



Trans. Revista Transcultural de Música

E-ISSN: 1697-0101

edicion@sibetrans.com

Sociedad de Etnomusicología

España

Agawu, Kofi

The communal ethos in African performance: ritual, narrative and music among the northern ewe

Trans. Revista Transcultural de Música, núm. 11, julio, 2007, p. 0

Sociedad de Etnomusicología

Barcelona, España

Available in: <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=82201108>

- How to cite
- Complete issue
- More information about this article
- Journal's homepage in redalyc.org

redalyc.org

Scientific Information System

Network of Scientific Journals from Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain and Portugal

Non-profit academic project, developed under the open access initiative

The Communal Ethos in African performance: Ritual, Narrative and Music among the Northern Ewe

Kofi Agawu

Key words: Northern Ewe of Ghana; Communal ethos; Modernity-Tradition; Pouring libation; Performing the news (*amanie*); Deceiving narratives; *gli* (performed story); Music making.

Resumen

Pese a la presión que la modernidad, con una fuerte tendencia al individualismo, ejerce sobre las sociedades tradicionales africanas en general, Agawu nos demuestra cómo entre los Ewe del norte de Ghana, aunque extensible también a otros grupos, el sentido de pertenencia a una comunidad, el “comunal ethos”, es capaz de transgredir y readaptarse ante esa modernidad. La actitud de pertenencia está presente en los diversos dominios sociales y culturales, donde la expresión del individuo se manifiesta bajo los diferentes mecanismos de interacción social. Para dar ejemplo de ello, describe cuatro de los más significativos modos de expresión entre los Ewe: *pouring libation*, *performing news*, *exchanging deceiving narratives* y *making music*.

Palabras clave: Ewe del norte de Ghana; Ethos comunal; Modernidad-Tradición; Libación vertida; Noticias actuadas (*amanie*); Narrativas engañosas; *gli* (relatos actuados); Producción musical.

In many traditional African societies, practically every domain of performance is conditioned by a desire on the part of participants to join rather than divide, to bring together rather than set apart, to unify rather than splinter—in short, a communal ethos. Ritual, narrative, dance, singing and the beating of drums and other instruments are typically motivated by an awareness of a primal togetherness, by the (imagined) presence of others, by a sense that the meaningfulness of an activity depends ultimately on the constraints imposed by its participatory framework. ‘I am because I belong with others’ is a fundamental belief that is affirmed frequently and in a variety of guises. The communal ethos does not deny individual agency; rather, it provides a forum for the performance of individuality through the enabling but also critical mechanisms of social interaction. Ethnomusicological studies of close-knit traditional societies like the Dagbamba (Chernoff 1979), Igbo (Nzewi 1991), and BaAka (Kisliuk 1998), among numerous others, have shown the workings of a communal ethos. This paper adds to this group of studies an outline and brief commentary on certain domains of expressivity active in a single but diversely constituted African society, the Northern Ewe of Ghana (see Gavua 2000 for basic ethnographic data and Agawu 1995 for a first pass through some of the issues discussed below).

The communal ethos

Communitary indexes consciousness of an irreducibly plural social existence. Participants subscribe to an always-already connected ethos that mediates all relevant modes of expression,

spiritual as well as physical. In principle, communality is opposed to individualism. Individualism rests the motivation for the performance of a life on an individual's predispositions, not those of a group. Under the sign of a communal ethos, by contrast, individuals are never unaware of others; these 'others' may be kin or extra-kin, may share one's language or religion, and may participate regularly in one's community of speech, dance and music.

One of the clearest manifestations of a communal ethos among the Northern Ewe is the network of greetings that are performed in the course of daily life. For them, greeting is obligatory, not optional. To fail to greet someone by either refusing to initiate a greeting or declining to respond to another's initiation is to signal a rupture in the social network. Greetings are exchanged at all times of day and under various circumstances. Greeting texts, accordingly, possess fixed as well as variable portions. In the early morning, I might greet you by asking whether you have risen with life, whether you slept peacefully, and whether your people slept peacefully also. I will then thank you for the 'work' or favors you did for me (or my people) yesterday or in the recent past. If I forget to thank you, I may well be reminded of it later by you or by others. To fail to acknowledge a favor is in effect to overlook or undervalue one of the ties that binds us, namely, regular giving and taking as defining practices in a relatively small, linguistically homogenous community.

