

Fall 1998

Descending Through Drums: A Field Based Study of the Yeve and Brekete Religions and their Music

Michael C. Spiker
djfrosty.me@gmail.com

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School for International Training
College Semester Abroad – Ghana
(Arts & Culture)

Fall 1998

**Descending Through Drums: A Field-Based
Study of the Yeve and Brekete Religions
and their Music**

Michael Kwadwo Frosty Spiker

Project Advisor: **Dr. N. Fiagbedzi Music**
Department, University of Ghana

Academic Directors: **Dr. Olayemi Tinuoye**
Ms. Ann Pobi

ABSTRACT

Descending Through Drums is an interpretive field study of two traditional religious groups called Brekete and Yeve. Based on four weeks of field research in Ghana, with the majority of time spent in the coastal villages of the southeastern Volta Region. Through specific experiences, the research aims at explaining the rituals of the two religions, the music, and the functions of the cults; and how they might explain the phenomenon of spirit medium-ship and possession.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Big thanks and respects to: Master Edo Ga Dondon Emmanuel Kushiado, my teacher, friend and mentor who was responsible for introducing me to the worlds of Brekete and Yeve.

Dr. Nissio Fiagbedzi, who spent his precious time proof-reading and correcting this paper, with one of the world's most difficult students.

Sofa Doworlo, for opening the doors that only a priest could open, and sharing the riches found inside.

Roger Miller, for being a funny little man who was always there for me.

Kofi Mensah for letting us play drums in the sand circle, and providing hospitality.

To all the priests, priestesses and elders who have given me gifts from their wisdom and experience.

To my brethren and sistren in Europe, India and the U.S.

To Yemi, Ann, Serwaa, Nana and all my sisters and brothers in the SIT family.

And the most thanks and respects to my family: Mama Fishy, Cassidy, Papa Billy, and Willy T. To the Campbells, and to the Spikers. The gifts given of life and support make me the luckiest man on the planet, worth well more than silver and gold.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

"The basis of music is sound, its aim is to please and to arouse various emotions in us."

(Descartes, 1961,11)

Music that is used in the possession rituals of the Ewe-speaking peoples occurs under specific conditions, in a complex system of religious worship. As an interpretive analysis of the music in the context of specific ceremonies in the field, there will be generalizations based on the events witnessed; for there are many factors that combine to create conditions for possession to take place. I participated in thirteen different ceremonies, and will draw similarities of the rituals experienced.

Two cults that seem to use music as a catalyst for possession in their ceremonies are the Brekete and Yeve cults. Their origins and development will be briefly traced, as well as how the traditions have held over time. The cults are viewed as traditional religion, and function in progressive Ghanaian society in unique ways. Thus in this study, the music played by the groups, the context in which they are played and the role of the musician will be highlighted.

The cults use music in the context of many rituals, and alone the music does not have the power to possess. The music does however serve as the cornerstone of the possession rituals, and is used in many ways for that purpose. The master drummer can evoke spirits, and speak to the gods and people through drum language. The evoking of spirits as well as the belief in the power of the gods to protect the members, in sickness and from evil spirits is a vital component in the worship processes of these two cults, but more so in Brekete.

The focus will be on specific field experiences that encompass the nature of the research, with concentration on the music, musicians, and their roles within the cults themselves. Emphasis will also be placed on how the drums are used to evoke spirits, and why this is so important in the workings of the cults. Researching possession music is difficult in that the spirits which are believed to possess, cannot be sensed empirically. What is seen in the field is ultimately subject to interpretation of data from specific informants, interviews and field experience.

METHODOLOGY

I stepped into the research time unprepared and unaware as to where my topic would arrive. I had a definite criterion for the project, but was open for adaptation. I tried in advance to establish connections to ensure a successful completion of the goal, but was unable to find a location of research, a reliable interpreter, and a defined topic. What I did have was enthusiasm, a whole lot of faith, and some good ideas.

Just moments before I was going to completely compromise what I wanted to see and do, I meet the man who was to become my drum master, interpreter, and friend. We met at a ceremony outside Accra, and soon met in his home town of Denu, a small village in the coastal area of the Volta Region, near the Togo border. We immediately started drumming lessons, which consisted of six hours of private instruction with two teachers, one playing two bell parts, and the other playing the master drum. Often there would be visitors who would join us to play the supporting drum parts, making the

instruction very thorough. On occasions we would break early to visit a shrine and participate in the activities, where I often played a supporting drum or bell.

In all I went to thirteen different ceremonies involving possession, some at the same shrines at different times, different villages, others in the same village and by different cults. At every ceremony I participated to a greater or lesser degree. I always danced or drummed, sometimes annoying or amusing the members with my attempts. I only once played the master drum, which was at the end of a wake keeping through sunrise.

The names of the villages and towns I visited are: Agbogba (a suburb of Accra), Aflao, Denu, Agbozume, and Adina, all in the southeastern coastal area. Living in Denu was very inspirational: there was hardly a moment that the drumming stopped. Wake keepings, ceremonies, funerals, and people coming to play music continued almost unceasingly. There were traditional concert parties at weekends' brass bands and constant music exuding from all over. I slept outside, and often went to bed hearing the distant sound of drums. Coastal Ewe-land is full of culture, and I hardly could put a dent in the potential of researching music in this area.

The methodology consisted of participant and non-participant observation. The only time I didn't participate in a ceremony was a mistake. I sat with my paper and wrote as the ceremony progressed, and got dirty looks from the drummers and dancers. So after that lesson, I put the pen down and participated.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Brekete is a relatively new cult that found its way around 1930 to the south eastern coastal villages of what was then the Gold Coast, and has since spread throughout West Africa. Its origin has been traced to the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast and Togoland since it was brought down through the agency of an Ashanti traveler (NK INT) who journeyed through what is now the Volta region of Ghana through a town called Kpandu. The Northern influence can be seen in the Brekete drum itself, which is indigenous to the north. Older shrines called parent shrines exist in the Northern region of Ghana, and drummers from the south have often been sent there to learn the traditional style.

A possible reason for the flourishing of Brekete was a slump in cocoa trade resulting in massive economic depression in the early 1930's. This drastic change caused people to reach out towards religious salvation, for a lack of essential resources was plaguing the country (NK INT). As an analyst observed,

'The large number of new cults and their popularity suggest a growing concern about evil magic and an attempt to assuage the anxieties arising from rapid social change.'

