
STORYTELLING SONGS OF THE ÈWÈ-DÒMÈ OF GHANA

By

DIVINE KWASI GBAGBO AND D. ROSE ELDER

Abstract: For the Central Èwè or Èwè-Dòmè people of Ghana's Volta Region, storytelling is a vital practice used to transmit key lessons. For centuries the Èwè-Dòmè employed storytelling performances in initiation rites, war celebrations, wake-keeping, and praise singing to enrich the gathering by relaying important information, building group identity, and binding the community together with story, song, and dance. Storytellers and community participants point to the role that songs play within storytelling as cultural markers for the Èwè-Dòmè communities in the area around Ho, the Volta Region's capital. Within the framework of extended family or town-wide storytelling performances, audience members habitually interrupt the story with song and dance that enlivens sleepy listeners and augments the story with an interpretive angle on the theme. Singing reverses the artist-audience roles. Other community events similarly provide an opportunity for artist-audience interaction and the reversal of roles. This paper documents the social role of songs in the context of storytelling as well as the performance practices, texts, melodies, rhythms, and harmonies of this important traditional musical genre in the face of numerous threats to its ongoing existence.

Key words: Èwè-Dòmè, storytelling, performance, storytelling session (Glitótó), song interludes (Glihàwó), song texts (Hàgbèwó).

Introduction

In this article we argue that storytelling songs provide a window into the memory of the community and a rehearsing of the norms and values of the Èwè-Dòmè people.¹ Songs represent a barometer of the community's resistance and adaptation to cultural change in the area from Ho to Hohoe in the Volta Region of eastern Ghana. Although they are not the only group living in eastern Ghana, the Èwè people comprise the overwhelming majority of the nearly three million residents. The Ghanaian Èwè form two main groups, the Anlo-Èwè in the south near Keta and the Èwè-Dòmè in the area around Ho. Throughout this article, we will use the word "Èwè" to designate the "Èwè-Dòmè" except where we are contrasting Èwè-

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Dòmè and Anlò-Èwè practices. During our three-year long research, we learned that storytellers and community participants recognise the significant role that storytelling and storytelling songs have as a common source of knowledge and identification.² For the Èwè, storytelling sessions present a platform for teaching and learning lessons in public speaking, ethical behaviour, morality, history, and other important traditions. As a key moment in community storytelling sessions, storytellers relate the origin and history of the group's arrival in Ghana. They explain how the Èwè elbowed their way into West Africa by the fifteenth century and spread further west from current day Nigeria (Dotse 2011: 1). Tsami Gazekpo of Takla-Gbògame recounts that his ancestors travelled across the African continent from east Africa, Ethiopia or Sudan, to Notsie and then to Ho. During this historical narrative, the Èwè interpose a set of songs to enhance the story. These are "Agbome miele", "Agòkòli be mile kpe gba ge", "Kaxoxoa nue", and "Tògbui Agòkòli." "Tògbui Agòkòli je ñuta sesè", for instance, reiterates not only the reason for Èwè migration but also the craftiness by which they fled to their present location.

This study of storytelling songs and the remembered and current performance practices of Èwè storytellers examines the transmission of cultural values and aesthetics and addresses the observation held by community members that modernisation threatens this cultural practice. We also provide examples to illustrate the performative aspects of storytelling.

Èwè storytellers cherish the stories as a link to their elders. When the extended family and larger community gather on moonlit nights or by firelight, the community invokes the memories both formally and informally. Today, the Èwè no longer practice many of the events that provoked storytelling performances. Storytelling and singing once enriched initiation rites, war celebrations, and wake-keepings. However, initiation rites have moved to the church in the form of baptisms and weddings. War celebrations have ended because Ghana is a peaceful democracy. Èwè storytellers point to the persistence of private all-night wake-keeping events; however, community members often substitute recorded music for live music. During funeral occasions, a visitor may hear the sound of indigenous and popular Ghanaian music blaring loudly from giant speakers. Recorded music may meet the varied musical tastes and expectations of a mixed-generational audience. One-

² For this article, the authors and a team of undergraduates and faculty from The Ohio State University Agricultural Technical Institute 2016 Ghana Research and Education Abroad collected data using qualitative methods appropriate to ethnomusicology. Researchers interviewed more than 150 people in the Ghana's Volta Region concerning the persistence of traditional storytelling and the role of storytelling songs in their performance. The team engaged formally in in-depth interviews with 57 storytellers and six local musicians. The researchers asked the participants to describe their interpretations of the past, present, and future of traditional storytelling songs focusing specifically on traditional community storytelling performances. This article documents and describes various aspects of their perceptions.

by-one, other modes of celebration overrun and replace traditional events like storytelling opportunities. The annual Yam Festival in September and the sporadic community gatherings to welcome visitors or tourists afford the few times each year when storytellers enjoy a substantial audience. Not surprisingly, young and old alike express their enjoyment of these performances. At these events they frequently pledge to create or attend a storytelling in the near future.

