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Performing Value: The Proverb as Analytical Framework in West African Music

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Abstract

This paper employs Jean-Louis Siran's tripartite model of proverb analysis in examining structural and functional elements of *seperewa* (Akan harp) music. I argue for an analytical approach to creative processes in West African socio-musical contexts that bridges musical structure and concepts of wisdom. To make this link, I draw parallels between "signification," "meaning," and "value" in the realms of proverb recitation and musical performance using the *seperewa* tradition as a case study. Siran's model of proverb analysis addresses three issues encountered in ethnomusicology: the relationship of (1) musical structure and context, (2) individual performance and tradition, and (3) language and music as forms of communication. This paper is part of an ongoing project between the author and *seperewa* performer and educator, Osei Korankye, that explores pedagogical approaches and generative processes in *seperewa* music.

Introduction – The Proverb as a Point of Departure

Proverbial styles of communication continue to permeate contemporary public life in Accra. The back windows of taxis and *trotro* minibuses provide a mobile platform for common sayings such as "God's Time is the Best," the comical "Love Me and Hate Money," and the enigmatic "2 Things." These texts draw meaning from their contexts, collectively creating a landscape of shifting phrases mapped through mobility. Linguist Kwesi Yankah argues that the importance of enactment and context for understanding proverbs extends far beyond the text to include "a mode of behavior, a style of communication that is manifested in both word and deed" (Yankah, 1989, p. 344). Mastering this mode of behaviour

distinguishes the orator as one with knowledge of not only texts but also the possible contexts in and processes through which proverbs will communicate.

As in proverb studies, music scholars have grappled with bridging structural elements and functional processes in the analysis of West African modes of creative expression. In the field of ethnomusicology, this discourse has centered on the relationship of musical structures and functions. In his seminal work *The Anthropology of Music*, Alan Merriam grapples with bridging musical and social analysis noting, "We wish to know not only what a thing is, but, more significantly, what it does for people and how it does it" (Merriam, 1964, p. 219). While acknowledging the challenges of "searching for generalizations which are equally applicable to all societies," he outlines what he sees as ten major functions of music (p. 218). These functions include emotional expression, aesthetic enjoyment, entertainment, communication, symbolic representation, and physical response, which, as Merriam posits, help link musical structures to their "purpose objectively designed" (p. 218).

Building on Merriam's framework, Charles Seeger's 1966 article "The Music Compositional Process as a Function in a Nest of Functions and in Itself a Nest of Functions" expands the scope of musical analysis. Seeger's analytical model operates on a continuum that includes musical structure, repertoire, social norms of performance, cultural traditions, the extent of these cultural practices, and the impact of these practices at both a societal and individual level:

> By "structure" I refer in the present instance to such examples as the physical form of a particular artifact and of aggregates of artifacts, to the patterns of belief and behavior observed in the individuals who produce the artifacts and the patterns of population distribution and social class these individuals represent; by "function," (1) to the traditions or ways of making, using, believing, and doing things that have been inherited, invented, cultivated, and transmitted by these individuals; (2) to the relative intensity of the activity; and (3) to the relative dependence and interdependence of the traditions of a culture, and to their combined operation in the culture as a whole and in the living bodies of their carriers (Seeger, 1977, p. 143).

Merriam and Seeger's structural-functionalist approaches continue to reverberate in recent ethnomusicological work, though Merriam's essentialist categories and Seeger's universalist framework find less footing than specific concepts that bridge symbolic, performative, and experiential realms of music making. For example, Steven Friedson, in *Remains of*

Ritual: Northern Gods in a Southern Land (2010), explores the phenomenon of the African hemiola or three-against-two rhythmic framework in relationship to the symbol of the crossroads, which figures heavily in West African folklore and religious practice.[1] From this perspective, Friedson links dance, symbols, musical form, and social action within the context of the ritual so as to explore "ontomusicological" structures in African music (Friedson, 2010, p. 153).

This paper takes cues from Friedson's ontomusicological inquiries by exploring music through the lens of proverbial "styles of communication." It focuses on the musical processes of Akan *seperewa* master Osei Korankye, specifically exploring how one might use models of proverb analysis to examine *seperewa* music within the West African socio-musical paradigm. By undertaking this approach the paper hopes to contribute to understandings of generative processes in African music that consider language.[2] In the words of Kofi Agawu, "No one who ignores its linguistic aspects can hope to reach a profound understanding of African music" (Agawu, 2016, p. 113).

