When the Gyil Speaks: Music, Emotions, and Performance in Dagaaba Funerary Rituals

By

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ABSTRACT

Funeral ceremonies are important social events in Dagaaba society. The funeral is by far the largest public ritual of the Dagaaba, celebrating and effecting the passage of a dead person’s spirit into the state of ancestorhood. Central in the organization and performance of Dagaaba funerals is the gyil, a wooden frame xylophone tuned to an anhemitonic pentatonic scale. Beginning from the announcement of death in a community to the performance of all important rituals, gyil music does not only mark the temporal structures of the funeral event but also defines and shapes it. The music that the gyil performs for the funeral is called kuurbine, a Dagaare word which literally means funeral dance music. Without the performance of kuurbine, the Dagaaba strongly assert that there cannot be a funeral ceremony. Beyond its normative role of accompanying the funeral proceedings, the Dagaaba ascribe much emotional functions to kuurbine music. The music is attributed with the power to evoke strong emotions in funeral participants. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork conducted among the Dagaaba in Nandom between November 2010 and June 2014, this dissertation examines the nature and purpose of kuurbine music in Dagaaba funerary rituals. It examines the processes by which musical forms become invested with emotion and, therefore, meaning. Kuurbine music embodies the very essence of mourning in Dagaaba society. It induces collective musicking, dancing, and wailing among the funeral audience that enables individual loss to become a communal affair, an affair that reinforces and strengthens people’s commitment to the communities in which they belong.
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Finally, my heartfelt thanks go to my family and friends whose love and support has spurred me on throughout this journey. You are too many to be mentioned here individually. I wish to especially thank my wife Patience for her patience, prayer, and emotional support without which this work would not have been completed now.
The non-English terms used in this work are mainly Dagaare, the language of the Dagaaba people. Dagaare forms part of the Gur language family of the Niger-Congo phylum (Mwinlaaru, 2016:2). It is spoken in three West African countries, namely, Ghana, Burkina Faso, and Cote d’Ivoire (Lewis, Simons & Fenning 2015; Bodomo 2000). In Ghana, Dagaare is the dominant language in the northwestern part of the country, and it is one of the nine languages approved by the Ghana Education Service as a medium of instruction in primary schools in the area. Written Dagaare basically utilizes letters from the English alphabet. However, Dagaare has two vowels and six consonants that are not found in the English alphabet. The following shows the alphabets in their respective categories, with a guide to how they are pronounced. The pronunciation of any consonant not listed here is identical to that of the English alphabet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vowels</th>
<th>Consonants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>gb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[a] as in “apple”</td>
<td>[gb] as in “bin”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>gy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[e] as in “table”</td>
<td>[gy] as in “jail”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ε</td>
<td>kp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ε] as in “egg”</td>
<td>[kp] as in “Paul”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>ky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[i] as in “give”</td>
<td>[c] as in “chair”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o</td>
<td>ng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[o] as in “smoke”</td>
<td>[ⁿ] as in “bring”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ɔ</td>
<td>ny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ɔ] as in “bought”</td>
<td>[n] as in “annual”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[u] as in “book”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dagaare is a two-tone language, and tonality is essential in differentiating between words with the same combination of consonants and vowels as in, for instance, báá (a dog) and bàà (to grow up). In this work, however, I do not use tonal markings on the words except some few examples in chapter four where I
discuss speech surrogates in gyil playing. To clarify any ambiguities that may arise, I have included as an appendix, a glossary of Dagaare words and expressions with their meanings.
PREFACE

Ghana has many varieties of musical instruments developed and handed down over many generations. Over fifty ethnic groups live in the ten administrative regions of the country, with each of them having unique sets of musical traditions. Thus, there are varied musical forms across which axes of ethnicities are mapped. While musical instruments such as drums proliferate among the Akan, Ewe, and Ga—to name some few ethnic groups—in the south, the northwest of Ghana harbors the xylophone. The Dagaaba, Birifor, and Sisaala are particularly noted for xylophone playing in Ghana. While each of these groups maintains a distinctive style of xylophone music, there is yet a considerable mutual influence and overlap between them due to the fluidity of territorial boundaries in the northwestern region. This study specifically deals with the Dagaaba xylophone tradition. The Dagaaba call the xylophone gyil, an iconic instrument that is deeply connected with their ethnic identity. The gyil is integral in the social and religious lives of the Dagaaba, and it is played in several contexts including events of the life cycle, religious ceremonies such as the bagr and Catholic Mass, and the post-harvest festival called Kakube. However, the funeral is the most significant context for gyil music among all the Dagaaba ceremonial occasions in which the instrument plays an integral role. This dissertation is primarily an account of gyil music in the funerary rituals of the Dagaaba in Nandom, an area located in the extreme northwestern corner of Ghana, bordering Côte d’Ivoire in the west, and Burkina Faso in the north.

My interest in Dagaaba xylophone music is deeply rooted in my growing up experiences in my hometown, Nkyeraa, in the Brong Ahafo Region of Ghana
(in the western central part of the country). Many Dagaaba people migrated from the northwest to my hometown in search of fertile lands for farming. Gyil music was a fundamental aspect of social life among the migrants. On Sundays, during which the Dagaaba brought their farming products for sale in the marketplace, it was not uncommon to see gyil performances, with groups of Dagaaba young adults expressing themselves through singing and dancing around the instrument. During moonlight, gyil music and dancing were the main source of entertainment for the Dagaaba. I can recollect with nostalgia, the characteristic leaps, runs, twists and turns of the body, and vigorous swinging of the waist and torso of the dancers. That was incomparable to the more graceful Akan dances such as Adowa, Kete, and Fontomfrom with which I was familiar and used to perform.

I became so fascinated with the music and dances of the Dagaaba, however, participating in their music was far from my reach. The stereotypes of the Dagaaba as uncivilized and superstitious people compelled many Akan parents like mine to stop their children from associating with them. That was the reality of life in an Akan community where ethnocentrism played a vital role in social stratification. In fact, this is reflective of the persistent discrimination against the Dagaaba and other ethnic minorities from the north in many southern Ghana communities, a reality which, nonetheless, has always been swept under the carpet in the socio-political discourse of the country.

However, the opportunity to study the gyil availed itself during my undergraduate studies in music at the University of Cape Coast. I learned to play the instrument as part of the curricular requirements for my studies in African percussion in the university. Under the tutelage of Gilbert Berese, a Dagaaba
master musician and a contemporary of Kakraba Lobi, one of the famous xylophone players from Ghana, I learned several gyil tunes from the *bewaa* recreational repertoire, Catholic Mass, and few others played in funerary contexts. During lessons with Berese, I realized that there was much more to understanding the Dagaaba gyil tradition than gaining proficiency in playing the instrument. For instance, Berese consistently emphasized the point that until a musician plays the gyil in funerary contexts, he will never be recognized as *gɔbaa*, a Dagaare word which means master of the xylophone. He explained that though it is expected of every xylophonist to demonstrate a high level of virtuosity in any given performance context, the *gɔbaa* accolade is reserved for only those players who do so in the funeral context. That is, irrespective of how dexterous, ingenious, and creative a xylophonist may be, the *gɔbaa* title eludes him until he demonstrates those qualities in the funeral. Spurred by these claims, I desired to know more about gyil playing after I completed my bachelor’s degree.

Thus, my M.Phil. thesis at the University of Cape Coast focused on the gyil. Tackling the broader question of what makes a *gɔbaa*, my thesis examined how Dagaaba gyil musicians were evaluated in various contexts in which the gyil is nowadays played, including Catholic worship, formal educational settings, concert stages, festivals, and funerals, and how that related to the determination of musical mastership in the art. Of particular interest in the study was to examine how social transformation and changing conditions of music-making in Dagaaba society affected the role of xylophonists and emic conceptualizations of gyil musicianship. The research revealed that Dagaaba concepts of musicianship and artistic evaluative processes in gyil playing were context-dependent. However,
playing at the funeral was so crucial in defining who a gɔbaa was. Beyond the factors of musical aptitude and skills expected of all xylophonists in any given contexts, strongly underlying the specificity of the funeral in the definition of a gɔbaa is the function of the gyil player and his music in the totality of the funeral event. That is the issue around which this dissertation is oriented. Though a sequel to my previous study, the present work does not focus on the musicians per se, but rather on the general issues of how Dagaaba funeral music effects and influences emotional behaviors in the funeral, and how that in turn shapes, transforms, and contributes to the overall success of the event.

While I attempt to describe and interpret some aspects of the significance of music in Dagaaba funeral ceremonies, this dissertation represents just a portion of the data generated through ethnographic fieldwork conducted intermittently between 2010 and 2014 in Nandom. One of the positives of this research is a side project that resulted in a documentary film on the gyil. The documentary features Victor Ziem, one of the musicians included in this study, in the construction of the gyil. It captures the processes involved in building and tuning the gyil as well as rituals performed to purify the instrument before it is sold to a buyer. Co-produced with my M.Phil. thesis advisor, Dr. Florian Carl, the documentary was published in 2016 by the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, Germany under the title, Daga-gyil Making in Ghana. Overall, this dissertation brings new insights into the gyil music of the Dagaaba as it examines how it engenders emotional responses in their funerary rituals. The dissertation also provides broader insights into how emotions in ritual contexts must be understood and interpreted.
There is no doubt that ethnography has, for a long time, been integral and one of the defining characteristics of ethnomusicological studies and research. The methodological approaches we utilize during fieldwork and the role we play in the research all have tremendous impact on the knowledge and experiences we build as scholars as well as the conclusions we draw from our data. The question of who we are in relation to the subjects we study may influence our experiences in the field and affect our research agenda. My fieldwork among the Dagaaba was full of experiences and encounters that have shaped my understanding of the difficulties involved in conducting research in one’s own country, especially under the prevailing circumstances of ethnocentrism in the larger Ghanaian society. Because of my Akan background, I faced several challenges in Nandom, which had adverse impacts on my research. However, I will not describe my entire field experiences as a negative one. Musicians including Victor Ziem, Ralio Yiryella, Francis Pelpuo, Dennis Nkyenyine, Mathew Nandom, and Candida Kobkuu among others included in this study did not only offer to dedicate their time and share with me their deep musical knowledge, but also received me as one of their own. Through the relationships I formed with these individuals, I got a better understanding of how people can be united despite the differences in ethnicities, beliefs, and customary practices. In my later interviews and conversations with Bernard Woma, he never hid his admiration for my enthusiasm in gyil music. He always commended me for demonstrating interest in advancing knowledge of the Dagaaba gyil tradition. I will forever be grateful to these individuals. In this work, I strive to approach the Dagaaba people and their musical culture with all the importance and respect they deserve.
INTRODUCTION

As the pair of xylophones under the big baobab tree began their funeral dialogue, the drum responded with dry syncopated sounds… The chanters, standing behind the musicians, began their mournful songs, piercing the hearts of the crowd with sorrow. It was their job to provide a structure for the crowd to release their pent-up feelings… The chanters were ecstatic, drunk with words… Each doleful phrase was followed by a huge howling, begun by the men and concluded by women… Slowly, by groups, the men began to move out of the crowd and walk rhythmically in a line toward an open area. The women followed the men, either in a column or in compact groups. There they stopped and began to perform a kind of jiggling, carefully synchronized dance consisting of rhythmical movements of the torso and hands. It was as if something deep inside each person was being pulled out of its secret hiding place…

When the xylophones speak [my emphasis], everyone experiences the meaning of poetry… Without xylophone music and chanting, there is no funeral, no grief, and no death (Somé, 1994:57-59).

The long quote above is how Malidoma Somé, in a reflexive account of his grandfather’s funeral in Dannon, a Dagaaba village in Burkina Faso, succinctly captures the important role music plays in Dagaaba celebrations of death. While painting such a vivid picture of the ritual atmosphere, Somé subtly highlights how music functions as an affective force that move the mourners in some powerful ways. The music propels mourners for action, such that “each doleful phrase” of the dirge performed by the chanters “[pierces] the hearts of the crowd with sorrow” (1994:57), and mourners despondently respond with a “huge howling” (1994:58). Expressive responses to the syncopated rhythms of the xylophones and drum also create an emotional contagion, in that, when the men move out of the crowd to “perform a kind of jiggling” in a carefully synchronized manner, the women follow, “either in a column or in compact groups” (ibid). The dance movements are also described with some invigorating visual metaphors. People danced “as if something deep inside [them] was being pulled out of its secret
hiding place” (ibid). These images painted by Somé are so revealing of the affective power of music in Dagaaba funerals, a crucial aspect of Dagaaba musical experience which, nonetheless, has rarely been examined in the extant literature (see Wiggins 2011; 1998; Wiggins and Kobom 1992; Woma 2012; Lawrence 2011; Saighoe 1988; Kuutiero 2006).

Drawing insights from fieldwork conducted between November 2010 and June 2014 in the Northwest of Ghana, this dissertation mobilizes performance and affective concepts to investigate how music evokes, intensifies, and sustains emotional behaviors that defines the quality and success of funeral ceremonies among the Dagaaba. That is, it examines how music moves people into action and how those actions in turn shape and transform the funeral event. More precisely, this dissertation is essentially a study of the nature and purpose of music in Dagaaba funerary rituals. It illuminates the processes by which musical forms become invested with emotions, and therefore, meaning. The funeral, the most elaborate social occasion of the Dagaaba, is the dramatic and aesthetic setting par excellence where Dagaaba indigenous art forms find their highest expression. Through collective musicking, dancing, and wailing, individual loss becomes a communal affair, an affair that reinforces and strengthens people’s commitment to the communities in which they belong. The Dagaaba are quite widespread in West Africa. They mostly occupy the eastern and southern parts of la Côte d’Ivoire and Burkina Faso respectively, as well as northwestern Ghana. This study, however, focuses on the Dagaaba who live in the Nandom traditional area located in the extreme northwestern corner of Ghana, bordering Côte d’Ivoire in the west, and Burkina Faso in the north.
Background of Study

Like any other society, death among the Dagaaba is a crucial matter. The ceremony held to commemorate the death of a person is distinct from all other social events in terms of organization, attendance, duration, and emotional display. In Dagaaba worldview, death is not the end of life. There is the belief that the spirit of a person lives on after death, therefore, death is only a transition or gateway from this physical world, *tengzu*, to a spiritual world, *dapaarewie* (Doggu, 2015; Gbal, 2013; Woma, 2012; Kuukure, 1985). However, the death of a person is believed to destabilize the carefully calibrated systems of *tengzu* (the physical world) and, accordingly, requires some practical measures to ensure the restitution of balance and to protect the living from the potentially harmful spirit of the dead, as well as to comfort the bereaved. The medium for taking these practical measures is the funeral (*kuur*). It provides the framework for the performance of significant rituals that would ensure the smooth transition of the deceased person’s spirit to the hereafter. Communal involvement in matters of death is always the focus of Dagaaba funeral ceremony, and the most important means of showing this involvement is through crying, dancing, singing, and other expressive acts.

Central in the organization and celebrations of death in Dagaaba society is the *gyil*, a wooden frame xylophone tuned to an anhemitonic pentatonic scale. The *gyil* is the most expressive instrument of the Dagaaba and the fulcrum around which funeral activities revolve. The music that the *gyil* performs for the funeral is called *kuurbine*, a Dagaare word which literally means funeral dance music. *Kuurbine* is performed by an ensemble comprising two *gyil* players, a drummer,
and a chorus of singers led by a dirge cantor. One gyil player and the drummer play supportive roles while the other xylophonist assumes the lead role. The supporting players play distinctive recurring rhythmic patterns that provide a ground for the lead xylophonist to superimpose elaborate melodic and polyphonic forms. The dirges (langni), which form the vocal component of the ensemble, are interwoven with the instrumental patterns to generate a very complex web of musical activity. As an integral aspect of kuurbine music, the dirges primarily celebrate the achievements of the deceased person in highly stylized linguistic forms. Likewise, the melodies played by the lead xylophonist have associated verbal texts that commemorate certain attributes of men and women in Dagaaba society. As the vital center to the occasion, kuurbine music remains the mainstay of the funeral once the ceremony begins. Without the performance of kuurbine at the funeral, Dagaaba strongly assert that “there is no funeral, no grief, and no death” (Somé, 1994:59). “Why so?”, is the simple, yet, deep question this study attempts to answer.

The Dagaaba funeral is an occasion for expressing a mélange of emotions, and in fact, the observer is struck by the intensity at which the emotions are expressed. The reasons for the intense expressions may be obvious. There is the searing fact of separation from a loved one. The realization that a person has lost a parent, spouse, child, or a close acquaintance may result in emotional responses of various kinds. Also, the suddenness with which death strikes out of nowhere may shock people, and there can be fear for one’s own life, and fear of the power of death itself. Anger may be expressed against the persons or powers supposedly responsible for a death. However, the manifestation of these sentiments, the
Dagaaba argue, expressly hinges on the performance of kuurbine music. As one interviewee claimed, “there is sorrow and anguish when someone dies. However, it takes kuurbine music to bring people’s feelings out. When the music moves them, they can act out how they feel about the death that has occurred” (Interview Berese, Winneba 10.10.2010). In the descriptions of his grandfather’s funeral, Somé makes a similar point, claiming that the funeral music “cracks open that part of the self that holds grief under control” (Somé 1994:57). Somé goes on to describe Dagaaba funeral musicians as “invaluable engineers of emotions” (ibid).

From this brief background, one thing becomes apparent. Beyond its normative role of accompanying the ritual proceedings, the most immediate function music plays in the funeral is either to incite strong emotions in people or kindle them to discharge their pent-up feelings. This means that music has much influence on how people behave in the funeral and Dagaaba funeral musicians, being aware of this, place much emphasis on this aesthetic singularity. This study sets out to address the following: How unique is kuurbine music among other musical forms in contemporary Dagaaba society? What is its role in Dagaaba funerals, and what exceptional qualities does it possess that lends itself so peerless in moving Dagaaba funeral participants to action?

By answering the above questions in greater detail, and covering other questions and topics that feed back into the discourse, one of the underlying assumptions of this study is that kuurbine music is an expressive form that influences the psychosocial behavior of Dagaaba funeral participants, generates public awareness, and prompt responses for the realization of personhood and formation of group identity (see Bokor, 2014:166). Many Africanists scholars
have shown that music plays a significant role in the broader context of ritual observances in Africa, such as Kaminski (2012), Hogan (2011), Jankowsky (2010; 2007), Friedson (2009), Strand (2009), Vercelli (2006), Saighoe (1988), Berliner (1979), and Nketia (1963). Evoking the contributions of these authors on the importance of music in rituals, I show how kuurbine performance in Dagaaba funeral ceremonies is not an activity that merely happens within the horizons of ritual, “but is the very terms of existence from which all else flows” (Friedson, 2009:8). As will be demonstrated, music does more in Dagaaba funerals than define the temporal structure of the event and effect the ritual’s role of marking the transition of the dead person’s spirit to the hereafter and protect the living from the potentially harmful spirit of the dead. It facilitates intensive emotional display, a quality that defines the success of the funeral event. That is, the success of the ceremony is gauged by the intensity of emotional performance by the participants, yet, the intensity flows out of the participants’ experiences with the poignancy of the kuurbine music. When the xylophones are played and the dirge singer, in a persuasive voice, touts the personal achievements of the deceased and laments the consternation that the death has brought to the bereaved family and the entire community, people feel the reality of the tragedy that has occurred, more than anything else, in the immediacy of the musical setting. The reality of the loss becomes apparent and people perform their feelings in culturally acceptable ways, including wailing, screaming, sobbing, sighing, and other expressive acts typical of the funeral.
Ritual and the Performance of Emotions

One of the concerns of this study is to interrogate how we can close the gap that exists between discourses about ritual observances and emotional behaviors that take place in them. Anthropological accounts of rituals, both classic and recent, have shown that emotions abound in ritual observances and they inform individual's involvement in the events (see Durkheim, 1915; Tambiah, 1985; Gamliel, 2015; Fiona, 2013; Michaels, 2012; Wolf, 2003; 2001; 2000). However, the most contested issue has been how to interpret emotional behavior within the framework of rituals (see Lutz and White, 1986; Briggs, 1993). One feature that distinguishes ritual action is its formal and rule-governed character, which anthropologists have invariably juxtaposed with informal and spontaneous activity (Mahmood, 2001). Whereas there is disagreement among anthropologists about whether ritual is a special mode of human action or any form of human behavior, there seems to be consensus that ritual activity is governed by certain conventions and social rules, a trait that differentiates it from activities of the mundane (Bell, 1997; 1992; Van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969). This dichotomy between formal and routine behavior has provided the basis of other conceptual oppositions within theoretical elaborations on rituals, such as conventional versus spontaneous action, genuine versus ingenuine emotions, and outer demeanor versus inner self (Lutz and White, 1986; Michaels and Wulf, 2012).

Narrowing down to funerals, the common underlying assumption in many ethnographies has been that acts such as crying or wailing in mourning situations
are often mandated by tradition and, thus, are normative and customary behavior independent of the feelings of the individual mourner (Durkheim, 1965[1915]; Kapferer, 1979; Michaels, 2012). It is postulated that the death of a person creates social crisis and as such, the ceremony held to commemorate the event entails emotional expression by the community at large. These expressions are, nonetheless, structured in specific ways to conform to the beliefs, traditions, and customary practices of the community concerned (Seremetakis, 1991). Emotional behaviors in Dagaaba funerals clearly demonstrate these features. However, interpreting them as merely normative and customary is simplistic. Whereas expressive behaviors in Dagaaba funerals may conform to certain rules, or even be independent of individually felt emotions, it is equally crucial to acknowledge that certain affective mechanisms are built into the ritual process that strive to produce deeply-felt sentiments in the participants and strive to link those sentiments to the prevailing ritual form. This affective mechanism is kuurbine music. Drawing on scholars such as Gamliel (2010), Briggs (1993), and Nketia (1963), whose works demonstrate how funeral dirges and laments engender emotions of various kinds in mourning situations, I argue that kuurbine music is an important musical form employed by the Dagaaba to move funeral participants into action, enabling them to feel what they express. In so doing, I claim that although rituals involve formal, structured, and stereotyped behaviors, emotional expressions in ritual observances are not necessarily less spontaneous as they are often assumed to be. Rather, rituals have the potential to generate a great number of strong emotions among participants through musical performance.
Definition of Concepts

Before I deal with the research method employed for this study and provide an overview of the chapters, there is the need to outline the theoretical concepts on which this study is grounded. Two concepts, *emotion* and *performance*, are of particular relevance to this study. On one hand, emotion provides a framework to account for how kuurbine music stimulates Dagaaba funeral participants to react and how the people’s reaction to the music in turn contributes to the overall success of the ceremony. Performance, on the other hand, brings emotion into being. That is, it enables us to understand emotions from careful observations of human behavior and action (Juslin and Sloboda, 2010:74). By performance, people’s feelings towards the death, facilitated by music, become manifest in expressive behaviors such as wailing, screaming, dancing and other acts. These individually performative acts oriented around kuurbine music coalesce to form a collective practice that legitimizes and validates the funeral ceremony as a communal event.

While both emotion and performance are everyday constructs, in the scholarly world, they have proved difficult to be conceptually pinned down. With regards to emotion, one of the most contentious issues has been the attempt by scholars to differentiate it from affect and other terms that describe intense experiences. Whereas emotion and affect are often used as synonyms in many writings (Rice, 2008:201), some scholars distinguish between the two words on several theoretical grounds. Brian Massumi, for instance, argues that affect and
emotion follow different logics and pertain to different orders. He writes: “affect is intensity; an emotion is a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of quality of experience which is from that point onward defined as personal” (Massumi, 2002:28). Massumi describes emotions as personal since, according to him, they have narrativized contents that are shaped through specific cultural, social, and political contexts. In contrast, affect in Massumi’s view is pre-personal, unintentional, independent of signification, and defies linguistic or semantic representation. Massumi does not only treat emotion and affect as distinct, but he also defines them against each other. If for instance, affect is pre-personal, emotion is personal, or if emotion is intentional, affect is unintentional. Likewise, Lawrence Grossberg strongly argues that emotion should not be conflated with affect in any sense. Grossberg writes: “Emotion [cannot] simply be described as affect, even as configurations of affect. I have always held that emotion is the articulation of affect and ideology. Emotion is the ideological attempt to make sense of some affective productions” (2010:316). Grossberg goes on to claim that affect has “become everything that is non-representational or non-semantic” (ibid).

In the introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg move further with this distinction, treating affect as something other than or beyond emotion. They write:

Affect, at its anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces—visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world’s apparent intractability (Seigworth and Gregg 2010:1).
The implication here is that, affect takes us beyond conscious knowing, one of the important criteria that, to many affect theorists, distinguishes it from emotion. Such views form part of a paradigm shift in affect studies that some have called “The Affective Turn” (Clough and Hallie, 2007). Drawing on the works of Tomkins, Deleuze and Guattari, theorists of the affective turn shift focus from the poststructuralist discursive modes of analyzing affect to examining how people experience their world through bodily intensities. According to Clough and Halley, contemporary affect theorists define affects in terms of their “autonomy from conscious perception and language” (2007:209).

These conceptual definitions of emotion and affect, and the distinctions drawn between them have been challenged by other scholars. With regards to its autonomy, feminist and queer scholars in particular argue that affects cannot be autonomous since they are continually mediated by social and cultural factors just like emotions. Ngai (2005), for instance, describes affect as a form of bodily knowledge that is concrete and already meaningful, rather than as autonomous, non-subjective, or independent of conscious knowing. For Ngai, it is even needless to differentiate emotion from affect because “at the end of the day, the difference between affect and emotion is still intended to solve the same basic fundamentally descriptive problem it was coined in psychoanalytic practice to solve: that of distinguishing first-person from third-person feeling, and, by extension, feeling that is contained by an identity from feeling that is not” (Ibid:27). That is, Ngai sees the affect/emotion split as a methodological problem rather than a conceptual one. She, thus, uses both terms interchangeably.
Brennan articulates similar views by arguing that both affect and emotion “are synonymous translation of the Latin word *affectus*” and, therefore, “there is no reason to challenge that emotions are basically synonymous with affect” (Brennan, 2006:6).

In the afterword to her second edition of *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2015), Sarah Ahmed offers a trenchant critique to this distinction between emotion and affect. For Ahmed, emotions include those processes that some scholars have used the term “affect” to describe. Inspired by the works of Spinoza, Descartes, and Locke, Ahmed points out that “emotions…involve bodily processes of affecting and being affected…[they] are a matter of how we come into contact with objects and others” (2015:206), and how we are shaped by the objects we encounter or vice-versa. Ahmed goes on to argue that emotions are not located in the individual, but move between bodies, a process that most theorists of the affective turn have failed to acknowledge and hence reduced emotions to personal or subjective feelings. Inasmuch as emotions may involve subjects, Ahmed argues that they are not reducible to them. She writes: “emotions are not simply something ‘I’ or ‘we’ have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others” (2015:10). That is, emotion, for Ahmed is nothing different from how other scholars theorize affect. However, she disagrees with the claim that affect is autonomous or devoid of intentionality and evaluations. According to Ahmed, affect involves an orientation towards something, hence, there are evaluative implications. Ahmed articulates this point clearly in her essay “Happy Objects” (2010), as she writes:
“to be happy is to be affected by something, to be happy is to be happy about something, and to be happy about something makes something good” (Ibid:29).

Similarly, Brennan views affect as “the physiological shift accompanying a judgement, or any evaluative orientation toward an object” (2006:7). Such viewpoints certainly differ from those who claim an autonomy of affect. According to Ahmed, emotion and affect do not refer to different aspects of experience, therefore, distinguishing between them is pointless (2015:208).

Emotion and affect are not new words in music studies, and they have been used interchangeably to describe affective experiences with music for many centuries (Hoffman, 2015; Thompson and Biddle, 2013; Wilson et al, 2012).¹ However, Juslin and Sloboda (2010:9) offer insightful ways on how music scholars can employ these two terms to describe experiences with music in non-conflicting ways. They define emotion as quite brief but intense affective reaction to music, whereas affect is the overarching concept that “comprise anything from music preference, mood, feeling, and emotion to aesthetic and even spiritual experiences” (ibid). Nonetheless, they express hesitation to use the term “affect” since, as they claim, the main journals in the field increasingly use emotion instead of affect.

