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COMMUNICATION PROCESS IN TOTOEME MUSIC OF THE AVATIME PEOPLE OF GHANA.

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ABSTRACT: *Based on the concept of music communication and relevant literature, the paper unravels the communication process in Totoeme musical genre of the Avatime people of Ghana. It attempts to elucidate some of the intrinsic and extrinsic facts in terms of repertoire and general performance of totoeme music. It is an insight into a traditional music phenomenon and some pragmatic but vociferous symbolical elements that enhance meaning in an indigenous musical performance and its associated rituals. Through observation and interview, it was found out that the channels of communication in Avatime music are experienced during procession, choral section, and the dance section in the various contexts. The paper concludes that messages transmitted in the performances during the social occasions portray the artistic cultural values giving opportunities to the people to air their sentiments, emotions and express how their challenges are dealt with.*

KEYWORDS: Music Communication, Totoeme, Movement, Song Texts, Visual Channel

INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, one of the means of understanding the human social world is through music communication. Music is an important channel of communication that gives opportunities to share emotions, intentions and meanings even if the spoken languages are different. Surely we can claim to have emotive responses to musical events as those events at times remind us of sadness and other triggering human emotions. Music making is mainly a social activity and therefore one of the primary functions is to understand the communicative process of the issues and messages being presented in the performance. Indeed, indigenous music normally presents issues on different levels that include the thematic content of song texts and their interpretation, the artistic integration of the components of the genre (singing, drumming and dancing), the cultural value of the genre, concepts of music communication, interpretation of musical phenomena, cultural and then contemporary issues in traditional music practice but this article seeks to unearth how sentiments are aired, emotions are expressed and challenges dealt with in the performance of *Totoeme* music among the people of Avatime of Ghana.

In music performances, people express their opinions by participating, not by talking; they behave with the understanding that what they do is an act of artistic participation (Chernoff, 1979). Much as this is a legitimate fact, some people may understand and enjoy indigenous music meaningfully by listening attentively. According to Agawu (2003) the attentive behaviour of spectators who stand or sit around the dance arena is enough evidence of music communicating to the audience. *Totoeme* music is a recreational musical type performed mostly

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by the Northern Ewe women in Ghana and Togo. Like *avihɛ* (funeral dirges) *totoeme* was adopted by the people of Avatime and is being used as a female musical type for female royal activities. It is very didactic like *gbolo* and *zigi* musical types and equally instructive (Ebeli, 2014).

"The field of African music studies is vast and many-sided" (Nketia, 2005, p.34), as a result of that, I address the communication process in music performance to contribute to the understanding of *totoeme* music, which until now remains undocumented. The article was culled from my Ph.D thesis and therefore does not exhaust all communication forms of the musical performance, however, it dissects the social and cultural sources for meaning into *totoeme* music. The concern here is that *totoeme* musical tradition consists of 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' facts of some sort, of repertoire and the oral traditions associated with it.

It is evident in Nketia (2005) and Muller (1999) that in a musical event there are other areas of "meaning" besides the sounds of instruments and voices. There are things that happen in the musical situation which are considered a part of its meaning. There are also norms of behaviour in musical situations which require some notice, it is therefore imperative to unearth this treatment of communication process of such a traditional genre to add to the existing literature in Music Communication.

Concept of Music Communication

It is difficult to point to any study in ethnomusicology that relies exclusively on communication theory (Stone, 2008). Nevertheless the concept has had an impact on the ideas of ethnomusicology. The area of communication has been of interest to scholars in ethnomusicology for some time now going back to Merriam's (1964) model in anthropology of music (1964). As Stone (2008) notes, much of the early theories in communication were quite rudimentary, with a diagram often showing a listener receiving a message from a sender, illustrated by an arrow drawn between sender and listener. Nauta (1972) enhanced on the concept by broadening it to the semiotic-cybernetic model of communication.

