003.

composed and by comparing them with similar themes drawn from differing genres, I strive to show the limits and extent of the processes of transformation in the genre of Agbadza music.⁴

Transformations in Contemporary Dzodze Society

Dzodze, like all *duko* in Eweland, is undergoing a period of transition between traditional beliefs and practices and those associated with Christianity and Western education. This combination of Christianity and Western education has provided the greatest impetus for change in Ewe society over the last century. John S. Mbiti has written about the link between these two forces in Africa in the following terms (1969:212): “Christianity from Western Europe and North America came to Africa not simply carrying the Gospel of the New Testament, but as a complete phenomenon made up of western culture, politics, science, technology, medicine, schools, and new methods of conquering nature.” This is also a major theme of Birgit Meyer’s recent study (1999) of Ewe Christianity, namely that the Ewe experience with modernity has been structured by the Christian duality between good (Christian, modern, advanced) and evil (traditional religion, primitive, backward). In this light, traditional drumming and dancing, and those who participate in them, are seen as backward or heathen, and one of the first requirements for admission into a Christian church is the eschewal of such activities (9-10, 24). In this section I want to highlight these processes of change and examine their effects on Dzodze music culture.

Before looking in detail at some of these transformations, something must be said about the nature of change in Dzodze Ewe society. Barber and Waterman (1995) have critiqued accepted notions of indigenous versus imported, arguing that change has always been present in Yoruba tradition, and that elements that might seem modern or postmodern in Fuji music were already present in Oriki. Among the elements they mention, inter-textuality and the prevalence of quotation and mixing of genres are relevant to *Ageshe* music (discussed below), but for the present I want to situate the changes brought by Westernization (or creolization, see Barber and Waterman 1995:240-41) within the continuum of change in Dzodze Ewe society.

⁴ The reader is also referred to the eCompanion to this article at www.oraltradition.org/ecompanion, which contains maps, photographs, music transcriptions, and audio examples.

Many elements in Dzodze society that were introduced long ago have become accepted in Dzodze culture. One example of how the “foreign” is “localized” is the case of *Afa* divination, which is believed to have come from the Yoruba system of *Ifa* divination at some point in the distant past.⁵ *Afa* is a divination system that incorporates 16 basic major signs and 240 minor signs based on combinations of the 16 basic signs. Each of these major and minor signs has its own name, as well as a collection of texts—songs, poetry, myths, and other associated forms of oral literature. A person who consults a priest of *Afa/Ifa* will be given one of these signs through a process of divination, and these texts will be used to help isolate a solution to the problem or question that brought about the consultation.

Afa as practiced in Dzodze, and indeed throughout Eweland, has maintained certain structural equivalences with Yoruba *Ifa*. The names of the 256 signs are virtually the same, as well as certain ritual items—the chain used for divination and the tablet used to write the sign that is found through divination. Additionally, the philosophy and methodology of the two systems are similar—a client comes to ask about a problem or misfortune, and through divination she or he is given a sign and a prescription for certain sacrifices or taboos as well as specific rituals to be carried out to rectify the problem. There is an important difference, however, and that is that the texts themselves and their corresponding interpretations are completely different. When one compares the texts given to researchers from Yoruba informants in Nigeria with those given by Ewe informants in Togo and Ewe informants in Dzodze, they are all different.⁶ In other words, it is a case of the Ewe taking certain outside elements and “creolizing” them to fit in with local religious and aesthetic needs.

Christianity and Western education (the two are closely linked) have undergone a similar process. Meyer (1999) argues forcefully that in regard to Christianity, the Ewe have modified certain ideas and practices to fulfill their need for protection and healing from the effects of evil spirit forces. Christianity was introduced to the Ewe by German missionaries in 1847 (Meyer 1999:5). Essentially what happened is that the Christianity propagated by the missionaries and inherited by Ewe church leaders emphasized that Ewe traditional religious beliefs were merely superstition and had no basis in fact. Eventually, however, many Ewe felt that

⁵ Interviews with Mishiso Tagborlo (2002), Kamasa Adegbedzi (2002), and Hotsu Vidzreku with Peter Atsu Dzila (2002).

⁶ I base this assertion on a comparison of texts recorded by Bascom (1969) in Nigeria, Pazzi (1981) in Togo, and my own research in Dzodze.

Christianity should take on the spirit forces that they continued to believe were very real and constituted the main cause of misfortune in their society. As a result, many schisms arose within the once-unified Ewe Christian movement, and people increasingly began to join churches that emphasized various forms of Christian faith healing, such as speaking in tongues, exorcism of demons, or syncretism with traditional religion (Meyer 1999).

