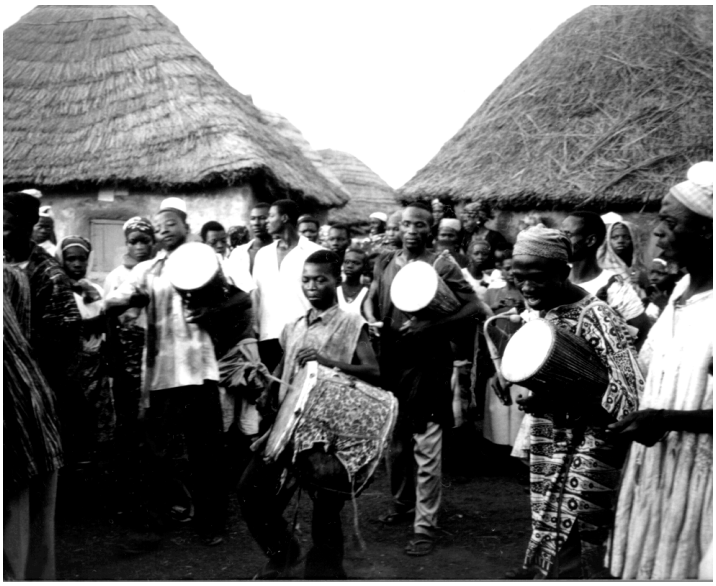
Dagomba Rhythms for Drum Set
By Jerry Leake

Cultural Context / The Drums

The Dagomba are an ethnic group located in the northern region of Ghana known as Dagbon. The Dagomba have a rich, intricate musical and oral tradition that has allowed them to preserve their history and origins in what can be referred to as "dance-drumming." Dagomba culture is heavily influenced by Islam, brought to the region by Soninke traders between the 12th and 15th centuries. As I discovered firsthand, their generosity to people who travel to Dagbon is an inspiring lesson of kindness and humanity.

A Dagomba music ensemble incorporates two types of drums. The first is a large bass drum called "Gung-Gong," with several gung-gong phrases adapted to drum set for this article. The lead drum in the ensemble is called "Lunga." The lunga is a type of "talking drum" that conveys proverbs and Dagomba history using changes in pitch and sonority that are similar to the nasal quality of their spoken language called Dagbani. A lead lunga phrase for an old rhythm called Takai is adapted toward the end of this study. Unlike the stationary single-head Ewe drums that are played with two straight sticks, the double-headed Dagomba drums that are struck with one curved stick are strapped around the shoulder and played in a roaming parade style.

Pictured below is a typical Dagomba drumming group with one gung-gong and several lunga.



The limited scope of this article cannot begin to explain the vast history and the evolution of Dagomba music. Google "Tufts University" and

“Dagomba Drumming” for a wealth of background and repertoire that includes examples for each instrument and their role within the ensemble.

A typical drumming ensemble like the one pictured above would include:

- One “lead lunga” player who speaks all of the “talks.” This is accomplished by squeezing and releasing the tension straps that raise and lower the pitch. The talks tell stories specific to the rhythm being played, as well as energize the solo or group dancers.
- Several “answer lunga” players who support the lead lunga with a short repeating phrase. This phrase can interlock with the “answer gung-gong” rhythm, or it can be in dynamic counterpoint to the supporting groove.
- One “lead gung-gong” player who is free to improvise using aesthetically appropriate phrases that have been passed down through the tradition. Ornamentation is based on the skill and style of the player.
- One or two “answer gung-gong” players who, like the answer lunga, render a short repeating phrase. Answer gung-gong and lunga are partners in maintaining rhythmic cohesion, much like the bell patterns of Ewe music. Powerful low tones of the answer gung-gong synchronize the dancers.

With four unique patterns happening simultaneously Dagomba drumming can be quite intense and daunting to follow. Independent parts weave in and around each other like a Bach chorale, with counterpoint and tension happening in a virtuosic display of style and technique.

