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ARTICLE

INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES AND MUSICAL CONTINUITY: THE AGBE ENSEMBLE AND THE LEADERSHIP OF ERIC ODARKWEI MORTON

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KEYWORDS

Eric Odarkwei Morton, Tabom music, *Agbe* Ensemble, cultural preservation, master drummer, musical innovation.

DECLARATION
OF GENERATIVE AI

AI-assisted tools, ChatGPT and Quillbot, were used only to support language editing and stylistic refinement during the preparation of this manuscript. The research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and all scholarly arguments remain entirely the author's original work and responsibility.

ABSTRACT. This article examines the role of master drummer Eric Odarkwei Morton in preserving Tabom musical traditions through his leadership of the *Agbe* Ensemble in Accra, Ghana. The Tabom community, descendants of Afro-Brazilian returnees who settled in Ghana during the nineteenth century, maintains a distinctive musical heritage, characterized by *Agbe* performances that include drumming, singing, and dancing.

This study shifts the focus from the transatlantic cultural significance of Morton's performances, as highlighted by previous scholars, particularly Juan Diego Díaz, to the internal organization of the *Agbe* Ensemble and the institutional mechanisms that sustain its musical traditions. The article explores Morton's musical journey, teaching methods, and rhythmic innovations through ethnographic fieldwork, which involves semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and content analysis of recorded performances.

The results indicate that Tabom musical traditions continue to exist because of a formal apprenticeship system, correction practices based on rehearsals that control how rhythms are played, and controlled innovation within the established *Agbe* rhythmic structures. The study demonstrates that traditional musical systems endure through ensemble organizations and performances rather than solely through symbolic heritage discourse.

This article contributes to ethnomusicological discussions on the preservation of traditional musical systems in modern contexts, emphasizing the impact of institutional musical practices on continuity and adaptation.

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МАҚАЛА

ИНСТИТУЦИОНАЛДЫҚ ТӘЖІРИБЕЛЕР ЖӘНЕ МУЗЫКАЛЫҚ САБАҚТАСТЫҚ: АГВЕ АНСАМБЛИ ЖӘНЕ ЭРИК ОДАРКВЕЙ МОРТОННЫҢ КӨШБАСШЫЛЫҒЫ

Автор қолжазбаның соңғы нұсқасын оқып, мақұлдады және мүдделер қақтығысы жоқ деп мәлімдейді.

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© 2026 Автор(лар). Құрманғазы атындағы Қазақ ұлттық консерваториясы жариялаған. Осы мақала Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) лицензиясының шарттарына сәйкес таратылады (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). Лицензия түпнұсқа еңбекке тиісті түрде сілтеме жасалған жағдайда материалды коммерциялық емес мақсатта пайдалануға, таратуға және кез келген тасымалдағышта көшіруге рұқсат береді. Сонымен қатар материалға өзгерістер енгізуге, оны өңдеуге немесе туынды шығармалар жасауға жол берілмейді.

Дәйексөз үшін

Амакье-Боатенг, Бенджамин. «Институционалдық тәжірибелер және музыкалық сабақтастық: *Agbe* ансамблі және Эрик Одарквей Мортонның көшбасшылығы» *Saryn*, т. 14, № 1, 2026, 17–46 б., DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59850/SARYN.1.14.2026.301>. (Ағылшынша)

Тірек сөздер

Эрик Одарквей Мортон, табом музыкасы, *Agbe* ансамблі, мәдени мұраны сақтау, шебер дабылшы, музыкалық инновация.

Жасанды интеллект құралдарын пайдалану туралы мәлімдеме

ChatGPT және Quillbot сияқты жасанды интеллект құралдары осы мақаланы дайындау барысында тек тілдік редакциялау мен стилистикалық түзетуді қолдау үшін пайдаланылды. Зерттеуді әзірлеу, деректерді жинау, талдау, түсіндіру және барлық ғылыми тұжырымдар толықтай авторға тиесілі және оның жауапкершілігінде.

Аңдатпа. Мақалада шебер дабылшы Эрик Одарквей Мортонның Аккрадағы (Гана) *Agbe* ансамблін басқару арқылы табомның музыкалық дәстүрлерін сақтаудағы рөлі қарастырылады. XIX ғасырда Ганаға қоныс аударған афробразилиялық репатрианттардан шыққан табом қауымдастығы дабыл ойнау, ән айту және биді қамтитын *Agbe* орындауымен сипатталатын ерекше музыкалық мұраны сақтайды.

Бұл зерттеуде бірнеше жұмыстарда, атап айтқанда Juan Diego Díaz зерттеулерінде көрсетілген Мортонның орындауларының трансатлантикалық мәдени маңызынан назар *Agbe* ансамблінің ішкі ұйымдасуына және оның музыкалық дәстүрлерін сақтауға мүмкіндік беретін институционалдық механизмдерге аударылады. Мақалада Мортонның шығармашылық жолы, оның педагогикалық әдістері және этнографиялық зерттеулерге негізделген ритмдік инновациялары талданады, ол жартылай құрылымдалған сұхбаттар, қатысушы бақылау және жазылған орындаулардың контент-анализін қамтиды.

Нәтижелер көрсеткендей, табом музыкалық дәстүрлері шәкірттік формальды жүйе, репетициялық үдеріс негізінде жүзеге асырылатын түзетушілік практикалар және ритмдерді орындау тәсілдерін реттейтін әдістер арқылы, сондай-ақ *Agbe* ансамблінің орныққан ритмдік құрылымдары шеңберінде бақыланатын инновациялар арқасында сақталады.

Зерттеу дәстүрлі музыкалық жүйелер тек символдық мұра дискурсы арқылы ғана емес, ең алдымен ансамбльдердің қызметі мен орындау тәжірибесі арқылы сақталатынын көрсетеді. Мақала қазіргі жағдайда дәстүрлі музыкалық жүйелерді сақтау туралы этномузикологиялық пікірталастарға үлес қосады, бұл сабақтастық пен бейімделуді қамтамасыз ету үшін институционалдық музыкалық тәжірибелердің маңыздылығын көрсетеді.

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СТАТЬЯ

ИНСТИТУЦИОНАЛЬНЫЕ ПРАКТИКИ И МУЗЫКАЛЬНАЯ ПРЕЕМСТВЕННОСТЬ: АНСАМБЛЬ АГВЕ И ЛИДЕРСТВО ЭРИКА ОДАРКВЕЯ МОРТОНА

Автор прочитал и одобрил окончательный вариант рукописи и заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

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Для цитирования

Амакье-Боатенг, Бенджамин. «Институциональные практики и музыкальная преемственность: ансамбль *Agbe* и лидерство Эрика Одарквея Мортон». *Saryn*, т. 14, № 1, 2026, с. 17–46, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59850/SARYN.1.14.2026.301> (На английском)

Ключевые слова

Эрик Одарквей Мортон, музыка табом, ансамбль *Agbe*, сохранение культурного наследия, мастер-барабанщик, музыкальная инновация.

Заявление об использовании инструментов искусственного интеллекта

Инструменты с поддержкой искусственного интеллекта ChatGPT и Quillbot использовались только для поддержки языкового редактирования и стилистической доработки во время подготовки этой статьи. Разработка исследования, сбор данных, анализ, интерпретация и все научные аргументы полностью принадлежат автору и находятся под его ответственностью.

Аннотация. В статье рассматривается роль мастера-барабанщика Эрика Одарквея Мортон в сохранении музыкальных традиций табом через его руководство ансамблем *Agbe* в Аккре (Гана). Сообщество табом, происходящее от афробразильских репатриантов, переселившихся в Гану в XIX веке, сохраняет самобытное музыкальное наследие, характеризующееся исполнениями *Agbe*, включающими игру на барабанах, пение и танец.

