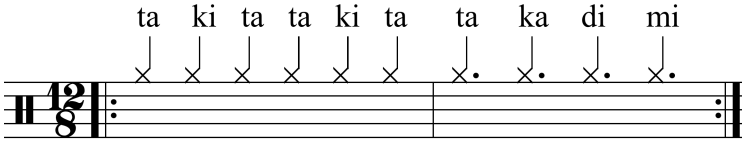
6 + 4 African Bell Perspectives
by Jerry Leake

This article explores a contemporary treatment of a bell pattern from the country of Benin in West Africa. Examples are adapted to playing drum set, but can be applied to any series of instruments, composition or arrangement. The 2-bar pattern in 12/8 is built with the first bar in a "6" feel and the second in "4." The alternation of 6 and 4 creates a profound shift in perspective as it is played by the musician and heard by the listener.

The 2-bar pattern in example 1 establishes the pulse in 6 and 4 without the syncopation found in most African bell patterns.
The first bar plays 6 consecutive quarter notes with the second bar playing 4 consecutive dotted quarter notes to mark the underlying "beat" of each feel. Shown above the note heads are Indian drum syllables with the first bar comprising two sets of 3—ta ki ta (ta ki tuh) and the second in 4—ta ka di mi. Combining the groove of African bell patterns with the math and language of Indian rhythm systems helps to fully internalize the phrase. Cycle the phrase while speaking syllables to grasp the change in feel.

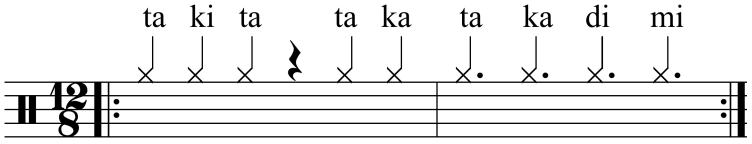
Ex. 1



Example 2 illustrates the actual bell pattern that will comprise this study. It incorporates the phrase from example 1 with one critical exception—the fourth bell strike in bar 1 is rested to create a subtle syncopation. Indian syllables have also changed with the first bar spoken as a group of 3 (ta ki ta) followed by a group of 2 (ta ka). The second bar has not changed its rhythm or language.

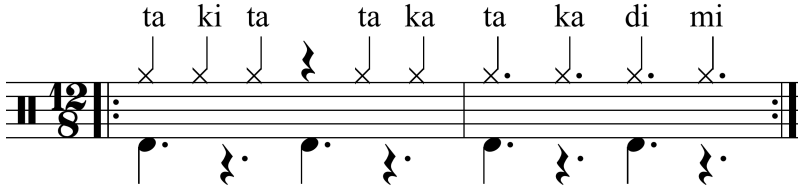
The 2-bar phrase has now become 3 + 2 + 4 or: ta ki ta – ta ka / ta ka di mi. Repeat example 2 while speaking syllables.

Ex. 2



Example 3 builds on the bell phrase by adding the bass drum in a 2 feel for both bars. This minimal approach enhances the sparse quality of the phrase. The bass drum could also play in 4 to create more momentum and energy. When comfortable with the limbs, add in the syllables.

Ex. 3
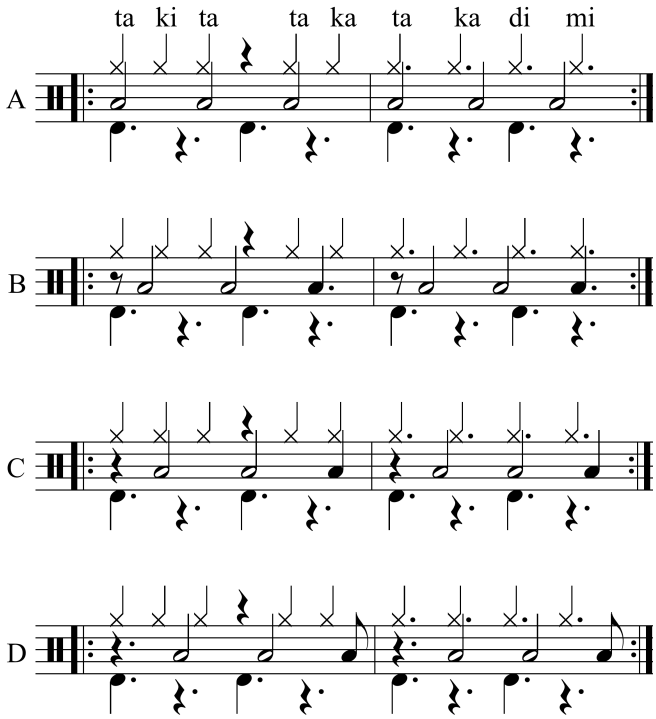


Finishing the Groove

In example 4 below, phrase A adds in the snare in an even 3-feel for both bars. Notice how the snare aligns with the first bar in 6 for an easy and relaxed flow. In the second bar the snare and cymbal break apart into a 4:3 polyrhythm. With the bass drum in 2 the resulting combination of the second bar is 4:3:2. Because the bell shifts perspective in each bar, its 6 + 4 structure may disguise the repetition between snare and bass—the drums take on a life of their own from the first bar to the second. This is where we experience the inherent mystery of the phrase.

As shown in variations B, C and D the snare shifts forward by an 8th note, rotating the 3 cross rhythm to its remaining positions. In 12/8 the 3 cross rhythm has four total positions: 12 ÷ 3 = 4. As the snare rotates inside the bar, it always maintains a consistent relationship with the cymbal in 6. In other words, phrase B places the snare between cymbal hits, phrase C anchors it back to the cymbal, and phrase D puts it between hits for the final position. In the second bar of B, C and D the rotating snare adds more intricacy within the 4:3:2. Even with all of the underlying tension, the overall sparseness and elegance of the groove is maintained.