I first met Osei Korankye in 2013 when I joined the University of Ghana's Department of Music as a visiting scholar. Korankye's history with the University of Ghana began in 1995 when he was introduced to Professor J. H. Kwabena Nketia by renowned palm-wine guitarist Koo Nimo. Through this meeting, Nketia invited Korankye to join the International Centre for African Music and Dance (ICAMD), which operated within the Department of Music and provided archival materials for researchers as well as practical instruction for local and visiting scholars in various musical traditions of Ghana.

The importance of preserving and developing *seperewa* music has remained an important thread throughout Nketia's own work as a researcher and administrator shaping cultural studies in the University of

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1 In Western art music, hemiola describes the technique of playing three beats in the space of two beats or two beats in the space of three beats. This gives a temporary impression of moving into a new time signature. The African hemiola is described as a perpetual balance of two beats in the space of three beats so that neither have the dominant role.

2 In 1933, Seeger wrote that in musicology, "to increase the understanding of the social function of music it is necessary first to examine the relation of music to language." Charles Seeger, "Music and Musicology" *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (1933), pp. 143.

Ghana. These efforts reached back decades to Nketia's time in the University of Ghana's Department of Sociology supervising traditional music research and collection, which included documentations of the disappearing *seperewa* tradition. These recordings, housed in the J.H. Kwabena Nketia Archives within the Institute of African Studies, date from the early 1960s and are rare examples of early 20th century *seperewa* performance styles. The goal of Nketia's work was not simply to document fading traditions but to apply them to nation building in Ghana:

> Of particular interest to me were those principals that reinforced the goals we set ourselves in the Department of Sociology, which enabled us to search for what Nkrumah described as 'Africa-centered ways' of looking at our traditional cultural legacy, not simply because of the need for decolonising scholarship in African studies, as he put it, but also because of the importance of relating our findings to specific contexts of application in national life. For the objective of reinstating traditional culture in contemporary contexts was viewed by President Nkrumah as a political priority for promoting national integration and the consciousness of the African identity undermined by colonialism (Nketia, 2016, p. 56).

Nketia's vision in creating a position for Korankye included not only the dissemination of traditional knowledge about *seperewa*, but also providing Korankye with an opportunity to advance his own educational interests and performance practice. Indeed, within the School of Performing Arts, Professor Mawere Opoku of the dance department regularly encouraged Korankye by suggesting readings as well as approaches to performance. Korankye noted that Opoku taught him how to draw an audience in and build a dynamic performance stating, "When you make noise, you draw people's attention. You get them closer to the instrument. After that you release it and just make it softer, and their spirit and your spirit will work together."[3] Opoku invited Korankye to perform for any willing listener so as to spread awareness of the *seperewa* after which he would comment on the song arrangements. As Korankye remembers, "It was like an audition. He taught me not to stay at one place for long." It was around 1996 after performing at a funeral attended by university staff that Korankye's deeply moving and introspective practice became more widely appreciated and he began to receive regular requests as a performer. At one point in 1997, Korankye was invited by Toyota Ghana

[3] Osei Korankye. Interview with author (2018).

for the promotion of a new model release where he translated the vehicle's profile into Twi and performed a praise song in the showroom.

Korankye's life as a practitioner of a traditional African art form reflects what Austin Emielu addresses as "progressive traditionalism;" a process in which "cultural interactions with outside forces are deployed to enrich, not destroy, inside resources in a progressive manner" (2018, p. 207). While Korankye's musical sensibilities are rooted in watching his grandfather perform the instrument, his practice developed through the efforts of Nketia, Opoku and other University of Ghana professors reinstating local performance traditions. While Emielu rightfully argues that ethnomusicology has perpetuated the "view that new developments and innovations in African music exist outside the orbit of the traditional," I hope here to also acknowledge the efforts of African scholars who have long advanced a perspective of traditional music as neither frozen nor at odds with change, innovation, urban culture, and international flows of information (Emielu, 2018, p. 209). Tradition could even interface with commerce as exemplified by Korankye's performance for Toyota Ghana. As a result of these expanding roles of traditional music, Korankye's recognition and performance network grew and he was able to reinvent a fading tradition in a way that served contemporary contexts of African music.

