TEMPO CHANGE: DANCE-MUSIC INTERACTIONS IN SOME GHANAIAN TRADITIONS

*by B. A. Aning**

Before proceeding to discuss tempo change and how the interaction between music and dance affects it, it may be useful to examine very briefly, a fundamental question. What is the concept of tempo among Ghanaians? Are they, as a people, aware of tempo? How do they perceive it? And how do they interpret or express that concept—first in their language and second, in their music?

That they are aware of tempo is reflected in the fact that they verbalize about it. To the Akan, one of the people whose music will be discussed later, a tempo or movement that is slow is referred to as *nyaa*, as *breoo*, or *bokoo*. A fast tempo or movement is *hare* or *ntem*. Slowness, or lack of haste is sometimes equated with dignity or majesty. The *Atumpan* (talking drums) inviting the King to an assembly, would say, among other things, "berempon nante brebre." (The King walks slowly; the King walks with dignity). One type of *Fontomfrom* dance called Ahenemma Asa (The dance of princes and princesses) is characteristically slow and dignified. Fastness or haste, on the other hand, is associated with gaiety, excitement, and urgency. In the absence of these, that is, gaiety, excitement, or urgency, the people normally go about their daily work very leisurely.

How, then, is tempo generated and maintained in a musical performance? The lilt and drive in singing, drumming and dancing are imparted through the presence of a regulative pulse which the creative performer carries in his or her head, and which is often reinforced externally by handclap, stickclap, or the iron bell. This regulative pulse or time line provides the point of reference for the musician and the dancer, and it is the main stabiliser of tempo in the performance of music and dance. The next question that arises is, "Is there any tempo change in Ghanaian traditional music and dance, and, if there is, how does it come about?

To answer these questions, I would like to examine three traditions: the music of the Ewe, of the Ga, and of the Akan. It became apparent from the body of examples studied, that there are no tempo changes in the Ga tradition. However, one can observe two distinct types in the Ewe and Ashanti traditions. First: that change which is a built-in part of the music; and second: that which may be described as incidental.

In the first type, tempo change is used as a compositional technique to give the piece a structural form. This is observed in *Atsiagbekpor*, an Ewe example. *Atsiagbekpor* was originally a war dance which is now adapted for social occasions and purposes. Basically there are four sectional elements which are used in the music in a kind of permutation. The sectional elements are: (i) unaccompanied singing in free rhythm; (ii) singing with bell accompaniment; (iii) slow tutti; and (iv) fast tutti. The following observations are worth mentioning.

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First, the durations of the sections vary one from the other. Furthermore, each section varies in length as it reappears throughout the piece. *Second*, the dancing is done in the tutti sections only. *Third*, the fast tutti is more than 200 per cent as fast as anything that precedes it, thus providing a real dramatic climax to the dance. *Fourth*, the fast tutti is always followed by the unaccompanied singing, and never by any of the other two. This provides for the release from the climax. *Fifth*, and finally, whenever the second sectional element, that is, the bell-accompanied singing, is followed by the danced slow tutti, there is a relatively small change of tempo, ranging from six per cent per minute to 20 per cent per minute. An explanation for this phenomenon will be attempted later in relation to the next type of tempo change.

The next type of tempo change is what I have chosen to call incidental; that is, the change is not predetermined. From the corpus of eight musical types examined, two types, one from the Ga area and the other from Ashanti, show very little or no incidental change either way. These will therefore be left out in the discussion. Of the remainder, two types, marked A and B on the graph, show a deceleration of 1.4 per cent and 0.9 per cent per minute respectively.

The B, the *Fontomfrom*, is a royal orchestra without singing, and it is here performed by the musicians of the King of Ashanti. That marked A is *Adowa*, an Akan funeral music, which is played here by two non-*Akan* performing groups.

The same *Adowa* music played by *Ashantis*, in AA, shows a rising tempo change of 3.1 per cent per minute. What accounts for the discrepancy between A and AA will be discussed later. It remains to be added that the remaining examples, C (*Adenkum*, an Akan women's music), D (*Akosua Tuntum*, another Akan popular music), and E (Akomadan Church music)—all show acceleration ranging from 1.1 per cent to 6.5 per cent per minute.