In this study, I take emotion rather than affect (though I also use them interchangeably) as the organizing term for analyzing music and affective

¹ Following the affective turn, however, there is an emerging trend in ethnomusicology and music studies in general that attempts to rigorously distinguish between the two concepts (see Hofmann, 2015; Thompson and Biddle, 2013). In fact, in recent studies of the affective potential of music, not only do scholars employ the term affect in the same sense that Massumi and others do, but also privilege affect over emotion, reifying musical affect as something autonomous and ineffable (Schrimshaw, 2013).
responses in Dagaaba funerals, albeit, not for the reason that Juslin and Sloboda give, but because emotion is the term used in everyday life to describe what I want to give an account of. In a general sense, however, my use of the word emotion conceptually leans more on the views espoused by scholars such as Ahmed (2015; 2010), Ngai (2005), and Brennan (2006). Their views about the intentionality and evaluative aspects of emotions are particularly significant for the ethnographic context within which my analysis is situated. They not only enable an account of how Dagaaba funeral musicians, in performance, intentionally incite specific emotions to achieve specific goals, but also enable an account of how participants in Dagaaba funerals evaluate musical performances, and describe their affective experiences with music by using indigenous aesthetic terminology. While I acknowledge that words may not be enough to capture fully people’s experiences with music, this approach, nonetheless, is crucial in explaining, for instance, why the Dagaaba prefer certain kinds of music over others for the celebrations of death.

The forces of change in contemporary Ghanaian society has influenced Dagaaba musical practice in several ways (Dankwa, 2012:35; Woma, 2013:75). However, Dagaaba people insist on the use of kuurbine music for funeral ceremonies. As will be shown in the ensuing chapters, insistence on kuurbine music hinges on its ability to move the funeral participants in more powerful ways, something Dagaaba claim cannot be found in any other music.

Similarly, “performance” has varied and contested meanings, and its very usage in academic discourse is bound up in disagreement about what sort of human action it is (see Schechner and Sarah, 2013; Bial, 2007). A cursory look at
the usage of the term shows that some scholars employ it to denote a more specific mode of action distinct from normal or everyday life (Turner, 1974; Schechner, 1985), while others use it to designate actions usually conceived of as the mundane, routine, or ordinary (see Carlson, 2004). But as a theoretical construct, performance has been approached from two main perspectives. One perspective originates in language and communication theory, sociolinguistics, and folklore (see Schieffelin, 1998; Drewal, 1991). A key figure of this perspective was Richard Bauman whose essay, “Verbal Arts as Performance” (1977), constructed a performance-centered approach to the study of verbal arts instead of the text-centered approaches that previously dominated folklore scholarship. Bauman defined performance as “a mode of spoken verbal communication [which] consists in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence” (1977:11). In focusing on performance as a communicative interaction, Bauman argued that the essence of verbal arts does not lie in the special usages or patterning of formal features within texts. Rather, it lies in the process of bringing the text into being. Bauman, thus, shifted the focus from the literal communication—the message being communicated, i.e. text—to the act of communicating—performance. In so doing, however, he promoted a lingua-centric frame of performance as verbal communication, as he wrote: “performance is a mode of language use, a way of speaking” (1977:11). In this definition, what becomes apparent is the exclusion of other forms such as nonverbal performance (for instance, dance, or mimetic play), or performance that communicates non-textual messages.
The second perspective, inspired by the works of Goffman (1959), Turner (1974), and Schechner (1985), shifts focus from language to relate performance to an understanding of behavior in social life as enacted. This approach focuses on the theatrical aspect of human behavior in social interactions, including the way people present themselves to others in social situations. In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman claimed that individuals, in their daily relations with others, present idealized versions of themselves, and by so doing attempt to protect and guide the impressions formed of them, a process he termed “impression management” (1959:22). For Goffman, social life is an analogy for theater where in our daily dealings with others we enact an inauthentic version of ourselves to influence others. Turner (1987) similarly theorized performance as a form of *social drama* that occurs outside the regular flow of social life through special framing of time and place. The basic assumption of this theory is that all social behavior is to a certain extent performed and that different social relationships can be seen as theatrical roles that differs from normative role playing in regular social life (Carson, 2004:31). Following Goffman and Turner, Schechner (1985: 36) conceptualized performance as “restored behavior.” This concept refers to performance situations where there is a certain distance between self and behavior, analogous to that between an actor and the role the actor plays on stage.

Both theories on performance are useful for this study. The first theory provides a framework in order to identify the Dagaaba funeral as a site in which the music specialists—gyil players and dirge singers—assume responsibility towards the rest of the funeral participants for the display of communicative
competence. Being an event in which music is so crucial for the enhancement of emotional experience, much is expected of the musicians. In so far as a highly emotionally charged atmosphere is a desirable feature of the funeral, the musicians must generate an intensity of socio-musical interaction by playing or singing appropriate songs that would enable people to wail or dance. The second theory is also relevant for this study, in that, performance becomes central in organizing the relationship between music and emotion in the funeral. In performance, we get to understand how people feel about the death that has occurred through “the public images of sentiment” (Geertz, 1973:82). However, we must also interrogate the metaphors of theatricality underlying this theory. If, for instance, interactions in social situations are always enacted, as Turner (1974) and others seem to suggest, then, how do we account for reality? In other words, what counts as reality? As I discuss music and emotional responses in the Dagaaba funeral, I exercise caution not to judge the display of emotions on the basis of truth or falsity. I rather emphasize the purpose of the intensive emotional displays and how the intended purpose is achieved through the affective power of kuurbine music.

**Methodology**

The relationship between emotions and music has been an issue of interest in ethnomusicology, and several methods have been employed to investigate this phenomenon. The most common method used by ethnomusicologists for this line of inquiry is ethnographic fieldwork where expressive behaviors in relation to music in live performances are observed and interpreted, often supported by
interviews. But in recent times a shift towards scientific approaches are being made, with the aim of scientifically comparing results (Bakan, 2009). These include experimental methods where rating scales, adjectival checklists, and questionnaires are used by some ethnomusicologists to obtain data for precise descriptions of people’s intense experiences with music (see Weisser, 2011; Mathur et al, 2013). The other approach is physiological experiments. Mainly developed in neuroscience, this approach theorizes the body as the structure within which emotions occur. It is argued that emotions involve a kind of perception that is internal to the body and, thus, can be assessed by measuring bodily changes. Hence, sophisticated technologies including fMRI and PET scan among others are used to measure the physiological activities of the body—heart rate, respiration, skin conductance, muscle tension, blood pressure etc.—to ascertain and interpret people’s internal responses to music (Villon et al, 2007).

Judith Becker has particularly advocated the use of these technological processes in ethnomusicology to investigate issues of music, emotion, and trancing (2009; 2004). Becker argues that humanistic approaches or ethnographic interpretations alone are inadequate in explaining how music induces trancing. In theorizing on how deep listening of music invokes deep emotional responses and trancing in people, Becker suggests that there is “something special” that happens in the lower regions of the brain of people as they listen to music. However, that “something special” can best be understood by combining empirical scientific methods with humanistic interpretations (2004). Thus, in her article “Ethnomusicology and Empiricism in the Twenty-First Century” (2009), Becker adapts rigorous scientific methods that rely on randomized, controlled
experiments, to investigate how music works in trancing experiences among a
group of Pentecostals. Friedson (2009), whose work focuses on music and
trancing in the Brekete cults of the Ewe in Ghana, however, disagrees with any
such empirical methods. He argues that such approaches amount to searching for
rational explanations to music, spirituality, and possession and as such, they “tend
toward a stasis that is antithetical to the multidimensionality of spirit possession”
(2009:9). Jankowsky (2010) expresses a similar concern by arguing that the
empirical methods advocated by Becker prevents ethnomusicologists from
learning and acknowledging “native understandings of their in-depth experiences
with music” (2010:23).

While the experimental approaches advocated by Becker may be helpful in
reaching more scientifically comparative conclusions, it must be understood that
such experiments are often reductive since they isolate emotions as variables to be
tested out of the complexity of the total musical experience (Benamou, 2003:62).
As may be inferred from Friedson (2009) and Jankowsky (2010), any
comprehensive analysis of people’s emotional experiences with music must
include the complexity of the context in which the experiences happen, as well as
views expressed by the subjects whose in depth experiences with music we seek
to understand. What the music means to the people who make it, and to those for
whom it is made are crucial in analyzing the relationship between music and
emotions from an ethnographic perspective (see Benamou, 2003; Baraldi, 2009).
These are some of the thoughts that guided my own inquiry into music and
emotions in the Dagaaba funeral.
The data used for this study derives from fieldwork conducted between November 2010 and June 2014 in Nandom. I attended many funeral ceremonies for people of varying ages and sexes. Most of the funerals I attended were recorded on video camera except some few instances where I was denied the opportunity to record. Other performance contexts that were documented audio-visually include the Kakube festival, Catholic church services, and marriage ceremonies. Guided by the knowledge that observation alone is not enough to interpret people’s emotional reactions in the funeral, this study is heavily supplemented by extensive interviews with very articulate gyil players, dirge singers, and non-musicians. Much of the questions during the interviews oriented around issues of Dagaaba musical aesthetics, albeit, not in the sense of the philosophical notions of aesthetics where the “beautiful” and the “sublime” in music forms the focus of analysis (see Apel, 1969:14). The questions rather privileged Dagaaba people’s understanding of their creative, artistic, and skillful process (see Kaufmann, 1969), as well as how they evaluate musical performances at the funeral. The interviews, thus, were more about indigenous appraisals that define the quality of music in the funeral.

While not too many words exist in Dagaare—the language of the Dagaaba—that describe the aesthetic qualities of performance in the funeral, the few that were mentioned during my interviews and discussions with musicians were emotion oriented vocabularies. The Dagaaba, for instance, speak of the funeral dirges (langni) as being aesthetically satisfying when it moves people into sorrow (baarə). Thus, the expression, langni ne baaro (the dirges are sorrowful) is used to describe the affective qualities of the dirges. Such sorrowful dirges are
said to enter deeply into people’s bones (kpen nzi pọ), which enable them to feel to the core (wokpe nena), the pathos of the occasion. The most appreciated musician in the funeral, therefore, is the individual whose performance carries and effects these deep feelings. I must acknowledge that these concepts are, to a larger extent, underdeveloped in this work partly because I did not create a separate chapter for that. However, some efforts are made to integrate the concepts with narratives on emotional responses to music in the funeral, especially in chapter five. Perhaps, the most important methodological point this study attempts to make is that an inquiry into emic concepts of musical aesthetics is a gateway to understanding people’s in depth experiences with music.

**Transcriptions**

Transcriptions of xylophone music has always been a challenge for Africanist scholars. Several systems have been used, which include cipher notation where the xylophone slats are represented with numbers (Kubik, 1994), and sonographic transcriptions that allows one to visualize the layout of the melodic movement in a graphic form (Zemp and Soro, 2010; Pinto, 1987). However, the western staff notation has been the most used system. The various authors that have used this system, nonetheless, attempt to modify it to suit various purposes. Some are intended to guide performance, with detailed notes on how to interpret each note represented on the staff (Vercelli, 2006; Strumpf, 1977). Other transcriptions are also meant to describe vividly, intervallic relationships between notes, and interplay of melodic and rhythmic patterns (Godsey, 1980; Seavoy, 1982, Strand, 2009). For xylophones with five note
scales, some scholars use a four-line stave, each line and space corresponding to the sound of one xylophone (Ciompi, 1989). Others also use five-line stave where each line corresponds to a slab on the xylophone (Vercelli, 2006; Strand, 2009).

For myself, I use the western staff notation without any alterations since Dagaaba music can be represented quite well with this system. In the transcriptions of gyil songs, I use the treble and bass clefs to indicate the range within which the two hands of the player operate as well as the interplay of the two hands in a melodic or polyphonic movement. It must, however, be noted that these transcriptions are by no means intended to convey absolute pitches played on the gyil. Rather, they are approximations intended to offer readers some insights on the nature of gyil melodic and polyphonic forms. For readers to grasp the sense of melodic organization in gyil playing, the transcriptions are represented as if the scale of the gyil corresponds to the pitches of a C-major scale, with C serving as the tonic around which other notes are oriented. This will enable readers familiar with reading western staff notation understand the intervallic relationships between the pitches represented.

Transcriptions of Dagaaba funeral dirges are also done with the staff notation, and like the xylophone melodies, the pitches are only approximations. The rhythms of the kuor drum and the supportive xylophone are each transcribed on a one-line stave to show durations of notes. While I strive to represent accurately the rhythmic patterns of the supportive instruments, I must also acknowledge that there were subtle stretching and contracting of timing here and there that could not be capture on the staff.
Overview of Chapters

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. Chapter one begins with a general description of the physical environment in the Northwest of Ghana and the ethnographic background as well as a short history of the Dagaaba. Chapter two situates the gyil as the most significant instrument for music-making in Dagaaba society. It discusses the spiritual attributes of the gyil through a careful examination of its mythical origins and construction processes. The chapter also considers issues of musical training and hierarchies in gyil musicianship. It concludes with a discussion of the various contexts in which the gyil is played.

The third chapter focuses on the funeral rites of the Dagaaba, incorporating into the narrative the religious beliefs and customary practices underlying the organization and performance of the funeral. The structure of Dagaaba burial rites, setting and orientation of events, and the basis of participation are described and analyzed. This is followed by a discussion on the place, organization, and performance of music in the funeral. One important issue the chapter places into perspective is the use of gyil speech surrogates for the announcement of death in Dagaaba villages. It describes the nature of the messages played on the gyil and the socio-cultural factors that enable listeners to decode the messages. The Dagaaba place much emphasis on the importance of speech surrogates in gyil playing, hence, the discussion continues into the fourth chapter. Chapter four begins with a review of the concept of speech surrogation in the broader context of African music. It looks at the social situations in which speech surrogates are used and the procedures by which texts are surrogated on musical instruments. It
then moves to how the concept applies in Dagaaba gyil playing. The chapter finally interprets and theorizes gyil speech surrogates as a form of ritual language.

Chapter five deals with Dagaaba funeral dirges. It discusses the stylistic features of the dirge (langni), its performance organization, and the socio-cultural training and expertise of the performers. The chapter also presents a musical analysis of the dirges in terms of structure and how they fit into the overall rhythmic framework of the accompanying instruments. The analysis in this chapter attempts to account for the affective nature of the dirges and how it engenders emotional reactions in the funeral. Chapter six summarizes the findings of the study.
CHAPTER ONE

THE DAGAABA: ETHNICITY AND MUSICAL CULTURE

This chapter presents a general overview of the cultural background of the Dagaaba in the Upper West Region of Ghana. The geographical area covered in this research mainly comprises the Nandom traditional area situated in the extreme northwestern corner of the Upper West Region. Nonetheless, a general background of the entire Dagaaba ethnic group will provide a useful frame of reference. I begin with a general depiction of the geographical boundaries of Dagaanie (the land of the Dagaaba), touching on its areal scope and linguistic typology. I then move on to discuss Dagaaba ethnic identity, socio-political organization, economy, religious belief system, musical concepts and practice which applies to the entire ethnic group, narrowing down after that to the specifics of the Dagaaba in Nandom. The general aim here is to introduce and situate the Dagaaba in the Upper West Region as a distinct ethnic group among the very similar cultural traditions in the area. As the heartland of xylophone music in Ghana, the Upper West Region is the traditional home for several ethnic groups whose principal instrument for music-making is the xylophone. These include the Sisaala, Birifor, Waala, and Dagaaba (See Figure 1.1 below for the map of the Upper West Region). While each of these ethnic groups may dominate in some specific areas of the region (as demarcated on the map), nonetheless, they do not
live in fixed boundaries since there is some fluidity. For instance, many Dagaaba are found in Sisaala or Birifor dominated areas and vice versa.

![Map of the Upper West Region](image)

**Figure 1.1. Map of the Upper West Region (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012. 5)**

Nketia refers to these ethnic groups as “the xylophone cultures”, a term he adopted from Jack Goody, which is supposed to indicate the inseparability of the instrument from the cultural and social lives of the people (2005:225). Beyond the common usage of the xylophone, the groups share many similar cultural and linguistic traits which superficially may obscure any evidence of cultural heterogeneity in the region (Woma, 2013; Hogan, 2011; Alenuma, 2002). However, the people themselves are much more aware of their differences than similarities, and names such as Sisaala, Waala, Birifor, and Dagaaba act as functionally stable categories of ethnic identification. There are significant differences in customs and traditions (Gbal, 2013; Saighoe, 1988; Seavoy, 1982; Godsey, 1980). Likewise, the sizes and sonorities of the xylophone, its
construction and tuning processes as well as playing styles differ quite significantly from one group to another (Wiggins, 2011; Vercelli, 2006).

**Dagawie: Geographical Boundaries**

The Dagaaba people cross national borders in West Africa (See Figure 1.2 below). Due to the arbitrary nature of African national boundaries invented through the Berlin Conference in the 19th century, they are found in three nation states: Ghana, Burkina Faso, and Côte d’Ivoire (Kuba and Lentz, 2001). Their population is estimated to be between one and a half million and two million (Lewis, Simons and Fenning, 2015; Bodomo, 2000). In the Republic of Burkina Faso, the Dagaaba are predominantly located in the south-western provinces of Nounbiel, Poni, Bougoriba, and Ioba (Mwinlaaru, 2016:2). In these provinces, they form the majority in towns such as Batie, Gaoua, Diebougou, and Dano (Ibid). In Côte d’Ivoire, the Dagaaba are rather a minority group and they live in the north-eastern part of the country (Kuukure, 1985:23). In Ghana, the Dagaaba largely live in the Upper West region, and they are mostly clustered around the far northwestern corner of the area. They are particularly found in principal towns such as Nadowli, Jirapa, Daffiama, Kaleo, Lambussie, Karnie, Lawra, and Nandom (Lentz, 2006).

The Dagaaba refer to their traditional homeland as Dagawie (Dagaabaland). Dagawie stretches northwards from Bole through principal towns such as Wa, Jirapa, Nadowli, Daffiama, Lawra, Nandom, Hamile, and into the southwestern part of Burkina Faso (Kuukure, 1985; Mwinlaaru, 2016). On the east, Dagawie is separated from the land of the Sisaala by the Sisili-Kyamnia
river system (Seavoy, 1982: 12). On the west, it extends beyond the West Banks of the Black Volta River to the town of Malba in Côte d'Ivoire (Dakubu, 2005; Alenuma, 2002: 3; Kuukure, 1985:23). In actual terms, however, it may be difficult to categorically define the territorial boundaries of Dagawie, because as mentioned earlier, these areas are inhabited by several ethnic groups whose territorial settlements overlap.

Figure 1.2. Locating the Dagaaba/Dagara on the map of West Africa (Mwinlaaru, 2016: 2)

One criterion for determining a particular community as Dagaaba, therefore, is the existence of a Dagaaba earth-shrine (tengan), covering a ritual parish under the custodianship of a tengan sob (owner of the earth, or earth-priest). The tengan sob is chosen traditionally from the patrilineal clan acknowledged as being the first to have settled in the community (Goody, 1962:7). Against this, therefore, is the fact that there are some settlements in this area where the majority of the population are Dagaaba but the custodian of the earth-shrine is a non-Dagaaba (Kuba and Lentz, 2001; Tengan, 2000:137). Thus,
the term Dagawie may be used in a limited sense only, and it may not necessarily encompass all the villages whose inhabitants are predominantly Dagaaba.

The environmental features of Dagawie are very typical of the West African savannah belt. Situated some few hundred miles south of the Sahara Desert, the landscape is a level ground where shrubs grow at approximately four to five feet tall during the rainy season. Trees typical of this area include the baobab, neem, dawadawa (*parkia biglobosa*), and shea. Stunted by frequent droughts and recurrent bushfires, these trees sprout singly or in spare clusters at widely-spaced intervals. The year is clearly marked with two seasons, dry and wet, the latter beginning from April through October. The landscape changes quite dramatically from one season to the other. During the rainy season, the environment thrives with thick grass and leafy trees. When the dry season, typically called the harmattan, appears in November, the land becomes parched, dusty and desolate as bush fires consume the dried plants. Rivers and streams are either completely dried up or shrink into veins and isolated pools of water. These bodies of standing water are of immense importance to animal life in the area. They are essential sources of drinking water to all livestock and provide comfort for pigs who wallow in them, searching for mussels and other crustaceans. The dust-laden harmattan wind which blows for most of the period affects visibility at day and night times. During the harmattan season, temperatures can drop as low as 15°C in the evening and as high as 40°C during the day.

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2 All these trees have their nutritional and economic benefit for the Dagaaba. The shea in particular is more cherished for its oil bearing fruits.
One remarkable feature about Dagaaba settlements, especially in the northwest of Ghana, is their similar style of architecture. Houses are constructed mainly with mud, cemented with laterite, and roofed with grass. Dagaaba houses are mainly “a cluster of compounds inhabited by several nuclear families of the same descent” (Alenuma, 2002: 3). Goody’s description of a typical compound in the village of Birifu, south of Wa, is typical of most compounds in Dagawie:

The eight-foot high walls of these compounds are built entirely of mud. They are divided into a number of rooms roofed with timber and covered in puddled earth . . . The entrance to these rooms is a long central chamber which abuts on an open semi-circular yard surrounded by a wall of the same height as the compound itself. Such a group of rooms forms a self-contained section of the house; I have seen openings connecting them with other similar sets only in the case of two full brothers who farmed together and in one other instance . . . Otherwise one can only get from one to the other by means of the roof. The one doorway in the outside wall leads into the byre and provides access to the remainder of the homestead (1967:38).

Dagaaba settlements, except a few, are fundamentally farming communities. In the Nandom traditional area where I conducted my field research, most of the villages I visited, including Tom, Piiru, Brutu, Sentu, and Monyupelle among others, unlike the Nandom town itself, are not compact settlements. Rather, houses are scattered unevenly over the land, fifty to hundred meters apart, between which crops such as maize, millet, sorghum, groundnut, beans and guinea corn among others are cultivated.

Socio-Economic Life in Dagawie

Socio-economic life in Dagawie is partly determined by the geographical conditions in the area. With agriculture being the single most significant economic

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3 Nowadays, houses built with bricks and cement blocks, roofed with aluminum sheets are also becoming common in the area.
activity in Dagawie, the beginning of rains in April ushers in the farming season. Beginning from April or early May, depending upon when the rain starts, all able-bodied males engage in farm work. Even boys of the age of about twelve who do not attend school are required to help on the farm. They assist in driving away foraging livestock or monkeys to protect the crops. Because of the shortness of the rainy season, and the variability in intensity and regularity of the rainfall, coupled with a scarcity of arable land in Dagaawie, the Dagaaba mainly practice subsistence farming. Only the products that in rare cases are of an excess of family requirement enter the market as cash earners. The level of production is equally contingent upon the method and technique of farming which in Dagawie is highly traditional. The Dagaaba use a short-handled hoe (kuuri or kukur) for the tiling or mulching of the land. With this technique, the user is obliged to bend down towards the ground, a tough process which inhibits the ability to cultivate large areas of land (Tengan, 2000). Perhaps, this explains why the labor of every member of the household is needed for even the minimum production. Under these conditions, the chances of producing excesses over and above what is necessary for the family consumption are very slim. In fact, quite often, the harvest is poor and leads to a severe shortage of food and therefore, misery, particularly in the beginning of the next rainy season. Only a handful of farmers has adopted modern farming methods and techniques whose productions are transported to the markets when food is scarce (Wood, 2013).

Gender differentiations regarding the assignment of different social roles are part of agricultural activities in Dagawie. While men are busy cultivating crops—millet, guinea corn, maize, yams, beans, and rice—that would be stored
away for the coming year, the women, for their part, work in vegetable gardens around the house. They grow tomatoes, onions, pepper, okra, green leaves and other condiments necessarily for immediate consumption. Though active farming is essentially for the men, sometimes the assistance may be sought from the women of the house especially during the sowing or planting period. Because of the involvement in farming activities by almost everyone in the homestead, social life in Dagawie almost comes to a halt during the agricultural season. The performance of most social, religious, and recreational activities including music and dance are deemphasized or entirely eschewed until September when the crops are ripe and are ready for harvest.

While the growing of crops dominates the agricultural life in Dagawie, some few individuals engage in animal rearing. Animals commonly reared in Dagawie include cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, and poultry. In the latter case, guinea fowl, ducks and chicken are the most common. During the rainy season when all available arable land is needed to produce food crops, pasture for grazing livestock become exceedingly scarce. Accordingly, most of the animals are sold away. The livestock farmers take advantage of the higher demand for meat in the southern regions where they fetch higher prices. Besides the economic gains, the livestock reared, especially cattle, are symbols of wealth and status. That is, the worth of an individual is measured by the number of his animals (Blench, 2006). Again, animals reared are also used for marriage transactions. Most invariably, dowries paid to a young woman’s parents at the time of marriage consist of cattle and other livestock as well as cowry shells. Except for the cowry shells, these are
rarely computed into money even though would-be-brides of today try to negotiate for payments of dowries in common currency (Abdul-Korah, 2014).

In addition to the agricultural base, economic life in Dagawie is further supported by some gender specific specializations. Following a pattern commonly found throughout the northern areas of Ghana, almost all Dagaaba adults engage part-time in some craft or service. This allows each specialist to claim a small corner on the production and marketing of essential commodities (Hogan, 2011: 98-100; Seavoy, 1982: 16-18; Saighoe, 1988: 30-31). Activities such as *pito* (local beer) brewing, shea butter extraction, pottery, and weaving—all done by women, as well as blacksmithing and xylophone-making by the men provide some income for subsistence. Some people in Dagawie are also into professional and technical occupations such as teaching, nursing, masonry, carpentry, and plumbing, but they represent a rather small minority viewed against the backdrop that professional occupations constitute only 4% of all income sources in the area (Ghana Statistical Service, 2010). More generally, by providing for most of the society’s basic needs, the agricultural base coupled with the practices of individual specializations produces a virtually independent community.

Changes from the rainy season to the dry season also imposes some shifts in the patterns of social activities. The dry season, in which agricultural related activities become less important, brings with it an increase in the tempo of social, recreational and ritual life. Ceremonial and recreational music and dances that go into hibernation during the rainy season come to the fore as various musical groups perform for the enjoyment of the community. Attendance at markets also become fuller and more regular for both men and women. The interaction between
neighborhood villages also increases, and final funeral ceremonies for individuals who died during the farming season are also performed (Gbal, 2013:14). Annual festivals such as Kobine in Lawra and Kakube in the Nandom town are all celebrated during the dry season when harvesting activities are over (Kuuder et al., 2012). It is also the time for building houses; new homes may be constructed, or old ones may be repaired or renovated. The beginning of the dry season also marks the start of the seasonal migration of many young people of both sexes.
Young men and boys go to the Ashanti and Brong Ahafo regions to work as farm laborers while the young women and girls work as load carriers, popularly known as kayaye, in the urban market centers (Abdul-Korah, 2008; Lobnibe, 2010).

**Linguistic Classification**

The language of the Dagaaba people is called Dagaare. It belongs to the Gur language family of the Niger-Congo phylum (Dakubu, 2005). Among the Gur languages, according to Bodomo, Dagaare is specifically classified as a northern Mabia language (Bodomo, 1993). Dagaare, therefore, is comparatively related with other Mabia languages such as Farefare, Safaliba, Tankpe and Buano, spoken in some parts of the Northern Region of Ghana (Mwinlaaru, 2016:3-4). It also shares several features with Moore, the dominant indigenous language of Burkina Faso and the largest Mabia language (Lewis et. al, 2015; Dakubu, 2005). In Ghana, Dagaare is one of the nine official languages taught in schools and colleges. It serves as a medium of instruction in lower primary schools in Dagaaba communities. Dagaare is also offered as a degree program in two public universities in Ghana: The University of Education, Winneba, and the University
of Ghana, Legon. However, according to Lewis et al. (2015), only 5%-10% of the Dagaare speakers can read and write the Dagaare language.

The Dagaare language includes a variety of dialects that are mutually intelligible. Scholars divide the Dagaare community into four dialect areas that follow the geographical directions of northern, central, southern, and western. Each dialect area consists of a set of closely related dialects (Mwinlaaru, 2016:4). It is worth noting, on the other hand, that such a division does not account for certain areas that may form distinctive enclaves and, hence, cannot be assigned to one dialect area rather than another without difficulty (Tengan, 2000:21).