It is apparent that, like the Yoruba, the Ewe have a long history of incorporating various “foreign” elements into their culture, and that the new meanings these elements eventually take on reveal that the Ewe are more than passive recipients of these new changes. I would argue, however, that the nature and extent of the transformations brought on by Christianity and Western education far exceed previous changes or upheavals in Ewe society. *Afa* divination, for example, came into an Ewe culture already familiar with spirits, destiny, and divination, and therefore did not require any significant metaphysical or ontological changes. In contrast, the religious and secular ideas brought by the Europeans were bound up with colonialism and its efforts at building a subservient class of Christian, educated elites. The resulting transformations have affected all spectrums of Ewe life from work, health, recreation, and marriage to the performance of funerals and ceremonies. Bearing all of this in mind, I will now enumerate and describe specific changes in greater detail.

Based on my research, as well as interaction with the people of Dzodze, I estimate that of the entire population about 25% practice Christianity exclusively, 25% practice traditional religion exclusively,⁷ and 50% mediate between Christian and traditional modes of worship. Sometimes Dzodze Christians refer to this last group as people who “go to church on Sunday and the shrine on Monday.”⁸ In fact, this group is made up of people who attend church occasionally as well as people who do not attend church but are not initiated into any shrine. Most members of this third group continue to practice ancestral customs and consult diviners in times of sickness or in cases of unexplained deaths. For ease of reference I will use the terms Christian, Traditionalist, and Syncretist to refer to these sub-groups of people.

⁷ Exclusive traditionalist implies someone actually initiated into a shrine, not one who simply goes for consultations or occasionally attends shrine activities. Exclusive Christian implies someone who not only goes to church but eschews all forms of traditional worship.

⁸ Meyer quotes a similar phrase given by her informants (1999:106): “yesu vida dzo vide” (“a little bit of Jesus and a little bit of magic”).

Each group has a different attitude toward traditional music and dancing, as well as appropriate procedures for carrying out a funeral. To some extent the beliefs of the deceased are the most important factor in determining the funeral proceedings, but the extended family also will try to ensure that the funeral meets the expectations of the majority of family members. Traditionalists perform the shrine dances as well as any funeral rituals required by that shrine. Many Dzodze Ewe do not feel comfortable attending these dances, but friends of the deceased in the Syncretist group might attend some of them. The Syncretist group generally performs the *Agbadza* dance at their funerals. Traditionalists as well as Syncretists both patronize *Agbadza*, making it the most widely attended music style. Christians have their own church hymns that they sing during service and at funerals. Within the Christian group, a small minority might attend an *Agbadza* dance if they knew the deceased, but most Christians do not attend traditional music events. As mentioned above, Christian church leaders, both Ewe and European, have emphasized the need to avoid non-Christian forms of music and dancing, but in the end it is up to the individual to decide which aspects of Ewe culture are evil or benign.

With the establishment in 1963 of the Dzodze-Penyi Secondary School, Dzodze now has a comprehensive educational system through the secondary level. Although education is not free, most children in Dzodze attend school at least to the junior secondary school level. It too has been a standard bearer for Western culture. All of the schools are Christian in orientation—many are set up and run by the Roman Catholic mission. While religious textbooks attempt to portray Islam and the traditional religions in a neutral light, no child would feel comfortable admitting involvement in a shrine. In fact, many children who were given shrine names at birth change to a Christian name when they begin school.

Additionally, education tends to orient children toward white-collar careers and away from the customary types of work found in the village. This has resulted in the migration of a great percentage of educated Ewe to the capital, Accra, or other urban centers in search of work. In this climate of “progress” musicians are seen as idlers, and are derided by their educated peers.

Most importantly, education, and the educated governmental ministers who set national cultural policy, have defined which elements of “culture” are appropriate for preservation and study. For that reason, when school children learn traditional music in school, they learn the music that has little or no association with indigenous religion. Therefore the secular *Agbadza*

dance has become the biggest representative of southern Ewe culture in Ghana.

Apart from Western ideas, another important source of transformation is what Daniel Avorgbedor (1998) describes as the “rural-urban interchange” between Ewe living in the villages and those who have moved to urban centers to seek work. In his article, which deals with the Anlo Ewe but is applicable to the situation in Dzodze, he lays out the contributions each side brings to the shared musical culture (396). The village is seen as a repository of musical knowledge that is drawn upon by the music groups that are put together in the city by Ewe immigrants. These groups are formed to allow the urban Ewe to continue the music and dancing that they enjoyed in the villages. Initially, all of the musical knowledge comes from the village, but soon an important change occurs.