Настоящее исследование смещает акцент с трансатлантического культурного значения выступлений Мортон, отмеченного в предыдущих работах, в частности у Díaz (2020), на внутреннюю организацию ансамбля *Agbe* и институциональные механизмы, обеспечивающие сохранение его музыкальных традиций. В статье анализируются творческий путь Мортон, его педагогические методы и ритмические инновации на основе этнографического исследования, включающего полуструктурированные интервью, включенное наблюдение и контент-анализ записанных выступлений.

Результаты показывают, что музыкальные традиции табом сохраняются благодаря формализованной системе ученичества, корректирующим практикам, основанным на репетиционном процессе и регулирующим способы исполнения ритмов, а также контролируемым инновациям в рамках устоявшихся ритмических структур *Agbe*.

Исследование демонстрирует, что традиционные музыкальные системы сохраняются не только через дискурс символического наследия, но прежде всего через деятельность ансамблей и практику исполнения. Статья вносит вклад в этномузыкологические дискуссии о сохранении традиционных музыкальных систем в современных условиях, подчеркивая значение институциональных музыкальных практик для обеспечения преемственности и адаптации.

1. Introduction

The Tabom¹ people, descendants of Afro-Brazilian slaves who returned to Ghana in the early 19th century (Amos and Ayesu, "I Am Brazilian"), have a rich cultural heritage that has been integrated into Ghanaian society. Central to their cultural identity is their music, also known as *Agbe*, which encompasses singing, drumming, and dancing. This musical genre has been preserved and adapted over generations. The *Agbe* Ensemble stands out as a prominent group dedicated to the preservation and performance of Tabom music, with Eric Odarkwei Morton at its helm as the master drummer, or *Agbetse*². This paper explores Morton's pivotal role in sustaining and evolving the musical traditions of the Tabom people through his work *Agbetse* with the *Agbe* Ensemble.

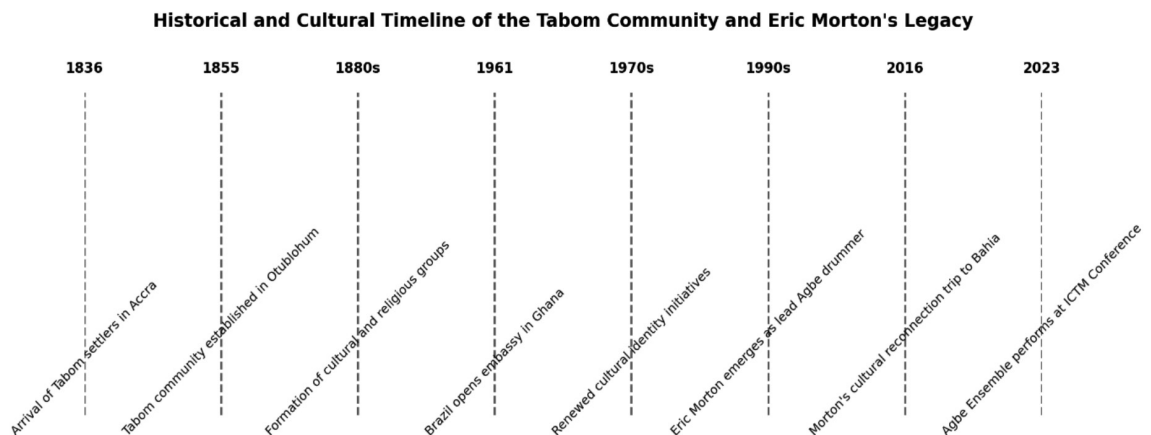


Fig. 1. Timeline highlighting key historical events in the development of the Tabom community in Accra and the legacy of master drummer Eric Odarkwei Morton, from the arrival of Afro-Brazilian settlers in 1836 to the *Agbe* Ensemble's international performance. Made by the author.

The timeline illustrated in Figure 1 contextualizes Morton's career within the extensive historical framework of the Tabom community, emphasizing the ongoing connection between Afro-Brazilian returnee heritage and modern musical leadership.

Master drummers in West African music serve as both performers and custodians of cultural knowledge (Idamoyibo, "The Impact of Dúndùn Drummers"). They lead ensembles, instruct on rhythms, and ensure the continuity of musical legacy. John Chernoff considers the master drummer in three typical roles: a leader in performance, a teacher in instruction, and a cultural historian in the preservation of tradition." Morton exemplifies these roles through his dedication to the *Agbe* Ensemble, preserving traditional Tabom cultural practices within contemporary contexts.

The Tabom people, with origins in Brazil, brought a blend of Nigerian and Brazilian cultural elements. Their music reflects this hybrid identity, combining Yoruba text, West African rhythm, and Brazilian art forms. According to Marco Aurelio Schaumloeffel

and Ato Quayson, the Tabom community has maintained a distinct cultural identity while integrating into the broader Ghanaian society (*Tabom the Afro*;

1 Also known as Tabon.

2 *Agbetse* is the local term for master drummer which means "Father of *Agbe*".

Oxford Street, Accra). Under Morton's leadership, the *Agbe* Ensemble plays a crucial role in cultural preservation and adaptation.

Morton's journey to becoming the *Agbetse* was marked by training, mentorship, and commitment to his cultural roots. His early exposure to music and training under master drummers equipped him to lead the *Agbe* Ensemble effectively. Morton's contributions extend beyond performance; he teaches younger generations and ensures continuity of Tabom's musical traditions.

This study discusses Morton's musical journey, methods of preserving Tabom traditions, and the cultural relevance of his collaboration with the *Agbe* Ensemble. By exploring these elements, the paper demonstrates Morton's efforts to preserve and rejuvenate traditional Tabom music for modern listeners. Furthermore, it investigates his leadership in promoting cultural identity and continuity among the Tabom people. The analysis focuses on how traditional music is preserved in contemporary performing ensembles, with a focus on apprenticeship hierarchies, rehearsal-based corrective processes, and adding new rhythmic elements into *Agbe* patterns. The research explores how various instructional, organizational, and artistic processes preserve traditional musical practices in a contemporary ensemble. Ultimately, by capturing the work of master drummer Eric Odarkwei Morton, the study offers both a tribute to his achievements and a rigorous analysis of the Tabom musical legacy in a changing environment.

While previous scholarship, notably Díaz, has explored various facets of Morton's work, analysis of his visit to Bahia as a significant moment of Afro-Brazilian reconnection ("The Musical Experience of Diasporas"). However, these studies predominantly emphasize the transatlantic cultural implications of Morton's performances. In contrast, the present study focuses on the internal musical and institutional dynamics of the *Agbe* Ensemble. By examining apprenticeship structures, rehearsal-based corrective processes, and rhythmic innovation, the article demonstrates how these mechanisms facilitate the preservation and adaptation of Tabom traditions in modern contexts.

Beyond documenting the activities of a prominent master drummer, this work contributes to ethnomusicological discourse on the persistence of traditional systems. The analysis reveals that cultural preservation is not merely an abstract notion; rather, it is manifested through the ensemble's organizational framework, redirecting the analytical focus from symbolic heritage discourse to internal organizational mechanisms that facilitate the maintenance and adaptation of musical traditions.

2. Literature Review

The body of work concerning Tabom musical heritage encompasses several interrelated themes: historical investigations of Afro-Brazilian returnee communities, ethnomusicological studies of master drumming traditions in West Africa, and contemporary research exploring transatlantic musical interactions involving the Tabom diaspora. This review contextualizes the current study within existing research frameworks to clarify its analytical contribution. This section synthesizes existing research to provide a foundation for understanding Morton's contributions to Tabom's musical heritage.