Currently, scholars identify six principal dialects of Dagaare, namely Ngmere, Birifor (divided into Northern and Southern dialects), Waali (also spelled Waala or Waale), Wiile (also Wule or Ule) and Lobr. Wiile and Lobr constitute the northern dialect area (Mwinlaaru, 2016; Lewis et al., 2015; Dakubu, 2005; Bodomo, 1993). The Wiile speakers are mostly found around Lawra in Ghana, as well as Guéguéré, Legmoin, and Dano in Burkina Faso. Some inhabitants around Lawra also speak the Lobr dialect, and it extends through Nandom and Hamile (all in Ghana), into the towns of Dissin, Mariatang, and Nyebo in Burkina Faso (Dakubu, 2005). The Ngmere dialect, which forms the Central Dagaare branch, is mainly spoken in Ghana. Its speakers include the inhabitants of Daffiama, Nadowli, Jirapa and their surrounding villages and towns. Waali forms the southern dialect and is spoken in Wa and its neighboring communities. The western dialect, Birifor, consists of two sub-dialects with a considerable variation: Northern and Southern Birifor. Northern Birifor is spoken around Diebougou, Gaoua and Batie in Burkina Faso and Malba in Côte d’Ivoire, while Southern
Birifor is spoken in Sawla and Tuna, south of Wa in Ghana (Hogan, 2011: 84ff). Among these dialects, Ngmere, Lobr, Wiile and Birifor (Southern) are more closely related than they are with Waali (Mnwilaaru, 2016:4). While Waali and Birifor are mostly classified as dialects of Dagaare, the speakers do not identify their languages as such (Bemile, 2000). Waali, in particular, is primarily classified by some scholars as a distinct language with five sub-dialects, namely Yeri Waali, Fufula, Dolimi, Bulengee and Cherii (ibid). Earlier classifications by Swadesh et al. (1966) also list Dagaare and Birifor as separate languages. Thus, the inhabitants who identify as Dagaare are predominantly the Central and Northern communities (Hogan, 2011).

However, among the Central and Northern Dagaare speakers themselves, sometimes they do not accept designations for their dialects beyond derivatives from names of towns or villages, a problem which according to Mwinlaaru accounts for the overall difficulties in classifying the Dagaare speakers into sub-linguistic groups (2016:5). It is not uncommon to encounter categories such as Jirbaale, Losaale, and Nandome, denoting Dagaare speakers in Jirapa, Lawra, and Nandom, with each of them claiming to be the speakers of ‘Dagaare proper’ (ibid; see also Tengan, 2000; Dakubu, 2005). These local classifications of the dialects certainly have a bearing on the use of ethnonyms for the Dagaare speaking community (Alenuma, 2000; Goody, 1962). In many situations, the inhabitants do not identify with any ethnic name apart from the derivatives mentioned above, the consequences of which have been the use of various nomenclatures as an ethnic

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4 Actually, neither the Birifor nor the Waala identify as Dagaaba or Dagara. They are distinct ethnic groups (Hogan, 2011).
description for the Dagaare speaking people. They have been referred to with names such as Dagarti, LoDagaba, and Lobi—by different authors (Goody, 1962; Cardinall, 1920, Rattray, 1932, Tauxier, 1912, Delafosse, 1912; Mensah, 1982). Whereas these nomenclatures are rejected by the people so labeled for their distasteful history and general inaccuracy, there is yet no unitary ethnic name for them. In the ethnographic discourse two names, “Dagaaba” and “Dagara,” nowadays, are commonly used to refer to the Central and Dagaare speakers respectively. This situation, according to Lentz, has become imperative because among the Central and Northern Dagaare native scholars, there is nowadays “a strong sense of collective consciousness and lively interest in the issue of which of the names to use” (2006: xi). Lentz observes that there is an ongoing local politics where the Central and Northern Dagaare groups are struggling for dominance. The conflict largely hinges on indigenous notions of territorial borders and land ownership, reinforced through historical narratives of cultural origins and migrations which the elites exploit for hegemonic purposes (Lentz, 2006:252-274).

While indigenous intellectuals from the Central Dagaare community assert that “Dagaaba” is the only correct ethnic name for the entire Dagaare speakers, those of the Northern Dagaare (i.e. the Lobr of Lawra and Nandom) claim “Dagara” as the most proper unitary ethnic designation (ibid). In my personal observations, some of the Northern Dagaare intellectuals, in some instances, emotionally invoke the dialectal variance and other subtle cultural variations as a differential of ethnicity in argumentative contexts (cf. Woma, 2013; see also Lentz, 2006:255-274). Overall, however, the ethnonymic problem is not a recent
invention. It follows a complex history of colonial encounters, anthropological explorations, and missionary activities in northwestern Ghana. While these histories may not be very relevant for my topic, they are yet worth discussing since they have a bearing on the choice of ethnonym I adopt for this study. In the following, I will examine the ethnic history of the Dagaaba, tracing how their identity was created in the accounts of British colonial officers, missionaries, and anthropologists, and how it has been shaped and continually defined anew by educated elites of Dagaare descent in contemporary times.

**Ethnic Identity**

Historically, the ethnic identity of the Dagaare has been exceedingly complicated. The Dagaaba/Dagara came into recorded history in the late 19th century when the northern territory of Ghana experienced a dynamic mix of slave-raiding and inter-tribal conflicts (Seavoy, 1982: 21-25; Hawkins, 1996). In the 1880s slave-raiding escalated in Ghana’s northern areas with the advancement of Maninka forces from the west under the command of Samori Touré (Seavoy, 1982: 21-25; see also Webster, 1967). Within the same period, Babatu, the notorious Zaberma slave-raider had established a strong base in the area (Lentz, 2006: 14-32; see also Holden, 1965). While Touré raided communities, Babatu systematically fueled and exploited already existing internal conflicts to the extent that clans and villages found themselves seeking the alliance of the better-armed Zaberma to attack each other (Lentz, 2006: 32). These internal conflicts resulted in forced mobility, increased insecurity and severe losses in property and human beings (Brukum, 1997). Disruption of family and communal life, property
destruction, widespread epidemics and diseases, extreme population decimation, and the everyday uncertainty of civil peace constituted the lot and legacy of the people during that period.

British colonial protection, initiated through the Berlin Conference in 1884/85, eventually introduced order into the area (Seavoy, 1982: 22). Dagaaba encounters with the British thus began towards the end of the 19th century when George Ekem Fergusson, an officer of the British Colonial Service of the then Gold Coast was dispatched to conclude treaties with the people of the “Ashanti Hinterlands” (Rattray, 1932; Arhin, 1974:99-100). Linguistic diversity and lack of centralized political leadership among the Dagaaba/Dagara were some of the problems Fergusson highlighted in his report to the colonial government (Hawkins, 1996). Thence, to integrate the Dagaaba/Dagara into the imperial system, the services of A. W. Cardinall and R.S. Rattray—all anthropologists attached to the Gold Coast colonial office—were employed. Thus, studies by Cardinall (1920) and Rattray (1932) had a common objective. Their works were primarily meant to provide anthropological insights into how the British could develop and foster efficient social and political systems among the Dagaaba/Dagara to make them governable by the colonial administration (Tengan, 2000:22). Cardinall (1920) and Rattray (1932) referred to the Dagaaba/Dagara as “Dagarti” and “Lobi” respectively, derogatory names that denoted primitiveness, anarchy, and bellicosity (Tengan, 2000; Hawkins, 1996).

The introduction of Christianity by Catholic missionaries in the 1930s further coalesced ethnicities in the northwestern region through their translation of the Bible into select languages, fostering the notion of a shared ethnicity based on
language (Hogan, 2011:89). The missionaries misunderstood the identity of the Dagaaba/Dagara to the extent that they were conflated with the Lobi who formed a distinct group along the west banks of the Black Volta River (ibid). These anthropological and missionary nomenclatures, henceforward, became popular in social and academic discourses. The Dagaaba/Dagara were either described as Lobi or Dagarti (Kuukure, 1985: 24). In contemporary Ghana, Lobi and Dagarti still function as ethnic names for Dagaare speakers in the southern regions of the country (Lentz, 2006: 259). Derivatives such as Dagartifoɔ and Lobifoɔ as well as other neologisms, mpepefoɔ or ntafoɔ—all denoting primitiveness and backwardness—are often used as ethnic descriptions for the Dagaaba/Dagara.

According to Susan Drucker-Brown, these derogatory coinages are borne out of the fact that:

[The] northwest is little known to southern Ghanaians, who frequently assume that the region is simply underdeveloped version of their own social world. [Because] the political history of Ghana as a nation state has been dominated by southerners, the southerners’ assumption of superiority with respect to the north is part of a wider context in which the creation of northern ethnic identities occurs (Drucker-Brown, 2011:514).

However, in the 1950s onwards, the British anthropologist, Jack Goody sought to regularize the ethnic category of the Dagaaba/Dagara through his introduction of the “LoDagaa” schematization of cultural and linguistic practices in the northwestern territory (Goody 1956, 1957, 1962, 1972). Being amongst the first scholars who conducted extensive ethnographic research in the northwest after the second world war, Jack Goody encountered difficulties in labeling the subjects of his study. The unpredictability of their ethnic identity, according to Goody, mainly stemmed from the lack of centralized political system and the fact
that “settlements [did] not automatically group themselves into larger territorially
defined units that one [could] call a society or tribe” (1962: 2). Because the people
self-designated with names of the settlements in which they lived, ethnic names,
either for themselves or their neighbors were ill-defined (ibid). Nonetheless,
people in one settlement area, according to Goody, distinguished themselves from
others in another settlement area using a pair of directional terms Lo and Dagaa,
denoting East and West, respectively (1962:3). Based on this, Goody introduced
his classification of the people by using the term “LoDagaa” (1962:5). LoDagaa,
thus, referred to the continuum of cultural and linguistic practices that extended
from the West (i.e. the Lo side) to the East (i.e. the Dagaa side). The people who
are today called Dagaaba/Dagara fell on the Dagaa end of Goody’s spectrum,
hence, he called them LoDagaba (Ibid: 5; see also Lentz, 2006: 260-261;
Alenuma, 2002). After this, LoDagaba became a useful nomenclature for other
students of Goody including Hawkins (1996, 1969) and Mendosa (1982) who later
worked in the area (see also Godsey, 1980).

Goody’s publications are a comprehensive study of the LoDagaa since
they cover almost every aspect of their culture. Goody demonstrates extensively,
how kinship systems, territory, and particularly significant artifacts combine to
provide a flexible system of ethnic identification (Goody, 1956, 1962, 1965, 1972,
1980, 1993). Goody’s works, thus, have special relevance to this study because of
his remarkable ethnographic details on Dagaaba funeral practices. However, his
anthropological classification of the people has been subjected to rigorous scrutiny
by indigenous intellectuals from the northwest. “LoDagaa” and its sub-categories
“LoDagaba,” “LoWiili,” and “LoPiel” etc. have been summarily dismissed as
pejorative (Mwinlaaru, 2016; Woma, 2013; Bodomo, 2007, 2002; Tengan, 1999; 1993). According to Alexis Tengan, while the root terms “Dagaa” or “Wiili” and “Piel” are ethnically defining terms, “Lo” does not have the same significance. Lo is rather an unsavory term used in hostile situations to identify someone as just a mere neighbor, and lacking some characteristics as a full member of the society. As he puts it: “Lo [literally] refers to ‘those inferior and contrasting neighbors living on the left side of us’” (2000:50). “The reference to the left hand,” Tengan writes, “does not here signify any particular direction but rather means culturally inferior” (ibid). For Benedict Der (1989), not only was Goody’s LoDagaa classification distasteful but also it did not represent the reality on the ground at the time that Goody conducted his research. As Der argues, the Dagaare speaking people for time immemorial have been referring to themselves as Dagaaba or Dagara, a fact that Goody himself acknowledges in a later publication (Goody, 1993). Among the elites of the Dagaare descent, Goody’s LoDagaa, and those nomenclatures—Dagarti and Lobi—used by the British colonial administrators are considered mere inventions of ethnic categories that have no correlation with reality. However, the use of a unitary ethnic name for the Dagaare speaking peoples, as indicated already, remains a matter of substantial controversy.

Inspired by scholarly debates on the ethnonymic controversy among the Dagaare intellectuals, Carola Lentz, through almost twenty years of intermittent fieldwork in the Northwest has produced two monographs aimed at contributing towards the understanding of ethnicity among the Dagaare speaking community (2013; 2006). With an extensive range of sources, including interviews, colonial writings, and literature produced by intellectuals from the Dagaare society, Lentz
(2006) raises issues that are critical to comprehending the nature of Dagaaba/Dagara ethnicity. She acknowledges that the complexity of the relationships between “ethnicity and the alternative basis of commonality” (2006:4) can be understood only from a historical perspective. Hence, Lentz provides a social and political history of the Northwest in general, which goes beyond inventing ethnic categories and their interconnectedness with pre-existing modes of social positioning and belonging, to the very nature of the encounter between the Dagaaba/Dagara and colonial administrators. In analyzing the complex sociopolitical organization of precolonial Dagaaba/Dagara society, Lentz argues that even though they lacked centralized political structures in the precolonial period, notions of ethnicity and a sense of belonging to a distinct ethnic group existed, which labor migrants used and continue to use to establish social networks away from home in southern Ghana (2006:150). In essence, according to Lentz, labor migrants utilized “indigenous principles of organization” to create “new idioms of solidarity” (ibid), many of which conveyed ethnic undertones, to emphasize ties transcending village boundaries. For the large part of the analysis, Lentz (2013, 2006) fundamentally depends on writings and interviews from Dagaaba/Dagara educated elites. Though it allows us to hear the voices of the indigenous people, Lentz also notes that their conceptions are “formulated out of critiques of colonial stereotypes and Jack Goody’s authoritative monographs” (2006: 269). Thus, while the educated indigenes aim at projecting a new public image of who the Dagaaba/Dagara people are, Lentz on the other hand, wonders how the rest of the population, especially the non-elites react to the colonial and anthropological misnomers (2006 :270).
However, in his research among the Dagaaba/Dagara in the northwest of Ghana, Sean Hawkins observed that these earlier classifications were of little concern to many of the non-educated Dagaare speakers. Accordingly, he adopted Goody’s LoDagaba nomenclature in his various works on the Dagaaba/Dagara (2002; 1996; 1989). But unlike Hawkins, Lentz did encounter strong objections to the use of these colonial/anthropological nomenclatures during her research in the Upper West Region (Lentz, 2006: xi). Like Lentz, I also faced the same objections in my research in Nandom. The problem I never encountered, however, is the simultaneous uses of “Dagaaba” and “Dagara” in the area. Except for Bernard Woma—a master xylophonist of the Northern Dagaare descent—who, in a recent discussion, insisted that the people of Nandom are Dagara, I never came across that term when I conducted fieldwork in the area. During interactions with musicians and traditional leaders—including the paramount chief of Nandom himself—they referred to themselves as Dagaaba. Isaac Mwinlaaru—himself a ‘Dagara’ offers a better explanation for this situation in his dissertation (2016). According to Mwinlaaru, the use of the nomenclatures “Dagaaba” and “Dagara” as ethnic names for the Northern and Central Dagaare communities, respectively, is rather a problem of linguistics (2016:1-8). The terms “Dagaaba” and “Dagara” are dialectal variants of the same word, so to speak. Hence, “Dagaaba” and “Dagara” are different ways of calling the same ethnic group. As he explains, the Ngmere dialect speakers (i.e. the Central Dagaare) call the language Dagaare and the people Dagaaba. On the other hand, the Lobr speakers (i.e. Northern Dagaare) call both the language and the people Dagara. However, because the Central Dagaare is privileged in church, education or language courses at universities, the
terms “Dagaaba” and “Dagaare” are mostly used in textbooks as ethnonym and language for the entire ethnic group. Accordingly, the Lobr speakers use “Dagaaba” as ethnic self-designation during conversations with non-natives (ibid: 5). It can, thus, be argued that the term Dagaaba functions as a category for ethnic identification based in part on a shared sense of cultural belonging. Furthermore, being Dagaaba in contemporary Ghana means membership in a group with long cultural heritage characterized by an ethnic name that people self-identify with and employ in casual conversations to distinguish themselves from others. Therefore, regardless of the ongoing ethnonymic debates among the native intellectuals, I maintain the ethnonym “Dagaaba” in this study because that is how the people I worked with in Nandom called themselves.

**Socio-Political Organization**

Since the time of British colonial administration in the 19th century, the socio-political organization of the Dagaaba has stimulated lively debates among scholars which, unlike the ethnonymic disputes, extends far beyond the spheres of Dagaaba native intellectuals. The argument oscillates between two opposing views. At the one end, the argument goes that the Dagaaba were acephalous in precolonial times and, in fact, the status quo partially remains even at present. Supporting this view is the fact that despite the introduction of chieftaincy hierarchies among the Dagaaba in the 20th century by the British colonial administration, the Dagaaba are still not organized around strict hierarchies of chieftaincies (Lentz, 2006: 15; Sabelli, 1986; Some, 1969). At the other end, the argument holds that the Dagaaba were not acephalous as they are depicted to have lived (Hawkins, 2002, 1996, 1989; Tengan, 2000, Rouville, 1987, Der, 2001,
Tuurey, 1982). While the Dagaaba indeed may not have had an externally
discernible centralized political system, the reality on the ground, according to
Brian Hogan, could have been that “complex cultural systems of kinship and
clanship . . . religious shrines and ritual action that anchored taboos . . . in physical
space, functioned as effective forms of social and political organization” (Hogan,
2011:84). Colonial officers, thus, classified the Dagaaba as acephalous just
because they were confounded by the nuance of these mechanisms of social
organization. Consequently, the introduction of chieftaincy among the Dagaaba by
the colonial administration amounted to imperialist philosophies that denied local
realities for the British normative concepts of ‘tribes’ and ‘native states’
(Hawkins, 1996: 235). Much of the historiography on Dagaaba socio-political
organization have been dealt with extensively in other works (Lentz, 2006, 2001;
Hawkins, 2002, 1996, Rouville, 1987). Therefore, I will only provide a brief
overview of how they purportedly lived in the pre-colonial period, and how
colonial influences shaped and transformed their socio-political structure.

In earlier ethnographies, such as Meyer (1936), Rattray (1932), and
Cardinall (1920), the Dagaaba unquestionably had no philosophy that
corresponded with the British colonial administration’s normative definition of
tribe which meant, “a population linked by descent, sharing a single language and
culture, living in a particular territory and ruled by council of elders” (Lentz,
2006:14). Instead, they lived as decentralized groups with overlapping networks
of familial relationships in flexible territorial boundaries (see also Goody, 1972).
These views expressed by the earlier ethnographers received heavy emphases in
the works of Jack Goody, whose analyses strongly suggested that the Dagaaba
were indeed acephalous. According to Goody, unlike the Ashanti of southern Ghana who, for example, had paramount and divisional chiefs ruling over well-defined territories, the Dagaaba had no individual heads or council of elders, “although [their] men of power and influence played important roles in their social interaction from time to time, particularly, in times of crisis” (Goody, 1972: 9). The Dagaaba were rather organized as groups of parishes whose boundaries were loosely determined by the jurisdiction of the tengan (Earth shrine), to which they owed allegiance. In this context, a parish was a collection of different families (yir). Members of each yir belonged to the same patriclan (yi\textit{ilu}) and had a patrilocal residence. They also had a double descent where inheritances were, and still are, based on the system of patrilineal and matrilineal (see also Mwinlaaru, 2016:7-8). Immovable property such as farms and houses are inherited patrilineally while movable properties such as money and animals are inherited matrilineally (ibid; see also Saighoe, 1988: 36-38).

Goody further explains that the Dagaaba had a special reverence for the Earth because it functioned as an important source of livelihood. Therefore, those who owed allegiance to a particular Earth Shrine constituted a local congregation and were bound together by the observance of certain taboos. While each parish was autonomous, they were all bounded by the same restrictions and penalties of transgression mandated by the Earth Shrines, regulated and enforced through the priests (Hogan, 2011:86). Mandatory participation in sacrifices to the tengan, either in thanks or expiation, therefore, created areas of ritual interdependence (Goody, 1956: 91; Some, 1969: 17-20). Interpretations of transgressions were in the bosom of the tengan sob (the Earth Shrine priest) who, per the degree of the
wrongdoing, required sacrificial expiation (Goody, 1962:7). Anyone who violated
the communal prohibitions did not only open himself to “mystical retribution of
the Earth spirit (who is believed to be responsible for the fertility of the land) but
also invited misfortunes upon his close kin” (ibid). In that regard, the observance
of the same taboos within the parishes “created a moral community across which
several lines of social differences connected, forming a kind of moral ethnicity”
(Hogan, 2011:88).

Before the introduction of chieftaincy in the area, the only distinct office
in the Dagaba socio-political structure, therefore, was the tengan sob (Goody,
1962: 32-39). However, the position of the tengan sob was more ritualistic than
political. As a ritual leader, he was invested with the responsibility to offer
sacrifices to the Earth Shrine occasionally. He assumed the responsibility of
maintaining the physical and spiritual well-being of his parishioners by
coordinating, carefully, through ritual, the interaction between the parishioners
and their shrine (Saighoe, 1988:38). The tengan sob, thus, occupied an extremely
sensitive position since a mistake in the ritual procedure meant a calamity in the
parish (Saighoe, 1988:39; Tengan, 1999). Besides the tengan sob, specialists of
the various Dagaaba traditional trades also assumed some important roles that
were relative to the fluctuating demands of the inhabitants and their specific needs
at a given point in time (Goody, 1962: 9). For instance, the bagbugre (diviner)
performed ritual activities at private shrines for people who consulted him, mostly
for an explanation of some troubles encountered by the people (Naaeke, 2006:
23). As discussed in chapter two, the destiny of a would-be-xylophonist, for
instance, was inquired from the bagbugre who, upon the outcome of his
interactions with the spiritual world performed the necessarily rituals to fortify the future musical specialist. In times of war, temporary military power and leadership were invested in the masters of the bowstring because they were highly skilled archers (Saighoe, 1988: 32). Besides these, heads of households (yindandoo) played influential roles in their families. In addition to settling disputes and providing guidance in the domestic affairs of their families, the yindandoo also “[performed] ritual functions to ensure the safety and prosperity of [their] household members” (Naaeke, 2006: 23).

Positions of the village, divisional and paramount chiefs were introduced among the Dagaaba by the British during the colonial period. Under the ambit of the British indirect rule, this new institution helped to establish a hierarchy of political power from the village chief—through the divisional and paramount chiefs—to the District Colonial officer whose administrative center was Lawra (Lentz, 2006: 65; Hawkins, 2002). The chieftaincy system was, however, unpopular among the majority of the people for several reasons. Firstly, for most Dagaaba, the traditional religious authority associated with the position of tengan sob (the Earth Shrine priest) could not be replaced with the secular chieftaincy office created by the British. The tengan sob, thus, was a figure of greater religious significance for the Dagaaba than the secular chiefs imposed upon them. Secondly, the imposed leaders manipulated and exploited their countrymen to satisfy their personal parochial interests (Hawkins, 1996; Hogan, 2011: 88). The procurement of forced labor coupled with unpaid employment became a silent viciousness of domestic tyranny carried out by the chiefs in the name of exercising jurisdictional authority (Brukum, 1997). To counterbalance the newly
introduced chieftaincy positions with the original forms of regional leadership. Chiefs were later selected from the patrilineage of the custodians of the Earth shrines (Lentz, 2006: 40-43). Again, Native Administrative Authority and Tribunals were established in the area to provide the indigenes with the opportunity to lodge formal complaints against chiefs who autocratically infringed on the privileges of their subjects (Brukum, 1997: 2).

Figure 1.3: The District Map of Nandom (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012:3)

While the standard feature of Dagaaba socio-political organization was the conspicuous absence of a single political authority which manifested itself in the autonomous Earth shrine parishes, today, permanent chieftaincies exist with hereditary successions (Lentz, 2006: 40-43). The Nandom traditional area where this study is focused falls under the jurisdiction of the Nandom-Na, Naa Dr. Puo-
Ure Puobekyiir VII. The Nandom traditional area comprises villages and farming settlements including Kogle, Piina, Piiri, Konyunga, Tom, Brutu, Sentu, and Monyupelle among others (see figure 1.3 above) whose administrative, educational, religious and economic center is Nandom (Saighoe, 1988: 34). Chiefs of the villages owe allegiance to the Nandom-Naa—i.e. the paramount ruler of Nandom—and they contribute to his administration of both the Nandom township and the entire paramountcy through counseling. The divisional chiefs also have elders who counsel them (ibid).

Since he became the paramount ruler of the Nandom traditional area in the 1980s, Naa Dr. Puo-Ure Puobekyiir VII has developed a greater interest in establishing a cohesive cultural identity. His efforts are not only meant at legitimizing his position but also contributing towards the reification of the Dagaaba ethnic category which for a long time has been misunderstood (Dankwa, 2012; see also Lentz, 1994:460). His introduction of the Kakube Festival in 1989 has contributed immensely towards promoting Dagaaba cultural traditions nationally and internationally (Kuuder et al., 2012). The festival celebrated annually on the last Saturday of November, signifies the end of a successful farming season (Lentz, 1989). The celebrations include various forms of music and other related artistic competitions. These include dancing contests, with particular emphasis on traditional dances such as bewaa and bine, a choral competition for women, xylophone playing competition for both males and females, as well as an exhibition of Dagaaba cultural artifacts (Dankwa, 2012: 104-105). Figure 1.4 below shows the procession of Naa Dr. Puuore Puobe Chir VII and his entourage during the 2010 Kakube festival.
While the chieftaincy institution is currently flourishing among the Dagaaba, it is equally important to note that the original concepts of belonging still revolve around families. The position and the role of the elders of the various families have not changed in any obvious manner since they still provide leadership and directional guidance in the daily affairs of their clan members. Critical decisions in the family are taken in consultation with the elders. Social hierarchy in the household is always determined by age and gender, “with younger members deferring to elder members and female members deferring to male members” (Mwinlaaru, 2016:7). Respect among men and women is, however, about age, meaning, “age tends to be the salient determiner of social power” in the family (Ibid). Similarly, the tengan sob maintains his spiritual role as custodian of the land (Mwinlaaru, 2016:8; see also Tengan, 2000).
Religious Belief System

The belief that there is a spiritual dimension to every aspect of life is an integral aspect of Dagaaba worldview, and this reflects quite significantly in their indigenous concepts of communal organization. While the Earth Shrine is a symbol of unity among people with common ancestors or in a common territory, it also functions as a religious deity that mediates between the parishioners and the spiritual world. Likewise, gods of individual clans not only bind the members of the family together but also protect them from malicious spirits which they might perforce encounter in their daily affairs. The Dagaaba traditional religious system is densely populated with beliefs in supernatural beings and spirits (Naaeke, 2006; Kuukure, 1985:60-73). Believe in Naamwin (the Supreme Being), tengan (the Earth), family gods, individual deities, and other spiritual entities including the kontobili (usually translated as dwarfs), ancestral spirits (kpime), witchcraft spirits (suolu) among others, constitute the complex body of their religious system (cf. Nkumbaan et al., 2014).

The most influential among the numerous spiritual entities and forces comprising the Dagaaba belief system is Naamwin, the Supreme Being and Creator of the universe (Tengan, 2000, 1999; Kuukure, 1985; McCoy, 1985). Viewed symbolically as male (daa), Naamwin is considered the ultimate source of good, evil, fate, luck, talent, etc., and the ultimate power behind all other spiritual forces. While the role of Naamwin is acknowledged in the everyday functioning of the belief system, most religious concepts and activities, however, focus on forces less remote, the most prominent of which are the Earth and ancestors (kpime). Propitiation of and sacrifices to these two forces constitute the major
pillars of Dagaaba traditional religious practice. The Earth (tengan), viewed as a companion god to Naamwin, is considered symbolically as female and the source of human and crop fertility, prosperity, and survival. Accordingly, Naamwin and Tengan may be addressed together at the beginning of a sacrifice, regardless of the shrine or entity being propitiated (Some, 1997, 1994). Dagaaba cosmological orientation towards the Earth is equally manifested in funeral ceremonies; in addition to being the residence for the dead, the Earth facilitates the passing of the deceased into the spiritual realm, transmuting thereafter, the soul of the deceased into ancestorhood (Gbal, 2013).

Ancestorhood, thus, is a concept built on the belief that the human soul lives on after death. The state of ancestorhood, a permanent condition, is the culmination of the process by which the living soul is changed from the state of being a wandering, rudderless ghost right after death to that of an ancestor (Gbal, 2013; Goody, 1962). This process is primarily a function of a series of elaborate mortuary rites, as demonstrated in the analysis of Dagaaba funerals in chapter three of this work. Ancestorhood through a long and well-lived life is the ultimate goal of the traditionally-oriented Dagaaba. In Dagaaba society age is synonymous with wisdom and knowledge; these are taken as intrinsic rewards for having lived a long life (Kuupuo, 2010). Elders enjoy a privileged social position because of their long experience in the Dagaaba culture, and because of having known the most recently incorporated ancestors (kpime)—who are considered as more experienced and wiser (ibid). As a logical extension of the values and authority of the gerontocratic social order, the ancestors are thought to possess ultimate moral wisdom and are regarded as guardians and the repository of the true Dagaaba
tradition. Dagaaba ancestors, thus, take an active interest in the affairs and conduct of society. Transgression in the moral order, which is against tradition and custom, can provoke ancestral affliction or withdrawal of protection, thus exposing people to the myriad of potentially hostile supernatural forces, especially witches (suobo) and wizards (suoboba). Thus, one shows the appropriate fear, respect, and obedience to the ancestors by making periodic sacrifices to them, assuring oneself of their protection (Naaeke, 2006:22-23).