Morning greetings may incorporate other subjects. For example, if there has been a death, and we are all mourning, I will ask, "Are you well with mourning?" This immediately acknowledges the period of grieving; it acknowledges that things are not cool, that we are sitting inside a fire. If I have been away from the scene of this greeting for some time—if, for example, I live and work elsewhere, and only visit my hometown occasionally—I am obliged to incorporate the question in the first greetings I exchange with others. The thought is that because some members of our community may have passed away while I was gone, and because the task of taking them and hiding them (burying them) has been undertaken by those who remained in the village on behalf of all of us, the work done ought to be acknowledged. And if I know you to be specifically bereaved, I will be sure to include that question. To overlook it would be to demonstrate particular insensitivity to your circumstances; it would also be to downplay our mutual membership of a community that mourns openly, extensively and together.

Greetings offered at other times of the day reinforce this larger sense of belonging. If I meet you later in the day, after greeting you in the morning, I will greet you again by noting that you have been 'sitting' (engaged at some task) all this while; and then, depending on how much time we have, I may inquire into the details of this 'sitting' or move on with a conventional affirmation of your being at work. There are similarly casual (second or third) greetings that acknowledge people returning from the farm, or from the river, or from work.

A second, deep source of a communal impulse among the Northern Ewe is the set of proverbs, parables, admonitions and wise sayings that provide the basis for verbal exchange. The ability to use these texts imaginatively is a mark of erudition. The texts themselves signal a set of philosophical and especially ethical attitudes shaped fundamentally by a sense of communality. "Drink finishes but a sibling does not finish" opposes material possession (a bottle of Schnapps, say) to human affiliation. The latter is valued over the former because it is felt that a sense of kinship is a permanent condition, not a temporary one. That is, whereas a bottle of Schnapps can be replaced, a sibling cannot. A variant of this saying is that "A sibling is more valuable than cloth." Investment in human and social bonds may sometimes sanction dependency. "You do not go hungry when your sibling is in a good place" is both an assurance that the relative prosperity of a sibling can always be tapped, and a reminder to those who are well to do that they have a responsibility towards their less prosperous kin. The reach of the word 'sibling' is sometimes subject to flexible and opportunistic interpretation. A sibling can be a member of one's nuclear or extended family, a blood relation, a person who comes from your village, or one who shares your mother tongue.

One way to gauge the strength of communal belief is to consider the consequences of violation. With regard to greetings, for example, not to greet someone signals friction or disrespect. Sooner or later the individual is confronted with this behavior and attempts are made to resolve the

problem. Similarly, refusing communal responsibility may make you the object of gossip and ridicule. In extreme cases, one who refuses membership of one's community may be denied a burial place within that community. "We do not know him," it might be said.

This composite portrait of communality may seem to apply primarily to traditional or precontact or precolonial African society. Even though 'tradition' is a "territory of the imagination" (Feintuch 1997:470), it remains in principle distinct from modernity, itself a territory of the imagination. Under various modernizing impulses, including urban living, the consumption of Western goods and services, and occupations defined by literacy (which means the ability to read and write the colonizer's language), the communal ethos has evolved in different directions but it remains an essential rallying point for many Ewe. Modern manifestations of a communal ethos take three essential forms. The first is a direct continuation of the practices found in traditional society. Even while living and working in an urban setting, some Northern Ewe will still greet one another regularly, pour libation as occasions demand, and mourn their dead in the most authentic ways. The second modifies aspects of the traditional group of practices, jettisoning those that are impracticable or simply inconvenient for modern living, but retaining others. For example, the pouring of libation on floors—often mud floors—may be modified so that a city dweller's Persian rug is not subject to regular alcohol abuse. The potency of the ritual continues to be valued even as its material expression is tweaked. A third response to communality denies its traditional precepts and embraces a new non-communal or even anti-communal lifestyle. Few Ewe embrace this ethos consciously or willingly, although the imperatives of modernity sometimes impose it.