Indeed, the storytelling session or *glitótó* provides a rich cultural experience with multiple layers of performance beyond simple story narrations (Agawu 1995: 170). These include comedic acting, mimicry, humming, dancing, drumming, morality play, and community correction. The storytellers choose their stories ahead of time, attempt a different cartoon-like voice for each character, practice the tunes, and invent nuances to surprise the audience. The community members also come primed as active participants in singing, drumming, and dancing. Èwè musician and university professor, Avorgbedor (2001) asserts, “Musical participation becomes a social debt” (40). Amegago notes that the Èwè use “drum-dance” or *vu* for “social harmony”, as well as “continuity, order and stability” (2011: xviii, 49).

Uugbe, the drum-dance language, increases the complexity of the storytelling event. Blum enumerates three characteristics of this language: the “strategic use of repetition; the modulation of speed, pitch and intensity to depict what is being described (for example, the motions of the different animals); and the use of nonsense syllables as sound effects” (1995: 74). Agawu explains that the community member who interjects interludes, with simple pitch and rhythm, contributes and “constructs a work of great complexity, through shifts of register, intricate motivic connections, and subtle tonal focus” (1995: 76).

Within the framework of a single story, two or three community members will each contribute a song to embellish the storytelling performance. Ultimately, the spectators’ assessment of a *gli vivi*/sweet story depends not only on the narrator’s eloquence or delivery skills but also on the songs her story inspires. The success or failure of a storytelling experience is thus a communal and collective responsibility. The song interludes, *glihàwó*, arouse laughter, bonding, bittersweet memories, and reflection.

Performing morality as storytelling

On a special night of storytelling, drumming and dancing, the *aḍaḅukḍe*, provides an opportunity for the people of the Asḍgli State to tell stories during the annual *Teḍuza*, or Yam Festival. The stories focus on a myriad of themes, particularly the migration of the Èwè people, conquests in wars, and other acts of valour. Storytellers perform a similar function and role to that of the griot, the West African praise

singer of the Mande people, who repeats political stories in public settings (Diawara 1997). Abankwah and Abankwah (2017) write, “The great storytellers of the Ghanaian society and the traditional singers, bards and griot were the ‘knowledge houses’ of the Ghanaian society” (369).

For generations, members have performed the story-song combination at a variety of events to build the community. Initiation rites depend on storytelling where young people repeat their individual stories and reinvent themselves by verbalising and singing about how they view their changing role in the community. Warriors and hunters celebrate victories, mourn defeats, and reinforce lessons of bravery with stories and singing. Community members remind the warriors that even in horrifying circumstances the community’s survival depends on their courage.

Storytelling may grace wake-keepings where women mourn, sing and tell family stories over the body of a deceased, loved one throughout the night prior to the funeral service. Westerners speak of “laying to rest” their loved ones, evoking the possibility of their disturbing or haunting the living. Èwè families perform these rituals “to make sure that the spirits of the dead are properly accepted in the ancestral world” (Dorvlo 2017: 69). During the wake, mourners console each other with humorous, exaggerated stories, like “The Priest and the Mystery Cap of Death”, to take their minds off the sadness and begin the healing. The story emphasises the reality, impartiality, and inevitability of death. In this story,

A priest asks God to give him prior notice of the next villager to die. God agrees and promises to alert the priest with a secret sign. In the cemetery during subsequent interment rites, a red cap, visible only to the priest, covers the head of each future victim. The priest silently enjoys this secret for many years. One day, much to his surprise, the very cap hovers around his head. In a great fright and much to the bewilderment of the mourners, the priest runs into the bush in the middle of the burial rites. However, only a few minutes pass before he returns resigned that it will soon be his turn to go. The priest sings:

Èwè	English translation
Kue dja ame nu loo;	Death is harassing people;
Yomeyiewo babaa na mi loo!	I sympathise with the dead!
Ao, novie!	Oh, my companion!
Ku menya ame o lo! Nyatefe.	Death does not show favouritism! Truly.
Ao, novie!	Oh, my companion!
Ku menya nu o lo! Nyatefe.	Death is so heartless! Truly.

The story and accompanying song help the participants find their way through the event as they face their grief and their own mortality. In each of the community stories, the participants hear the distilled wisdom of the ancestors, the storytellers having prepared themselves to interpret and reinterpret this rich store of memories (Locke 1992: 17). A storyteller might interject with a proverb, spoken in Èwè, English, French, or other languages. For example, storyteller Divine Gbagbo closes a story by quoting the adage, “*Akpòkplò kuku dzime lotoo, ata ñeñe abò ñeñe!*”/A dead frog with its back bloated and its legs and arms broken.” Then, to enlighten the uninitiated he explains further, “One can only measure the full length of a frog when it is dead, which means that one can better appreciate the value of something when one loses it.”

In storytelling sessions, storytellers tell *gliwo*, *nyatotowo*, *adzowo*, *alobalowo*, *lowododowo* and *nyadodowo*. *Gliwo* are stories with moral lessons, such as “The Old Lady and the King’s Ram” and “The Priest and the Mystery Cap of Death.” *Nyatotowo* are origin myths like the one often told by grandparents while walking. In answering their grandchildren’s curiosity about one of life’s mysteries, “Where does God live?” grandparents explain, “God used to live nearby, but humans started pounding *fufu*. The noise caused God to move far away.” A storyteller may tell *adzowo*, puzzles and riddles, such as “*Sodza akpe, beleti deka* /What is a battalion of soldiers wearing only one belt? A broom”, or *alobalowo*, which comprise short parables or stories ending with a question, such as “The King’s Daughter and the Three Suitors.” In this story,

A king’s daughter is ready to marry. The king announces a challenge to find the best suitor. Three men arrive ready to pursue the challenge. The king instructs the men to search the world for three months to find something truly unique. On a specified date, the three return. One has found a magic mirror; another, a magic mat; and the third, medicine that brings the dead back to life. The king is impressed. He tests the mirror by calling his daughter’s name. As her image appears in the mirror, to their horror the four discover that she has died suddenly. They jump on the second suitor’s magic mat and fly to her side where the king successfully uses the third suitor’s medicine to revive his daughter.