Dagaaba religious beliefs and practices, however, have not remained static. Since the introduction of Christianity in the 20th century by Catholic missionaries, many Dagaaba people have become Christian converts, the majority of whom are Catholics (McCoy, 1985). Catholic missionaries had a substantial influence on all areas of Dagaaba life. In addition to introducing Christianity in the northwest, the Catholic missionaries also brought formal education and health care facilities in the area. Many Dagaaba people learned to read and write in Catholic mission schools while the various clinics and hospitals built catered for their healthcare needs (Lentz, 2006). By introducing new regimes of discipline, literacy, and other relevant training, the Dagaaba were educated into an alternative religious worldview—Christianity. Because of the intimate bond between Dagaaba social order and religious practice, most of the converts to Christianity reject the entire socio-religious way of life which is the very essence of tradition (Gbal, 2013). Others syncretize their beliefs by incorporating both the indigenous and the Christian worldviews. Such people attend Christian churches but still believe in the ancestors and, thus, occasionally offer sacrifices to them. Similarly, traditional forms of protection against harmful spirits are not completely eschewed
among some of the Christian converts (Interview Victor Ziem, Nandom-Piiri, 12.12.2010). Overall, however, Christianity—particularly Catholicism—is the strongest religion among the Dagaaba today. In the Nandom traditional area, Christians form about 86% of the total population (Ghana Statistical Service, 2010:22).

Music-Making in Dagaaba Society

Having examined the geographical background, ethnic identity, religious belief system and socio-political organization of the Dagaaba, I now turn attention to music-making in Dagaaba society. To say that music is part of Dagaaba way of life would be an understatement as it forms an intrinsic aspect of social life and constitutes a vital element of the Dagaaba system and processes of enculturation. Many occasions provide the foci for music-making which spans from individuals who use music for self-entertainment to spontaneous or formally organized groups who perform music to strengthen social bonds, coordinate efforts at communal labors or praise deities of spiritual significance (Bodomo and Mora 2007: 6-8, Saighoe 1988: 51-60). Dagaaba music is not a unitary art form since there are several genres associated with the various demographic segments of the society. Though music-making in Dagaaba society is more open with regards to participation, certain types of music and repertories are restricted to particular occasions, cults, cooperative work groups, age groups and ceremonies. For example, praise songs (danmu) are exclusively reserved for ancestor venerations (Dankwa, 2012:28). Certain musical types are associated with the religious cult group called bagre which holds an annual ritual ceremony. The music that
features in this context is the bagrbine and its performance is solely for people who are members of the cult. There are special musical types for other ceremonies such as funerals, ritual sacrifices, weddings, naming ceremonies and other initiation rites (Woma, 2013; Vercelli, 2006).

Certain types of music may be prohibited on some occasions. For instance, bewaa, a recreational musical type, is not performed when a member of the community is seriously ill or when someone has died, unless the deceased person was a member of a bewaa group. Whereas the youth usually performs recreational dances such as bewaa and feroo, there is another recreational dance called segaanaa that is mainly performed by the elderly (Bodomo and Mora, 2007). In contemporary times, one occasionally finds dances, which in the traditional recreational context are performed by all, are restricted to a formal group that has practiced, wears a uniform dress, and presents as entertainment for the public rather than as a recreation for themselves (see figure1.5).

Figure 1.5. Bewaa Group Performing at the Kakube Festival. Photo by the author, November 2010)
Musical Instruments

The Dagaaba do not have too many types of instruments because of the centrality of the xylophone in their musical culture. Though in principle, their musical instruments span the four standard organological categories (membranophones, chordophones, aerophones and idiophones), only some few drums, wind, string and other percussive instruments are found among the Dagaaba. Two types of drums, gangaa (a cylindrically shaped wooden drum) and the kuor (gourd drum) may be used at different occasions. Figure 1.6 shows the kuor drum.

![Kuor Drums](image)

Figure 1.6. Kuor Drums (Hogan, 2011: 55).

The gangaa drum is mostly used in recreational and Catholic church music contexts. While it may be employed in other performance settings, the kuor is essentially a funeral drum, used to accompany the xylophone during performances of the kuurbine funeral music. Saighoe claims that the specificity of the kuor as a funeral drum is based on the reason that its name is a derivative of kuur, which
means death (Saighoe, 1988:54). My personal interviews with musicians, however, suggests no such associations. On the contrary, players maintain that the instrument derives its name from the gourd resonator which bears the same name as the drum. The gourd in Dagaare language is *kuor*, and so is the drum.

In recent times, however, one occasionally finds the use of non-indigenous Dagaaba drums in certain performance contexts. During fieldwork in Nandom, I observed that the djembe is gradually being incorporated into xylophone ensembles in most Catholic congregations in the Nandom Parish. Again, some of the Catholic churches have adopted the kete ensemble of the Akan to accompany certain liturgical dances and the consecration of the Eucharist. In the St. Theresa’s Minor Basilica in Nandom, for example, the use of the kete drums have become an important component of the mass, and they are mostly played in combination with a keyboard synthesizer to accompany a choir that performs contemporary African choral music during Sunday mass. This innovation is certainly not an affront to the Akan tradition where the kete ensemble is fundamentally associated with royalty (see for instance Nketia, 1964). In the Akan culture, kete drums have both sacred and ritualistic functions. As such, most Akan Catholic churches in southern Ghana have included kete music in their Sunday mass, implying a greater and more communally accepted emphasis on traditional musical forms while at the same time embodying the authority of the God unto whom the mass is being celebrated. The recent proliferation of this practice among the Catholic churches in the Nandom traditional area is thus a product of cultural borrowing.
Apart from the drums, the Dagaaba use some string instruments: *kankaara, penaa,* and *korinduo.* The kankaara is primarily a hunting bow, a stave to whose two ends a string is attached. Beyond its primary function as a weapon, the bow is occasionally used by the hunter for music-making. The player holds the bow at the farthest end and direct the other end in such a way that the string passes in front of the mouth, which then serves as a resonating chamber. Different pitches are generated when the string’s tension is manipulated by slightly bending forward or backwards, the farthest end of the stave. The tone quality produced depends on how the player may shape the vocal cavity—the resonating chamber. The penaa and korinduo, on the other hand, are said to be morphologically similar, and have four to six strings which are plucked with both hands rather than bowed. During moments of leisure, especially after dining in the evenings, a male person from the household may play either the penaa or korinduo while others sit and listen, or sing the songs whose melodies are being played. These musical instruments are mostly used for personal entertainment. They may serve the purpose of entertaining oneself at leisure or release boredom when embarking on long journeys by foot. There is also a bamboo flute called *wulee* that herdsmen use to entertain themselves when taking their animals for pasturing. The Dagaaba also use a few percussive instruments. These include the *kyeeme* (ankle bands with bells), *buulo* (wristband with jingles), and *nupura* (iron castanets). The buulo and kyeeme are worn on the ankles and wrist respectively so that when the body moves in performance, they vibrate to strengthen the percussive vitality of the music. Xylophone players usually wear the buulo (wristband) on the left wrist,
and it has bells attached to it which activate to equally reinforce the percussiveness of the music when the hand is in motion.

The principal instrument around which Dagaaba musical activities revolve is the xylophone. The Dagaaba call the xylophone gyil, a Dagaare word which means “surround”. Mireku (2005:5) speculates whether the term refers to how music is made around the instrument since in traditional performance contexts people often quite literally “surround” the instruments with the performers in the middle. Though much of the details on the gyil is presented in chapter two, I introduce it here in terms of the types found in Nandom. Principally, there are two types of gyil used by the Dagaaba, the lo-gyiil and the daga-gyiil, both of which are frame xylophones constructed in a similar manner with pentatonic tunings. The lo-gyiil usually has fourteen slats and is mostly played in the context of recreation (Dankwa, 2012:28). It is also used for announcing death in a community by playing some tunes exclusively reserved for that purpose (Saighoe, 1988:145). The daga-gyiil has commonly eighteen slats and is reserved for funeral ceremonies and other ritual contexts, including the Catholic Mass.

Xylophone music serves the purpose of recreation and accompanies events of the life cycle (Bodomo and Mora, 2007:5). The genre that features prominently in the recreational context is the bewaa dance (Wiggins, 2015; Vercelli, 2006; Saighoe 1988:140-161). Xylophone music also serves as an accompaniment to the bagr ritual (Tengan, 1999:22-24). Likewise, festivals such as the Nandom Kakube and Lawra Kobine are characterized by music-making with a strong focus on the xylophone (Campbell, 2005:29). In the context of funerals, the xylophone functions as the single most important instrument around which all funeral
activities revolve (Woma, 2013; Campbell, 2005; Lawrence, 2006). Furthermore, since the 1960s, the gyil has become an integral part of the liturgy of the Catholic Church in Dagaaba-speaking congregations (Saighoe, 1988:140). In recent times, there is a commodification of gyil music within the framework of transnational cultural business where some gyil virtuosos perform on concert stages and also organize workshops and lessons in gyil playing for economic gains (Campbell, 2005, Lawrence, 2006).

**Musical and Performance Concepts**

As is the case in other non-Western cultures, the Western concept of music has no equivalent in Dagaare. Instead, there are terms for specific musical actions such as singing, drumming, and dancing. Music is thus deduced from combined activities and terms expressing the idea such as ayiee (songs), yieelu (singing), ngme lolow (play drums) or ngme gyili (play xylophones). The word ngme literary means ‘play’, as in ‘playing games’, and applies to the articulation of sounds in any instrument used for music making among the Dagaaba (Bodomo, 1996). The word ngmiere, which means ‘player’ is used as suffixes to the local names of musical instruments to designate the players of those instruments. The Dagaaba, thus, speak of gyilngmiere (xylophone player/xylophonist), lolowngmiere (drum player/drummer) or kuorngmiere (player of the kuor gourd drum, in this case, being more specific with the type of drum played). There are also specific labels such as bewaa (music for the youth), lobri (music for death announcement), kuurbine (funeral music), bagrbine (ritual music for the cult of bagr), nuru and kaare (women’s song genres) that distinguish between musical types and
ensembles. Dagaaba concepts of music also include other performing arts such as dance, poetry, and story-telling. Unlike some societies where dance is treated as an independent art, the fact that among the Dagaaba there is no dance (yawr) without singing or playing of musical instruments makes the two art forms inseparable. The primary forms of Dagaaba poetry (kolagni), such as the langni (dirges), dannu (praise poetry), and the esoteric chants of secret cult groups such as the bagr and summa mask—though performed in speech-like modes—are also classified as songs (ayiee).

There are also terms in Dagaare that distinguish between vocal and instrumental music. All forms of music in which the human voice (kɔkɔr) is used are classified as ayiee (songs). The Dagaaba also distinguish between vocal and instrumental music in hierarchical terms. Usually, the human voice is prioritized over musical instruments in terms of sound production and, thus, vocal music is essentially more important to the Dagaaba than instrumental music. In that regard, musical instruments perceived as possessing a voice (kɔkɔr) fall into the same category with vocal music in terms of status, and it is in this sense that the gyil becomes the most important instrument for Dagaaba musical expression. In anthropomorphic terms, the Dagaaba speak of the gyil as having a voice (gyil kɔkɔr, i.e. xylophone voice), able to sing (yieelu) songs, and also speak (yeru). In many ways, the gyil has substituted for spoken verses wherein human speech has not been reverent enough, or at distances greater than that which human speech itself can cover. Except for the gyil, no other instrument of the Dagaaba is anthropomorphized and hence their music is not on the same level as the gyil.
Among the Dagaaba, isolating music from the realms of the supernatural is very unusual. In Dagaaba worldview, music originated from Naamwin (The Supreme God) and was passed down to humans through the kontobili—heavily bearded dwarflike beings of the wild with huge testicles—who also act as intermediaries between humans and Naamwin, and for that matter taught people how to make music. As told in Dagaaba myths on the origin of the gyil (Wiggins and Kobom, 1992:3), Dagaaba initial attempts at music making took place in the context of an accidental discovery by hunters with the agency of the kontobili. Against this belief, exceptionally gifted musicians are said to obtain their talents from Naamwin. Therefore, to succeed or fail as a player is believed to partly result from lang yin, an innate musical aptitude given to people as a gratuitous gift by Naamwin before they are born, or partly from whether one is born as a reincarnation of an ancestor with past records in a particular musical field. The pertinence of the lang yin to this view lies in the traditional tendency to attribute remarkable success or failure stories of individuals as undertakings or trajectories brought along with one from the spirit world into the physical world and either wisely or negligently followed. Deriving primarily from their encounter with the supernatural, the Dagaaba have been making music from time immemorial, fulfilling a felt need in the lives of the people.

Musical performance among the Dagaaba is not rigidly defined as an activity that occurs only in specific places, bounded by time and a set of norms that distinguishes it from the mundane. Rather, it is thought of as part of everyday life. Gyil playing in the farms by individuals who want to flex their tired muscles, lullabies sung by mothers to put babies to sleep, or the playing of the wulee flute
by cowherds while tending cattle in the fields are all recognized as forms of performance. Nevertheless, there is a distinction drawn between performances that are ‘light’ and those that are ‘serious’. Musical performances that occur in the contexts of individual private enjoyment, cooperative work, and communal recreational activities are classified as ‘light’. Examples include bewaa (recreational music for the youth), feroo (recreational music for elderly women), bine (social music for men and women), and children’s songs. Performances associated with funerals and rituals of the esoteric bagr and summa mask cult groups are rather said to be ‘serious’ (Woma, 2013). The Dagaaba account for this discrepancy by arguing that funeral music and music of the cult groups occur in contexts where there is a meshwork of interactions between humans and supernatural agents, which is absent from the other performance contexts.

Considering these distinctions, musicians who perform ‘serious music’ are placed higher in the ranks of Dagaaba musical specialists (see chapter two of this work). Whereas, for instance, there are many gyil musicians in the Dagaaba society, those categorized as masters (gɔbaa) are the ones who have distinguished themselves as accomplished players at funerals and the most esoteric rituals. Dirge chanters also occupy a high status within the ranks of musicians by their duties as eulogist whose musical and oratory skills are very crucial in funeral ceremonies. The dirge chanter, langkône, is an improviser whose function at the funeral is to recreate and reproduce knowledge of people’s genealogy, and publicly express praise or criticisms to the deceased and his/her family. The content of their songs is a repository of family histories, praise names, and elaborations on family and individual qualities. As I discuss in chapter five, the langkône is responsible for
stirring up emotions at the funerals (see also Some, 1997:77). More generally, the skills, knowledge, and competence needed to perform at funerals and other esoteric contexts are certainly not commonly assumed. It involves a long process of enculturation, and as mentioned earlier in our discussion, an innate musical aptitude planted in the individual by God.

While the Dagaaba people draw distinctions between serious and light music, and there are musicians recognized as specialists and are thus, “called upon, or simply take their ‘rightful’ place in musical situations” (Merriam, 1964: 124), there are no ‘artist-audience’ distinctions in any given context. At any social occasion where there is music, Dagaaba philosophy holds that every individual present contributes towards the sonic atmosphere desired of the event through dancing, singing, ululations, handclapping etc. Passivity as, in for instance, sitting in silence, contemplating the music as it occurs in the western classical traditions is exceedingly rare in Dagaaba musical events. Active participation is almost a rule because the success of any social occasion involving music is determined by how deeply people get involved with the music. Likewise, the quality of musicians and the music they play are evaluated through ecstatic feedbacks from the participants. Players who can elicit intense responses from people are often rewarded with gifts. Music-making in the Dagaaba society, thus, mostly occurs as a communal activity within the frame of interactive social events.

Music-making in a Changing Society

To conclude the brief survey of music-making among the Dagaaba, it is also important to consider the dynamics of musical practice in the context of the
changing Dagaaba society. It must be understood that Dagaaba culture, in general, is not immune from the impulses of modernization since they are not living in cultural isolation. They are rather part of a vast system of interconnected societies facilitated by circumstances of migrations, advanced modes of transportation, and technology. Against this backdrop, Dagaaba musical tradition is certainly not monolithic. Like for most Ghanaian peoples, heterogeneous identities, and the coexistence, sometimes the overlapping, of different music systems within societies are realities the Dagaaba also deal with. In the Nandom town where I lived for the most of my research, it was not uncommon to see groups of young people dancing to contemporary Ghanaian genres such as hiplife, highlife, and hip-hop, featuring lyrics of Ghanaian indigenous languages. During the dry season when farming activities are completely halted, nightlife in Nandom is filled with musical celebrations that mostly features exclusively non-traditional Dagaaba music. The youth spend the night dancing to hiplife or hip-hop music played through loudspeakers, with its unique blend of raps in local languages superimposed on programmed beats, bass lines, and sample loops.

Like urban life in southern Ghana, it is becoming a common tradition for Dagaaba men and women to gather at beer bars for refreshment after the day’s work. In Nandom, the available drinking bars come alive in the evenings with music from loudspeakers. Dagaaba men and women spend part of their evenings enthralled in talks and relaxing over bottles or glasses of beer in hand, with most of them spending as much time as possible on the dance floor, moving either alone or with a partner to the music. Again, it is not uncommon to hear popular music from nearby communities filling the soundscape, particularly in the dry
season when the wind carries sound afar. If we extend our gaze beyond the Dagaaba indigenous musical performances, the benefit of popular music as a domain of human action and interaction in the Dagaaba communities, nowadays, become readily evident. It bridges the gap between people of different ages, social status and gender in a society where gerontocracy and patriarchy are well emphasized in all aspects of traditional culture. Popular music thus becomes a conduit for people of all ages to challenge the existing boundaries in gender relations, social hierarchies and the very meanings of Dagaaba cultural identity. More generally, current social transformations in the Dagaaba society has reached a point where people have begun questioning the essence of ‘tradition’ within the context of ‘modernization’ where individualism, freedom, and equality are being prioritized.
CHAPTER TWO

THE GYIL IN DAGAABA SOCIETY

The focus of this chapter is to situate the gyil as the most significant instrument around which Dagaaba musical activities primarily revolve. The chapter will discuss the spiritual attributes of the xylophone through a careful examination of its mythical origins and construction processes. The discussions will also include gyil musicianship in Dagaaba society, taking into consideration the methods of musical training. In the Dagaaba tradition gyil playing falls within the domain of men. Gyil performances, thus, demonstrate Dagaaba men’s artistic expression and technical mastery. When a gyil is found in a household, it may indicate that there is a lineage of xylophone musicians in that family (Saighoe, 1988:54-56). Though not strictly a hereditary activity, experienced gyil players usually come from families with a long background history of xylophone playing. The men in such families develop their unique interpretation of the local repertoire, though many never develop their talents to the degree necessary for performance at important occasions such as funerals. Accordingly, there is a high expression of individuality asserted through performance, with each player retelling the xylophone repertoire according to their level of proficiency, and their own personal artistic agenda. Finally, music repertoire and the various contexts in which the instrument plays an integral role will be discussed, highlighting the funeral as the most important framework for gyil music. Before focusing on the Dagaaba, situating the gyil within the primary tropes of xylophones in Africa will be worthwhile. It will provide an opportunity to understand how the Dagaaba gyil

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relates to other xylophone types on the continent regarding morphology and tunings.

The Gyil in Regional Context

Xylophones are widely distributed in Africa, and they exist in different forms such as log, leg, pit, frame and trough xylophones (Anderson, 1967; Kubik, 1965). While the xylophone “represents one of the oldest and most diverse musical instrumental traditions in Africa” (Strand, 2009: 89), its historical origins have been a matter of theoretical controversy among scholars for many years. At one end, it is hypothesized that the xylophone was brought over to Africa from Southeast Asia, based on the evidence that Indonesians have been present in some parts of Africa around 500 CE (Jones, 1964, 1960; Kirby 1966; Sachs, 1940). This view holds that the essential similarities in structure, tuning scales, and playing techniques of the African and Indonesian xylophones could only be explained by possible culture contacts between the two xylophone traditions. At the other end, this proposal is rejected because if existing evidence of contact is to be used to show influence, the weight of proof rather lies for an opposite view (Jeffrey, 1961; Mensah, 1982; 1982; Saighoe, 1988). For Atta Annan Mensah, “the spread and incidence of usage of the instrument in Africa, the existence of a wide range of constructional sophistication, combinations in ensemble and the high level of skills in performance of the instrument in Africa would make it difficult to dispute a theory of the African origin of the xylophone” (1982:139). Without placing too much burden of proof on whether the xylophone came from elsewhere to Africa, or it originated and developed on the continent, the instrument has come to occupy
an important position in most African societies. As Maxwell Heather observes, “because of their special sound and deep connection to regional and ethnic identity, xylophones are highly valued by most sectors of the African society.” (Maxwell, 1995:59).

Xylophones in Africa come in diverse shapes and sizes, and they are distributed across West Africa, through to some parts of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Africa (Anderson, 1967; Tracey, 1948). In West Africa, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Mali, Cote d’Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Nigeria and Cameroon have the most prominent xylophone traditions (Charry, 2000:40). In East Africa, the distribution covers some parts of Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya (Kubik, 1994; Anderson, 1967), while in Southern Africa they are found in some parts of Mozambique, South Africa, Zambia, and Malawi (Hogan, 2006; Tracey, 1991; Johnson, 1976; Kubik, 1965). Africanist scholars have identified several characteristics for distinguishing between the xylophone traditions in Africa (Hogan 2011; Charry, 2000; Maxwell, 1995; Kubik, 1964, Cooke, 1991 etc.), few amongst them will be considered here. Not only are there differences in their morphological structures and sonorities, but also in the musical function and type of musical ensemble of which the xylophone may be part (Anderson, 1967:46).

In terms of design and shape, the xylophones are by no means uniform in construction and in appearance, and distinctions between them are primarily drawn upon whether the keys are free or fixed (Anderson, 1967:46-47). The free key xylophone comprise those whose keys are not permanently fixed to any frame or support but are rather assembled each time the instrument is played. The most representative of the free key category is the log xylophones mostly found in East
Africa (Kubik, 2010; 1994; Bae, 2001; Anderson, 1967). Ranging from a few to more than twenty keys, the log xylophones customarily have their keys simply laid parallel on banana trunks which function as resonators. The assembled keys are usually separated and supported by thin sticks that prevent them from striking each other or dislodging from their places (Kubik, 1994:56; see also Figure 2.1. below). The popular amandinda and akadinda log xylophones in Uganda, for instance, belong to the free key category (Bae, 2001). Other East African xylophones such as the rimba and vilangwe played in Tanzania, and the vilango played in Kenya also fall under the category of the free key xylophones (Anderson, 1967:48).

Figure 2.1. The Amadinda Xylophone (Kubik, 1994:56)

In contrast, the fixed key xylophones are permanently constructed, with the keys remaining constantly secured to a frame (Maxwell, 1995:59). Typical of this category include the gourd resonated xylophones such as the timbila of the Chopi in Mozambique, the West African Mande and Senufo balafons, the
Dagaaba gyil of northwestern Ghana, or the Sambla baan of Burkina Faso (Strand, 2009; Zemp, 2010). The manza and longo, portable xylophones played by the Zande people in Central African Republic, also fall under this category (Kubik, 1999:15; Hogan, 2011: 53). The structure of the fixed key xylophones exists in two basic forms: flat-framed with the keys built on a parallel surface, and sloped-framed where one end is higher than the other by several inches (Godsey, 1980:90-92). The Mande balafons and the Chopi timbila may be classified under the flat-framed xylophones since the structure barely has a part higher than the other. The Senufo balafon, the Dagaaba gyil and the Sambla baan, unlike the Mande balafons and Chopi timbila, have their frames sloped with the smallest and highest pitched keys placed at the low end of the frame. The manner to which the keys are secured to the frame also differ among the fixed key xylophones. In the West African xylophone traditions, as Charry observes, “the wooden slats are attached to the frame by cord wrapped around the ends of the slats rather than threaded through holes in the slats [while] in other parts of Africa, they are held in place either by pegs inserted into holes in the slats or cord threaded through them …” (Ibid: 139).

Tuning systems also vary from one xylophone area to another. Anderson (1967) mentions that hexatonic and heptatonic tunings are common in Tanzania and Kenya while xylophones in Uganda are mostly tuned to the pentatonic scale. The Chopi timbila in Mozambique are tuned to the heptatonic scale (Tracey, 1948: 118). Heptatonic tunings are also found among the Mande of West Africa where the tonal organization of the flat-framed balafon is based on seven pitches in an octave. The sloped frame xylophones among the Sisaala, Birifor, and
Dagaaba of Ghana as well as the Senufo in Côte d’Ivoire have pentatonic tunings with relative variances (Zemp, 2010; Heather, 1995; Godsey, 1980; Seavoy, 1982). In the Dagaaba xylophone tradition, for instance, the intervallic consistency within and between octaves, and the range of each xylophone varies depending on the lineage from which the xylophone maker comes (Wiggins 2011). Brian Hogan observes similar tuning trends among Birifor xylophone makers in northwestern Ghana. According to Hogan, “certain families are known for a slightly higher or lower range, for greater consistency within octaves, or for a specific tuning taken from a single xylophone” (2011: 63). While xylophones in Africa may use local tunings, sometimes sophisticated gadgets may be employed for Western tempered tunings to be used in contemporary ensembles (Wiggins, 2011).

**Origin of the Gyil**

From the foregoing, I have already noted the morphological tradition to which the Dagaaba gyil is related. The gyil falls within the category of pentatonic wooden frame xylophones in West Africa, sharing close affinities with the sloped key xylophones found in Côte d’Ivoire, Burkina Faso, and Ghana. With regards to its origin, there is no validated evidence from any source indicating where the Dagaaba gyil came from, or which Dagaare speakers were the first to adopt it. It is suggested by Larry Godsey that the gyil may have originated from Côte d’Ivoire based on migration accounts given to him by some prominent Dagaaba people in Lawra in the Upper West Region (1980:18-20). The Lawra Na (chief of Lawra) recounts to Godsey a series of migrations by his ancestors from Côte d’Ivoire to
their present location around the 1840s. Two types of xylophones are cited by Godsey as having been brought along: the lo-gyil and lo-gun, the latter described as a large instrument that corresponds to the daga-gyil (1980:18-20). The 1840s dating may be corroborated by evidence from another people mentioned by the Lawra Na. He names two groups, the Dzanni and Lamba, who had left signs of having inhabited Lawra prior to his own people’s arrival. While the meaning of “Dzanni” is not clear, the term probably refers to the Dyan, a Lobi speaking people who are believed—based on their own oral history—to have out-migrated west across the Black Volta before the arrival of the present inhabitants (Goody, 1967: 14-15).

While the Dagaaba in Lawra may have arrived in their present destination from Côte d’Ivoire with their xylophones, the same may not apply with other Dagaaba people in the northwest. For instance, the Dagaaba of Nandom trace their origins to the Dagomba of Northern Ghana while those in Kaleo claim a Mossi origin (McCoy, 1988:36; Kuukure, 1985:27; Tuurey, 1982; Herbert, 1976). The Dagaaba in Nandom are estimated to have arrived in their present location in the 17th or 18th century (McCoy, 1988:36). Though their migration histories have been collected (Tuurey, 1982; Herbert, 1976), they do not mention the xylophone or any music related topics. However, it is interesting to note that the Dagaaba in Nandom use a fourteen-key xylophone called lo-gyil, which probably might be a borrowing from the Dyan, the Lobi speaking people who, as mentioned above, initially inhabited Ghana’s northwestern territory. The Lobi are noted for the use of a fourteen-key xylophone that has similar tuning as the gyil among the Dagaaba (Mensah, 1982:139). According to Saighoe, the use of the prefix “lo” in the name

In her study of the Sambla xylophone tradition in Burkina Faso, Strand (2009:92) traces the origin of the West African pentatonic xylophones to the Senufo of Côte d’Ivoire based on what she identifies as the easterly expansion of xylophone practice across the region. Taking pre-colonial settlement patterns of the region into consideration, Strand holds the view that the Senufo may have been the first to own the xylophone in the region, which then spread to neighboring groups due to migratory patterns precipitated by economy, religion, and insecurity. Notwithstanding the similarities that many of the xylophones in the area bear to the Senufo balafon, the surrogate language systems practiced on the instrument could also suggest a possible Senufo root (2009:92). While no specific evidence suggests that the origin of the speech surrogacy on the xylophones lies in the Senufo tradition, Strand expresses no doubt that the idea supports the theory that the Senufo xylophone is the ancestor for other pentatonic xylophone traditions practiced in West Africa.