Sharing in the academic culture of the University of Ghana has also impressed on me that discussions of music in Africa are shaped by analytical concepts that can obscure as much as they reveal. For example, the idea of "African rhythm," which underlies academic and pedagogical discussions of traditional music, is largely constructed from Western epistemologies. As Kofi Agawu observes in *Studies in African Music* (1959)—a classic work on Ewe music—Reverend Jones uses the term "rhythm" as if it is *de facto* universal:

> It seems remarkable that it never occurred to the Reverend A. M. Jones (or if it did that he did not mention it), in the course of writing some 533 printed pages mainly on the rhythmic structure of African music, in particular that of the Southern Ewe people, to ask his "native" informant, Desmond Tay, whether the Ewe have a word for rhythm or at least a concept of rhythm (Agawu, 1995, p. 387).

A reason for the absence of a direct translation of rhythm into Ewe could be partially due to the term's relationship to Western notation and forms of analysis. The concept of rhythm in Western musical analysis is predicated on the conceptual separation of pitch and time, which extends

to the independence of music's basic sonic elements (rhythm, melody, harmony, and timbre) from the contexts of performance. Isolating and reifying rhythm in notation makes it concrete and so grants it the power to replace the processes of expression and communication that give it meaning. As Agawu argues, the analytical perspectives that accompany this reasoning lead to myths such as African music's inherent rhythmic nature. With these questions of music analysis in Africa in mind, I look to research on proverbs in West Africa for models of how values are expressed and understood in the hope that it will inform how we analyze communication in music and advance perspectives of traditional expressive arts as important living practices in contemporary Africa.

Proverb Studies and Conceptions of Wisdom

Proverbial styles of communication and conceptions of wisdom offer a useful framework for studying West African music and examining the dynamic relationship between structural musical events and their functional roles in people's lives. Scholars studying African philosophy share important challenges with those studying music. As argued by Brookman-Amissah (1986), Gyekye (1987), and Yankah (2012), context as a source of meaning in proverb recitation is under-theorised compared to structural analysis. As is evident in the number of proverb collections, it is much easier to transcribe a proverb than it is to describe the contexts in which it is meaningfully used. In actuality, uncovering even a small number of possible contexts that could give a proverb meaning requires extensive fieldwork, making it a daunting task.

The same could be said of the structural rhythmic patterns found in West African bell time lines.[4] These timelines have been transcribed and so reduced to a "rhythm" or static structure separate from the myriad of instances in which they are performed. Though easier to analyse as structural forms, we find that bell patterns depend on context in which they are performed to understand how they communicate expressively. Just as the term rhythm reduces musical processes to structural elements, the Western definition of philosophy reifies wisdom as something sought rather than enacted and, in doing so, separates it from the actions of the

[4] In 1933, Seeger wrote that in musicology, "to increase the understanding of the social function of music it is necessary first to examine the relation of music to language." Charles Seeger, "Music and Musicology" *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (1933), pp. 143.

individual. Kwame Gyekye argues one cannot directly translate the word "philosophy" into Akan languages:

> In Akan conceptions one is conceived of at once as a wise person (*onyansafo*), not a lover of wisdom. It is such a wise person who in fact does or would have the ability, flair, and disposition to ask certain types of questions and make types of inquiries (Gyekye, 1987, p. 61).

Building on this understanding nature of wisdom in West African paradigms, Yankah argues that the study of proverbs outside of discourse and context has led scholars to assign them fixed forms and meanings. When a form has a fixed meaning it can be contradicted, whereas when it is open to a multiplicity of meanings it enters the realm of interpretation. In West Africa, the proverb is a flexible concept related to a social process (Yankah, 2012, p. 15). Proverb study has come to emphasise how meanings emerge from context. The proverb is, in this sense, a tool that must be applied to be effective. Simply stating a proverb will not constitute wisdom. Rather it is the proverb's relationship to a dialogue that gives it efficacy.

As with proverbs, the *seperewa* performance, especially when reified through transcription, can be analysed on a structural level. However, as Seeger's conceptualisation of structure and function shows, this physical form must be linked to cultural practice and, more importantly, embodied acts. As structure lends itself to analysis more readily than function, the embodied experiences of music can be mistakenly equated with structure-describing terminologies such as rhythm. In educational contexts, musical performance often takes on the characteristics of these static definitions as curricula emphasise rote learning of concepts rather than practical knowledge of creative processes. Seeger's framework, however, expands the analytical scope beyond "the physical form of a particular artifact" to include traditions of thought and the actions of "living bodies."

