

FROM TRADITION TO INNOVATION: THE INCORPORATION OF TRUMPET IN BŌBŌBŌ (BORBORBOR) DANCE OF THE EWE PEOPLE

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Abstract

This article explores the emergence and evolution of bŌbŌbŌ (borborbor),¹ a distinctive Ewe dance that originated in mid 20th century British Togoland (now the Volta Region of Ghana) and French Togoland (now Togo). Initially rooted in traditional kokomba dance forms, particularly tuidzi and akpese, bŌbŌbŌ rapidly integrated European military brass band instruments, notably the bugle and later the trumpet, influenced by the burgeoning popular music genre of highlife in Ghana. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in Ewe communities in Ghana, this paper examines the transformative role of the trumpet within bŌbŌbŌ ensembles. It investigates how the trumpet's adoption led to its unique interpretative functions, including improvised obbligatos, sampling of familiar tunes, and enhancing the rhythmic and percussive dynamics of performances. Ultimately, this study illuminates the process of indigenization of the trumpet within bŌbŌbŌ, highlighting themes of adoption, assimilation, and reinterpretation in the evolution of this vibrant musical tradition.

Keywords

Borborbor, Ewe Dance, Trumpet Integration, Highlife Influence, Evolution of Performance, Musical Indigenization

Introduction

Among the diverse traditions of Ewe culture in West Africa, funerals emerge as pivotal communal gatherings, resonating with profound significance. Since the 1960s, the bŌbŌbŌ style has risen to prominence as the apex of funeral celebrations among many Ewe communities, unfolding amidst the solemnity of the funeral service and burial rites. Fueled by the inherent spirit of competition that permeates Ewe traditions, these performances often evolve into spirited contests when multiple bŌbŌbŌ groups gather for the event. With each ensemble vying to surpass the other, the atmosphere crackles with the pulsating energy of original compositions, rhythmic drumbeats, entrancing choreography, and the iconic strains of bugle-led or trumpet-led interludes. One such unforgettable spectacle unfolded during a funeral gathering in December 2020 at Dzolokpuita, nestled within the verdant landscapes of the Ho West District in the Volta Region of Ghana. The convergence of two bŌbŌbŌ groups, the Saviefe Agorkpo Youth Band and the Dodome Avexa Unity Borborbor, ignited a fervent outpouring of music and dance that held mourners in its thrall for over three exhilarating hours. Amidst the pulsating rhythms and spirited movements, it was the resounding clarion calls of the bugle from the former group and the triumphant trumpet melodies from the latter that elevated the performance to its zenith. As recounted by Senyo Dzoagbe, an elder of Dzolokpuita and enthusiast of bŌbŌbŌ, in a personal exchange, these brass instruments emerged as not mere embellishments, but they stood as essential foundations of the bŌbŌbŌ dance signifying its remarkable success and enduring legacy (pers. comm. 2020, December 5). The objective of this paper is to address the following inquiries:

¹Orthography: In Ewe language, the letter “ɔ,” pronounced as “au” as in augment, is alternatively represented as “or” as seen in the term “borborbor” and certain names like “Kɔdzo” and “Nuatrɔ.” For consistency, we employ “ɔ” for the dance name but maintain “or” for quoted and referenced instances. Additional Ewe letters utilized in this study include “ɔ,” pronounced as “d” as in deer, “ɛ,” pronounced as “eh” as in err, and “ŋ,” pronounced as “ng” as in song.

How did the introduction of European military brass band instruments into the *bɔbɔbɔ* dance impact traditional Ewe cultural practices and perceptions? What were the socio-cultural implications of the rapid adoption and incorporation of Western musical instruments like the bugle and trumpet into the traditional Ewe dance ceremonies? How does the process of indigenization of the trumpet within the context of *bɔbɔbɔ* performances reflect broader dynamics of cultural assimilation and reinterpretation in Africa?

This research embarks on an ethnographical exploration delving into the intricate processes of cultural interchange and musical transformation surrounding the incorporation of the trumpet within the dynamic interplay between Ewe musicians and norms of performance culture. Central to this investigation is an examination of the multifaceted roles assumed by the trumpet within the context of *bɔbɔbɔ*, probing the origins, timing, and modalities through which this Western brass instrument integrated into the traditional West African ensemble. To illuminate these dynamics, the study engages with diverse sources of information, including field interviews conducted with trumpeters, members of *bɔbɔbɔ* groups, and enthusiasts of the dance. Furthermore, the research draws upon a comprehensive analysis of live performances, archival materials sourced from digital audio libraries of various Ghanaian radio stations, as well as content from social media platforms, notably Facebook and YouTube videos, to provide a nuanced and detailed understanding of the evolutionary trajectory of the trumpet within the realm of *bɔbɔbɔ*.

