People often ask me about my journey into Ghanaian music, wondering how an American percussionist from Boston wound up in Ghana, drumming in the Ashanti King’s palace, speaking Twi, eating fufu, and wearing traditional African clothing. Like an increasing number of percussionists, I stumbled across Ghanaian music while studying percussion performance at college—in my case, at UMASS Dartmouth with Royal Hartigan, Kwabena Boateng Jamie Eckert, and Chris Poudrier. I was fortunate enough to travel to Ghana for several study trips during my undergraduate years, and completely fell in love with the rich music and culture of this West African nation.

Several years after graduation, I moved to Ghana to immerse myself in the music, language, and culture of the Ashanti people. The following two years in Kumasi—the capital of Ghana’s Ashanti Region—proved to be a life-changing experience, and the time was filled with countless lessons with my teacher, Attah Poku, traveling up and down Ghana, Togo, and Benin, and playing hundreds of gigs for presidents, dignitaries, chiefs, and queen mothers with groups such as the Centre for National Culture and the Nsuae Kete Group. Now back in the U.S., I am excited to share the incredible music of Kete with the international percussion community at the 40th Anniversary of PASIC in San Antonio!

Kete Research Paper
My research paper presentation at PASIC 2015, “Kete: Ashanti Royal Court Drumming from Ghana,” is based off my article “Kete for the International Percussion Community,” which was recently published in Discourses in African Musicology: J.H. Kwabena Nkетia Festschrift (University of Michigan & University of Ghana, 2015). The following sections provide the reader a thorough background of Kete and an overview of my upcoming PASIC presentation.

Social Context of Kete
Ashanti culture contains an impressive canon of dance-drumming genres that each exist for
a distinct purpose in their society. In his seminal work Drumming in Akan Communities of Ghana, renowned Ghanaian ethnomusicologist Professor J.H. Kwabena Nketia relegates Kete into the category of “state drumming,” “used as a comprehensive term for all forms of drumming which are directly associated with chieftaincy.”

Pioneering ethnomusicologist James Koetting, in the only published scholarly work devoted entirely to Kete, further describes the traditional usage of Kete in Ashanti culture: “Kete is solely the privilege of paramount chiefs and the Asantehene, the titular head of Ashanti. The Kete drummers are in the service of the chief and hold a position in the royal court. The drums themselves are owned by the chief and are considered one of the marks of his office.

In the 58 years since Ghana won its independence from Great Britain, Kete has found its way into public life, and can now be heard at funerals, weddings, parties, and business functions, as well as the customary celebrations of chieftaincy.

**INSTRUMENTATION**

Kete, in the classic version taught by Attah Poku at both Tufts University and Kumasi’s Centre for National Culture, is played by seven percussionists. The seven percussion instruments in the pedagogical version of Kete are as follows:

- **Kwadum**: deep-pitched lead drum played with two nkonta curved sticks.
- **Apentema**: high-pitched support drum played with two bare hands.
- **Petia**: medium-pitched support drum played with two straight sticks.
- **Aburukwa**: high-pitched support drum played with two straight sticks.
- **Dawuro**: iron, boat-shaped bell.
- **Ntrowa**: gourd rattle.
- **Dondo**: hourglass-shaped tension drum.

In contemporary practice, a second dawuro part is often added, and in many cases, the ntrowa and/or the dondo can be omitted.

**TIMELINE ANALYSIS**

The main body of Kete drumming is in 12/8, with an underlying pulse of four dotted quarter notes. Even though the Kete dance is beyond the scope of my PASIC presentation, it is useful to consider the rhythm of the dancers’ footsteps in understanding the drumming. Through most of Kete, the dancers step to the pulse of two dotted half notes per measure. This half-time feel is fundamentally important to feeling the groove of Kete. As Kete is often played at tempos up to 200 bpm, the fastest underlying subdivision is the eighth note. Two constantly underlying polyrhythms are felt in relation to the dotted quarter note pulse: a layer of six quarter notes (6 over 4), and a layer of three half notes (3 over 4).