The music groups formed by these urbanites are composed of Ewe from several different villages, as well as some non-Ewe, who join the group because they enjoy the music. Thus these urban groups draw on dances, songs, and *yugbewo* (drum language patterns) from many different areas and ethnic groups. Consequently, the urban musicians will often have a greater breadth of musical knowledge than the village groups.

As pointed out by Avorgbedor, funerals provide an important link between the village and urban groups. When someone from the city group dies, the group performs in the city and then brings the corpse home to the village for burial. They then perform in the village, giving the local musicians a chance to evaluate their playing, and importantly, to pick up new ideas and incorporate them into the village music repertoire (*ibid.*:393-94). Through this very means, Dzodze has incorporated the *Kpanlogo* dance, from the Ga ethnic group whose hometown is Accra, and modified the drumming parts and songs to conform to their own aesthetic needs.

Another aspect of this relationship that needs attention is the dichotomy that has emerged between “city” and “village,” not only in Ewe culture but also within virtually all of the ethnic groups in Ghana. On one hand the village can be seen as the storehouse of culture, but often the village and those who remain there are looked at disdainfully for their perceived simplicity or backwardness. One of the most stinging reproaches one can convey to a person is to call him or her a “villager,” an insult that can even be heard in the village proffered by one villager to another! In this sense a “villager” connotes someone whose “eyes aren’t open,” in other words a person who has not gone to school or received any formal education. In contemporary Ewe culture people from the village are often seen as country bumpkins who have never experienced modern life.

The processes of transformation mentioned above, which are only part of the influences affecting contemporary Dzodze, highlight the religious, social, and musical changes that have led to the development of new *yugbewo* in Dzodze *Agbadza* music. Parallel with the movement away from modes of traditional religious worship, changes in world outlook brought about by education, and influences from urban popular culture, Dzodze musicians have opened up a floodgate of creativity and injected it into the traditional rhythms they inherited from their forebears. I now describe this process in detail by looking at the innovations produced by the Tagborlo family.

The Tagborlo Family—A Family Tradition

Tagborlo metsona hliha o, hliha le tsihe biam.

The bare head can't carry a rough stone; it needs a padded cushion.

The Tagborlo surname is derived from the above proverb and connotes a difficult job that requires some assistance. It turns out to be apropos of the way in which the current *azagunɔ* (“chief drummer”)⁹ Kodzo Tagborlo has drawn on the unique musical heritage of this large extended family in creating a new style of *Agbadza* music—*Ageshe*.

The Tagborlo family has a long history of music. Their oldest known ancestor, Togbui Avoklia, who was among the elders who led the migration from Notsie¹⁰ to Dzodze sometime in the late seventeenth century, was a well-known musician. According to legend, his son Tovɔ was born with a small drumstick in his hand and went on to become a great drummer (interview with M. Tagborlo 2002). Each succeeding generation all the way to the present day has boasted Tagborlo ancestors who were famous drummers, dancers, and singers. Elders in Dzodze today remember Togbui Tagborlo, the father of the present family head Mishiso Tagborlo and the source of the Tagborlo name, as the most accomplished drummer in the area.

⁹ The Ewe term *azagunɔ* is often translated as “master drummer,” but I prefer to use “chief drummer” because there can be many drummers who play the master drum, but out of them one will be the acknowledged leader.

¹⁰ Notsie is a city in Togo from which all Ewes in Ghana trace their origin. Oral traditions from the various Ewe *duko* mention a wicked King Agokoli, whose tyranny caused the townspeople to escape from the walled city that he had them build and to migrate to their present homes in Ghana sometime in the late seventeenth century.

He was known to be conversant in many genres of music, sacred and secular, a tradition that continues today.¹¹

Looking at the situation today, Mishiso Tagborlo, now in his nineties, has had 36 children, virtually all of whom are renowned musicians. His son Lucas is a drummer for a dance group at the National Theatre in Accra. Lucas and another son, Kofitse, a well-known *heno*¹² (“song leader”), are leaders of Novisi, an important urban music group located in Nima, an area in Accra. His daughter Dzenko is an important singer in Dzodze, and is a member of several musical groups. His son Kodzo is the most talented of all his children, and has taken over as *azagunɔ* for the Tagborlo family, and by extension the division¹³ of *Apeyeme* in Dzodze. It is Kodzo who has served as my teacher of Dzodze music and culture and has been my primary informant.

