

ROWING RHYTHMS

West African Drums Hit US Streets

BY CHERIE YURCO

■ Throughout West Africa, drum ensembles play an important role in everyday life, performing for recreation and at parties, as well as at ceremonies, weddings, funerals, and religious meetings. The tradition of drumming is passed down from generation to generation. Immigrant West African drummers have brought this tradition to cities all over the US.

"I can't remember how old I was when I first learned to play the bell," explains David Etse Nyadedzor, who was raised in Ghana. "I grew up into it."

According to Nyadedzor, the *agogo*, or cowbell, was the first instrument he learned, playing a simple *bobobo* rhythm on it. This instruction began before he could walk. "That's how you learn to keep time, and once you know that, you can move on to learn support rhythms, and then it goes on from there," he says.

Throughout West Africa, drum rhythms and accompanying dances vary greatly among countries and tribes. "From my tribe, I learned the *kpanlogo* and *bobobo* rhythms," says Nyadedzor, explaining that he then went on to study drumming at the Folkloric Selamta Center for National Culture in Accra, Ghana, where he learned other Ghanaian drumming techniques, as well as Togolese, Nigerian, Guinean, Senegalese, and Zimbabwean repertoire.

Today, Nyadedzor is a master drummer and founder of the Adanfo Drum and Dance Ensemble from West Africa, which consists of about 16 to 20 drummers and dancers that perform at various cultural and entertainment venues. A resident of Syracuse, New York, he also teaches West African drumming and choreography, including participation in an afterschool program for local children.



Photo: Cherie Yurco

Some traditional instruments found in West African drum ensembles include:

djembe: This wooden, goblet-shaped drum, played with bare hands, has a great tonal range. It dates back to the 12th century Mali Empire.

dunun (or djun-djun): A cylindrical wooden bass drum played at an angle, either strapped around the neck, on a stand, or on the floor resting on its side. Sometimes there is a bell mounted on top. A group of dunun may be played as a set.

dun dun: These double-ended bass drums with cow skin heads are common throughout West Africa. They are played with sticks.

kpanlogo: The most common Ghanaian drum, it has a wooden tapered body, similar to a conga, and is carved from a single piece of wood. The head is tightened with six wooden pegs that protrude from the sides near the top. It is played with either a stick or bare hands.

talking drum: An hourglass-shaped drum with a pitch that can be regulated to mimic the tones of human speech, the talking drum was at one time used to communicate across farming fields and during hunts. It is often played with a bent stick.

gome: This drum was created by Jamaican slaves. Freed slaves brought the tradition home to Sierra Leone in the 1800s. It is made of goatskin stretched over a wooden box frame. A drummer sits atop the box and plays it with both hands and the heels of the feet, which press against the skin to change the pitch.

fontomfrom: This royal drum set includes a bell and six drums—two very large drums called *fontomfrom* (pictured); two talking drums called *atumpun* (half the size of the fontomfrom); and two small drums called the *ostrama* and the *apentema*.

shekere: Made from a gourd, these shakers have seeds, beads, or shells assembled on a net on the outside to make a rattle sound.

gongon (agogo): A two-pronged cowbell that is held in one hand and played by striking it with a stick.

◀ David Etse Nyadedzor's student, Ernest Borketty, plays a fontomfrom with the Adanfo West African Drum and Dance Ensemble. For more pictures, please visit, www.MakingMusicMag.com/rowingrhythms.

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