Scholarly publications on Ewe music have generally examined various aspects of *bɔbɔbɔ*, namely, its historical background (Agordoh 1994), organization of the dance ceremony (Younge, 2011), performance process (Agawu, 1995, 2016 & Fiagbedzi, 2019), costume and other visual forms (Younge, 2011), and songs repertoire (Gbagbo, 2021). Other studies that have discussed *bɔbɔbɔ* acknowledge the impact of the trumpet on the performance culture but lean more on the genre's style and its socio-cultural relevance to the Ewe people. To fill that gap of musical syncretism in the Ewe music literature, this essay takes a detour and focusses on the evolution of the trumpet in *bɔbɔbɔ* and its performative roles particularly in the first two decades of the 21st century.

To understand how the Ewes assimilated the trumpet into one of their most influential music genres, it is necessary to examine cross-cultural exchange as it relates to expressive cultures. The transnational flow of information, commodities, capital, and people between nations accelerated concepts of cultural contact, social transformation, and musical evolution (Slobin 2003). This exchange facilitated a dynamic interplay between cultures, contributing to the diversification and adaptation of musical traditions worldwide. Slobin's observation underscores the profound impact of globalization on the interconnectedness of musical cultures and societal change. Across the span of time, new avenues have opened for the enhancement and evolution of local cultures, paving the way for the emergence of novel forms of musical culture (Baltzis, 2005). In colonized regions, the influence of Western religion, culture, and politics has shaped the assimilation of Western musical practices, resulting in either their complete acceptance or the incorporation of suitable elements, thereby nurturing intercultural musical behaviors over time. Exploring the preservation of identity within intercultural musical practices across diverse environments, Stoke (2004) proposed that the interplay of visual and aural elements facilitates the rapid conveyance of intricate social and physical dynamics to listeners, observers, and dancers. These practices function as immediate conduits, vividly portraying the distinctiveness of profound social cohesion and expressive physicality.

Musical behaviors exhibit both convergent and divergent characteristics in their structures, roles, and cultural interpretations across different human populations. These variations reflect the interactive synergy between shared musical elements and unique cultural contexts. When delving into the study of expressive cultures born from cross-cultural encounters, it becomes imperative to navigate through a complex lexicon rife with specialized terminology, including terms like "appropriation" (Middlestone, 2002), "assimilation" (Herskovits, 1958), "reinterpretation" (Apter, 1991), and "diffusion" (Kaemmer, 1993), all of which address the subject of cultural evolution in time and space. These interconnected concepts delineate the various processes of contact and interaction between diverse cultures, elucidating how elements from one culture are adopted by another. Within the realm of music, this lively engagement of contact and change can exert profound influences on the organization, stylistic nuances, and utilization of instruments across various levels of musical interaction. As such, understanding these concepts enriches our comprehension of how musical traditions evolve and intersect within multicultural contexts, shaping the vibrant elements of global musical expression.

Ethnomusicologist Kazadi wa Mukuna, in his seminal work of 1990, advocated for a deliberate approach to cultural interactions within the realm of world music, emphasizing the importance of collaborative efforts between different cultures to cultivate hybrid musical expressions that authentically reflect their diverse cultural heritage. To grasp this cultural production, wa Mukuna suggested identifying shared geographical spaces where cultural elements, such as musical instruments or practices, are integrated into the community's cultural fabric. Furthermore, he proposed that for a musical instrument to be fully integrated into a new geographical and socio-cultural context, it must meet three criteria: compatibility with existing musical practices, accessibility or availability of raw materials for replication, and a reinterpretation or reassignment of its role by new users to complete the assimilation process (wa Mukuna, 2010). Does the trumpet meet these three essential conditions of assimilation? To what extent has *bɔbɔbɔ* performance culture embraced the trumpet? Why has the trumpet become

a preferential choice for bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀ patrons in the 21st century? Further examination is required to determine whether this instrument aligns with the criteria for assimilation and how extensively it has been integrated into the fabric of bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀ performances. Understanding the factors driving its appeal among bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀ enthusiasts will also provide valuable insights into its role within the Ewe culture.

Interactions with bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀ practitioners reveal a distinct preference for the trumpet over other wind instruments, driven by both practicality and musical considerations. This choice is steeped in historical context, referencing syncretic musical styles that originated in Ghana during the first half of the 21st century, blending European and local musical elements, including instruments. Additionally, the accessibility and affordability of the trumpet have been pivotal factors in its adoption by bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀ groups, particularly as brass bands became more prevalent in Ewe communities and churches, notably during the later part of 21st century. Moreover, the trumpet's utilization in bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀ involves the rendition of fanfare-like, high-pitched melodic patterns, serving as musical interludes reminiscent of earlier Ghanaian popular music styles. Consequently, the trumpet's integral role in the bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀ dance aligns closely with the assimilation model proposed by wa Mukuna.