While morphology, tunings and migration stories may combine to support a Côte d’Ivoire root of the Dagaaba xylophone, a commonly-held myth of origin in which the gyil’s construction and repertoire are attributed to the kontobili (dwarfs or fairies) are rather emphasized by the Dagaaba. Ralio Yiryella, an elderly xylophonist in Nandom-Konyunga, for example, recounts the kontobili myth as follows:

The gyil once belonged to the kontobili. The first person who learned the music was a hunter. One day, the hunter went to the bush in search of meat and saw the kontobili playing the xylophone. Obsessed by the captivating
melodies of the gyil, the hunter, with magical powers apprehended the kontobili. The kontobili bargained for his life by offering to teach the hunter how to make and play the gyil. The hunter learned the building of the gyil, its repertoire, and brought it home to his people. Upon his return from the bush, the hunter played the xylophone and the entire community surrounded around him, dancing in twists and turns ... That explains the reason why up to this day, people surround and jump around the gyil anytime it is played ... the kontobili are so attracted to the gyil sound and anytime it is played they come around to enjoy the music (Interview Yiryella, Nandom-Konyunga, 12.12.2010).

Variances of this myth have been documented by Trevor Wiggins and Joseph Kobom (1992). In their version, the myth has it that the hunter killed the kontobili and some of his blood spilt on the gyil (1992:3). Consequently, women are forbidden to play the xylophone because their menstrual blood is not supposed to mix with that of the kontobili. The kontobili blood that spilt on the xylophone is said to be potentially dangerous for women, so that playing the instrument could even lead to barrenness. Michael Vercelli also recorded a version of this myth in which the kontobili is said to harbor animosity towards humans for taking the xylophone away from them (2006:19). For that reason, the construction of a new xylophone includes ritual sacrifices meant to appease the kontobili (Woma, 2013:40).

These mythical narrations stimulate some interesting questions: Why does the myth matter in the gyil’s origin? Is it a mere fantasy, a fable or valueless fanciful fiction that depicts what Edward Tylor defined as “primitive ways of reasoning”? (Quoted in Bell, 1997:4). These questions may as well apply to other xylophone traditions in Africa. In fact, there is hardly a study on xylophones in an African society that does not mention the ascription of supernatural origins of the instruments. In the Mande tradition, it is said that the balafon was first captured
from water spirits by the Sosso King, Sumanguru Kante who was later overthrown by Sundiata Keita, the founder of the Mali Empire (Williams, 2006:30). It is believed among the Mande of Guinea that the Sosso Bala, an ancient xylophone currently kept in the town of Niagassola, is precisely the xylophone captured from the water spirits by Sumanguru Kante (ibid). In that regard, the Sosso bala is attributed an important role in the rise and fall of civilizations among the Mande of West Africa, and its continual presence keeps these memories alive. From the Birifor and Sisaala comes a similar myth in which fairies played and danced to the music of the xylophone; when disturbed by humans, they left the xylophone behind for the humans to take up (Seavoy, 1982:107; Hogan, 2011:82). Myths have also been recorded from elsewhere in West Africa in which the invention of the xylophone is attributed to bush spirits or animals. Zemp (1996:624-625) notes several such myths among the Dan, Guere, Baoule, and Senufo of Côte d’Ivoire. Likewise, the Sara of Chad claim divine origins of their xylophone (Anderson, 1967:49).

In every human society, myths have been part of peoples’ cultural heritage (Richard, 2016; Longenecker, 2014). However, it’s worth has been a subject of controversy among scholars for many years (Hicks, 2010:19-33). Prolonged influential debates on myths ensued in the 19th and 20th centuries that gave rise to several theories of interpretation—evolutionist, functionalist, structuralist, symbolist, and cognitivists among others (Bell, 1997:3). While some scholars in the 19th century discredited myth as an irrational attempt by non-literate societies to explain their world (Tylor, 1881; Muller, 1869; Frazer, 1911), several scholars in the 20th century held contrary views, upholding myth as an important window
through which people perceived and related to their world (Malinowski, 2013[1926], Campbell, 1972; Jung, 1960; Eliade, 1963). In his *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (2013[1926]) Bronislaw Malinowski, for instance, developed the argument of myth as a “charter”, by which the sovereignty of traditional societies was created and defined (2013:176). Based on the functionalist interpretations that were placed on his ideas, Malinowski outlined the purpose of myths in primitive culture as follows: “it expresses, enhances, and edifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of rituals and obtains practical rules for the guidance of man” (Ibid). Among other things, he emphasized the immediacy and living reality of myth as well as its discursive and pragmatic qualities. For Malinowski, myth is not an idle tale, but rather a hard-worked active force, “a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and wisdom” which functioned as “a vital ingredient of human civilization” (2013:177).

Like Malinowski, Joseph Campbell maintains that “myth has an important function in society in four ways: it evokes a sense of awe; it supports a religious cosmology; it defines the social order; and introduces individuals to the spiritual path of enlightenment” (1972:12-13). Carl Jung also examined the deeper significance and function of myth in the human psyche. As claimed by Jung, mythical stories connected individuals and societies with the “collective unconscious” (1960:25) in which all humans participated, and is one of mankind’s ways of interacting with the vast unseen world. Likewise, Mircea Eliade, in his *Myth and Reality* (1963) argued that myth enabled people to know how to make sense of their world and how to behave in their society. Combined with religious rituals myth, according to Eliade, facilitated people’s deep connections with
shared societal events, memories, and values. In another book, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* (1992), Eliade further argued that, in every society myth represented the unqualified truth about prehistoric time. Again, myth served as the means through which things that were regarded as sacred in the society were created (1992:23).

Eliade, therefore, asserts that the origins of phenomena essential for the existence of humanity typically provide the focus of myth, as he writes, “myth is always an account of a creation” (Ibid). As he observes, many societies believe that the power ascribed to a thing lies in its origin (1992:93), and “if origin is equivalent to power, then, it is the first manifestation of a thing that is significant and valid” (1992: 94).

In Eliade’s view, then, a thing’s sacredness, genuineness, or value lies basically in its historiography, and it is in this sense that the commonly-held myth of the gyil’s origin must be understood. In Dagaaba society, myths are so pervasive in the various spheres of life (Naaeke, 2009; Dannabang, 2004; Tengan, 1999; Goody, 1972). The origin of life, death, good, evil, procreation and all the things pertaining to human existence are rooted in myths. Jack Goody has documented hundreds of such myths, often recited in the context of a ritual called *bagre* (Goody, 1972). Dagaaba myths, as Goody observes, center on the tripartite

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5 Naaeke (2009) analyzes the Bagre myth to assess its cultural relevance for the Dagaaba society today, highlighting its significance in women’s roles and position in Dagaaba society. Tengan (1999) discusses the ritualization process of myths among the Dagaaba society based on personal observation and involvement in the Bagre cultic rituals. He concentrates particularly on the social dimensions which lead to the narration of the myth in a ritual context to show what meanings the Dagaaba society people themselves attach to the belief in the myths. For Dannabang, myths in Dagaaba society are “conduits through which the Dagaaba society acknowledge and comprehend their spiritual, cultural and ritual relationship with their seemingly harsh … environment, which battles them in its unpredictability, but also nonetheless nourishes them” (2004:1).
relationship between human beings, God and the kontobili (pl. *kontobile*)—translated as ‘beings of the wild’. In that relationship, the kontobili is heavily invested with a divine role, mediating between human beings and God (Naamwin). Unlike Malinowski and the others, Goody is of the view that myths in general do not have a central function in human cultures, but instead are a part of the total picture, a part which is “in many ways peripheral, changing, the sort of thing that mankind can take or leave” (1972:33). Despite his view, Goody does not doubt the importance of the kontobili in the religious narratives of the Dagaaba. In the Dagaaba cosmology, as Goody explains, the kontobili is responsible for the origins of many things—artisanal skills, farming, methods of procreation, religion, rituals etc.—in the society. The kontobili is described by Malidoma Some as a being with “pointed ears … two feet tall at most, with genitals so long they have to roll around their necks, and hair so long it touches the ground” (1997:69). According to Some, the kontobili come from a world called *Kontonteg*, a fine place, far bigger than the Earth, yet very difficult to locate in time and space (ibid). When human beings need their counsel or assistance, they perform rituals to assess the world of the kontobili. Thus, the ascription of the gyil’s origin to the kontobili reminds the Dagaaba of the instrument’s divine source and sacred value.

In line with these cosmological beliefs, the Dagaaba have special reverence for the gyil, and various rituals are instituted to maintain its sacredness. For instance, during funeral ceremonies, special rites of sacrifice are performed over the gyil before it is used. Often, a guinea fowl is killed by a senior member of the bereaved family who hits it against the gyil’s biggest (and deepest) key. The
blood that spills out onto the gyil is said to invoke the sacred spirit of the instrument. It is believed that the gyil’s spirit lends the bereaved and their sympathizers the ability to mourn, and to guide the deceased’s spirit on its journey to the other world. The carcass of the sacrificial fowl is offered to the first xylophonist who arrives at the death scene (Saighoe, 1988: 197; Goody, 1962:51).

The myth is also very integral in the building of a gyil. The process of gyil making is an arduous task that requires not only a substantial amount of manual labor from start to finish but also “the help of supernatural spirits who see to it that the materials used for the construction remain in good shape” (Interview Victor, Nandom-Piiri. 10.02.2011). Dagaaba instrument makers believe that they owe their skills to the kontobili. Therefore, they acknowledge the kontobili by making sacrifices to special shrines established for that purpose before beginning a gyil construction. After building the gyil, a ritual known as gyilkpiiru is performed to cleanse the instrument before it is sold to any person. In the ritual, a black or red hen, and a guinea fowl are slaughtered and the blood poured over the smallest and largest gourd resonators. These serve as marked signs to ward off any evil spirit that may hover around the newly constructed instrument. It is also meant to compensate the kontobili from whom the hunter forcibly captured the gyil. The meat is then used to prepare a special meal called gyil-tii which all males in the household of the maker eat.

**Gyil Construction and Tuning**

In Dagaaba society xylophone makers (gyil maale) are uncommon because very few individuals specialize in the craft. Whereas many people may know how
to play the instrument, gyil making is rather a less common skill. Xylophone repairs may be effected by musicians, but the actual manufacturing is left to those who specialize in it. Therefore, very few Dagaaba men are responsible for all the xylophones used. It must be noted, however, that not every xylophone maker is a good craftsman. At social occasions or festivals where xylophones of different kinds are displayed, it is easy to discern varying degrees of skill in the manufacturing of the instruments. Some show high craftsmanship while others do not. Like many other crafts in the northwest, gyil construction is often found in families, the art being handed down from father to son. In the Nandom traditional area where this study is focused, some of the renowned gyil makers come from the Ziem family in Piiri, the Berese family in Piina, and the Yiryella family in Konyunga. These families also produce some of the well-known and highly skilled musicians in the area. While xylophone making is not exclusively a hereditary activity, the skill and feeling for the work appear to be more developed in the sons of xylophone builders. Accordingly, sons are mentored in the craftsmanship by their fathers and apprenticeship lasts as long as the father lives. In gyil making, indefinite apprenticeship is the rule since regardless of the level of skills attained, the apprentice is socially constrained from branching out on his own.

There is, in fact, hardly a study on Dagaaba xylophone music that does not devote some attention, however fleetingly, to the construction and tuning of the gyil. To some extent, then, descriptions of gyil making among the Dagaaba, although packaged differently are available in the literature (Wiggins, 2011; Hogan, 2011; Vercelli, 2006; Mensah, 1982). However, the spiritual dimensions
governing the construction process have been neglected. Therefore, I provide a brief description of gyil making, taking into consideration the spiritual knowledge required on the part of the Dagaaba craftsman to produce a good instrument. The description is based on interviews with Dagaaba gyil makers and personal observations in the workshop of Victor Ziem, a master musician and instrument maker in Nandom-Piiri. I and Florian Carl, a professor of music in the University of Cape Coast, spent several weeks in 2012, living and learning with Victor as he built us a daga-gyil for a film documentary. Victor is a great xylophone maker whose competence is well acknowledged in the area. While in Nandom I interacted with some makers, Victor was practically among the fewest that were actively engaged in the craft. Thus, he draws his clientele from a wide geographical area including Dagaaba communities in southern Burkina Faso.

Building a new gyil is a difficult task that requires more than one set of hands on the job. Accordingly, Victor usually builds his consignments in the dry season when farming activities come to a halt to guarantee the availability of the most hands. Victor’s compound is full of young and agile men and they all render their unqualified assistance to him to complete the arduous task which consumes inestimable amount of labor. Building a seventeen key daga-gyil normally takes two or three months to complete. The range of the time, however, is also directly related to Dagaaba work habits in general and their continual reordering of priorities which sometimes result in divertible attention to the job at hand. Some days pass between sessions, the reasons varying from the precedence of other activities such as funerals and communal labors to the reservation of time for other personal issues.
Materials and Tools

The materials required for gyil construction are all found around Dagaaba villages. The wood used for the gyil slats come from the *ligaa* tree (*pterocarpus ernaceus*) which grows well on the savannah and can withstand the long dry season and frequent bush fires. The *ligaa* wood comes in three colors—white, red, and brown. Xylophone makers determine the age and durability of the tree based upon the wood’s color (Vercelli, 2006:23). The tree is regarded as very old when it is clearly dead, having lost all its leaves. Makers prefer the brown wood because of its physical properties and sound quality. Victor mentioned in an interview that the brown wood can repel moisture, resulting in more sustained and better tone. Because of scarcity, gyil slats nowadays are made of the red wood. The white wood is not used because it is considered immature for construction. The ligaa tree is usually felled by men in the maker’s compound. Two traditional methods may be employed in the felling of the tree. One method is to light fires around the trunk of the tree and leave it burning for several weeks to make it weak and able to fall. The other method is to cut away the roots with an axe, leaving the tree standing until it dries and falls by itself (see for instance Mensah, 1982:141). Nowadays, makers may employ chainsaw operators to cut down the tree.

The four poles of the gyil frame are made from a specific wood called *susule*. The susule wood is stronger, durable and resistant to attacks of fungi.

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6 The makers prefer the ligaa for its durable qualities. It is described as hard and heavy and is resistant to attack of fungi, termites or wood-boring beetles. The ligaa is also used for charcoal and roof beams by the Dagaaba society.
termites and other wood insects. The horizontal pieces of wood that connects the four poles together are made from the *gaa* tree. The *gaa* is flexible and can easily bend without breaking. The *gaa* also serves as the sloped ‘bed’ on which the gyil keys lie. In-between the horizontal *gaa* wood are battens made of the *yila* tree that hold the gyil resonators. The resonators are made from hard-shell gourds (*kuor*).

In Dagaaba villages the gourds are grown for different purposes. They are used for food containers, drinking cups, diviner’s rattles, and the *kuor* funeral drum. The fresh gourds—greenish in color—are prepared for use as gyil resonators by cutting off the top at the stem. The seeds and pulp inside the gourd are loosened by filling the cavity with water and letting it stand for about a week. The pulp rots and is easily removed and the empty shells are dried in the sun, turning brownish thereafter. Xylophone makers always ensure that they have more than enough supply of gourds for the most efficient work and effective results. Other materials needed for building a new gyil include the *gyilgana*, a hard rope from a leaf-less creeping plant used in tying the gourds in their position; *paapir*, spider’s egg membrane for buzzing effects; goat hide, and dried goat intestines for tying the four vertical poles.

Gyil makers mainly rely on very few general and multi-purpose tools. The keys are carved, shaped or trimmed, and tuned with a traditional socketed adze (*la pera*). A small knife is used at the final stage for smoothing key surfaces. The small knife is also used in the preparation of animal hides and calabash resonators. Finally, a big axe, a hammer and iron wedges are also employed for the splitting of logs. Collection and preparation of materials is probably the most time-consuming activity. As mentioned above, a gyil maker needs several different
species of wood for a single instrument, each requiring longer days of preparation. Fresh goat hides and intestines are also prepared through a careful drying procedure. Wood for the gyil keys are seasoned with smoke from an open kiln filled with cow dung, coals, and a cake glue (akraa, usually latex from the local shea nut tree). Also, some special medicinal preparation (lobr) are employed in the cutting or burning of the tree, smoking of keys and for the craftsman’s own protection and assistance.

**Construction Process**

Usually, xylophone makers do not wait until all materials are collected before beginning the construction. Sometimes the needed materials are fetched as work goes on. First, he makes the gyil frame. Usually, there is an older gyil in the maker’s compound which serves as the model against which all new instruments are built. Thus, the height and breadth of the new frame is measured against the old one. In doing so, the maker tappers his wood when necessary and estimates the gradually diminishing distances needed to set his notes in perfect line, each distance carefully set off to preserve a kind of balance. The frame is made of four vertical susule pieces, comprising two short and long ones. The susule are held firmly in place at a trapezoidal shape by strong horizontal gaa (Diospyros mespiliformis) bars fixed to them and tightly tied by strings made from goat hide. Depending on the size of the gyil, short gaa bars are joined to the vertical poles higher up and the frame is further strengthened by several thinner battens which skirt the poles in the middle (Figure 2.2 below shows a finished gyil frame).
Two particularly important features of the frame must be explained here since they are used as reference points when discussing the structure of the gyil and take on special importance due to their application in performance practice. The Dagaaba divides the keyboard into two sections. The section containing short and high-pitched slats (i.e. the treble slats) is referred to as the lower end of the keyboard (per) while the section comprising the lower-pitched or bass slats is known as the higher end (zu). Its distinctive slope derives from the exigencies of construction due to the instrument’s size, and serves the performer’s need to be able to reach both ends. In performance, the player does not sit facing the middle of the keyboard, but rather slightly towards the lower end so that the first five or six keys on his right lie comfortably under his right hand (this position may be reversed if the player is left-handed). This group of keys lies low to the ground at a height most comfortable for the player seated either on a log or a low stool. At the sixth or seventh key, the keyboard begins to curve upward to the extent that
the last key lies almost twice as high off the ground as does the first. The slope serves two purposes: it brings the longer (bass) keys within easier reach of the player’s left or right hand than if they were stretched out on a flat plane and gives more room for suspending the large, spherical gourd resonators. The higher end (the bass slats) of the keyboard is the “gyil’s head or top” (gyil-zu), and the lower end (treble slats) is the “bottom” (gyil-per). These terms are applied to the musical parts played at their respective ends of the keyboard, thus distinguishing the group of keys at the bottom from those at the top as separate, but overlapping, musical areas.

**Preparing the Gyil Slats (Gyil-bie)**

Preparation of the slats usually begin several years prior to the construction of a new instrument. The selection of the appropriate tree marks the beginning of this process. Xylophone makers look for a ligaa tree that is straight to accommodate the largest keys which are up to about hundred centimeters long, and of sufficient thickness for splitting lengthwise into several sections. But such ideal requirements rarely prevail as gyil makers mostly must deal with poorly shaped and crooked woods. After the tree is hewed down, the suitable parts are cut into pieces and left in the bush for several years to dry before they are transported home. Sometimes makers allow six years for seasoning the ligaa before it is used in carving a new gyil (Wiggins, 2011: 13; Strumpf, 1975:110). In interviews with Victor, he mentioned that xylophone makers are aware of the effects of seasoning on sound, and of the possibility of eventually having to retune the slats if the
woods are not adequately dried. Thus, when the woods are transported home, they are subjected to a rigorous drying process before tuning.

Before the drying process, the woods are cut and trimmed into the required sizes, using the adze. Depending on the size or type of xylophone being built, many of the carved woods (called gyil-bie at this point) are then selected per the quality of shape and absence of knots or cracks, and are arranged by length on the ground. In Victor’s workshop, the trimmed gyil-bie are compared to the keys of an older instrument, and shortened if necessary. The intent here is aesthetic, because key lengths are systematically graded to produce the traditional keyboard design, a more or less uniform isosceles trapezoid. Next, the entire gyil-bie are smoldered over a ground trench in which live coals, cow manure, and some ingredients meant to spiritually cure the wood have been placed (Figure 2.3. below shows the trench for drying the slats). The slats are kept on fire for several hours each day to ensure that all liquids are completely sapped from the wood. This process may take several weeks depending on the amount of liquid in the wood. Occasionally, the maker taps the wood to find out by its sound whether all the sap has dried off. When satisfied, he planes the slats further to clean off any patches and smoothens the surface, making it well formed and attractive. The reasons given by xylophone makers for drying up the keys on fire center around their general sound and resonance, and as protection against the spiritual hazard to which an instrument maker is subject. In discussions about the process with Victor it was interesting that the musical effects of drying the keys were always subordinate to the spiritual implications in which malicious spirits are said to be driven out of the wood by the fire.
Tuning

Tuning begins when the maker is assured that the slats are well dried and do not contain any sap. Tuning is done by scooping the middle of the under part of a gyil-bie into a shallow arch to lower the pitch and by chipping off the ends diagonally toward the edges to raise the pitch. Some makers tune the higher pitches first while others begin from the lowest pitch. Victor Ziem, for instance, makes the lowest bass slat (gyil-maa, i.e. mother of the gyil) first which then serves as his tone center or tonic against which the remaining slats are tuned. He works out the next lower pitch (gyilmaa-ture, i.e. next after mother) from the first, then the third from the second until he is through with the rest. Gyil makers usually tune their instrument to an older xylophone in the family to maintain some degree of standardization in their tunings. Because of variances in tunings, the Dagaaba hardly use two xylophones from different makers in performance. Atta Annan Mensah asserts that gyil makers in the northwest generally cultivate
absolute pitch which enables them to work to a local standard pitch, hence, two xylophones from different makers can be played together in any given situation (1982:145). However, interviews with Victor and other musicians in the Nandom traditional area suggests otherwise as they stressed the need to use two xylophones from the same maker in performance.

When the tuning is done, the slats are laid on the frame in order of size and pitch. The maker then selects gourd resonators and carefully grade them per the pitches of the slats. He does the grading by picking and hitting each slat while at the same time slightly thumping the base of the gourd (kuor) on the ground to check for correspondence. He then trims the mouth of the gourd to resonate with the sound of the slat to which he wants to assign. Next, he makes three holes in each of the gourd resonator and covers them with paapir, the white, smooth, and flat material in a spider’s web that protects the eggs, or thin rubber membranes to give them a buzzing sound. Then, he drills two small holes around the mouth of each resonator. Through these he threads the string, gyilgana, which will then be tied to the smaller battens in the frame to suspend the resonator beneath the slat. After all the slats and resonators are firmly tied, the maker may either spray the instrument with lacquer to make it visually appealing. From this point, the construction is completed and the instrument is ready for music-making.

The Spiritual Dimension

Within the framework of traditional Dagaaba society it is believed that all living things including trees have spirits living inside them. There is a powerful active life principle associated with trees that requires wood carvers to take
precautionary and protective measures to assure the safe handling of wood before, during and after construction. The ligaa tree, xylophone makers explained, is alive and therefore bad spirits are in it that prevent the keys from sounding sweet and crying loudly. This belief is not based simply on the obvious natural phenomenon of growth, reproduction, and death. Trees can affect human beings for good or bad; improper handling cause sickness, or even death. Various parts of trees are widely recognized for their medicinal properties (Goody, 1962:54). Much medicine in local use for curing bodily disorders, for spiritual assistance or protection is made at least partially from them. They are not cut down “anyhow” as the Dagaaba would say. Prayers, apologies, and sacrifices may be required. The Dagaaba have much respect for nature, and bearing this in mind, we may address the various prescriptions available to xylophone makers for rendering a ligaa tree safe to use and, therefore, a xylophone safe to play.

As part of the precautionary measures, xylophone makers apply lobr, “black medicine” to the ligaa tree before attempting to cut or burn it down. The lobr is applied in cruciform on the tree’s trunk. If the cruciform is still visible after a certain time the tree is judged safe to cut down. If the cross disappears, it is said that the tree has wiped it away, and that is unsafe to use. The medicine is even applied to trees that are clearly dead, with the bark peeled off, and all leaves lost. Victor mentions that the lobr renders the tree harmless while he works with the wood. This belief assumes that the wood is always in some sense alive, as are by extension the gyil keys made from it. Thus, the lobr may also be applied to the first and last keys of new instruments so they will not, as Victor puts it, knock against each other at night, or come to harm him. In the context of this belief,
failure to use the black medicine would surely result in the maker’s death should he attempt to carve the wood. If the carver needs or prefers to use a ligaa that is less than safe, there is another type of black medicine which may be burned at the base of the tree or applied directly to the trunk to render it safe, since its ingredients are thought to be a source of greater power than the tree’s spirit.

Drying the slats rest partially in similar beliefs about the power of trees. Victor gave reasons for doing it, most relating to the gyil’s sound and general dangers inherent in working with wood. Victor emphasized the point that smoldering not only prevents slats from losing their sound, but also helps them sound sweet. But the mystical dimension always prevailed in discussions of the practice. For Victor, the smoke from the trench contains medicine that are stronger enough to overcome the bad spirits that may still reside in the wood. The composition of materials used to generate medicinal fire for the keys varies from maker to maker. Victor uses old xylophone key shavings, cow dung, latex from the shea tree, and a bone fragment from any animal. The function of the bone, he claims, is to keep the keys as strong as bones so that they will not crack. Whether emanating from the cow dung or other ingredients, there is also a smell component to this medicine, the offensive quality of which is expected to act against the bad spirits in the wood.7

Given the evidence for such active elements in the ligaa, it is logical that the gyil keys are thought by Dagaaba musicians to be alive. One musician cited as evidence, the fact that if a person sat on the xylophone he/she would contract

7 In most Ghanaian traditional societies, evil or bad spirits are driven away from things through the burning of substances that produce offensive scents.
some illness raging from bodily rash to severe bodily pains, or swollen testicles if the victim is a male (Interview Berese, Winneba, 12.11.2012). The spiritual dimension looms important in other aspects of the gyil maker’s work as well. I have mentioned in the previous section that some gyil carvers make sacrifices to the xylophone shrine for assistance in their work. Victor successfully utilized this method. By way of explanation, he recalled that his father used the shrine for assistance in gyil building, something he picked up in the bush that he thought was given to him by Naamwin (God) for his work. This has become a personal family shrine that Victor consults for assistance in his work. Before embarking on the construction of a new instrument he invokes his father through the shrine, asking for guidance in the project. When the project is done he similarly expresses his thanks for the spiritual assistance.

The Gyil Musician

Among the Dagaaba there are two categories of gyil specialists. The first comprise those who perform gyil music in occasions such as funerals and festivals and the second, those who not only perform but make the instrument as well. While the foregoing discussion considered instrument building, I will now turn attention to gyil playing, touching briefly on the religious beliefs concerning gyil musicianship and associated learning processes. Like the instrument makers, it is believed that gyil musicians owe their skills to the kontobili. In the past, this was acknowledged by making sacrifices to the gyilengmin (xylophone shrine), or an established household shrine. Goody observed that this practice was commonly initiated by the parents of a young would-be-player, in consultation with a diviner
(1967:28). The reason given by musicians for associating themselves with such shrines was that, it ensured that their playing remained “strong” (ibid). Another interpretation of the function of such shrines is offered by Goody, who wrote that they were established “principally to protect the individual concerned” (ibid).

Despite the influence of Catholicism on Dagaaba traditional beliefs in recent times, some gyil musicians still acknowledge the importance of the gyilengmin in their lives. The gyilengmin serves as an important source of protection for such musicians. As discussed in chapter five, Dagaaba funerals bring together a conglomeration of highly accomplished gyil players. For most of these players, their role as musico-ritual specialists leads to extensive jealousy within a local culture of competition and suspicion, making them targets of malicious attacks. It is a common practice among gyil players that they try to outplay each other during a performance to prove their superiority. The quest for superiority is often accompanied by spiritual warfare as “black medicines” (lobr) may be thrown at each other. In that regard, the gyilengmin spiritually fortifies and offers protection for the musicians who must maintain a degree of control over, and fight against malicious powers that they must perforce encounter at the funeral.