The storyteller asks the children, “Tell me which suitor should marry the king’s daughter and explain your choice.” Every child has an opportunity to offer a response.

Storytellers may insert *lododowo*, or proverbs, like, “*Detsi vivie hea zikpui*”/The soup that is sweet draws the chairs closer”, or *nyadodowo*, the advice from lunatic’s ramblings:

The lunatic from Keta says he has a lot of responsibilities, and he doesn't know what to do first. One of these jobs is to shout. He decides to complete the easiest one first and move to the most difficult. He decides shouting is the easiest and shouts to get that out of the way.

When a storyteller tells this story, she is warning an angry, misbehaving child that he sounds like the lunatic from Keta.

Each of these aforementioned oral performing practices creates a space for exploring human nature and teaching valuable lessons as to how to comport oneself within the community, how to overcome obstacles, how to create beauty and renew the soul, and how to be alone without feeling lost. Tellers and hearers alike empathise with the story's characters, who may be similar or unlike themselves. The stories ground and centre the community members and allow their imaginations to take flight.

Despite the acknowledged value and appreciation of traditional storytelling, storytellers admit that when they hold sessions, fewer and fewer people participate. One farmer in the small town of Akrofu-Xewiwofe, west of Ho, complains, "The children are busy with their homework and television. The arrival of cell phones and the proliferation of social media platforms further exacerbate this trend. Youth don't have time or interest in storytelling. We organised a storytelling, and they wouldn't come."

Another reason for fewer storytelling events, explains storyteller Pauline Gollo, is that a Christian pastor cautioned her against telling these "fetish" or pagan stories. "He is brainwashing us to cast aside our cultural traditions", she asserts. "I'm telling people not to be greedy. I wonder, is he greedy? Is that why he wants me to stop telling them?"

In one town, Akoeffe-Gadza, west of Ho, leaders had been organising storytelling sessions every two weeks to fulfil their responsibility to group solidarity. However, by 2018, the sessions had collapsed. The group leader, Anthony Ntumi admits, "We only meet every three months, and no one but our group members attends. We have lost our motivation." Ntumi expresses dismay at the changing patterns.

For the foreseeable future, the storytelling performance may only live on due to the perseverance of cultural preservationists and musicians like Miriam Anku, who started a storytelling club in her high school, or Francis Dzormeku of Ho, who specialises in collecting and teaching stories and songs to children and youth.

Song types

During the storytelling performance, three types of songs form the corpus: the *glimiha* or embedded song, *glimedeha* or interrupting song, and *glinuwuha* or postlude (Kovey 1988: 15). The storyteller sings a *glimiha* from the perspective of a character in the story. Audience members sing *glimedeha*, interrupting the story with scheduled or spontaneous song interludes and clapping and dancing. The audience sings a *glinuwuha*, congratulating the storyteller and bringing the group out of story-time into real-time. Each of these song types deserves further exposition with musical examples.

The *glimiha* (lit. story-inside-song) only occurs in the confines of one specific story. A story may feature an embedded song anywhere in its beginning, middle or end. When the narrator sings a *glimiha*, he must sing it in the special voice he has created for that character and depict the appropriate mood. The narrator may sing the song alone or with the help of the audience, depending on the structure of the song.

In the story of “The Disobedient Daughter”, Miriam Anku, an English teacher at Mawuli Senior High School, sings “*Jane, Jane, Janeti*.” Anku portrays three characters: for the first and fourth times she sings as Janet’s mother; the second time, the Lion in a gruff, deep bass voice; and the third, the Lioness³:

A young girl named Janet is stubborn and wilful. One day, Janet’s mother sends Janet and her siblings to the river to bathe. Before they leave, she instructs the children not to sit on one particular rock. Janet wonders, “Why can’t I sit on that rock?” When she reaches the river, Janet ignores her mother’s warning and immediately sits on the rock. To her frustration, she sticks to the stone. Nothing will pry her loose. Her family does not abandon her. They build a hut around her to protect her in the night. Again, her mother advises, “When I come with food, I will sing to you. Don’t open the door for anyone else.” The mother demonstrates, “Jane, Jane, Janeti, Jane, Jane, Janeti/I am the one, I am the two, I am the three/ Open the door, open the door for me” to demonstrate her song.

Meanwhile, a lion hiding in the bushes overhears the mother’s song and decides to entice Janet into opening the door. When the mother leaves, Lion knocks and sings the song. Janet puzzles for a minute, then decides that that loud, low voice is not her mother’s. She ignores Lion’s knock. However, Lion is not to be deterred. Cleverly, he recruits Lioness. She also

³ Elder and Crook. 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3o5qgS88Bmk> (at 4:17)

observes the mother's approach and hears her song. The following day Lioness approaches the door ten minutes before Janet's mother is due. She sings a warm, rich aria; a siren song. The mesmerised Janet opens the door. Lioness pounces and devours her. When Janet's mother arrives, she finds the blood and bones of her daughter dripping from the rafters.

