

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Ghana: Asante Elephant Tusk Blowing

by Joseph S. Kaminski

Arrival. Kumase, capital of the Asante Region of Ghana, is the center of a thriving ivory trumpet tradition. The city is situated in the West African rainforest, 268 kilometers (168 miles) north of coastal Accra, the nation's capital. Its temperatures are hot, with humidity levels so high that many days are overcast with low lying gray clouds. Though difficult in some respects, this location has been beneficial to the Asante. First, they are a nation of people descended from eight Akan clans believed to be native to the region. They have an origin myth that says they came from a hole in the ground in the forest and that they are therefore from there. This legend has helped them maintain their preeminence. The term *Akan* also means “from the first,” but the term *Asante* derives from an Akan expression meaning “because of war!” The Asante had earlier developed a strong military, and in 1701 overthrew their masters, the Denkyira Kingdom. Once the Asante became politically established, the rainforest protected them from outside penetration.

First Impressions. On first hearing, you might wonder, is this really music? Rather than melody, you hear masses (or clusters) of sounds, seemingly with no logical tuning. While the sounds of the trumpet ensembles are very dissonant to all listeners, including the Asante, its function is to create sound barrages, i.e., sonic barriers that dispel evil spirits. Therefore, the most dissonant sound is desired, and tusk tuning lengths are intentionally cut so the tones of the ensemble trumpets clash when sounded together.

Aural Analysis. Asante ivory tusks come from African elephants. Though these animals are endangered now, the Asante trumpets were made before the Elephant Conservation Act of 1988. Customarily an Asante tusk trumpet ensemble has seven trumpets, each contributing its single pitch to a group tone cluster. In songs, two clusters



Seseɛ or “speaker” tusk trumpet

seseɛ or “speaker.” This lead trumpeter recites lines from proverbs, poetry, and royal appellations by imitating them in a kind of surrogate speech that imitates both rhythms

alternate in rhythmic patterns of interlocking high and low tones particular to each song. Six trumpets, divided into two groups, blow these alternating dissonant clusters. The six tusks are divided into two *afre*, or “callers,” which play their clusters on the strong beats, and three *agyesoa*, or “responders,” which play their clusters on the off beats. The *agyesoa* cluster adds a tone from a sixth large tusk that serves as a grounding tone.

The seventh tusk, the smallest of the group, is called

and relative tones. The ensemble then follows, beginning with the *agyesoa* response on the weak beat, rather than entering on the strong beat using the *afre* group. This performance style of alternating rhythms to form a whole melodic pattern has been termed “African hocket.”

The dissonances of the clusters are striking musical features. In the *ntahera* group the *afre* tusks sound together tuned approximately a half tone apart, and the *agyesoa* tusks sound together in varied tunings within the range of a whole tone. The ground tusk for the *agyesoa* approximates the *afre* register. Over these dissonant clusters, a *seseε* trumpeter speaks word rhythms by vibrating his lips into the tusk to produce the speech-like tones. The tones glide within the range of four tones.

The sound example is a rendition of a surrogate verse by a *seseε* trumpeter followed by a trumpet song. The performance of the verse follows the inflections of speech and tonal patterns from the Twi language of the Asante. The lines are metaphors regarding the greatness of the second Asantehene (King of Asante) Opoku Ware, including references to Asante warriors fighting fiercely like porcupines, antelopes being self sufficient, and the Asantehene being like a large tree where people come for shade. The verse consists of nineteen lines and is followed by a song denoting the proverb “The Fox Wants to be the Leopard.” The proverb’s connotation reflects how some people wish they were the Asantehene but are not, that is, a portrayal of human envy in animalistic terms

The song’s meter is set in a quick pulse of three at the *afre* entrance, and the *seseε* stylizes the words from the proverb, sometimes in a cross-rhythm of two pulses. The listener must be aware that the *agyesoa* cluster is the higher of the two clusters and is sounded on the weak beat. In this song, the weak beat is beat three, and the *afre* sound on strong beats one and two. The length of this song is not fixed, and its melorhythmic pattern can be repeated numerously.