It is important to stress the global or diasporic reach of the Ewe sense of communality. In Ewe communities in London, Berlin, Sao Paulo, Mthatha, Toronto, New York and Los Angeles, among many other places, a sense of community is expressed through some of the markers we have identified above. Efforts—some of them strenuous—are made to retain Ewe language and customs, to encourage traffic between home and abroad, and above all, to mourn the dead. Modernity has not superseded tradition; rather, modernity has selectively incorporated the morphologies of tradition. Indeed, the aggressiveness with which some Ewe practice their native traditions away from home suggests that one of the paradoxical effects of modernity is to foster a stronger embrace of tradition. In short, if traditional society is the normative site for the display of a communal ethos, modern society supports equally normative sites for such display; modernity is no more than updated tradition.

Markers of communality dot practically all expressive modes, and it would take a more extended study to analyze them in detail. Here, I would like to describe four of the most resilient of these expressive modes: pouring libation; performing news; exchanging deceiving narratives; and making music. Although distinct, these modes share a comparable set of background communicative impulses deriving from a will to communal living (Agawu 1995 includes a description of their rhythmic dimensions).

Pouring libation

Pouring libation is a ritual that many Ewe perform on a variety of occasions—some daily others seasonal; some low, others high; some serious, others playful; some highly formal others informal. Typically, an elder or otherwise qualified individual, usually but by no means exclusively male, will invoke the gods and ancestors for the occasion. Gin, schnapps or palm wine are favorite offerings, but room is made for ancestors who do not drink alcohol by offering them cold water or water mixed with flour. Colonial discourse sometimes referred to the pouring of libation as praying, but libations are more than entreaties, confessions or thanksgiving. They are flexible narrative spaces designed to accommodate a range of desires (see Yankah 1995 for an account of the parallel Akan practice).

The text of a normative Northern Ewe libation is organized in four parts. First, gods, ancestors and legendary figures are invoked by name. Second, the immediate reason for this particular

proceeding is stated. Third, a curse of self and others enables the narrator to place a set of (constructed) ethical constraints on the proceedings to follow. A fourth and final section wishes for peace, blessings and prosperity (Agawu 1995: 52-60).

The communal element is manifest in the basic fact that pouring libation is almost always a group event, not an individual one (here is another reason why analogies with Christian prayer are not felicitous: Christians often pray alone, whereas pourers of libation rarely do). Second and related, the performance is conceived as a poly-vocal utterance, not a solo performance. The elder doing the performing is in a literal sense speaking for us, not only for himself. His is the embodiment of a group voice, of our collective aspirations. The strongest support for this conception comes from the attitudes to error or omission that are displayed in the course of performance. If, for example, the elder forgets to mention a certain ancestor while recalling a particular genealogy, any resulting retributions will fall on all of us, not just on him.

The consequences of failure —or success for that matter— are understood as socially dispersed. We pour libation together. Even though certain individuals are recognized for their eloquence — and may therefore be asked to perform more often than others—, and even though some understand better the reasons for the specific gathering, the elder's role is conceived with the community as a whole in mind.

Performance of a libation often features interjections, some quiet, some not so quiet, some restricted to a monosyllabic exclamation of approval, agreement or dissent, others involving the shouting of whole phrases to amplify certain sentiments. Ululating is not uncommon on elevated occasions; on others, on-lookers —who are not merely on-lookers— will affirm the truth of what is being said, or reinforce the wish that evil forces not visit us on this occasion. Participants in effect re-perform the elder's spontaneously generated text, and they do so selectively. The effect, then, is of a dual, triple or multiple performance. The elder's text is notionally complete, while the others are necessarily incomplete as material expression. The mode is participatory, the conception thoroughly communal.