Stone (2008) illustrates this model in her analysis of a *Kpelle* performance in which an audience pleased with the performance, goes into the arena, calls for a pause so that she could praise the singer and offer a token. This kind of gesture is interpreted as feedback. It obviously will serve as a morale booster and will generate enthusiasm in performers for even a better show in response to audience appraisal. This feedback model derived from communication theory has been used by a number of ethnomusicologists (Shelemay, 1998; Stone and Stone 1981).

Many writers (Nketia, 1964; 1974; 2000; 2005; Agordoh, 2002) support the view that music communicates. Similarly, Hanna (1987) attests to the fact that dance is a communicative behaviour–a text in motion. This is to say that the production of musical sound from the singing of *totoeme* songs, the production of sound from the accompanying instruments, and the dance movements of the participating women transmit something which carries messages. The definition of music provided in Merriam (1964:27) indicates that "music is a uniquely human phenomenon which exists only in terms of social interaction." Every interaction is about exchange of ideas, messages, information, feelings and emotions; a process engaging

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transmission and receiving. It is, therefore, that interaction involving the behaviour of individuals and groups of individuals that the communication takes place.

It is worth noting that music communication is a process (Stone, 2008). It is dynamic, ongoing, changing and continuous in which participants, including performers and audiences interpret symbolic behaviour. Another view concerning music communication is that it involves four main components. These components are (i) the music performers (ii) the channels through which communication is facilitated and transmitted such as the instruments, sounds, costumes, props, movement and song texts (iii) the audience and (iv) the messages that are intended to be communicated. In addition, these components derive their function in music and dance communication through multiple channels (Clayton, 2001; Nketia, 2005; Stone, 2008). This may imply that music and dance communication incorporates the musical sound channel, the linguistic channel, the movement or kinesics channel and the actual participants or performers as channels. Each of these is an effective channel of communication but when they are appropriately combined their impact is much greater.

In a critical study of music as communication, Saighoe (1997), focusing on the music of the late Nigerian popular musician, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, demonstrates how musicians seek redress for the ills of society through their songs. He re-echoes assertions found in Nketia (1974) and Agordoh (2002) that songs in traditional African musical practices have always served as vehicles of expression, and they also serve as a means of checking periodically those in authority thereby helping to enforce sanctions of social behaviour.

The musical communication in *totoeme* is affected by the total cultural substance, material or ideologies pertaining to the Avatime people. Several scholars (Nketia, 2005; Stone, 2008; Ampene, 2005 Younge, 2011) demonstrate Jorgenson's (1981) basic opinions concerning music and dance communication. One of the opinions about music is that a music and dance event is a communication event. Younge (2011) supporting this view indicates that musical events in Ghana are perceived as performance activities and are interactive and communicative social processes. This is evidenced in the fact that if not all, most participants who attended the music and dance event derived and assigned meanings to the event depending on how they understood the communicative event. Hence in traditional music event, we expect to see both the performers and the spectators to either re-create music or dance motives, or listen and dance to the event with the intention of understanding the various components of the event.

In another instance, Amoaku (1975) emphasizes that traditional music is symbolically definable from within the Ewe worldview. This position is linked to the involuntary alteration that occurs in the psyche, the spiritual upliftment, the transcendental imagination of a spirit world, oneness with the gods and spirits of departed relatives among the Ewe people. Fiagbedzi (2009) is of the same opinion with Amoaku (1975) in this regard and discovers how the author celebrates the spiritual essence of traditional African music with emphasis placed on the artistic value in what a good dancer, singer or drummer can do. My view is that the Avatime people have cultural signification for interpretation. Notions of this kind derive their legitimacy and being from the worldview of society which enables sustenance of the music to stand the test of time. These standpoints from my study are placed in some kind of perspectives conceived in the trajectory in

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which Amoaku (1975, 1985) has a spotlight on the communication value of traditional music among the Ewe.

Following the trend of discussion, it has been indicated that *totoeme* musical tradition does not consist only of repertoire but also of a body of knowledge in terms of which the music takes place or is interpreted. This study therefore goes beyond musical interpretations and explores other aspects of *totoeme* musical tradition (the dance, performers, contexts, rituals and costume) as sites for interpretation.

METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURE

The study adopted the paradigm of post-positivism, which emphasizes that social reality is viewed and interpreted by the individual himself/herself according to the ideological positions he/she possesses (Dash, 2005). Also known as Anti-positivists, it is believed that reality is multi-layered and complex (Cohen, Lawrence & Morrison, 2000) and a single phenomenon may have multiple interpretations. This essentially drives the study into understanding and interpretation of *totoeme* musical phenomenon and making sense out of the process. In using the paradigm of anti-positivism a lot of stress is placed on subjectivist approach to studying social phenomena (Dash, 2005). In view of that observation and interviews were employed as the main instruments. I had to embark on several visits to Avatime-Gbadzeme and its environs where *totoeme* was performed. The emphasis of the research was on observables, including observations by informants thereby making it to be naturalistic.

For investigation within *Totoeme* musical group, the participants, made up of audience, chiefs and queen mothers were involved. The investigation sought to find out how sentiments are aired, emotions are expressed and challenges dealt with as they sing *totoeme* songs, accompany the songs with instruments, and add dance movements. What exactly the messages transmitted and how both the performers and the audience understand their communication process. *Totoeme* musical performance in context of *ablabe* rites, Easter durbar, royal funeral rites of a queen mother and enstoolment of a new queen mother were observed. Some of the audience watching the performances were randomly selected and interviewed to know exactly how they understood the communication involved in the performances. The observations of those outside the tradition (whether or not they were insiders in the culture or had musical training) were treated as complementary sources of information. A considerable effort was made to carefully observe and document what performers and listeners of *totoeme* music did and said. During the observation process, no events or details were considered insignificant or irrelevant, even if the performers themselves considered them to be so.

Also, there was multidimensional interaction that took place among performers and audience outside the speech mode. These ideas are found in the words of Ross (1987) that a work of art is complete only as it works in the experience of others than the one who created it. On the other hand, we cannot overlook the fact that the hearer is an indispensable partner. This opinion is similarly conceived by the Avatime and is applied to the study to understand *totoeme* music performance. When the Avatime seek interpretations or meanings into anything what they ask for is the 'inside' or 'underneath' of the phenomenon. This concept is carved from the

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conventional expressive forms of the Avatime language (*siyase*) for inside (*bɛɛmɛ*) and underneath (*beese*) into clarification of issues and phenomena. Interpretation is a necessary active component in the social life of the Avatime with regards to *totoeme*, bridging individual competence with realms of theory and epistemology.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion of the communicative process in an indigenous music such as the *totoeme* might spark passionate reactions given the high profile and academically sensitive status of such a topic. My intension is not to answer the question of whether or not music in traditional situations is or not interpreted by listeners, but to shed light on the subject from the perspective of listeners and audience as well as performers in relation to the *totoeme* musical performance. It is very important to bring the discussion of musical communication tied to the concept of multiple affordances espoused by Clayton (2001) and the integrated approach championed by Nketia (2005). These and Fiagbedzi (2009) were grossly considered to cover various aspects in the performance of *totoeme* during funeral, installation of queen mothers, and state durbars. The potential of music to communicate is not a question. What we need to reflect on is the mechanism by which a continuous flow of auditory and paramusical information can come to be experienced as a sequence of signifying music making. For this reason, I wish to catalog for discussions from the various settings on how the communication takes place in *totoeme* music.

Totoeme being a female musical type is said to promote unity and coherence among Avatime women as well as the women in the towns that celebrate it. It was found out that it is used to remind the folks about their identity and to emphasize the symbolic importance of the traditional authority vested in the queen mothers. Through the performance of *totoeme,* Avatime cultural values for females are projected and I think it helps our girls to control the insurgence of teenage pregnancy and promiscuity in view of modernity and technology.