The most unusual aspect of this musical heritage is that I was the first person to receive active instruction in music. Throughout their history no one was taught to drum, dance, or sing—they were born with the talent. The Ewe believe in something akin to reincarnation that they call *amedzodzɔ*. The essence of this belief is that when people die their talents, mannerisms, and general appearance are inherited by succeeding generations. This idea is similar to the way we talk about genes in the West. For the Ewe this means that if you are meant to drum you will be born with it; it is not something that is taught or learned.

I observed this feature firsthand in Kodzo’s son Sosro, whom I first met when he was nine years old. At that time he was already an accomplished drummer, able to correct mistakes in my playing when his father was not around. Now, at age 17, he is a master drummer able to play better than many adults. He was able to reach this point without ever being taught *anything* by his father! It is believed that Sosro inherited his talent from Togbui Tagborlo, who passed away before he was born.¹⁴ Recently I

¹¹ Interviews with Kodzo Tagborlo, Mishiso Tagborlo, Aholi Woname, and Kamasa Adegbedzi.

¹² *Heno* is a term for the song leader in a group, Ewe music groups having a song leader and then a chorus who sings the response. It also implies a person who composes his or her own songs.

¹³ I am translating the Ewe term *to*, denoting an area within the town settled and inhabited by certain patrilineal groupings, with the term “division,” which reflects Ewe habits of use when speaking English.

¹⁴ Interviews with Kodzo Tagborlo and Sosro Tagborlo.

observed King, a two-year-old toddler who is the great-grandson of Mishiso Tagborlo and is just beginning to walk and learn his first words of Ewe, pick up drumming sticks and play patterns on the drum. The most amazing aspect of his performance is that he is able to vocalize the patterns using the drum syllables used by Ewe drummers as he plays. All of this adds a certain mystery to Ewe music, in that the complex drum language patterns used in each musical genre are apparently learned only through observation and without any instruction.

In the late 1970s Kodzo and his brother Lucas went to a funeral at a village outside the Ewe town of Agbozume, and there they first heard the *Ageshe* rhythm. Inspired by the new sound, they returned to Dzodze and (re)created it.¹⁵ Essentially they took the rhythmic foundation and composed their own drum language patterns to go along with it. It is these *yugbewo* that form the basis of this study.

This is where the advantage of the large Tagborlo clan comes into play. Unlike other divisional music groups that are composed of people from different families, the Tagborlo family, in addition to the numerous children and grandchildren of Mishiso Tagborlo, also draws on the other descendants of their ancestor Tagborlo; all together they number at least 100 drummers, dancers, and singers. This vast reserve of talent was drawn upon by Kodzo to create new *yugbewo* of a scale and complexity never before seen.

With the departure of his brothers Lucas and Kofitse for Accra, the type of rural-urban connection described by Avorgbedor was established, and Kodzo was able to draw on ideas from Accra to complement his own creations. Through the establishment of a Dzodze style of *Ageshe*, Kodzo has become a renowned drummer throughout southern Eweland and in Accra. Having looked at the environment of change and the musical heritage that led to the creation of the new style of drum language, I now turn to the music of *Agbadza*.

The Development and Style of *Agbadza Ageshe*

Agbadza has a long history in Dzodze and throughout Eweland. Nissio Fiagbedzi (1977:51-61) classifies it as having been created during the early settlement period after they arrived from Notsie, a period he defines as

¹⁵ Interviews with Mishiso Tagborlo, Kodzo Tagborlo, and Lucas Tagborlo.

1650-1886. This was confirmed for me by the Dzodze elders I interviewed.¹⁶ In Dzodze it is said that *Atrikpui* was the foundation of *Agbadza*, and is considered the oldest style of *Agbadza*. *Atrikpui* was originally a war dance, which Fiagbedzi believes was developed in Anlo after the 1680 war with Dahomey (*ibid.*:57-58). Like many *Atrikpui* songs, the following one refers to war:

Afika dzi miafe viwo woto woyia adzogbe? em̩ ee.
Afika dzi miafe viwo woto woyia adzogbe?
Amekae du 'zanu hegbe ayameyi a?
Amekae be em̩ menyō o?

Which path did our sons take to their fate? Which road?
 Which path did our sons take to their fate?
 Who ate the food and refused to go to war?
 Who says that the road is not good?