(Bascoro, Herskovits 1959:276)

This depression intensified beliefs that there were spells placed on the people through forms of witchcraft. Since then the Brekete cult has evolved into a complex medicinal religion, and can be found in Ghana, Togo, Ivory Coast, Benin, Nigeria and Gabon.

Yeve is the oldest cult in the South Eastern coastal area of Ghana. It was introduced to the Anlo-Ewe people from Dahomey, through the Republic of Togo-land (Fiagbedzi,1966:12) Specific dates of its origin are uncertain. Possible origins can be traced through a supposedly secret Yeve language, which is similar to early Dahomean dialects (Herskovits,1938: 162-200). Yeve shrines can be found in many of the coastal villages and towns of southeastern Ghana.

Children of the towns and villages are exposed to the cult ceremonies and activities at a very early age. Some are born into the workings of the religious system, while others see the ceremonies as outsiders. They grow up in constant exposure to the drumming, dancing and rituals of the cults. The music is ingrained within their minds from childhood, paving the way for the youth to learn, and eventually master the music of their elders.

Many times I witnessed young boys playing supporting drum patterns and bell parts during less intense phases of the ceremony or festival; only to be replaced by the regular drummers when it appeared that the spiritual energy was high. It is in the midst of these first experiences that the drummer is born (Hill,1981:83). Time, age and practice stand between a young drummer holding a seat as one of the regular musicians. Graduation to the regular ranks come when they can stand "strong" under the pressures and tests of the older generation. Tests can consist of many things such as: holding solid rhythm under swift tempos and tempo changes, proper beginnings to songs, and staying strong when the master deliberately goes into playing around with the rhythms. I was tested once playing the kagan supporting drum at a ceremony in Denu, in which I

fumbled a bit at first, but remained strong through the "tricks" of the master, and when a boy bumped my shoulder off beat to distract me. This may be because I was Yevu (a white man), but I speculate that this happens to the children and other beginners too.

In talking to the Brekete drummers, and seeing for myself the playing styles that differ from one cult house to the next, it seems that the traditional style is fading. The master Brekete drummer is now learning in the same way a supporting drummer learns, by watching, listening and remembering the patterns. This is allowing for drummers to become lazy with the old traditions of arm position and time keeping elements. In 1981, Richard Hill found it to be different. He saw the drummers undergoing a serious event involving formal training. The older generations took the original style down from the "parent" shrines of the north to the coastal villages. There were originally only about 10 patterns that were used (Hill, 1981:85) originally these patterns were adhered to, but as time has grown, other influences have been infused. Instruments like the dondon have been adapted as master and supporting drums, while the number of songs and rhythms evolve along side of introduction of new instruments. The tempo also has evolved from a slower beat to a very rapid tempo (Hill,1981:85).

Performance skills are a big factor in becoming a competent drummer. The Brekete drummer must know the songs in context with the ceremony, for he is in control of it in many ways. The master Brekete drummer often plays beside a supporting Brekete drummer. The supporting drummer must learn what he can and cannot do, and must have the skills to follow the master. The drummer must go through the ranks before he can become a Brekete drummer, and youth and skill always step down to the elder.

The master musician and lead singer have the ability to control a ceremony, and together serve as the leader and mastermind of the event. This requires a vast knowledge of the music; and in Brekete this means knowledge of over two hundred songs, different rhythms and tempos (Hill,1981: 62).They must know not only the songs, but their meanings as well. In the field I noticed that people would often become possessed at the initial moment the drumming began. Sometimes they would sing a song after being possessed, and when the musicians played that song, they reacted greatly which seemed to imply that the gods do prefer specific songs, and the master musicians must know who they are summoning or pleasing.

The drummer plays yet another important role of keeping the spirits in the presence of the ceremony. This is done through holding the energy levels high, keeping people entertained and attentive, so that they will stay in the ceremony; for once the people depart, the gods also depart. The master ensures this by frequently changing songs, increasing tempo and skillfully improvising on the patterns. Improvisation is controlled within the context of drumming, particularly Yeye drumming, for it affects the parts of the dancers and singers, as well as communication with the gods (NK INT).

Communicating with the gods through drumming is an essential role that must be understood by the master. This manner of 'speaking' to the gods during a rhythm is called speech mode drumming, and is established within the master drum patterns, usually by playing the names of the gods (Hill 1981:279) Many African languages are tonal and rhythmic, especially Ewe which uses three tone levels: low, high and middle which are

easily accommodated within the 8-pitch strokes afforded by the Anlo-Ewe master drum. Thus the languages can be translated into drum languages with ease. Speech-mode drumming is a deliberate system of constructing drumming around its communicative purpose. One of its ultimate purpose is to summon and evoke spirits, and keep them in the presence of the ceremony by making them listen. Another type of drum language is called drum text. Drum text differs from speech-mode drumming in that it is interpreted language after the song is constructed. This is used more for the people than the gods. Out of all the drum languages used in ceremonies, the most powerful is the drum call. The drum call is a direct communication with the gods, and is used to lead congregations. They are quick short pieces, usually very fast in tempo, and have the power to immediately evoke spirits.

In performance either the lead singer or the master drummer controls the ceremony. The lead singer can be male or female, while the drummers are men only. In the field I never experienced a singer control a Brekete ceremony, while in one Yeve ceremony I saw both a male and female singer lead. In Yeve there is only one master drummer, who plays the Vuga or master drum. In Brekete there is also one master drummer, but as many as five people can play the Brekete drum together. The master, or awuku, will control the form of the songs and the length of the patterns. He leads and the other players will listen carefully, adapting quickly to those of the master (Hill,1981:279). The master position is not permanent to the one Brekete player, for he can switch, giving the master role to another Brekete player. From the standpoint of the drummer this is literally stepping off the "right sheep skin" to the "left skin" position.

The drummers will often move around in unison with each other, stepping and sliding the sheep skin behind them. The Brekete drummers stand upright with the strap over their left shoulder, balancing the drum on their left thigh. The traditional technique is to extend the right arm, locked elbow, striking the drum with the stick mostly with wrist movement. The arm can be bent slightly and used in the striking for increased volume. The left hand is used to fill in the space with light, loose-fingered taps giving it a slight rolling sound. The hand also helps keep the tempo or time of the rhythms. I noticed that some younger generation players were ignoring the left hand, and bending the elbow. The older players told me that this does not make them happy.