The exchange, borrowing, or adoption of musical instruments has been a longstanding practice among world cultures, facilitated by factors such as migration, trade, religion, and tourism (Sachs, 2006). For instance, numerous Western cultures have embraced the jembe drum of West Africa through various forms of acculturation (Charry, 2000 & Polak, 2000). However, colonialism and Christianity played pivotal roles in introducing Western wind instruments to the West African subregion, notably Ghana, during the nineteenth century (Agordoh, 2011). Despite the widespread accommodation and domestication of musical instruments across different cultures, the extent of adoption, assimilation, and reinterpretation varies greatly within each geo-cultural context. Musical genre, social structure, and economic factors have each exerted significant influence on the process of domestication in respective cultures. To gain deeper insights into how bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀ incorporated the trumpet, it is valuable to explore its functions during the colonial era in Ghana.

Unveiling The Bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀ Style: Exploring the Brass Band Tradition and The Evolution of Ghanaian Popular Music²

Brass band music stands as a significant musical legacy of the colonial era, notably in Ghana, where it was organized into three primary categories as documented by Flolu & Amuah, (2003). These included government-established bands such as military and police bands, missions and church-established brass bands, and community-established brass bands. The colonial government-established bands fulfilled military-related duties in garrisons and colonial administrative centers, while church-established bands enriched Christian church events with hymns and other forms of musical accompaniment. Meanwhile, indigenous communities embraced brass instruments, forming their own bands to provide music for various occasions, including festivals and lifecycle events like child-naming ceremonies, marriages, and funerals (Dordzro, 2020). Initially, these bands mirrored Western-style ensembles in both structure and repertoire, encompassing brass and concert bands, marching bands, bugle bands, and drum and fife bands, with their sizes and instrumentation dictated by instrument availability. Their repertoire mainly consisted of military marches and occasional ballroom styles like waltzes, quicksteps, polkas, and ballads (Collins, 2018).

The significance of military influence on music during the colonial period cannot be overstated, as Kaemmer (1993) noted in *Music in Human Life: Anthropological Perspectives on Music* (pp. 196–197), highlighting how music was employed to showcase the grandeur and might of European armies during territorial expansion. Despite the deliberate musical agenda of colonial powers, native musicians endeavored to domesticate the repertoire and style of colonial bands. Drawing influence from the brass orchestras of West Indian regiments stationed in the Gold Coast during the late 19th to early 20th centuries, Ghanaian brass bands commenced integrating popular local melodies into their repertoire, signaling a progressive transition towards indigenous musical expression. This process of domestication gained momentum in the mid 20th century, a critical period politically as Ghanaians pursued independence from British colonial rule.

During the late 1800s to early 1900s, a prominent music genre called highlife emerged in Cape Coast, Accra, and Sekondi, blending Ghanaian traditional melodic and rhythmic patterns with Western instruments, notably horns and guitars. This fusion of musical elements encompasses polyrhythmic patterns, audience participation, social commentary, dance-focused performances, utilization of local scales, and the incorporation of indigenous Ghanaian languages (Collins, 2018, p. 77). John Collins, who researched and wrote extensively on West African popular music genres, traced the genesis of highlife to the elite dance orchestras, regimental brass bands, and maritime guitar and accordion groups of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (2016 and 2018). Collins highlighted how rural Ghanaians formed musical ensembles to partake in the burgeoning urban popular music scene, leading to the proliferation of highlife across the nation, particularly through earlier iterations such as *adaha* and later *konkoma* or *konkomba*, which originated in southern Ghana and spread rapidly throughout the country

² In this paper, “brass band” is used generically to describe all types of wind ensembles featuring Western wind instruments.

until the 1950s. Smith (1962) characterized *adaha* and *konkoma* as embodying a “compromise between African Traditional forms and Western music” (p. 11). Moreover, Ewe communities within West Africa crafted their unique interpretations of the *konkoma* style, labeling it with diverse names such as *sanikoko*, *tuidzi*, *akpese*, and *dzole* (*jolle/jolly*). In his memoirs, Walter Blege (2019), a Ghanaian composer renowned for his contributions to Ewe art music, asserted:

“When the people in the area [of Blege’s hometown, Kpedze] saw that the white man’s ballroom dance was flourishing in the towns, they created their own band of popular dance called *jolle* to entertain themselves in the villages. The *jolle* dance is a flute and vocal band ... the predecessor to the *konkoma* and highlife dances of recent times and was very popular among the youth.” (p. 6)

Thus, Blege’s experience succinctly illustrates how rural inhabitants in Ewe communities reimaged their rendition of urban popular music styles during the initial decades of the twentieth century, culminating in the emergence of the distinctive *bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀* genre.

During the early 1950s, Francis Kɔ̀dzo Nuatrɔ, a retired police sergeant deeply involved with the Kpando Konkoma group, established the *bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀* dance ensemble in the northern Ewe town of Kpando (Agawu, 1995 & Younge, 2011). In a short span, the *bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀* style spread to neighboring Ewe communities, extending from Hohoe in the north of the Volta Region to Ho near the central area and even reaching into neighboring Togo. Many communities formed their own *bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀* bands with the aim of fostering community cohesion and development, while also providing entertainment and engaging the youth in their hometowns. The band names, such as Agbeyeye (new life), Afenenyɔ (for a better home), Dunenyɔ (for a better town), Lɔ̀lɔ̀nyɔ (love is good), Nɔ̀visi (fraternity), Mɔ̀wɔ̀nenyɔ (do it well), and Ɖekawɔ̀wɔ̀ (unity), reflect the leadership’s aspirations and motivations. Retaining essential elements of singing, drumming, and dancing from its *konkoma* predecessors, the *bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀* style has undergone evolution in its performance techniques, solidifying its status as perhaps the most prevalent dance ensemble in contemporary Ghana. Presently, both Ewe and non-Ewe communities alike consider their social gatherings incomplete without the presence of *bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀*.

