



**ARTISTIC-AESTHETIC IN-PUT OF SONG LEADERS
IN AFRICAN ENSEMBLES: A CASE OF *ZIGI* IN GHANA**

Mary Dzansi-McPalm

University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

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The cultural values of Ghanaian indigenous culture are best expressed in the musical arts that are performed and displayed in the community. To comprehend the meaning of what goes on in the different ethnic groups of Ghana, the 'musical arts' (music, dance, drama, poetry, and costume arts) become a powerful tool for the outsider in this particular culture. Zigi, a recreational dance type of the Asogli ethnic group in the Volta Region of Ghana, is one of the local music ensembles that I research. This paper discusses the musical art idioms that song leaders adopt in Zigi, with a focus on symbolism in song texts, sounds, and rhythm patterns of the different drums, and the artistic features expressed by song leaders. Also discussed are what and how artistic-aesthetic values are treasured, their cultural identity, and their implications for music education.

In the Ghanaian communities where there are many types of musical performances, performing groups are organized based on gender or age i.e. adult or youth groups. In other words, there is music for every group as well as for males and females. Furthermore, there is music for every occasion performed by the musical types. Most of the musical

types are performed by mixed groups of males and females. Some musical types, however, are performed exclusively by males or females.

Ziavi Dzogbe where my research was conducted is part of the Asorgli ethnic group located in the central part of the Volta Region of Ghana. The Asorgli society has a rich store of musical types that include *Gbolo*, *Tuidzi* or *Akpese* commonly known as *Borborbor*. Others are *Asafo*, *Adevu*, *Gabada*, *Egbanegba*, *Adavatram*, *Aviha*, *Zigi*.

Zigi, a recreational dance that is the focus of this article plays an important role in the culture of the Asorgli society in the Volta Region. In the past, only mature women could perform *Zigi* in many villages. However, the picture has changed since 1973. As a matter of fact, *Zigi*, the one time favourite dance began to disappear from the musical scene of Ziavi because the younger generation did not show interest in the dance. This lack of interest changed in the early seventies when drumming and dancing were introduced on a competitive basis in the elementary schools. *Zigi* was therefore revived on a small scale in the Ziavi schools.

Features of *Zigi*

The texts of *Zigi* songs are highly educative in the society. The songs could be described as ‘rich stores’ from which the society draws its social, moral and spiritual support. *Zigi* songs are eminently enjoyable, dramatic, and above all, they are closely related to the people and their way of life. In other words, *Zigi* songs have certain characteristic features

that represent the general community traits of the people. For example, Ziavi Dzogbe, a small farming community, depends on subsistent farming for livelihood so everyone is expected to work hard on the farm in order to earn a living. The songs are used to teach the dignity of life, therefore preventing stealing and cheating. The music below, “Yao Kowa” admonishes Yao Kowa, a thief, to stop stealing and earn a living from his own farm.

YAO KOWA

Transcribed by:
Mary Dzansi-McPalm

Yao Ko - wa me nu - tsui me wo do ve'o Yao Ko - wa me nu - tsui me wo do ve'o da

The first system of music consists of two staves. The top staff is a treble clef with a 6/8 time signature. It contains a melody with notes and rests. The bottom staff is a bass clef with a 6/8 time signature, containing rests. The lyrics are written below the top staff.

9 si le fi nu na le do - wo - wo me da si le fi nu na le do - wo - wo - me E -

The second system of music consists of two staves. The top staff is a treble clef with a 6/8 time signature. It contains a melody with notes and rests. The bottom staff is a bass clef with a 6/8 time signature, containing rests. The lyrics are written below the top staff, starting with a measure rest '9'.

17 me le nua wo zo fe me le tsia do de nu gbe me le nua wo zo fe me le tsia do de nu gbe E -

The third system of music consists of two staves. The top staff is a treble clef with a 6/8 time signature. It contains a melody with notes and rests. The bottom staff is a bass clef with a 6/8 time signature, containing rests. The lyrics are written below the top staff, starting with a measure rest '17'.

25 me le nua wo zo fe me le tsia do de nu gbe E

me le nua wo zo fe me le tsia do de nu gbe

33 me le nua wo zo fe me le tsia do de nu gbe

me le nua wo zo fe me le tsia do de nu gbee.

Zigi performances come alive by the artistic in-input of song leaders. A song such as Yao Kowa is danced to and the song leader's section is embellished and decorated by stressing the tail end of the chorus, "*emele nua wo*" from measure 16 onward.

There are several occasions for *Zigi* performances such as the installation of a new chief. To be invited to perform for a new chief or for national celebrations such as independent anniversaries requires extra creativity and spontaneity. On short notice, an appellation of a chief is sent to the group leader to be incorporated into a performance. Performances of this nature expose the aesthetic-artistic in-input of song leaders in a *Zigi* ensemble. It is the duty of the song leader and her group to impress the chief and his elders with songs and new styles of dances that extol the chief. During such occasions, the song leader intrigues the audience by her spontaneity and creativity. It is not unusual to hear a song leader's "praise shouts" like: *Mevie ke?* (Whose child is this?) *Edo le kɔme kɔgba* (His appearance scattered the hill) or *Enya Kpɔkpɔ, Menya wawao* (Beauty is easy to admire but difficult to acquire).