The Yeve maser, called Zaguno, is highly respected and serves as the maestro of the ceremony. The Yeve are very controlled and systematized, with a definite vocabulary established (NK D9T). This is reflected in the master drummer, how he plays his drum and what is played. He does appear to use improvisation, although it is very controlled within the context of the general drumming. The position of the Zaguno is usually in the center of the supporting drummers. The master drum placed horizontally on the ground is propped on its sides by a few rocks. The Zaguno bends over the front of the drum, sometimes with a leg cradling it. The drum can be played with one or two sticks, usually with one. The left hand is used for the bass, while the right holds the stick and plays the higher end. The drum has a very strong low end, and water can be placed inside to further intensify the bass.

The master drummer is the conductor of the ceremony. He controls the dancing, singing, and summons the spirits through drum communication. People believe that the

master drummer is given the power to play the drums well by the spirits, and that if the spirits are in the presence of the master drummer, he cannot make mistakes. The drums and sticks can be blessed by certain rituals. My master told me that he pours libation to the spirits, and sacrifices one fowl to bless his drums. In some cases the master Brekete drummer will serve as an apprentice or assistant to the priest, which is called the sofo-kuma-kpedziga. Many times I observed that the priest would not be leading the group, and often not in the presence of the ceremony, so the master drummer takes control.

The Brekete and Yeve cults are traditional religions that function in progressive Ghanaian societies both as separate and integrated units within the community. Members of the cults abide by the laws set forth by the government, and are viewed as equals outside the compound of the shrine. This was not always the case, especially in the Yeve tradition. In the past Yeve members were regarded highly amongst community members, and had freedom to do certain things that now the law prevents them from doing (NFINT). In current society the members function as regular Ghanaians do, holding similar jobs and participating in community events and activities. People who do not belong to the cults often come to listen to the music and watch the dancing. Nonmembers can go inside the shrines themselves, but it does not happen regularly. People go to the shrines for different reasons, and not everyone who seeks help is a full member. I noticed many times that there were Christians in the presence of a ceremony. Many people were firm believers in both. At the house of the rain priest in Denu, a man who was a Roman Catholic was seeking help for his farm to get rain. While he was there he

was preaching about the Bible to me, and talking down on customary rites (rituals) of traditional religion. I was a bit confused, and my interpreter also thought it was quite disrespectful to the priest. Many of the pure members of Yeve and Brekete do not go to church, although some now and again leave the shrines and become regular Christians. People seek spiritual blessing and assistance from the shrines. In the Yeve, they believe that they are protected by the Yeve god from people or spirits doing them harm. The gods have the power to seek out the evil, and bring forth punishment to them. In Brekete, which is a medicinal cult, the members often go for healing purposes, spiritual and physical. These powers are deep-rooted secrets, and exist deep inside the knowledge of the priests, the gods, and the shrines. Supposedly there are magical objects within the heart of the shrines, so only trusted members can enter.

Shrine members function in a hierarchical fashion, and respect is always paid to the elders. The members take vows and abide by cult rules (NK 1NT). Both cults have extensive initiation procedures. During the initiation, members make prayers to the gods. The initiation of women into Yeve is celebrated as if it were a marriage between the god and the new member. Procedures similar to baptizing occur, the members are covered with water that has been blessed by the spirits. In many cases but not all, members are given tattoos or undergo scarification. Some Yeve members are recognized easily by three cheek scars under each eye. The tattoos usually consist of the persons name, where they are from and their religion, and are found on the forearm of the members. There are many different forms of scarification, and in my travels I noticed tattoos on members' faces as well as scars. Members often take medicine for spiritual

and health purposes. In Brekete, which is a cult based on medicinal use, the members speak about 'atikedudu', which is the taking of medicine for spiritual purposes (Fiawoo, 1959: 276). This medicine is a combination of herbs, and looks similar to black sand or gunpowder. It can be taken with local gin, or with water. In every ceremony I experienced there was always the taking of local gin or Schnapps. It is taken as a drink, as well as used in the act of evoking spirits called 'pouring libation'. Libation pouring is an essential element in the processes of ceremony. The priest will often say thanks to the ancestors, the gods and the people while pouring libation. He will speak often extensively to the gods and the people around him, pouring shots of gin into the earth, and taking a drink himself. In Yeve the members took the gin with their left hand (not everyone), usually in doses of two. The Brekete used the right hand, and often offered large quantities to their guests.

When greeting a priest for the first time a ritual of dropping on hands and knees, and touching the ground with the forehead and the chin is observed. In the Yeve shrine they continued by touching the chest as well. Dancers have similar rituals as they finished a procession. They would stop, bend over, touch the ground, stand back straight, and touch their forehead and the chest with both hands. This ritual differed from shrine to shrine, but every place I visited did it in some manner. In experience it seems that different priests have different rituals for welcoming. So many of these rituals are open to adaptation by the priests, making every shrine unique in its powers and procedures.

Brekete is a very complex religion which infuses influences from many different cultures into the context of African traditional religion. Being a relatively new cult, its

influences stem from older traditions, borrowing other religious philosophies and forms of worship. Vows are taken, and are institutionalized within the belief system. There are commandments as well as a phenomenon of baptism. Other direct influences like the ban on eating pork, apparently an Islamic restriction, has been established. Many of the influences come from West Africa, as seen in the adoption of language in the context of songs. In the translations of songs you can find languages of Hausa, Twi, and Ewe.(Hill, 1981). The religion has been widely spread over West Africa; through the countries of Ghana, the Ivory Coast, Togo, Nigeria, Gabon, and Benin.

The Brekete pray to many gods but like all other traditional religions do also believe in one supreme being called Mawu. There is a hierarchy between the supreme god and other lesser spirits, also within the rankings of the living. Within the cult members, the highest seat belongs to the 'Sofu', or priest. Under the Sofu is what is called the Kpedziga who can perform any ceremony, and can act in the Sofu's absence. Next is the master drummer called Awaku, who if he is experienced can act as the Kpedziga. The supporting drummers are named the Awukuwiwo. Then, the singers, called Tsaleba also function as a support for the drums with clapping and playing claves. Next, the possessing mediums called Komfu, who can also be singers, stand above the Sentrewa, who assist the people possessed. The Brekete members often chew kola nuts and occasionally eat little sticks of white clay, which has spiritual power.