The *seperewa* tradition developed in Akan societies as a medium for conveying stories, history, social commentary, and aesthetics. As Nketia states, the *seperewa* is a "vehicle for the expression of mood and thought in song" (Brandel and Leichtman, 1994, p. 122). The instrument's name—*se* or "speak", *pere* or "touch," and *wa* connoting "little"—describes the careful balance between the voice and instrument as well as the delicate sound of the music. The word *pere* also invokes the sound of the plucked string. Like Mande *kora* players, *seperewa* repertoire includes praise singing though songs are also drawn from personal issues encountered in local communities as well as stories commenting on moral conduct. With the influx of guitars and accordions in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the

seperewa has faded from public life though it remains a foundational element in highlife music. The name *seperewa* reflects Akan dialogic perspectives of wisdom as well as West African musical values. As Gyekye argues, in Akan culture, wisdom is an activity: "*nyansa* (wisdom) is seen in what a person says…and how he or she says it; that is, it is through discussion and discourse that a person shows that he or she is wise" (Gyekye, 1987, p. 62). In order to convey wisdom, the *seperewa* master creates dialogic relationships between the instrument, sung or spoken text, and bell pattern, as well as the performer and listener. In a musical context, wisdom or value is created through a performative process in which the same idea (repeated textual or accompaniment pattern) is presented in an evolving context (changing musical setting through variation).

As Yankah notes, proverbs live in motion, embedded in both written and non-written forms, including cloth designs, personal action, and drumming. Wisdom is recognised in those who know how to wield language, placing the right phrase in the right context. In a recent conversation with Korankye about proverbs, he reflected on observing his nephew's verbal skills, recalling a story in which the young boy used a birdcall as the template to compose the proverb *Baa te di ɛkɔ wua ɛkɔ wu* (Come eat because, whether you eat or not, death will come).[5] In this case, the boy's ability to connect tonal and rhythmic characteristics in a spoken phrase with his natural surrounding demonstrated an ability to connect structural forms in a way that contributed to the proverb's adaptability and non-fixity. For Korankye, his nephew's observation and verbal skills has permanently linked the specific bird song to these phrases and sentiments.

Analytical Models in Proverbs: Signification, Meaning, and Value

In the following section, I employ anthropologist Jean-Louis Siran's tripartite model of proverb analysis to bridge structural elements and functional contexts in *seperewa* music and explore directions in musical analysis and dialogic processes of how wisdom is conceived and perceived.[6] As Siran argues, the proverb's message exists in three distinct

[5] This was translated from Sefwi, an Akan dialect of Western Ghana. The name Sefwi is said to be derived from the phrase *"asa awie"* (stop war), which references the pervasiveness of conflict in the region during the 17th century.

[6] Jean-Louis Siran, "Rhetoric, Tradition and Communication: The Dialectics of –Footnote continues on next page

though interrelated realms: "signification," "meaning," and "value." A proverb's "signification" is represented by what can be translated from the original language. It is what is spoken and the easiest aspect of the proverb to be analysed because it can be written down. Proverb collections often offer translations of these texts with few explanations, which give the proverb a sense of stability and concreteness, as if the meaning somehow lived in the text. However, to interpret the signification's "meaning" requires culture specific knowledge. This knowledge could be a familiarity with specific uses of symbols or references to site-specific events or characteristics. For those who lack cultural understanding, the proverb appears confusing or overly simple though it is this knowledge that enables the signification or text to be short. The culturally generated "meaning" is also what enables the listener to interpret events in their own lives. This process of applying the proverb to interpreting a real life situation constitutes the text's "value." It is in the proverb's "value" that we see the variety of understandings that can arise from a single text or signification.

For example, anthropologist Sjaak van der Geest examined multiple interpretations of the enigmatic Akan proverb *Ɔpanyin nni biribi a ɔwɔ abatwɛ*, which he loosely translated as "If an elder (*ɔpanyin*) has nothing, he has an elbow (*abatwɛ*)" [Van Der Geest, 1996]. This process of translating identifies the proverb's signification or structural form. However, one requires cultural knowledge to interpret the sentence, particularly the symbol of the elbow (*abatwɛ*). Amongst his informants, van der Geest finds twelve different meanings or cultural interpretations of *abatwɛ.* The interpretation that he finds most convincing explains how the elbow can be a subtle way for an elder to warn a youngster who is not following proper social protocol in the chief's palace. The elder uses the subtle bump of the elbow rather than verbalising his criticism to communicate sensitive information in a public space. "Value" emerges when this proverb is used in a specific social situation. This requires one to speak the proverb with the present situation in mind and the listener to understand its relevance. One might be alerting someone else to be aware that not all warnings are easy to see.

