

## **From Musical Instruments to Interior Design**

### **Drum Carvers in Central Ghana**

by Andreas Meyer

In 1993 my colleague Urban Bareis and I travelled to Ghana in order to acquire a Fɔntɔmfrɔm-drum set from the Asante Region for the Ethnological Museum in Berlin (then called "Museum für Völkerkunde"). We visited the drum makers Kodwo and Kwaku Marfo in the village of Adwomakase Kese not far from the Asante capital Kumasi. The manufacture of the drums were documented on film, from the felling of the tree to the first playing on the instruments. (Bareis & Meyer, 1994)

The drums of the Fɔntɔmfrɔm-set belong to the most representative musical instruments in Ghana. They can normally be found in the possession of a chief. And only with his permission may these instruments be played on ceremonial occasions. In the centre are the goblet shaped Atumpan-drums, which are always played in pairs by the master-drummer. Two mighty cylindrical drums called Bomaa - each played by one musician - tune in with the Atumpan. They belong to the largest drums of West Africa, and it is just their full deep sound which lends the music its festive character. While the Atumpan-drums are also played in other less ceremonial orchestras the Bomaa is only heard within the Fɔntɔmfrɔm-set. In addition several accompanying drums and two iron bells belong to the ensemble.

The drums were made from the wood of the tweneboa tree (*Cordia milenii*) a massive species of cedar which has in the meantime become rare in Ghana. The drum makers prefer trees which have already been dead a long while because dry wood is needed for the construction of the drum so that the resonance body does not develop cracks later. For our instruments a tree standing in a cassavafield located approximately 3 kilometres from Adwomakase Kese was used. The rough operations, the peeling and hollowing out of the wooden blocks, were carried out directly in the cassava field in which the tree was felt.



Fɔntɔmfrom-set. Made by Kodwo and Kwaku Marfo. Kept at the Ethnological Museum, Berlin.

After the resonance bodies had roughly obtained their shape they were transported to the village of Adwomakase Kese. The workplace of the drum makers was located on the edge of the village in front of their house under a mango tree. The village lies some fifteen kilometres north of the Asante capital of Kumasi. The main buildings comprised a couple of churches, a school, and a medical station however there was no running water and no electricity. The Marfo-Brothers are third generation drum carvers. Their grandfather - they said - started the drum making business "around eighty years ago". (personal communication 1993)

At the workplace in the village the drums received their decoration. The goblet shaped drums were first given a groove which was carved out in the upper third of the resonance body. Above the groove the drum got a ring shaped pattern made of narrow notches, the traditional family design. Each drum maker in the Asante region has traditionally his own design by which one can always recognise the origin of the

instruments. Beneath the pattern of notches the resonance body got narrow vertical grooves which is a decoration widely distributed throughout Ghana and the neighbouring countries. In the middle of the instrument a so called "eye" or "symbol" was carved. This was a small rectangle with the notched pattern of the family design. This rectangle is a relic from olden days. At an earlier stage the sacrificial offering would be performed on this place on the resonance body for the spirit of the tree. (Rattray 1955, pp. 261)

The final operation, the fastening of the hides, began with the cutting of wooden pegs. The hides were fastened with the so called string peg tension or peg tension as one can find everywhere in Ghana, Togo and other neighbouring countries. (Meyer



Accompanying drum of a  
Fontomfrom-set made by  
Kodwo and Kwaku Marfo:  
Carved "eye" or "symbol".

1997, pp.22) With the string peg tension a string is tied to the hide edge and this string forms loops which are put around the pegs. The pegs are forced through holes previously bored into the resonance body. For the membranes the Marfo-Brothers used cow leather. Earlier antelope hides and - for the Atumpan - even elephant ears were used. (Nketia 1963, p. 11, see also Woodson 184, p. 224) Traditionally the membranes are fastened with reed or bark. But since reed and bark are not durable, today the carvers look for alternative materials. The Marfo-Brothers asked us if we would prefer wire or leather lacing for our instruments. Believing it would be "more traditional" we chose the leather, which in a certain sense was a mistake as we will see later.

When I again travelled to Ghana in 1997 many things had changed. The Marfo-Brothers had given up their business. Kodwo Marfo the elder brother worked together



Resonance body of a Kpanlogo-drum,  
freely designed by James Acheampong.

with a lorry driver and Kwaku Marfo had found a job as a drum carver at the Centre of National Culture in Kumasi. He explained the development as follows:

At first I worked at Adwomakase Kese with my brother. At that time we were facing financially problems. We did not have money at that time. So I was visited by one artist who used to be a carver, too. And he told me he will help me to come and work with him so that I decided to go with that artist. .... The difference is that at my village - sometimes there is no customer who used to come to the village. And at Cultural Centre here, here is a tourist centre, so all the times there is a tourist who come to visit here. (Kwaku Marfo, Interview, 4/3/97)

The name of the artist referred here is James Acheampong. Born in Kumasi he is a typical product of the urban Ghanaian culture. As a young boy he took lessons in drumming at the Centre of National Culture. Later he joined the state promoted musical group at the centre and became one of the best drummers in Kumasi playing mainly the traditional Asante musical styles like Adowa, Kete and Fɔntɔmfrɔm. In the mid1980s he planned his second career as a drum carver and sculptor. He learned carving traditional drums from the Marfo Brothers:

I started drumming at the Cultural Centre here about 22 years ago. My family, my grandfather was a carver. Even my mother was a carver. So the carving job is also from the family. And one time I wanted to buy Kete drums from a friend at Adwomakase Kese. And I decided to help rather then watch. So I started to carve. Because the whole idea is: My family has a particular job, the carving. They carve Dondo (the hourglass), cooking bowls and so forth. Using wood. So the carving itself is from the family. And because I was a drummer I decided to carve drums. (J. Acheampong, Interview, 26/3/1997)

His idea was to combine the making of the instruments with artwork. He used old symbolic patterns of the Asante and other Akan-peoples, among others the so called "Adinkra symbols" which traditionally can be found on woven clothes and have very often religious meanings. (Quacoo 1994, pp.5) Sometimes he created new designs for the resonance bodies of the instruments, some of which were his own ideas:

At times it just comes to my mind. Some of the designs come to me in a dream. And when something come to my mind, I just draw and later I transfer it to the drum. (Interview 26/3/1997)

Success came very soon. In 1986 he had his first exhibition. People were impressed but some told him that they did not like the wire lacing he used which he had learned

from the Marfo-Brothers. That is why he got the idea to use laces of leather. As a model for that he deferred to various drums from the northern peoples of Ghana which are in use in the Asante Region also. So it was James Acheampong who introduced the laces of leather to fasten the Asante-drums, a fact which was confirmed by Kwaku Marfo. (personal communication, 1997) Beside the laces he introduced some other innovations. The pegs of the drums are often covered with decorated brass, and brass handles are fastened to the resonance bodies. Sometimes pieces of brass are fastened with nails around the holes for the pegs.

Being successful James Acheampong was able to found his own workplace at the Centre of National Culture, an institution sponsored by the state which nevertheless is run partially by self-employed artists. The system requires, that they have to give



Kpanlogo-drum made by James Acheampong and Kwaku Marfo; decorated with brass, a brass handle, shells of kauri snails and the Adinkra symbol *gye nyame* within the map of Africa. *Gye nyame* (literary *except god*) means: *I fear none except god* .(see Quarcoo 1994, illustrated examples no. 1 and 3)

10 % of their income to the Centre but they don't have to pay rent. (James Acheampong, personal communication, 2000) He was also able to employ a co-worker, and he asked his friend Kwaku Marfo to come to his workplace or - as he calls it - his "studio". Working together, they not only introduced innovations in making the Asante-drums, but they also started to carve drums which do not belong to the traditional Asante-culture. For instance, they carve Kpanlogo-drums which are usually played among Ga-people around the Ghana-capital Accra. The Kpanlogo-music has been developed very recently (around the 1960s) and is influenced by African-American dance music and other musical forms of expression. (see Collins 1996, pp.109) In the meantime it has become, internationally, the most popular percussion music from Ghana. The form of the drums resemble the Cuban Conga-drums but since the membranes are fastened with the string peg tension described above they can still be considered as typical Ghanaian drums. James Acheampong and Kwaku Marfo also make Jembe-drums and these instruments have nothing do with the traditional Ghanaian culture at all. They are different in various ways from the Akan-drums. The membranes for instance are stretched and fastened by complex lace work.(see Meyer 1997, pp.30) They come from the Western Sudan area and they were originally distributed in certain regions of Mali and Guinea. Since their sound is very melodic and multi-faceted they currently are enjoying a growing popularity beyond of their homelands. Even in Europe and in the Americas they have obtained a large following. (see Polak 2000)

"Sometimes some tourists need Jembes" says Kwaku Marfo (Interview 4/3/1997) which leads to the question who would normally buy the drums made at J. Acheampong's studio. The main customers of the Marfo-Brothers at Adwomakase Kese were chiefs and musicians from the villages, school teachers, churchmen and priests of the traditional Asante religion (Kwaku and Kodwo Marfo, personal communication, 1993). When I asked James Acheampong about his customers he said that he had carved for museums, musical groups from outside the area, visitors and interior designers. Asked about local drummers he said:

Native drummers they come here for drums. (...) But you can use a set of drums for about twenty years. So if they come for a set of drums it will take long time. So the demand here of the native people is not as high as people living in another country. Even the time when I came here (to the Centre of

National Culture), the drums we were using are still here. And they are still in good shape.(Interview, 26/3/1997)

Later he added:

There are some designs which are not good for drumming. For example when the design is too complicated or too complex technically it would affect the movement of the drum. It won't affect the sound but at times if this drums were used at the funeral ground, some have to break, even the decoration, whenever I hit a sound, it will break.

These remarks clearly show that some of J. Acheampong's well decorated drums are not made to be played. They have to be considered as sculptures rather than musical instruments.

When I again visited the Centre of National Culture at Kumasi in February 2000 James Acheampong had received a degree in art from the *University of Science and Technology* in Kumasi. He and Kwaku Marfo were employing two students. All four of them worked on a couple of drums which were ordered by an Australian Company that co-operates with a Ghanaian goldmine. The instruments - two Bomaa, two Atumpan drums and some Kpanlogo drums - will be placed in the entrance hall of the company's office. So the team was indeed very busy. Kodwo Marfo on the other hand, Kwaku Marfo's elder brother, had lost his job in the lorry driving business. He returned to live in Adwomakase Kese again, but there was nothing there for him to do.

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