In Dzodze, *Atrikpui* is now played as part of *Agbadza*, and is referred to as *Tovi Agbadza*, or uncle's *Agbadza*. Played at a medium tempo of about 120 beats per minute, this is the style of *Agbadza* that was played before *Ageshe*. The elder master-drummers I interviewed in Dzodze feel that at some point after the British came in 1874, *Atrikpui* ceased to be performed as a war dance due to the cessation of ethnic conflicts brought on by the British colonial occupation.¹⁷ It is still played as a folkloric war dance in the Anlo Ewe state to the south. It seems likely that at one time *Agbadza* and *Atrikpui* were separate dances with differing *yugbewo*, but as *Atrikpui* lost its original context and *Agbadza*'s popularity rose, the *yugbewo* became merged into one. In Dzodze, as in many towns in southern Eweland, the *Agbadza/Atrikpui* dance has been eclipsed by *Ageshe*.

Another style of *Agbadza*, *Akpoka*, is also very ancient. Fiagbedzi (1977:56) classifies it as originating in the same period as *Atrikpui*. *Akpoka* has a slow tempo ranging from 78-90 beats per minute, and is played at the opening of each *Agbadza* performance for the old people to dance. These songs also have many war references. The following song, available for preview in the eCompanion to this article, refers to a person who advises another not to accompany him to war because he is not strong enough:

¹⁶ Interviews with Mishiso Tagborlo, Aholi Woname, Kodzo Tagborlo, Kamasa Adegbedzi, Hotsu Vidzreku with Peter Atsu Dzila, and Zogli Amegbleto.

¹⁷ Interviews with Mishiso Tagborlo, Aholi Woname, Kodzo Tagborlo, Kamasa Adegbedzi, Hotsu Vidzreku with Peter Atsu Dzila, and Zogli Amegbleto.

Mebe mayi wobe nyemegayi o nuka nuti?
Agbetofle nu mefle agbe le ku asi o.
Avutsu wo da mele kpole dzogbe o.
Meyina Xogbonu, kalewoe menyo o
meyina Xogbonu.

I say I am going (to fight) and you say I shouldn't go—why?
 The living may buy things but they can't buy life from Death.
 The dog can bark but he can't catch a leopard in the bush.
 I am going to the fight¹⁸ (alone), foolhardiness isn't good, I am going to
 the fight.

Akpoka, like *Atrikpui*, has also been mixed with other genres of music in Dzodze. In this case, it uses many *yugbewo* and songs from the slow *Afa* dance. Originally slow *Afa* was performed for rites of the *Afa* shrine, and as discussed above, many of the *Afa* signs have their own songs. At some point in the past, *Afa* came to be played in secular contexts as well, for example at the starting of the *Agbadza* dance or at the opening of a recreational dance group's performance. Through time, *Afa* has come to have two forms—slow and fast—and the slow version has gradually been merged into *Akpoka* as they both share the same tempo and musical structure.¹⁹

The cases of *Atrikpui* and *Akpoka* highlight changes that have been brought on by the colonial experience and the introduction of Christianity. Transformations in performance context have resulted in the hybridization of these two dances. If Christianity continues to gain converts, it is possible that one day in the future the sacred genres of Ewe traditional religion will no longer be a prominent part of Ewe music.

For the most part, the *yugbewo* for both *Akpoka* and *Atrikpui* are not associated with any meanings in the Ewe language. They are simply phrases that use various combinations of the three drum sounds: bass, tone, and mute. These parts have recognizable sounds, and when called by the master drum, *agbobli*, are answered by one of the supporting drums, called *asivui*. Each pattern has its own response; thus it is essential that the master drummer and support drummers know and recognize common patterns. The

¹⁸ *Xogbonu* is actually the name of a town in Benin, known as Porto Novo, but often connotes a kind of dangerous place in contemporary Ewe song texts—a place one should not go because one is not ready or has not been initiated. I have translated it as “the fight” in line with the theme of the song.

¹⁹ Interviews with Mishiso Tagborlo and Kodzo Tagborlo.

phrases, therefore, are usually short—occupying two or sometimes three bell cycles. This changed considerably in *Ageshe*.

It is interesting to contrast the tone of *Akpoka* and *Atrikpui* with that of *Ageshe*. The first two styles were created in the ancient past, a time of powerful warriors who used their great powers, physical and spiritual, to overcome their enemies. *Ageshe* was created in the 1970s, more than 200 years afterwards. Meanwhile, enormous changes are taking place in Ewe society. The gods that were powerful in the past have now largely been superseded by a new god, along with a new type of knowledge, and rituals that once held great power and significance are now falling out of use, replaced by a new mixture of ideas deriving from foreign sources as much as local ones.

