NOTES ON MEMBRANOPHONES OF THE ANLO-EWE

by N. Flagbedzi*

Various writers since the 19th century have taken different lines of approach in their descriptions of membranophones found in Africa, south of the Sahara. Wachsmann[1] for instance, adopts the method of fastening the membrane to the resonator as a line of classification, leaving the characteristics of the latter, tuning and general use of the instrument as a whole as of secondary consideration. Kirby[2] was concerned to describe the murumbu, moropa etc. and to show the ceremonial use to which they were put. More recently, Professor Nketia[3] also did the same, going beyond other works of this genre in pointing out the social implications of the music for the community as well. From the constructional point of view, the sources mentioned above reveal that resonators are most commonly hollowed out of felled tree trunk. But there is yet another method of construction found among the Anlo-Ewe briefly referred to by A.M. Jones[4] in his chapter on the Anlo-Ewe instruments of the orchestra which dwells mainly on tuning, playing technique and various types of 'beat'. The present article describes the method in detail and offers it in agreement with Jones as yet another interesting example of cultural adaptation.

The material was collected during a field trip to Aflfe in the Volta Region to observe the annual religious rite and record the music, of the war-god Nyigbla in February, 1972. My informant is Kɔbla Dogbe, a master carpenter who specializes in this method of membranophone construction. His workshop can be seen at the Accra-Denu road-side at Akatsi about a 100 miles from Accra. He and two others stationed at Denu and Ada road junction respectively learnt their trade from Lawrence Nutakor at Abor who is old and no longer makes the instrument. This is not to imply though that this other make of membranophones is the only one found among the Anlo-Ewe. In fact, Atsu Kpeli at

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Nyekɔnakpɔe, about four miles off Adrakpo a few miles beyond Akatsi in the Anlo district carves the examples below:

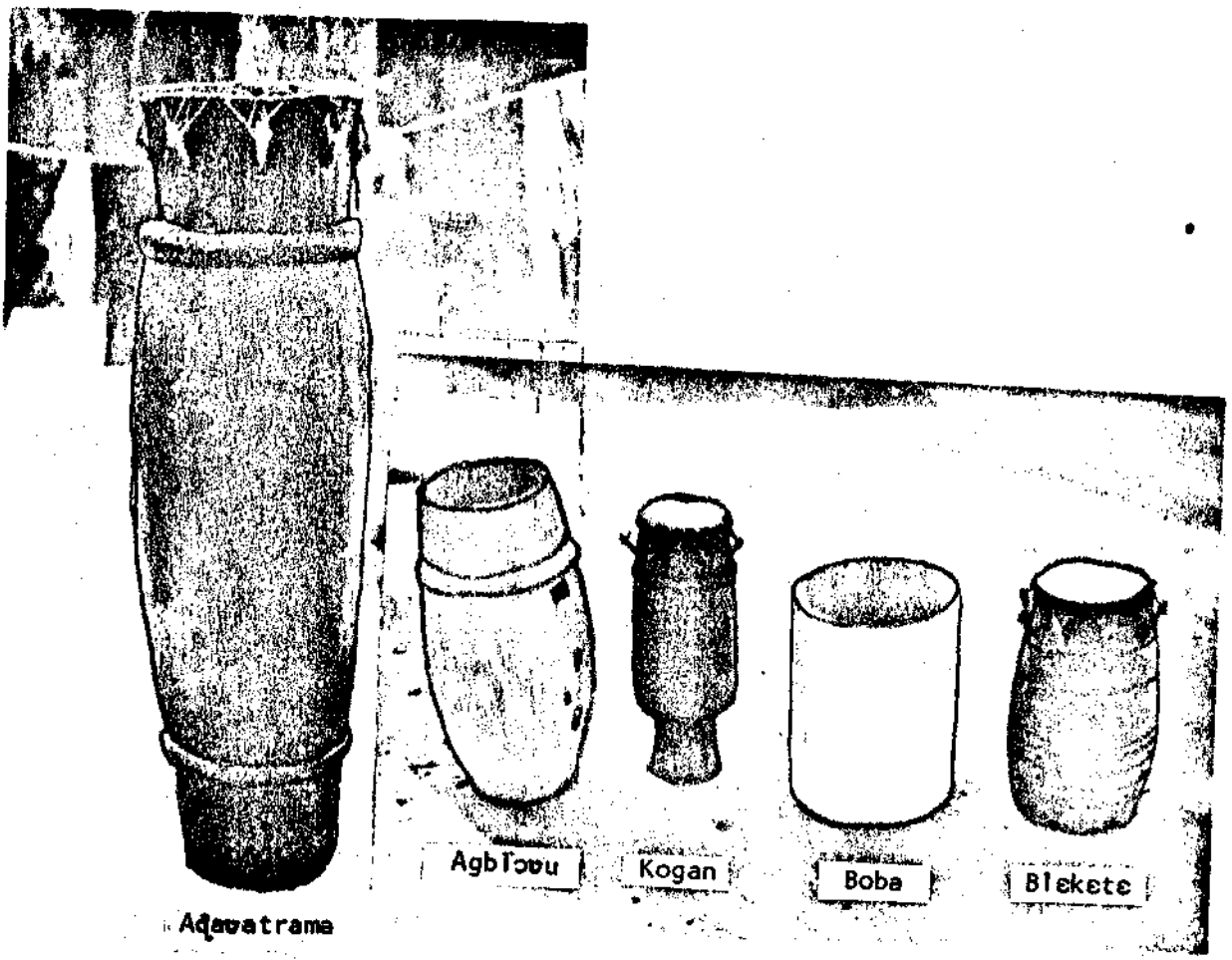


Fig. 1

There are different sizes of this other make of membranophones which is generally referred to as yubabla. Atsimevu, sogo, kaga and kidi (Fig. 2) constitute the standard full ensemble (i.e. apart from idiophones). At times, kloboto may be added; atsimevu may be doubled for musical dialogue during performance or alternate with sogo as in the newer agɛshe dance; again, it may be replaced by boba as in Kenka recreational and by sogo in older agbadza ensembles. There are two other sizes identified by their ensemble names: blekɛtɛ and kpanlogo. Like its carved counterpart, blekɛtɛ is double skinned with both skins sound skins. With regard to kpanlogo, it is not yet evident how the term of Ga origin came to be used for the instrument.

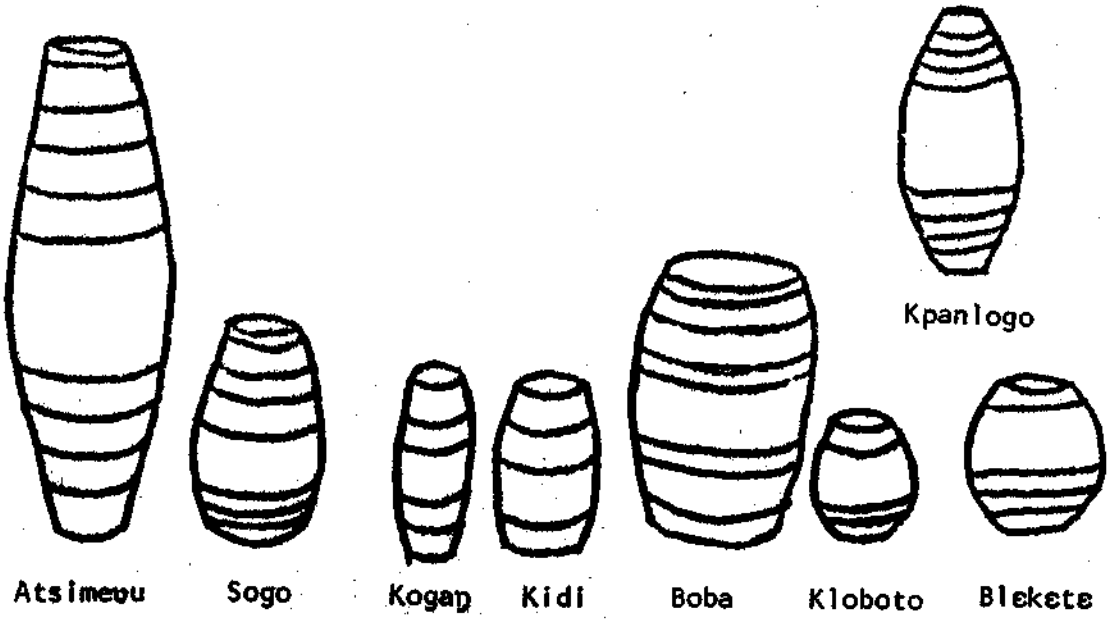


Fig. 2

A table of measurement is provided below. If one compares it with the diagrams in Fig. 2 above, it will be seen that the end-stopped resonator has a bulgy stem; the open, a relatively slimmer and taller stem; that the stopped end of kidi is wider compared with the head; and that where both ends are diametrically uniform as in boba, there is only partial closure of the foot. Blekete is an exception, being an Anlo version of an importation from Northern Ghana along with the medicine cult of that name.

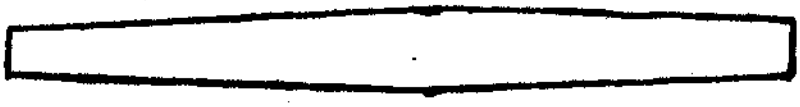
Table of Measurement

Type	Height	Diameter of Head	Diameter of Stem	Diameter of Foot	End-Type	Metal Band	No. of Pegs
Atsimevu	189 cm	26 cm	53 cm	23 cm	Unstopped	5 + 5	
Sogo	67	26	45	32.5	stopped	4 + 3	10
Kogaŋ	56	18	23	15	Unstopped	3 + 3	7
Kidi	53	20.5	34	26	stopped	3 + 2	9
Mini-atsimevu	127	23.5	45	21.5	Unstopped	4 + 4	15
Kloboto	40	24	28	23.5	Unstopped	2 + 2	9
Boba	79	43	53	43	half-stopped	4 + 4	
Blekete	43	26	34	26	Double skin	1 + 3	
Kpanlogo	75	20	34	18	Unstopped	4 + 4	8
Mini-kagaŋ	36	18	20.5	15	Unstopped	2 + 2	7

Height, size of stem, total or partial closure or non-closure therefore constitute the requisite variables that make for varying basic qualities of timbre and pitch. Thickness of the

resonator as a variable does not enter into consideration as it does with regard to the hollowed-out resonator; since as will appear below, the odum staves used are all of the same thickness.