Performing the news (*amanie*)

“Performing the news at the end of the journey is what makes the journey sweet”, says one Northern Ewe song. The news or *amanie* is performed ritualistically on any number of occasions, large or small, grand or modest. Anytime one Northern Ewe visits another, two things initiate their interaction: first they exchange greetings formally; second, the visitor explains the reason for his visit by telling the news. The news is essentially a narrative of the purpose of the visit and the course of the journey that brought the visitor from his point of departure to this point of arrival. The host will sometimes say, “We know it but we still ask”, which means that we know why you are visiting but we still want to hear you say it —in effect, we want to hear you perform the narrative. Performance can be brief and to the point, or elaborate and prolonged, incorporating many parentheses. Typically, the visitor will begin by saying, “I am not on a bad leg”, or “I do not come with any evil”. He will then narrate the circumstances of the visit, beginning with the motivations and extending to the details of the actual journey, terminating in the arrival at the host's home. After the host has heard and received the news, he will in turn be asked by the visitor to tell his news. The host's performance follows, often more modest than the visitor's, and often no more than an affirmation of what is known or even adumbrated in the visitor's account.

The performance of *amanie* is an incorporative gesture. The purpose of my visit may be no more than to inform you of a birth or death, announce a coming celebration, or simply renew contact. These items of news are not delivered dryly or matter-of-factly; they are performed. And performance in turn opens a space for communal participation. For example, in bringing news that Kwame's younger wife has given birth to a baby boy, I may work in some remarks about Kwame himself, what difficult labor he proved to be —or so says his mother— or how tiny he was when he was born. Who would have thought —I might ask rhetorically— that this baby who once fit into the palm of one hand would eventually grow into a tall and handsome man, able to

take on more than one wife? Opportunities to incorporate details of a life are welcomed and exploited, so that the telling becomes not merely informational but entertaining. And the incorporation of detail may sometimes depart from the known historical text, or may involve fabrication of ‘facts.’ Indeed, the Northern Ewe say that “the site of description is also the site of insulting.” So in telling the news of Kwame’s new child, I might reveal some prejudices about him, his other wife, his other children, and so on. In short, the performance of the news represents an acknowledgment of an individual’s social affiliations. There is no mode of aloneness here.

When the songwriter captures the ethos of *amanie* by imagining that it is its coming performance that makes the journey sweet, not —presumably— the journey itself, one catches a glimpse of Northern Ewe investment in narrative acts. *Amanie* signals a deep attachment to the pleasures of narrating by defining the genre not as a mere conduit for the exchange of information but as performance itself, as enactment in the present. This also explains why some performers of *amanie* exercise their imaginations, sometimes blurring the distinction between truth and untruth. *Amanie* has to be delivered with enthusiasm and spice. If, in the process, one or two points get embellished or distorted, so be it. There will be opportunities to enter corrections in subsequent private discussion. In some contexts, the imperatives of immediate performance do not allow for the checking of facts; therefore the narrator simply makes them up as he goes along. Of course, “making them up” is sometimes well understood by everyone present as part of the aesthetics of performance, so there is no necessary confusion in the minds of listeners. Sometimes, however, making up facts misleads and produces undesirable consequences.

The alignment between performance and communality is not merely a choice made by the Northern Ewe; it is in fact definitional. To perform is necessarily to perform with and for others. Verbal performances like the pouring of libation and the performing of *amanie* exhibit a necessary communality. Again it is important to emphasize that this constraint does not deny individual creativity; it does not, for example, mute the display of narrative skill. On the contrary, it is precisely because there is an audience that corroborates, criticizes, or simply enjoys the narrative that one is inspired to perform at the highest possible level.

Deceiving narratives

At the end of a performed story or *gli*, the narrator typically says something like this: “As I was coming here this evening, I saw an old woman who gave me this story to come and *deceive* you with.” Deception indexes the imaginative realm, a realm without certain immediate checks, indeed a world without historical or socio-cultural constraints. Deceiving narratives make possible the construction of other truths (see Anyidoho 1983 for a comprehensive study of Ewe verbal art and Agawu 1995:142-179 for a close reading of one Northern Ewe folktale).

