The Language of Independence

By Jerry Leake

My college-level drumset students have the excellent technical skills and stylistic diversity to become professional musicians in a highly competitive and demanding music industry. Many of them focus on studying and playing jazz, while also being aware that much of their living may be made playing more commercial, dance-oriented styles: rock, funk, Latin.

Jazz drummers use all four limbs to create an entire blend of sound and rhythm, with parts working to serve the collective "whole" of the rhythm section engine. Multiple gears interlock to create the "clock" of time that propels a jazz ensemble of any size. Private students know that my approach involves a language-based "Harmonic Time" (HT) method that fully dissects and challenges rhythm independence. HT involves carefully analyzing each gear to build a new clock with a more focused and attuned engine.

I begin with basic African repertoire and drum language in 12/8 and then incorporate the mathematics and language of Indian rhythm to form complex and sophisticated grooves. The key is using the "voice" to speak all the parts played by each limb, to achieve a high level of singing songs while playing intricate and evolving grooves. Nowadays, drummers need to enhance their skills with the ability to sing background vocals, usually with simple and repeating grooves. I strive for a level of independence that breaks this basic mold of independence.

AFRICAN LANGUAGES

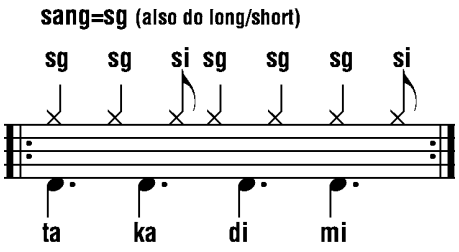
Students first learn to sing the Standard African 12/8 bell from the Ewe people of Southern Ghana. The Ewe phrase is "matekpo matekpo kple ku ja" (the "k" is silent in kple). The bell (ride cymbal) plays on all syllables except "tek" ("teek"), which marks the empty 2nd and 3rd beat. Notice in Example 1 that the syllable "ja" is actually beat 1. Ewe patterns do not typically begin on beat 1; they end on beat 1. This vocal phrase clearly marks the 12/8 pulse with each beat aligned with the syllables tek, tek, kple, ja.

The folling phrase establishes the bell on the ride cymbal and the four-beat using the bass drum. Once you are comfortable speaking and playing the matekpo bell, speak the bass drum (BD) four-pulse using the Indian syllables "ta ka di mi." You will notice the tension points on beats 2 and 3 (ka, di) and the resolution points on 1 and 4 (ta mi). Switch back and forth between bell and BD languages.

A more academic method of analyzing and speaking the bell is based on long and short strokes: quarter notes are "long" and eighth notes are "short." Doing this, your awareness may shift from a 12/8 to a 6/8 orientation.

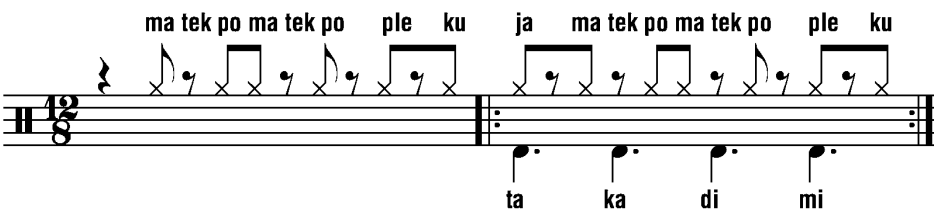
A more musical, language-based approach, developed by James Koetting, is to incorporate the syllables "sang" and "si" as shown in Example 2. Switch back and forth from matekpo of 12/8, sang/si of 6/8, and the BD in 4 using Indian syllables. In the following notation, all "rests" from Example 1 have been eliminated.

Example 2: sang/si



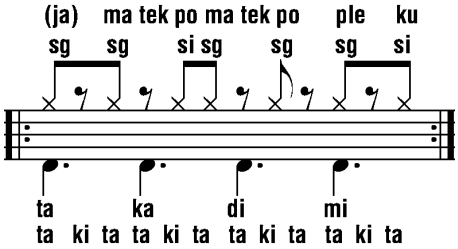
The bass drum can also be realized using all 12 pulses by speaking four sets of **ta**kita (**ta** ki tuh) with the bold **ta** marking each "beat" (Example 3).