The disobedient Janet not only disregards her mother's prohibitions, she cannot distinguish the sound of her own mother's voice from that of Lioness. She pays the ultimate price for her disobedience.

When the storyteller initiates the *glimaha*, the audience members know which lines they may sing. There are those they may not sing no matter how familiar they are with the song. An interjection at the wrong time would constitute a breach of etiquette and an act of insubordination. Even in situations where narrators, especially children, omit crucial portions of a song, an audience member who wants to help must first seek consent by applying to the narrator, "*De mo made me na wò/Allow me to join!*" In exceptional situations of a narrator's inability to sing properly due to tone deafness or a sore throat, the narrator would ask in advance for an audience member to double the melody or take the entire singing part. In such a case, the helper immediately relinquishes the artist's role at the end of the song.

Unlike the embedded song, a *gli-me-de-ha* (lit. story-inside-put-song) is not part of the storyline. Indeed, these songs may be random, a passing thought or a favourite instruction of an audience member that has little connection or perhaps only a personal connection to the story. Still, when the audience member introduces the song, the entire gathering joins. A *glimedeha* serves to deepen the involvement of audience members in the storytelling session and to help them remember key cultural messages, judged as such by the interjector. For example, an interjector may sing, "Jesus loves me", a widely-sung Christian hymn, then improvise her own melody to an additional text, "Even though I don't deserve it" or "Everyone's pointing, saying I stole the *fufu*."

Another interrupting song, "*Tsentsen kuma*", adds an energising, rhythmic call and response. However, all the words except "*apɔtyiwa*", which in the Akan language means an earthenware bowl, are either vocables or could be words from another language, long forgotten:

Call: *Tsentsen kuma*
 Response: *Tsen kuma*
 Call: *Apɔtyiwa*

Response: *Tsen kuma*
 Call: *Agudublese*
 Response: *Tsen kuma*

When choosing a *glimedehe* the interjector must be certain that the majority of the group is familiar with the song interlude or the singing may fail. The lead singer also selects a comfortable key so that the song does not lé ve na/catch the throat of the participants. Song styles may vary, moving back and forth from speech to song (Locke 1992: 16). Although the audience has high expectations of every part of the overall performance, they would generally treat presentations that fall below expectation with humour and fun, especially if they come from children.

Even when the thematic content of a song sounds like nonsense, the singer can use it to make a point. “*Gole mimli tolitololi*/A gourd is rolling on and on” expresses uncertainty about the origin of the rolling gourd as well as its final destination. (see Figure 5) The song charges both the narrator and the audience to participate, learn moral lessons, and keep alive the community stories. The lyrics express how the storytelling process is an unending and evolving one.

The actors suspend the forward momentum of the plot when they interject a song. The delay in the action creates tension thereby heightening the audience’s interest. Through songs, the audience learns about the characters’ motivations and inner thoughts. When audience members choose the songs, they offer their own take on events and thereby reveal more about themselves than they do about the story or the characters in it.

At the end of each story, the narrator and audience perform a formulaic, rhythmic dialogue or *glinuwuha* (lit. story-end-complete-song). The audience initiates this favourite *glinuwuha*:

Audience: *Yòò, dzenume wò!*/Okay, you have salt inside your mouth!

Narrator: *Dzeseto goboe mi!*/You equally possess salt-laden hollow ears!

Audience: *Akūa!*/The cheek of it!

In the *glinuwuha*, the audience members joke with the storyteller, “Wogablemi egbe/You have deceived us today with your outrageous tale” or “*De menya*/If I’d known... but...I wasn’t there that day” (Agawu 2007: 4). This tussle between the narrator and audience strikes a fair balance of approval for all the storytellers, guaranteeing equal treatment irrespective of differences in delivery skills. The *glinuwuha* sharpens boundaries, marking the exit of one narrator, the storyteller, and the arrival of another. Thus, the *glinuwuha* returns one to the role of audience

and elevates another to the role of performer. Here again, the audience might occasionally sing contemporary songs that are related to the story to reinforce a moral lesson. For instance, at the end of the earlier cited story of “The Disobedient Daughter”, they might sing the Christian hymn based on the Biblical ⁴story of Absalom (II Samuel 13-19):

<i>Nàzu òyè òyè to be Mawu nàb wò.</i>	Be an obedient child for God to love you.
<i>Zu òyè nyui.</i>	Be a good child.
<i>Absalom òyè agla eye wòka avatso.</i>	Absalom revolted and lied.
<i>Megawòe o.</i>	Do not fall victim.

The song references a Judeo-Christian example that reinforces the Èwè cultural norms.

When the audience members sing the text, “*Wogablè mi 'gbe*/We have been deceived again today”, they acknowledge the fictional nature of storytelling. One way or another, the three meanings of the Èwè word *blè*, to deceive, entice or convince, all aptly encapsulate the audiences’ perceptions of the storytelling process. They appreciate that the storyteller is always trying to dupe the audience with an impossible tale, and the participants want to assure the storyteller that they are not fooled.