It is worth emphasizing that deception in this creative context is a positive rather than a negative value. Everyone who attends a session at which deceiving narratives are performed knows before hand that he or she is going there to consume deception. This is, of course, the essence of the numerous fictional truths that animate social life in communities around the world; it is also the essence of performance. Among other advantages, this understanding of performance sanctions the construction of new truths, not merely the repetition of existing ones. Assured of the audience’s quiet participation, indeed of their deep familiarity with the broad outline of a given oral text, the narrator can proceed to inflect familiar events in ways that surprise and delight. The presumption of a communal understanding is crucial for storytelling narratives; without it, the narrative strategies which distinguish one narrator from another would lose their *raison d’être*.

As with the pouring of libation, deceiving narratives are mediated by a communal ethos. This is readily evident from the first thing one hears, namely, the formula that announces the tale. “The tale, the tale, tell the tale”, or “A telling, a telling, a telling”, to which the audience replies, “An eating, an eating, an eating,” thus acknowledging the ‘eating’ or consumption of the tale. The narrator would say, “The tale came from very far off and landed on Yao”, to which the audience replies, “It landed on him,” “It landed on Ama,” to which the audience says, “It landed on her,”

“Then it landed on hare, spider and rabbit,” to which the reply is “It landed on them.” This formulaic opening ensures that all are on board for this narrative journey. Indeed, in acknowledging the *dramatis personae*, audience members may begin to predict the course of the story by saying things like, “It’s going to be tough”, or “Something is going to happen,” or “Spider is here again?” Such spontaneous reinforcements may be expressed as onomatopoeic noises that are easily decoded. The performance of a deceiving tale thus begins in earnest as a group utterance. The voices of everyone present are exercised, and the narrator understands that he speaks for and with us, not just to us. Indeed, if he forgets something, we remind him of it; if he ‘lies’, we correct him; and if he strays from the path, we put him back on it.

After the opening formula, the story proper begins, and this constitutes the main segment of the narrative. The narrator advances the plot, but participants typically interrupt in order to reinforce a point, savor a moment, or delay the onset of an action. Practically every theme or action can elicit a response from the audience. Beautiful girls, trickster figures, barren wives, thieving men, ambitious animals (like the tortoise who wished to fly), speaking plants, terrifying spirits and numerous other themes could bring on song or rhyme. Some of these so-called folktale interludes are particular to certain tales; others migrate freely from tale to tale as long as their subject is vaguely relevant to the topic being explored at that moment in the narrative. The participating audience thus carries in memory an important body of texts; these texts are displayed intermittently and with varying degrees of intensity to ensure the success of the performance.

The sense of communality is readily seen and heard in the kind of language used to interrupt a narrator. “I was there that day” might be used by an audience member to signal his or her (imaginative) presence at the scene of the action. “I, too, saw the very events you’re narrating,” he or she would seem to say. By bearing witness in this way, the audience reinforces its own participation in the events being enacted. These moments represent in effect a foregrounding of the communal voice that has been present all along but is nominally entrusted to the narrator. The narrator may say, in response, “You were,” and then the audience member will begin the song. Others join in as soon they recognize the song. If the song is integral to the tale, there is less of a time lag between the proposing of the song by an individual and the group’s performance of the rest of it. If the song is not integral to the tale, it may take a while before others join in. In any case, the intention is to amplify the theme at that particular moment in order to enhance the sense of performance. When the song is over, the narrator may say, “You were truly there.” Or the audience member may hand back the narrative baton with the words, “Look on your path and go.” These actions and interactions are difficult to accommodate within an individualistic ethos.

Interludes may be songs, rhymes or performed verbal phrases. In principle, everyone is supposed to join in. Practically, the performance of an interlude may give the narrator a brief moment of respite. It may also inflect the direction of the tale by causing him or her to go in a different direction from that intended. Since a performance is meant to bring to life a familiar sequence of events in such a way that the audience is delighted (deceived) by the telling, the narrator’s ability to create a web of intertextual allusions with strong contemporary resonance is highly valued. The challenge is to know ourselves as a community, to be alert to the things that make us laugh or cry, angry or content, sad or happy. Imaginative appropriation of these themes is part of a successful narrator’s toolkit.