As a specialist activity, gyil playing is basically for men. Women are generally excluded from this activity because of pre-defined gender roles and certain cultural prohibitions. Among the Dagaaba, gender cuts across all aspects of social life. Relationships between men and women are characterized by a complex web of masculinities and femininities within which a hierarchical system of status and privileges are situated. Dagaaba society is highly patriarchal and gender becomes an ideological system in which male dominance prevails in the
social structure. In many facets of traditional life, the dichotomy of male superiority and female inferiority is prevalent, and women are infamously downgraded under the pretext of “rhetoric of tradition and cultural authenticity” (Lawrence, 2011: vii). Scholars have identified several factors that fuel the perception of inferiority of women in Dagaaba society. Jack Goody, for instance, attributes it to the commodification of women in Dagaaba marriage practices. Honor and prestige, according to Goody, eludes the Dagaaba woman because she is considered a possession of her husband who has purchased her with cows, fowls, cowries and other materials so that she can be economically and in other ways beneficial to her husband and his family (1962: 60). Other studies such as Lawrence (2011) and Nanbigne (2003) also make references to the various myths, customs and traditions that have historically been assigned to Dagaaba women. For example, women are not included in most traditional religious ceremonies, let alone participate in the musical chants associated with them, because they are considered impure or not reliable enough to be able to keep the esoteric secrets of the religious bodies. Because of the social stigma and ostracism that accompany the few women who defy such prohibitions, most women have been reticent, taking things dispassionately since “[they] have been socialized to believe that suffering in silence is a virtue” (Nanbigne, 2003: 23). As Nanbigne observes, women who rise above such socio-cultural repressions to rap shoulders with men are often stereotyped as pọgnaa, which means a ‘woman chief’, a derogatory remark denoting that the woman is headstrong (ibid). During my fieldwork in the

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8 Though Goody observed this some fifty years ago, the practice remains in contemporary times. Young men pay huge amounts of dowries before they can get a wife, a practice which indeed commodifies the women.
northwest, I met only a woman musician, Candida Kopkuu from the village of Tom, the only woman in the area who could defy all odds to perform the gyil in public. Candida is well known for her courage in playing the gyil at Dagaaba funeral ceremonies, a phenomenon that is frowned upon by many male musicians that I interviewed.

Figure 2.4. Candida Kopkuu at the gyil. Photo by the author (December 2010)

While gyil playing is men’s activity, few men acquire the knowledge and skills needed to become expert musicians. Some men do not even express interest in learning the instrument, let alone become specialists. There are others who go through the learning process but subsequently abandon it for lack of determination and persistence. So, in the Dagaaba tradition, it is argued that gyil specialists are born with the gift of music and not socially produced. Thus, only those destined to play the gyil learn it to an appreciable level and eventually become specialists. The most common explanation in this regard is the story that some babies are born with closed fists, their thumbs placed between the index and middle fingers in the same way that musicians hold the mallets (gyildoɔre) when playing the
instrument. Such babies, the Dagaaba claim, are called into this specialization by Naamwin (God) and their parents must ensure that they fulfill their calling. When the signs of a clenched fist are noticed on a baby boy, people who are deeply connected with the belief mentioned above perform certain rituals for the baby. They will first see a gyil-maale (xylophone maker) to make miniature gyil mallets to be placed between the fore and middle fingers of the baby. A prayer will then be said to ask for protection for the baby. Endowed with an innate talent called lang yin, “such a baby would demonstrate interest in the instrument at an earlier age” (Interview Woma, Bloomington IN, 10.28.2016).

It must, however, be noted that, though destiny is recognized as a major factor that determines who becomes a gyil specialist, not everyone born with the talent nurtures it to achieve that status. It is said that the talent must be cultivated. Cultivation comes in the form of early exposure to the instrument, the repertoire, and the appropriate socio-cultural contexts in which the music occurs, where master gyil players and their technique can be observed. For that reason, “when a father observes that his son is born with visible signs of a xylophonist, he purchases a xylophone for the family if he doesn’t own one already, and arranges for musical training with a renowned musician in the community” (Interview Berese, Winneba, 10.10.2010). The trainer becomes the child’s “gyil father” who teaches him stories associated with the origin of the instrument, how to play properly, and takes him through all the necessary rituals that will make him a strong player (Woma, 2013: 44-45).
Training and Levels of Musicianship

Like the xylophone makers, gyil musicians mostly come from families that have a lineage of players. Not only do such people acquire musical knowledge at an earlier age because there are facilities and people around to coach them, but there is also a strong sense of sustaining the family tradition, since, as one musician related, “we must do what our fathers did” (Interview Berese, Winneba. 10.10.10). Families that have a long-standing tradition of xylophone playing ensure that the tradition is sustained by transmitting musical knowledge from one generation to another. Sons learn from their fathers and their children in turn learn from them. In this sense, gyil playing is an inherited tradition and follows the idea that a family’s life pattern should be a continuation of how its ancestors lived.

Describing how he became a gyil player, for example, Victor Ziem emphasized that xylophone playing has been running through generations in his family. He says:

Xylophone playing is part of our family. It is something that we inherited from our forefathers. My great grandfather was a gyil player and so was my grandfather. My father learnt from his father and I learnt from my father…Now, it is my turn to play and the children must learn from me. When I’m old or die my children and their children’s children will continue to play… This thing [the xylophone], when it enters your house, never leaves (Interview Victor, Piiri, 01.12.2010).

There is no formal system of training for would-be gyil musicians. Rather, children acquire musical knowledge through exposure to musical activities that take place in the community. On a general level, the learning process, as recounted by interviewees follows “the traditional pattern of acquiring any skill in Dagaaba society [which] is observation and imitation” (Kuupuo, 2004:5). In every aspect of life, Somé notes, “Dagaaba children learn by watching adults work and
by doing same on a smaller scale” (1994:17). Thus, the young aspiring xylophonists watches, imitates and replicates what he hears or observes on the instrument. Through constant practice he gradually acquires the needed skills to become a gyil player. In that regard, training of xylophonists does not involve a direct, systematic instructional approach. Prospective gyil musicians develop their skills by observing their “gyil fathers” and other musicians, imitating them and actively participating in musical activities in the traditional context. Part of experiencing the traditional contexts is attending bewaa performances, funerals, and traditional religious rituals. Over time, the trainee gets a deeper understanding and knowledge of the repertoire and its appropriate extra-musical contexts.

While there is no formal system of training, there are several distinct levels of musical skill distinguished by the Dagaaba. At the most basic level, a person may become familiar with the rhythmic organization of gyil recreational genres such as bewaa through dancing and begin to practice the rhythms on the gyil. This phase of musicianship which mostly occurs between the ages of six and ten is regarded as the “learner stage”. Boys who play the xylophone at this state are designated with the Dagaare word gyilzane, translated as “learner of the gyil”.\(^9\) Having developed a partial knowledge of the rhythmic patterns of the gyil repertoire, some boys may begin to play familiar tunes by the time they reach their early teens. From that point, they become \(\text{\textit{bawona gyil}}\), meaning “they know how to play the xylophone”. This may be regarded as an intermediate level of

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\(^9\) In Dagaare, the word \textit{zane} means “to learn” and it applies to the process of acquiring knowledge in anything. Sometimes, a student of any trade may also be called \textit{\textit{zane}na} (note “zane” in between “\(\text{\textit{\textit{o}}}\) and “\(\text{\textit{na}}\)”. \textit{\textit{\textit{zane}na}} is also translated as a leaner).
musicianship, with many males in Dagaaba society never developing their skills beyond this level. Such musicians may play the gyil privately for self-entertainment or recreational activities around the family, but will never perform in a ritual context such as the funeral. A third level, *gyil korba* (literally translated as proficient player) refers to individuals who have gained much musical skills beyond the *ɔbawona gyil*. At this stage, the musician becomes a *gyilmibre*, a term used by the Dagaaba to designate a recognized gyil player. The gyilmibre (pl. *gyilmabwebe*) publicly performs on the gyil at funerals, bagr ceremonies, and bewaa recreational dances.

A gyilmibre who advances further in his playing, and attains a certain level of musical and socio-cultural maturity is termed as *gɔb(aa)* (Dankwa, 2012: 55; Saighoe, 1988:33). The term *gɔb(aa)*, thus, basically refers to a musician who possesses in-depth musical qualities and profound socio-cultural knowledge on the xylophone. The Dagaaba measure the difference between the *gɔb(aa)* and gyilmibre in terms of experiential age in the occupation, and musical competence or maturity. The *gɔb(aa)* are musicians who not only exhibit higher standards of technical mastery or dexterity at the instrument, but also through a combination of a long process of enculturation and talent, have acquired sufficient wisdom (*yangsɔb*) to assume leading roles in ritual performances. In Dagaaba society *yangsɔb* (wisdom) is perceived as a product and indication of social maturity, the essential prerequisite for responsible leadership in all spheres of life (Kuupuo, 2010:4-5). Thus, most gyilmibre rise to the ranks of *gɔb(aa)* in their late forties or early fifties (Interview Yiryella, Nandom-Konyunga, 12.01.2010). At these ages, it is said that they have enough *yangsɔb*, and can assume some positions in their
lineage systems which carries with it certain amount of social and ritual responsibilities. While progressions through the various learning stages are not heralded by any ceremony, transitioning from a gyilmbiere to gɔbaa comes with it certain initiation rituals. Usually the oldest master xylophonist in the gyilmbiere’s family or clan, or a highly recognized gɔbkora, a retired gyil player in the community performs the initiation rituals. The initiation ritual is called gyil-tii dib (Woma, 2013:45), and it involves the eating of medicine prepared from the remnants of an old gyil and certain medicinal herbs. After the gyil-tii dib, the initiated gyilmbiere is given the buulo, a jingle metal worn on the left wrist when playing the gyil in funerals.

While most of the gɔbaa are at least more than forty years old, interviews with Dagaaba musicians in Nandom suggest that some players may rise to this rank at an earlier age. Such individuals are said to be exceptionally gifted and adventurous. They acquire enough experience that enable them to be entrusted with social and ritual responsibilities in the society, and to be initiated early into the “gɔbaaship”. Such musicians can wear the buulo during performances at funerals, a visible way of distinguishing between the gɔbaa and gyilmbiere at any social gatherings (Interview Woma, 10.28.2016). In most of the funerals I attended in Nandom, some of the leading musicians were rather young, but the buulo on the left hand indicated that they were fully fledged musicians. Dagaaba musicians maintain that gyilmbiere who are not yet gɔbaa are traditionally barred from wearing the buulo. A non-ɔbaa who attempts wearing the buulo at funerals does so at his own risk since people sometimes test the potency of an initiated musician’s gyil medicine through spiritual means (Some, 1994:62). Once a player
has the buulo on his wrist, it is assumed that he is spiritually fortified. If the contrary is the case, then, a player’s career could be ruined forever when spiritual medicines are thrown at him.

**Socio-Economic Status of Gyil Specialists**

Traditionally, Dagaaba gyil specialists do not think of their specialization as an essential occupation. Unlike the Mande tradition where the *jelis* are full time musicians (Hogan, 2011: 55-56; see also Charry, 2000: 133-145), Dagaaba gyil players do not rely solely on their specialization for economic livelihood. Among the numerous musicians interviewed during this study, only a few of them could be categorized as professionals. Most gyil specialists are into farming and other related activities for economic livelihood since they do not accrue any substantial amount from their skill as musicians. Traditionally, gyil players do not receive payments for their services. It is part of their social responsibilities to offer musical services to clients in Dagaaba society for free. However, there are few instances where they may be given some incentives or motivations for playing the gyil. The most common is when they perform at funerals. Usually, the incentives come in the form of insignificant cash amounts and sometimes gifts of farm products such as maize or guinea corn (Figure 2.5 below shows a group of xylophone musicians sharing some few coins after playing in a funeral). The quantity of the gift however may depend on the number of performers on that occasion. Likewise, the cash incentive may be contingent on the musicians’ ability to tap into the emotions of funeral participants to donate some coins in reciprocity. The social status of the deceased person also accounts for how much a xylophonist receives after funeral performances. In a funeral that I attended with
one xylophonists, Francis Pelpuo, at Nandom-Monyupelle, for instance, he received as little as eighty pesewas (an equivalent of eight cents at most) after playing the xylophone. In another instance, Francis got as much as fifty Ghana cedis ($15.00 equivalent). In the latter case, the deceased person was a military officer and many prominent people had graced the occasion. Occasionally, a xylophonist may be given the carcass of a fowl that was used for a ritual prior to the commencement of the funeral, depending on how early he arrives at the death scene (Gbal, 2013:25; Saighoe, 1988:167-170).

Other instances where gyil specialists receive some economic motivations for their services are when they manufacture xylophones for sale or train a would-be-musician. In both instances, three hundred and sixty pieces of cowries (or cash equivalent), yams, maize, fowls, guinea corn and locally brewed schnapps (akpeteshie) may be demanded as fees. It is also intended by custom that when a trainee graduates, and begins to perform at funerals, he shares whatever profit he
gets with his master. This practice goes on until the master dies. However, the sharing ratio is indeterminate (Interview Berese, Winneba, 02.02.2010). Gyil playing in the northwest, overall, is not a lucrative job.

Nevertheless, there are some few players who have benefited immensely from their skill. These are musicians who receive students—particularly from foreign countries—who travel to the region for research and to learn gyil playing. Such musicians are mostly linked up by their colleagues who live elsewhere in the country and ply trade as professional musicians. Ralio Yiryella of Nandom-Konyunga, for instance, recounts how he met Mark Stone, a percussion instructor at Michigan Oakland University in the US, through Bernard Woma in 1995, and how the connection has impacted on his economic livelihood. Through Mark Stone, Ralio Yiryella received many students from the US who came to learn gyil playing in the Konyunga village. Ralio acknowledges the financial benefits he has received from this business as he claims that he has been able to complete a four-bedroom house with monies accrued from teaching the students. The building now serves as a guest house for students who come to him to learn gyil playing. He charges the students for accommodation and feeding in addition to the tuition fees (Interview, Yiryella, Nandom-Konyunga, 12.02.2010).

Some gyil virtuosos also practice gyil playing as a profession by teaching in colleges and universities. Since 1972, Gilbert Berese, for instance, was a full-time xylophone instructor in the University of Education, Winneba in the Central Region of Ghana, until he died in 2013. He also held a part-time position in the University of Cape Coast during the same period. Berese was entitled to monthly salaries and retirement benefits unlike Ralio Yiryella, for instance, who does not
hold any such professional position. The internationally recognized gyil virtuoso, Bernard Woma, since 1999 has been in residencies as adjunct faculty or guest artist in many universities and colleges in the United States. Not only does he provide workshops, lectures and lessons in gyil playing with students and musicians in the United States, but he also organizes summer trips for students and musicians who want to learn more on the gyil traditions in Ghana. In 2000, Woma established his Dagaga Music Center in Accra which, since then, has achieved lots of commercial success. This is evidenced by constant additions of infrastructure and renovations to better accommodate the number of students, most of who travel from abroad to take lessons in Woma’s compound. Woma also employs several xylophonists from the northwest who serve as teachers to the numerous students from abroad. In that regard, professionalism in gyil playing is being expanded by Woma as he hires his compatriots on full time basis and pays them salaries regularly.

The Gyil Repertoire

Several Dagaaba musical genres revolve around the gyil. These include bewaa, bagrbine, lobri/kuurbine, and other contemporary genres such as church music, each of them comprising a vast corpus of songs (Woma, 2013:53). Kuurbine is the traditional music associated with funerals while bewaa functions mainly as recreational dance music. The Dagaaba do not have any term for church music. However, the entire corpus of local songs compiled as a hymnal for Catholic congregations in the Nandom traditional area is called sog hamama (i.e. hymn book). Songs in the sog hamama are over five hundred and they are sung to
xylophone accompaniment during Catholic Mass. Bagr-bine on the other hand is exclusively reserved for the rituals of the bagr cults in Dagaaba villages. Musicians and people that have not been initiated into the bagr cult do not play or participate in bagr-bine (ibid). The instrumental organization of bagr-bine includes the lo-gyil (fourteen key xylophone), kuor drum, and the sesege—a small gourd rattle used in strengthening the rhythmic component of the bagr song cycle. In the context of bagr, the fifth slat of the pentatonic scale is not played. They are termed as gamberra, meaning, “bad keys”, to which some dangerous spirits in the cosmos are attributed. As claimed by one interviewee, playing the gamberra invokes some bad spirits that cause trance and, or even death (Interview Berese, Winneba, 10.10.10). In that sense, bagr music is based on a tetratonic scale instead of the usual pentatonic modes of playing Dagaaba music. Because the bagr ritual is performed in a bounded place and participation is restricted to only the initiates, I never had a personal experience of this event during fieldwork in Nandom. Some of the musicians interviewed for this study had played in bagr rituals before. However, they were reluctant to give any information of the rituals since it was against their oath of secrecy. Therefore, for the remaining of the discussions here, I will focus on bewaa, church music, and lobri/kuurbine which are the most visible genres.

**Bewaa**

Bewaa is the most popular recreational genre of the Dagaaba people. Because of its entertaining nature, bewaa is not only performed as an accompaniment to, but also as an integral component of social events such as the
celebration of a prolific harvest, marriage ceremonies, the enskinment of a new chief, the welcoming of an important government official into the community, and at music festivals for schools (Bodomo and Mora, 2007:5-7). Bewaa may also be performed at pito (beer) drinking parties, markets, and in cooperative work situations in the village. Since bewaa songs are often playful and humorous, it is mostly excluded from funeral ceremonies. However, it may be performed in a funeral if the deceased person was a member of a bewaa group.

Among the gyil genres identified with the Dagaaba, bewaa is the most studied by scholars. Its historical origins, performance practice, and musical structure have been extensively dealt with by Wiggins (2015), Vercelli (2006), Campbell (2006), Lawrence (2005), and Saighoe (1988). In addition, Bernard Woma has produced scores of recordings featuring bewaa songs. Therefore, the following is only a modest attempt to introduce the music to readers who may not be familiar with the literature on this music and are encountering it for the first time. The term bewaa means “come together” (Saighoe, 1988:95). It is a call for young adults in Dagaaba communities to come together to express themselves through singing and dancing. It often occurs simply as a spontaneous musical expression. In recent times, however, formally organized groups exist that perform bewaa in festivals, rites, and ceremonies (See Figure 2.6 below). Participation in bewaa dancing generally falls within the competence of almost every young adult in Dagaaba society since competence in dancing is commonly assumed and is a product of general enculturation.
Figure 2.6. Bewaa performance at the Kakube Festival in Nandom. Photo by the author (November 2010).

The characteristic features of the bewaa dance include leaps, runs, twists and turns, and vigorous swinging of the waist and torso. In more stylized performances male dancers strap their ankles with the *kyeeme* (jingle metals) for embellishment and mark the dance beat with the *nupura* (iron castanet) in their right hand to crystallize the rhythmic vitality of the music. Sometimes the dresses of both male and female dancers have beads loosely stuck on them which when articulated through dance movements help to augment the overall percussiveness of the music. Instrumental accompaniment for bewaa includes the lo-gyil, gangaare, or kuor. Each of these instruments may be doubled depending on the occasion and availability of musicians and instruments. In most of the performances that I witnessed and recorded in Nandom, two people were involved in the playing of the gyil, with one of them assuming a leading role. The lead xylophonist introduces the songs, improvise on musical patterns, and cue dancers to begin or end movements. The supporting xylophonist, plays a steady ostinato
pattern which serves as timeline. The drums are used to reinforce the rhythmic patterns with some subtle improvisations.

Bewaa performances usually take place in an open arena. Instrumentalists position their instruments at the center of the arena, leaving some space around for dancers to maneuver. The dancers form two files, one by each of the sexes outside the arena. When the musicians begin playing, the dancers move towards the arena, singing and dancing, and at an appropriate distance from the instrumentalists, they begin to merge into one file. Finally, they form a dancing ring around the instrumentalists. The dance is usually of three parts. The first part consists of singing along with the gyil and running around the instrumentalists with occasional foot stomping, and some forth and back movements that articulate the underlying rhythms of the song. In this case, the xylophonist does not play in unison with the singers. Rather he embellishes the song in such a way that the core melody is less pronounced while the dancers sing the song text. This section is followed by a frenetic display of action. The dancers cease singing and focus on synchronizing their foot stomps with the rhythm of the music characterized by infectious expression of smiles. The third section involves solo and duo dancing where the dancers, combining youthful power and strength, demonstrate their skills by rapidly contracting and releasing the torso whilst stomping their feet heavily on the ground. The xylophonist intensifies the speed and plays a melodic ostinato, during which the dancers take turns to perform various stylistic variations of movements with strong athleticism.

While the focus of bewaa is vigorous display of dance movements, the song text covers a wide range of themes, communicating issues on current affairs
in the community, criticizing social deviance, sexual promiscuity, and youth delinquency among others. For Bernard Woma, “bewaa music is the community mouthpiece through which people engage in dealing with issues of their daily circumstances” (Woma, 2013: 50). The music does not only inform and educate the youth, but also its compositional flexibility provides opportunity for the youth to churn out their own compositions, bringing out the creative potentials in them. Bewaa songs are melodically simple and recognizable, which allows anyone to compose new songs. While women do not commonly play the gyil as the result of cultural taboos associated with it, they produce most of the new bewaa repertoire played on the instrument (Wiggins, 2015:10).

Though it is recreational in intent, bewaa is not only performed for the sheer fun of it, but also used to form and mediate relationships, articulate understandings of similarities and differences between people, and generate consensus and disagreements with neighbors (Woma, 2013:51). For most of the Dagaaba youth, bewaa performances serve as the platform on which they experience a communal sense of belonging, transcending the cultural boundaries that are often erected between the opposite sexes. According to Saighoe, most Dagaaba youth find suitable marriage partners for courtship during bewaa performances (1988:105). Saighoe explains that young adults meet possible partners during bewaa dancing, initiate otherwise impossible romances, and experiment with adulthood. Through the dance, the youth employ their bodies as a means of presenting and legitimizing certain body moves and physical contacts which, in the traditional sense, are considered unacceptable public behavior. In that regard, bewaa performances reflect a kind of a carefree atmosphere
concomitant with social interactions among young people of the opposite sex within the same age group. Therefore, thematically, most bewaa songs revolve around issues that are lighthearted, satirical and many times have leanings towards vulgarity, sensuality, and eroticism.

Historically, bewaa did not originate with the Dagaaba in Nandom. It was borrowed from the Sabile people of Jirapa who called the dance bawaa (Wiggins, 2015:10-15). Bewaa became more prominent in the Nandom area in the 1960s after Ghana had gained independence from British colonial rule and had been declared a republic. At that point, there were conscious efforts to resurge and reassert the cultural traditions that had been suppressed by the ravages of colonialism. The projection of the African personality was one of the core aims of Ghana’s first president Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, and in pursuance of that, people were strongly encouraged to revive, stabilize and perpetuate Ghanaian indigenous music, dances, poetry and other art forms. The youth were particularly encouraged to be the torch bearers of this movement of cultural resurgence and the formation of youth musical troupes based on ethnicity became fashionable especially in the 1960s. Youth music and dance ensembles were formed at national, regional, and community levels to promote the performance of traditional music and dances (Schauert, 2015).

It is within this historical context that bewaa emerged in Dagaaba society. As part of the national agenda, a special ensemble known as the Nandom Bewaa Dance Group was formed in the 1960s by Chemoghr Bangnidong and Gyima Benny under the auspices of Naa Imoro, the then chief of Nandom (Wiggins, 2015:11). Their aim was to bring together several social dances of the region to
form a suite to be performed in concerts as part of the post-colonial trend for promoting African cultural traditions. They choreographed various movements from some Dagaaba traditional dance types such as *dalaari*, *sepkele*, and *bine* to form the suite. Because *bawaa* of the Sabile people in Jirapa was close enough to the local dances of the Dagaaba, it was incorporated in the choreography. In many performances, the *bawaa* was the first movement in the suite and, therefore, the entire dance was named as such, which then became *bewaa* in the Dagaare dialect. The Nandom Bewaa Dance Group became very popular in the 1970s and won many regional and national awards (Saighoe, 1988: 97). Since then, the dance became an integral aspect of Dagaaba musical expression in both recreational and ceremonial contexts. However, changing times have detracted the frequency and intensity with which the Dagaaba perform bewaa as a recreational activity. During my research, it was only in the context of festivals such as the Kakube in Nandom and Kobine in Lawra that I witnessed bewaa performances. The advent of technology has provided many Dagaaba communities with other recreational opportunities.

Nonetheless, given its rigorous stylistic and athletic displays, it is the only Dagaaba genre that has received national and international exposure. Bewaa is performed in various music and dance departments in Ghanaian universities, and the Ghana Dance Ensemble incorporates it as one of its vibrant dance styles. The defunct National Dance Company of Ghana also presented bewaa performances during international tours in the 1960s and 1970s (Schauert, 2015:38). This has also contributed significantly to the popularity of the Dagaaba gyil, inspiring non-traditional Dagaaba music groups to incorporate it into their performances. For
instance, in the coastal areas where transnational music business thrives, many neo-traditional dance ensembles incorporate the Dagaaba variety of the xylophone to enrich their performances in various ways (Dankwa, 2012: 27-32). The Pan-African Orchestra formed in 1988 by Nana Danso Abiam has employed the gyil as one of the most important instruments of the orchestra (Woma, 2013:52). Similarly, the Hewale Sounds, a resident African ensemble in the International Center for African Music and Dance, utilize the gyil to give their music a pan-ethnic feel. Formed in 1996 by Dela Botri, a prolific Ghanaian traditional flutist, the Hewale Sounds have produced several albums that features gyil playing. The gyil has also been featured in popular music bands over the years (Hogan, 2011:67-68).

Church Music

As mentioned in chapter one, the Dagaaba were introduced to Christianity by Catholic missionaries in the early 20th century (McCoy, 1988). As it occurred in many areas in Ghana, the missionaries who brought the Christian faith to the Dagaaba also brought with them their “western church music, which was utterly unsuitable for worship in the area” (Hanley, 1983:1). This music was unintelligible to the Dagaaba because, as Hanley, a Catholic nun puts it, “its poetic imagery was foreign and not meaningful to Dagaaba Christians” (Ibid). In their ignorance of the essence of Christianity, however, the converts accepted the music along with the Latin mode of worship which they mistook as the only genuine expression of the Catholic faith. Following the Vatican II proclamation in the 1960s that permitted Catholic churches around the world to indigenize their ways
of worship, gyil music became part and parcel of the Dagaaba Catholic liturgy (Saighoe, 1988:247). Commonly referred to as the “inculturation”, the Vatican II proclamation was a religious reform and theological liberalism initiated by Pope John Paul II that encouraged the adaptation of indigenous practices in Catholic congregations as a form of evangelization (Gbal, 2013: 40).

Before the papal proclamation, the European mode of Catholicism prevailed among the Dagaaba until Cardinal Peter Poreku Dery, a Dagaaba Bishop of the Wa diocese in northern Ghana, awakened to the inappropriateness of European trappings in which his people expressed their Catholic faith, particularly of the celebration of the Mass on Sundays. His understanding of Christianity, especially of Catholic theology and liturgy enabled him to distinguish between the essence of Catholicism and what was the European approach of it. Armed with that knowledge, Cardinal Dery was to become the protagonist of the development and the use of indigenous music in Dagaaba expression of the Catholic faith (Hanley, 1983:2). During his seminarian training, Cardinal Dery had begun a crusade for sensitizing his folks to the need for expressing their religious faith in a fashion compatible with Dagaaba cultural patterns (Saighoe, 1988: 248). As a young priest, he set new words that expressed Christian beliefs to Dagaaba folk tunes. He then travelled from one parish to another teaching his new songs to choirs that began singing them in church, though he did not have any formal music training (ibid). The enthusiasm with which his kinsmen received his new version of church music encouraged him to continue with his efforts. As Mitchel Strumpf puts it, “every Sunday and Holy festive occasions, congregations in
Catholic churches in northwestern Ghana sang sections of the Mass, including the Psalms, in the Dagaare language” (1970:19).

Following his ordination and consecration as Bishop of the newly created Wa diocese in 1960, Cardinal Peter Dery formally petitioned Pope John Paul II to allow Dagaaba Catholics to celebrate the mass in the Dagaare language, using indigenous musical idioms and musical instruments. Cardinal Dery puts it in his own memoire as follows:

After my ordination as a bishop I thought it worthwhile to have an audience with the Pope to express to him my feelings about the issue relating to the liturgy. It was my intention to ask him for permission to make certain adaptations to the liturgy to make it meaningful to my people. In my meeting with him I explained that I am not against the use of Latin in the liturgy provided those participating understands what they are saying and singing through that language … This was because in my vision as bishop my principal concern was to make the people interiorize their faith. I wanted to help them live their faith authentically (2003:113).