In Brekete ceremony there are many parts that contribute to the whole. As an outsider, some aspects will be shared and others will be kept secret. So what will be mentioned is subject to my experience in Brekete ceremonies, and will not thoroughly

cover the intricacies of the religion. In total I visited five different Brekete shrines, and participated in nine ceremonies. Each experience was under different circumstances, and different music, dance and rituals happened. They all were different, but some common threads tie them all together. There will be an evaluation of one wake keeping in Agbozume which will serve as a generalization of a typical Brekete ceremony.

THE RITUALS

(A) AGBOZUME

On Friday, November 20 at 5:00 P.M., my drum master, three friends and I traveled to a village on the Keta Lagoon outside the town of Agbozume. Friday nights are always celebrated by the Brekete, and we had many options. My master had an invitation by Sofo Daworlo to perform, so our decision was made. The gathering was small, maybe fifty people at most, in a small courtyard. In an interview with Sofo a few days after the wake keeping, I learned of the preparations for the evening's ceremony. Morning prayer, called Sala, began at 4:00 A.M. with drumming and libation pouring. The drumming continued until 7:00 A.M. when they break to eat and rest. The drumming resumes at 1:00 P.M. and continues throughout the night.

When we arrived, we were warmly accepted into the shrine. Traveling with my master always ensures us warm welcomes, for he is greatly respected and very well liked. I obtained permission to photograph and record the music, and we joined in on the celebration. The priest offered us gin, beer and minerals in generous portions, which may have added to my relaxed mood. I felt very free to dance, drum and participate in

the celebration. My master, Edo, and friend Roger took over the Brekete playing, while my friend and I supported with dondon. The music was typical Brekete music, and will be discussed in the music section.

The setting was a small thatch roof enclosing the small square area where the drummers, singers and dancers were, which was inside a larger square courtyard, directly attached to the shrine. Left from the priest's seat was a corner, and on the wall juxtaposed was the entrance to the shrine. Directly across the Sofo were the drummers and the singers. The dancers were constantly proceeding across the sandy floor, and dashing in and out of the shrine. The Komfu (spirit mediums) would periodically give ritual handshakes from right to left, starting with Sofo. The handshake seemed to differ from spirit to spirit, but in general was a strong initial slap of the right-hand, accompanied by a loud vocal shriek, continuing to the left hand and back to the right in a crossover pattern. The komfu were dressed according to the spirits possessing them, with their faces covered in white clay.

The gods that manifested that evening were Geriya, Sonya, Bangere and Wango. Inside the shrine there were altars for all of the gods and one that did not come called Kunde. Friday night ceremonies do not usually attract Kunde or Geriya, but it seemed Geriya came anyway. Inside the altars were square openings about one foot deep, two feet tall holding totems such as cowry shells, clay pieces, and other things. There was a large wooden carved mask about three feet in diameter on the wall directly back from the entrance. It was very dark and hard to make out all of the paintings. There were two lions, palm trees with sunset, and an alligator painted on the light blue walls. On the

ground there were a doll carved out of wood, two piles of cloth, and various things such as bottles and water pots. My time in the shrine was limited, and people were constantly moving around, making observation quite difficult.

The ceremony continued through the night and eventually the spirits left. We ended the evening with eating a special food pronounced Dzenkple, a salty com dish served with chicken. Sofu said prayers to the gods, poured libation and asked the spirits for safe travels. The taxi ride home was full of singing and laughing, which was even funnier because I did not understand a word that was said.

Yeve is the oldest cult of the southeastern coastal area, and is practiced in respect of its antiquity and presumed power. Yeve have had a history of being a 'secret' society and not being readily open to researchers wishing to document their religion. Perhaps some of the reasons behind this veiling is to protect the cult's knowledge of juju, or magical power. The cult has recently accepted outsiders to see some parts of their practices; for the ways of the past are being forced to make room for a progressing society. This is seen when conflicts arise between members and non-members. In the past there was no intervention by civil authorities between members and non-members, but now they are involved. Education has worked its way into the system bringing English and western knowledge into the picture. This possibly allowed me to come in and see things that before were forbidden. My getting to see the shrines had very much to do with my company, Brekete members, who were greatly respected by the people of the Yeve cult.

(B) ADINA

I had the opportunity to visit a Yeve shrine in depth on November 30, by invitation of the priest and priestess of the Adina shrine, in the presence of Sofo Darwolo (Agbozume/Adina). We arrived at the mixowo (Fiagbedzi,1966:13), or shrine, at 3:00 P.M., took off our shirts and sandals, and wrapped a skirt of traditional cloth around our waists, and were welcomed with gin and customary greetings. I was shocked at the freedom I had to photograph and record the music, and the level of acceptance I had of the cult members. Some of the elders gave me interesting looks, but they were friendly about it. Some even pulled me aside for photographs.

Some rituals were similar to those of Brekete, like the greeting of the priest by dropping on hands and knees, touching the ground with forehead and chin, then touching the chest, forehead, and the chest again with both hands. The hierarchical system is similar to that of Brekete. They also shook hands with the right, but occasionally they would switch. We shook hands from right to left, and returned to greeting the priest They took gin out of what looked to me as some kind of carved horn, in a cone shape with the left hand. They insisted that I was to take two shots, and I have never been one to refuse. After greeting the priests we entered the compound to see the music and dancing. There were many people participating and observing the ceremony; approximately 150. The setting was a large rectangular courtyard with drummers and singers opposite the mixowo. Being about one hundred yards from the ocean the ground was sand, with a small number of trees in the rectangle. Two of the plants were the anya

and aviaya, which have medicinal purposes as well as a belief that they conduct lightning.(Fiagbedzi,1966:13) If you were to stand in the middle of the courtyard facing the drummers, to the left against a wall was where the elders, the priest and priestess sat. The dancers progressed from the front left corner, through the middle, and to the back left. At the back sat some observers and some elders. Next to the entrance to the mixowo was a man dressed in white, who I was told was a very powerful person in the Yeve cult.