The telling of the story proper may, in addition to the interludes just mentioned, be reinforced by various spontaneous interjections: “That exactly is it,” “You don’t say,” “Ao!” (expressing sorrow), “How am I going to face it?”. While these are ostensibly stylized reactions to the themes of the story, they may be motivated by personal experience, or by emotions originating elsewhere. For example, the theme of death, loss and tragedy may remind an audience member of an actual occurrence, perhaps the death of a close relative from which she has not yet recovered. But the behavior may also represent an imaginative reaction. Thus the network of actions and interactions that the tale makes possible exert a ripple effect on the audience. The ensemble is no longer conceived as a binary structure with the narrator on one side, the audience on the other; rather, as individual audience members respond to certain themes, and as others respond to these responses, the entire proceeding takes on the character of a network. Ideally, a deceiving narrative is a constellation of verbal and musical actions, shot through with a deep and lively semantic

awareness that touches on our common heritage of life, philosophy and meaning.

At the end of the story proper, a moral application is made. There are tales that explain why husbands should not buy cows for their pregnant wives, or why it is better to have baby boys than girls. Others give an imaginative twist to phenomena that we observe daily: why the frog seems to have something lodged in its throat (it swallowed a ladle); why the tortoise is bald; why we eat three times a day; and so on. The mood of the audience during the moralising section is one of studied surprise. Everyone is prepared to learn something, and so audiences act in ways that convey the success of this stylized didactic posture. While the failure of a performance tells badly on a narrator, it is more significantly an indictment of all of us. The communal ethos ensures that everyone present wishes the telling to succeed by playing whatever role is necessary to guarantee that outcome. The stance by which individuals stand back and judge a performance is alien to the spirit of the genre. We are all in it together. This does not mean that individual narrators do not feel a sense of competition. On the contrary, competition among narrators can be keen, especially as the evening wears on and narrators feel compelled to outdo their predecessors. Still, each narration is propped up by a communal ground.

After the moral is delivered, the narrator invokes a closing formula announcing that we have just been deceived. Deception here simply means that the narrative was not a report on actual historical events; nor was it fashioned within the constraints of real-world happenings. Rather, the performance of non-realist truths liberates the work of the imagination and opens other vistas for the pursuit of truth. Everyone laughs at our willed desire for, and eager participation in, self-deception. Deceiving narratives are a wonderfully paradoxical art that exemplifies a nexus of deeply held African beliefs.

Music making

Music, understood in an expanded African sense as akin to a *Gesamtkunstwerk* or total art work, is made by fetching and carrying songs, by beating drums, castanets and gourds, and by negotiating movement. Although individual acts that might suggest solo music-making exist, most musicmaking among the Northern Ewe is conceived in relation to other human actors. Like the pouring of libation, the performing of news, or the enactment of deceiving narratives, music-making is a thoroughly communal activity.

The material constraints on music-making are already a sign that there is no aloneness here. A typical drumming ensemble, for example, is conceived as a poly-unit, comprising bells, rattles and drums of various sizes, and accompanied by voices and handclaps. It may be likened to a family in which each member plays a distinct role, the ensemble as a whole being greater than the sum of its parts. To make music is of necessity to interact with others, to join hands with them, indeed to be at peace with them. The need for bonding becomes obvious whenever things go wrong. If the bell sags, the ensemble as a whole is in danger of collapsing, the lead drummer must rush to return things to normal by, for example, beating the bell rhythm on his own drum until the musical texture is stabilized. If the support drums fail to engage with the lead drummer, he may forego some of his own opportunities for virtuoso display in order to set the supporting conversations straight. Clearly, then, the success of the ensemble depends crucially on each instrument recognizing its part in a larger whole and performing with accuracy and vigor. For some, the drum ensemble is a metaphor for social cohesion and successful communal living.

One manifestation of a communal ethos in drum ensemble performance is the kinds of narrative that lead drummers employ. The lead drummer is the virtuoso in the group; he is in charge of the ensemble. It is his duty to ensure the success of the performance as a whole even while he delivers a sequence of (complex) rhythms. Complexity for Ewe drummers is never divorced from meaningfulness, and meaningfulness in turn demands some awareness of communal expectation. Sometimes, the cultivation of complex rhythms is tied to speech patterning. This factor may be missed by people who hear African rhythms as 'purely musical' patterns—as number, accent and quantity—but fail to notice the linguistic elements sedimented in them. Although not every

pattern played by the lead drummer conforms to a word in spoken Ewe, the meaning and especially sound of the word is never far off. Since language and linguistic meaning return us to the social and indirectly to the communal sphere, the ultimate constraint on the lead drummer's actions may be said to originate in a collectively-sanctioned view of what is meaningful and what is not.