2.1. The Tabom Community and Afro-Brazilian Return Migration

The Tabom population in Accra represents a substantial West African Afro-diasporic return migration. The group originated in the 18th century, when formerly enslaved Africans and their ancestors returned from Brazil to the Gold Coast (Amos and Ayesu; von Hesse and Yarak). Returnees lived in Jamestown and Ussher Town, Accra, where they formed a separate cultural group with Brazilian, Yoruba, and Ga influences. The repatriates used a term derived from the Portuguese phrase “*tá bom*” (“it is good”) in everyday communication to refer to their descendants. According to scholars, the Tabom kept Afro-Brazilian culture despite merging into coastal Ghanaian society (Schaumloeffel, *Tabom the Afro*). This composite background can be seen in architectural, gastronomical, religious, and musical characteristics.

Figure 2 below shows Brazil House in Jamestown, built by Afro-Brazilian returnees in the nineteenth century and a Tabom community icon. As noted by Hermann von Hesse and Larry Yarak, urban space played an important role in the life of the Tabom community in Accra, serving both residential functions and supporting the preservation and transmission of cultural practices such as music, dance, and ritual performance. Brazil House is more than just an architectural legacy; it provides a spatial setting for understanding how cultural traditions like *Agbe* performance were integrated into Tabom life.



Fig. 2. Brazil House, Jamestown, Accra. Built by Afro-Brazilian returnees in the nineteenth century, the building remains a central historical landmark of the Tabom community and illustrates the architectural and cultural heritage associated with their settlement in coastal Ghana. Photo made by the author.

In addition, the Brazil House in Jamestown has become a prominent symbol of the community’s historical presence and diasporic identity. At the same time, the Tabom people participated in the cultural and economic life of Accra, contributing skills in masonry, carpentry, tailoring, and trade (von Hesse and Yarak, “A Tale of Two ‘Returnee’”).

Recent scholarship has increasingly focused on the diasporic dimensions of Tabom cultural life. Juan Diego Díaz provides the most detailed ethnographic account of Morton, particularly in relation to his return visit to Bahia, Brazil. Díaz interprets this visit as a symbolic act of diasporic reconnection, highlighting how musical performance facilitates transatlantic cultural dialogue between Ghanaian and Afro-Brazilian communities (“The Musical Experience of Diasporas”). The study demonstrates that Morton’s engagement with Afro-Brazilian musicians reflects broader historical continuities between the Tabom and their Brazilian counterparts.

The review article “Tabom in Bahia”, published in *Ethnomusicology*, provides further insight into the transatlantic dimension of Tabom cultural history.³ This study evaluates the documentary film by Juan Diego Díaz and Nilton Pereira, which chronicles Morton’s visit to Bahia and the musical interactions that occurred during that event, highlighting how these exchanges reveal the ongoing cultural discourse between West Africa and the Afro-Brazilian diaspora, especially in the context of ritual drumming and performance practices. In contrast, the present research shifts the analytical focus toward the everyday institutional practices of the *Agbe* Ensemble in Accra. Rather than focusing solely on the symbolic significance of diasporic interactions, this article examines how traditional music is maintained within a contemporary community context.

However, Díaz’s work primarily examines the symbolic and transnational significance of Morton’s musical activity. Less attention is given to the internal mechanisms through which Tabom musical practices are reproduced within the community itself. In particular, the processes through which *Agbe* musical knowledge is taught, rehearsed, and regulated within the *Agbe* Ensemble remain underexplored. The present study addresses this gap by examining Morton’s pedagogical practices and rehearsal leadership as central mechanisms sustaining *Agbe* performance.

2.2. *Agbe* Music and Community Performance

Agbe music plays an essential role in Tabom cultural life. It is a structured ensemble performance that mixes drumming, singing and dance, and is performed during funerals, festivals and community meetings. Even though the music includes rhythms from the Yoruba culture, it has created its own local features in the Tabom community, like special instruments and unique singing styles that show its cultural background.

The ensemble usually includes a bell timeline, supporting drums, a lead drum, vocal sections, and dancers. The bell pattern serves as a structural reference point for the ensemble, guiding its coordination. The supporting drums articulate overlapping rhythms, while the lead drum offers changes to cue transitions and interact with the dancers. This form reflects rhythmic organizing concepts common to West African percussion traditions (Anku, “Principles of Rhythm Integration in African Drumming”).

Agbe performances have several societal functions. Aside from its musical features, they encourage communal engagement and strengthen community relationships. Participation in ensemble performances frequently follows hierarchical patterns based on expertise and apprenticeship. Younger musicians usually start with supporting instruments before moving to more complex parts.

While current research acknowledges the cultural relevance of *Agbe* music,

3 Hikiji, Rose Satiko Gitirana. “Tabom in Bahia.” *Ethnomusicology*, vol. 69, no. 1, 141–143. DOI: 10.5406/21567417.69.1.14.

few studies have investigated the underlying educational processes that sustain these practices. The majority of talks focus on historical backgrounds or performance venues rather than the day-to-day rehearsal techniques that keep the tradition alive.

An ethnographic analysis of these procedures is therefore required to understand how *Agbe* musical expertise is passed down across generations.

2.3. Musical Authority and Master Drumming Traditions

Ethnomusicology has long emphasised the master drummer in African ensembles, who coordinates ensemble interaction (Nketia, *The Music of Africa*). To ensure structural integrity, the lead drummer announces musical section transitions. Anku's study on rhythmic integration demonstrates the organization of complex polyrhythmic patterns around a temporal pattern ("Principles of Rhythm Integration in African Drumming"). He believes ensemble cohesiveness hinges on performers internalising this time frame and coordinating their rhythmic sections. Thus, the lead drummer regulates rhythmic interactions and synchronises the ensemble in addition to improvisation (Anku 235).

Chernoff underscores that the authority of master drummers stems from more than technical proficiency; it is rooted in professional longevity, spanning rigorous apprenticeships, extensive performance experience, and ensemble leadership (70–71). While existing ethnomusicological discourse provides a broad conceptualization of such hierarchies, it often lacks site-specific application. Consequently, applying these frameworks to the *Agbe* Ensemble offers a unique opportunity to examine how drumming authority is negotiated and maintained within a specific diasporic community.

2.4. Oral Pedagogy and Musical Learning

African musical traditions are usually passed down through oral pedagogical techniques rather than written notation. Alan Merriam emphasizes that musical knowledge is learned through participation, imitation, and social interaction (*The Anthropology of Music*). In such systems, learning takes place in the context of performance practice rather than conventional classroom instruction, which is exemplified by the apprenticeship model prevalent in many West African drumming traditions, where students learn directly from experienced musicians. Young musicians study from seasoned performers and learn rhythmic patterns through frequent engagement. This technique enables apprentices to internalise both the structural and social aspects of musical performance (Nketia, *The Music of Africa*), which are crucial for their development as musicians in collaborative settings. Recent research into African ensemble traditions has also highlighted the value of mnemonic strategies in oral instruction. Vocalized syllables and rhythmic phrases are frequently used to encode drum patterns, allowing trainees to memorize complex rhythmic frameworks. Such strategies aid in the transmission of musical information while keeping performance flexibility, which is essential for adapting to different musical styles and improvisational contexts.

Although these teaching strategies have been extensively recorded in ethnomusicological literature, little research has investigated how they are used in Afro-diasporic returnee communities, such as the Tabom, who are descendants of Africans that returned to their ancestral lands. Investigating Morton's teaching practices offers a critical perspective on how oral pedagogical systems function in modern urban settings.

2.5. Research Gap and Analytical Approach

While existing scholarship clarifies the Tabom community's historical context and the broader organization of West African drumming, significant empirical gaps persist. Specifically, the intersection of oral transmission and modern urban adaptation remains under-researched.