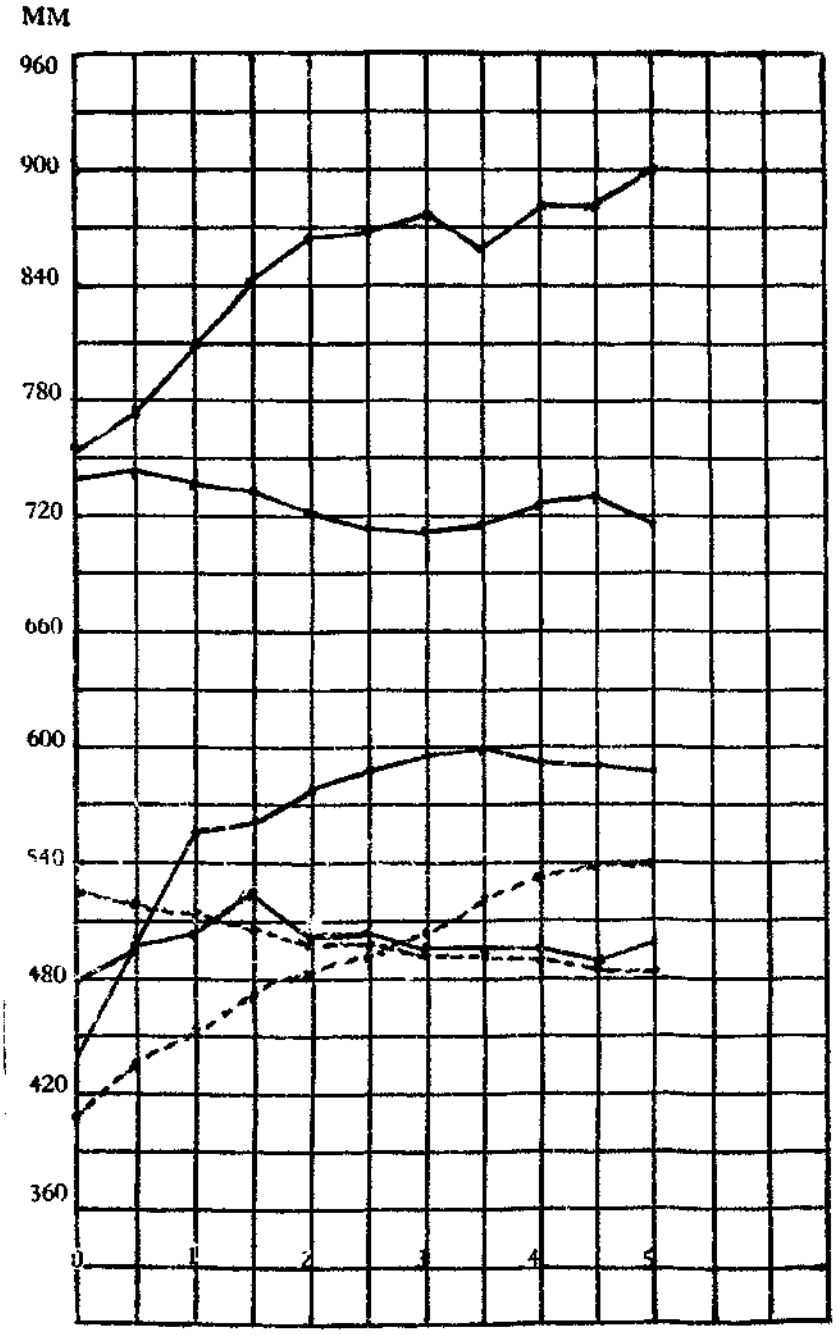
When is there a change in tempo, and what accounts for it?

1. *Beginning of Performance*

Without exception, there is change of tempo in all examples at the beginning of each performance; and, except in A, each one shows an acceleration, even B. I would venture to suggest that the reason for this is that the musicians are adjusting or getting settled. One reason, among others, that accounts for the sharp rise in tempo in D within the initial section is that the musicians begin with the bell which is then joined in by singing, and a little later by the drums. This explanation may be offered also for the slight change in tempo between the second and third sectional elements in the Ewe *Atsiagbekor* example discussed earlier.

2. *Later: After Adjustment*

It is the middle part of the music where the changes in tempo present an interesting study. What accounts for the continual rise in tempo in AA, D, and E? I would like to offer three speculative answers:



A = Adowa Played by non-Ashantis
AA = Adowa played by Ashantis
B = F
C = Adenkum
D = Akosua Tuntum
F = Akomadan Church Music

(i) *Interaction of Dance and Music*

Let us imagine the scene—dancers entering and leaving the arena throughout the performance. A particularly good dancer might be noticed, her dexterous movements initiating a chain of reactions among spectators, instrumentalists, and singers. There is excitement. Hearty approval is expressed in diverse ways. The master drummer and the dancer engage in an animated dialogue while the other musicians continue with their respective parts. All this drama contributes to the rise in tempo.

(ii) *Singing and Song Text*

While the drama just described unfolds, the solo singer may sing about the ancestry and performance of the dancer or the master drummer. If the song does not allow for such a textual improvisation, she introduces another song. The effect of this change is often as definite and swift on singers, instrumentalists, and spectators as it is on the dancer. That is, clapping and shouting increase; the music becomes louder and faster; the dancing becomes more animated. And the cycle of cause and effect continues.

(iii) In many performances, wine is liberally supplied and consumed. This generates an excited atmosphere which, in turn, influences the tempo of the music and dance. This phenomenon was definitely present when example D was recorded at a funeral by the writer.

The next question to consider is why the *Fontomfrom,* that is, example B, does not behave similarly. I would like to suggest, first, that the rise in tempo from the third minute on the graph, lasting for ninety seconds, may well be caused by the impact of a good dancer, a phenomenon discussed earlier. Second, the general decrease in tempo may well be due to the absence in this type of music, of singing which, as we have seen, is an important factor in bringing about tempo change.

We may now look at the discrepancy between A and AA. As observed earlier, the A is performed by two groups of musicians to whom, technically, the music is foreign. The master drummers of these groups may not possess that wide repertoire of rhythmic and speech patterns which their Ashanti counterpart possesses. And the solo singers may also suffer a similar language deficiency. They, therefore, cannot experience and react to the same degree of excitement as the indigenous Ashanti musician. I might add that the same reason is also true for the dancer(s).

In conclusion, I would like to submit that there is a close relationship between music and dance in the Akan and Ewe traditions of Ghana, and that both mutually interact to influence any changes in the tempo.