Example 1: matekpo



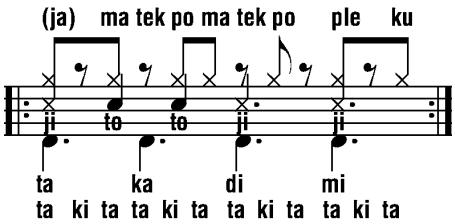
At this point we have four spoken phrases: matekpo, sang/si, ta ka di mi, and takita. Mix these up freely, focusing on each limb as defined by the language you speak. Example 3 incorporates all four spoken phrases.

Example 3: takita BD



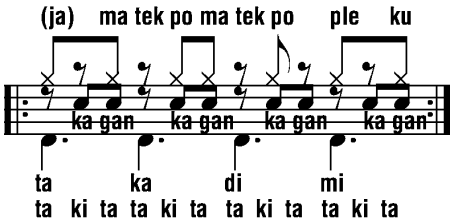
Now we will examine two traditional Ewe drum phrases using our weak hand on drumset. The spoken phrases (vocables) are derived from the names of the traditional drums: totoji and kagan. For totoji, the syllable **to** "pronounced ("toe") is played as an open tone on floor tom, and the syllable **ji** ("x") is played as a pressed tone on floor tom (for example). Another approach is to play **ji** on the high tom and **to** on the floor tom. In Example 4, the totoji phrase and language is brought into our previous work.

Example 4: totoji



The kagan is known as the "baby" of the Ewe drumming ensemble. It plays on the offbeats and usually renders either a one-beat or two-beat phrase with many possibly variations. For this study we will look at the one-beat phrase that is spoken as "ka gan." If you think of "om pah pah" the "om" is the beat (BD) and the "pah" is the offbeat kagan pair. Shown in Example 5 is the kagan played on snare (snares off), or as rim clicks.

Example 5: kagan



A fourth and higher level to our work would be to play the bell, beat, and kagan using the limbs *and* speak the totoji. Alternatively, play totoji while speaking kagan. The fourth level—speaking a phrase that is not physically played—is how you develop the skill to sing songs while drumming sophisticated grooves.

Summary: At this point we have four African languages: matekpo, sang/si (bell), and totoji, kagan (drums). We also have the bass drum in slow and fast Indian syllables: ta ka di mi (beat) and takita (filled up). At all times shuffle every language.

CROSS-RHYTHMS

With a strong foundation established using the previous phrases we can speak and play the many available cross-rhythms—2, 3, 4, 6, 8—inside 12/8. With any cross-rhythm we can apply multiple hits to each stroke, and rotate the entire phrase to different locations inside of 12/8. The possibilities may seem daunting, but know that each variation is a potent groove that is not wasted.

2 cross-rhythm (2 CR)

Shown in Example 6 is the first 2 cross-rhythm rendered with the weak hand on snare drum and with language. Also play the phrase while speaking matekpo, sang/si, and BD. Shown are double and triple hits of the phrase with language. You can also apply four hits with "ta ka di mi." Continue speaking the other languages (bell, BD).

Example 6: 2 CR



2 CR Rotation

Twelve (from 12/8) divided by two (CR) equals six, which is the number of possible rotations before returning to the original starting position on beat 1. As you explore the rotations with one, two, and three hits (single hit shown), your awareness of the downbeat may start to diminish: "Where's the 1?" Speaking matekpo helps you realign your compass, which may be suffering from temporary "rhythm culture shock."

The key is to remain on a given phrases for as long as possible, speaking all the languages with the same drumming mechanics. Consider this a form of yoga and meditation that allows you to drift into and around all aspects of the entire groove. You will discover details and depths you could have never imagined.

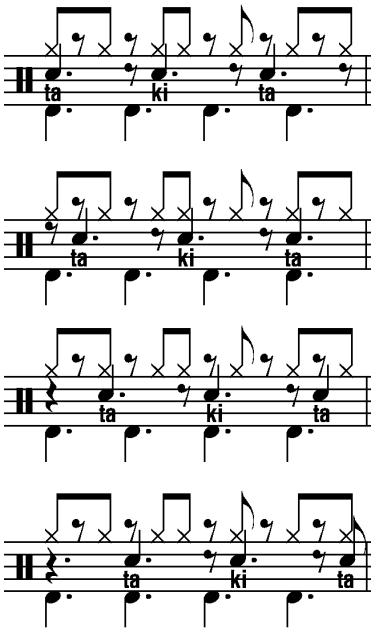
Example 7: 2 CR rotations



3 Cross-rhythm

Twelve divided by three equals four: the number of rotations possible with the 3 CR. While retaining the four in the bass drum, the 3 CR results a 3:4 sensibility, which is a much more demanding and intricate phrase. Single hits are shown in Example 8. Also incorporate double and triple hits using **taka** and **takita** syllables.