Style and Aesthetic in *Zigi*

During performances members of the *Zigi* group dance in a procession to the stage in attire selected for the occasion. A processional song is selected from among many other songs by the song leader for the group to dance to. The performance sequence is artistically arranged through the spontaneity of the song leader. There are a series of songs selected for the introit to warm up the group and prepare the audience for the performance. The introit comprises songs of greetings such as *Miawoe zɔ* (You are welcome), *Mele agoo dom* (I am knocking), or *Amanie* (Your mission). Normally these warm up songs do not have dance with them. The song leader at this moment dances to the stage and performs a dramatic greeting gesture by kneeling down and extending her arms to the audience. The most important musical instrument in addition to the drums is the *akaye* or rattle. The rattle plays an important role during the warm up songs. At the end of every song, the song leader signals the group by prolonging the shaking of the rattle on the last note.

Song leaders adopt several musical idioms in *Zigi* such as symbolism in song texts, sounds, and rhythm patterns of the different drums. The song leader explores a variety of ways to depict the song texts and the dance patterns adequately and vividly to the audience. Indeed, there are different dance styles to depict the meaning of the words in a particular song and they all testify to the persuasive power of rhythm in *Zigi* ensembles. A

vivid example, is the “*E mele nua wa*” section of Yao Kowa that changes the style of the dance through the creativity, imagination and artistry of the song leader.

The *Zigi* dance is a very graceful dance that looks so simple to the audience, yet the dance steps are quite intricate and spectacular. Much flexibility is required in body movement as well as footwork. Even though there is a particular *Zigi* dance step, the texts of the songs themselves create variety in the dancing. The text of every song determines the style of the dance explored. For example, in a dance with the theme being an orphan’s life, the song leader puts her hand across her chest showing the sad state of an orphan left at the mercy of the cold.

The symbol of death and deprivation is depicted by placing the hands on the head as a sign of bereavement. Whoever loses a loved one shows grief by placing the hands on the head and wails. Placing the hands on the head, the dancer takes slow steps forward and backward. The dance depicting death does not only move an audience to shed tears but leaves them meditating on death which is an inevitable end. A repertoire with a love theme is danced in pairs, whereby a male dances towards a female. In the course of the dance, the male puts his hands out to the female and brings the hands back to his chest, meaning he loves her. If the female responds favorably, she dances towards him with a broad smile. The dance gets to a dramatic climax when the male holds the waist of the female and they both dance together and retreat to the rear of the dance arena. On the other hand, if the male walks toward the female and extends his hands to her and she rejects the offer, she ridicules him and brushes his hands off and shakes her head in disgust. The male

loses enthusiasm in the course of the dance and moves backwards with disappointment. In addition, the change in the sound of the drums aids in creating expressive variety in each dance.

Expressive In-Put of Song Leaders

The role of a *Zigi* song leader is demanding. She is the soloist and the over-all leader. As a result, she must excel in most of the activities that go to make an excellent *Zigi* ensemble. She must possess certain qualities that differentiate her from the other female members. It is essential that the song leader be a good singer, meaning, she must possess a pleasant sonorous voice that projects to the dance arenas that are usually outdoors. More challenging, a song leader must be able to extemporize or improvise, i.e., she ought to perform spontaneously without the aid of a manuscript or sketch. For example, indigenous *Zigi* songs are repetitive, thus a song leader will never sing a repetition the same way, but will always improvise the repeat. Most often “doh tih lah” becomes a “doh toh lah,” i.e., the lowered 7th. In addition, a *Zigi* song leader must be able to add vowels at song beginnings and endings to embellish the song texts. The most common vowel that is added is “e” to exaggerate and emphasize the song text.

The normal song text for the music below:

EWE	ENGLISH
<i>Tɔ̃ Tɔ̃ ŋu, nɔ̃ ŋu, vi nɔ̃ do loo</i> <i>ŋdi koko nono dzroam</i>	A child clings to father and mother

<p><i>fie bladzo meme dzroam.</i></p>	<p>I also crave for morning porridge I crave for roasted plantain in the evenings</p>
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But a song leader performs it thus:

E ɛ ɲu nɛ ɲu vi nɛ do loo
E ɲdi koko nono dzroam e
E fie bladzo meme dzroam e e..

ET NU, NO NU

Transcribed by:
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The musical score is written in 2/4 time. It consists of three systems of music, each with a Cantor part (treble clef) and a Chorus part (treble clef).
 System 1: Cantor part has lyrics "E - to nu no nu vi no do loo e - to nu no nu vi noa do loo e".
 System 2: Cantor part has lyrics "nu di ko-ko no - no dzro yee e - fie bla dzo me me dzro yee a - mea de me lia".
 System 3: Cantor part has lyrics "wo nam o de e - to nu no nu vi noa doo." and Chorus part has lyrics "E - to nu no nu vi noa do".
 The page number 28 is located at the bottom left of the score.