Nuatrɔ’s band initially performed a form of snare marching drumming style, complemented by musical instruments including *pati* (tom-tom), *kresɔ̀wa* (castanet), *akaye* (rattles), *tamalin* (small frame drums), *asivui* (hand drum), *vugã* (master drum) and *biglo* (bugle) (Burns, 2016). Groups progressively added *ɔ̀ndɔ̀* (hourglass drum), *atoke* (slit bell) and *tigo* (double clapperless bell) to the list of instruments. A prevalent trend among *bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀* groups in the 21st century is the adoption of a set comprising three or more master drums instead of just one. The differences in size of these drums create pitch variations and maximize the intensity of sound.³ To produce the desired *vugbewo* or drum tone variations on the master drum, drummers position their drums between their thighs and employ both hands to play, occasionally lifting the drums to generate low pitches. This enduring drumming method was inherited from the socio-recreational *akpese* dance and integrated into *bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀* presentations by early groups within and beyond Kpando (Fiagbedzi, 2019, p. 99).

The bugle played a distinctive role in early *bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀* ensembles, alongside the array of drums and bells. Its unique contribution added depth to the ensemble’s sonic landscape. When musicians included a Western musical instrument in the neo-traditional dance ensemble, they signaled the introduction of urban styles to rural areas. The incorporation of the horn marked a significant stride in the process of indigenizing a “foreign” instrument and integrating it into the ensemble of traditional instruments. This step also conferred upon the horn a vital role within the traditional musical framework.

The Process of Adoption and Assimilation of The Trumpet

In the acculturative process of a musical tradition, socio-cultural adaptations are significantly influenced by migration patterns, political affiliations, and religious considerations. Since at least the 1700s, ethnic groups in Ghana such as the Akan, Ga, Adangbe, Ewe, and Dagomba have engaged in the borrowing and exchange of each other’s musical traditions, particularly those associated with rituals and religious ceremonies (Nketia, 1962, p. 13). This cultural exchange has facilitated the enrichment and diversification of musical practices within these communities. Such interactions have played a crucial role in shaping the musical traditions of Ghana over the centuries. For instance, various ethnic groups in Ghana utilize *atumpan* drums and perform *asafo* or warrior songs from the Akan tradition during festivals, ceremonies marking the installment of a new chief, or funerals honoring deceased elders. Likewise, the *donno* or hourglass drum, prominent among the northern Dagbamba, Kokomba, and Gonja ethnic groups, is an integral component of the *adowa* and *kete* dances of the Akan people. This mutual exchange of musical styles, ensembles, songs, and instruments fosters healthy interethnic coexistence and advances harmony, progress, and development within Ghanaian society. Consequently, the adoption and integration of the

³ See Borborbor Class. 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WIPYg5YCd8Y>

bugle initially, and subsequently the trumpet, despite their non-traditional and non-Ghanaian origins, align with this pattern of cultural exchange and adaptation.

As Jari Villanueva (2019) delineates, the bugle has historically functioned as a signaling instrument within military establishments, paramilitary Boy Scout troops, and fraternal organizations in Western cultures. During the 19th century, buglers were responsible for sounding dinner calls on passenger ships, announcing sporting events, and directing prison formations (Sperber, 1951). In the 20th century, the British colonial administration in the former Gold Coast colony utilized valveless bugles, trumpets, or cornets to announce daily routines and calls to duty in garrisons (Rumbolz, 2000). Soon after, the bugle became integrated into the *bɔbɔɔbɔ* dance, serving to signal the activities of both drummers and dancers while maintaining strict rhythmic and metrical patterns within musical performances. The bugle's sound conveys diverse narratives to dancers, drummers, and singers, prompting dancers to focus on their movements, drummers to engage in rhythmic exchanges, and singers to await cues for concluding each section with special melodies played by the bugler.

In the final decade of the 20th century, the utilization of bugles in *bɔbɔɔbɔ* dance experienced a notable decline, largely supplanted by the preference for valve trumpets. Three key factors contributed significantly to this shift. To start with, the proliferation of *bɔbɔɔbɔ* groups within the Ewe community rendered bugles increasingly scarce and challenging to acquire. Following that, *bɔbɔɔbɔ* music has increasingly become a fundamental component of congregational worship in the Evangelical Presbyterian and Roman Catholic Churches, both of which wield considerable influence within Ewe communities. Its incorporation serves to enrich worship experiences and foster communal bonds among parishioners. Ultimately, *bɔbɔɔbɔ* performers realized that the bugle's pitch limitations restricted their musical expression. In contrast, the trumpet provided the ability to play in multiple diatonic and chromatic keys effortlessly and precisely. Concurrently, churches, groups, and individuals acquired trumpets and other brass instruments from their Western counterparts, aiming to establish church and community-based brass bands across various communities. The combined factors of accessibility, flexibility, and versatility solidified the trumpet as the favored substitute for the bugle among *bɔbɔɔbɔ* groups.