Cultural Considerations. Before the Denkyira war (1697-1701) the Asante had gained the power of ivory trumpets, it is said, from the *ntahera* spirit that descended from the sky. The *ntahera* instructed the traditional priest Okomfo Anokye to release its power through the sound of the tusks to protect the nation. Ensembles were acquired for the first King of Asante (Asantehene) Osei Tutu, and most of today’s ensembles and repertoires date from that period (c.1701). But evidence of older ivory trumpet traditions in Africa is large.



Teaching the ivory trumpets

England eventually conquered Kumase in 1896 and brought colonialism and Christianity. During this epoch some Ghanaians gave up traditional beliefs. Theoretically the trumpet spirits were unable to withstand the colonialist invasion, but clearly they still maintain their power today.

The Asante ivory trumpet tradition is an oral tradition, i.e., knowledge of its practice is taught orally by word of mouth and learned aurally by ear. Because there is no notation system for either the songs or surrogate speeches, the trumpeters must memorize their parts. A *seseɛ* trumpeter learns his lines by rote from a master elder. An ensemble song, too, is rehearsed by rote, but kinesthetic (muscle memory) education occurs here as well. For example, when a *seseɛ* trumpeter teaches a song to the members, he may hold the arms of *agyesoa* and *afre* trumpeters in pairs and lower and raise them in sync with the hocket rhythms they are learning to coordinate. An arm is lowered for the sounded tone and then raised for the silence left to be filled by the other part. Thus, when one player's arm is raised, the other's arm is lowered.

While staying in Kumase, a person will not hear an *aben* (ivory trumpet; pl. *mmen*) blown unless he or she attends an Akwasidae Ancestral Veneration at Manhyia Palace, which takes place every sixth Sunday. Here, all the ivory trumpet groups of the Asantehene accompany the veneration of the ancestral spirits that return to the royal shrine on sacred days. The function of the trumpets' sounds is to dispel evil spirits from the event so that the living Asante may commune with their ancestors. The *ntahera* trumpets perform outside the shrine at dawn on the day of veneration and then proceed to play at the homes of every affiliated chief before the afternoon veneration, which begins around 1:00 pm.

Horn blowing can also be heard on more tragic days, such as at funerals of royal family members. They will be heard for propitious occasions as well, in accompaniment to the Asantehene on state visits, which are private affairs. Yet, because ivory trumpets are the personal properties of chiefs and not played by or for the public, they are seen and heard only at sacred and royal events. To the casual visitor, there is no evidence that the Asante have a trumpet tradition. In order to experience this aspect of Asante culture, a visitor would have to seek out one of these special sacred or ritual occasions.

While there is a taboo on women touching tusks, one woman stands out as a tusk trumpeter: a granddaughter of the Ejisu *ntahera* chief. Although she later married and left the group when she moved away from Ejisu, the fact of her playing the instrument demands an explanation. The Ejisu trumpeters said that she was always interested in the tusks and wanted to join the group to play, so she did. Her initiative is comparable to that of Yaw Asantewaa, the queen mother of Ejisu, who led the Asante army against the British in 1901 when the male royal family members were exiled. Ejisu are aware of women innovators.

When a person arrives in Ghana, he or she should notice the icons of tusk trumpet blowers in strategic places. The outside entrance wall of the terminal building at Kotoko International Airport in Accra holds a life size relief of three



Bronze ivory trumpeters at the mausoleum of Ghana's first president Kwame Nkrumah

ivory trumpet blowers facing the visitors. The rationale is the traditional ideology that the sound emitted from an ivory trumpet is a spirit that dispels evil. Ensembles create sound barrages against powers that could harm the nation. The performance practice is maintained at the courts of Akan chiefs, particularly among the Asante in Kumase. Today, visual representations of ivory trumpets also have power, so when the sound of trumpets cannot be present, their icons serve the same spirit.

Theoretically, the icon at the airport prevents evil from entering the country, and it likewise protects good visitors. In Accra, life size bronze statues depicting an ensemble of fourteen ivory trumpeters protect the mausoleum of Ghana's first president Kwame Nkrumah. Statues of trumpet blowers are also placed outside the Ghana National Museum, the Accra Performing Arts Center, and the Music Department of the University of Ghana at Legon. Paintings of trumpeters are also numerous in restaurants and hotels. All the images are said to contain a trumpet spirit.