Proverbs thus do not contain a single meaning but are constantly

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Meaning in Proverb Use," *Man*, New Series, 28, no. 2 (June 1, 1993): 225–42. By "functional context" I refer to both the specific physical and social environment of a given performance as well as the musical setting, which includes the layers of musical activity created by different instruments.

changing and open to interpretation. As van der Geest finds, "[p]roverbs are no static depositories of traditional knowledge and wisdom, but instead living things, changing all the time."[7] In some cases, the official meaning of the proverb could be less important than the discussion generated around the proverb. Some studies have examined various interpretations of a proverb to demonstrate the misleading process of looking for the correct or original meanings. Rather, we should accept that proverbs, as well as songs, "are living things and they are recreated continuously in conversations and disputes, changing their meanings and appearances all the time" (Van Der Geest, 1996, p. 116).

Though van der Geest reminds us that we should not "get entangled in exegesis, looking for 'correct' or 'original' meanings," he does not examine the *abatwɛ* proverb in actual use (Van Der Geest, 1996, p. 116). As Siran shows, the difference between "meaning" and "value" is dependent on contextual specificity. Like van der Geest's informants, Twi speakers I asked who were familiar with the *abatwɛ* proverb did not have a unified explanation of the elbow's meaning. In one case, as we discussed possible meanings, it was also noted how the word *abatwɛ* (elbow) could also be easily mispronounced and incorrectly intonated so as to produce the words *oba* (child) and *twɛ* (vagina), which creates a vulgar though absurdist phrase. The resulting comical and taboo non-meaning then became the basis for an interpretation of the *abatwɛ* proverb that I interpret as "speak carefully lest you become a fool in your attempt to appear wise," and liken to American writer Mark Twain's saying, "The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug" (Fishkin, 1996, p. 192). This conversation demonstrated that even when the proverb's *signification* changed due to mispronunciation, the new emergent *meaning*, despite its absurdity, still provided a means through which it could communicate *value* in a specific context.

Interpreting Signification in Music

The proverb's pithiness belies the breadth of its applications and occurrences. Much like the proverb, common West African bell patterns also share this quality. Bell patterns such as the 3-2 clave (common to *kpalogo*

[7] Sjaak Van Der Geest, "0panyin: The Ideal of Elder in the Akan Culture of Ghana," *Canadian Journal of African Studies/La Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines* 32, no. 3 (January 1, 1998): 465.

drumming) are short and easy to remember, embedded in the mind as the body moves from place to place. Though these patterns are repeated often thousands of times in a performance, they are most often studied as a single unit or smallest repeating cycle.

If we apply Siran's model to *seperewa* music, we see a parallel between the spoken proverbial text or signification and the sung and performed sound. Like the proverb, *seperewa* music relies on short structural ideas that lack value outside of contextual placement. In Brookman-Amissah's words, the concise nature of the proverb "does not allow one to draw more conclusions from them than their context would allow" (Brookman-Amissah, 1986, p. 75). The proverb's succinctness lends itself to easy memorisation and adaptation to regular speech. This balance of conciseness of structure and limitlessness of application requires all present participants to contribute to the creation of value. Because context changes, participants must adapt concepts and construct new understandings and perspectives that fit the given situation. In music, this may be conceived as improvisation, where genre-specific structural elements are arranged to fit the given musical and social context ideally unlocking potentials of a given idea.

Conciseness in *seperewa* music is apparent in the short and cyclical phrasing that is structured in reference to a guiding bell pattern. Often this pattern follows what John Collins calls the "triple offbeat" pattern of Ghanaian highlife and *siyki* music (Collins, 2006, p. 81). In Figures 1 through 4, we see the triple offbeat pattern, played by the bell, arranged against increasingly complex variations of a *seperewa* melodic cycle as performed by Osei Korankye.[8] As the context of the accompaniment changes, we see the bell pattern as a "potential space" in which multiple interpretations arise rather than a repeating static figure. The value of the supporting parts derives from their relationship to the "potential space" of the bell pattern. As is shown in Figures 1 and 2, Korankye's *seperewa* part moves from marking the silence of the bell pattern to accenting the first and last beat of its cycle (beats 4 of the measures). As Korankye increases the density of *seperewa* part, he begins to blend these two approaches of marking the bell pattern's space and accents.

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[8] I chose a series of pedagogical exercises designed by Korankye for this analysis because they are more accessible to non-music specialists reading this work. These exercises for beginning *seperewa* students serve to build facility playing across the instrument's range as well as ingrain a sense for dialogic processes discussed here.