The Yeve members of high rank often wore head bands of red feathers, and had large necklaces strung with many small beads spiraling around each other, with one large bead in the middle. Some had cowry shells on their ankles and arms. The dancers also wore long belts of cowry shells over their right shoulders as seen in Yeve photograph number two. The dancers would proceed in groups according to their rank within the cult, some in groups of two to large processions, led by higher ranked members. The Yeve photograph number two shows them dancing around one of the trees in a circular manner. The dance style was somewhat similar to Brekete, in that the elbows were raised in unison. Yeve is the Grandfather of the southeastern coastal religions. I conclude that the newer cults borrowed many of their rituals, dance styles, and music from the Yeve. The similarities are many and Yeve is the oldest.

(C) AGBOGBA

The festival outside Accra in the village of Agbogba was my first field experience, which I now better understand. There were two religious groups celebrating at Togbui Kukubor's shrine; the Yeve and the Brekete. Togbui has his own way of

performing ceremonies, as I later found out. The Yeve and Brekete hardly ever hold ceremonies together, but in this festival they were celebrating together and sometimes side by side. Togbui used to be an explosive expert in the Army, and while some shrines fired off a shotgun to initiate a ceremony or celebration, Togbui Kukubor detonated a few small bombs. I was sitting with him after the opening wake-keeping of his annual festival, and the sun had risen. I was exhausted and he was offering gin to me and my interpreter; and all of a sudden the atmosphere was pounded by one of his explosions. This just about explains how Togbui wants his festival to be conducted.

Two cows were sacrificed after the first wake-keeping, and many people went into possession. The festival started large and continued strong. I left the festival and did not return till the end, because at this point I was still taking classes during the day. When I did return was when things actually started for me, and I met the people that would help me accomplish my goal. As the festival came to a close some interesting things happened that were unique to my field experiences with Brekete and Yeve. Apart from the ceremonies being held side by side, there were aspects of the festival that were different from other ceremonies. For the most part the ceremonies progressed and were held in the same ways, especially in spirit possession and dancing techniques. What struck me as being most different was the layout of the shrines.

The shrines were placed in different rooms around the courtyard, and each shrine could hold one or more spirits. Standing in the middle of the large rectangular courtyard, facing north, was a sizable open-air dance area enclosed with a thatch-roof, and decorated with red, black and white cloth triangle-shaped flags. The width of the area,

which will be called 'area one', was about forty feet, and the length seventy feet. Facing the same direction, there were two rooms for spirits set within the far wall of area one. The room on the left I found out to be for the spirit Kunde, in which were paintings of a tree, and a hunter. The room on the right had a painting of an alligator, as well as two concrete alligator sculptures with their mouths wide open. The entrances to the rooms were covered with cloth, and I never went inside. In the middle of area one was a circular altar constructed of concrete in a cog shape. A support pole next to the altar held the Brekete drums high, and other drums were resting against the altar. In front of the alligator room were two atumpan talking drums of Akan origin. Lining up left of the Kunde room sat the elders, including the priestess. The priest, when present, would sit to the right of the atumpan, directly in front of the two spirit rooms. The left side was lined with benches and chairs, occupied by elders sitting close to the rooms. My position was in the middle, and the possessing mediums sat back to the far left. The musicians were lined up against the back wall. The drums were set up: a Yeve substitute drum was first, continuing through the agbadza set, with two kidi, and a drum made from cement that can be used as the master drum in some Yeve music. The singers were in the back right corner, and played claves and axatse (gourd rattle). The right wall was occupied by singers, dancers and observers.

From the main courtyard in the middle were two square altars, one used for sacrifice. Facing north to the left side was the priests' quarters, and continuing back to the left was a spirit room. The possessing mediums would often run into the far back left corner, but I never ventured back there. To the back there were some houses and a little

shack that had local gin for sale. To the right (east) was a smaller performance area which will be called area two. There were two spirit rooms in this area, one that I caught a few glimpses of as people entered and came out. They were located on the eastern wall, on which was a painting of a man and a woman. A priest was seated, and to his right sat elders. The right hand room had a concrete circular altar in it with a drum hung high on the wall, with some clothes hung on the wall inside. The clothes looked like northern smocks, which were similar in the way they were woven to kente. This area is where the Brekete ceremonies were usually held, although sometimes they gathered under a tree in the courtyard. Directly opposite the eastern wall were two square altars with the heads of two sacrificed goats, and in the middle, the head of a small dog. To the right was where the drummers sat, extending out from the wall, continuing to the singers. The Brekete players moved around this area in front of the drummers. To the back right was a white circular altar, which before I knew what it was, was where I placed my recorder. What happened to the following recording is slightly unbelievable. The recording machine stopped working and the next pre-recorded cassette I placed in the machine was erased. The next night on the very same altar sat three heads of sacrificed goats. They later told me that the altar was itself a god.

Many people went into possession at Agbogba, and since it was my first time seeing these ceremonies I was taken aback by the intensity of the spirit mediums. They would snap into possession, usually with a scream of some sort, and continued to make odd noises of squeaks and screeches. Sometimes the mediums upon possession flopped to the ground, and made twitching or shaking movements, and sometimes made violent

spasms. They gave ritual handshakes, and often made many trips to one shrine. Some constantly ran around the areas, with eyes closed just barely missing the support poles. Libation water was poured at their feet, and clay smeared on their faces, usually by other spirit mediums.

What was interesting is that the people that participated belong to different cults, but while I was there I thought the Brekete and Yeve as the same. Good thing I found a new interpreter. Afterwards I realized that there was separation between the groups. At the end of the festival, the Brekete were playing in the courtyard, and the Yeve in area one. The energies of the groups often shifted from one to the other, and drew dancers and observers back and forth. The Brekete played in all three areas, while the Yeve stayed in area one. Now that I look back I have realized there was a friendly rivalry between the two, and since they celebrated in parallel ways, there was no harm in joining together for the festival.

I believe the music is the cornerstone of the power to alter consciousness, and evoke spirits, and must be viewed within the gestalt of African traditional religion; that is, that every aspect of the religion affects the other part, and must be viewed as a whole. The music by itself can be seen as a machine of its own, functioning within the complexities of the religion. With its use of multiple support rhythms, master drum parts, communication abilities, and functions in cult rituals, it works like a separate brain in the mastermind of the ceremony. Just analyzing the music as notes, rhythms and lyrics, would sever what the music represents, and how it functions. The instruments

themselves also represent different things, and must be viewed with respect to their origins.