Totoeme music accompanies rites such as the ablabe performed at the Easter durbar. Although *ablabe* is no longer performed, the modern version of puberty rites (*kusakɔkɔ/avɔtata*) is compulsory for every Avatime female. *Totoeme* music in Ablabe rites is understood as fertility. Any Avatime female irrespective of her religious or educational background, who has not performed the rites before her death normally has the rites performed for her while her remains lie in state. A similar cultural experience is found among the Ndebu people of Northwestern Zambia who perform special rites (*Wubwang'u,* if the women suffered from reproductive troubles and *Nkula,* for menstrual troubles) for women who suffer from reproductive misfortunes. There is therefore a close link between music and socio-cultural life of the Avatime people. Similar observation was made in Burns (2009) when he studied musicians of Dzigbordi community dance drumming club in Dzodze. His interpretation of the songs in the study gave a clear understanding about the relationship between culture, social life and indigenous music. It is evident that oral traditions in Avatime are tied to performance as observed in Finnegan (1970). In real terms we cannot speak of *totoeme* in Easter durbar or in *Amuna* festival without *ablabe* since the two represent relics of Avatime female traditions.

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It can be noted that contextual setting is charged with symbolism. Such symbols exhibit the properties of Avatime worldview of life. A single setting of *totoeme* may represent many things at the same time: it is multivocal not univocal a concept rooted in pluralism of meaning advocated by Nketia (2005), Fiagbedzi (2009) and in Clayton (2001). Inferences drawn from these scholars and my own study reveal that referents to a traditional musical performance are not all from the same logical order but are drawn from many domains of social experience and ethical evaluation.

Totoeme music is also performed to send the queen mother off to her ancestors on a peaceful journey and to express sorrow for her demise and mourn with the bereaved family. It provides an emotional outlet for Avatime people based on the texts. Avatime women sing *totoeme* songs which philosophize on life and death generally. This confirms reports from earlier scholars (Anyidoho, 1997); (Saighoe, 1997); (Okpewho, 1992); (Agordoh, 2002); (Ampene, 2005) and (Nketia, 2005) that song texts have the power to disseminate views about a society.

The performance of *totoeme* during enstoolment of a new queen mother among the Avatime is a total work of art. This is in consideration to the involvement of countless artistic forms and actions (drumming, singing, dancing, use of costume and oral art in pouring libation). They are seen as distinct but their separate nature is subsumed in occasions by the impact of the whole, a continuous and unified event often surpassing beauty and rich cultural significance. During the installation, there are four segments of *totoeme* performance. These are: procession from the river side; solidarity and acceptance dance; procession to the father's house for fortification rites; and recession to the paternal home for the finale dance. The longest session for performing *totoeme* is when the women process from the stream to the community square after the cleansing rites. As they are in the procession from the stream the women sing songs that are open metaphor veiled in traditional oratory and move in a single file. The single file formation by the *totoeme* performers signifies the readiness of the people to follow and support the new queen mother during her reign, a symbol of allegiance and unity. Also the acceptance dance by the queen mother, as well as the solidarity dance is all symbolic behaviour that expresses the cultural values among Avatime women and society. As Merriam (1964, p.246) notes, "there is no question but that music serves a symbolic communication function in human cultures on the level of affective or cultural meaning". The people in Avatime have assigned symbolic functions to music which connects *totoeme* to the elements of feminine in traditional culture.

The communication implied in *totoeme* music during enstoolment rites is sandwiched between the very first segment from the stream and the final segment back home. With reference to Clayton's (2001) theory of multiple affordance of musical meaning it is apparent that different interpretations characterize the significance and meaning of *totoeme* in the installation rites. Participatory gesture from the women perhaps indicate the value of *totoeme* in Avatime culture and what the music communicates to them is within Avatime traditional worldview – societal cohesion.

We may ask how this communication occurs. The answer lies in the observation made in Merriam (1964, p.10) that "the obvious possibility is that communication is effectuated through the investiture of music with symbolic meanings which are tacitly agreed upon by the members of the community". In fact, the sound of *totoeme* during the installation at every stage has its

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own meaning. It may be that there are certain common processes (such as call and response forms in melodies, dance, hierarchical structure in procession) which are applied only, or mostly in the performance of *totoeme* using the raw materials of sound production (songs, instruments) which the society possesses. These processes that give rise to this graphic art produce music in kinship system and are understood by insiders of the art.

