

Tempo

You will be amazed at what changes in tempo can do to a rhythm. Beginning drummers often get a case of "happy hands," always trying to "go fast," and even experienced drummers often pick a faster tempo to show off on rather than going a notch or two slower than "the usual tempo" and striving for the best, funkier, most soul satisfying groove. In any particular rhythm, slow, slower and slowest are often more effective in giving a feeling of ritual unfolding, a story unwinding, a strolling and talking, a gentle trancing before dancing. When in doubt I would try slower, softer, lower, more earth, a little water, forget fire. ((but don't forget the ether around each sound)) as you VARY THE TEMPOS.

Accents

Some accents louder than others can make a huge difference, change the character of the rhythm dramatically. Putting a fire slap on the third accent and really hitting it creates a big up-beat effect. Adding an accent changes the rhythm itself, e.g. if you are playing earth, earth, water on the accents of the "Malfoof" rhythm and then put an earth bass on the fifth beat of the eight note pattern you are suddenly playing that Cuban version of samba for a conga!

VARY THE STRENGTH OF ACCENTS.

Dynamics

You are doing earth basses on the first two accents of the rhythm. Now add three water tones each louder than the one before it at the end of the eight note pattern. The third accent disappears into the water. Sounds like a whole new groove but it can still be thought of as the same dynamic pattern with a surge of water flow at the end of each phrase. Any pattern can be crescendo'd or diminuendo'd overall, or just a portion of it can be "surged" or "faded".

VARY DYNAMICS.

Starting Points

Shifting the actual or imagined starting point can easily create a whole new rhythm, like adding a bass accent on the fifth note changes this rhythm to core Cuban samba, but if you do it for a little bit, or do it "in your head" as you are improvising, it may not alter the playing of other drummers or alter the perceptions of listeners. So it is a legit way to morph or shape this rhythm. Just know that it could easily become something else if you are not careful.

For example, moving the basic conga pattern for salsa one eighth note "to the right" (change tonetone = Four-and to become tonetone =s and-One) creates a slow, funky, samba beat.

For example, "starting" with a slapped third accent (beat 7) on our original "Malfoof" rhythm can give me the psychological feel of a New Orleans Mardi Gras Indian bass drummer. As I write this sentence I suddenly realize that 7 is really the pick up beat of the old New Orleans pattern, so "One" in New Orleans is the same as the "One" of this rhythm! So let's call it the "New Orleans Rhythm" (NOR) or maybe New Orleans Instant Rhythm Excitement (NOIRE, that's French for black or what the French call "le black feeling"). If you put fire or slaps on the first and third accents of NOR and do a big water or big earth on the middle accent you are a contemporary New Orleans bass drummer and ready to play with the Dirty Dozen Brass Band or the ReBirth Brass Band or the Wild Magnolias or the Wild Tchoupitoulas. [The reason I was confused and then confused you about all this is that "one" or "the first beat of the measure" is a Western idea and most Africans are not worrying very much about where one is or is not.]

I've heard that a big story in the NY Times not so long ago was devoted to the controversies attending dancing salsa "off one" or "off two," but in the good old days before dancers were getting and giving formal instruction, your older sister taught you to salsa and you danced in synch but slightly out of phase off 1 or 2 or 3 or 4 or 4 and three/quarters as the spirit moved you – it's all in the sauce or "salsa" you're stirring at a particular moment in time.

VARY STARTING POINTS in your mind every so often so that you don't get sucked into too many "where is one" worries or controversies.

Shamanic Shakers

Under most circumstances more shakers, maracas, sekeres, or more scrapers, or more shaken tamborines, would create more and better "high end" or high frequency grooves. The seeds inside rattles or wrapped in strings around a sekere, or the waving of dried palm fronds, etc. are emulating wind, water, flows of spirits, in shamanic work all over the world. Rainsticks. Swish. And there are certainly as many ways to shake shakers, scrape scrapers, create high-end grooves as there are ways to play drums. VARY THE SHAKER pattern and add much magic and mystery to the drumming. Where do alternating hands come in here? Well, think of shaking and scraping as another alternation or back-and-forth technique done with both hands or one hand at a time. And when one hand or arm gets tired of shaking you switch or alternate. Right? Getting tired? Time for the Left. Right?

Two or More Drums

Jembes and dumbeks and frame drums are almost always played as a single drum (sometimes in conjunction with other drums), but congas have a long tradition of being played in pairs, or occasionally in "three way" or "four way" combinations by one player. Some of the most satisfying Afro-Cuban drumming, e.g. my two favorites, bembe and iyesa, require four tuned drums (plus bells, sekere or shakers) each played by a separate player to create their best magic. There is more community building and interdependence going on when each person plays one conga and holds a part well. When this is done in the tradition and in balance it does not detract from singing or dancing but enhances both very powerfully.

VARY THE DRUMS and reclaim the drum family. In very different African traditions like Tiv and Yoruba, the "mother drum" is the low toned, most dynamic and improvising drum and may be supported by "female," "male" and "neuter" drums/parts as tradition requires. In other words, some Latin conga soloists on the high pitched "quinto" conga, some show-off jembe players too, are straying from the African roots, and letting macho or western patriarchal tendencies spoil the drum family balance. Wherever and whenever possible I'd like to reclaim the mellowness and magic that comes from having tuned drums in balance with a guiding, lowest pitched mother drum.

Stopping Sounds

Watching and hearing someone stop the ringing tone of her frame drum at the end of certain phrases reminded me of what great groove secrets there are in stopping, damping, or "grab" techniques (the term for it in middle eastern drumming). When the tone is cut off deftly it leaves not just ether but Big Ether, a gap, hole or space that spirit can pass through. Playing the bass drum or surdu in samba you are cutting off the big boom on 3 to create a great space for the "four" or "4and" up beat that moves the whole parade along the street. Playing one of the four conga drums in bembe each drummer sets up the interlocking tones by muffling or choking or slapping and tapping the beats just before or after the open tones. Just as every sound must have a beginning, so it must have an end. As much as half of the magic in drumming could theoretically

be in the endings of sounds, that place where the ether starts. VARY THE STOPPING OF SOUNDS. And be aware that creating ether and Big Ether may be where most of the groove feeling is created.

That's it: eight ways to vary a rhythm or any alternation of hands pattern so that you and GOD (Group Of Drummers) can create what is needed for wonderful parties and rituals in your community.

Pat Campbell:

Past the point of alternating hands (a challenging skill for some to hone), there are the points: (1) Aim for varied tones, (2) Play slow, (3) Play soft, and let the accents out, (4) Play soft with gradual loudness, and loud with gradual softness. For the very young, the alteration of hands is a difficult task to achieve, and children in the primary grades K-1-2 may, as a whole, do well to play two hands together before succeeding at separate hands, alternating. Consider also the manner in which children learn to jump on two feet before they hop on one foot, the other one held up and away from the ground. The way galloping precedes skipping, developmentally, is another prime example of how the alternation of hands (or feet) is a more sophisticated skill than a one-sided, single-sided venture—or one where both sides go together at once.

* Look at Will Schmid's World Music Drumming: A Cross-cultural Curriculum (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 1998). His is a great sequence, pedagogically speaking, with outstanding examples of sensitivity to sequence, and attention to which strategies work, and in what order. But beyond the pages of this curriculum, the workshops he and others offer on drumming will bring about the alternation of hands, and other necessary techniques, so that real music can be made with confidence and eventual ease.