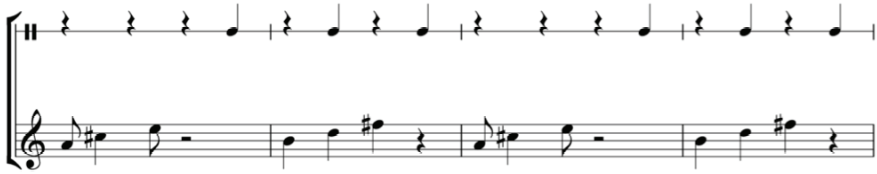

Figure 1: Basic *Seperewa* supporting part (lower staff) with "triple offbeat" bell pattern (upper staff)[9]

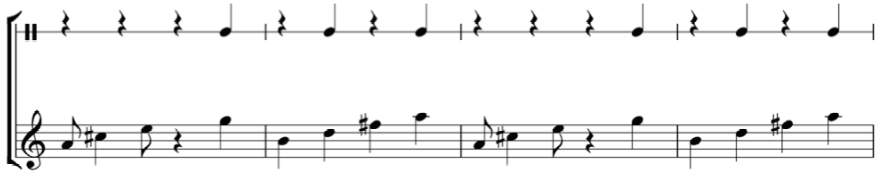

Figure 2: First *Seperewa* variation (lower staff)

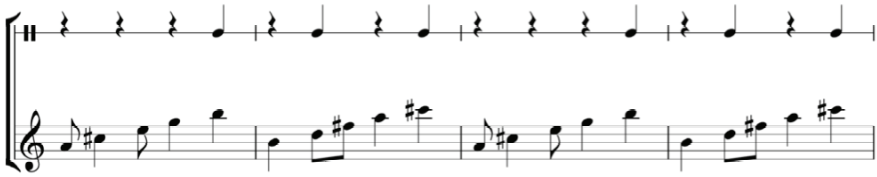

Figure 3: Second *Seperewa* variation (lower staff)

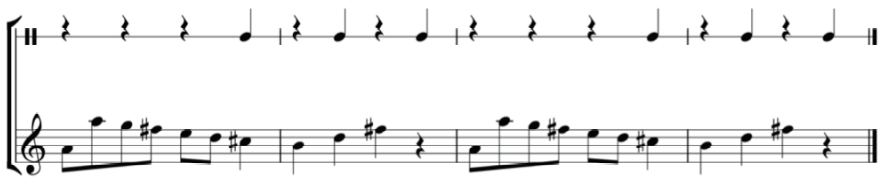

Figure 4: Third variation *Seperewa* (lower staff)

[9] The quarter note should equal approximately 100 beats per minute (bpm).

Korankye's four variations on a basic *seperewa* phrase enable the bell pattern to "speak" in two distinct ways despite its structural continuity: as interjection and as accent. In Figure 1, we see the bell interjecting in the spaces left by the *seperewa* creating an interlocking or hocket relationship. In Figures 2 and 3, the bell shifts to a roll of accenting (beat four of measures 1 and 2), which creates a polyphonic musical texture while also displacing the phrase's focal point from beat one to beat four of the measure. In Figure 4, the *seperewa* pattern creates a context in which the bell is both accenting (beat four of measure 1) and interjecting (beat four of measure 2). This further development of musical texture provides the listener with new contexts in which to hear the bell pattern.[10]

Though the above figures are taken from a pedagogical exercise designed by Korankye and not an actual performance, they still demonstrate the importance of shifting contexts in the music's structure, which can be related to the Akan concept of *agoro* or "play." Nketia defines *agoro* as a type of performance "in which aesthetic and behavioral aspects of music making are integrated through the use of interactive structures and play elements" (Brandel and Leichtman, 1994, p. 122). Nketia notes that this play is most apparent in shifting rhythmic foundations and is demonstrated in the bell's changing function as interjection and accent. In this sense, the bell pattern, though repeating in that its structural signification is static, is applied to ever shifting contexts in the process of creating value in music.