The master Brekete drum as noted before came from the north, and has been adapted from its original wood resonator to a metal shell. The skins used by my drum master were one side cow, and the playing side has two layers of goat skins, played with one hand and a curved stick. The skins are held down by metal and string, and the rim is often slapped in tuning. The instruments used in Brekete support drumming come from the traditional Agbadza set of Anlo origin. The agbadza drums used are called, from the smallest to the biggest, kagan, kidi and sogo. The drums are constructed with wood panels fit together and supported by three metal strips. The tuning system is by a dozen or so wooden pegs, that hold the skin above the rim of the drum. They can be antelope or goat skins, but I only came across one sogo with goat, skin used as a master drum. The kagan is open at the bottom while the rest are closed. The kagan is tuned very high, and the kidi and sogo are relatively low. The bells used are metal atoke bells, and are shaped like a banana and are struck with a metal beater. A rattle is made from a gourd with a net of wooden beads covering it. It is called an axatse. There can be many axatse in a ceremony, although they are very loud and can overpower the singers if too many people play. The singers often play the axatse and clap hands together as akpewo. A drum called the adevu, which comes from the Northern Volta region is sometimes used in replacement, or in context with the kidi or kagan. The Northern dondon can be used in Brekete support drumming and occasionally as the master drum. There can be many or just one dondon, and are usually used to support.

In performance, the Brekete drummer or singer controls the music, and the songs can be through-composed or in call and response form. This call and response can be between the master and supporting drummers, and between the drummers and the singers. The call and response can be improvised by the two Brekete players.

The support instruments of Yeve are similar to Brekete support drums, although the master drums are different. The Yeve master drum is called the Vuga, and the head is covered with antelope skin, tuned with the peg system, and played with sticks and hand. Yeve musicians also use different bells called gakogui, which is a double bell with high and low pitches and adodo which held in the middle and shaken. They use the axatse, sometimes in large numbers. The support drums are kagan, kidi and sogo. The singers clap and play claves as support to the drummers.

Spirit mediums are persons believed to be the channels which the gods, spirits or ancestors can tap to descend into the living world. In African traditional religion the spirit medium is used for many purposes, including healing, divination (speaking to the gods) and for guidance.

"The spirit will tell the priestess where to get the medium to heal the person (or) where to find a solution to one persons problem, or how to perform certain rituals. (Koo Nimo INT)

The spirits possess only under controlled ceremony circumstances, which involves undergoing many rituals. After being initiated into a cult, the medium must perform rituals such as prayer, the taking of medicine and herbs, and customary rites.

Many things go into preparing for spirit medium-ship that I did not experience. I only twice entered a shrine in which people were possessed, both in Brekete and Yeve. I saw things that I do not understand and cannot explain.

The spirit mediums can be men or women, singers, dancers, drummers, and even master drummers. The spirit can choose its body, and often returns to the same person. The mediums when under possession become ultimately different from their own personalities, and they stick to the altered role without fail. In Agbogba the mediums would constantly return to the same shrine, often bringing with them elements inside the shrine. These elements consisted of clothes, hats, brooms, tails of hair, shafts, crowns made from herbs, belts, beads, and white clay smeared across their faces. They would sing songs that the spirits wanted to hear, and dance in a similar fashion throughout the possession time. The dances varied from fluid, graceful twirls and steps, to spastic stomping and spinning.

Some rituals that occurred during spirit possession are: the removal of cloth upon spirits handshakes, libation pouring of water and gin, the lighting of gunpowder on the ground and in the hands of the mediums, which would shower out in a fountain-like manner.

CLINICAL BACKUP

Music that helps induce possession is a very difficult area to find supportive information to back-up its legitimacy. Also the context of religious worship can make for obstacles in providing empirical data, that is, something that can be detected by the five human senses, although there are some laboratory findings that contribute possible explanations of possession. In the clinical findings of Walker, she found that lab subjects experienced symptoms of trance in exposure to rhythms that have multiple main beats (Walker: 1972,18).

Without question the phenomenon of multiple rhythm gestalt occurs in Southern Ewe drumming. The structure of drum ensemble music facilitates it in five ways. First, the continuous play of the bell pattern shapes time into cycles without an obvious beginning or end. Second, the felt beats and pulses are unaccented and forever regular. Third, instruments have varied movements of entry within the cycle of the bell rhythm. Fourth, rhythmic pattern may be entirely offbeat, or accents may be regularly placed on offbeat positions. And, fifth, cross rhythm, both permanently imbedded in the polyrhythmic structure or temporarily introduced is extensively used (Locke, 1978:349).

Defining what trance symptoms are becomes a bit tricky, in that trance is a phenomenon that occurs in the depths of the brain, altering the state of consciousness, which affects the physical body, usually in an incapacitating manner. So to attack the problem from a different angle, it should be necessary to define altered states of consciousness brought on from natural stimulus. In Nehers findings, polyrhythmic music helps bring on altered

states of consciousness. As the rhythms become more complex, the brain is not only stimulated, but has been found to change consciousness in laboratory subjects. Raymond Prince sees in altered states of consciousness alterations in thinking to a greater or lesser degree, disturbed time sense, loss of control, change in emotional expression, body image change, perceptual distortion, change in meaning or significance, sense of being infallible, feelings of rejuvenation, and hyper-suggestibility (Prince,1968:77-82). Similarly music also affects people differently; its subjective nature leaves room for arguments on its power to alter consciousness.

In the context of Brekete and Yeve, people who have not been initiated into the cults cannot be possessed by the spirits. I never witnessed a non member get possessed, and do not believe it can happen. Which suggests that members gradually become prone to possession through the force of constant exposure to the ritual and its music. In the ceremonies, and while playing drums I had certain experiences that suggested altered states of consciousness. The most profound experiences occurred while playing Brekete, Yeve, adevu and dondon. Many times I lapsed into regressions of childhood memories into great detail, often losing my concentration of the drums. My mind would race, and I would start reveling in new found thoughts, often projected on human potential. But not all the symptoms were inspirational. Many times I fell into ruts of frustration, energy loss, and loss of concentration. These were my reactions to the music and therefore subjective in nature.