This possible 'linguistic' residue in drumming may be what some critics have in mind when they say of a certain performance, "He is not saying anything on the drums". This evaluative phrase, often used to register some disappointment at the spirit of the performance, seems to acknowledge the exposition of durations, accents and periods but not of culturally-mediated meaning. There is athleticism but not sensibility; body, perhaps, but not soul. No doubt there is a surplus here, a measure of mystery that, while impossible to render in words, is easy to spot and verify aurally or visually. Oftentimes, knowledgeable insiders respond with a nod or a wink —tiny affirmative gestures that would require volumes of text to unpack. The unnameable element in drumming that elicits such response retains strong affinities with the semantic dimension of language without being identical to it. This is not surprising in the African context, given the close connections between language and music. We might also recall the fact that the semantic domain is not limited to naming objects. Given the complex ontology of everyday objects, naming is at best a process, a pointing-to gesture; it succeeds in different contexts and at different moments not by encompassing all the attributes of its object but by encompassing enough of them to engender recognition by individuals. By the same token, the meaningfulness of a performance retains some of that pointing-to aura, and it may well be that that which is pointed to is of deeply social origin.

As a mode of self as well as communal expression, dance displays some of the characteristics we have noted about verbal narratives. Northern Ewe dances range from highly formal and tightly choreographed to informal, relatively free physical exertion open to all. The act of dancing is understood as competent domestication of a rhythmic texture. Dances have a vocabulary of gestures, and these enable an individual dancer to communicate a variety of messages. With the appropriate signs, a dancer is able to say "I am hungry", "you are my anchor", "you and I will keep," or "I think you are shit" (Duodu 1995). The semantics of dance are not constrained in ways that would render each and every action undertaken by the dancer translatable into verbal language. Gestural signification in dance is intermittent rather than continuous; whatever is signaled is absorbed into a larger, dynamic process of pure movement.

Again, instances in which things go wrong may sometimes be the result of a forgetting of communal constraints. Failure to heed the resultant rhythm of the drumming or the singing is often a recipe for disaster. If the resultant rhythm is understood as an embodiment of a set of socially based tendencies, then the failure to heed them is a refusal of a communal constraint. Performers who refuse such constraints are often less successful than those who accept those constraints and pursue their creativity within the limits set.

Whereas drumming and dancing seem to be relatively specialized activities, singing is expected of everyone. The ability to sing, or to be part of song performance, is basic, part of what defines an individual as member of a social group. Not to sing is not to exist. Singing may range from responding within a simple Call-Response structure to improvising moving or delightful texts as a song leader or 'mother of song' or 'person with a cooked tongue'.

Song is the heart of African music performance. Song performance displays a communal ethos more immediately and spectacularly than other performance modes. The material foundation for song performance is the Call-Response principle. Although typically figured as solo followed by chorus, the Call-Response principle is a complex structure whose basis is the chorus, not the solo. The solo departs from the chorus; it is not pitted against it. The solo takes its bearings from the chorus; the chorus 'sends' the solo. In short, it is the communal chorus not the individual solo singer that constrains the defining actions of song (Nzewi 2003:28).

When a soloist steps forward to 'speak', her utterances are conceived in relation to the chorus. Nothing she does is ever exclusively her own. A touching embellishment is expected to enhance her message because it is sanctioned by the community as a whole; it does not merely represent

fanciful display. Spontaneously improvised words are designed to speak to particular experiences, and for this to be effective the singer must understand the lives, cares and concerns of the people and be able to capture them in poetic language. One thing is certain: no improvising soloist functions in isolation. If the soloist forgets to name someone, or to express a certain sentiment, chorus members will immediately remind her of what she has forgotten, or amplify what she is saying. The soloist is a spokesperson for the group; she reflects the group voice, sense and feeling. Again, if something goes wrong with her song, if there are, say, spiritual consequences brought on by something she did or did not do, they will be visited upon all participants, not exclusively upon her. The chorus (which includes the soloist) thus represents the essence of the performing group; a soloist issues forth from the chorus and returns to it at the close of a performance.