Adaptations to Drum Set

It is physically impossible to simultaneously adapt all four patterns of a Dagomba rhythm to drum set. That said, many of the answer and lead gung-gong patterns are adaptable by adhering to basic guidelines. The gung-gong produces loud bass tones that speak the syllable “ka” or “kaw.” This bass tone will be adapted to the bass drum. The gung-gong also plays muted or pressed strokes by turning the wrist forward slightly and pressing the side of the curved stick against the center of the head. This pressed stroke called “ki” will be adapted to the snare drum.

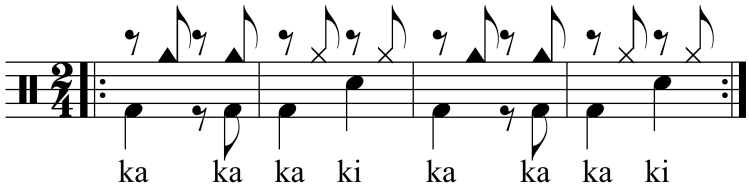
The ride cymbal pattern will attempt to assimilate some attributes of the “answer lunga” rhythm. Since the answer lunga is capable of playing three pitches to produce a tonal melody, the cymbal will utilize normal strikes in combination with bell strikes (triangle note head) to reflect the lunga’s melodic contour. Once the variations that follow are understood, improvise cymbal and drum melodies to add in your own interpretive voice.

DAMBA

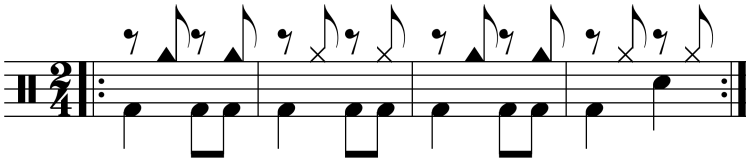
Damba is probably the most popular of the Dagomba rhythms, with annual festivals that feature lively drumming and solo dancing. “Held in the eleventh month of the lunar calendar, the Afro-Islamic festival commemorates the birth of the Prophet Mohammed. Ceremonies during the eighteen-day festival provide citizens of the Dagomba polity to give homage to their leaders and to reaffirm bonds of kinship.” (from the Tufts Website).

The fast parade style version of Damba features driving gung-gong grooves and an intricate off-beat answer lunga pattern. In some ways Damba is similar to a Samba rhythm from Brazil (Damba-Samba). In example 1 below, the gung-gong is adapted to bass drum and snare. The answer lunga pattern has been “tweaked” to become a consistent off-beat cymbal pattern. Bell-of-cymbal tones (triangle note head) highlight a pitch change in the lunga melody. The Tufts website will provide a plethora of traditional sounds and information.

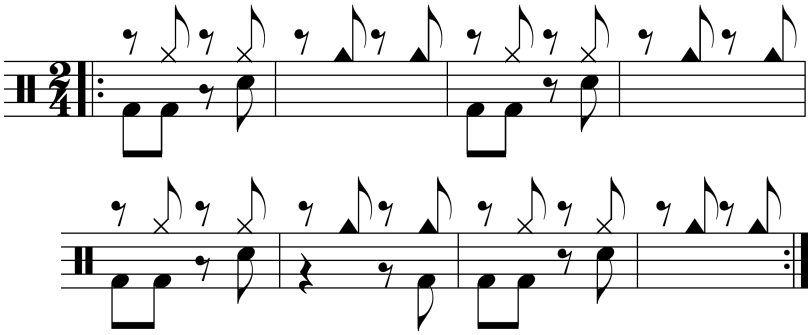
Ex. 1: “answer gung-gong” basic pattern with syllables



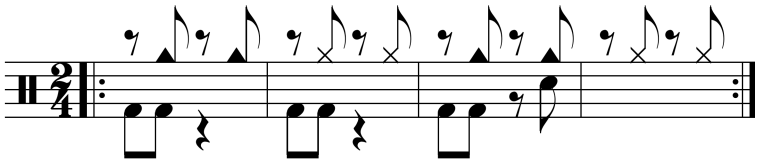
Ex. 2: “answer gung-gong” variation
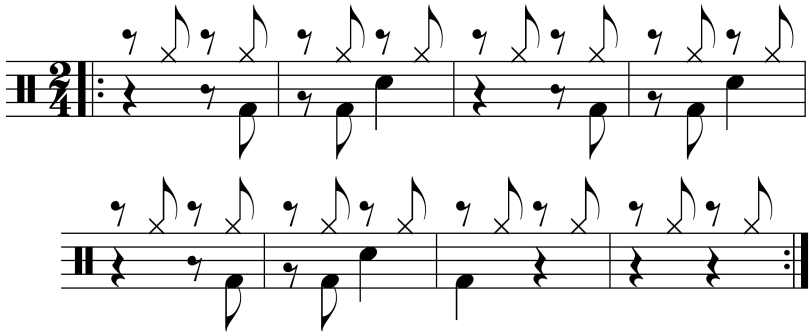