First, prior studies have primarily focused on historical and transnational aspects of Tabom cultural identity, overshadowing the internal mechanisms that sustain *Agbe* performance within the community. Second, while theoretical discussions of master drumming emphasise artistic authority and apprenticeship, there is a lack of research investigating how these concepts work in specific ensembles.

The current article addresses these deficiencies by conducting ethnographic fieldwork on Morton's leadership of the *Agbe* Ensemble. By examining rehearsal techniques, pedagogical interactions, and ensemble coordination, the study provides empirical evidence regarding the function of musical authority and oral pedagogy in contemporary Tabom musical life. Consequently, the article contributes to existing literature bridging the gap between theoretical models of master drumming to the lived experiences of a particular community ensemble. This approach underscores the value of anthropological observation in understanding how orally transmitted musical traditions adapt to modern urban settings.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Approach

An ethnographic approach was employed to investigate how musical knowledge and authority function within the *Agbe* Ensemble of the Tabom community in Jamestown, Accra. This method is particularly effective for studying music in social contexts because it allows the scholar to observe how musical practices are taught, rehearsed, and performed in everyday community life (Rice, *Ethnomusicology: A Very Short Introduction*; Barz and Cooley, *Shadows in the Field*). Rather than focusing exclusively on formal musical patterns, this approach views music as a lived practice shaped by social interactions, cultural memory, and performance experience.

The study utilized participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and performance analysis to examine how Morton teaches and conducts the *Agbe* Ensemble. These methodologies allowed to investigate both the musical architecture of *Agbe* and the social processes through which the repertoire is disseminated.

3.2. Fieldwork Context

Fieldwork was conducted in Jamestown, Accra, between May 2019 and August 2024. As the historical center of the Tabom community, Jamestown remains the primary location for *Agbe* rehearsals and performances. During this period, the author attended six ensemble rehearsals and several public performances. Notable observations included the funeral rites of woman called Mamuna Cofie, a former leader of the ensemble, and the 47th ICTM World Conference in Accra, where the ensemble presented a lunchtime concert featuring Tabom music.

Field observations focused on three core aspects of ensemble activity: rehearsal organization, teaching practices, and the interaction between the lead drummer and other performers. Field notes were recorded during sessions and expanded shortly thereafter to capture details of musical interaction, rehearsal corrections, and teaching demonstrations. Such reflective documentation is a central component of ethnographic research, enabling the scholar to record both observed actions and contextual interpretation (Emerson, et al., *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*).

3.3. Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between 2022 and 2024 in Accra, Ghana, with Morton, members of the *Agbe* Ensemble, and senior figures within the Tabom community. This format was selected because it enables participants to describe their experiences in their own terms while remaining focused on specific research themes (Kvale, *Interviews: An Introduction*). The interviews explored Morton's musical training, pedagogical methods, and leadership role, as well as the perspectives on cultural preservation.

In total, four interviews were held with Morton, each lasting between forty-five and sixty minutes. Additional informal conversations with ensemble members and community elders offered contextual information regarding the history of the group and the social significance of *Agbe* within Tabom life.

During an interview conducted at Brazil House, Jamestown, Morton explained:

"*Agbe* music is not something you learn from books. You must stay with the elders, listen to the bell, and learn how the drum speaks. The drum teaches you when you are ready."

This statement illustrates the oral and experiential learning process described by Nketia, in which musical competence emerges through immersion and apprenticeship rather than formal instruction (*The Music of Africa*). Morton's emphasis on prolonged engagement reflects the embodied transmission systems characteristic of West African musical pedagogy.

Additional interviews with ensemble members confirmed the centrality of demonstration and imitation in learning. One apprentice drummer stated:

"When he plays, we watch his hands and listen carefully. He does not explain everything with words. You learn by doing."

This reinforces Merriam's theoretical framework that musical knowledge in oral traditions is transmitted primarily through participation rather than abstract explanation.

In another interview, Morton emphasized the foundational role of the bell pattern in *Agbe* performance:

"If you don't understand the bell, you cannot lead *Agbe*. Everything follows the bell."

This clarifies how ensemble members conceptualize rhythmic structure and leadership in *Agbe* practice. All interview recordings were transcribed and analyzed in relation to observations collected during rehearsals.

The interview material produced numerous pages of transcribed dialogue. Selected excerpts from these transcripts are integrated into the analytical sections below to elucidate the empirical foundation of the argument.

The interviews revealed three primary themes pertinent to this study:

(1) the apprenticeship hierarchy that musicians navigate from bell player to supporting drummer and ultimately to lead drummer; (2) the rehearsal correction practices employed by Morton to ensure rhythmic precision within the ensemble; and (3) the incorporation of new rhythmic variations that enhance the expressive capacity of *Agbe* music while maintaining its structural integrity.

3.4. Participant Observation

Participant observation played a central role in the research. By attending rehearsals and performances, the author was able to observe how Morton interacted with other musicians and how musical knowledge was communicated within the ensemble. Ethnomusicologists have long emphasized the importance of such observations for understanding how musical traditions are maintained in practice rather than merely described in theory (Barz and Cooley).

During rehearsal sessions, Morton typically demonstrated rhythmic patterns on the lead drum before asking other performers to repeat them. When mistakes occurred, he corrected them through demonstration rather than verbal explanation. This practice illustrates the embodied nature of musical learning in many African ensemble traditions, where repetition and imitation form the primary means of acquiring musical competence (Nketia; Rice).

Observation also revealed how ensemble coordination was maintained. Morton frequently introduced rhythmic phrases that signaled transitions between sections of the performance, thereby guiding the ensemble's structure in real time. The other musicians immediately recognized this cue, demonstrating a shared understanding of performance conventions.

3.5. Content Analysis

Content analysis was employed to examine the recordings of *Agbe* Ensemble's performances and instructional sessions. This method involved systematically analyzing the content of these recordings to identify patterns, themes, and significant elements (Krippendorff). The analysis focused on both musical and contextual elements, such as the structure of the performance, use of specific instruments, and cultural narratives conveyed through the music. The recordings were transcribed and coded to identify recurring musical patterns and innovations, Morton's teaching techniques, and audience reactions and engagement during the performances. Attention was focused on the recurring bell-timeline structures, lead-drum cueing patterns, and call-and-response vocal entries evident in various recordings of the ensemble's performances. This section addresses specific examples from the recorded performances, focusing on musical innovations and performance adaptations.

3.6. Review of Historical Documents and Previous Research

To contextualize the findings, the study included a review of historical documents and previous research on the Tabom people, their musical traditions, and the roles of master drummers in West African music. This review provides a historical and cultural

framework for understanding Morton's contributions. Key sources for this review include historical accounts of the Tabom people's migration and settlement in Ghana (Schaumloeffel), academic studies on the musical traditions of the Tabom people and the fusion of African and Brazilian performance practices (Amakye-Boateng), and research on the training and roles of master drummers in West African music (Chernoff; Nketia).

Employing these diverse methodological approaches provided the study with a comprehensive understanding of Morton's contributions to the *Agbe* Ensemble and the preservation and evolution of Tabom music.

The subsequent sections utilize these data sources directly. The interview material aids in reconstructing Morton's musical trajectory, while observational field notes shed light on rehearsal practices and pedagogical dynamics. Additionally, content analysis of recorded performances offers evidence for discussing rhythmic innovation within the ensemble, highlighting specific examples of how these innovations have influenced the overall sound and style of the group's music.