Superficial understanding of the communal constraint might lead some to conclude that it discourages individual creativity. If one's utterances have to meet with a group approval, then — the thought continues — there is a limit to what one can do as an individual performer. But the communal ethos is not in principle a disincentive to individual creativity. After all, Northern Ewe recognize some individuals as more skilled than others, some as endowed with sweeter or more concentrated voices than others, some as imaginative makers of texts, and so on. Just as the fingers of one hand are, despite their differing lengths, functionally coordinated, so the members of a chorus are — metaphorically speaking — of different 'heights'. The soloist's skills are thus recognized and celebrated, and she is indeed encouraged to continue exercising and improving them. The only firm constraint placed on this exercise of the imagination is that creativity have a *human* dimension, that it be meaningful within the expressive modes that define us as a community. Of course, the boundary between the human and the inhuman is never defined in abstract, although it is immediately recognized when crossed in performance. To accept a communal constraint is to accept a certain measure of ethical responsibility for what one produces musically; it is to give rein to a communicative impulse that acknowledges an always-already connected ideology.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined some of the senses in which the expressive modes of the Northern Ewe (and, by implication, other traditional African societies) are mediated by a powerful communal ethos. Acts of verbal narrating, dancing, beating of drums and singing acquire meaning for performers within a network of social ties. To make this characterization is not necessarily to distance African expression from others; it is certainly not to set African communality up as a binary opposite to Western individualism. Expressive and communicative domains in which communality rules are easily found in the West. Styles of worship in African-American churches, for example, provide ample illustration of the workings of communality. Nevertheless, the communal mode is intensely marked in many traditional African societies. True, the imperatives of modernity have sometimes forced a modification or redefinition of communal display, but no active spheres of music-making have ever succeeded in jettisoning a participatory framework.

There is beauty in communality, a sense of belonging, the security of never being alone, not even in death. There is meaning in the on-going assurance that one's kin are never far off. In performance, the communal ethos fosters interpersonal exchange and affirmation even while making room for extending the boundaries of what is expressively possible. Were it conceivable, the loss of communality would have a profound effect. But despite the sometimes radical changes engendered by modern living, many Africans continue to think 'we,' not 'I.'

References

- Agawu, Kofi. 1995. *African Rhythm: A Northern Ewe Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Anyidoho, Kofi. 1983. *Oral Poetics and Traditions of Verbal Art in Africa*. Ph.D. diss, University of Texas at Austin.
- Chernoff, John Miller. 1979. *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Duodu, E. Ampofo. 1995. *Introduction to African Dance. A Book for Students, Teachers, Cultural Officers, Researchers and Performing Artistes*. Legon, Ghana: Institute of African Studies.
- Feintuch, Burt. 1997 "Tradition". In *The Dictionary of Anthropology* ed. by Thomas Barfield. Oxford: Blackwell, 470-71.
- Gavua, Kodzo (ed.). 2000. *A Handbook of Eweland. Volume II: The Northern Ewes in Ghana*. Accra: Woeli Publishing Services.
- Kisliuk, Michelle. 1998. *Seize the Dance!: BaAka Musical Life and the Ethnography of Performance*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nzewi, Meki. 1991 *Musical Practice and Creativity: An African Traditional Perspective*. Bayreuth: Iwalewa-Haus, University of Bayreuth. ____ 2003. "Acquiring Knowledge of the Musical Arts in Traditional Society." In *Musical Arts in Africa: Theory, Practice and Education* ed. by Anri Herbst, Meki Nzewi & Kofi Agawu. Pretoria: University of South Africa Press: 13-37.
- Yankah, Kwesi. 1995. *Speaking for the Chief: Okyeame and the Politics of Akan Royal Oratory*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Autor. 1998. *Título*. Trad. Alfredo Bosi. 2ª ed. São Paulo: Martins Fontes.