Ex. 3: “lead gung-gong”



Ex. 4: “lead gung-gong” variation



Ex. 5: “lead gung-gong” variation – improvise cymbal tones



TAKAI SUITE

From the Tufts Website: Takai is one of the oldest drum and dance rhythms of the Dagomba, and the story tells of how they came to be so close to the Mossi tribe. There was a war going on between the Dagomba and Mossi, and a Dagomba woman got lost in the bush and was eventually found by a Mossi hunter. Years later, when there was once again conflict between the Dagomba and Mossi, the woman’s history came to light, and because of this connection they halted the fighting. Combined, the drum language for all the parts says “chief says listen, stop the fight.”

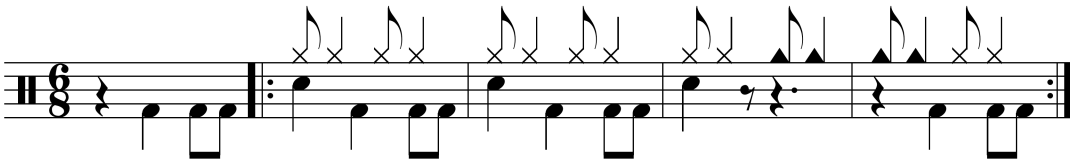
TANCHILI GONG

Tanchili Gong is the third part of the Takai Suite of five rhythms. Shown below in examples 1 and 2 is an adaptation of the gung-gong’s 4-bar phrase. The third bar within the repeat, where the gung-gong is rested, is where the lead lunga player would drum the various “talks” that tell the story. The cymbal pattern adapts a driving 1-beat rhythm of the answer lunga. Improvise cymbal and bell tones to alter accent points.

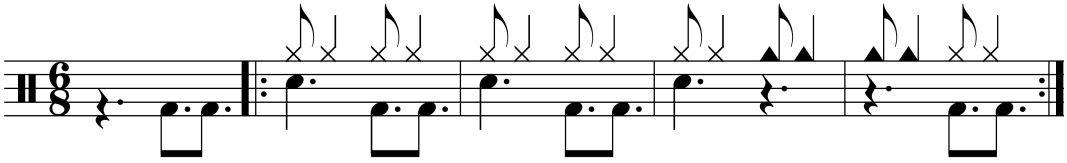
Example 1 retains the ternary structure of the 6/8, with drums and cymbal interlocking in a partnership of tension and resolution. Example 2 represents a radical shift as the bass drum plays a more “binary” phrase that leads to the snare drum downbeat.

When going from one example to the next it is important to always transition at the 4th bar.

Ex. 1: ternary basic pattern



Ex. 2: binary variation

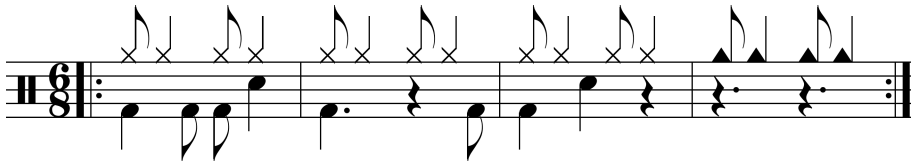


NUNDA NYULI

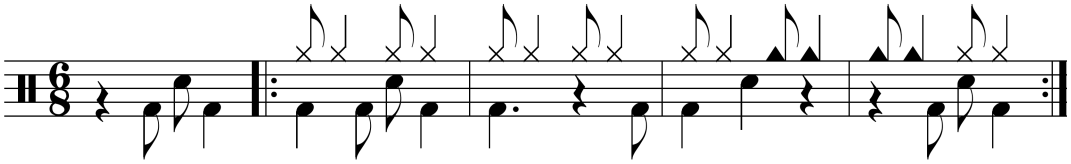
Nunda Nyuli is the fourth item from the Takai Suite and shares the same answer lunga pattern as above. The end of the 3rd bar and all of the 4th bar leave room for lead lunga talks. The pick-up bar in example 2 would replace the 4th bar of example 1 for a smooth transition.