4. The Journey of Eric Odarkwei Morton

Eric Odarkwei Morton, pictured in [Figure 3](#), is widely known within the Tabom community simply as Odarkwei. Born on 19 December 1955 in Jamestown, Accra, his musical career developed within the social environment of the Tabom community, where drumming and ensemble performance are integral of everyday cultural life. Like many musicians in West African percussion traditions, Morton's early musical experiences began informally during childhood. In an interview conducted during one of the rehearsal sessions in 2019 at Jamestown, Morton revealed that his first attempts at drumming involved improvising rhythms on empty tomato tins and other household objects – an activity that allowed him to experiment with rhythmic patterns long before receiving formal instruction.



[Fig. 3](#). Eric Odarkwei Morton, master drummer and leader of the *Agbe* Ensemble in Jamestown, Accra. Photo made by the author.

In his youth, he traversed his community and engaged in musical performances for personal enjoyment. His compositions, such as “*Yeee jole ejofioe shi me*” (*My lover has left me*) and “*Nimgbe matso manale*” (*Where would I discover her?*), were individual expressions rather than traditional Tabom songs. At this juncture, Odarkwei had not yet been exposed to the Tabom drumming tradition; however, his innate inclination towards rhythm and performance presaged his future musical endeavors. In an interview conducted during the fieldwork for this study, Morton described this early period as follows:

“At that time I was not engaged with tradition. I was just playing rhythms that I felt. Later the elders showed me that what I was doing already had structure.”

This reflection illustrates how informal experimentation was later integrated into the structured apprenticeship that organises *Agbe* drumming knowledge.

Morton’s introduction to *Agbe* performance occurred during his adolescence, when he began observing rehearsals conducted by senior drummers in the community. These early encounters with the ensemble marked the beginning of a long process of apprenticeship. In many West African musical traditions, apprenticeship constitutes the primary pathway through which performers acquire technical skill and musical authority (Nketia; Chernoff). Rather than learning through written notation or formal instruction, young musicians gradually develop competence through observation, imitation, and repeated participation in rehearsals and performances.

Morton described this process during an interview conducted on the University of Ghana campus in June 2023:

“When I started, I didn’t play the lead drum. I watched the elders and learned the bell first. If you don’t understand the bell, you cannot lead *Agbe*.”

In many African percussion ensembles, the bell pattern functions as a rhythmic reference that guides the coordination of all other instrumental parts (Anku, *Principles of Rhythm Integration in African Drumming*). Learning the bell therefore represents an essential stage in the development of musical competence. Only after mastering this foundational role can an apprentice progress to more complex instrumental parts.

Morton’s apprenticeship followed this hierarchical progression. His earliest responsibilities within the ensemble involved playing the bell and observing the interaction between the supporting drums and the lead drummer. Over time, he began performing supporting drum patterns, gradually developing the ability to synchronize his playing with the bell timeline and with other ensemble members. Such incremental learning processes are characteristic of oral musical traditions, where knowledge is accumulated through sustained engagement rather than formalized lessons (Rice).

As Morton’s skills and experience increased, senior members of the ensemble began to recognize his musical abilities. Community recognition plays a central role in the formation of musical authority in many African performance traditions. According to Chernoff, master drummers acquire authority not simply through technical proficiency but through long-term participation and the trust of other musicians (70–71). In Morton’s

case, this recognition was demonstrated when elder drummers gradually allowed him to assume more prominent roles during rehearsals and performances.

Eventually, Morton assumed the position of lead drummer within the *Agbe* Ensemble. This role involves more than performing complex rhythmic patterns; it requires the ability to regulate ensemble interaction. During performances, the lead drummer introduces rhythmic phrases that signal transitions between musical sections and coordinate the movements of dancers and singers. Morton's ability to perform these functions effectively established his reputation as a master drummer within the community.

4.2. Participation and the Development of Musical Competence

Odarkwei completed elementary school in 1974, but his passion for drumming had already shown itself the year before. When he performed *Agbe*, a traditional drumming technique, in 1973 at the age of 17, he attracted the attention of local elders. They invited him to take part in their concerts after they realized how talented he was. These seniors included respected drumming practitioners J. H. Commey, Fotozo Nelson, George Aruna Nelson, and Ataa Tawiah.

Odarkwei's appearance during performances caused the elders to comment on how well he could mimic their movements. They were so confident in his abilities that it was normal for one senior to willingly give up their position so that Odarkwei could take over – a remarkable privilege for someone so young. His musical development began with the bell, moved on to the supporting drum, and ended with his mastery of the lead drum.

This learning and development pattern is consistent with Nketia's findings regarding the function of drummers in Akan society, which show that young drummers usually start out playing supporting instruments before switching to the lead drum. Anku outlined the fundamentals of rhythmic integration in African drumming, emphasizing that it requires a complex balancing act between structure and improvisation; thus, the selection process is not random but is based on demonstrated skill and the ability to react to rhythmic cues (*Procedures in African Drumming*).

As a performer and a steward of tradition, Odarkwei received guidance from the elders. They left him their legacy, bestowing benedictions and a musical legacy, as they were too old to perform any more. Odarkwei is currently the only one of his original groups still playing *Agbe*, as one fellow trainee has passed away and other has stopped playing the drums.

One of Odarkwei's unique qualities was his ability to combine singing and drumming – something his masters did not typically perform. He learned the songs while practicing drums, using his keen sense of hearing to acquire melodies from the older female members of the group. Women such as Auntie Amina, Agyei Nyz Kuma, Auntie Fatima, and Mante Nyz provided essential musical instruction. Odarkwei was able to understand and internalize the rhythms and underlying meanings of the songs because some of these ladies, who were fluent in Yoruba, provided translations and contextual explanations.

Nketia, who stresses the value of oral learning in African musical traditions, states that the transmission of both drumming and song traditions is consistent (13–15, 24–26). He clarified that young drummers learn from their surroundings rather than just from formal instruction. Anku further explains this approach by discussing the use of mnemonics and encoded verbal phrases to teach intricate rhythms (28–35).

4.3. *Agbe* Performance and Ceremonial Practice in the Tabom Community

Today, Odarkwei acts as a guardian of *Agbe* drumming, safeguarding traditions passed down to him. His story encompasses not just musical expertise but also resilience, commitment, and cultural stewardship. More than a mere percussionist, he serves as a living archive of rhythms, tales, and customs. As the only active performer remaining from his original group, Odarkwei's role extends beyond performance. He embodies the continuation of musical heritage, safeguarding the rhythms and traditions of his people for future generations.



Fig. 4. Eric Morton performing at the initiation of the Shango Priestess in July 2014. Photo made by the author.

Figure 4 illustrates Eric Odarkwei Morton performing in a ritual context during a Shango Priestess initiation ceremony in Jamestown in 2014. Participation in ceremonial events reinforces familiarity with the ensemble's repertoire. Many *Agbe* pieces are socially controlled, and performers must recognize the sequence in which pieces are presented during an event. Experience gained through repeated performances allows musicians to anticipate transitions and maintain coordination between instrumental parts, which is crucial for ensuring that the performance aligns with the socially controlled structure of *Agbe* pieces.

Chernoff describes the master drummer as a "cultural historian" tasked with conserving, interpreting, and conveying traditions (92–95, 140–150). Likewise, Anku suggests that drumming surpasses artistic skills, functioning as a means of storytelling and shaping identity, which is essential for preserving cultural narratives and fostering community connections (28–35, 70–85). By carrying forward the *Agbe* legacy, Odarkwei ensures that upcoming generations continue to experience and value the richness of Ghanaian drumming traditions. His journey – from a child using tomato tins as makeshift drums to a respected master drummer – illustrates the power of passion, mentorship, and the lasting importance of West African drumming traditions.

