

GAHU: Part Two

Boba master drum rhythms

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Last issue, we explored the bell (*gakogui*), rattle (*axatse*) and ‘supporting’ drum rhythms from Gahu, a recreational dance of the Ewe people of Ghana, West Africa. Those drums were the *kagan*, *kidi* and *sogo*. As promised, this time we will take a look at a few of the rhythms played by the *boba*, the ‘master drum’ that is commonly used during Gahu performances. The rhythms we will focus on here are patterns found in *Kokosawa*, the slow section of Gahu. As we discussed in the previous article, *Kokosawa* was the Yoruban style that the Ewes of Benin, Togo and Ghana rearranged and sped up. It is common to hear this slower version performed before kicking into the newer, fast version of Gahu. All of the rhythms introduced below are found in both the slow and fast arrangements.

Master drum(mer)

The first topic I’d like to address is a misconception of the meaning of the title ‘master drummer.’ For many Westerners, the term immediately conjures thoughts of a highly technical performer, a prestidigitator with speed, power and, in general, impressive ‘chops.’ Although it is indeed true that these characteristics may very well be possessed by a master drummer, they do not even begin to explain the reasons for his title.

Let’s examine the master drummer’s instrument. The *boba* is a large drum (mine pictured measures about 2.5 ft. tall, with a head diameter of roughly 16 inches) that is carved from one solid piece of wood or constructed in a stave-style, much like a cooper’s barrel. The head is made of antelope skin and, to facilitate playing, the drum is leaned forward on a wooden or iron stand. The *boba* is labeled the ‘master drum’ because of its function in the music being played. Its role is to send audible signals to the dancers and other drummers, cueing the necessary musical transitions, breaks and endings.

Therefore, the ‘master drummer’ tends to be the musician who can best evaluate the current musical situation, quickly make decisions as to where the music should go and clearly communicate the appropriate signals. He must also stay aware of the energy level of the dancers, the drummers, the singers- even the other attendees. The decision to move the music in different directions might be affected by how well a section is being received by the audience, how tiring a particular step is for the dancers, or the fact that the vocalists have completed their accompanying lyrics. In my studies with Rubben Agbeli in Kopeyia, Ghana, he added that one cannot consider himself a master drummer until he knows how to play *all* the instrument parts for *all* of the [Ewe] songs, sing all the songs, dance all the steps, and fix/rehead all the drums.

There are many embellishments that can be added to each of the *boba* patterns. Ewe musical traditions and the drum’s role at that moment dictate which are and aren’t acceptable. Only immersing oneself in the culture and studying their music firsthand will

bring about the understanding to discern between them. For our purposes here, we are looking only at the primary rhythms (without embellishments) played during these sections of Gahu. That said, let's take a look . . .

Basic/Free Movement

The first pattern, often called 'basic,' accompanies the 'free movement,' a relaxed step during which the dancers enter the staging area and form a circle, swinging their arms loosely from side to side. The boba player uses two large drumsticks and plays a basic phrase consisting of two muffled strokes, followed by a series of normal (open) stick strokes. Get the short, higher-pitched, muffled strokes by pressing into the drumhead with one fist while striking the head with the opposite stick. As in the previous article, we will use both boxed and standard notation styles. In our boxed notation, the muffled strokes are represented by the letter M and regular (open tone) stick strokes are shown as a bullet (•). Each box represents one subdivision, or small, equidistant unit of time. In the standard notation, the regular stick strokes are written as regular noteheads and the muffled strokes are seen as X's.

M	-	-	-	M	-	-	-	•	•	-	•	•	-	-	-
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Rolling

After allowing the participants to enter, dance and sing to the rhythms of the free movement, the master drummer sends a rhythmic cue to lead everyone seamlessly into the next section of the performance. Before sending that cue, he needs to make sure that he has the attention of all present. To do that, he plays a short, intense passage called 'rolling,' creating excitement and anticipation for the upcoming variation. All drummers maintain their original patterns throughout this section. The dancers respond to the call of the master drum by shouting and waving their arms in the air.

•	-	•	•	•	-	•	•	•	-	•	•	•	-	•	•
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Signal

After a couple repetitions of the rolling phrase, the master drummers signals the change into the next section of music with an obvious signal. The signal again utilizes regular and muffled strokes.

•	•	-	•	-	•	•	-	M	-	M	-	•	-	M	-	•	•	-	•	•	-	-	-
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

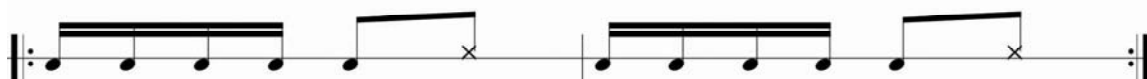


Serious Movement

That signal leads the entire ensemble- drummers, dancers, singers and bystanders- directly into the ‘serious movement.’ The intensity builds; the sogo player switches to a busier, energetic 16th-note rhythm; the dancers bend towards the ground, throwing their arms in front of them to match the steady quarter-notes being played by the boba. In addition to the loud pulse he’s playing on the drumhead, the master drummer often adds sharp stick shots on the side of the drum shell. This creates a more balanced rhythm and infuses yet more volume and excitement. The shell stroke has been notated as a letter S (boxed notation) or a circled X (standard notation).

Sogo:

•	•	•	•	•	-	M	-	•	•	•	•	•	-	M	-
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Boba:

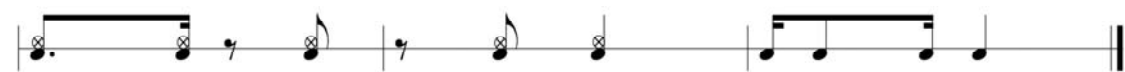
•	-	S	S	•	-	S	-	•	-	S	S	•	-	S	-
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---



Ending

After Kokosawa’s serious movement, the master drummer sends another signal, this time to cue the ending of the performance. This final signal is identical to a rhythm known to many as ‘clave,’ which permeates a great deal of the music from Africa, South America and the Caribbean. The drummer will often play this phrase with both hands in unison- the right stick rapping against the shell of the drum; the left hand letting its stick strike the rim of the drum while simultaneously playing a closed-fist stroke in the center of the drumhead. Immediately following this signal, the drumming concludes with ‘gede-gede’ (right, left- right, left)- a short series of boba open strokes.

S	-	-	S	-	-	S	-	-	-	S	-	S	-	-	-	•	•	-	•	•	-	-	-
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I hope that this series has offered you fresh insight into the rhythms of Gahu. Please feel free to contact me anytime at: mark@powerspercussion.com or 920-410-0465.

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Mark Powers has studied and performed throughout the United States, China, Thailand and West Africa. His teachers of world percussion styles include Emmanuel and Rubben Agbeli, Inchai Srisuwan, Carlinhos Pandeiro de Ouro, Jorge Alabe, Mamady Keita, Jerry Leake and Takaaki Masuko. Mark is a freelance percussionist and educator in Salem, Oregon and co-holder of the Guinness World Record for longest drum roll by a group. He can be found online at: www.powerspercussion.com