This kind of communication in a familiar medium drives the discussion to assertions made by Ingle (1972) that the use of language, symbols and styles familiar to an audience facilitates effective transmission of messages. Such familiarity with music for common meaning may not necessarily be the product of agreement by the members of the community as suggested by Merriam (1964). Familiarity might have been gained through prolonged participation by members who have observed the interaction among performers of a genre (Dzansi, 2006). In the case of *totoeme* music, members gained knowledge by repeated participation. This is based on an earlier assertion that symbols or conventional signs are often used to convey information to dancers who over a period of time have gained knowledge in sonic communication of instruments (Agawu, 1995). An elaborate instance of this occurs in the Gbadzeme war dance, *Apasimaka*. In order to choreograph a set of stylized responses to the general subject of war, the dancers respond to a set of previously agreed-upon signals decades ago. So, through repeated participation, dancers in contemporary times have become familiar to drum patterns that demand changes in dance movement (Ebeli, 2010).

In most *totoeme* songs the singer, presumably impersonating inanimate and organic creatures declares her situation in life. The singer continues to express the result of her situation repeatedly sometimes in uncompleted phrases which when considered independently may be ambiguous. Perhaps she is soliciting sympathy as these phrases form the basis for interaction between the cantors and chorus in antiphony. However, Agawu (2003) observes that textual ambiguity of this sort is common in Northern Ewe songs. We may then postulate that the purpose of such text is to put performers and audiences in mind of certain deep or metaphorical situation, remind them of their own vulnerability and limitations. Such permutations thus bestow on the occasions of performing *totoeme* a spiritual atmosphere.

Drumming is the component that generates interest to *totoeme* music as well as structure to the performance. The introduction of drumming in *totoeme* is a recognized musical variation that serves as a vehicle for improvisation on the part of male drummers as well as female dancers. Although women in *totoeme* classify any recognized variation as drum pattern (*Ùugbe*), not all of the patterns have actual linguistic texts through the use of call and response. Drumming in *totoeme* creates the space for the queen mother, her attendant and other women to express themselves through dance as play or recreation with the drummers. As in other Ewe dance-drumming, instrumentalists in *totoeme* provide the cue for the dances to begin and end the dance section (Dzansi, 1994; Dowoeh, 1980; Agawu, 1997). Trying to understand how drum patterns could signify, we may refer to the three modes of predominant form of traditional drumming. Nketia (1964) identifies the speech mode, the signal mode and the dance mode. The two drummers employing the speech mode simply reproduce the tonal and rhythmic patterns of speech on the drums. Agawu (2003) refers to this as an iconic mode of transfer in semiotic terms. In this instance, there is direct transfer of tones in speech texts to a different medium without diction of vowel and consonant sounds.

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The semantic meaning of the drumming in *totoeme* is embedded in the polyphony of the instrumental ensemble. Of all the improvisational skills employed by the principal instrument (*asivuga)* all the indigenous women are able to distinguish one verbal phrase which they vocalize simultaneously with the drum pattern. The composition of the message is a blend of phrases in Ewe and Avatime languages in the two phrase text which is concealed by the surrounding frame of two alternate beats from the gourd shakers. The message from the drums is further obfuscated still more by the use of vocal syllables and words borrowed from the Ewe language. Nonetheless, conventions of *totoeme* performance such as the tendency not to allow the choral section to be heard at the same time with the instruments creates room for instrumental embellishment and the application of rhythms that are governed by the semantic meaning.

It is apparent that communicative symbols in drumming are not presented directly. It requires some level of familiarity and further reasoning on the part of the individual to deduce the meaning of the music and dance expressions. As Ampene (2005) observes, it remains to be said that interactive structures encourage a dynamic (or communal) approach to the musical process as opposed to contemplative or passive approach. Such interactive structures brought the entire community to the same platform and space although with varied interpretations based on personal views and life experiences (Amoaku, 1975; Fiagbedzi, 2009). This is not to say that interactive structures in music are emblematic to the Avatime people only. The concept of interaction in music has found favour with ethnomusicologists who reveal its existence all over the world. Some of these interactions located in acoustic focus on language also extends to music performance (Stone, 2010, p.60). Nonetheless, it could be argued that although dimension of ordinary language is evident in *totoeme* drum text in a speech mode, it is not designed to facilitate a conversation. Hence, the system of communication is largely, but no means exclusively, one way (Agawu, 2001).