The narrator first entices the audience with the naming of characters at the introductory stage of the story. She then goes on to convince listeners with exceptional narrative skills and innuendos until she sways them. The audience unwittingly follows the narrator who escorts them to another world where they learn important life lessons.

Only after the story is ended does the audience complain in good humour that they have been deceived.

Since postlude songs have a dual role of serving as the finale to one storytelling episode and the transition to the next, the audiences usually perform them in a fast and lively tempo as they watch one storyteller exit and another enter. This example does not feature the usual call and response structure of African songs. Rather, everybody sings jointly to complement the storyteller and acknowledge the group’s appreciation despite its incongruities. In addition, their melodies are relatively short with repetitive texts.

⁴ This is a story from the Christian Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures.

The storytelling performance

At the beginning of a story, the storyteller symbolically knocks on the door to request admission to the storytelling space with a formulaic call, “*Àgòò!*” The audience quiets down and answers, “*Àmèè*”, to invite the artist. The storyteller calls again, “*Misè glí lóo/Listen to a story*”, inquiring as to whether the audience members are ready for the story. Hearing the affirmative, “*Èglí névá/Let the story come*”, the storyteller introduces the characters of the story; a widow, a chief and his daughters, a turtle and a flock of birds, or *Yiyi*, the trickster spider. The audience affirms, “*Wodze dzi/It has fallen on them.*”

At this point, the storyteller launches into the narrative. A minute or more into the exposition, an audience member leaps to her feet. Often with a sly or self-congratulatory look, he asks permission to sing a song, “*Menɔ etefe/ I was there, I witnessed it.*” The narrator responds, “*Yoo/ Yes*” or “*Nɔ etefe nam tɔɔ/ Be a true witness*”, granting him permission to perform. Even when the group anticipates the song as in the case of embedded songs (see *glimeha*), the listeners feign surprise, then engage in impromptu dancing while singing the chorus over and over. Singing unifies the group and can “enhance their retentive ability as they learn and retain the stories and song” and their important messages (Oamen 2012: 192). The use of repetition builds the excitement and opens up space for more of the audience to participate and shine. Repeating a word or a phrase also serves as a musical device to give prominence and urgency to messages. According to an Èwè proverb, “*Ne gbede le tefe deka tum la, nyae be abi le afi ma/ If the blacksmith continuously hammers a particular place, know that it is a problem spot.*” After several choruses in which the energy rises and flags, the group members decide they have had enough and wind down to the final chorus. Next, it is the storyteller’s responsibility to incorporate the song’s meaning into the story.

Today, a song interlude may consist of any song, a modern one like “Happy Birthday to you” or “*Kofi kple Ama*”, or a traditional one like “*Nèke de nu*” (see Figure 3) that is triggered by the story, however tangentially. “*Kofi kple Ama*”⁵ may accompany stories as diverse as one about a headstrong girl or another about the trickster, *Yiyi*. On occasion, interrupters create simple, repetitive songs on the spot. One woman improvised on the words, “I was there, I was there, I was there”, to the amusement of all.

To recapitulate, storytelling songs add greatly to the storytelling performance. Certain songs may enhance any story, whereas others are specific to one particular story.

⁵ Crook and Elder. 2017c. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XrzRxJ88BIU>
The song borrows from the European nursery rhyme, “Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water.” “Jack” and “Jill” are “every child” names. The Ghanaian equivalents, *Kofi* denotes a male born on Friday, and *Ama*, a female born on Saturday.

The storyteller may sing a song in character all alone or the audience may join in a chorus or subsequent repetitions. Audience members themselves may interrupt the story and take the performer's role with a song. Whatever the case, dancing and clapping further enliven the song and the storytelling event.

Performing *hàgbèwó*, the song texts

The performance of song texts provides another area of interest. The term, *hàgbèwó*, means "song-sounds." Community members pass the texts from one generation to another and typically cannot identify their original sources. Èwè song lyrics usually employ two patterns for repetition of the lyrics, aabba or aabbca. These represent straightforward repetitions, not rhyming patterns because of the relationship between the tonal language and melody.

In performance, storytellers and audience members employ various devices to personalise and enhance the texts. These include: "reduplicative intensifiers" like "*kákákáká*/very, very, very" or "*ḍḍḍḍḍḍ*/ slowly, slowly"; "extensions" of the vowels as in *sègèe* with two e's or *gódóo* with two o's, directing the prolonging of the syllable; sonic "attention grabbers" like an explosive onomatopoeic "KPÀM" or imitative noises like *kpùkpùrù* when a character chews on a mouthful of cloves; speeding up or slowing down the spoken or musical line, to emphasise the rhythmic aspects of the narrative and "musicalise" the language (Agawu 1995: 167, 170). For example, when using the phrase, "*Èzò dzáa dzáa dzáa*/She walked stealthily", a storyteller slows down each repetition of *dzáa*, building the excitement. A performer may speak songs texts as a patterned rhyme or sing them as a melodic song or a combination of the two, as in "*Prom, Prom, Prom*", which starts out all rhythm in the first two lines then turns melodic in the second two lines.⁶

A compelling storyteller must have an *aḍebibi*/cooked tongue, as the Èwè describe the storyteller's verbal and musical prowess (Agawu 1995: 31). The ability to create multiple expressive voices, time the presentation, and sing musically endear a storyteller to her audience.