For the unfamiliar listener learning to play Kete, it is important to always keep the dotted quarter note pulse in mind. The 12/8 rhythm can easily be heard “in three” as 3/4, but this does not represent the groove of the music as expressed by the dancer’s footsteps. In his article “It’s Not a Waltz! Understanding the Triplet Feel in Afro-Centric Music,” percussionist Michael Spiro explains that in most 12/8 African-based music, the groove is felt as four beats, each with three subdivisions, as opposed to three beats, each with four sixteenth note subdivisions.”

Try practicing the following examples to connect the Kete bell...
pattern to the more widely known Standard 12/8 Bell as made famous by the Ewe people of southeastern Ghana. Bring this issue of Rhythm! Scene on your laptop, tablet, or smartphone to “Kete: Ashanti Royal Court Drumming from Ghana” and play along!

**ABOFOO**

Abofoo, which is traditionally used as hunters' music, is often played first to start a Kete performance. Although it can be played at any tempo, Abofoo is often played slowly, although it does normally build to a medium tempo over time. Abofoo uses the standard Kete timekeeping rhythms described in the “Timeline Analysis” section. On top of this foundation, the donno improvises on a two-stroke phrase on the first and third of every three quarter notes. This pattern repeats every two beats and reinforces the dotted half note feel. The transcribed donno part is the most basic pattern played on the drum; in performance it is merely a springboard for traditional variations. Experienced players enjoy the freedom to play unique improvised phrases as long as they fit with the timeline and stay within the idiom of traditional Ashanti rhythmic vocabulary.

The Abofoo petia part is the standard petia rhythm for the slower sections of Kete. An attack stroke fills in the gap between the first two strokes of the lead bell, and then three open strokes lead up to beat four. Because it plays directly on beats three and four, the petia is the easiest part for many Western percussionists to play in Kete.

The apentema part is challenging. It utilizes eight of the twelve possible eighth notes in 12/8, but not one of them is on the beat. It plays every offbeat partial, which is very common for the apentema in Kete. For Abofoo, it has open strokes off beats four and one, which are the beats where the dawuro aligns with the basic pulse. While its open strokes surround the downbeat, the apentema plays mute strokes off beats two and three, or directly around the second dotted half note of the measure (beat two of the half time feel).

**KETE FOR DRUMSET**

I first met Professor Nketia in 2009 when I was traveling with the Kekeli West African Drum and Dance Ensemble from UMASS Dartmouth. Speaking to a group of American music students who had just spent three weeks studying Kete in his hometown of Ashanti Mampong,
Professor Nketia surprised me with his advice. He urged us to use the traditional Ghanaian music we had learned as inspiration for our own creative composing.

When I got home, I took Professor Nketia’s advice by trying to adapt Kete to my main instrument: drumset. I was delighted to find that Kete works quite nicely on drumset, as many of its rhythms are complex yet sparse. There usually are no mutes in the support drum rhythms (except for apentema), so they are possible to play with one limb while playing drumset. There are many different ways to orchestrate Kete rhythms onto the drumset.

Thank you to my teachers in Ghana: Attah Poku, Ernest Domfeh, the Centre for National Culture in Kumasi, and the Nsuase Kete Group, all of whom generously shared with me their knowledge of Ashanti drumming over the years—meda mo ase paa. Additional gratitude to Royal Hartigan, Kwabena Boateng, Nani Agbeli, David Locke, Kwasi Ampene, and Rhythm! Scene editor Megan Arns, who I first met halfway around the world in Ghana!

**ENDNOTES**

1. See Agbadza by David Locke and African Bell Ritual by Jerry Leake for more ethnomusicological information and percussive adaptations of the Standard 12/8 Bell.
2. See Royal Hartigan’s West African Rhythms for Drumset for many other examples of Ghanaian rhythms for the kit. Also, see my Hot Licks article in the August 2014 Rhythm! Scene.

**WORKS CITED**


Nketia, J.H. Kwabena Nketia.


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