Permission was granted to Cardinal Dery by the Pope. The former then arranged the first Dagaare Mass, the text having been translated and paraphrased from the Latin and set to Dagaaba folk tunes. Prior to this move, when the Dagaaba sang the Mass in Latin, as Woma mentioned, “they often produced sounds which at times could be profane, because they tried to match the Latin words with Dagaare sounds, [which] produced “Dagarized” Latin sounds that were comic” (Personal Interview, Bloomington IN. 10.28.2016). Because of Cardinal Dery’s efforts, the first Dagaare Mass, and the first Mass ever to be sung in indigenous idioms in Ghana was celebrated in Wa in 1960 (Saighoe, 1988:248). In his personal memoire, Cardinal Dery claims that “the liturgical adaptation [of indigenous elements in the celebration of the Mass] started in the Wa diocese before Vatican II when it became a universal policy for the entire [Catholic]
Church” (2003:113). Today, Dagaare Masses and hymns transmitted orally or through hymnals which provide only the words, have spread throughout Dagaabaland in Ghana and in neighboring Burkina Faso.

While the response to the adaptation of folk tunes in Catholic churches in the Wa diocese was massive, xylophone music and drumming were excluded from the indigenization process at the initial stages. Cardinal Dery explains the reasons for their omission as follows:

Even though I had the approval of Rome, I had to be very careful and gradual in initiating any changes in the liturgy. People could misinterpret things. Some could say [that] the White Fathers brought us the true religion. Dery has taken over as bishop and he is dragging us back into the very pagan practices that we have rejected. I decided to start by using Dagaaba tunes for the Latin chants. Hence, though we continued to sing in Latin, the tunes for the songs were taken from the traditional folk songs. It was only after some time that we decided to experiment singing in Dagaare to the accompaniment of the traditional xylophone and drums. This we did first in Nandom by means of a prepared choir. The very first Sunday that we had them sung Mass in Dagaaba, we posted people at all the exits of the church instructing them to try to get a feedback from the people on the liturgy as they left the Church after Mass. The reports we received were overwhelmingly positive. Many were heard saying: “Aha, now we can understand this celebration. That is what we should have been doing sing long” (2001:113).

When the Catholic faith reached Dagawie (Dagaabaland), many Dagaaba embraced it. They found it to be a meaningful replacement of their traditional tengan (Earth shrines) and bagr worship (McCoy, 1988)\(^\text{10}\). The gyil was very integral in the traditional religious ceremonies (Woma, 2013: 53-54), hence, its usage in the church could mean contaminating the newly found faith with traditional beliefs and practices. Therefore, Cardinal Dery’s cautiousness in

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\(^{10}\) Many Dagaaba, today, are reluctant to talk about these forms of worship since they consider them defunct and, hence, must be forgotten. Generally regarded as kotɔdem (i.e. idol worship), the younger generation in Dagaaba society today do not even want to know about the tengan or bagr religious beliefs, let alone partaking in their rituals.
introducing the gyil into the Catholic liturgy was indeed guided by the fears of possible rejection by the converts. Nonetheless, it was well embraced and, today, xylophone music is played in Catholic churches in the Nandom traditional area. The conversion stories of many older Catholics in the area are tightly linked with the introduction of the gyil in worship (Woma, 2013:15). People could not only understand the songs they sung, because they were in Dagaare, but also could identify themselves with the music and the worship. The gyil, thus, became very significant in terms of attracting people to the Catholic faith. Bernard Woma, for instance, mentioned in an interview that the gyil was fundamental in his conversion to Christianity: “Personally for me, it was gyil music that drew me to be converted to Catholicism in 1990. Not only was I fascinated with the playing of biblical lyrics that were transposed on the gyil melodies that I already knew, but the textual meanings of the new songs with its promise of salvation was appealing to me” (Interview Woma, Bloomington IN, 10.28.2016). With the inclusion of the xylophone, the celebrations of important Christian festivals such as the Good Friday assumed some local meanings. The use of the daga-gyil and the kuor drum to accompany the Good Friday Mass was a replica of Dagaaba funerals. People could weep during the Mass because they could envision the crucified Jesus on the paala (funeral stand for displaying corpses in Dagaaba communities), and his mother and relatives, or other Jewish sympathizers mourning him (Woma, 2013:15). Gyil music, thus, became significant in that context because the Dagaaba could identify with Jesus Christ and his family, and mourn him as they would for any dead person in their community (ibid).
In the early stages, gyil music was played mainly in the St. Theresa’s Minor Basilica in Nandom. It was the most crowded Mass, partly because people wanted to participate and enjoy xylophone music in the context of the newly found faith (Hanley, 1983:3). While there were Catholic churches in several villages, most people walked long distances to the Basilica in Nandom to worship because the Mass was made attractive with the introduction of the gyil (ibid).

Aiming for a music that would enhance their religious expression and experience in the newly found faith, the xylophone was employed in accompanying Dagaare Masses in the 1960s. While the practice has spread to all Dagaaba Catholic churches in the Northwest, it was revealed in interviews with some elderly Catholics in Nandom that the enthusiasm is not at the same level as when it first started. Today, other forms of music are incorporated into the worship service. These include contemporary Ghanaian choral music that are structured for four-part singing with piano accompaniment, and other gospel songs. In the St. Theresa’s Minor Basilica where I attended several Dagaare Mass,
services held for the youth in the church usually featured two different choirs. One choir sang Dagaare choral songs composed in the western medium and accompanied by a synthesizer keyboard. The other choir sang some Ghanaian gospel songs, accompanied with hand clapping, drumming and the synthesizer keyboard. While I did not inquire from the priests, or the music directors of the groups the rationale for forming these choirs, I can confidently assume that they were borne out of the influx of Pentecostal movements in Ghana, and the emergence of contemporary gospel singing groups as well as youth choirs in the country nowadays (see for instance, Amuah, 2013).

The rise of Pentecostalism in Ghana since the second half of the 20th century has impacted, in various ways, on liturgical music in the old missionary churches in the country—Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Seventh Day Adventist, Evangelical Presbyterian, and Anglican (Agordoh, 2010: 20-24). The Pentecostals are “a group of Christians who emphasize salvation in Christ as the basis for one to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and in which the ‘Spirit phenomenon’ (including speaking in tongues, prophecies, visions, healing and miracles in general) is perceived as in line with what happened in the early church in the Acts of the Apostles and accepted as a continuous experience in the contemporary church as a sign of the presence of God and experience of His Spirit” (Peter and Cornelius, 2015: 472). Their dramatic worship styles, branded by loud music and frenzied dances that send people into trance, are perceived as “the experience of the Holy Spirit in transformation . . . and manifestations of the

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acts of the power that demonstrates the presence of the kingdom of God among His people” (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013:10-11). The Pentecostals have contributed immensely towards the development of church music in Ghana with their introduction of “Gospel music singing” (Agordoh, 2000:34). This musical genre started in the 1980s and 1990s, and has developed into an art form comparable to what pertains in the contemporary gospel music scene in the United States of America (ibid). Every year, millions of Pentecostal gospel music cassettes and CDs are sold in the market, and it is the most ubiquitous musical genre heard on Ghanaian radios and televisions (Florian, 2012). Gospel music, thus, is the most popular church music in Ghana today, and many of the younger generation in the older mission churches prefer this style of music to the hymns, anthems, and canticles that form regular parts of the church service. To maintain and satisfy the musical as well as the spiritual demands of the youth in the church, many of the older missionary churches nowadays have youth gospel bands with sophisticated musical instruments that perform gospel music during church services. It was thus, unsurprising to experience this performance genre in the St. Theresa’s Minor Basilica in Nandom. The extent to which this trend may impact on xylophone music in the church may be worth assessing in a future study.

Lobri/Kuurbine Music

Lobri and Kuurbine are strictly associated with funerals and are considered the most important gyil genres in Dagaaba society (Gbal, 2013: 25-40). A funerary situation of any significant ritual or celebratory dimension must include xylophone music. Without xylophone music, there will not be any public
ceremony for a dead person (Woma, 2013: 46-50). There are age considerations as well as factors of status of death which prescribe the presence or absence of gyil music at the funeral. Gyil music is not played at the funeral of individuals who die “bad deaths” (kuur faa). An individual is said to have suffered a bad death if the person commits suicide. Others include deaths caused by a curse and persons killed by a god for practicing witchcraft (suolu). The corpses of such individuals are quickly disposed of without any public ceremony. Detailed analysis of Dagaaba funerals as well as the musical content and structure of lobri and kuurbine are presented in chapter three. To avoid redundancy, I will only introduce the music here in terms of their categories. The lobri is the genre played to announce the occurrence of death in a community. The lobri comes in two distinct styles: pɔglu, and deblu. Pɔglu is played to inform the community of a woman’s death while deblu announces the death of men. When a person dies, there are rituals performed privately by select functionaries in the family to ensure a smooth funeral ceremony and effective transition of the dead person’s spirit to the otherworld. These rituals take place concurrently with the preparation of the corpse for public viewing and mourning. During the rituals and preparation of the body, the lobri is played constantly to spread the news of death to as far as the sound of the gyil can cover. The instrumental organization of lobri includes two lo-gyil (fourteen key xylophone) and a kuor drum. Lobri music is not meant to be sung. When the corpse is finally displayed for public viewing, the lobri ceases and gives way to the performance of kuurbine where two daga-gyil (seventeen-key xylophone) are used. Kuurbine music comprises a vast repertoire of songs and impressive improvisation procedures in the playing of the gyil. Kuurbine also
includes dirge singing. The singing of the dirges is led by an individual gifted in oration. The elegance of Dagaaba funerals leaves no room for common place expression. Therefore, dirge performances at the funeral calls for a lofty and ornate use of language. Individuals who lead the singing have deep knowledge of the Dagaaba oral art forms. Through proverbs, riddles, and other figurative expressions, they effectively play on the emotions of the funeral audience and address issues in ways which are deemed impossible in ordinary speech.

Having given a general background of the gyil, its various contexts of musical performance, and the depth to which gyil music permeates virtually all facets of Dagaaba life, the following chapters will present specific details of gyil music in funerals. Chapter three takes on the importance of gyil music in the organization and performance of Dagaaba funerals, taking into consideration its communicative and affective functions. The communicative aspect of the music continuous through to chapter four where issues of speech surrogates in gyil playing form the focus of analysis. Chapter five concentrates on the langni (dirge)—the sung component of the kuurbine music—taking into account, its features and emotional responses it engenders in the funeral ceremony. In chapter six, I reflect on the significance of the gyil and the unique aspects of kuurbine music that defines its affective relevance in Dagaaba funerary rituals.
CHAPTER THREE

GYIL MUSIC IN DAGAABA FUNERALS

In Dagaaba society death is regarded as an occasion of the gravest crisis. The funeral ceremony held to commemorate the occasion of death is more complex and distinct from all other Dagaaba social events (Alenuma, 2002:12). Except for the funeral, publicly celebrated rites are not very common in the Dagaaba tradition. While life cycle events such as baby naming, puberty, and marriage, as well as the assumption of ritual and social positions by a person may be ritually marked, such events are primarily private and involve only the individuals or segments of the lineage immediately concerned (Somé, 1997:16-18). In contrast, Dagaaba funerals are distinguished by their public dimension, length, and the presence of many people outside the lineage who find themselves in varying degrees of social and ritual obligation to attend and perform certain roles. Funerals are indeed the only ceremonies of any kind that formalize interpersonal, inter-social, and inter-kinship relationships in the context of a large-scale public event. Dagaaba funerals include various ritual stages that may span several days depending on the age and status of the deceased.

One of the most significant stages is the burial rites which provide members of the community with an opportunity to mourn to ease the pain of physical separation and to facilitate the passage of the deceased’s soul (sić) into the world of the ancestors. Public display of grief at the burial rites is so crucial because the Dagaaba view it as the most significant means through which loss can be tamed and assimilated into a form with which one can live. However, in
Dagaaba funeral custom, “grief unleashed without the music of the [gyil]… runs the risk of producing another death” (Somé, 1994:56). This ideology places the gyil at the core of the funeral since the music is not only crucial in defining the temporal structure of events but also in the management of bereavement in the community.

This chapter discusses the significance of gyil music in Dagaaba funerals, highlighting how it provides a framework for mourners to convey feelings that words may be unable to express. The music evokes powerful emotions in the mourners, causing them to wail intensively and letting them freely embrace their sorrow over the death. To appreciate the centrality of gyil music at the funeral, an understanding of Dagaaba conceptualizations of death and its significance to humankind would be necessary. Therefore, in the following, I will first consider the social meanings of death among the Dagaaba and how it influences the organization of funeral ceremonies. Several factors, including indigenous perceptions of death, the relationship between the deceased and the survivors, and the mode of death are crucial in determining how funerals are conducted in Dagaaba society. These factors also determine the use of music at the funeral.

Subsequently, an interpretive understanding of the organization and structure of Dagaaba funerals will be presented, focusing particularly on the burial rites, one of the most crucial stages of the mortuary rituals. A significant aspect of the burial rites to be considered here is the nature of the support network available to the bereaved family. The burial rites bring together various groups of people from within and beyond the community of the deceased who play vital roles to support the bereaved and share in their grief.
Finally, I will discuss music at the funeral, examining how it evokes, sustains, and intensifies the atmosphere which the event must convey while guiding the community of mourners to come to terms with the loss that has occurred. In that regard, it is worth noting that the purpose here is not to engage in elaborate transcriptions and structural analysis of Dagaaba funeral music. Transcriptions of the music would be presented only for exemplification purposes. Thus, the focus of this chapter is to present an overview of the need and nature of music in Dagaaba funerals as well as discuss the types of music performed for the management of death and the successful resolution of grief. In so doing, the aim is to deal with “the humanistic foundations” (Nzewi, et al. 2001:91) of Dagaaba musical thoughts and practices. The main argument of this chapter is that Dagaaba funerals provide members of the society with a very powerful means of mourning and celebrating the dead and that music plays a central role in the various mechanisms and avenues for the expression of grief, which ensure a systematic and positive adjustment to human loss.

**The Dagaaba Concept of Death**

The Dagaaba believe that death (*kuur*) is an inescapable phenomenon everyone is bound to experience. It is an undeniable reality and phase of life that awaits all. Indigenous Dagaaba unisex names such as Kuurbeterzie (death has no fixed place), Kuurnigne (death lurks), and Kuurlaare (death hovers around), to cite some few examples, reflect the extent at which the Dagaaba acknowledge this reality (Gbal, 2013: 16). However, the Dagaaba believe that death is not an end to life. Instead, death is “a kind of new birth into another world, where one lives on
as a changed, transformed human, [modified] in status and power” (Kuukure, 1985:111). Edward Kuukure articulates this further:

For the Dagaaba death is not seen merely as the end of mortal life. It is the beginning of a journey to another country, the land of the dead. The dead … is said to have departed (ɔkyena), to have gone home (ɔkula), to have returned (ɔleba—said of a child) …Death is conceived of as a departure from one’s (pilgrim) earthly home to a (permanent) home in the hereafter, from where there is no further departure, a process assured by the funeral ceremony (Ibid).

The funeral is the final rite of passage, one that transforms the dead into a state of being that is beneficial to the living community, thereby ensuring a sense of continuity between the living and the dead. Only in the world of the dead (dapaarewie) can a deceased person function successfully and securely as an ancestor (nikpεε), a mediator between the human and the supernatural. The belief that the soul lives on after death plays an integral role in funeral observances among the Dagaaba. It is believed that the soul (siε) leaves the body at death to become a ghost (nyaakpiin) that wanders around in a liminal state, belonging neither to the world of the living (tengzu) nor the world of the ancestors (dapaarewie). Since people are essentially social beings in life, the nyaakpiin (ghost) is uncomfortable in the liminal state and can be potentially dangerous to its surviving kin and the entire village. Only at the completion of the full mortuary rites is the ghost transformed into a permanent ancestor and eligible to take its place among the company of other ancestors. A nyaakpiin that attempts to enter the world of the ancestors without the appropriate funerary rituals are said to be turned back. Literally left homeless, it is believed that the nyaakpiin will return to the homestead and may begin killing off other family members until the appropriate rites have been completed. The Dagaaba maintain that “a spirit who
cannot find his way to the realm of the dead is dangerous to the living” (Some, 1997:76). The significance of Dagaaba mortuary rites, thus, lies in the belief system, in the concept of ancestorhood. All activities—wailing, animal sacrifice, music and dance performances—associated with Dagaaba mortuary rituals are intended to meet the requirement imposed by the following ideological premise: to create the necessary conditions under which the dead person would leave the world of the living, and to ensure the restitution of balance in the social systems.

The concept of death and the imperatives of ancestor veneration becomes even more evident when one observes that the deaths of infants, and victims of violence and suicide are handled differently because the individuals involved do not qualify for ancestral status (Gbal, 2013: 25). Integral in Dagaaba concepts of death are distinctions drawn between “bad death” (kuur faa) and “good death” (kuur vula). These perceptions also appear in other Ghanaian societies (Geest, 2004:904; Miescher, 1997:529; Sarpong, 1974:35). As noted by Geest, “bad death”, in its widest sense, “is a death which comes too early, which terminates the life of someone who has not yet completed his course, who has not yet come to full maturity” (2004: 904). In principle, thus, the death of anyone but an adult of considerable age is considered a “bad death” in Dagaaba society, and it is viewed with suspicion of supernatural interventions (Gbal, 2013:26).

While sickness, murder, accidents, snake bites, falling out of a tree, etc. may lead to the death of a person, none of these is thought to be the true cause. The ultimate cause of death is attributed to several spirits, the most common being witchcraft (suolu). Among the Dagaaba witches (suobo) and wizards (suoboba) are perceived as individuals with malicious spirits who cause harm to people.
They are said to be responsible for many deaths in society. They are attributed with the power that enables one to “spiritually catch and eat the body of people they hate…eventually leading to their demise” (Interview Yiryella, Nandom-Konyunga. 12.02.2010). The Dagaaba also believe that some deaths are caused by malignant spirits that act independently. Such spirits—bush spirits, river spirits, mountain spirits etc.—may cause the death of any individual when they are accidentally disturbed or offended. Violation of taboos associated with a wide range of sacrificial objects and altars intended for worship may also cause someone to die. Such violation may include the failure to observe avoidance patterns and sacrificial requirements associated with spirits worshiped by members of cult groups (for instance, the bagr), or any traditional religious organization (Kuukure, 1985: 113; Goody, 1962: 55).

On the other hand, the Dagaaba talk of “good death” when the deceased is an older person who has lived a fulfilled life. When sacrifices and libations are made to remember the dead, as is commonly done, both in formal ceremonies and during more casual meetings, those who died “bad death” are not mentioned. To be mentioned or not be mentioned during such events is indeed one of the clearer indications of the two categories of death recognized by the Dagaaba. In that sense, then, death per se does not necessarily qualify one for an ancestral status. Ideally, death comes only to the fulfilled adult, the person who has made his or her contribution to society and has many children and grandchildren.

Dagaaba funerals are organized along the categories of death mentioned above. Details of the burial rites, modes of participation, and emotions generated are incumbent on the type of death. Whereas “bad deaths” are often despised by
the Dagaaba, ironically, they produce the most emotionally charged funerals and sometimes the most esoteric rituals. When death occurs when it is least expected, it brings to the family grief grounded in fear and suspicion. Thus, the family of the deceased may be obliged to ascertain, through a diviner, the supernatural cause of the disaster (Somé 1997:76). If, for instance, a person dies of a snake bite, the family would have to divine its cause. It does not imply that the family is not aware that a person can be killed by a venomous snake when he or she accidentally steps on it. Factors of this sort are seen not as final but rather as intermediary agents. In that regard, what to be ascertained here is the agent that was associated with the snake at the very moment it struck. In the end, it resolves itself into an inquiry as to who or what had grounds for hostility against the dead person. So, the cause of death is perceived as a function of the individual’s network of spiritual and human relationships. If a human agent is determined as the cause of death, the deceased’s surviving kin may avenge his or her death through spiritual means. Though in recent times death divination practices have declined due to Christianity (Gbal, 2013:23), human agents—especially witches and wizards—do not escape the wrath of mourners and sympathizers during the funeral. With the least suspicion of human involvement in someone’s death, gyil musicians and dirge singers make it a subject for music making. They castigate and cast aspersions on persons perceived to have been responsible for the death. The funeral scene in such cases is a pandemonium of vehement wailing.

Funeral ceremonies for the elderly who die “good death” are unique events, and they occur on two separate occasions: burial and final funeral rites. The burial rites are completed shortly after the death has occurred and the final
funeral rites given on another occasion. The final rites bring together events
surrounding the obligation of specific individuals and groups to celebrate the
deceased in a proper manner. In the most logical sense, the final funeral rites are
meant to reveal visibly and dramatically the nature and quality of a person’s life.
The measure of an individual’s life is expressed both qualitatively and
quantitatively in the design of the event. A long life characterized by various
attainments and a proliferation of structured social relationships are reflected
directly in the ceremony by length, elaboration, and richness of texture and detail,
as well as the number of participating individuals and groups. Funerals of older
persons who have left many offspring and a wealthy household attract an
extensive network of relatives, friends, and associates. Because scores of relatives
are obliged to attend, and the more joyful commemorative aspects are extensive,
the final rites are usually postponed for several months after the burial. Such
funerals do not arouse the intense wailing typical of tragic deaths (i.e. bad deaths).
It includes much dancing, singing, and a general air of celebration, for a life well-
lived pervades most of the proceedings.

In some cases, the nature of the funeral relates directly to the status of the
deceased person rather than to age or manner of death. While all elders may be
accorded befitting burial and final funeral rites, celebrations with a more
elaborately conceived performance and aesthetic content are rendered to people of
authority and status in the community. Given the premise of belief in ancestors, it
naturally follows that the more important the individual is in life, the greater will
be his or her potential effectiveness as an intermediary between the world of the
living and the world of the ancestors. The funerals of persons of rank and status
such as paramount and village chiefs, clan heads, custodians of earth shrines, diviners, and other important people entail major celebrations. Sometimes, large and wealthy families, whatever the official position or status, produce elaborate funeral celebrations for members of their families for reasons of personal pride and prestige (Nangpiire, 2008:25). Thus, different expectations are raised for the format as well as the content of Dagaaba funerals.

A proper funeral ceremony is defined by several ritual requirements comprising many relatively short proceedings that may function independently of each other and engage different sets of actors. The funeral may either begin with events preceding and surrounding the burial or, as stated above, take place some months after the actual burial, at a time when the family is deemed adequately prepared. Several rituals such as purification for widows, widowers, and children, and other events to formally consecrate a deceased person into ancestorhood may occur after the burial rites. Such rituals are mostly private affairs and only those lineage members directly concerned are involved. While each Dagaaba funeral may be highly individualized, burial rites in general follow the same overall design regarding its formal structure and directional flow. But the details may differ from one event to the other based on sex, age, clan affiliation, membership in social or ritual organizations, wealth, family status, and social prominence among others.

**Organization, Structure, and Orientation of Events**

As discussed in chapter one, Dagaaba social organization is fundamentally oriented towards the family system, and this level of association is represented by
the individual community whose compounds all trace their origin back to a common ancestor. Based on this system of social organization, ancestor veneration is essential to society as each individual compound acknowledges a host of ancestors through rituals designed for that purpose. It is on this ancestral system that Dagaaba funeral ceremonies assume much of their importance since they are the means through which dead people are incorporated into the spiritual world of the ancestors. The entire funeral sequence includes several ceremonies, both public and private, which may cover several days depending on the status of the deceased person. Out of the entire sequence, the first day following the death of an individual is reserved for the burial rites, including mourning with music and dancing, and it is this segment that will be considered in this chapter.

Ethnographic material reported here is drawn partially from published sources and interviews conducted during fieldwork, but principally from observation of varying portions of twelve burial rites in eight villages in Nandom. The deceased individuals ranged from young adults to the very old, both male and female. There was no opportunity to attend rites for children or infants.

Important ritual observances begin when death is imminent on a homestead, at which time the dying person is held by one of the senior women of the compound while other women from the lineage gather around (Kuukure, 1985: 110). The Dagaaba never leave a dying person unattended because of the fear that he or she might die lying down, a phenomenon abhorred by tradition (ibid). This practice, however, is gradually fading out since people nowadays die in hospitals and community clinics whilst seeking medical attention (Gbal, 2013:22). Nonetheless, except for a few occasions where a corpse may be preserved in a
morgue for a later funeral, the performance of essential mortuary rites begins as soon as a person dies, leading to his or her burial. Mourning starts immediately but may remain informal while the family maintains a false sense of normality until the head of the deceased’s patrilineage is informed of the death. By informing the head of the patrilineage, the scene is set for the formal announcement of death, a rite designed to affirm the reality of the loss. Death announcements usually take two forms: heralding wail and gyil playing. The heralding wail is a loud projected cry recognized by the community as a mourning lament. It establishes the fact of death to members of the neighborhood who, upon hearing it, run to the household of the deceased to participate in the wailing and simultaneously sympathize with the bereaved family. The next step of the announcement is to communicate the details of the funeral to the community through the lo-gyil (fourteen-key xylophone). The relatively stronger and carrying power of the lo-gyil spreads the message to people farther away that can otherwise be reached by the wailing. The gyil genre that features in this context is the lobri, which comprises melodies that indicate the sex of the deceased and comments on the situation at hand. Though lobri tunes are not meant to be sung, the Dagaaba can determine the sex and other attributes of the deceased through the underlying

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12 As far as I witnessed in Nandom, the Dagaaba quickly arrange to have their dead buried, instead of preserving them in morgues for a longer period, as is the common practice in most southern Ghanaian communities. While some few Dagaaba may preserve their dead relatives in morgues, which is by no means forbidden by tradition, such instances are very rare.

13 After the fact of death has been established. Usually, the head of the lineage whose member has died must arrange for the musical instruments that are used for the occasion. He may hire xylophones from outside the household if, as it normally happens, no one in the family owns any. This practice is particularly common since families that do not have xylophone musicians normally do not have the instrument as well. The presence of the xylophone in a particular household, thus, is evidential of the availability of musicians from that household. When the xylophones are ready, a sacrificial ritual (its form and significance has been stated in chapter two) is performed for the instruments before they are used for the lobri.

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semantic contents. Lobri music is confined to this context and since few, if any
mourners and sympathizers, can fulfill their funerary obligations without recourse
to its semantic meanings, it is crucial to examine it more carefully.

**The Lobri: Announcing Death through Music**

The use of musical instruments by Africans for communicative purposes
has long drawn the attention of Africanist scholars. Employing speech surrogates,
musical instruments such as the ntahera (ivory trumpets) of the Asante in Ghana
(Kaminski, 2012), the ese drum of the Yoruba in Nigeria (Nzewi, 1987), and the
atsimevu drum of the Anlo-Ewe in Ghana (Locke and Agbeli, 1981), to cite some
few examples, have substituted for spoken language in contexts wherein ordinary
speech were not reverent or powerful enough. Though not frequently mentioned in
the literature on talking musical instruments in Africa (Zemp and Soro, 2010)\(^{14}\),
the practice of using xylophones to communicate information to people is also
found in various parts of the continent. In his study of Ganda xylophone music in
Uganda, Kubik observes that musicians display “an impressive vocabulary, in
which onomatopoeic syllables, or syllables which constitute words, as well as
metaphorical comparisons are used for didactic purposes” (1994:54). In Sisaala
funerals, Seavoy (1982:454), demonstrates how certain melodic patterns played
on the xylophones are infused with texts meant to transmit specific messages to
listeners. In a recent study, Hogan (2011) discusses how Birifor blind musicians,

\(^{14}\) In their thorough review of the two-volume work on speech surrogates edited by Sebeok and
Umiker-Sebeok (1976) which include seventy-four articles, Zemp and Soro (2010:7) observe that
only three out of forty-six articles completely devoted to Africa mentions the xylophone in
passing. The rest focus exclusively on drum and whistle systems.
through surrogate speeches on the xylophones, lament their predicament and contest their subordination in contemporary Birifor society during funeral ceremonies. By using speech surrogates, the blind musicians, according to Hogan, could say things about themselves and others in which it would be impossible with an ordinary human speech.

Like the traditions mentioned above, the Dagaaba employ the gyil to announce death in a community. Jack Goody is the first anthropologist to have observed this practice among the Dagaaba, as he wrote: “the playing of xylophones spreads the news to the whole settlements as well as to nearby parishes, and the particular tune indicates whether it is a man or a woman who has died” (1962:51). The tunes, though Goody does not name them, are referred to as lobri by the Dagaaba. The tunes are of two forms—deblu and pɔglu. The former is played when a man dies while the latter is reserved for women. Both have underlying texts that comments on the accomplishments of the deceased. In deblu, the text usually revolves around farming, the main source of economic livelihood among the Dagaaba in northwestern Ghana. Farming is the central activity of a man’s life in Dagaaba villages, the primary source of wealth, and a universal role that all men may fill at some point in their lives. Therefore, when a man dies, the text of the deblu celebrates his farming accomplishments and touts his value in society. Likewise, the role of women as mothers and husbands form the nucleus around which the pɔglu death announcement tune revolve.

