

# Agbekor of the Ewe in Ghana/Togo: Global Connections Through Music

## A World Music Pedagogy Lesson

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**Suggested Grade Levels (anticipated):** 3-5, 6-8, 7-12

**Country (origin of the piece or genre of music):** Ghana and Togo

**Region (Can be continent, or cultural region):** Africa

**Culture Group (specific group of music's origin, if known):** Ewe

**Genre (type of music):** Agbekor (Percussion ensemble, dance, singing)

**Instruments (used in recording):** *Gankogui, axatse, kaganu, kidi, kloboto, totodzi, sogo*

**Language (of the lyrics):** Ewe

**Co-Curricular Areas (places where this music might tie in to students' other subject areas, providing ideas for integrated learning):** Social Studies

**National Standards of Music Education:** 1. Create ("Plan and Make" **Enduring**

**Understanding:** Musicians' creative choices are influenced by their expertise, context, and expressive intent.) 2. Respond ("Select" **Enduring Understanding:** Individuals' selection of musical works is influenced by their interests, experiences, understandings, and purposes.)

**Prerequisites (What must students have mastered in order to be successful?):** Ability to perform rhythms in a variety of meters helpful, but can be adjusted to students' experience; ability to sing from Middle C to G above middle C.

**Objectives (can be adjusted based on student age/ensemble, include conditions, criteria, and action verbs for assessment):** Students will...

- Play one of the instrumental rhythms (*either gankogui, axatse, kaganu, kidi, kloboto, or totodzi*) demonstrating the ability to "facet" rhythms (focus on the timeline rhythm of the gankogui) in the style of Agbekor, in the context of the piece: "Kondo yi Yevuwo de megbc o"
- Sing the chorus of the piece "Kondo yi Yevuwo de megbc o," aurally learned from a recording.
- As a group, create and perform lyrics in English (chorus and improvised solo) and instrumental ostinati that complement each other (timeline and 2-4 ostinati).
- Identify salient features of the Agbekor tradition, including past and present manifestations, through the creation of a slide show that illustrates and explains the music to their audience.

**Materials (Include all materials needed to recreate the lesson):**

- Instruments: Gankogui, axatse, and drums. Drums might be Agbekor instruments if possible, but other hand drums (tubanos, djembe, etc) can be used
- Recording of "Kondo yi Yevuwo de megbo o" from Smithsonian Folkways  
<http://www.folkways.si.edu/dennis-allen-a-kdjo-tetty-and-wk-amoaku/kondo-yi-yevuwo-de-megbo-o/childrens/music/track/smithsonian>

- Recording “Atsiagbekor—If it comes to fighting with guns”  
<http://www.folkways.si.edu/e-we-musicians-dancers/atsiagbekor-if-it-comes-to-fighting-with-guns/world/music/track/smithsonian>
- Sheet music simplified for “Kondo yi Yevuwo de megbo o” (From *African Songs and Rhythms for Children, A Selection From Ghana*, by W. U. Amoaku, 1990).
- Map of Ghana/Togo region, photos of Agbekor instruments

**Lesson Segments (How will I break down the learning into measurable chunks?):**

1. **Musicking “Kondo yi Yevuwo de megbo o” (Integrating World Music, Attentive Listening, Engaged Listening, Enactive Listening)**
2. **Musicking “Kondo yi Yevuwo de megbo o” (Creating World Music)**
3. **Presenting, Performing, Teaching: Preparing “Kondo yi Yevuwo de megbo o” for an audience**

**How does a teacher choose a genre or piece of music?** I decided I wanted my students to learn to understand drumming traditions originating on the continent of Africa. To choose a region and culture group, I decided to select a tradition that I was unfamiliar with so that I could learn along with the students. I began to listen to music and search for references that would help me. I found a chapter on traditions in Africa in the book “Worlds of Music,” by Jeff Todd Titon. This chapter contained information and music from the Ewe people group in Ghana/Togo, and I began listening to one of the traditions of the Ewe: Agbekor. As I listened, I focused on the following questions:

- 1) What sonic features stand out to me about this music? And
- 2) What sonic features will my students notice first about this music?