Musical performance

In the following description, a group of farmers in Kpenoe, a town five kilometres northeast of Ho, are meeting for a storytelling session planned as part of a welcoming ceremony for a group of travellers. Regina Dake weaves a story, "The Old Lady and the King's Ram":

⁶ Elder and Crook, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3o5qgS88Bmk> (at 5:23)

The king's ram repeatedly invades the old lady's farm and eats the vegetables she wants to sell at the market. One day, the old lady has had enough. She catches the ram, kills it, and sends the meat home for cooking. The old lady directs her grandchild to fetch some wood for roasting the goat. As the grandchild walks to the bush, she sings, "*Fia f'agbotsu ke!*" (see Figure 1). A townspeople overhears her song and informs the King about the killing of his ram. The King orders the old lady executed and the grandchild enslaved. The moral of the story is "When you hide, people will find out."

The figure shows a musical transcription of a song in 6/8 time. It is divided into three parts: Counter Rhythmic Clapping, Melody (Call), and Response. The lyrics are: "Fia f'a gbo tsu ke; Ma ma wui lo; Ma ma ða mí ðu; A zi go ðo!" and "A zi go ðo!".

Figure 1: "Fia f'agbotsu ke."⁷ Transcription by Divine K. Gbagbo.

Èwè	English translation
Fia f'agbotsu ke;	The king's ram;
Mama wui lo;	Grandma killed it;
Mama ðaa míðu--	Grandma cooked it--
Àzi gòdó!	A giant peanut!

Dake performs "*Fia f'agbotsu ke*" using the voice of a small child. At the end of each phrase of text, the assembled farmers and their families answer Dake with the line, *Àzi gòdó*. In the key of C, they sing GG-CC, low-low, high-high, on four quavers in 6/8 metre, imitating the tonal inflection of a drum. Every time, the joking phrase, "Oh, goody! A large peanut! There will be a lot to eat", provokes peals of laughter in the audience. As soon as Dake starts the song, everyone rises, dances and claps their part. They know how and where to respond because this is a community favourite. They laugh loudly, showing their appreciation and approval of the subtle nuances Dake incorporates in her story.

Because of the tonal nature of the Èwè language, the melody of each verse must change as the words change (Locke 1992: 60, Agawu 1995: 50). The singer would find it difficult to fit a single melody to the rise and fall of pitches required for a

⁷ Crook and Elder 2017b. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=izkfa5C2aaM>.

second set of words. To clarify, throughout this paper, the accents over each word show the three-pitch levels of syllables in Èwè. An accent *grave* (ò) denotes a low pitch; accent *acute* (ó), a high pitch; and no accent, a middle pitch. The tonality of words varies from low to middle to high, and these pitch levels differ from town to town.

A few songs use word substitutes when the verse is repeated. In “*Kue ðia me nu loo!*”, “*mè-ò*” replaces “*nú-ò*” in bars 7 and 9 (see Figure 2). It is worth noting that word substitution is possible only if both words, the original and the substitute, have the same tonal inflections on each syllable. However, in its absence, the writer could slightly alter the melody to create the tonal structure of the language and still give the appropriate meaning. In this example, the use of two different pitches (G-E) for “*nú-ò*” in bar 7 and the use of the same pitch (E-E) for “*mè-ò*” in bar 9 illustrates a treatment of tonal inflections of Èwè words that rhyme rather than repeat.

Kue ðia me nu loo. Yò me yis woe ba ba na mi loo. Ao no vie, ku me

7 1. nya nuo loo, Nya te fe. 2. nya meo loo, Nya te fe.

Figure 2: “Kue ðia me nu loo!” Transcription by Divine K. Gbagbo.

The song, “*Ne ke ðe ñu*”, in Figure 3, enhances any situation where a character fails to heed advice and consequently falls into trouble. In this version, the Èwè harmonise in thirds and sixths, which they have learned through practicing part-singing in Christian church choirs. They harmonise with friends at other gatherings, such as during their hours of tedious, backbreaking communal crop weeding. All these rehearsals mean that harmonising on old favourites comes easily in storytelling sessions.

Nè di_tse, nè ke ðe ñu; Nè di_tse, nè ke ðe ñu. Nè yi to fe li

6 fe, nè ke ðe no fe ñu loo.

Figure 3: “Ne ke ðe ñu.” Transcription by Divine K. Gbagbo.

Èwè	English translation
Nè di tse, nèke ɔe ŋu;	You looked for it. You got it.
Nè di tse, nèke ɔe ŋu.	You looked for it. You got it.
Nèyi tɔfe li fe,	You demanded payment for father's debt,
Nèke ɔe nɔfe ŋu loo.	You uncovered mother's outstanding debt.

At this point, a brief description of the rhythm, harmony, and melody of Èwè storytelling songs is required. Typically in 6/8 or 12/8 meter, the rhythmic organization of Èwè *vugbe* relies on the bell. Storytelling songs themselves derive from popular rhythmic patterns of Èwè drum-dance ensembles, such as *agbadza*, *kinka*, and *zigi*.⁸ A storytelling song may also use *bɔbɔbɔ*, *gabaɔa*, or highlife style in 2/4 meter.

