

**African-American “Stepping”
and
Ghanaian Step-Chanting:
Witnessing a Cross-Cultural Connection**

A Research Paper

for

MUS 334: Music in World Cultures

University of Arizona School of Music

October, 2004

Background

A two-month trip to Ghana, West Africa in the summer of 2004 offered me a range of opportunities to witness and record varied traditional music and art forms, through a series of workshops, individual and group lessons, and performances.

A week spent at the Dagara Music Center outside of Medie, Ghana (a small suburb of Accra, the capitol) included two notable performances. The first performance was of a troupe of perhaps a dozen dancers and several drum and xylophone players. Audience members in our group were invited to participate in the dancing.

However, the second performance, in particular, resonated with my rhythmic sense and my growing appreciation of the enormous variety and complexity of West African musical genres and musical rhythms in particular.

This six-man group (name unknown) presented a unique performance, approximately one hour in length, which combined the following: rhythmic chanting, whistle-blowing (each whistle played only one note; three notes were played in all), the near-constant playing of small hand-held cast iron bells (actually, they created more of a clanking sound than a ringing sound) and a kind of undulating, shuffling dancing.

On occasion, however, the group would also break into brief displays of highly percussive dancing (a kind of stomping) to the accompaniment of the clanking bells; in fact, the point of the dance seemed to be more the percussive sounds that resulted than the physical display or any symbolic nature of the dance. Over a period of perhaps fifteen seconds, the dancing would significantly heighten the energy level of the performance, then would subside again and be replaced by the drone of the whistles, the chanting and the more subdued movements. Several episodes of the dancing occurred

during the performance. I recorded the performance with digital still photography and a mini-disc audio recorder.

This Ghanaian performance group is shown here:



Ghanaian Dance/Chanting Group, performing on May 21, 2004, in Medie, Ghana

Some two months after concluding my West African travels, I became familiar with an African-American art form called “Stepping”. This performance style, practiced by a great many youth groups, school ensembles and African-American fraternities and sororities in America, struck me as having a particular resemblance and a possible connection with the stomping/dancing I’d observed in Ghana.

Attending a performance of the Rough Diamonds, a “step squad” from Santa Rita High School, at the Tucson Meets Itself Festival in early October, I likewise made an audio recording and took photos of the group’s approximately five-minute performance.



A brief history and background of Stepping, and notated transcriptions of some of what I observed are included in this document.

Stepping History and Heritage and Evolution

African-American step teams practice a custom that has known connections to African dance and rhythms. One explanation for the art form is that Europeans issued boots to African miners to protect their feet, and that the miners would stomp their feet to rid their boots of dust and dirt, producing characteristic rhythmic sounds and patterns.

Eventually, the practice became an end in itself, for communication and social activities. Some scholars have also traced the stomping movements to traditional

African-American children's games in America's rural south. The rhythmic patterns that result from well-rehearsed group jump-roping also come to mind, as do the stomping and rhythmic patterns exhibited by (especially African-American) cheerleading squads.

Another interpretation of the origins and evolution of stepping dates to the early 20th century, when African-American veterans of WWI entered college and infused their social dancing with a highly rigorous, drill-like quality.

The practice of stepping has also become "a public display of organizational unity" according to Carol Branch, a doctoral researcher in folklore at UCLA. The stepping, according to Branch, shows "how together they are, how in tune they are, how they trust each other...showing a love for their organization".

Stepping has evolved to include hand clapping and chanting, a kind of hybrid between African-American dance and rapping. Step teams rarely use any recorded music, instead providing all the musical components themselves. There is also a significant use of call-and-response, a practice found in many forms of African music, and seen frequently in the blues, jazz and other musics of America today.

Transcriptions

The Ghanaian performance group described above performed its brief dance steps (in the form of stomping) to the accompaniment of the finger bells which I described.

The dance steps exhibited the following percussive rhythms:

The image shows two musical staves. The top staff is labeled 'Finger Bells' and contains a melody of quarter notes in 3/4 time. The bottom staff is labeled 'Stomping pattern' and contains a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes and rests in 3/4 time.

The image shows two musical staves. The top staff is labeled 'Fing. Bells' and contains a melody of quarter notes in 4/4 time. The bottom staff is labeled 'St. Pattern' and contains a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes and rests in 4/4 time.

In contrast to the above, the Rough Diamonds Step Squad performed in a consistent 4/4 meter. The percussive sounds were produced by stomping, clapping, and slapping the knees or thighs. Resulting rhythmic patterns included the following:

The image shows three musical staves. The top staff is labeled 'Claps' and contains a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in 4/4 time. The middle staff is labeled 'Knee slaps' and contains a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in 4/4 time. The bottom staff is labeled 'Stomps' and contains a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in 4/4 time.

The rhythmic patterns shown here, while musically dissimilar, are part of two cultural traditions – one Ghanaian, one American – which quite possibly are members of the same or a similar “musical lineage”, and I found the similarities of overall style and feel (if not the actual musical material) to be compelling.

I look forward to additional study of these two traditions, and to learning more about how they may be related to one another.

Dan Kruse

October, 2004