Interpreting Meaning in Music

Meaning in *seperewa* music operates in the shared interpretations of the music's cycle. For instance, the "triple offbeat" pattern notated in the above figures could theoretically begin from any point in a *seperewa* melodic phrase but cultural knowledge designates a specific placement. This placement sets into motion the process of dialogue that makes a performance valued. As ethnomusicologist Friedson notes, congruities in structural patterns in West African music do not always signal congruities in meaning:

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[10] As anyone who has had to play in a traditional West African drumming and dance ensemble knows, these shifting perspectives can easily mislead the novice bell player. For a detailed examination of rhythmic frameworks used in African music see (Locke, 2011)

> The bell's timing for *abey* has the same seven-stroke configuration of short and long values as that for *agbadza*, and, as far as I was concerned, "Same structure, same bell." It wasn't that Kpesusi was unaware of this fact. Naturally, the bell patterns for *agbadza* and *abey* are the same, that is a given, but the bell for *agbadza* is not a slow-downed version of the bell for *abey*, nor vice versa. They are two different kinds of groove, and that was precisely his point. This difference is not incidental, but fundamental. It speaks to a concrete musical experience that absolutely refuses to be reduced to abstraction (Friedson, 2010, p. 137).

Friedson's extended fieldwork revealed how patterns, even though structurally similar when analysed as a rhythm, functioned differently according to specific musical performances and traditions of musical thought.

When cultural knowledge is missing from analysis, the signification is subjected to meanings generated from the observer's own cultural and educational models. Figure 5 shows the traditional palm-wine guitar supporting part for the song "Yaa Amponsah" as transcribed by guitarist Banning Eyre. Rather than present the guitar part in relationship to the bell pattern, Eyre joins the two together and aligns the first strike of the triple offbeat with the downbeat of the measure. As opposed to Collins' transcription of the triple offbeat, which presents the bell as a response to an accented beat, the transcription in Figure 5 makes the first of the three pulses the beginning of the phrase and the strongest downbeat. This representation of the common highlife harmonic pattern, which stems in part from *seperewa* music, demonstrates how a signification—in this case a short musical phrase—is interpreted without the depth of cultural knowledge that gives the signification meaning. Figure 6 shows my reorientation of Eyre's transcription with the final note (C) as the accented downbeat. This subtle shift in placement helps free the melody from the Western metrical framework in which it is presented so that the dialogic relationship that defines the music is more readily apparent.

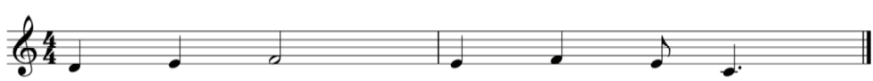

Figure 5: "Palm-wine" guitar supporting pattern as transcribed by Banning Eyre (Eyre, 2002, p. 6)

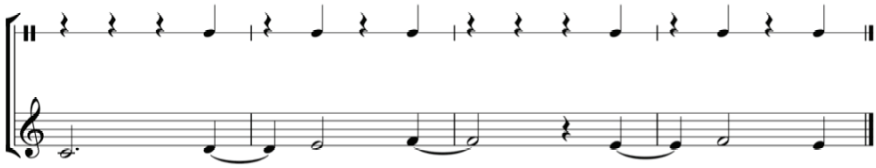

Figure 6: "Palm-wine" guitar supporting pattern (lower staff) reinterpreted with "triple offbeat" bell pattern (upper staff)[11]

This shift in orientation between Figures 5 and 6 reveals the differing meanings that can be imposed by Western musical frameworks. The same is evident in proverb study, where Western conceptions of wisdom obscure the communicative power of structurally simple sayings. In Hugh Clifford's introduction to *Ashanti Proverbs: The Primitive Ethics of a Savage People* (1916), his observations acknowledge the struggle Westerners have in linking signification with meaning when reading African proverbs:

> Many of the wise saws appear to the European mind as so trite and obvious that we should hardly esteem them worthy to rank as proverbs at all. At the very outset, therefore, we discover indications of a wide discrepancy of mental outlook and appreciation between ourselves and the people who have evolved these aphorisms—a discrepancy which seems to exist not only with regard to that which to us is obscure and to them self-evident, but also with regard to what they recognize as wisdom and we should be inclined to class as banal truism (Rattray, 2014, p. 6).

Left with the representation of "Yaa Amponsah" in Figure 5, which aligns the bell pattern with the meter's pattern of accents creating a Western march interpretation of the song, one might be led to believe this tradition of music to be "trite" and "obvious" as a communicative art. What is missing from this analysis is the social context and cultural knowledge that transform short structural ideas into communicative value.