There are other channels beyond words in music which are meaningful. The usual single line which characterizes the processional formation in *totoeme* is an expression in itself; the rhythm of gourd shakers, the paramusical additives, the special songs at the various stages of installation rites, the structure of the songs of the choral segment are in themselves impregnated with meanings. They show us that reality is a system of signs and symbols. They are embedded with meanings although they may not be apparent to everyone especially the audience outside the tradition.

Taking into consideration how a song in *totoeme* (musical expression), communicates with performers reference is made to the change in tempo of the movement by the procession from the river side from slow to moderately fast. The song *Mikɔ wɔ nɛ yewo dzo; gidi mese asieme do oo* (Hurry let us go, chaos in the market place is rampant) is a request made to the procession to speed up because the day was far spent. Likewise, the end of every *totoeme* dance section is marked by an extra musical additive in which all participating women hoot and shout a vocal phrase rhythmically. It is worth stating that the lead singer of the group had a reason introducing that particular song. That intention was the sense she communicated to the entire group in the song. The feedback from the chorus instantly brought about a change in speed for their footsteps. Apparently, the chorus had made sense of the communication in the song text, hence their fast movement. In this instance, the commencement of the song is used as a mode of expression.

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Significant observation concerning music communication is that music has a collective character (Turino, 1999; Nketia, 2005). This was obvious in the performance of *totoeme* in all contexts which revealed that musical communication could take place between an individual and herself; between two individuals; between an individual and a group; between a group and an individual; between individuals in the same group as well as between members of one group and those of another group (Nketia, 2005). Specifically musical states of communication were those involving a concerted simultaneity of nonverbal sound events or movements in *totoeme*, i.e. between the chorus and its members; between the group of drummers and the *tesikpoe* or the queen mother or between two groups (the drummers and the female chorus turn dancers). It was also evident that speech in *totoeme* was subordinated to temporal organization of its prosodic elements (rhythm, accentuation and relative pitch) and it became intrinsically musical. This was evident from the choral character of the rhythmically chanted slogan at the end of the drum section. In this way as Tagg (1999) observes, music and dance are suited to expressive collective messages of affective and corporeal identity of individuals in relation to themselves, each other, and their social as well as physical surroundings.

CONCLUSION

The rhythmic patterns and the sound of instruments, the musical sound itself, the song texts, costume, the visual arts and the dance gestures have all been confirmed to have meaning and these meanings are communicated to both participants and the audience. However, there is plurality of meanings assigned to the music and dance event based on the individual's perception. Cumulatively, the study has come out with a few tenets with regards to how *totoeme* communicates and how inherent meanings or interpretations are generated. Evidently, apart from *totoeme* music seen as a continuation or extension of life processes, its performance is further perceived as unrepeatable events because each *totoeme* event changes according to the particular situation. There is therefore the irreversibility in its effect in terms of meaning and interpretation. Thus, communication, meaning and interpretation to *totoeme* event involve the total personalities of its participants who assign meaning to the music.

Considering the concept and mode of communication in music, empirical examples can be found in Burns (2009) who notes that in the Dzigbordi group, the drums speak, the songs speak and the dances speak- all communicating pieces of a larger message. These communication trails are embedded within the musical domain of *Totoeme* music of the Avatime people. It is usually set by attitude and action patterns that have proven to be meaningful. This communication and subsequent meaning is a continuing condition of life experiences, a process that ebbs and flows with changes in the environment (context) and fluctuations in the emerging needs, drives and demands of the people. The song texts, the verbal expressions, segmentation of *totoeme* during enstoolment, musical cues from the chorus are all markers of messages intended to be communicated to derive meaning. In the nutshell, meaning in *totoeme* is achieved through markers and cues established for audio, linguistic, movement and visual channels.

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