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Female Voices from an Ewe Dance-drumming Community in Ghana

Our Music Has Become a Divine Spirit

JAMES BURNS

An **Ashgate** Book

FEMALE VOICES FROM AN EWE DANCE-DRUMMING COMMUNITY IN GHANA

To the women of Dzigbordi and the women in my life:
Elisa Salinas (Grandmother), Elisa Wells (mother), Sarina Barrera (wife)
and Elisa Saraswati Barrera-Burns (daughter)

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Conventions and Orthography

The indigenous ethnonym for the Ewe people is *Ɖegbetɔwo*, literally *Ɖe*-speaking people.[1] Some authors use the term *Eve* (or Ev̲e), marking the bilabial middle consonant; however, native speakers rarely use the term *Eve* in quotidian discourse, preferring the term *Ɖegbetɔwo*. When speaking in English, native speakers have adopted the term 'Ewe', which is the term that most often appears in academic scholarship, including the present work.

Discussions in this book will employ several terms from the Ewe language – important, recurring terms are also listed in the glossary. When I introduce foreign terms, I place the English translation in brackets – *agbe* (life). Terms from Ewe and other African languages that appear first in English, are subsequently written in brackets, preceded by the initial letter of the language. For example: 'life' (E. *agbe*) is an English translation of the Ewe term *agbe*. I have written all foreign words with italics throughout the book to prevent possible misinterpretations.

Orthography

In transcribing the Ewe texts below, I have followed the standard system of Ewe spelling and orthography, based upon the Ewe–English, English–Ewe dictionary compiled by Westermann.[2] Westermann's dictionary employs spellings that derive primarily from northern Ewe dialects, which often conflict with their pronunciation in the southern Anlo dialect. The Anlo dialect is the tongue of many renowned Ewe drummers, and consequently academic studies of Ewe music over the past 50 years have tended to use both standard and Anlo spellings. The texts below come from both southern Ewe and Togolese Ewe sources; nevertheless, I spell each term according to its representation in Westermann's dictionary to avoid confusion. There are also many idiosyncratic interpretations of 'standard' Ewe orthography, in terms of how to join the subject and objects to the verb, and whether to represent spoken (descriptive) or written (prescriptive) variants. The texts in this book are consistent with current academic practice in Ghana, as shown to me by Ms Kafui

[1] There are different accounts of the meaning and origin of the moniker *Eve*, but one that seems plausible is that it was coined by autochthonous communities who retreated up to the mountains upon the arrival of the Ewe, whom they labelled *Eveawo*, people of the valley; Kafui Ofori, personal communication, October 1995. Note: *Eve* literally means pit or valley.

[2] Diedrich Westermann, *Evefiala, or Ewe English Dictionary* (Berlin: D. Reimer, 1928).

Ofori of the Language Centre at the University of Ghana, and as outlined in F.K. Atakpa's *Evegbeŋɔŋlɔ ŋuti Sewo* (*Rules for Writing the Ewe Language*).[3]

The different dialects of spoken Ewe show a wide divergence in the pronunciation of basic vowel sounds, and the following pronunciation guide represents a synthesis of southern Ewe usage:

Ewe	**English Equivalent**
a	'ah' as in father.
e	'uh' as in fare.
i	'ee' as in he.
o	'oh' as in lingo.
ɔ	'aw' as in hawk.
u	'oo' as in food.
ɛ	'eh' as in bet.
˜ *ex. ã, õ, ĩ*	Nasalized vowel.

In terms of consonants, most bear their English pronunciations; however, the following deserve brief explanation:

ŋ, ŋ	'ng' as in sing.
Ɖ, ɖ	A retroflex 'd', similar to a slightly rolled 'r'.
D, d	The uninflected 'd' in Ewe is made with the tongue at the back of the teeth, like a voiced 'th'.
Ƒ, *f*	A bilabial 'f', similar to blowing up a balloon.
Ʋ, ʋ	A bilabial 'v', produced by allowing air to escape between loosely closed lips.
Ɣ, ɣ	A 'g' pronounced with the throat.
Kp	As in saying *backpack* without a pause between syllables.
Gb	As in saying *bugbite* without a pause between words.
X, x	A non-voiced 'h' as German 'ich'.
ts	Varies between 'ch' as in church and 'ts' as in bits.
ny	As in onion.
dz	Varies between 'j' as in Joe and 'ds' as in suds.

[3] F.K. Atakpa, *Evegbeŋɔŋlɔ ŋuti Sewo* (Cape Coast: University of Cape Coast, 1986).