Interestingly, the gung-gong adaptation of example 1 below is derived from example 1 of Tanchili Gong—the first five strikes of both patterns are rhythmically identical. However, example 1 below begins from the downbeat, as opposed to the pick-up phrase in the previous example.

Ex. 1



Ex. 2



TAKAI

Takai proper, as it is often called, is the first item played in the Takai Suite. It is introduced now because it contains the most rhythm complexity and challenge. The adaptations below are derived from three lead lunga talks. Given that the lunga produces three distinct pitches the phrases have been adapted to the tom toms of the drum set: low, medium and high.

The challenge of the rhythm stems from a common cognitive issue that can occur with players not born in the tradition. Simply put, the unsettling

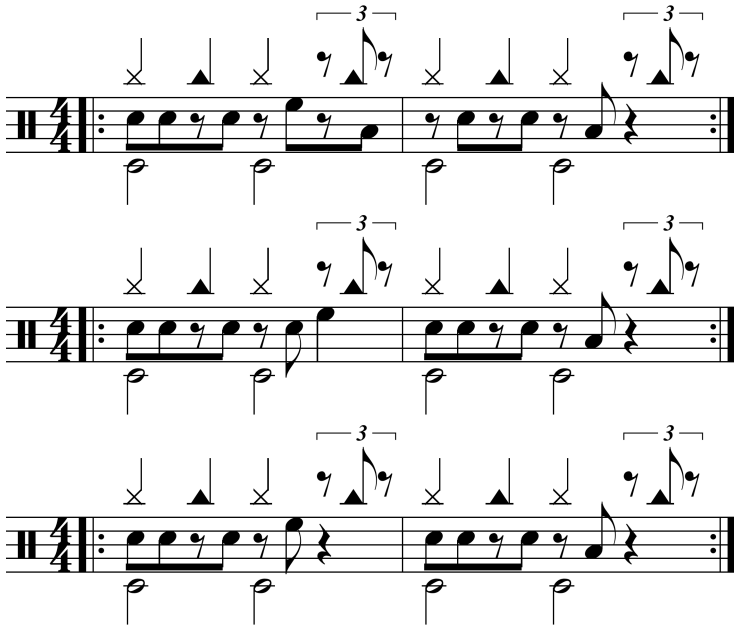
gravity of the off-beat pattern may cause one to flip the phrase to a more stable and comfortable on-beat position.

To strengthen this awareness, cycle just the tom pattern with the bass drum playing half notes, as shown in the "Stage 1" examples below. Notice that the bass drum aligns with the toms on only the first beat, with the three remaining strikes falling in between the tom melody. When you have a clear sense of the off-beat tom melody, add in a single cymbal hit at the downbeat of the first bar to confirm the "1" of the phrase. This cymbal strike also coincides with the dancers who would strike a held stick with the stick of their neighbor dancer. Once comfortable with the cymbal marking the downbeat, bring in cymbal hits on beats 2 and 3.

Try to achieve maximum comfort and calm before attempting the ternary (triplet) cymbal strike shown on the 4th beat of both bars. When properly placed, this unique aspect of the phrase adds rhythmic elasticity, like a push and pull of energy and breath to the time. To better grasp this quality, cycle the cymbal and bass drum that align on beats 1 and 3. As you bring in the drum melody pay close attention in the event that the phrase suddenly flips, perhaps with the bass drum shifting its position. The more challenging bell-of-cymbal notation reflects a high level of phrase adaptation. Refer to the video link to hear this and all of the adaptations in this article.

