

## Local Music Traditions: Ghanaian Drumming



“The drum is the musical instrument most commonly associated with Africa.” This assertion from the *Encyclopedia of African Religion* articulates both an advantage and a challenge to this type of music that Ghanaian drummer Maxwell Kofi Donkor has experienced throughout his life. Kofi, a Hudson Valley resident and representative of the musical traditions of the Asante (Ashanti) people of Ghana, West Africa, enjoys success as he travels the region performing and teaching this widely recognizable form of African music. At the same time he is challenged by the difficulties of communicating this tradition to his American audiences in all its complexity of technique, tradition, and cultural meaning.

Even the term “drum” represents a far more intricate system of classification, as this one word in English refers to a wide variety of Ghanaian instruments. Kofi’s performance group, called Sankofa, incorporates drums of many designs, including the *djembe*, which Kofi is playing in the picture above, the *kete* and *kpalogo* with pegs around the top to hold the drum head taut, the paired *arumpan* drums, the *ashika* with its woven strings, and the cylindrical vertically-stacked *kenkene* and *djundjun*. Additionally, the gourd shaker *akasa*, bamboo flute *atentenben*, and the xylophone-like *gyil*, shown in the foreground of the picture at right, complement the many drums and add textural variety to the music. This diversity of instruments exists not only in the music of the Asante people, but in many African communities, as their musical traditions incorporate similar instruments, though often identified by different names. For example, the Uruba people use the *akasa* shaker, as well, but instead call it a *shekere*.



The complex, polyrhythmic, syncopated music of Asante drumming arises from a sophisticated knowledge of the many ways in which a drum can produce sound. In describing the variety of techniques used in playing this music, Kofi says, “On a 13 to 14 inch drum, there are about 40 different sounds you can make based on position, and then of course you can always vary the intensity of the sound, too... There are many different positions: with your hand concave, or at an angle.”

### Themes for Understanding Asante Music

#### Nature

An understanding of music as integrally related to nature is one key element of Asante music that Kofi seeks to convey. “I want people to realize that it’s more than just a sound, it’s a real live element,” he says. In fact, many aspects of the music reflect

With such a variety of techniques to convey, it is no wonder that Kofi has at times found it difficult to communicate effectively with his audiences and students. He

sounds found in nature, such as the footsteps of an elephant, the movement of a spider, the motion of a river, or thunder and lightening.

### **Village**

Kofi began his study of Asante drumming in the village of Otumi, where he spent much of his childhood learning from his grandfather. He continues in his performance to draw on this experience, encouraging the participation of the audience through singing, dancing, and playing instruments, as you can see in the picture to the right. Kofi describes this focus, saying, “I use the village as the model for our philosophy, to bring everyone in.”

### **History**

An understanding of history through the continuation of traditions and knowledge of one’s ancestors is an important part of the music. Kofi explains his work along these lines; “As the ancestors say, ‘I have to teach you everything, to pour myself out for you,’ and that’s what I’m doing.” By communicating the importance of his own history, Kofi hopes to inspire others to do the same.

describes this process, recalling, “I started out saying, ‘I want you to do it this way,’ but I needed to modify the way I teach, to give room for fun. To let people play free form and then bring them back to the traditions.”



His performances and workshops continue to draw on this synthesis of innovation and tradition as a way to make the music of his native country both accessible and informative for Western audiences because he sees his music as part of a broader mission. “If you’re a drummer, you have to know traditions: when and why, how they can evolve to the mainstream, help people use the drum in today’s world. You can’t just entertain or maintain traditions,” he says. Through his music, Kofi seeks to transcend his role as exclusively artist, musician, performer, or instructor in order to, in his words, “use traditional art forms to generate discussion and conversation, to get people thinking.”

**Suggested resources for additional information:**

Featured Artist's Website: Maxwell Kofi Donkor (<http://www.bak2roots.com/index.html>)

"The Drum" in *Encyclopedia of African Religion, Volume 1* by Molefi K. Asante and Ama Mazama (Sage Publications, 2009)

"Asante [Ashanti] Music" in *Oxford Music Online* by J.H. Kwabena Nketia (<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>)

*African Music in Ghana: A Survey of Traditional Forms* by J.H. Kwabena Nketia (Longmans, Green and Co., 1962)

*Musical Instruments of Africa: Their Nature, Use, and Place in the Life of a Deeply Musical People* by Betty Warner Dietz and Michael Babatunde Olatunji (The John Day Company, 1965)

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April 2011