Reinterpretation of Trumpet in The *Bɔbɔɔbɔ* Ensemble

The distinctive timbre and the hard-edged sound of the trumpet seems to be at odds with the light bell patterns and warm harmonic tone of the drums in the *bɔbɔɔbɔ* ensemble. The musicians prefer the lack of vibrato, sharp, punctuated, earsplitting sound in striking contrast to the round, mellow sound of a concert-style trumpet.⁴ Further exploration is warranted regarding the idiomatic and aesthetic contributions of the trumpet within the *bɔbɔɔbɔ* ensemble. These include performing improvised obbligatos during interludes, complementing the lead singer's role, reinforcing melodic and harmonic patterns, and enriching the rhythmic and tonal foundation of the instrumental section.

Playing Improvised Obbligatos

Crucially, performing improvised obbligatos has been a core responsibility of the trumpet in *bɔbɔɔbɔ* performances since its rise in popularity. Typically, the trumpet's distinctive section follows one or two sets of song medleys, each comprising at least three songs. The trumpet's sound serves to heighten dramatic tension, offer brief reprieves to singers, and prompt participants to focus on their dance movements. Victor Hlogbe, co-founder and lead-trumpeter of the Edzordzinam Fafali Borborbor group in the Abeka suburb of Accra, describes the initial trumpet announcement as "ha yruyu" or "song ululation" (pers. comm. 2022, February 7). He draws a parallel between the sharp, punctuated, and resonant trumpet sound and the high-pitched, joyous cries of the Ewe people, particularly women, during festive occasions.

Often, trumpet interludes adhere to a structural framework of *ha yruyu* (announcement), *atsyāwɔwɔ* (improvisation), and *hadodoɔa* (introduction of songs). However, players may introduce additional improvisational variations based on the performance context, individual competence, and preferences. For example, a skilled trumpeter might incorporate a variety of melodic or rhythmic motives from popular songs during the *atsyāwɔwɔ* section. Analyzing a trumpet solo from the Taviefe Borborbor Group, Agawu (2016) identifies elements such as fanfare obbligato with rising arpeggios, complementary but shorter falling triads, waiting patterns, motivic dialogue, and reiterated cadential gestures as the "essential ingredients" invoked by the trumpeter (259–260). The bugle solo in Example 1 simulates Agawu's framework.

⁴ See Newton Studio. 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=40FGt_q688o

♩ = 120-132

Part 1

Part 2a

Part 2b

Part 2c

Part 3

Fine, fine ba - by! You no go fine pass your mo - ther.

Example 1: Bugle obbligato performed by Saviefe Agorkpo Bòbòbò group. Transcription by Divine K. Gbagbo.

The bugle obbligato (Example 1), performed by the Saviefe Agorkpo Bòbòbò group during the funeral at Dzolokpuita in 2020, comprises five discernible analytical units: Part 1 (ha yruyu), Part 2a, 2b, and 2c (atsyāwōwō), and Part 3 (hadodoḍa). Part 1 (measures 1–6) commences with robust fanfare-like arpeggios on the second inversion of a B flat chord, ascending to and sustaining a high F before concluding with a glissando. The prolonged high F serves to command the attention of drummers and dancers, akin to how a bugle call alerts and signals military personnel and scouts. Upon the entrance of the horn, participants exuberantly ululate in anticipation, expressing their readiness for the ensuing lively section by chanting phrases such as “Èvu nedj, ekpē nedj” / “Let the drum sound, let the horn sound,” or “Èvu wo gbe, ekpē wo gbe” / “The sound of the drum, the sound of the horn.” Such expressions serve to herald the interlude while acknowledging the impact of the listed instruments on this special segment.

The atsyāwōwō component (measures 7–36) comprises three distinct sections of arpeggios that harmonize with each other. Like the opening segment, the motif in 2a (measures 7–13) initiates on the dominant of the B flat chord, featuring ascending and descending arpeggios. The bugle then repeats the introductory pattern, adding rhythmic variation to embellish the arpeggiated sequence and concluding this part at measure 13. Transitioning to the 2b section (measures 13–23), the bugler reinforces the previous phrase with another complementary set of arpeggios. Here, the instrument echoes the three-measure opening phrase from earlier segments to reaffirm the chosen patterns. In 2c (measures 23–36), the bugler introduces a novel syncopated rhythmic gesture, featuring a rising arpeggiated sequence of the tonic chord followed by a shortened repetition of the opening motif in

descending sequence (measures 35–36), culminating with another glissando. This variation in the melodic sequence adds rhythmic complexity to the development of the thematic motif.