Most southern Ewe dialects partially palatalize 's' and 'z' before the vowel 'i', pronouncing the sound *ashi* for the word *asi* (hand) or *azhi* for the word *azi* (peanut). Southern speakers also palatalize 't' and 'd' before the vowel 'i', pronouncing the sound *atsi* for the word *ati* (tree) and *dzi* for the word *di* (to look for).

In terms of vocabulary, Ewe use the suffix *wo* to indicate the plural: *ati* (tree), *atiwo* (trees). The word *wo* also means 'they' and is often used to indicate an indefinite person or group of people. Most of the songs examined in this study come from Togo, where they use a slightly different vocabulary and pronunciation. Most important to note is the substitution of *be* for the normal *fe* to indicate the possessive: *Miabe vu* (our drum) instead of *Miafe vu*.

Although Ewe is a tonal language that broadly employs low, medium, high, rising and falling tones, the tones are not conventionally represented in the orthography except for a few special cases, where a tone is required to distinguish between otherwise similar written alternates: for example, the second (*e [you]*) and third person (*é [she/he]*) subjective pronouns; the first person plural (*mí [we, us]*) and second person plural (*mi [you pl.]*) subjective and objective pronouns; and the third person plural subjective and objective pronoun (*wo [they, them]*) and the second person objective pronoun (*wò [you]*). I have also followed these conventions of tone marking.[4]

Finally, in translating the Ewe texts in this book, I have taken some liberties in the English versions to succinctly convey the sense of the original meaning. Ewe uses a wealth of idiomatic expressions that are not easily understood when texts are translated word-for-word. Due to space limitations, no attempt has been made to give both an exact translation and an interpretive translation of the Ewe texts.

[4] Note: some texts mark a low tone for these words, *mì*; however, it is also common to leave them uninflected.

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Introduction

Our Music Has Become a Divine Spirit

Music and Identity in an African Town

The present work is an ethnography of Dzigbordi, a contemporary Ewe dance-drumming club (E. *Habɔbɔ*), as seen through the eyes of its predominantly female members. The female song leaders of Dzigbordi see their music as *adekeɖeha*, or songs of complaint or redress. Using music to confront ongoing social issues in their community, the Dzigbordi *Habɔbɔ* demonstrates how dance-drumming continues to be culturally and artistically relevant to a group of rural Ewe women living in twenty-first-century Ghana (Figure I.1). My extended musical and cultural discourse with the women of Dzigbordi spans over ten years, and traces the birth, emergence and significance of the group within its social and cultural milieu. Within this context, we will find that singing songs is an important way in which women demonstrate and renew their beliefs. Music associations build alliances (E. *wobɔ ha*) between women, based upon common descent, beliefs and interests. Dzigbordi music attracts a wide range of women, who share their songs, humour and resources in service of the community.

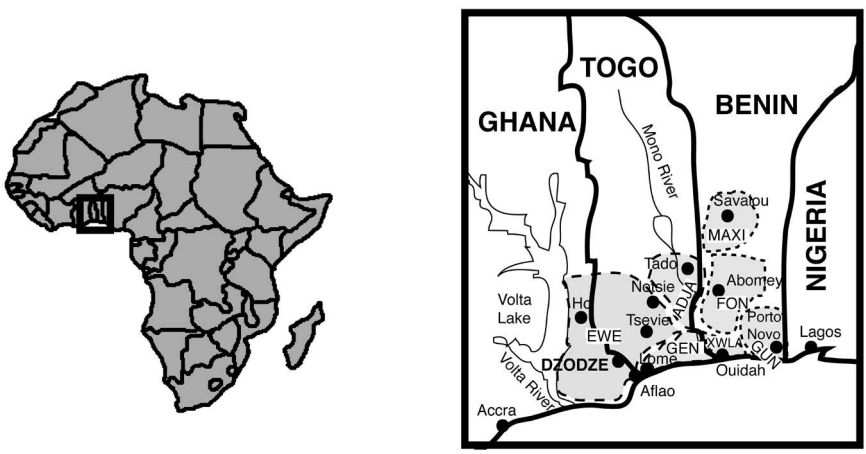

Figure I.1 Map of Eweland

Blacking writes that people who share the experience of music 'become more aware of themselves and their responsibilities towards each other'.[1] Like other musical anthropologies, this book seeks to explore how the musical community of Dzigbordi articulates the life and belief system of a multi-generational group of Ewe women.[2]

Our Music Has Become a Divine Spirit

The subtitle of this work originates from a song used to open the Kinka dance, one of the introductory dances at a Dzigbordi performance. Shortly, I will discuss how this line of text embodies the social identity of Dzigbordi women, thereby forming an important interpretive lens for viewing the connections between music and identity throughout this study; however, it is imperative that I first address the issues raised in translating these three important Ewe terms: *vu* (music), *zu* (to become) and *abosaŋu* (divine spirit).