The storytelling session may feature a few of the many patterns available in the *bɔbɔbɔ* drum-dance in handclapping or slapping thighs, arms or chests. These frequently replace the bell to establish a counter-rhythm. Agordoh notes that handclapping serves as a musical instrument of a “contrasting timbre” and is not simply a marker of time (2002: 14). Not all storytelling sessions include instruments, but participants will always use hand clapping or body tapping. With the timeline and melodies registered in their memories from dozens of repetitions, audience members are ready to perform at the appropriate time.

African-influenced music often puts the emphasis on the backbeat, the second and fourth beats in 4/4 meter. For example, in Regina Dake's song, “*Fia fa gbotsu ke*”, in Figure 1, the bell plays dotted crochets on the strong beats of one and four. A second group fills in with quavers on two-three and five-six. The vocal part “rocks” the beat, short-long, long-short, long.

Energetic drum-dance patterns are not the only source of storytelling songs. Songs in very slow and free rhythmic style accompany melancholic and contemplative narratives. In a slow speed with neither accompanying instruments nor hand clapping, a storyteller sings the songs alone. The songs have irregular pulses and staggered rhythmic structures. In “*Mama ɔe fe xɔme*”, in Figure 4, the last quavers of most bars are each tied to the first quaver of the following bar, as in bars 1 and 2. The ties in Western notation accentuates that the rhythm stresses the weak beats and displaces the governing meter of 6/8. The tied notes emphasise the overlapping of two-against-three rhythms and produce a lilting effect. The storyteller assumes her own speed without any interference from the audience.

⁸ For their timelines, the Anlo-Èwè in the south use a *gankogui*, a double bell, while the Èwè-Dome use either *kretsiwa*, a finger bell, *atoke*, a slit bell, or a *tigo*, a two-in-one bell like the *gankogui* tuned approximately a fifth apart. The double bells are generally sonorous. But the *kretsiwa* is light, and the *atoke* sounds loud and sharp.

The image shows a musical transcription of the song "Mama de fe xome mito." It consists of two staves of music in 8/8 time. The first staff contains the lyrics: "Ma ma de fe xome mito. Ma ma da ma ka ni kae. Ne nye nye ye". The second staff, starting with a measure rest (6), contains the lyrics: "qui la, tsi ne lem gbe, tsi ne lem gbe." The melody is written in a treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat).

Figure 4: “Mama de fe xome mito.” Transcription by Divine K. Gbagbo.

The melodies of storytelling songs may consist of historical songs attached to their stories for generations or derive from popular songs. Amegago proposes that birdsong may have inspired some melodies (2011: 58). “*Ativi tukui*/The small but heavy tree” provides an example of the correlation of speech tone and melody in the first and second call sections with an interval of a third (F – A), while they loosely correlate in the response phrases with an interval of a second (F – G – A).⁹ Yet, many song melodies veer from tonal inflections of the Èwè language. For example, “*Kofi kple Ama*” uses a western-style, contemporary melody, exhibiting no adjustment for the tonal language.

The Anlo-Èwè employ pentatonic scales with men and women singing in parallel octaves, whereas the Èwè-Dòmè use seven-note scales and sing polyphony in thirds and sixths (Agordoh 2002: 88). Èwè-Dòmè melodies tend to be diatonic and offer one note per syllable of text (Agawu 1995: 46) Since artists limit the range of their songs to an octave or less, each audience is able to sing the song without difficulty. The syncopated and lively rhythms add to the enjoyment.

Agawu and others note that the Èwè aesthetic shows preference for melodic patterns that “descend from their high point to a low point” as much as the tonal language allows (1995:50, Jones 1949, Nketia 1963, Ekwueme 1980, Gorlin 2000). Examples include “*Fia f’agbotsu ke*” (see Figure 1) and “*Go le Mimli*” (see Figure 5).

⁹ Crook and Elder 2017a. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FwTU5xwUZGQ>.

The musical score for "Go le mimli" is presented in two systems. The first system (measures 1-6) shows a counter-rhythmic clapping pattern in the left hand and a melody in the right hand. The lyrics are: "mli to li to li to li, go le mi mli. Go le mi mli to li to li". The second system (measures 7-12) continues the clapping and melody, with lyrics: "to li, go le mi mli. Fi ne ke go tso go le mi mli to li to li to li, go le mi mli. Fi ne ke". The third system (measures 13-18) concludes the piece with lyrics: "go tso, go le mi mli to li to li to li go le mi mli." The clapping pattern consists of eighth notes with rests, and the melody is a simple eighth-note line.

Figure 5: “Go le mimli/The gourd is rolling on, regardless of its origin.” Transcription by Divine K. Gbagbo.

Another song with a descending melody is “Tre kpoe”, in Figure 6, in which the tortoise mumbles and mourns over and over, “Peer pressure brought me here” and “I am who I am. Everyone has their specialness.” The melody falls from a high C to a low C with multiple leaps of a fourth.

The musical score for "Tre kpoe" is presented in two systems. The first system (measures 1-6) shows a counter-rhythmic clapping pattern in the left hand and a melody in the right hand. The lyrics are: "Tre kpoe Tre kpoe so hae kplɔ mu ve; Tre kpoe ɖa ɖi ma ka nu na". The second system (measures 7-12) continues the clapping and melody, with lyrics: "yea; Tre kpoe a gble to la va va; Tre kpoe za za, Tre kpoe." The clapping pattern is similar to Figure 5. The melody is a descending line with several leaps of a fourth, ending on a low note.