Transitioning to the closing segment, Part 3 (measures 37–40), the bugler and participants perform in unison. The bugle player initiates this section with a musical phrase, which participants vocally express in pidgin English as “Fine, fine baby!” or “Beautiful baby.”⁵ Together, the bugler, lead drummers, dancers, and singers perform the final responsorial gesture, ‘You no go fine pass your mother’ or ‘Your beauty cannot surpass your mother’s.’ The bugler may prompt participants to emphatically repeat the concluding phrase two or three times, effectively bringing the interlude to a close. Thus, the bugle obbligato section commences with a solo fanfare-like gesture reminiscent of garrison bugle calls, supported by indigenous musical instruments, but concludes with a tutti responsorial gesture. While the sound of the bugle takes center stage at the outset, it gradually yields its prominence to the collective expression of all participants by the end. This performative process embodies the essence of African communality, cohesion, collaboration, and conformity, enacted through music.

During the 1970s, bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀ groups predominantly showcased the bugle in their performances. Example 1 illustrates how buglers adapted and reinterpreted certain original bugle call patterns for bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀ music. This instance underscores the constraints of the bugle, particularly its ability to only play arpeggiated patterns in a specific key. Consequently, bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀ groups introduced the trumpet to overcome this performance limitation.

Complementing The Lead Singer

The wind instrument in bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀ frequently complements the lead singer’s vocals. In recent times, groups have increasingly assigned the lead singer’s role to the trumpet due to its louder and more precise nature. Many participants express feeling more energized when the trumpeter briefly assumes the lead singer’s part. “The precision and skill with which the trumpeter delivers melodies are both invigorating and soothing,” Sally Owusu affirms in a personal conversation (pers. comm. 2023, July 1). This positive reception empowers trumpeters to select songs they know will meet participants’ high expectations. Skillfully and creatively playing further endears the trumpeter to the audience, prompting requests for more.

Performers may repeat popular songs multiple times or opt for a series of songs to introduce variety and augment the groove. To enhance this section, the trumpeter intermittently plays hit songs by Ghanaian popular music and gospel artists to smoothly transition between bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀ songs. Typically, the horn player collaborates closely with the lead singer to choose well-known songs that lead to a satisfying responsorial section.

Mensah Viglo, a trumpeter of the Dodome Avexa Borborbor group, emphasized that a thorough understanding of the group’s song texts “hagbewo” and drum texts “vugbewo” is essential for leading, as participants may perceive any unfamiliar piece at this stage as a disappointment (pers. comm. 2021, December 1). Consequently, the player must be resourceful, proactive, and versatile to seize the moment, lead the singing, sustain participants’ interest, and drive the entire performance to a crescendo. The enthusiastic exclamation, “The drum [performance] has met our desired expectation!” (“Uua de me na mí alegbegbe!”) from participants at the end of a lively section signifies their approval of the trumpeter’s contributions and reflects an invigorating blend of sound and movement, accompanied by spontaneous feedback from the audience.

Melodic and Harmonic Enrichment

In contemporary times, a skilled trumpeter not only introduces a song but also takes a further step by performing the “response” alongside the singers. This gesture elevates the trumpeter’s role to a more sophisticated level. Trumpeter Simon Felitse characterizes this accompaniment as a “seeing-off” (“dɔ̀dɔ̀ dɔ̀”) gesture, marking a departure from the traditional assigned role (pers. comm. 2022, January 2). Felitse’s approach pushes boundaries beyond mere song intonation, establishing a more dependable and supportive presence for the singers. The creative prowess of highly esteemed trumpeters easily enhances both the melody and harmony of bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀ singers. Furthermore, while the lead singer may become submerged in a chorus of responsive singers, the distinct sound of the trumpet rises above, adding an extra dimension to the choral “response.” Occasionally, the ensemble may include a second trumpet, with players dividing to support the first and second vocal parts (Example 2). Together, trumpeters and singers relish these call-and-response moments.

⁵ This expression highlights the special bond between a mother and her child. It implies that a child’s physical attractiveness and moral virtues are often attributed to the influence and nurturing of the mother. Essentially, stating that a child cannot surpass its mother in being “fine” acknowledges the inherent bond between a mother and her child, emphasizing the transmission of qualities from parent to offspring.

$\text{♩} = 120-132$
Part 1: *End of obbligato* Part 2a: *Solo*

Trumpet 1
Trumpet 2
Kretsiwa (castanet)

7 Part 2b: *Response* | 2. Part 3: *Chorus*

7 wɔs loo!) A - wɔs A - wɔs. Xe yi xia de, Ma-wu ga-le na-ne wɔ ge;

16 Ga - fo - foa ɔɔ, A - wɔs. A - wɔs.

Example 2: Melodic and harmonic reinforcement of two trumpets in Ho Kpodzi Evangelical Presbyterian Church Students Union (EPSU) Bɔbɔbɔ dance. Transcription by Divine K. Gbagbo.

