

THE GOMOA OTSEW TRUMPET SET

Animal horn and tusk trumpet ensembles exist in many parts of Africa. But their thick clustering in the Akan speaking Gomoa district of Southern Ghana — a district extending for not more than forty miles in length and in breadth — appears significant. The ensembles at Otsew, Fawomanye and Budu-Atta in this district are perhaps, the best known, because of their excellence, but few Gomoa villages have not seen flourishing local ones.

The ensembles are known as Mmensuon, from the Akan words Mmen (wind instruments or horn) and esuon (seven). In many ensembles within and outside the Gomoa area the trumpets are really seven in number, with drums and bells functioning as a separate section.

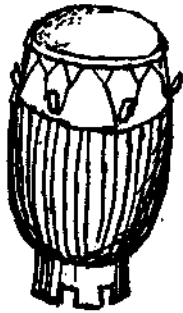
The Gomoa Otsew Mmensuon ensemble is so constituted. Made from elephant tusks, each of the trumpets produces two notes blown from a mouthpiece cut into the tapering end of the instrument. Members of the set are in different sizes, and are distinguished by names which reflect their rank-defining roles. The largest is called Otu, after one of the highest war gods of Gomoa Otsew. It has the deepest voice and is regarded as the eldest of the instruments. In the view of the performers, its utterances serve as a general endorsement on the statement being made by the rest of the set.

The ranks of the other members of the trumpet set do not, however, seem to be strictly related to their sizes. The shrillest and slenderest member, the sese, has the privilege of calling the tune; its larger colleague, the oboso, underlines the phrase announced by it with a special response; the ofar picks up the sese's announcing phrase and carries it forward; the agyeseba, a trumpet with great carrying power regarded as the signaller and time-keeper among the group, follows with a motif designed to heighten the general effect.

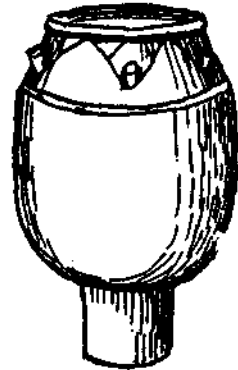
All this happens with great rapidity and with a great deal of interlacing of parts. Finally, within some 60 seconds of start, the Otu comes in with its confirmatory utterances. It is supported in this by two more trumpets, the fifth and sixth in order of size, called Otu-no-koma (Otu in miniature) each.



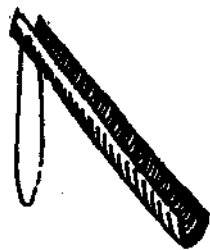
Mmensuon (Ivory Trumpet)



Kyensin Drum



Ampa a Drum



**Adawura
(Struck Bell)**

In proclaiming their assent, this trio, Otu and its two small-sized colleagues, produce two long drawn-out two-note quartal chords in slow, parallel, pendular motion. By this time the other instruments have become free, and they join the trio in repeating this quartal harmony several times over. This section of the piece is often repeated all over again.

Observers have described the effect of this chorus as mystical and awe-striking. But this effect is immediately cancelled by a loud quick, snap phrase spoken by the leader of the ensemble; a cantor then raises a song and is followed by a response from a vocal chorus accompanied by the struck bell in the ensemble - the adawura, and two drums called kyensin and Ampaa respectively. The trumpets remain silent during this section of the piece and some of the blowers join in the singing.

This horn ensemble (without drums) alternate with vocal ensemble plus percussion several times before the piece is brought to an end.

Since each trumpet is capable of producing only two notes the four discussant members generally form their phrases by rapidly repeated notes, which often follow speech melody and rhythm; but they do not entirely avoid long notes. For instance, the sentence jestingly addressed to those hiring the ensemble by one of the instruments has one long note in it:-



meaning that performance must be followed by a good meal.

II

The organisation of the Gomoa trumpet ensembles poses a problem. The names of the members of a trumpet set suggest a pre-occupation with a call and response structure in music. This, indeed is the predominant structure of Akan ensemble music; for instance, those of Atentenben (flute) ensembles and seprewa (sharp-lute) ensembles

follow this structure. Mmenson ensembles, on the other hand, express themselves basically through team work that anything less than the full set is incapable of maintaining. Informants from the Otsew group stress this point. They can never be persuaded to perform with a single trumpeter absent. They insist that this would be impossible. Each trumpet has a special "voice" which is essential in every performance, they maintain.

This is certainly true of the first portion of the trumpets' music, where, although complete utterances may be given by individuals, most of the utterances emanate only from the combined phrases of all the instruments speaking at any time. The trumpet set employ a *hocket* technique that very few musicians known in the community can maintain. One of the members of the Otsew group has taken a job at Nkwatia, a village nearly 200 miles away in the Kwahu district. But for every performance he has to turn up. No one in Otsew can play his part yet, and that part, like any other, cannot be 'edited' out.

As already pointed out, however, the tail-end of the trumpet section, like the vocal section of every piece, is an ordinary refrain out of which some of the trumpets can drop. We thus have a call and response style added on to a *hocket* technique. This is unusual. Traditional musical types in Ghana tend to remain homogeneous in style and technique. The two techniques used in the Gomoa Otsew Mmenson repertoire suggest a drawing upon the resources of two cultures - the local Akan culture and that of Guan whose remnants may be found in Winneba, eight miles to the South-east, and in various places in the Gomoa neighbourhood farther east. The use of two scales - a pentatonic scale and heptatonic one - strengthens this point. But perhaps the tradition of the origin of this ensemble would throw more light on the issue.

The trumpet set, the tradition goes, was modelled in ancient times after seven long-billed amphibious birds (now extinct) which frequently sung together in their home near the Mbonyi, a lagoon lying five miles south of Otsew believed to be the abode of a powerful deity. The trumpets imitate the bird sounds.

This tradition thus ascribes the origin of the ensemble to ancient times and associates it with an earth deity. References in the song texts to the god of the sea (Bosompo), to local rivers (e.g. Kyere), and to land features not close to Otsew village indicates a wider influence than Otsew's political influence would suggest.

The ensemble at Otsew, as in other places, belongs to the court. Akan court musical ensembles sing about kings, warriors, and acts of good government. The Mmensuon ensemble at Otsew carries some of these themes in its song texts. But the occurrence of references to earth deities as well as the pentatonic scales and quartal harmony, distinguishes it from the normal Akan ensemble, certainly from all other ensembles found so far in Otsew.

The village occupies a spot in an area described in an anonymous 17th century Dutch map as Akron. Christaller suggests all this the larger concentrations of Guans in Winneba, Senya Bereku, Awutu, Bawjiase and their numerous villages, Christaller's point must be given a high probability of truth.

Nana Bagyire VI of Abiriw also recalls a tradition which claims prior ownership of trumpet ensembles for the Guans living with the Akan.² Evidence from Gomoa Otsew would support this claim as well as Christaller's.

A.A. Mensah

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1. See Rev. J. Christaller. A Grammar of Asante and Fante Language (Basel Mission Book Depot, 1875) Intro. 5A | ID II 5, 6 etc.
 2. See Otutu Bagyire VI's "The Guans: A Preliminary Note" in Ghana Notes and Queries No.7, January, 1965 p.2