4.4. Key Milestones in the Musical Career of Eric Odarkwei Morton

Morton's career as a master drummer is marked by several key milestones that reflect his growing influence and contribution to the preservation and evolution of Tabom music. His appointment as the *Agbe* Ensemble's lead drummer was a career highlight. This position, traditionally held by the most skilled and respected drummer in the community, allowed Morton to assume a leadership role and direct the musical direction of the ensemble. Under Morton's leadership, the *Agbe* Ensemble has achieved national and international recognition. Their performances at cultural festivals,⁴ academic conferences,⁵ and international music events have showcased the unique sound of Tabom music to diverse audiences. Morton's ability to blend traditional rhythms with contemporary influences has been a key factor in the ensemble's success. As noted by Euba, the ability to innovate while preserving tradition is crucial for the survival and relevance of cultural music (10–15, 219–223).

A significant chapter in Morton's musical journey was his visit to Bahia, Brazil in July 2016. This trip represented the fulfillment of a lifelong dream for Morton, who saw it as an opportunity to reconnect with the lands of his ancestors. Díaz revealed that, while in Brazil, Morton participated in various musical and cultural exchanges, including lecture demonstrations, workshops on *Agbe*, and performances with local Afro-Brazilian musicians. These encounters were deeply emotional and spiritually significant for Morton, as they affirmed the shared ancestry and cultural connections between the Tabom in Ghana and the Afro-Brazilian communities in Bahia.

Díaz argued that Morton's ability to bridge these cultural worlds was evident in his musical interactions in Bahia. He effortlessly adapted to local musical styles and rhythms, demonstrating a profound understanding of and respect for shared musical heritage. One notable encounter was with Gabriel Guedes, a Candomblé drummer from Salvador, with whom Morton shared a profound musical connection. According to Díaz, their collaboration highlighted the similarities in their drumming traditions and reinforced the transatlantic ties between their communities.

Contemporary engagement between the Tabom community and Brazil has also been expressed through cultural and diplomatic initiatives that highlight the shared historical experiences of Afro-Brazilian returnees and their descendants in Ghana. These initiatives often involve collaborations between cultural organizations, researchers, and diplomatic institutions, which aim to draw attention to the historical links between the two regions.

One example of such engagement occurred on the 25th anniversary of the Pan-African Historical Festival of Brazil, when the Embassy of Brazil in Ghana organized a public screening of the documentary *Tabom in Bahia*, directed by Pereira and Díaz. The event brought together members of the Tabom community, scholars, and members of the public to reflect on the historical and cultural connections between Ghana and Brazil.

Figure 5 presents the official poster issued by the Embassy of Brazil in Ghana announcing the screening of the documentary. The event formed part of broader cultural initiatives aimed at strengthening dialogue between

4 For several years, the *Agbe* Ensemble has featured in the Chale Wote Festival organised in James Town, Accra.

5 The *Agbe* Ensemble performed at the International Council for Traditional Music and Dance 47th Conference held at the University of Ghana in July 2022.

Afro-Brazilian and Ghanaian communities. Such activities demonstrate how the historical legacy of the Tabom continues to be recognised within contemporary cultural diplomacy and heritage programmes.

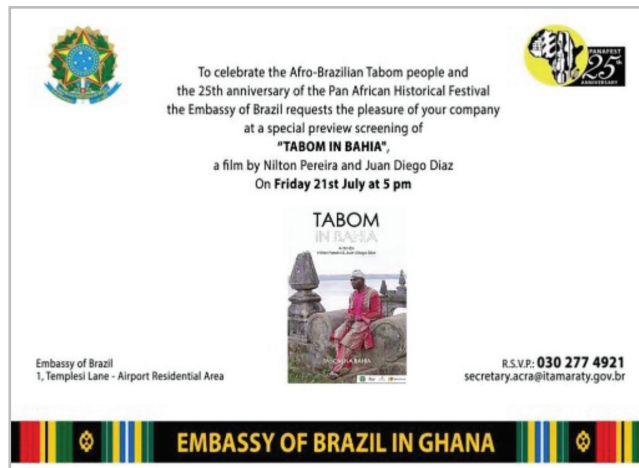


Fig. 5. Poster announcing the screening of the documentary *Tabom in Bahia* at the Embassy of Brazil in Ghana, organized to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Pan-African Historical Festival of Brazil.

4.5. Pedagogical Practice and Musical Adaptation

Teaching within the *Agbe* Ensemble is primarily organized around demonstrations and collective participation rather than formal instruction. Rehearsal sessions typically begin with the establishment of a bell timeline, after which supporting drums enter sequentially to reinforce the rhythmic framework. Within this structure, the lead drummer introduces variations that guide transitions between musical sections. Through repeated interactions with these patterns, ensemble members become familiar with the rhythmic organization of the repertoire.

Instruction during these sessions relies heavily on demonstration. Instead of providing detailed verbal explanations, the ensemble leader often performs a short rhythmic phrase on the lead drum and asks other musicians to reproduce it. This method encourages performers to focus on listening and synchronizing their plays with the established pulse. When timing becomes inconsistent, the ensemble pauses briefly so that the relevant passage can be repeated until the rhythmic relationship between instruments becomes clear.

Figure 6 illustrates a teaching session in which Morton demonstrates rhythmic passages to a group of students and ensemble members. The image captures the informal yet structured environment in which instruction typically occurs. Participants are seated in proximity, allowing them to observe hand movements, drum strokes, and rhythmic cues directly. Such spatial arrangement supports interactive learning, where students respond immediately to demonstrations by attempting the patterns themselves.

Through this form of practical engagement, learners become familiar with the coordination between the bell timeline, supporting drums, and lead drum cues that structure *Agbe* performance.



Fig. 6. Eric Odarkwei Morton demonstrates *Agbe* drumming techniques during an instructional session with students at the University of Ghana, Legon-Accra. Photo made by the author.

Observations during rehearsals suggest that this approach helps participants internalize rhythmic patterns through active engagement. Rather than treating learning as a separate activity from performance, musical knowledge emerges gradually through collective repetition of ensemble passages. This form of education emphasises coordination among performers, allowing each musician to understand how their individual parts contribute to the overall structure of the performance.

Teaching sessions conducted outside the immediate community context follow a similar pattern. Workshops organized for students and cultural participants often begin with a demonstration of the bell timeline, followed by the introduction of supportive drum patterns. Participants are encouraged to repeat these patterns collectively before attempting to perform them on instruments. This process allows learners to experience the interaction between rhythmic parts while observing how the ensemble structure is maintained.

Through this method of demonstration and repetition, participants gradually become familiar with the rhythmic cues that organize *Agbe's* performances. The approach reflects a pedagogical emphasis on listening, imitation, and ensemble coordination rather than on abstract theoretical explanation.

4.6. Oral Tradition and Practical Learning

Morton employs the oral tradition, a cornerstone of West African musical instruction. This method involves learning through listening, repetition, and practice rather than written notation. As Nketia notes, "music is learned through participation in musical activities," a process that enables students to internalize rhythmic structures together with their cultural contexts (13). Morton's students learn by observing and mimicking his drumming patterns and gradually developing their skills through continuous practice.

This pedagogical pattern was documented during the observation of rehearsals in June 2023 at the University of Ghana. In the field notes, Morton is documented halting

the ensemble – made up of students of the Department of Music – when the bell player missed an entry point. He is found replaying the bell timeline and instructing a supporting drummer to re-enter solely after rhythmic alignment had been re-established. This observed interaction illustrates that instruction within the ensemble functions via corrective repetition and embodied listening, rather than through verbal theoretical explanation.

Participant observation during rehearsal sessions further illustrates this pedagogical approach. In field notes documented on July 2014, Morton interrupted the ensemble mid-cycle to replay the bell pattern independently, subsequently directing the supporting drummer to re-enter only upon synchronization with the timeline. These corrections illustrate that rhythmic precision is developed through embodied repetition rather than through theoretical discourse.