Example 2, a transcription of the melodic and harmonic support provided by two trumpets during a performance of “Mawu gale nane wɔ ge” or “God is about to do something again,” captures a bɔbɔbɔ performance from the 2021 New Year's Eve celebration by Ho Kpodzi Evangelical Presbyterian Church Students Union (EPSU). Without a score, trumpeters Simon Felitse and Kenneth Azanu engage in dual improvisation to complement each other, with Felitse leading and Azanu supporting. Following 12 measures of obbligato improvisation, the final section of the obbligato gesture (measures 1–4) also serves as a transitional passage to the vocal section. In measures 1 and 3, the trumpeters repeat the same rhythmic pattern but alternate motives in measures 2 and 4, creating rhythmic and harmonic variation, highlighting unity in diversity in bɔbɔbɔ performance.

Felitse, as the lead trumpeter, introduces a transitory three-tone scalic pattern in measure 5 to transition into the vocal section. His call (measures 6–7), “Awɛ loo!” (“God will surely do it!”), elicits the singers’ response, “Awɛ!” (“God will do it!”) in measures 8–9. The performers passionately repeat this call-and-response (measures 6–9) in anticipation of the chorus. Together, the trumpeters support the singers in parallel thirds during the chorus: “It is time and God will do something” (“Yeyiyia de, Mawu gale nane wɔ ge”). “The hour has come; God will do it” (“Gafofoa ɔɔ; awɛ”).

The chorus not only contrasts with the preceding call-and-response section but also energizes the performance, heightening participants' sense of collectivism.

In addition to singing in unison, octaves, and occasional triadic harmony, dyadic singing is another prominent harmonic feature in bɔbɔbɔ. Lead and supporting trumpeters, well-versed in the repertoire, may

simultaneously co-lead the singing if they have played together and are familiar with the material.⁶ Churches with brass bands typically have competent trumpeters accustomed to playing together. Furthermore, popular community-based bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀ groups, such as the Edzordzinam Fafali Borborbor group in Abeka Lapaz, Accra, and the Unity Borborbor group in Dodome Avexa, replicate the two-trumpet feature in their performances. Encouraging competitiveness to enhance performance motivates trumpeters to collaborate with other performers while creatively fulfilling their roles.

Amplifying The Rhythmic and Timbral Foundation of Bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀

The rhythmic and tonal texture created by the drums and vocals of the bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀ dance is undeniably rich, but the trumpet elevates it to even greater heights. Beyond its discussed melodic and harmonic roles, the trumpet also bolsters the rhythmic and tonal elements of the instrumental section. Guided by the master drummer, who leads and invokes various modes of drumming, the performance predominantly revolves around the three drumming modes identified by Kwabena Nketia in Akan drumming: speech mode, signal mode, and dance mode (Nketia, 1963). As Agawu further elucidates, “The speech mode is affiliated with rhythms of speech, the signal mode with stylized speech, and the dance mode with rhythms of the body” (2016, p. 165).

Drummers engage the speech mode when they mimic the duration and pitch elements of spoken speech, which are familiar to the community. Similarly, drumming in the signal mode entails playing coded sound patterns on a drum to convey essential information to a group or community. And utilizing both basic and complex rhythmic patterns on drums to lead a group of dancers initiates the dance mode. All three drumming modes play significant roles in any dance event, guiding the performance’s direction and instructing participants accordingly.

The dance mode, paramount during the bɔ̀bɔ̀bɔ̀ dance, requires drums to provide rhythmic support within a familiar metrical framework, setting an easy pace for dancers. Supporting drums and bells maintain fixed, interlocking rhythmic patterns, while the master drum intermittently introduces improvisatory patterns to maintain variation and invigorate the dance. Even as the trumpet embarks on its obbligato interlude, drumming remains rooted in the dance mode. Periodically, with support from the trumpet, the master drum may transition to either the speech or signal mode, prompting participants to voice specific speech or signal motifs in unison.

The musical score is written in 2/4 time with a tempo of 120-132. It features three staves: Bugle/Trumpet, Uugã, and Kretsiwa (castanet). The lyrics are: "Nye dzi lo, nye kpe Nye fe dzi lo, nye fe". The score includes three motifs: Motif 1, Motif 2, and Motif 3. The Kretsiwa part includes a 'kpe!' marking. The score is divided into two systems, with the second system starting at measure 9.

⁶See Bright Delali. 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRMXuMh9KyY&t=49s>

Example 3: Rhythmic and timbral reinforcement of trumpet and master drum in Edzordzinam Fafali Borborbor group performance. Transcription by Divine K. Gbagbo.

Example 3, taken from a performance by the Edzordzinam Fafali Borborbor group, showcases four succinct rhythmic motifs executed by the trumpet during the interlude. Both the trumpet and the master drum maintain identical rhythmic patterns to underscore emphasis.