Ageshe is the fastest style of *Agbadza*, performed at a tempo of 150-60 beats per minute. For the uninitiated the speed alone is overwhelming. The *yugbewo* are also quite different. Most have meanings in Ewe and extend several bell cycles, some more than ten cycles. This all requires a lot of coordination between the master and support drums, something Kodzo was able to work out with his family of drummers. I do not believe another drummer could have worked out complex phrases like these without that kind of family support. This first *yugbe* phrase is a prime example of the *Ageshe* style:

Ege metuna exo na adaba o.
Ege metuna exo na adaba o,
adaba li xoxoxo hafi ege va dzo.
Gake kpekpe le ege asi wu adaba.

The beard can't tell stories to the eyelash.
 The beard can't tell stories to the eyelash,
 Because the eyelash was there long before the beard came.
 But it is the beard that grows thick and beautiful.

A comment on the old and the new, this drum language pattern represents the essence of the *Ageshe* style created by Kodzo. Using six bell cycles, it is a long and complicated pattern to work out. It also nicely sums up the innovations Kodzo created—many elders thought he was spoiling *Agbadza* when he first brought out *Ageshe*, but gradually the whole community accepted it, and it has grown thick and beautiful.

This next pattern is a type of sexual verse complete with onomatopoeia, not too dissimilar from a dirty limerick:

Kolo do supporta, aya do gakuku.
Kolo do supporta, aya do gakuku.
Bolo bolo dodzadza gedeme.
Alekea Mawu wo, wosi ami de to,
Za me miadogo kolo nuti gba gba za nado!

The vagina is wearing lingerie, the penis a hat.²⁰
 The vagina is wearing lingerie, the penis a hat.
 An uncircumcised penis has to fight to get in.
 But thankfully the Lord has prepared the vagina with oil.
 Let us meet in the night, and the vagina skin goes bang bang bang, it's
 all over!

While these patterns are being played on the drums, a chorus of men and women chant the texts along with them—all at a funeral! Such language is considered vulgar by many older Ewe, who have expressed to me their belief that when they were growing up people would not use this type of language in public. They blame “the youth of today” for having lowered the standards of polite speech. In any case, it is also important to acknowledge the process of secularization that has transformed the sacred traditional music genres into new forms that resemble popular music with all of its openness to experimentation and its willingness to break social taboos and barriers.

Musically, this pattern extends over ten bell cycles long, and therefore because of the speed and complexity is very difficult to follow and work out. Interestingly, this type of virtuosic phrase shares much in common with the “riffs” that played an important part in the evolution in the 1940s of bebop in jazz among African-Americans. A “riff” is a musical phrase that is played over a set of chord changes, and like the Ewe *yugbewo*, requires working out with members of the group who must harmonize with the soloist. At that time there was much serious competition between individual musicians and groups. The way to set yourself or your group above the rest was to develop a complicated “riff” that would blow away the competition. Interviewing Clyde Bernhardt, a pioneer musician of bebop, about the complicated “riffs” composed by Buster Smith, also a famous bebop saxophonist, Scott DeVaux reports him saying the following (1997:191):

The other guys would have to harmonize with that, and if they didn't get the harmonic notes to every one of those things he made, they just [got] eliminated . . . and Buster would do that in a jam session, especially when

²⁰ An uncircumcised penis apparently looks like it has a hat on according to Dzodze Ewe.

it got to be too many horns in there. He'd set some of them heavy riffs and the guys would just get their horns and go away and sit down.

Significantly, Kodzo often told me that many people could play the master drum, but to be considered a true *azagunɔ*, it was necessary to compose your own *yugbewo*.²¹ When *Ageshe* is played at a funeral, there are often two *agboblɩ* master drums alternating phrases. During the final hour of the dance, drummers from different divisions within Dzodze, or even from outside, challenge the local group. Ewe master drummers pride themselves on their ability to sit and watch the *yugbewo* played by other groups, and then sit down and play them back on the spot. During a challenge, therefore, playing complicated *yugbewo* gives the local group an advantage because outside challengers have to be very fast in order to catch the phrases and play them back. I think this connection between “riffs” and *yugbewo* is an important example of the connection between African and African-American music.