Interpreting Value in Music

Culturally based knowledge of the bell's orientation enables participants to internalise phrases and react through clapping, dancing, or verbal responses that in turn offer new perspectives on the repeating structural

[11] A quarter note in Figure 5 equals a half note in Figure 6.

patterns. These processes of interpretation—what constitutes in-the-moment experiences and reactions—construct the music's value. Just as a single proverb can be adapted and applied to many situations, a rhythmic cycle can be interpreted from many vantage points. By bridging the bell pattern's signification with its cultural referential meanings, we advance understandings of rhythm that relate it to the collected experiences that generate its value. Working towards this goal, Friedson's ontomusicology engages the perceptual realities of different musical systems. Concerning the application of the Western technique of hemiola in describing traditional music in Africa, Friedson states:

> The work the hemiola does in Africa is not the same work it does in the West. In Western parlance, hemiola refers to a musical device used "for giving rhythmic variety." For the most part, this has been merely a rhythmic technique and has had no particular structural significance. The African hemiola, on the other hand, is not some occasional rhythmic device, but something that runs deep in much of African musical life. It is as structurally important to musical thought as the authentic cadence is to functional tonality in Western art music (Friedson, 2010, p. 142).

Friedson's distinction between hemiola as compositional technique and functional process exposes the term's limits as a cross-cultural concept yet unlocks its potential as an effective analytical tool and bridge between Western and African musical ontologies. The difference is in how musicians and listeners experience the structural elements of performance.

The 3-2 clave, like proverbs and pithy sayings, permeates life in Accra. It emanates from radios and phones, signaling to the listener a continuum of lived expression linking past and present, urban and rural, local and foreign. As a student at the University of Ghana in 2000, I remember a lesson from drum lecturer Johnson Kemeh on *kpalogo* drumming patterns using the 3-2 clave. Listening back to a recording, I noticed at one point a taxi on the nearby road also honking the 3-2 clave. Though the driver could not hear us, we were linked at that time and place through this short musical idea. From this experience, I realised that the music I was learning was inextricably linked to the place and imagination of the region. One had to listen as much to those patterns as to the context in which they occurred. The communication was not pre-determined but contingent on who was listening. It also became apparent that the bell pattern takes on ever-shifting meanings through repetition.

Conclusion – Universals and Specificity in the Music of Africa

Siran's model of proverb analysis addresses three relationships at the center of ethnomusicological study: (1) musical structure and context, (2) individual performance and tradition, and (3) language and music as forms of communication. In African socio-musical performance contexts, the connections between signification (what can be transcribed), meaning (cultural knowledge and "on-the-ground" experience), and value (understandings generated from a specific performance), provide a holistic conceptualisation of African expression. This enables music to avoid being "exhausted by its present use" and become "a potential space on which the actual situation leaves its mark" (Siran, 1993, p. 227). Siran's model reminds those studying African music that while structures can be examined in terms of syntax, they are not inherently communicative. Rather, meaning emerges from how structural elements are interpreted and experienced. In oral traditions, knowledge in the expressive arts must be applied in daily life or it is lost. This gives the proverb and music important roles in maintaining cultural norms for it is not the proverb or music itself that teaches but rather how it is used.

Scholars of West African music often reference an African ontology centered on ability to create and control oppositional forces. The wisdom of polyphonic expression in African music is, as stated by John Collins, the ability to "balance opposites, to orchestrate multiplicity, to turn ends into new beginnings, to combine the hot and the cool and simultaneously appreciate all points of view" (Collins, 2004, p. 305). The result of combinations of individual elements creates a phenomenon greater than the sum of its parts—what Collins calls "polyvalent acoustic gestalt," Gerhard Kubik the "inherent rhythm", and Ruth Stone the "unitary whole" (Collins, 2004, p. 55). This collectivity is a holistic approach to creative expression where individual elements gain their efficacy in their mutual existence.

How can we approach Collins's "polyvalent acoustic gestalt" as a dynamic and contested space in contemporary Accra? For example, what does it mean to hear a bell pattern in the University of Ghana's Department of Music as opposed to a funeral in Kumasi? Are these individual realisations of a specific sound structure within the same "polyvalent acoustic gestalt" or do the contexts of performance and experience render them fundamentally different? As I write this in a Music Department office, I can hear a music student playing the 3-2 bell with a drumming and dance ensemble. They are dragging the feel of the pattern in a way that seems to demonstrate that they have not yet embodied the music's gestalt. To my ears, the second and third strikes of the pattern feel rushed

and are not locking into the feel of the supporting drum parts. Is this student indirectly constructing Nkrumah's envisioned "Africa-centered" understandings of traditional culture as they study traditional music within a university setting? How does this short repeated bell pattern echo within the institutions Nkrumah, Nketia, and others helped build to construct new ways of being in Accra? As we listen to Korankye's *sepere-wa* music, we should listen for answers in the contexts of place, time, and traditions. From this perspective we may approach the value of these musical statements.

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