Clinically, drums have been found to have significant affects:

1. a single beat of a drum contains many different frequencies. Different frequencies are transmitted along different nerve pathways in the brain. Therefore, the sound of a drum should stimulate a larger area in the brain than the sound of a single frequency.

2. a drum beat contains many low frequencies. The low frequency receptors of the ear are more resistant to damage than the high frequency receptors, and can withstand higher amplitudes of sound before pain is felt. Therefore, it should be possible to transmit more energy to the brain with a drum than with a stimulus of a higher frequency (Neher, 1962: 152).

In the sonic driving experiments by Neher, the average human brain wave frequency is between eight and thirteen cycles per second, and he found the high response in this range. With lower frequencies, slower rhythms showed high results. In Richard Hills analysis of Brekete, the slow rhythms rated at 7.5 beats per second, and the high ranging up to 10.5 beats per second, with the average at about nine beats per second. Many times the music starts slow and gains tempo as it progresses, parallel to variations in human brain-wave frequency. The progression from slow to fast Brekete music correlates with Neher's findings of producing trance symptoms in laboratory subjects. Neher also experimented with rhythmic stimulation through light flashes. He found that as the rhythm of the light is shifted, the brain rhythm changes in parallel to the new rhythm. His conclusions were that through connections with sensory area stimulation, rhythmic stimulation affects many parts of the brain that are not normally affected (Neher 1962:152).

Music, especially rhythmic and drum oriented music has powers to alter states of consciousness. In combination with rhythmic complexities such as polyrhythmic, low toned drums, combined with high volumes, is possible in affecting some humans. In the context of traditional African religion, weaving together the tapestry of medicinal use, customary rites, initiation rituals and ceremony, this music has the ability to induce possession on its members.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The possession music played by the Brekete and Yeve cults appears to have powers in altering the consciousness of some people, and has the ability to induce possession on its members. The music is the cornerstone of cult functions, and can help activate prayer, medicine, spirit invocation and possession. Cult members believe its power to be limitless, and they feel protected from bad spirits or sickness with this believe. In fieldwork I experienced many people go into spirit possession, and believe that some foreign entity did indeed enter their bodies. The music was in many ways the inducing factor to spirit possession; and served as the link between the earthy world and that of the spirits, ancestors and gods, with the master drummer or lead singer being in control of communication with the un-seen, and the conductor of the ceremony. The music is the catalyst to African traditional religion, and unites the people with ceremony, and links the humans with their gods.

APPENDIX A:
PHOTOGRAPHS



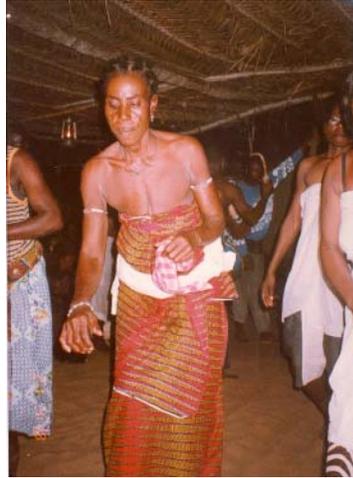
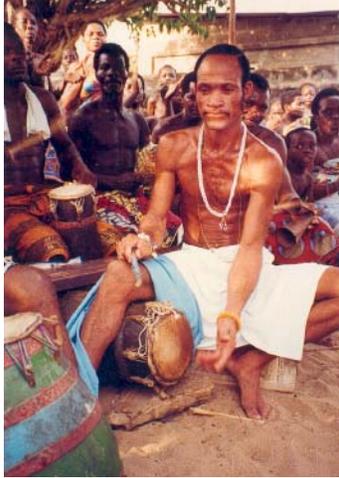
Yeve Woman: Adina note: headdress



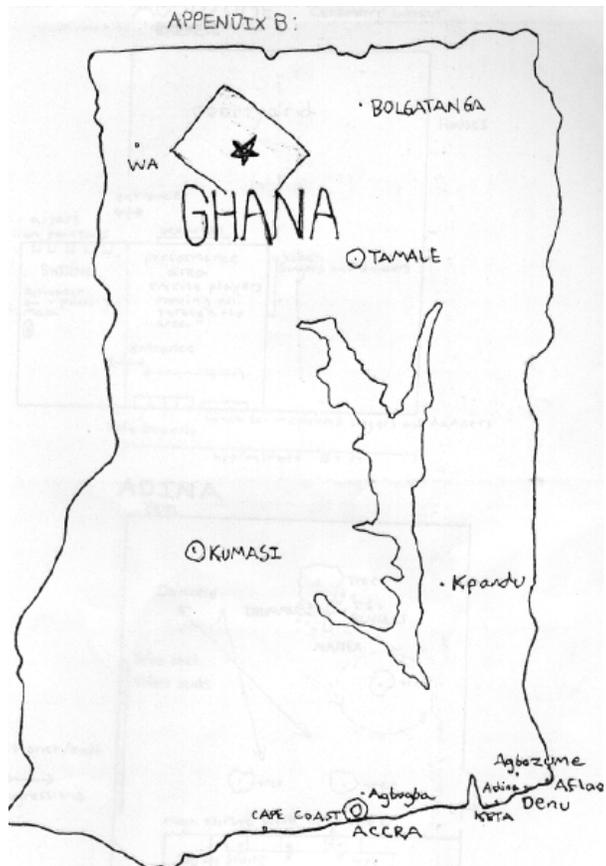
Priest and priestess: Adina



Adina: Performance Area



APPENDIX B:



APPENDIX C:

INTERVIEWS

J.H Kwabena Nketia, November 25, 1998

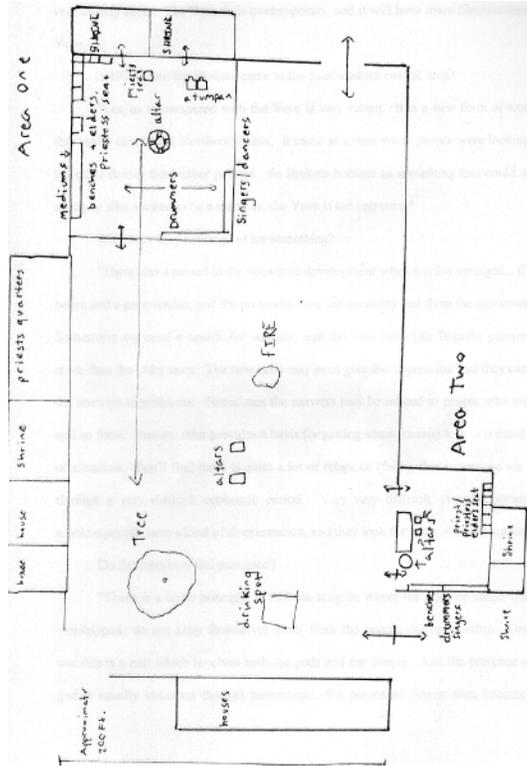
"What is the role of the drummer in the Brekete and Yeve cults?"