These questions gave me a starting point and helped me decide how to focus my lesson design.

**Lesson Segment 1: Musicking “Kondo yi Yevuwo de megbo o” (Integrating World Music, Attentive Listening, Engaged Listening, Enactive Listening)**

As I thought about how I would integrate, or teach the context and importance of the music, I asked myself: What role does this music play in the Ewe culture today? What is its historical context? Who makes this music (past and present)? What historical events influenced the impact of this music on the people who make/made it? How can I share this with my students and encourage them to continue researching with the goal of broadening their perspectives?

A. “Integrating World Music” (This step introduces the context and people who originally performed the music and possible music made today).

- 1) Play “Atsiagbekor—If it comes to fighting with guns” as the students enter the classroom.

- 2) “I want to tell you a story of a group of people called the Ewe. In the 1600s, they were held captive in a walled city-state called Notsie (located in Togo) with a tyrannical king named Agokoli. But one night, they intimidated their captors with their fierce drumming and escaped in the dark. The music used to either prepare for war or to celebrate a successful campaign such as this one became known as “Agbekor” or “clear life.” The Ewe moved to the Southeast, and settled near the Volta River where they grew in numbers. The Agbekor music then became part of the music of funerals. To honor the family heads, who were often war heroes, the Ewe celebrated their life through the performance of the Agbekor war music.

In the 1880’s -1950’s the lands of the Ewe were invaded by the British, German and French people. This is called colonization. Colonization brought poverty and funerals were difficult to afford. The tradition of Agbekor faded. In the 1960s, mutual aid organizations along with school and civic youth groups worked to revive and preserve the tradition. Now, resources are pooled for funerals and the music is still performed. “We, the younger ones, decided to revive it in 1970. Three or four people sat down and said, ‘How can we let this thing just go away? Agbekor originated in our place, among our family, so it is not good to let it go.’ We felt that it was something we had to do to remember the old family members.” Evans Amenumey, quoted in Locke, 1978:63.”

I believed that they would notice the unique instrumentation as well as the complex polyrhythms. With this belief, I then asked myself the following questions related to the layers of World Music Pedagogy:

- 1) Attentive listening: What questions can I ask my students as they listen to the music, helping them to focus in on the sonic features of timeline and polyrhythm?
- 2) Engaged listening: How can I invite my students to participate musically and engage with the music?
- 3) Enactive listening: How can I invite my students to “enact” the music, or reproduce the vocal or instrumental parts they hear?

My answers are reflected in the lesson design below:

- B. Attentive Listening 1: Ask, “Listen and see if you can identify the instruments.” Play 30-1:00 of Atsiagbekor, and gather student responses. Guide students as they identify a type of bell, a shaker, drums, and multiple voices. With photographs of the instruments and ensemble, share the instrumentation of the Agbekor ensemble.
- C. Engaged Listening 1: Invite students to respond musically as they listen, either moving to the music, tapping on laps as they listen, etc.
- D. Attentive Listening 2: Play the recording of “Kondo yi Yevuwo de megbo o” (use this recording in the subsequent parts of the lesson). Ask students to focus their listening on the gankogui part, identifying this part as the “timeline,” or cyclical instrument around which the other parts facet.

- E. Engaged Listening 2: Invite students to respond musically again, but this time maintain focus on the gankogui. Identify this as “faceting” or fitting in musical parts around the timeline, interweaving. The idea of “faceting” can be related to the metaphor of a gemstone sparkling in the sun: as the gem’s multiple faces reflect the light, a person can focus on one at a time, or see (or in the case of Agbekor, “hear”) the gem as a whole.
- F. Engaged Listening 3: Invite students to tap the part of the gankogui on their legs. Once students can tap the rhythm, invite them to identify the low and high tones of the gankogui part, and to simulate those parts on their legs.
- G. Engaged Listening 4: Invite students to tap out additional parts, inviting groups of students to focus one part at a time. Tailor this step to the age of the group. With older students, groups can listen to the recording and identify a repeating rhythm to learn and recreate.
- H. Engaged Listening 5: Now invite students to pay attention to the sung parts, identifying the repeated chorus and the solo. Invite students to learn the words to the chorus and solo with your assistance, exploring the meaning. Depending on age of students, teacher can sing the solo with students singing the chorus.
- I. Enactive Listening: Invite students to play the parts they have learned without the assistance of the recording. Begin with the gankogui part, and layer in parts. Remind students to use their listening skills to focus on the “timeline” part, and if they are having trouble fitting their part in, rather than rely on their memory, see if they can create a new part that fits in with the gankogui as a new “facet” (Creating World Music). Add in the vocal parts.