To make the instrument one first of all measures out a 12-foot long odum board using a wooden stave cut to size. The size of the stave determines the number of pieces obtainable from one odum board. Usually, as in the diagram below, one end is wider than the other; the middle, wider still. Hence the differences in diameter of both ends and the stem of the finished product. One kidi stave for example was 3.5 cm., 3.8 cm., 2.7 cm. wide at (a), (b) and (c); and thirty-six staves were cut from one board.



At the yubabla stage (i.e. the stage at which the individual pieces are fastened together), the staves are arranged side by side between two concentric iron hoops of different diameter, very much like those found on wine-casks; the hoops are held a few feet above the ground with the other end of each stave resting firmly on the ground. The inner hoop is then removed after as many larger ones of various sizes are added as are necessary at the outside and hammered into position to knit the staves more closely together. This way one half-end of all the staves used are close-knit, all the other half-ends remaining stuck out.

To knit the other half-ends, a rough and ready method was used. A rope was tied round a tree trunk near-by, and looped round the staves. On pulling the rope fast, the staves were forced together. More iron-hoops of suitable size are added, ringed round the staves to keep them close-knit as before.

With the resonator complete, peg holes are bored. The distance between pegs depends on the size of the instrument and on the number of pegs necessary to ensure an evenness of tension. Boba with a skin-end surface diameter of 43 cm. has 15 pegs; kloboto with 18, has 7. The distance between the pegs and the rim is governed by the distance between the iron-hoop nearest the rim and the other immediately below it, the position of the hoops being themselves controlled by the adjustment the staves need to become close-knit. That is to say, the maker uses partly his discretion as to where to bore the peg-holes. The pegs are cut and shaped from akpafia which grows wild in the few groves in the area, and are notched to keep the tension twine in place.

The next and final stage of yusisi combines two operations: fixing the membrane on the head and tuning. There does not seem to be any word in Ewe for tuning as a gerund. One speaks of the result rather than of the operation itself. For example, the expression yua gbe dom loo means the drum sounds very well indeed; again, yua medidim nyuie o ! implies also that it sounds out of tune. One also often hears onomatopoeic modifiers like tontonton or dindindin used for acceptable high-pitch, and gbɔ̃gbɔ̃gbɔ̃ for unacceptable low-pitch sounds.

To fix the skin on the head, an adzɔka hoop large enough to fit the rim of the resonator is placed on the rim with a much wider skin spread between it and the rim. The skin is then laced to the hoop and knotted round the peg in six vertical thongs that show a combined pattern of W and X. Compare with Jones's illustration with patterns of Y. The X pattern strengthens the first. The skin is then trimmed close to the adzɔka hoop and the pegs are driven in evenly to rough tune the instrument. Fine tuning may be done the same way, although quite often a few gentle downward strokes on the adzɔka hoop near the rim is all that is necessary to raise the pitch.

This method of constructing the resonator would seem to have originated after the Anlo-Ewe settled where he now occupies, where the relative absence of forests and hence of suitable trees for making the instrument must have forced him to use wine, rum or gin casks imported by

the Dutch or Dane as a resonator instead of carving one. That he knew of the older hollowing-out method and used it, is attested by the fact that agblɔvu recognized as one of the oldest instruments associated with chiefship and war was and is still made this way; secondly, until recently and in only very few cases in which yubabla is used, the atsimevu of Yeve cult ensembles is always a carved instrument; and more confirmatory perhaps of my submission, is the fact that both makes of boba and kagan (see Figs. 1 and 2) co-exist in the tradition. There is an older tradition now being superceded by a newer. In Togo and among the northern Ewe speaking people, the carved type is still the rule: yubabla then would seem to an example of a particularly Anlo-Ewe adaptation to environmental influence.

Composition of the ensembles of the various dances show that there is some degree of specialization in the assignment of performance role. Atsimevu, sogo, boba, and kpanlogo generally have a wider range of rhythmic patterns to select from for use on any given occasion, and they are normally assigned by the tradition the role of improvising within the limits imposed by the musical type. The other instruments play a supportive role. Kidi is indispensable in all ensembles, less so is kaga though both and in conjunction with kloboto and klobozi or totodzi support with rhythmic ground or permutation of grounds.

In addition to specific performance role differentiation, there is also distribution in terms of occasions of use. Agblɔvu for instance is always a part of stool regalia and is used in heraldry and in leading warriors to war. A set of two membranophones with ivory resonator forms part of Nyigbla ritual equipment and are used only as such.

REFERENCES

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