During the dance mode, the trumpeter introduces Motif 1, followed by the master drummer joining in on the second repetition. Subsequently, the performers seamlessly transition to the speech mode with Motif 2 coinciding with the vocal entrance. The entire ensemble then vocalizes the instrumental motif in a rhetorical manner, articulating, “Nye dzi ‘lo nye kpè? Nye fe dzi ‘lo nye fe kpè?” (“My heart or my buttocks? My heart or my buttocks?”), while dancers simultaneously gesture toward their chest and backside to signify their “dzi” (heart) and “kpè” (buttocks).⁷ The text, when reinforced instrumentally, wields considerable influence in addressing participants’ cathartic requirements.

Following the intense and communal phase in the speech mode, the trumpet and master drum transition back to the dance mode, introducing Motif 3 and Motif 4 respectively, while dancers focus on executing intricate movements. This progression is notable for its elegant layering of single-double-multiple textures, showcasing a gradual shift in performance dynamics from individualism (trumpet alone) to collaboration (trumpet and master drum) to collectivism (trumpet, master drum, voice, and dance gestures). Thus, the trumpeter plays a pivotal role in initiating and orchestrating this harmoniously diverse performance model.

In addition to interludes, horns and drums collaborate to deliver rhythmic finales. Bòbòbò groups may select specific well-known songs, such as “Dayi kple Amu mekea dji o” (“River Dayi pales in comparison to River Amu”) or “Kalè menò afe tsi ade o” (“One cannot accrue experiences of bravery by remaining at home in comfort”), to signal the conclusion of a performance. However, regardless of whether a performance ends with a popular signaling song, the master drummer possesses distinct motifs in the drumming repertoire to formally conclude the dance. In practice, drum motifs can effectively and abruptly bring closure to a performance compared to signaling songs. If the dance completes its full cycle, drum motifs take precedence over signaling songs. Whenever the master drum invokes an ending signal mode, the performers must cease the performance. The trumpet can contribute by adding a timbral layer to the final signal mode (see Example 4). The wind instrument’s energy enhances the concluding drum signal, instilling a sense of urgency and signaling to participants and the audience that the performance is ending.

Example 4: Trumpet-led and master drum-led ending rhythmic motifs in Dodome Avexa Unity Borborbor dance performance. Transcription by Divine K. Gbagbo.

⁷ In this performance, the vocal phrase “Nye dzi ‘lo nye kpè?” serves as a metaphorical expression, symbolizing fleeting sensual pleasure represented by “dzi” or “heart,” and genuine, enduring love represented by “kpè” or “buttocks.” Consequently, the question posed to a potential lover prompts the suitor to choose between a casual and a committed relationship, as one cannot simultaneously pursue both paths.

In a *bɔbɔɔbɔ* performed by Dodome Avexa Unity Borborbor, the musicians chose from two ending motifs, one ending on a weak beat and the other on a strong beat (Example 4). The master drummer and trumpeter have the prerogative to select either that better suits the final song of the dance. The supporting drums may also diverge from their rhythmic patterns to join in the ending motifs in a unified climax, to bring finality to the performance. Lead drummers and other instrumentalists possess the creative freedom to blur the lines between the three “drumming” modes, adding an element of surprise for both performers and the audience. In instances where trumpeters are granted the opportunity to lead or collaborate with the master drummer, they must showcase their ingenuity, versatility, creativity, and leadership abilities to enrich the performance.

Conclusion

In the colonial context, the trumpet may carry connotations of Western dominance and Christian influence for many Africans, yet Ewe traditional musicians have reclaimed and integrated it into the *bɔbɔɔbɔ* dance, decolonizing its symbolism. Through domestication and assimilation, the trumpet now serves vital functions within the performance, beyond improvising obbligatos, including aesthetic and lyrical roles that profoundly impact all participants. This paper highlights the transformative journey of the trumpet in *bɔbɔɔbɔ*, from colonial relic to an indigenized instrument, shaped by adoption, assimilation, and reinterpretation within Ewe musical traditions.

In essence, the trumpet has become an integral part of the Ewe musical tradition, lending its voice to the expressive language of *bɔbɔɔbɔ* music. To outsiders, the trumpet defines the essence of the *bɔbɔɔbɔ* dance, often referred to as “the trumpet-dance of the Ewe people” or “the Ewe dance featuring the trumpet.” Despite these labels, *bɔbɔɔbɔ* groups must continually adjust the trumpet’s role in their performances to maintain its historical, musical, and cultural significance.

The *agbadza* dance of the Anlo-Ewe and the *gome* dance of the Ga people represent additional traditional music genres in Ghana where horns play significant roles reminiscent of *bɔbɔɔbɔ*. A comparative study exploring the horn-playing traditions among these dance groups, their evolution over time and across different geographical regions, and their respective performative functions would be valuable research. Investigating whether the *agbadza* and *gome* groups also incorporate the trumpet as a substitute for the bugle could shed light on instrument usage trends. Such research could also examine how the interaction between indigenous and European instruments in African traditional ensembles evolves over time, influenced by modernity and various cultural agents, thereby documenting processes of cultural diffusion and adaptation

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