28
loo e - to nu no nu vi noa do loo

33
c nu di ko-ko no no dzro yee fic bla-dzo me me dzro yee a

42
mea de me lia wo nam o de e - to nu no nu vi noa doo.

The above *Zigi* song is a lament of an orphan. It teaches the community to love and appreciate the efforts of parents and at the same time educates the community on the plight of orphans. The summary of the song is that a child lives through the support of his parents. “The longing for ‘morning porridge’ and the desire for roasted plantain in the evening”, are cultural connotations. Porridge prepared with maize flour or dough is a Ghanaian delicacy during breakfast, and during story-telling sessions, at night, plantain, yam or groundnuts are roasted as snacks. Imagine how an orphan would long to be part of this. A *Zigi* song leader is challenged to decorate the text and add a variety of expressions to the dancing to impress the audience. It implies that she must excel in dancing in order to entertain and sustain the interest of an audience during a performance.

Furthermore, a song leader must have a strong memory in order to recall a wide range of repertoire and be able to select appropriate songs to suit every occasion and performance. She also must express emotions of love, hate, joy or sorrow through dramatic facial

expressions (Nketia, 1974). She must be a composer and a teacher, because she is required to fit new words to old musical tunes and themes (Nikiprowetzky, 1973). For example, in a *Zigi* performance, the song leader must be able to use texts that fit the occasion for which the group is invited and fit these texts to old tunes in order to get a variety of songs. Especially, she is challenged to compose the appellation of the royalty and important dignitaries.

Another aesthetic in-put of a lead singer is efficiency in co-ordination. She must combine singing, dancing, and the playing of the rattle during a performance. In performing these roles, the song leader achieves a remarkable standard of virtuosity. It is therefore a delight to watch Mawuse, the song leader of *Ziavi Zigi* ensemble combine her numerous roles. Her facial expression changes according to the song text and her broad smile whets the musical appetite of the audience whenever the *Ziavi Zigi* group performs. The success of every *Zigi* ensemble depends on the aesthetic and artistic in-put of the song leader.

Acquisition of Knowledge and Leadership

Indigenous instruction is not generally organized on a formal institutional basis; for it is believed that natural endowment and a person's ability to develop on her own are essentially what are needed. No formal training in singing, dancing and playing of an instrument is required before joining an indigenous ensemble. This is typical of most musical groups of Ghana and indeed throughout Africa. In the evening when a *Zigi* performance is taking place, children watch and try to imitate their parents or brothers and

sisters who belong to the *Zigi* ensemble before they finally get themselves actively involved.

It is also true that to a great extent oral tradition serves as a reliable source through which musical knowledge is transmitted. In *Ziavi*, parents gather their children by the fireside and tell them stories. Such stories are always interspersed with folk songs including those of *Zigi* that children learn to sing. Therefore, those who grow up and join the *Zigi* ensemble already have some knowledge of the local ensembles.

In the local ensembles there are talented performers among drummers, singers and dancers. They are in the forefront and spearhead the smooth running of affairs as well as being responsible for excellent performances. During every performance, the song leader in a *Zigi* ensemble takes up her position in front or in the inner circle to lead the singing and dancing. When she is absent, the dancers notice it and complain and the ensemble suffers the loss of *gbenyo* (good voice).

The important question is: How are song leaders chosen? My findings reveal that no one chooses them; they are just there. Once a song leader volunteers for the first time, she automatically becomes a song leader. These song leaders are good dancers as well so they combine everything. They never skip any practice and they participate in every event in which the group is involved. The more they lead, the more their improvisatory skills improve and the more confident they become.

Acculturation and Enculturation

Indigenous African music is making a great impact on religious music. In the Catholic Church for example, many Masses are composed using *Zigi* rhythms with the music marked “Tempo de *Zigi*”. The persuasive rhythm of *Zigi* is transformed in Christian worship so that many Christians prefer the change from the use of the Gregorian chant to music based on their own cultural identity. *Zigi* is kept alive in the religious set ups of the Ewes in the Northern part of the Volta Region. Dances are choreographed to suit worship and uplift the heart in prayer. The difference is that song leaders do not perform the magnificent artistic roles in church due to the solemnity of the Mass. The church cantors perform more gracefully and do not improvise to the same extent.

The Challenge for Teaching

Currently, African countries, including Ghana are making tremendous efforts to design African indigenous music curricula. This curricular planning could include indigenous performing groups such as the *Zigi* for the holistic approach that characterizes their performances. Formal music education could reflect on issues such as performance, cultural identity, and community values. Schools could be enriched by inviting song leaders to share the artistic-aesthetic values that they portray in their performances that integrate composition, performance and listening.

References

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Mary Dzansi-McPalm is a lecturer at the University of Education, Winneba (UEW) in Ghana. E-mail: dzapalm@yahoo.co.uk