Example 8: 3 CR



4 Cross-rhythm

The 4 CR has three positions and can be played as single (shown in Example 9) and double hits with each position.

Example 9: 4 CR



4 CR; BD in 3

Because the bass drum is also in the 4 CR, we can change it from a four-pulse to a three-pulse. This results in a 4:3 juxtaposition as shown in Example 10 with each single-hit position.

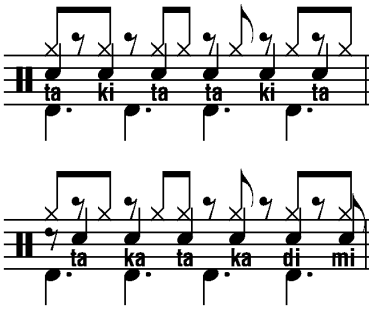
Example 10: 4 CR; BD in 3



6 CR

The 6 CR has only two positions, on and off, each played with a single hit. In the first position notice that the first takita phrase is "on" (with) the bell, and the second takita is "off" the bell, revealing the inherent flip of the bell. In the second (off) CR position the resulting alignment with the bell is off, off, on, on, on, on. For this phrase speak two sets of takita or taka takadimi to align with off and on positions.

Example 11: 6 CR



8 CR

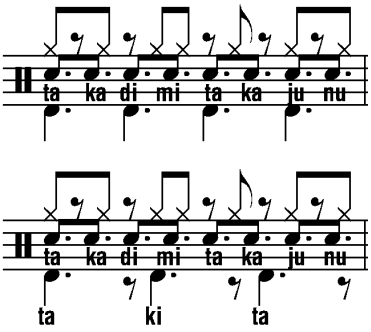
Twelve divided by eight equals one and a half (1.5). Basically, you will play dotted-eighth notes that double the dotted-quarter BD in four. In this unorthodox treatment the bell and drum align in only two positions: beat 1 and beat 4. All other bell and drum strokes weave in and around each other in a sort of "flam dance." To speak the 8 you say "ta ka di mi ta ka ju nu." You may also notice that the "matekpo" language fits comfortably to the phrase. Also shown in Example 12 is the bass drum in three, resulting in a complex 8:3 combination.



The Language of Independence video examples.

Refer to the video link to see and hear all the examples in this article. The video also demonstrates a unique orchestration of the 8 using a simple reduction principle (8, 4, 2, 1) and dividing the phrase into 332, 323, 233.

Example 12: 8 CR



CONCLUSION

This article explored the power and language of the African 12/8 groove, integrated with higher-level Indian mathematics. As drummers, we love rhythm puzzles—as long as we are not puzzled by them. When exploring any new idea, we need to take small steps to go deep below the surface and surrender all the tension and gravity we may feel when stepping outside of our comfort zone. With practice and devotion a language-based method may become an essential tool for you to achieve the highest level of independence and ownership of any idea.

Jerry Leake is an Associate Professor of Percussion at Berklee College of Music and the New England Conservatory of Music. He is leader of the world-rock-fusion octet Cubist, which has released an acclaimed studio and live CD. He is also co-founder of the world-music ensemble Natraj and the dub/trance groove collective Club d'Elf . Jerry performs regularly with R.A.R.E, C-Jammers, Another Realm, and the Agbekor Drum and Dance Society. On tabla, he has accompanied Ali Akbar Khan, Steve Gorn, Sharafat Ali Khan, Nandkishor Muley, Kumkum Sanyal, Chitravena Ravikiran, Purnima Sen, and Shyamdas. Jerry graduated from Berklee College where he studied jazz vibraphone with Gary Burton and hand percussion with Pablo Landrum. He studied tabla in Pune, India with Rajiv Devasthali and Carnatic rhythm theory and mridangam with T. K. Ramakrishnan. He has learned African music for 20 years with Dolsi-Naa Abubakari Luna of the Dagomba tradition, Ewe music with Godwin Agbeli and David Locke, and balafon/djembe with the Coulibaly family in Burkina Faso. Jerry has written eight widely used texts on North Indian, West African, Latin American percussion, and rhythm theory; manuals for playing world rhythms on drumset; and articles published in *Percussive Notes*. Jerry is former president of the Massachusetts PAS Chapter and has been a composer and member of the Portland Symphony Kinder Koncert percussion ensemble since 1984. PN