

## The everyday poetics of ideophones in a West-African society

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Ideophones are marked words that vividly depict sensory events, like English *kerplop* or Siwu *mukumuku* ‘mouth movements of a toothless person eating’, *nyenene* ‘sensation of shivering’, and *wiriwiri* ‘small things dispersed in great numbers’. They serve to ‘recreate events in sound’ (Fortune 1962) and to ‘give an imagination to the listener’ (Webster 2008). Hitherto, the emphasis in ideophone research has always been predominantly on form rather than function. This paper aims to rectify this imbalance by exploring the use of ideophones across several ways of speaking in Siwu, a Kwa language of eastern Ghana. It starts with a brief overview of the use of ideophones in day-to-day discourse and then zooms in on two ritualized genres where ideophones occur perhaps unexpectedly: funeral dirges and greeting exchanges.

Funeral dirges (*sikubienɔ*) are a special genre of verbal-musical art performed during the period of public mourning preceding a burial. The dirges are crucial in containing, orienting, and canalizing the feelings of loss and pathos surrounding death. Ideophones, with their evocative semantics and strong ties to emotional involvement, are perfectly fit to help evoke these powerful feelings. Moving on to greeting routines, the connective tissue of Mawu society, I show that these, too, regularly feature ideophones. The use of ideophones in these everyday exchanges contributes a layer of empathy and helps build a strong sense of interpersonal involvement.

Concluding, I show that the use of ideophones in each of these genres is distinctive while at the same time building on core interactional functions of ideophones in everyday speech. The ethnomusicologist Kofi Agawu has suggested that the expressive modes of West-African societies are shot through with a deep sense of communality — a ‘communal ethos’ (Agawu 2006). The empirical study of how ideophones help build and maintain this communal ethos in social interaction is still in its infancy. I offer this contribution in the hope that others may be induced to explore these issues in more depth.

- Agawu, V. Kofi. 2006. The Communal Ethos in African performance: Ritual, Narrative and Music among the Northern Ewe. In Enrique Cámara de Landa & Silvia Martínez García (eds.), *Approaches to African Musics*, 181-200.
- Fortune, G. 1962. *Ideophones in Shona: An Inaugural Lecture Given in the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland on 28 April 1961*. Oxford University Press.
- Webster, Anthony K. 2008. 'To Give an Imagination to the Listener': The neglected poetics of Navajo ideophony. *Semiotica* 171. 343-365.