Assessment: Observe the students. Is each student able to perform one of the instrumental parts of “Kondo yi Yevuwo de megbo o” by faceting, or fitting in their ostinato part with the timeline? Are the students able to perform the chorus of “Kondo yi Yevuwo de megbo o,” using the recording as a reference point?

### **Lesson Segment 2: Musicking “Kondo yi Yevuwo de megbo o” (Creating World Music)**

In designing this lesson segment, I asked myself: How can my students create or improvise music related to this piece? I decided that they could do both!

- A. Invite students to create improvisations in the context of “Kondo yi Yevuwo de megbo o.” Ask a student volunteer or two to play the gankogui part, while small groups of students improvise (parameter: the improvisation should be a repeatable rhythm, fitting in with gankogui). Point out students’ polyrhythms and ostinati.
- B. Invite the students to improvise vocally. Teacher can model a solo improvisation using words from the text and pitches from the song, inviting students to take turns as the soloist.
- C. In small groups, invite the students to create either a unique vocal or instrumental composition with the following criteria: for instrumental, a “timeline,” and 2-4 interweaving ostinati; for vocal, an improvised solo in English and a repeating chorus (solo can use and expand on words/phrases from the chorus).

**Assessment:** With the students, create a rubric. Invite students to either perform or record their compositions in groups. Ask them to present their composition by describing the creation process and describing how their composition contains the elements associated with Agbekor (faceting, timeline, ostinati, solo/chorus). Score the projects using the rubric (invite students to participate in the scoring).

### **Lesson Segment 3: Presenting, Performing, Teaching: Preparing “Kondo yi Yevuwo de megbc o” for an audience**

To design this lesson segment, I asked myself: How can I include my students as we work to share what they have learned? What particular strengths did I see my students demonstrate throughout this learning process, and how can I encourage them to use these? How can I ask them to go beyond what I have taught them in class and demonstrate autonomous learning?

- A. With the students, research current use of Agbekor music. Guide the students in a discussion reminding them about the learning process they undertook to gain understanding of the music and how it is made. If preparing the music for a performance, explore questions such as:
- a. What would be an appropriate way to play/sing/dance Agbekor in a performance that would honor the people for whom this tradition is important?
  - b. How can we teach the audience about the significance of this music?
  - c. Can we invite the audience to engage with the music as we did?
  - d. How can we present a slide show with photos, videos, and narration that will accomplish these purposes?
  - e. How can we take this learning forward as we continue to examine the importance of music to identity?
  - f. What does the colonization of the Ewe people mean to this tradition? How has colonization influenced music in the United States?
- B. Students may decide to invite the audience to participate in an attentive or engaged listening experience, and share their research.

**Assessment:** As students design their inform/perform/ance, invite them to work in groups to complete the slide show, narration, and musical presentation. Each group can focus on a different feature of the music or the learning that is salient, making decisions. Use a rubric to assess students’ use of outside/primary sources, visual and auditory components, and synthesis of historical and personal perspectives.

**Resources (List any resources helpful in planning—books, videos, journal articles, websites, Smithsonian Folkways Resources):**

Locke, David, 2005. “Africa/Ewe, Mande, Dagbamba, Shona, Ba’Aka.” From *Worlds of Music: An Introduction to the Music of the World’s Peoples*. Ed. By Titon, J., Belmont, CA: Schirmer.

Video of Ewe Drumming: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vq35XWgzZFE>

DVD: Dance-Drumming of the Anlo Ewe, An Instruction. 2006. Vijay Rakhra Productions, University of Ghana.