The drummers are the people who know the complete repertoire, and normally the repertoire consists of songs on drums, and the songs usually deal with the mood...Provide basis for action and interaction during a performance. A lot of the vitality and the animation of the performance depend on the drummers, especially the master drummer. Brekete sometimes initiates changes in style of movements, and in the style of dance. So the drummers are extremely important for sustaining the entire event... Sometimes you will find some of the drums may change hands. The master drummer will be played by another master drum for some time, it is that way that they keep everything going.

Does improvisation occur in Brekete and Yeve Drumming?

Yes, but "... If it departs too much from the structure and the given rhythms, then they are playing a different kind of music. Musicians have to be careful what they play. It affects the dancing, it affects the communication with the gods."

"Yeve is even more controlled than Brekete. It is very systematized as is a quite a lot of Ewe drumming. The order of the master drum sequences can change, but usually there is a vocabulary established... That is, the thing about Ewe Drumming is that it is



very closely knit... The Brekete is contemporary, and it will have more liberties than the Yeve.

Is 1930 when the Brekete came to the Southeastern coastal area?

"Yes, as to compared with the Yeve is very recent. It is a new form of worship that really came from Northern Ghana. It came at a time when people were looking out for other deities from other powers. So Brekete became as something that could admit anybody who wanted to be a member; the Yeve is too secretive."

Why were they looking out for something?

"There was a period in the economic development when a crisis emerged... Cocoa boom and a poor season, and the pressures from the economy and from the environment. Sometimes we need a search for security, and the new cults like Brekete promise for more than the older ones. The new cults may even give the impression that they can find the answers to problems. Sometimes the answers may be related to people who are bad and so forth. Brekete then provides a basis for getting some security in a depressed kind of situation. You'll find there is quite a lot of religious (faith), this is because we went through a very difficult economic period. Very very difficult...(which) pertains to anytime people have a kind of disorientation, and they look for other areas of support. "

Do the members feel protected?

"There is a basic principle in African religion where the gods or spirits that are worshipped do not keep themselves aloof from the people during worship. Because worship is a part which involves both the gods and the people. And the presence of the god is usually indicated through possession... the possessed person then becomes the

medium of the god. During the possession the god removes evil spirits from the person, or can indicate what they should do. They can give them the assurance of protection... or they can give them instruction of how to deal with the problem. The possessed medium can carry any message."

Paraphrased: It sometimes can involve a clinical situation and the person who "consults the medium or the priest who divines and tells them what to do. The individual person who has a problem; personal problem or even disease may then later consult the priest, face to face... The clinical situation and individual private consultation is different from the public situation of worship. "

Is music involved?

"...a communication or ritual assembly seeks communion or interaction or assurance from the gods through music. They say because the gods also love music, and they are attracted by the music they want. And sometimes when the person gets possessed he may sing...the kind of song that he (the god) wants to dance to. It is that moment that the gods indicate..."

"This puts a particular responsibility on the musician. The singers and the drummers who are expressing the mood (mode?) of worship. They should be able to sing the song that will excite the group ...They must know the songs meanings as well as being able to play (the songs). That means out of the hundred people, you only find a few taking the lead parts."

Can people speak through the spirits with drums?

" The drum can make statements just as the singer can make statements. Those who understand the drum will also get the message. Just as the song is addressing the deity those who are around are also hearing. The communication is important not only in addressing the gods but also in assuring the congregation who are listening to the message going to the gods. We cannot assume that the communication chain is complete, that when you send a message that the god necessarily hears it. But once we know that it has been sent, that what we have wished has been expressed...the presence of the god is indicated by the possessed people shows that they are likely here."

Sometime drummers play drums throughout the night, does this have significance?

"... you can sustain an event if you have music going. From the moment you stop, and if you stop for a long while, you know the whole thing begins to break down and people begin to disperse. The use of this is to sustain an event or to entertain a crowd...that kind of integration role is very important.

In Brekete, is there influence from other religions?

"(Christianity) is sometimes difficult to separate...because of the common belief in one supreme god. Our people tend to accommodate Christianity...Some (cults) have even tried to increase their validity by even keeping a bible (in the shrine)...The people who created (Brekete) must have been aware of such codes in Islamic and in Christian religions; the things you do and the things you don't do. "

"In Yeve there are several gods. Brekete and some of the newer cults they have one particular deity that they address, so that is an important thing."

By the end of the night are many spirits evoked (Brekete)?

"If they are Brekete gods yes, then they will be evoked. Brekete music will not necessarily evoke Yeve gods. Gods respond to particular things instituted...the Yoruba god will not respond to an Akan drum...What has been instituted and established as the sacred music of the god probably will be based on the experience of what excites and draws their attention of that particular god... (this) worship is a set of things to do, including music, dance and so forth...you don't change this."

Interview with Sofo Doworlo, November 28, 1998.

How do drummers become drummers?

Translated from Ewe by Edo Kushiado,

"A gift from the spirits."

"If a drummer plays bad, when the spirit comes they never play off."

Paraphrased. The spirit must give permission for the master drummer to become a drummer. Also stated in the Agbozume section is the hierarchy of the cult, and as well as the preparations of Friday night's ceremony. Regarding the ages of possession he stated,

"Spirits can possess on a small child, but not very very young.

Regarding the healing powers and techniques of healing: If somebody is sick, we give them herbs called amatsi or, atike, and has healing ability in combination with the music and prayer. The limit is decided by the gods. The spirit upon possession can tell ailment, sometimes by the priest diving through tossing kola nuts or cowry shells, and translating their landing positions.

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