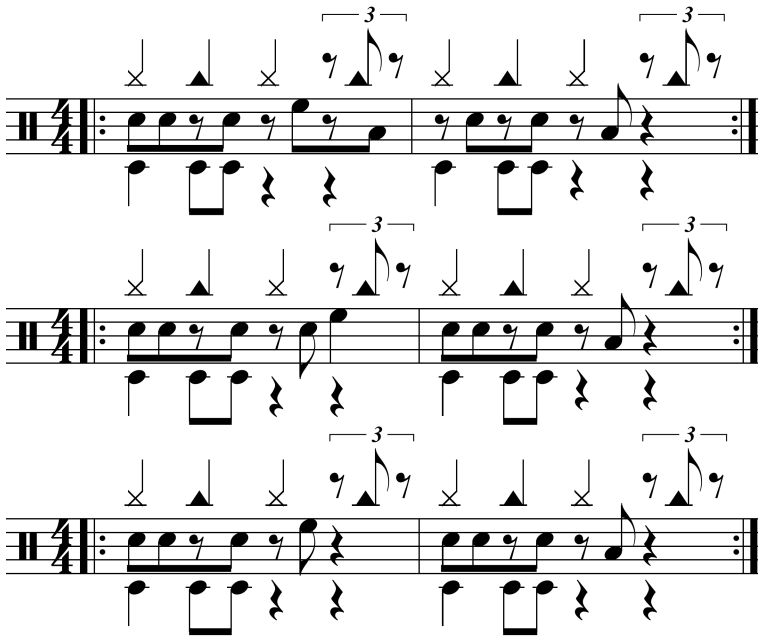
The first example shown below in "Stage 1" is the primary lead lunga phrase, with two variations. When comfortable with shuffling these phrases, improvise bell and drum melodies.

Ex. 1–3: Stage 1



Ex. 1–3: Stage 2
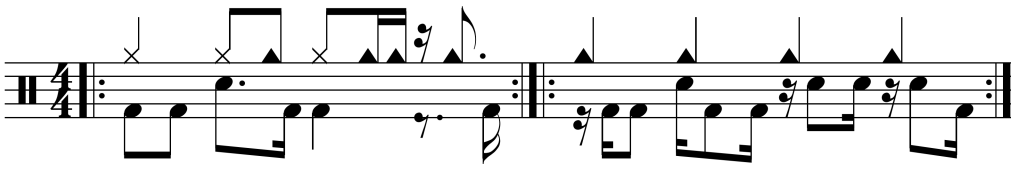
The Takai Stage 2 examples shown below are similar to the previous except that the bass drum now introduces the “answer gung-gong” rhythm from the traditional composition. In this orchestration three of the four Takai patterns have been adapted to drum set, creating an authentic and sophisticated groove. As with any of the examples in this article, ease in gradually by first strengthening the paired combinations—bell and bass drum / bell and toms / toms and bass drum.



ASSORTED RHYTHMS

ZAMBALANTON

Zambalanton is a lively rhythm that emulates qualities of rock and funk styles, making it an effective adaptation to drum set. The first bar represents a more authentic interpretation with the second taking liberties with syncopation and off-beat energy. Explore variations that develop the traditional motif of the first bar.

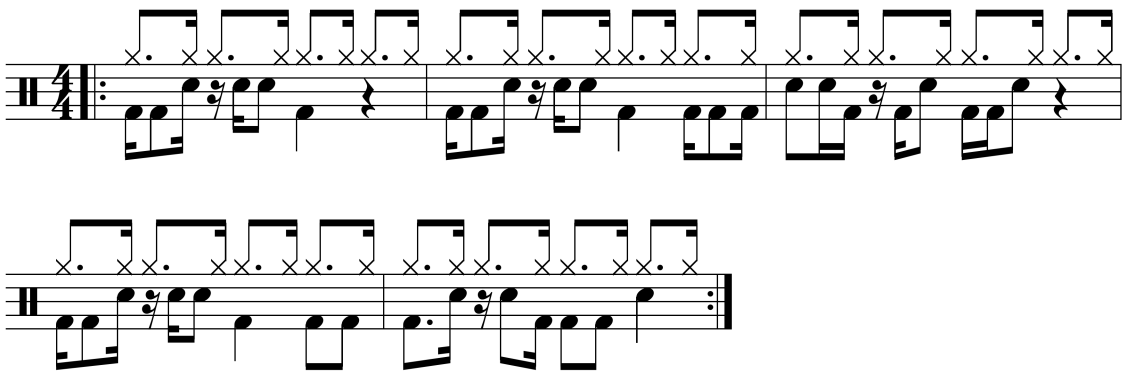


JUNKUNO

“Junkuno” is the Dagbani word for “Cat.” Junkuno is a popular rhythm that features a 5-bar gung-gong phrase. The answer lunga pattern shares the