4.7. Mentorship and Apprenticeship

Following the traditional apprenticeship model, Morton fostered close relationships with his students by providing personalized guidance and feedback. This mentorship extends beyond technical instruction, encompassing cultural education and the transmission of values and histories associated with Tabom music. Many scholars highlighted the importance of this holistic approach in cultivating not only skilled musicians but also cultural custodians.

This mentorship framework elucidates the organizational structure of musical authority within the ensemble. The progression from bell player to supporting drum and ultimately to lead drum is not arbitrary; it is contingent upon the consistent demonstration of rhythmic reliability in both rehearsal and performance contexts. Morton's corrections during rehearsals effectively dictate the allocation of prominent roles among musicians within the ensemble. The continuity of Tabom drumming functions through a structured hierarchy of apprenticeship, rather than relying solely on informal participation, which ensures that each drummer is trained and evaluated systematically before taking on significant roles in performances.

4.8. Adaptation and Expansion of *Agbe* Performance

Recognizing the need to engage younger generations, Morton incorporated contemporary elements into his teaching. This includes using modern technology to record and analyze performances, which enables students to review and improve their techniques. Additionally, he adapted traditional rhythms to fit modern musical contexts, making them more relatable to contemporary audiences, such as incorporating elements of popular music genres that resonate with today's listeners.

4.9. Musical Innovations

Morton's contributions to the evolution of Tabom music are marked by several key innovations that ensure its relevance and vitality:

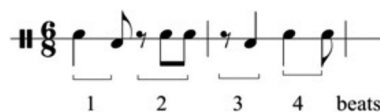
4.9.1. Introduction of New Rhythmic Patterns

Morton introduced new rhythmic patterns and drumming techniques that expanded the traditional repertoire of the *Agbe* Ensemble, allowing for more complex and varied musical expressions in their performances. A notable song is "*Wɔ man joo nɛ*" (to wit "This is our music"), which is performed with a sense of pride and belonging by the musicians. These innovations are not only technically challenging but also creatively

enriching, offering fresh interpretations of traditional rhythms. This approach aligns with the practice of continuous innovation seen in West African drumming traditions, in which each generation contributes new ideas and styles (Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*).

This assertion is grounded in a content analysis of performance during the initiation rite of the Shango Priestess in July 2014, wherein a modified master-drum cue sequence within the *Agbe* rhythmic cycle appears with a recurrence that diverges from the standard cueing structure traditionally used to regulate ensemble transitions. The recording specifically demonstrates a repeated cue pattern followed by a delayed ensemble entry, effectively extending the phrase structure beyond the normative cycle. This renders the innovation analytically verifiable rather than simply claimed.

In *Agbe* performance, the rhythmic organization is systematically structured around a bell timeline, which serves as the temporal reference for the ensemble. An established *Agbe* bell pattern exhibits a cyclical pulse structure, which can be represented schematically as follows:



Ex. 1: *Agbe* bell pattern

Source: based on field research of the author and earlier data.

In this framework, supporting drums delineate complementary patterns that interconnect with the bell timeline, whereas the lead drum presents improvisational phrases that signal transitions between sections of the composition. In the performances examined in this study, Morton extends traditional phrasing by prolonging lead-drum calls across multiple cycles instead of resolving them within a single cycle. This modification enhances the expressive capacity of the ensemble while maintaining the foundational rhythmic structure of *Agbe* music.

Morton's innovations do not supplant the established rhythmic structure of *Agbe* music; rather, they function through controlled variation within that framework. Morton enhances the improvisational capacity of the ensemble by extending lead-drum phrases and incorporating subtle rhythmic displacements in relation to the bell timeline, all while preserving the distinct identity of the *Agbe* rhythmic cycle.

4.9.2. *Use of Technology and Modern Platforms*

By embracing modern technology, Morton incorporated digital tools into his music and teachings. This was evident in their performance at the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM) conference held in Accra in 2023, where the ensemble utilized PA systems to enhance their production. He used recording equipment to document performances and instructional sessions, allowing for detailed analysis and broader dissemination. Additionally, he has appeared on national television, social media, and online platforms to reach a global audience, showcasing Tabom music to a wider community and attracting interest from international musicians and scholars.

4.9.3. Educational Outreach and Workshops

Beyond the *Agbe* Ensemble, Morton conducts workshops and educational programs in schools and community centers, such as those held at the Department of Music, University of Ghana. These initiatives aim to introduce young people to Tabom music and drumming, fostering an early appreciation for their cultural heritage. Morton's outreach efforts contributed to the broader goal of cultural preservation by inspiring the next generation of musicians and cultural enthusiasts (Locke, "Africa/Ewe, Mande, Dagbamba, Shona, Baaka").

4.9.4 Adaptation and Expansion of *Agbe* Performance

Alongside the transmission of established repertoire, *Agbe* performance has also adapted to new contexts in response to changing performance environments. While the core rhythmic structures remain recognizable, the ensemble has occasionally incorporated variations that respond to contemporary audiences or performance settings.

One area of adaptation involves the presentation of *Agbe* in educational and cultural institutions. Demonstrations and workshops conducted in universities and cultural festivals require adjustments to the length and structure of performances to fit within program schedules. In these contexts, shorter musical sequences may be selected to illustrate key rhythmic patterns while still maintaining the character of the tradition, allowing for a more engaging experience for the audience within the limited time available.

The visual presentation of *Agbe* performances during public cultural events demonstrates another form of adaptation. While the rhythmic structure of the repertoire remains consistent with community practices, performances staged for festivals or cultural programs often incorporate coordinated costumes and organized seating arrangements that make the ensemble visually accessible to audiences.

Figure 7 illustrates the *Agbe* Ensemble performing in coordinated traditional attire during a public cultural event. The arrangement of drummers and singers in a semicircular



Fig. 7. Members of the *Agbe* Ensemble performing during a public cultural event in Accra. The coordinated attire and semicircular arrangement illustrate how *Agbe* performance is adapted for contemporary cultural presentations. Photo made by the author.

formation allows participants to maintain visual contact with one another while projecting the performance outward to the audience. Such staging reflects an adaptation to contemporary performance contexts, where visibility and audience engagement become important considerations, particularly in settings such as outdoor festivals and large concert venues where the audience's experience is enhanced by the performers' arrangement.

Participation in academic and cultural conferences has also contributed to the visibility of *Agbe* performance beyond the immediate Tabom community. Such events provide opportunities to present the repertoire within settings where audiences may include scholars, students, and international visitors unfamiliar with the tradition. In these contexts, performances often combine demonstration with brief explanations that help audiences understand the structure of the ensemble. Figure 8 presents the promotional poster announcing a lunchtime concert featuring the Tabom community during the 47th World Conference for Traditional Music (ICTM) held at the University of Ghana in July 2023. The performance formed part of the conference's cultural program and introduced participants to the rhythmic structures and performance practices associated with *Agbe* music. The ensemble's presentation in this setting exemplifies the sharing of community-based musical traditions within scholarly and intercultural environments, all while preserving their distinctive ensemble interaction.

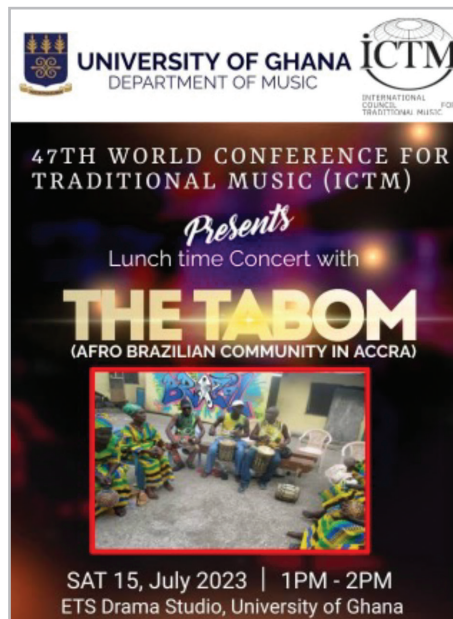


Fig. 8. Poster announcing the lunchtime concert featuring the Tabom community during the 47th World Conference for Traditional Music (ICTM) held at the University of Ghana, Legon, on 15 July 2023.