Africanists may be surprised to see the use of the term 'music', as many have taken great pains to insist that African languages do not possess a term 'congruent with the Western notion of "music".'[3] However, if we appeal to the etymological origin of the term 'music' – from the Greek *mousikē* (any art presided over by the Muses including poetry, instrumental playing, dancing, song, drama and history)[4] – it actually resonates nicely with the semantic field designated by the Ewe word *vu*, which literally means drum, but also connotes a wide range of artistic behaviour that normally accompanies drumming such as singing, dancing, dramatizing and stylizing. Falling back on the comfortable trope 'There is no word for music in Ewe' only begs a greater recognition that Ewe and English encode two unique realities with only a short period of contact. The emerging creolization of Ewe culture with the West (World) is still in its infancy; simply coining new terms that may or may not catch on does not advance the interpretation and reception of Ewe art forms. Hence, I will use the terms 'music' and 'dance-drumming' to denote the total spectrum of artistic activity exhibited during a regular performance.

The Ewe word *zu* is normally translated as 'to become' or 'to change into', implying a physical transformation from one state to another. Transformation is also at the root of Dzigbordi music, which we will learn is an amalgamation of earlier music styles that have been recreated and consciously stylized by the artistic

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1 John Blacking, 'Deep and Surface Structures in Venda Music', *Yearbook of the International Folk Music Council* 3 (1971), p. 95.

2 Anthony Seeger, *Why Suyá Sing: A Musical Anthropology of an Amazonian People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

3 Ruth Stone, 'African Music in a Constellation of Arts' in Ruth Stone (ed.), *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 7.

4 'music, n.', *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, December 2007), accessed 10 December 2007, <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00305575>.

leaders of the group. I have argued that Ewe dance-drumming genres are works in progress, continually updated by successive generations of musicians.[5] This dynamic model of Ewe music acknowledges both the continuities and alterations present within the exposition of a dance-drumming genre.

Translating the term *abosaŋu* as 'divine spirit' is perhaps the most controversial interpretative choice according to Ewe cultural discourse, because a growing majority of bilingual Ewe would translate it as 'devil', 'evil spirit' or simply 'Satan', reflecting a growing discordance between women that stems from differences in religious belief and education. This crisis of belief is one of the most significant issues in contemporary Ewe discourse, and frames many discussions in this study. As they are a group rooted in Ewe culture, however, I believe most of the Dzigbordi members would agree with the translation 'divine spirit'.

Let us now turn our attention to the text of song, because it felicitously opens a deeper discussion of the connection between music and identity in Ewe culture:[6]

‖: *L: Evua zu abosaŋu la,*	The music has become a divine spirit,
amesiame nawɔe.	everybody come join in.
C: Míabe Kinkavua zu abosaŋu la,	Our Kinka music has become a divine spirit,
amesiame nawɔe. :‖ [2x]	everybody come join in.
L: ee Gbogbo ɖina ee	And the spirit is really working its power!
R: Gbogbo ɖina ee	And the spirit is really working its power!
L: ee Gbogbo ɖina ee	And the spirit is really working its power!
R: Gbogbo ɖina ee alele	And the spirit is really working its power!
Evu zu abosaŋu la,	The music has become a divine spirit,
amesiame nawɔe.	everybody come join in.
Míabe Kinkavu zu abosaŋu la,	Our Kinka music has become a divine spirit
amesiame nawɔe.	everybody come join in.

The song text uses the idea of transformation to compare the power and vibrancy of the group's dance-drumming to that of a divine spirit, *abosaŋu*. The composer of the song may have simply chosen *abosaŋu* to serve as a potent metaphor for a

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[5] James Burns, 'The Beard cannot Tell Stories to the Eyelash: Creative Transformation in an Ewe Funeral Dance-drumming Tradition', PhD Dissertation (University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 2005).

[6] The song can be seen in performance on the accompanying DVD (chapter one, 00:25). Note, in this performance the singer uses the alternative words *bobo ɖina ee* (the crowd is crying out with excitement) for lines 4–7.

state of intense emotional excitement – evoking the sensation of losing oneself in the music, creating a state of communication between performers and audience.[7] By comparing the music to a divine spirit, however, the song alienates a significant portion of the local audience, who choose not to associate with these spirits. In Eweland, *abosaŋu* now evoke fear, dread and shame for a growing number of people, who instead associate with the spirits of Christianity and Western education.