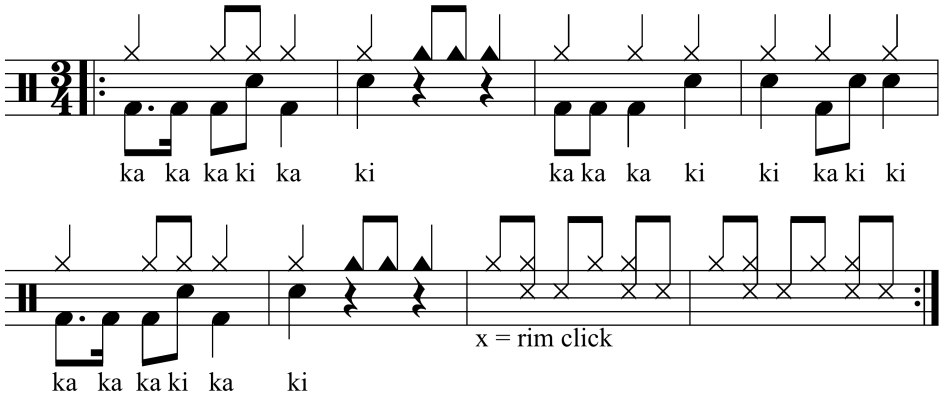
same rhythm as the gung-gong. Because Junkuno feels much like an African samba, the cymbal pattern introduces a 16th note shuffle to fit the samba-dance vibe. By all means explore other cymbal variations and tones.

Note: A few liberties were taken in the first two bars to bring in snare drum strikes. The snare drum pattern can also be played using rim clicks with effective results.



TAMPIEMON DUN DON

The gung-gong pattern for Tampiemon Dun Don shares the same rhythm as the answer lunga and leaves space at the end for the lead lunga to "talk." As shown, the groove is notated in 3/4 to demonstrate the relationship between 3/4 and 6/8. It also includes "ka" and "ki" syllables to reemphasize the language origins of the gung-gong. With all of the previous examples speak the syllables to reflect the traditional inspiration.



Conclusion

I would be remiss if I did not pay respects to my teachers who have taught me about the music of the Dagomba people. In 1991 I began group lessons in Boston with the late great Alhaji Dolsi-naa Abubakari Lunna (pictured in the photo below with his sons). For many years Dolsi-naa came to the United States to teach at Tufts University at the invitation of Professor David Locke, who is a longtime teacher and mentor of mine. When I first

met Dolsi-naa he was known as Abu. Years later he became a prominent drumming chief in the region of Dagbon and earned the title “Dolsi-naa.” A few years before Dolsi-naa passed away he made the journey to Mecca and became Alhaji.

To say that my lessons with Dolsi-naa during the nearly twenty years that followed were intense would be an understatement. His demands for purity of sound with precise and relaxed strokes, and thorough knowledge and skill with traditional repertoire cannot be exaggerated. In 1998 I made the sojourn to Africa to study with Dolsi-naa in his land. Those life-changing experiences strengthened the bond I had with such a loving and demanding teacher. As he would often say with tough-love honesty: “I teach you fully and you give it back to me halfway! Why?”

Dolsi-naa always taught his students from a pure and authentic perspective. He did not encourage stepping outside of traditional boundaries to create something new at the risk of diminishing his music. Even as I write this article I ponder what his reaction would be to these drum set adaptations. I consider that perhaps Dolsi-naa would be grateful that I am sharing his tradition with musicians who would, by no other means, become aware of such a wonderful art form.

Hopefully this glimpse into Dagomba drumming will inspire readers to visit the Tufts website and discover something new and amazing, and someday journey to his land to learn the music fully and not halfway.