Such appearances illustrate how *Agbe's* performance continues to engage new audiences while retaining its core rhythmic organization and ensemble structure.

Despite these adaptations, the essential features of the ensemble remain consistent. The bell timeline continues to provide the structural reference for the performance, while the lead drum guides transitions and coordinates interaction among musicians and dancers. Through this balance between continuity and flexibility, *Agbe* performance

remains responsive to new contexts while preserving the rhythmic relationships that define the tradition, allowing for innovative expressions that still honor its cultural roots.

5. Discussion

The findings presented in this study offer clarity about how *Agbe* performance within the Tabom community continues to operate as a structured ensemble practice shaped by apprenticeship, collective rehearsal, and ceremonial performance. Observations of rehearsal sessions, teaching demonstrations, and public performances suggest that the organization of the *Agbe* Ensemble reflects broader principles identified in the ethnomusicological studies of African drumming traditions.

One of the most prominent features observed during rehearsals was the central role of the bell timeline in maintaining rhythmic coordination. The bell pattern functions as a temporal reference that allows supporting drums and the lead drum to align their rhythmic parts within a shared pulse. This structural role corresponds closely with Anku's analysis of rhythmic integration in African percussion ensembles, where timeline patterns serve as organizing frameworks for the interaction of multiple rhythmic layers ("Principles of Rhythm Integration"). In the *Agbe* Ensemble, maintaining the clarity of the bell timeline proved essential for sustaining ensemble coherence during both rehearsal and performance contexts.

The interaction between the bell pattern and the supporting drums also reflects Anku's concept of interlocking rhythmic structures. Rather than functioning as independent musical lines, the drum parts combine to produce a composite rhythmic texture in which each performer contributes a complementary element. Observations of rehearsal practice demonstrated that performers frequently adjusted their patterns in response to the bell's timeline, reinforcing the idea that ensemble coordination depends on the collective internalization of a common rhythmic framework.

A second important aspect of the findings concerns the role of the lead drummer in coordinating ensemble interaction. During both rehearsals and performances, the short phrases introduced on the lead drum served as cues that signalled transitions between sections of a piece or prompted adjustments to the tempo. These cues were immediately recognized by other musicians and dancers, allowing the ensemble to maintain synchronisation without verbal communication. This coordinating function corresponds with Nketia's description of the master drummer as the principal organizer of ensemble performances. According to Nketia, the lead drummer is responsible for guiding the ensemble by introducing signals that regulate the interaction of rhythmic parts (78–86).

The observations in this study illustrate how this coordinating role operates in practice. Rather than simply performing rhythmic variations, the lead drummer shapes the progression of the performance through a series of cues that guide both musicians and dancers. The ability of ensemble members to recognize these cues suggests that they share a collective understanding of the performance conventions associated with *Agbe* repertoire.

The social dimension of drumming traditions discussed by Chernoff also provides a useful framework for interpreting these findings. He emphasizes that African ensemble

performances are fundamentally collaborative, requiring musicians to listen closely to one another and respond to subtle changes in rhythmic interactions (Chernoff, 94–98).

Evidence from rehearsal observations supports this perspective. Moments when the ensemble paused to correct timing errors revealed how performers collectively negotiate rhythmic alignment. Rather than relying on formal instruction, musicians adjusted their playing through repeated interaction with the bell timeline and with one another. These processes highlight the importance of listening and responsiveness within ensemble performance.

The findings also illustrate how *Agbe* performance operates within broader social and ceremonial contexts. Observations of community events and ritual ceremonies demonstrated that drumming interacts closely with dance and ritual activity. Rhythmic cues introduced by the lead drum often corresponded with shifts in dance movements or transitions within ceremonial sequences. This interaction reflects Nketia's broader argument that African musical performance is deeply integrated with social activity rather than functioning as an isolated artistic form.

In addition to community ceremonies, *Agbe* performance has increasingly appeared in educational and cultural settings such as workshops, festivals, and academic conferences. Presentations at events like the ICTM World Conference at the University of Ghana demonstrate the ensemble's adaptability to unfamiliar contexts. In these settings, demonstrations often include brief explanations of the bell timeline and the interaction of drum parts, allowing listeners to understand the structural principles of the music.

Despite these contextual adaptations, the core elements of *Agbe* performance remain consistent. The bell timeline continues to provide the rhythmic foundation of the ensemble, while the lead drum maintains its coordinating function. Supporting drums reinforce the composite's rhythmic texture through interlocking patterns that depend on careful synchronization with the timeline, creating a cohesive sound that enhances the overall performance of the ensemble.

Taken together, these observations suggest that *Agbe* performance illustrates many of the structural and social principles identified in ethnomusicological studies of African percussion traditions. The organization of the ensemble reflects rhythmic integration as described by Anku, the coordinating role of the master drummer as emphasized by Nketia, and collaborative interaction as highlighted by Chernoff.

By examining these processes within the specific context of the Tabom community, the present study contributes to ongoing discussions about how African ensemble traditions are maintained and adapted within contemporary urban environments. The continued practice of *Agbe* drumming demonstrates how community-based performance traditions sustain their structural principles while engaging with new audiences and performance contexts, such as festivals and cultural events that celebrate African heritage in urban settings.

6. Final Reflection

This study set out to examine how the leadership of Eric Odarkwei Morton within the *Agbe* Ensemble illuminates broader processes of cultural transmission, authority,

and adaptation in Afro-diasporic musical traditions. The findings suggest that Morton's role provides a useful case for understanding how musical leadership and ensemble knowledge are organized and sustained within the Tabom community.

First, the study demonstrates that long-term participation in ensemble practice, rather than formal institutional training, constructs musical authority within the *Agbe* Ensemble. Morton's progression from an early participant in rehearsals to the position of lead drummer reflects a pattern of recognition that emerges through experience, demonstrated competence, and acceptance by other musicians. This form of authority corresponds with Nketia's description of the master drummer as the individual responsible for guiding ensemble interaction through rhythmic cues and structural knowledge of the repertoire (13–15).

Second, the findings illustrate how cultural transmission occurs through collective musical practice. Rehearsals, ceremonial performances, and teaching demonstrations provide the settings in which rhythmic patterns, repertoire sequences, and performance conventions are learned. Rather than relying on written notation, knowledge is shared through demonstration, repetition, and attentive listening among performers. These processes support the kind of collaborative interaction described by Chernoff, in which ensemble cohesion emerges through musicians' ability to respond to one another within a shared rhythmic framework.

Third, the study highlights how *Agbe* performance continues to adapt to changing cultural contexts while maintaining its structural principles. Presentations at festivals, educational workshops, and academic conferences demonstrate that the ensemble can engage audiences beyond the immediate Tabom community. In these contexts, the fundamental elements of the music – particularly the bell timeline and interlocking drum patterns described by Anku – remain intact even as the performance setting changes.

Taken together, these observations indicate that Morton's leadership illustrates how Afro-diasporic musical traditions are sustained through a combination of structured ensemble interaction, shared community knowledge, and responsiveness to new performance environments. Within the Tabom community, *Agbe* drumming continues to function as both a musical practice and a social activity that links performers across generations. By documenting these processes, the study contributes to a broader understanding of how Afro-diasporic musical traditions maintain continuity while engaging with contemporary cultural contexts.

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