Ex. 4
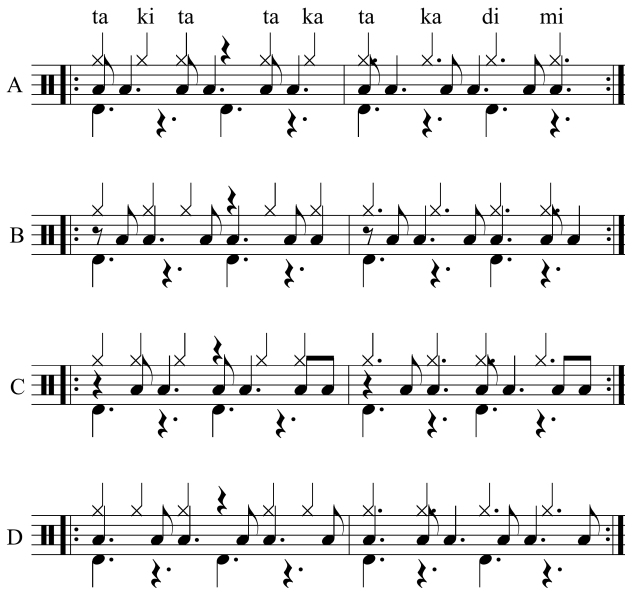


Double Hits (Snare in 3)

Example 5 below is identical to the previous with one exception: the rotating snare pattern introduces a second strike. This adds energy to the phrase that is also more challenging. Notice that the first strike of each snare pair is in the same position as example 4—they share identical starting anchor points.

Groove for a while on phrase A from example 4 then progress to phrase A of example 5. Alternate these in a kind of theme and variation sequence. Repeat this approach for phrases B, C and D. With muscle memory and enhanced intuition, you will no longer need the notation.
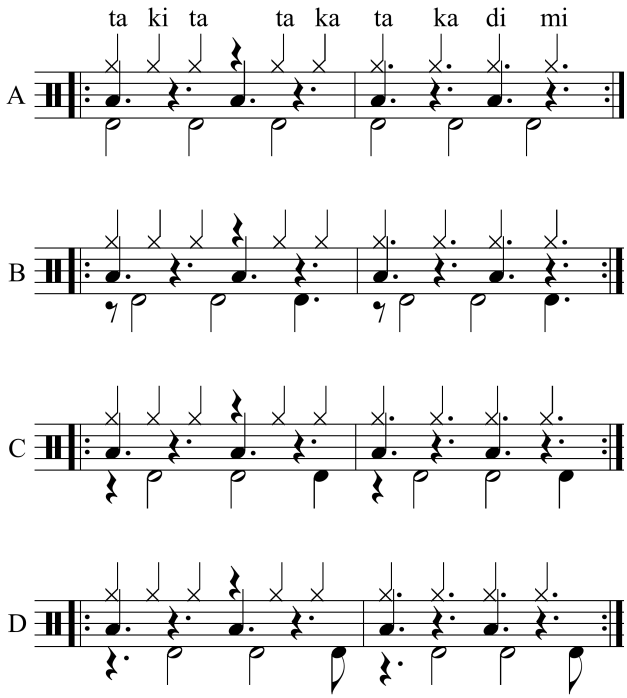
Ex. 5



Shifting Positions

Additional variations on the basic phrase from example 4 are possible by switching the roles of the snare and bass. In example 6 the snare is now in 2 with the bass in 3. In all four A–D treatments the cymbal and snare remain constant. It is the shifting bass drum in 3 that challenges your sense of gravity and downbeat. Speaking the syllables of the cymbal may help to keep your place within a given phrase. Once proficient with A–D on their own, alternate all three A phrases as one series, then the three B phrases, and so on.
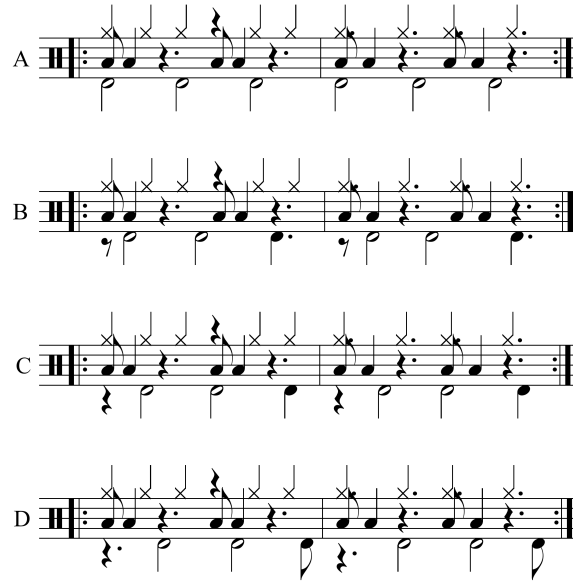
Ex. 6



Double Hits (Bass in 3)

Example 7 below expands on the previous series by adding double hits to the snare drum. At this point there are four variations on each A–D series (Ex. 4–7). As previously suggested groove on the A phrases for an extended period and flip variations at will. Eventually you will start to own the phrase for it to become part of your rhythm vocabulary.

Ex. 7



Conclusion

All drummers love to tackle different types of rhythm puzzles—as long as they are not puzzled in return. We twist and turn a single idea into variations that exercise the mind and body, like working out at the gym where each apparatus strengthens a specific part of the body. As with any practice regimen this requires focused discipline and devotion. Adapting unusual bell patterns and counter rhythms to drum set can result in intricate and musical puzzles that groove on many levels.