Another type of “riff” used in *Ageshe* is what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. describes as a signifying riff. He cites the following quote by Ralph Ellison (Gates 1988:104-5):

Back during the thirties members of the old Blue Devils Orchestra celebrated a certain robin by playing a lugubrious little tune called “They Picked Poor Robin.” It was a jazz community joke, musically an extended “signifying riff” or melodic naming of a recurrent human situation, and was played to satirize some betrayal of faith or loss of love observed from the bandstand.

Signifying riffs allow musicians and cognoscenti to tease or make fun of a situation or a person without their knowledge. The following *yugbe* is a prime example of this strategy. It relates an incident in which a local pastor took someone’s wife to be baptized at the riverside, and ended up seducing her:

Mawufɛ se ewoawo gbogblɔm be megamɔ
Amesrɔ o, megawɔ hasi o,
Pastor fe home!

God’s ten commandments say don’t have sex with someone’s wife,
 Don’t engage in prostitution,
 But the pastor split the vagina!

²¹ Interview with Kodzo Tagborlo.

Kodzo said his inspiration for composing this pattern was the fact that Christians in Dzodze are always trying to claim the moral high ground. As a musician and practitioner of certain elements from the traditional religion,²² he has been derided by members of the Christian community. Kodzo says this *yugbe* allows him criticize their behavior, which seems to contradict their beliefs—thus the reference to the ten commandments. It is also another example of the continuity between Africa and the Diaspora: the secretive nature of the signifying riff in both areas allows marginalized groups to comment on the behavior of the elite to their face without their knowledge. Indeed many of the Christians who attend that pastor’s church have rejected music like *Ageshe* and consequently would not understand the drum language.

The title of this study comes from another drum language pattern, which teases someone by stating “my mother has a television, does your mother have one?” When, presumably, the answer is no, the speaker retorts “get up and buy a round of drinks then!” It is not difficult to transport this scene to a schoolyard in America where a boy might boast of owning a Sony Playstation 2 as he teases another boy who does not have one, and this was created in a village that did not even have electricity at the time!

Televisi le danye asi, ele asiwo a?
Tso yi sela gbo!

My mother has a television, does yours have one?
Then get up and buy a round of drinks!

This type of phrase also seems reminiscent of another African-American tradition—the dozens. The dozens is a type of rhetorical game in which opponents try to out insult each other, usually by insulting the opponent’s mother or family. The bystanders cheer both sides until one person is able to give an insult that is so original that it cannot be countered. In this type of game the audience plays an important role as the “judge” by responding favorably to especially original insults (see Gates 1988:68-70, 99-101). In the challenges that occur between Ewe master drummers, the audience plays the same role by favoring the drummer with the most original drum patterns.

The final pattern I want to discuss is from a Bob Marley song called “Kaya.” Kodzo “sampled” the chorus from the song and put it into the *Ageshe* rhythm. The use of reggae “samples” like this one has given *Ageshe* the nickname *Agbadza* “reggae.” It is interesting to compare the Western

²² Kodzo could be considered to be part of the Syncretist group discussed above.

post-modern aesthetic of sampling and allusions that are so much a part of our music, films, and T.V. shows with what Kodzo has done in his own music:

Gotta have kaya now. Got to have kaya now.
Got to have kaya now, because the rain is falling.

This sampling is also a feature of Fuji music as described by Barber and Waterman (1995). They give an example of a signature tune by Dr. Ayinde Barrister and his group that uses the melody from Malaika, a folk tune from Kenya that was made popular by Pete Seeger, Harry Belafonte, and Miriam Makeba (246-47). Although quoting from the works of other artists may well have been a part of African aesthetics before the arrival of Europeans, it must also be acknowledged that the scope of references now available has increased exponentially as globalization has flooded groups like the Yoruba and Ewe with material not only from other parts of Africa but also from the rest of the world, including the African Diaspora. Bob Marley's music is a prime example of this—he is probably the most popular musician in Africa and the lyrics of his songs adorn buses, shops, and residences.

The *yugbewo* presented here aim to show how the *Agbadza* funeral music has been affected by the encounter between the Ewe and the outside world. Unlike neo-folk traditions such as Fuji, the Ewe have not made use of new instruments or amplification. In fact, to an outside observer the surface structure of *Ageshe* is indistinguishable from the earlier styles like *Akpoka* or *Atrikpui*. It is at the level of the drum texts that the transformations can be seen, as Ewe musicians like Kodzo have spiced up the phrases by linking them to oral texts. The fact that *Ageshe* is a secular dance has also permitted excesses in the composition of many of these texts, especially the ones with sexual themes. The older sacred dances like *Afa* or *YeƷe* have been resistant to these changes, and significantly the *yugbewo* are believed to have remained relatively stable throughout time.²³ Therefore it appears that secularization has also been an important influence in the composition process.