Figure 6: “Tre kpoe/Short calabash.” Transcription by Divine K. Gbagbo.

For a second shape, the melody begins and ends on the same pitch although it rises and falls in the middle section. The third, upward shape ends on a higher pitch than the one on which it starts. “*Ativi tukui*” demonstrates an upward shaped melody as it begins on F and ends on A, a third above. The melody also often features a step up one tone and leaps down two or more tones as in “*Ne ke de yu.*”

The Èwè value harmony as an adornment of the entire performance. To this end, if the song meets the expected harmonic standards, the Èwè singers say, “*Edze fia wo to dze ga wo to/* [Harmony] is pleasing to the ears of king” (Amegago 2011: 189). The group expects that everybody will sing in tune, or one might hear, “*Ègble ha/You spoiled the song*” or “*Èdzi ha gbegble/You have given birth to a spoiled song.*” Although the Èwè sing in two- or three-part harmony, they would rather the individual voices *lɔ de wo nɛwo me/weave* or blend into each other. According to Agordoh, Èwè-Dòmè musical sense focuses on listening to the horizontal flow of two voices in thirds as equals with “scant regard for intervallic relationships” weaving into a colourful whole (2002: 16). At a storytelling event in Wegbe-Kpalime the audience sings “*Mienɔ anyi*” in three-part harmony.¹⁰

The harmony clearly stands out in songs that have the responsorial singing or call-and-response structure, which is also characteristic of the Èwè-Dòmè *avihawo* or crying songs, which storytellers or audience members may incorporate into the storytelling performance. In this style, the group responds to the melodic line in triadic harmony. In storytelling sessions, two singers may work together to perform the lead part and sing the melody in parallel thirds or sixths.

More recently, storytelling audiences have introduced European functional harmony, especially hymn-derived harmony into their performances by adding a third or fourth part to the song. Audience members who can sing four-part harmony join in on their favourite parts. Storytelling songs become occasions for the introduction of what Agawu (2016: 301) refers to as “macroharmony”, in which singers create simultaneously unrehearsed, unplanned harmonising.

Excellent Èwè storytellers are those who employ appropriate performance techniques in story and song to paint a vivid and accurate picture of the unfolding events in a traditional *glitótó*. They skilfully weave the melody and appropriately capture the various characters’ emotional states of fear, anger, joy, grief, disgust, and surprise to satisfy the needs of the audience. In other words, the storytellers’ art of narration contributes immensely towards the aesthetic perceptions of participants. It makes them either *lé blanui/* ‘catch’ sadness or *kpɔ dzidzo/* ‘see’ joy (Fiagbedzi

¹⁰ Crook and Elder, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iI4BF85C_mE&feature=youtu.be (Listen at 2:50.)

2009: 251-254). Moreover, the audience members themselves contribute to create a joyful community event. Only then can the audience exclaim: “*Gli la de fu tome na mi/* The story has entered into our bones.” In the storytelling session, songs fulfil both musical and dramatic purposes in the hands of these accomplished performers.

Conclusion

Storytelling songs reveal how Èwè culture has evolved. Songs range from culture-specific to borrowed songs sung in many different languages, including languages that differ from that of the story and in languages that the participants can no longer translate. Audience members bring songs from a variety of sources, ancient and modern, to interject into the proceedings to the amusement of all. Even so, the participants express fondness and appreciation for the old favourite songs and the traditional values they project, values that appear to be changing from the communitarian to the individualistic.

Particularly in the past ten years, we have noted the rapid homogenisation of the culture. For example, as many Èwè move from an extended family to a nuclear family, the opportunities for intergenerational sharing diminish,¹¹ and international media, like Nigerian movies and American cartoons, present new cultural messages. Local traditional leaders, older community members, and storytellers speak of the value of the traditional messages in storytelling, but they must work tirelessly to attract community members to storytelling sessions. Ghana’s national education service has written traditional stories into the required literature and moral education curriculum, but many of the teachers no longer know the songs or the performance methods. As the song “*Gole mimli tolitoliti/A* gourd is rolling on and on” predicts, the story of Èwè storytelling moves on, and storytellers are unsure about its future.

Storytelling songs remain vital avenues of musical and creative verbal expression among the Èwè-Dòmè. Their performance bridges social gaps in relation to age, gender, religion, and class, and fosters cohesion. Participants perpetuate the culture of sharing and experience the joy of receiving knowledge and social values from others. To preserve this rich legacy, Èwè-Dòmè communities should include storytelling in all traditional festival events and encourage schools to promote it in their extra-curricular activities. Furthermore, to prevent the rapid loss of much of Èwè oral culture due to modernisation, researchers could avail themselves of several opportunities. To capture the essence of storytelling songs and their performance, future research should centre on systematically recording storytelling performances and cataloguing storytelling songs. Researchers could also examine other forms

¹¹ See Kpoor, Albert (2015).

that storytellers employ, such as riddles, puzzles, and proverbs, to determine their relevance in contemporary Èwè culture and how they complement stories to enrich these indigenous Èwè oral traditions.

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