# ALTERNATION OF HANDS

# Alternation of Hands

The main lesson I try to teach young drummers or beginners of any age is "alternation of hands" – right, left, right, left, a lot like walking. It was bipedalism, walking on two feet and using two "free hands" that evolved our beautiful triune brains in Africa until we became the species *Homo ludens collaboratus* (see Appendix A) in the first place. So it shouldn't be a surprise that drumming flows best in most of the world's drumming traditions when right and left hands alternate with each other regularly, evenly, steadily, groovily.

Here is a very common regular eight beat pattern (Middle Eastern "Malfouf"? or "the New Orleans" beat? or "Muskrat Ramble"? or "hemiola"?) accented as follows:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8								
R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L etc. etc.
>			>			>		>			>			>	
SING	with	me	BE	fore	you	PLAY	now	SING	with	me	BE	fore	you	PLAY	now SING etc.

It can be and is done RLLRLRLRLRLRLRLRLRLRLRL etc.

It can also be done at slow tempos with just the Right or lead hand, usually hitting the center of the drum on the accents and the rim on the unaccented beats.

Some reasons for learning it by alternating hands are:

A) the flow and groove are often better, steadier, easier to relate other rhythms to, if we "fill in" the accent patterns with alternating hands;

B) your endurance will be somewhat to markedly better if you use two hands equally and endurance can be very important for maintaining a long song, dance, performance, ceremony, dawn to dusk or dusk to dawn ritual;

C) you can go much faster without losing the groove, eventually, IF you need to;

D) you can improvise more easily and transform this rhythm into other rhythms without losing the possible advantages of A) thru C) above.

Alternating hands, the middle eastern pattern called "Baladi" looks like this:													
R L	RLRL	R L	RLI	RLRLR	L R I	RL	RLRL	RLF	RLRLRL	RL	RLRI	R	LRL
0	0	>	0	>	0	0	>	0	>	0	0	>	0
will	you	be	gin	now	will	you	be	gin	now	will	you	be	etc.
tone	tone	rim	tone	rim etc.	dum	dum	tek	dum	tek	on a	dumbek		

Notice that all the accents fall on the Right or Lead hand when alternating. Very easy to learn and repeat.

All the accents fall on the Right or Lead hand for a "filled in" Karatsi as well: 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 >> no I will not GO GO I etc. no no no no no not dum dum dum dum tek dum dum dum dum tek OR tek tek tek tek dum tek tek tek tek tek dum

Beverly Frederick taught me the words for these chants or songs (any melody/interval pattern will do) as ways into these three "middle eastern" dynamic patterns. Bev asked us to walk in time and sing the song before we drummed the pattern. Walking in time as you sing these songs (or any song that you make up to express the accent pattern of the rhythm you are teaching or learning) links song to dance to drumming at the very beginning of learning each pattern. Especially for beginners, this is a great way to keep whole body involvement and a sense of the rhythm coming from within you as song and dance. Once it comes from within as song-dance, you can put it on or into a drum more easily.

## Eight Ways to Vary the Beat/Groove/Dynamic Pattern

The following eight aspects or ways or variations in playing these rhythms can be applied to the opening eight beat "Malfoof" or "hemiola" pattern, or to Baladi and Karatsi, or to samba, bomba, rumba, funga, conga, etc. – to just about any rhythm or dynamic pattern you can find, fall into, or invent.

## The Elements

Bass is EARTH, the full hand on the drum to get the lowest most booming sound the drum (jembe, conga, dumbek or frame) is capable of producing.

Tone is WATER, the fingers held together and bounced off the drum to produce the clearest possible tone.

Slap is FIRE, "open" with fingers loose and arriving at the drumskin milliseconds apart and bounced off the skin; or "closed" – fingers loose and arriving at the drumskin milliseconds apart BUT held immediately into the drumskin to produce a snapping or popping sound. This paradoxical situation of "loose" fingers held "tightly" to the head takes beginning drummers months or years to get right and I'm still working on my inconsistent "slaps" after decades of drumming. Of course FIRE is harder to control than EARTH, AIR or WATER.

Soft tones or, more usually, very soft slaps and muffled basses, are AIR that "fills in" around EARTH, WATER, FIRE. And around every earth sound, water sound, fire sound or air sound there should be a little bit of *ether*, just so that we can tell which element is being sounded, even at the fastest tempo. Andy Byron first introduced me to basses, tones, slaps and air-fills as The Elements (and gave me a big wink as he demonstrated "ether" effects), but it was probably some pagan wizard or Sufi mystic who made this correlation for him.

VARY THE MIX OF ELEMENTS on the eight beats of this "Malfoof" rhythm and a seemingly infinite variety of dynamic patterns/feelings will result. Try Earth, Earth, Water on the three accents with air in between. Try Earth Water Fire on the three accents. Try Water on all three accents with Earth in between and try not to let it get too muddy or too fast; you have to go slow to get the basses right. Try all eight beats as tones for maximum water flow effect. And so forth.

## 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, funkiest, 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 upbeat 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 <u>World Music Drumming: A Cross-cultural Curriculum</u> (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.