²³ Interviews with Mishiso Tagborlo and Kodzo Tagborlo.

Tradition and Change in Dzodze *Agbadza*

Based on my interviews with older drummers in Dzodze, I would affirm that change has always been a part of their music.²⁴ Indeed, as described above, the mark of an *azaguno* is that he composes his own *yugbe* in addition to playing those already known. The fact that the *Ageshe* patterns are so different from the older ones attests to the change that Dzodze has undergone in the last 30 years.

When I asked the meaning of *Agbadza*, Kodzo told me it means “everyone’s music” or “the people’s music.” He explained that unlike the shrine music or the music of the folkloric dance ensembles that are meant only for those members to participate in, *Agbadza* is for everyone. When I asked him how he felt about comments from certain elders that he was spoiling the music, he replied that most of the village funeral groups now play *Ageshe* using the *yugbewo* he created, and the music he created was his own inspiration.²⁵

Ageshe is a prime example of transformations going on within a tradition. The context of playing the music at funerals has not changed, the instruments have not changed, and the rhythmic structure of the music is the same. The innovation therefore lies solely in the creation of new drum language patterns that are relevant to the times. The humor, music “samples,” sexual jokes, and taunts present a snapshot of Dzodze at this moment, and form an interesting link between Ewe and African-American aesthetic devices. In the future other drummers will come to take over from Kodzo and they will bring their own *yugbe* to the music. Perhaps by then the patterns created by Kodzo will be out of date, and therefore no longer relevant to Dzodze culture. It will be interesting to see how this art form evolves in the next (re)creation. But in the meantime Dzodze is alight with the new sounds brought by Kodzo and the *Apeyeme Ageshe* group.

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²⁴ Interviews with Mishiso Tagborlo, Aholi Woname, Kodzo Tagborlo, Kamasa Adegedzi, Lucas Tagborlo, and Zogli Amegbleto.

²⁵ Interview with Kodzo Tagborlo.

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Interviews

- Adegbedzi 2002 Kamasa Adegbedzi. Interviewed Thursday 4 July 2002 at his home in Afetefe, Dzodze, accompanied by Kodzo Tagborlo.
- Amegbleto 2002 Zogli Amegbleto. Interviewed Tuesday 6 August 2002 at his home in Ablorme, Dzodze, accompanied by Kodzo Tagborlo.
- K. Tagborlo 2002 Kodzo Tagborlo. Interviewed a) Friday 19 July 2002, b) Sunday 21 July 2002, c) Thursday 25 July 2002, d) Thursday 8 August; all at the Tagborlo home in Apeyeme, Dzodze.
- L. Tagborlo 2002 Lucas Tagborlo. Interviewed Sunday 18 August 2002 at his home in Achimota, Accra.
- M. Tagborlo 2002 Mishiso Tagborlo. Interviewed on Thursday 25 July 2002 at the Tagborlo home in Apeyeme, Dzodze, accompanied by Kodzo Tagborlo.
- S. Tagborlo 2002 Sosro Tagborlo. Interviewed Saturday 17 August 2002 at my flat in Medina, Accra.
- Vidzreku and Dzila 2002 Hotsu Vidzreku and Peter Atsu Dzila. Interviewed Tuesday July 9 2002 at their home in Fiagbedu, Dzodze, accompanied by Kodzo Tagborlo.
- Woname 2002 Aholi Woname. Interviewed Thursday July 4 2002 at his home in Kpodeave, Dzodze, accompanied by Kodzo Tagborlo.

Note on Orthography

To make the Ewe texts included here easy to read, I have kept the use of diacritics to a minimum. Ewe is a tonal language, and the tones can often be marked after the vowels. However, I have not attempted to reproduce this quality here, as this paper focuses more on the symbolic value of the texts more than their representation. I use the following characters to depict certain unique sounds found in the Ewe language:

d is pronounced with the tongue against the back of the teeth like a rolled “r”

v is a bilabial “v”

f is a bilabial f

x is an unvoiced “h” pronounced by lifting the tongue against the roof of the mouth

o is pronounced like “aw” as in “saw”

e is pronounced “eh” as in “let”