Ewe people are currently in the midst of a radical and pervasive epistemological transformation from an older, dynamic set of local beliefs and practices, referred to as *dekɔnu* (culture, tradition) in Ewe discourse, and a new set of beliefs and practices that have grown out of the introduction of Christianity and Western education by the British, German and French during their colonization of Eweland. The Ewe term for culture, *dekɔnu*, can be glossed as a *thing* (E. *nu*), which is *placed* (E. *de*) into a semantic field of ritual restrictions, taboos and powers (E. *kɔ*). In this study, I will use the English word Culture, with an initial capital, to designate the traditional practices of the Ewe people, including religion and music. Bilingual Ewe also use 'Culture' in quotidian discourse; for example, if you ask an Ewe artist: '*Dɔ ka newɔna?*' (what work do you do?), they can respond, '*mewɔ Culture dɔ*' (I do Culture; I work with Culture).

Divine spirits permeate the Ewe life-world, interacting in symbiosis with the living by exchanging their affective power (E. *nuse*) for the sustaining ritual services (E. *subɔ*) performed by their children (E. *viwo*). This aspect of West African religion, what Karen Barber calls 'making god', expresses the reflection of the divine in the living, and the living in the divine.[8] The resulting image is articulated most clearly during enactments of the liturgy during a *vufofe*; a music event where devotees renew the covenant with the divine spirits through dancing (E. *wɔɖuɖu*), singing (E. *hadzidzi*) and drumming (E. *vufofo*). While all of these elements are essential components of a successful event, songs are perhaps the most significant because they comprise an oral testament of this shared experience including its myths (E. *ŋutinya*), laws (E. *sewo*) and rituals (E. *kɔnuwo*).

Opposing the epistemological system delineated by *dekɔnu* is a complex of beliefs that have fruited from the imposition, and later local development, of Christianity and Western education. I use the term opposition deliberately because both have been consciously antagonistic towards *dekɔnu*. Since its introduction into Eweland, Christianity has attempted to redraw the metaphysical boundaries in order to articulate a cosmic battle between the forces of good, represented by God–Jesus, and the Devil, represented by the divine spirits and other aspects of Culture. In her study of the first Christian mission in Eweland, established by Bremen missionaries in 1847, Birgit Meyer writes that a new convert had to eschew their previous Cultural identity during baptism:

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[7] Like many of the songs in this study, the original composer is unknown.

[8] Karen Barber, 'How Man Makes God in West Africa: Yoruba Attitudes Towards the Orisa', *Africa* 51/3 (1981): 724–45.

> Baptism implied that a person had to choose a new Christian – preferably biblical – name, to reject any 'connection with idol worship', to refrain from participation in 'heathen ceremonies', and to take off all *dzo* ('medicine/magic') strings and amulets.[9]

The Bremen missionaries recognized the connection between music, religion and identity; hence the insistence of changing a person's name as a precursor to changing their behaviour.

In conjunction with Christianity, Western education has employed a discourse of modernity to attack Culture as an embarrassing remnant of a primitive past; the future, in contrast, is identified with a new social identity that is the product of a Christian education.[10] While education has become increasingly secular in the West, in Ghana most rural schools are still run by local churches, which maintain the link between Western knowledge and Christian belief. Throughout the twentieth century, Meyer concludes, European missionaries and their Ewe converts have treated 'education, Christianity, and "civilization" … as synonymous'.[11] African scholars such as John Mbiti have also noted this link between Christianity and Westernization. In his book on African religion he writes:

> Christianity from Western Europe and North America has come to Africa not simply carrying the Gospel of the New Testament, but as a complete phenomenon made up of Western culture, politics, science, technology, medicine, schools, and new methods for conquering nature.[12]

In Eweland today, three general categories of social identity have crystallized from the binary opposition between Culture and Christianity, which I have termed Christian (E. *Kristotɔ*), Mediator (E. *Dometɔ*) and Culturalist (E. *Dekɔnutɔ*).[13] Since the arrival of Bremen missionaries in northern Eweland in 1847, Christianity has gradually, and to greater or lesser degrees, begun to displace traditional religious practice in every Ewe community.[14] Figure I.2 concisely describes this progression since the mid nineteenth century, grouping segments of the population into Christian (X), Mediator (M) and Culturalist (C). As shown on the right side of the figure, today roughly 30 per cent of the population are Christians (*Kristotɔwo*), who practise

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[9] Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity Among the Ewe in Ghana* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 9.

[10] Ibid., p. 213.

[11] Ibid., p. 213.

[12] John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1992 (1969)), p. 212.

[13] This section is a reformulation of a similar section from my PhD dissertation. I have changed the categories, and modified some of my original arguments; see Burns, 'The Beard cannot Tell Stories to the Eyelash'.

[14] Meyer, *Translating the Devil*, p. 5.