The semantic contents of lobri music are not conceived of as song lyrics by the Dagaaba. They function as surrogate speeches that are intelligible to the “towone, the initiated ear” (Kuutiero, 2006:111). The tonal nature of the Dagaare
language enables gyil musicians to simulate speech patterns on the gyil to communicate important information to people who understand them. Unlike other cultures in Africa where speech surrogates function predominantly as an esoteric communication intelligible to a circumscribed audience (Nzewi et al 2001: 92; Nketia, 1971: 703), most Dagaaba people presumably understand the language of the gyil. Lobri tunes usually contain specific information that are understood by listeners who are adequately primed. But the fact that the Dagaaba also speaks of the wong (the uninitiated ear) indicates that not every single individual can understand everything said on the gyil. The wong is described as a person who only enjoys the melody of the music and is completely oblivious of the underlying surrogates (Kuutiero, 2006:111).

In an earlier study, Francis Saighoe claims that lobri music is textless and functions mainly as melodic signals to the community rather than as speech surrogates (1988:171). As melodic signals, Saighoe writes, “they do not give the aural impression of speech-like utterances as it occurs in, for instance, the drumming traditions in southern Ghana” (1988:172). Therefore, the audience to whom the signals are conveyed derive meanings through conventional associations. Illustrating this point, Saighoe claims that if the melodies in figure 3.1 and 3.2, for instance, are played, listeners will perceive them as death announcements for men and women respectively.

![Figure 3.1. A tune announcing the death of a man. Transcriptions by Saighoe (1988:168)](image-url)
Figure 3.2. A tune announcing the death of a woman. Transcriptions by Saighoe (1988: 169)

While the examples quoted above, according to Saighoe, “do not have any textual connotations, the Dagaaba are able to quote texts consistently for these melodies even outside the funeral context” (1988:171). Saighoe explains that the tunes are performed only for death announcements and, thus, stimulated by the music and its contexts over the years, the Dagaaba can assign textual meanings to the melodic outlines and verbalize them. Also, experience through constancy in contextual usages further enables the Dagaaba to distinguish between melodies associated with funeral announcements for men and women (1988:173).

According to Saighoe, “if, for example, the melodies above were played to a number of Dagaaba on different occasions and at different places, the following texts would be quoted, almost invariably, as the verbal expression of the melodies: Figure 3.1. Wo ne noɔ, wo lon tuo kuur saa [for a man to live and suffer, then, death is better]; Figure 3.2. Za noɔ doɔɛ, za pa kpankpan doɔɛ, do kom [what you cooked for lunch was sweet, and so is what you cooked for dinner. Great cook, go ahead and cook for me]” (ibid).

If Saighoe’s claims are anything to go by, then, it implies that the Dagaaba have a restricted and standardized lobri repertoire known to the various communities, and upon which musicians draw to communicate the news of death to people. However, my personal interviews with gyil musicians, and the examples of several lobri tunes recorded during fieldwork in the Nandom traditional area reveal that the music is anything but a fixed category. When I was
collecting lobri tunes and their corresponding texts among gyil musicians, they always emphasized the individuality of expression. Some musicians utilize short proverbial sayings (zukpai) while others approximate a continuous narrative with sentences of different lengths to communicate death news in the community. Using a wide range of vocabulary, musicians may run commentaries on the incident that has occurred, narrate the attributes of the deceased, and tell stories about the deceased’s ancestral lineage. In so doing, the melodies become more significant for their semantic meanings than as signals.

The semantic contents of lobri differ from that of everyday speech because they are usually expressed not in plain language but the form of proverbs and metaphorical allusions. In the announcement of a man’s death, the gyil player may, for instance, play the following text:

- Kukur-na ga teng: The chief farmer lies on his side
- Kukur ka kple-kple: The farming hoe is broken into pieces
- A pog zeng gu, mong tan saab: His wife must eat soil for food

By playing the text above, listeners would draw connections between the message and daily life in the community for understanding. Firstly, the mentioning of kukur (farming hoe) in the text does not only denote a specific economic activity among the Dagaaba but also the category of people to whom that activity is concerned. To reiterate a point made earlier in chapter one, the primary economic activity among the Dagaaba is farming, and because of predefined gender roles, it is categorized as men’s business. Again, due to the lack of mechanized farming, the major implement that farmers use in tilling the land is the hoe (kukur). Thus, a good, capable, and successful farmer is the man who through the growing of cash crops produce food and shelter for the family. In
Dagaare, such men are described as kukur-na, a term derived from “kukur” (the farming hoe), and “na” (chief). Kukur-na, thus, means “hoe chief,” which can be paraphrased as “chief farmer,” a title that denotes honor and prestige. So, in this context, it is announced that the chief farmer “lies on his side,” his “hoe is broken,” and therefore “his wife must eat soil for food.” The farmer lying on his side, on the surface, may be interpreted as being physically incapacitated, a phenomenon that can be attributed to ill-health. However, no one publicly announces the ill-health of an individual in Dagaaba society because it is a private affair. By the public announcement of the farmer’s incapacity, a condition more serious than ill-health is being stated. The condition becomes more apparent in the statement regarding his broken hoe. When a farmer’s hoe is broken, he cannot do anything on his farm since the implement has become useless. Whereas a broken hoe can either be repaired, or at the very worst, replaced, such a temporary damage to the farmer’s implement is a private affair rather than a public concern. Nonetheless the hoe, as used in this context, is metaphoric. The Dagaaba explains the hoe (kukur) as a symbol of a farmer’s strength. Thus, by announcing that the “hoe is broken” (kukur ka kple), it implies the irretrievably broken strength of the farmer. And, since the farmer’s strength is broken, he cannot provide food and shelter for his family. But in actual sense, it is not just the farmer’s strength that is broken. It is the farmer himself that is broken into pieces (ka kple-kple), an idiomatic way of saying that he is dead (Interview Chemougo, Nandom. 12.01.2010). Accordingly, upon hearing a tune with the text quoted above, the initiated ear (towone) relates the hoe to the strength of the farmer, and since a
farmer is perceived as a man (and not a woman), he or she interprets it as an announcement of the death of a man.

A woman’s death is also announced figuratively as expressed in the text below:

- **Birkpakpa dugre**  
  The great matron of sour leaves sauce
- **Dan kon**  
  She who would cook
- **dug dambil zier**  
  Palatable soup even with minimal ingredients
- **Samonbiin mong sakere**  
  The best cook has failed
- **A vuur ka kple**  
  Her stirring stick has broken in the process (Kuutiero, 2006:111).

As shown in the text above, the culinary expertise of the deceased woman, as well as her economic management abilities are emphasized. Cooking is women’s activity in Dagaaba society, and the great cook is the one that makes appetizing food with “minimal ingredients” (ibid). Just as in the previous example the hoe signifies the strength of the farmer and a broken hoe symbolically corresponds to the death of the farmer, so does the broken *vuur* (stirring stick) symbolizes that of a woman. The broken *vuur* (stirring stick) is an idiomatic way of saying that the woman has died. Sometimes a woman’s role in the continuity of the family through childbirth also provides themes for lobri music. Likewise, the death of a woman of an outstanding personality may be announced as follows: *mwan nyuura ma woi!* meaning, alas! the precious calabash for drinking water is broken.

From the perspective of mass communication in contemporary Ghanaian society, it may be legitimate to question the usefulness of the gyil in broadcasting death news among the Dagaaba. The advent of FM radios and television systems coupled with the proliferation of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and
Instagram, to mention some few examples, has made announcements, entertainment, and even education far easier in many Ghanaian communities than they were before (Agyeiwaa, 2014). In Nandom, for instance, there is one FM radio station (Radio Freed 92.3 MHz) established since 2003 that facilitates the transmission of information to the public. Beer-bar owners, small grocery stores, and hospitality service providers take advantage of the FM radio to advertise their products and amenities to the people in Nandom and other nearby villages. It is also becoming a common trend that families announce the death of their relatives on the radio. In instances where I personally heard such announcements, the detailed background of the deceased and the funeral arrangements were presented in Dagaare and in English.

The extent at which the FM radio has impacted on the use of the gyil for death announcements in the area was not assessed for this study. However, from personal observation, the gyil remains the principal announcer of death in most of the communities I visited during fieldwork. Those communities are deprived of electricity and, for that reason, access to the radio is difficult. Very few individuals have portable radio sets that use dry cell batteries. The gyil, thus, becomes practically convenient since it has a farther reach in the traditional environment of public information dissemination. But beyond the inaccessibility of the radio and other modern communication facilities, the idea that societal control and conformity are more effectively transacted and enforced through transcendental means is an important factor in the continual usage of the gyil for death announcements. The Dagaaba worldview is richly suffused with spirituality. The gyil is believed to be supernaturally empowered and, hence, spiritually
affective as well as effective when used to broadcast death news. As such, what is said on the gyil through surrogate speeches is psychologically more impressive, imperative, and compelling than verbal utterances in ordinary human speech (see Nzewi et al. 2001:91-92). Additionally, the use of figurative expressions in the announcement texts is a powerful tool for evoking emotions in listeners. Unlike verbal announcements on the radio that employs impersonal language and unornate, concise expressions, the lobri tunes offer more emotive and intimate accounts of the deceased. By figuratively praising the attributes of the deceased, his or her contributions to the family and community, and the trauma that the death would cause the bereaved, lobri music excite powerful emotions, and thereby rally collective empathy as well as the appropriate, imperative support-action that makes communal, the sorrows and misfortunes of the bereaved family. For these reasons, the performance of lobri begins as soon as someone dies and it continues until the public phase of the burial rites is formerly opened.

Preparation of the Corpse

Upon hearing the lobri tunes, the deceased’s village members, as well as acquaintances or other relatives from neighboring communities, respond to the music by going to the dead person’s home to mourn and offer emotional support to the bereaved. Elderly women from the deceased’s patriclan who are knowledgeable with Dagaaba funeral procedures arrange to wash the corpse. These morticians are people of an advanced age (Gbal, 2013: 24; Goody, 1962: 56). By their age, they have passed menopause and, thus, are “considered clean to handle this very significant ritual” (Gbal, 2013:24). Goody describes such older
women as “asexual”, an attribute that “permits them to carry out intimate physical acts on members of both sexes” (1962:56). The women shave the corpse clean and cut the finger and toe nails. After that, a ritual bath is performed on the corpse. A substance called *kambuur* (the residue of a shea butter) is smeared on the body to ritually cleanse it of all spiritual dirt (*deghr*). Sometimes chewed-groundnuts may also be used for the ritual cleansing (Gbal, 2013: 25). Subsequently, the corpse is thoroughly washed with warm water, anointed with oil, and dressed in beautifully designed apparel according to sex, age, and status. The purpose of subjecting the corpse to this regimen of cleanliness is to make it hygienically possible for the bereaved, mourners and sympathizers to come to as close to it as possible to express their feelings and sentiments during the public burial rites (Saighoe, 1988: 178).

When all the indoor mortuary rites are over, and the body is ready for public viewing, it is displayed on a funeral stand (*paala*) erected on a convenient spot around the deceased’s house, the location depending upon the position of shade trees in the compound. The funeral stand is built with four strong posts from the ebony tree, which are driven deep into the ground to form the corners of a square. Halfway up the posts, transverse poles are fastened with fibers to make a rough platform for the body. Clothes or straw mats are fixed on top to form a roof,

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15 The association of the ebony tree with death has been noted by Jack Goody. According to Goody, if a custodian of the earth shrine (*tengan sob*) wish to expel an inhabitant of the parish for a wrongdoing, he may drive an ebony stick into the ground outside the offender’s compound (1962:79). It is thought that death will come to the person on whose compound the ebony stick is planted, or else to one of his close kin, unless he leaves the ritual area within a short period. Though such practices of banishment have faded out, in any other circumstance, except in the erection of the funeral stand, there is a strong prohibition on driving ebony sticks in the earth in contemporary Dagaaba society (Gbal, 2013:23).
and around the sides are hung other fabrics to provide shade for the corpse. Nowadays, the use of metals for the paala is becoming common. In Nandom, I witnessed several instances where corpses were displayed on metal stands decorated with colorful fabrics, as shown in figure 3.3 below.

![Figure 3.3: The corpse of a man seated on the paala. Photo by the author, Brutu, 2010](image)

In Dagaaba society the corpse of a man faces the east while that of a woman faces the west when mounted on the funeral stand. The corpses of men and women are made to face east and west respectively to symbolize the rising and setting of the sun, a cosmological phenomenon which the Dagaaba exploit as a differential in the socio-economic interactions between the opposite sexes. As already noted, Dagaaba men are mostly farmers, and they go to their farms the moment the sun’s rays begin to permeate and diffuse the darkness of the night. The farmer perceives the rising of the sun as nature’s indication of time for him to begin playing his role in the socio-economic order of his people. As the sun, the source of the farmer’s energy and power rises in the east, so is the male corpse made to face there to remind him of whence comes his energy as well as to
emphasize the significance of his relationship to that phenomenon (Saighoe, 1988: 181). When a woman’s corpse faces the west, it is said to symbolize the setting of the sun and how it serves as a reminder to the deceased woman to be in the kitchen to perform her culinary duties. For the same reasons, men are buried at sunrise whereas women are buried at sunset. The funeral stand may be surrounded with certain personal belongings of the deceased, mostly being tools of specialization such as guns, bows and arrows, farming hoes, sowing machines, and carpentry tools among others. In the case of an elderly man who was a hunter, a bow or gun is laid on the legs, and sometimes a quiver of arrows slung on the shoulders.

The public burial rites begin as soon as the corpse is displayed on the funeral stand. This phase of the funeral offers the chance to create community through total participation, as wailing, gyil playing, dirge singing, and dancing bind families and generations together in a communal expression of grief. Musical performances provide a context for journeying between life and death as song themes deal with the transition of the deceased’s soul and enable ideas of life after death to be passed on. Intensive wailing and other ritual gestures accompanied by music ease the deceased’s passage into the ancestral world (Somé, 1997: 68). The outside observer first experiencing a Dagaaba funeral is likely to be struck by some level of disorder arising out of the perplexing crosscurrents of people, sounds, music, dances, and a host of separate undertakings that together constitute

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16 These modes of displaying corpses among the Dagaaba, are however, not without modifications. I have personally witnessed Dagaaba funerals in southern Ghana in which corpses were laid in state on specially designed coffins and funeral beds just as the southerners do. Saighoe (1988:179) also mentions other instances where corpses are leaned against a wall and seated on a board.
the funeral. But as the ceremony unfolds and the individual outsider gets immersed in the occasion, he or she can discern an orderly progression of a carefully designed and controlled event. Like any performance event, Dagaaba funerals occur in a specific bounded setting, governed by “act sequence and ground rules which consist of cultural themes and socio-interactional organizing principles that govern the conduct of performance” (Bauman, 1977:99). The burial rites have a clearly defined opening and closing, and what happens between these two extremes are concurrent events that are not mutually exclusive of each other.

**The Burial Rites**

Dagaaba burial rites cover the events surrounding the preparation of the corpse, construction, and decoration of the paala, grave digging, and the burial itself. The public display of the corpse and mourning rituals begin after the dead body has been prepared and other private ritual requirements have been met. In all the funerals that I attended in Nandom, this phase was completed within twenty-four hours. The rites formally begin with an invocation by the head of the deceased’s patriclan, followed by a mandatory crying by all members of the lineage. This performance is called *wuofu* and it involves crying and running around the corpse in a more turbulent fashion to express how the family has been affected by the death. The head of the patriclan begins the *wuofu* by crying out loud “*saa woi*” (alas my father) and “*maa woi*” (alas my mother) to invoke the ancestors of the lineage to lend their spiritual support for the ceremony (Gbal, 2013: 24). Crying, which will already have begun among relatives, friends, and sympathizers, now increases in intensity. With the belief that the corpse, when
seated on the paala, can transmit information to the ancestral world, mourners speak to it directly, calling upon the ancestors through the corpse to intercede for them. To reinforce the official opening of the public burial rites, the fourteen-key xylophone (lo-gyil) used for the performance of lobri music are replaced with the daga-gyil (seventeen key xylophones). The lobri music ends and gives way to the performance of kuurbine, the most important genre associated with the funeral. From that point, people cluster around the musicians who, led by the gøbaa (master gyil player), form the fulcrum upon which every activity now revolves.

Regardless of the time a person dies, public burial rites begin at mid-day and continue through to the following day before interment takes place. One group of musicians succeeds another and the day wears on while gyil playing, chanting of dirges, and dancing continues almost constant. About midnight, tension recedes and tiredness sets in. Thus, the number of mourners and sympathizers dwindles and activities become more subdued. The funeral rekindles in intensity and seriousness in the early morning. Recuperated from activities of the previous day, mourners and sympathizers return to the funeral with more strength and vigor in the morning to regenerate the emotional atmosphere with which the ceremony began. Before the body is taken off for burial, the family of the deceased perform a final ceremony to bid the person farewell. Details of this ceremony have been reported elsewhere (Gbal, 2013: 25-35). Burial takes place in a commonly designated area in the community. However, elderly people with many grandchildren are buried in the compound of the family house.
**Basis of Participation**

Dagaaba burial rites are communal events and every member of the village where the death has occurred participate in the occasion in one way or the other. While the obligation to participate in the burial rites is binding to all close relatives of the deceased’s lineage and other clans connected by ancestral consanguinity, members of the community participate in the funeral based on reciprocity. Individuals or families that do not attend the funerals of others are reciprocated in the same measure by members of the community (Somé, 1997:80). When a family gains notoriety for not attending funerals, people hesitate to offer communal support when death occurs in that family. Should members of the village attend any such funeral, they go with the purpose of protesting the bereaved family’s declining sense of community. In the performance of dirges, such families are harangued on social ethics about death and the responsibility that weighs on everybody who learns about the death of anybody in the community. Overall, funeral attendance is mandatory for every adult member of society except in cases of sickness or physical weakness due to old age.

Each rite incorporated in the ceremony specifically concerns either an individual or a specific social group. By kinship or associative relationship with the deceased or his/her lineage, people may be mandated to be present at the funeral. Likewise, because of a specialization in certain necessities of the funeral or customary reciprocity with the bereaved family, people may come together to form a team that would provide some essential services. Among the various participants in a Dagaaba funeral, the most important are the kin—defined in this context as one’s relatives, including every person in one’s patrilineage,
matrilineage, and those to whom one is related through marriage. Within the kin group, the father’s side (i.e. patriclan, or “father’s sons”) shoulders much of the responsibilities at the funeral. Organization of the mortuary rituals are the duties of the patriclan under the direct supervision of the chief mourner (kutuosobo; also, translated as “funeral-custodian”). The kutuosobo is usually the head of the paternal family of the deceased. He is responsible for the pre-funeral rituals, and for notifying through intermediaries (kuuryiri—funeral messenger) all bereaved survivors who have an obligation to mourn and are expected to attend the rites. Furthermore, the kutuosobo is in charge for the preparation of grave and the funeral stand as well as all other necessary rituals that need to be performed before and after burial. He oversees the rites of incorporation that transforms the deceased’s ghost (nyaakpiin) into an ancestor (kpime).

While the kutuosobo is responsible for the organization of the funeral, the most significant group regarding affective and kinship bond to the deceased is the parents, spouses, and children. These are known as the kotuodeme (the closest relatives of the deceased). In any funeral ceremony, the kotuodeme can be identified by some body marks made with kaolin clay or ashes. Sometimes stripes made from clothes, animal hide, and plant fiber may be wrapped around the wrist or the waist to distinguish the kotuodeme from the other funeral participants. The marks on the kotuodeme enable the people who might have known the deceased person but not his closest relatives to identify them to give their sympathies and funeral donations. Though crying at the funeral is a communal act, the kotuodeme cry the most. They are the people greatly affected by the death and, thus, act out their emotions by running hither and thither, jumping about and throwing
themselves on the ground out of “a deep frustration with life’s vicissitudes” (Somé 1997:79). Because the kotuodeme sometimes harm themselves through a turbulent and violent display of emotions, people are designated to restrain them. The restrainers regulate their movements and keep a close eye on them to prevent any self-inflicted injuries.

Whereas certain funeral obligations may directly concern the closest relatives, the entire community within which the funeral takes place must be involved. Members of the village organize themselves into familial groups called semandem to mourn the deceased and to express condolences to the bereaved. Community members give honor to the dead and the mourning lineage in direct proportion to the size of their semandem. One can recognize a family unit arriving at the funeral ground by their “check-in-ceremony” (Somé, 1997: 79). This ceremony is known as puor a kuur (greeting the funeral), and it involves filing past the corpse four times in a straight line. At the fourth passing, the semandem performs some commemorative and symbolic acts by throwing coins to the deceased, speaking to the corpse through laments, and leaving gifts of money near the body. The money presented goes into defraying some of the funeral cost. The mourners next present a gift to the musicians by placing coins or paper currency in a container placed near the xylophone. After that, they integrate with the rest of the gathering. The men from the various semandems join the chorus behind the gyil ensemble to support the dirge singing while the women continue to cry, or dance. Monies left in the container near the xylophones are gifts of appreciation to the musicians. Although various families in the community attend funerals to mourn and commiserate with the bereaved, the situation also provides the
opportunity to mourn other people whose deaths might have been celebrated already. Therefore, in the largest sense, a Dagaaba funeral may not only be about the death of one person but may also include a ritualized process that encompasses all the dead of a village up until then.

In traditional Dagaaba society, each village is divided into reciprocal burial groups that may share common ties of descent and common funeral taboos. This tradition assures each funeral of a group of men outside the bereaved lineage that will construct the paala (funeral stand), dig the grave, mount the corpse on the stand for public mourning, and bury it. It follows the principle that no family buries its own dead (Goody, 1962: 64). It may be argued that extreme distress, particularly in severe cases of separation often leads to incapacitating anxiety and sorrow in the bereaved, hence, burying one’s own dead could be detrimental to one’s life. Nonetheless, Goody explains that this system of allocating burial tasks to reciprocal groups is not simply a direct outcome of psycho-physical reactions to death and mourning. Rather, it is subject to social definitions such that “the exchange of [essential services] between social groups and persons is an important method of building up a network of interrelationships in society, especially, insofar as neighbors are concerned” (1962:64). As soon as death occurs in a homestead, the kutuosobo (chief mourner) arranges with the reciprocal group to construct the paala and dig the grave for interment. The group is referred to as bagr-tugre (grave-diggers) and it usually comprises four people, with one of them serving as the leader. Like gyil playing, grave-digging is a specialized activity, and its practitioners are required to undergo an apprenticeship that is not only a training of the work itself, but also a protection against the mystical dangers
surrounding the bodies of the dead (Goody, 1962:74). Initiation into the grave-digging specialty involves the consumption of a special powder known as *tii tuo* (grave-medicine)\(^{17}\). Grave diggers, thus, are spiritually fortified to be able to handle all affairs relating to dead bodies. The bereaved family hands over the corpse to them when all necessary private rituals have been completed. The corpse is mounted on and removed from the paala for burial by the grave diggers. They may receive payment for their services from the bereaved family through supplementary donations given during the public burial rites.

Unlike the grave diggers that are organized around fraternities with reciprocal roles, the participation of musicians at the funeral are predicated on a different reason. Dagaaba musicians perform at any funeral irrespective of their familial or affinal relationship with the deceased. In that sense, the primarily (but not exclusive) source of musicians for a funeral could be the bereaved lineage itself, or the village where the death has occurred. The musicians—gyil players, kuor drummers, and dirge specialists—are not formally or informally invited to perform at funerals in their community. While they are mandated by custom to render their services to the community, most of them, if not all, genuinely honor their obligations to serve. They also recognize the economic and personal advantages in doing so. Once a pair of gyil and kuor drum begin to play, the performance continues until fatigue sets in, or custom deem that the musicians be replaced. As there is only one pair of gyil and a drum set out for each funeral, the trio is responsible for accompanying all delegations of mourners with whatever

\(^{17}\) In Dagaare, *tii* denotes any material that confers special powers upon its possessors. Therefore, the phrase, *o tera tii* (he has medicine), is used to refer to someone who has extraordinary powers such as grave diggers, which they employ to become successful in their various specializations.
their wailing or dance needs may be. All funeral musicians are remunerated in coins and paper currencies by the mourners served per item performed. In some instances, the proceeds may be pooled and redistributed by the musicians according to seniority.

The Music of the Burial Rites

A funerary situation of any significant ritual in Dagaaba society must include gyil music. The genre played in this context is the kuurbine. Sometimes bewaa recreational dance music may be performed at funerals in which the deceased was a member of a bewaa group. In such instances, nonetheless, the music has no ritual or structural significance in the ceremony. It only signifies the interest group represented as well as generally helping to boost the sonic density of the occasion. Only the designated funeral music, kuurbine, accompanies all the necessary funerary procedures. Kuurbine music is provided by an ensemble that comprises two groups of musicians—instrumentalists and a chorus of singers led by the langkône. The instrumental section includes two seventeen key xylophones (daga-gyil) and a kuor (gourd) drum. While the fourteen-key xylophone (lo-gyil) is used for the announcement of death, the Dagaaba employ only the daga-gyil (seventeen-key xylophone) for public burial rites due to certain musical rationalizations and cultural meanings ascribed to it. The Dagaaba maintain that public celebrations of a deceased person are the final episode of his or her entire life and existence on earth, hence, must be accompanied by their largest and most significant instrument for musical expression—the daga-gyil. The daga-gyil is conceived and institutionalized for funerals, conducts its ritual-dramatic activities,
symbolizes the community’s endorsement of the honors and credits accruing from a Dagaaba funerary event. In Dagaaba funerals, dirges (langni) which constitute one of the most important aspects of kuurbine is performed only to the accompaniment of the daga-gyil. Without these musical forms, a funeral is never classified as a public event (Somé, 1994:59; see also Woma, 2013:52).

To appreciate the centrality of the daga-gyil in a funeral ceremony, a brief recap of the form and structure of the burial rites is worthwhile. The public burial rites open with the wuofu, an invocation and mandatory crying by members of the deceased’s lineage. The chief mourner begins the crying by exclaiming saa woi! (alas my father) or maa woi! (alas my mother) to officially open the funeral. The crying—saa woi! and maa woi!—do not necessarily refer to the crier’s biological father and mother. Rather, it refers to all the men and women in the lineage who have died and have been incorporated into ancestorhood. Gbal explains this as “a cry of frustration and literally asking the ancestors of the lineage why they have visited the surviving kin with death” (2013:30). The entire group responds with repeated short and gaspy shouts of “Woi!”, “Ah!”, “Oh”, “Eh!”, and the like. The funeral ground erupts with loud noise. Crying voices, sobs, coughs, and speeches intermingle to create a sonically dense atmosphere. The chief mourner and lineage members move to and fro, throw their arms about and engage in other physical and emotional gestures of grief. Such emotional expressions are chaotic and uncoordinated. It continues for a shorter or longer period (ten minutes to a half hour was observed during fieldwork) depending generally on the mourner’s emotional state and the age of the deceased.
While these uncoordinated emotional expressions are ongoing, the funeral ensemble, usually situated about twenty-five meters away from the corpse, prepares to perform the kuurbine music. The music would subsequently control, and redirect the emotional expressions. Men at the funeral grounds gather around the instruments for the performance of the dirges. In their rendition of the dirges, lead singers derive their introductions directly from the cry vocalization, “woi!” exclaimed by the mourners. The singer’s vocalization enables the wailing to flow easily and naturally into the dirge chanting and evolve into a series of stylized and standardized expressions delivered as a chorus in unison by the group and repeated periodically. By the time kuurbine music begins, the crying has temporarily cooled down for a musical expression to take over. The meaning of wuofu now becomes apparent from its function; the daga-gyil is now able to accompany the burial rites; it has figuratively been “opened up” for the performance of kuurbine music.

**The Kuurbine Ensemble**

The kuurbine ensemble is structured in such a way that each musician plays a specific role that displays the familiar hierarchic organization found in many West African ensembles (see Jones, 1959:51-71). First, there is a supportive xylophonist (gyilkpaore) who maintains a recurrent rhythmic motif called kpagru. The kpagru functions as point of reference for the rest of the instrumentalists. The player of the kuor drum occupies the next subsidiary role. The kuor is a semi deep-tone, close-ended membrane drum played with the hands. The player’s role in the ensemble is to maintain, consistently, the pulsation pattern of the music, and
on which dancers base their fundamental steps. The drummer may occasionally play variations during very hot or tense passages to intensify and reinforce the overall rhythmic complexity of the music. The most involving role is played by the xylophonist who assumes leadership of the ensemble. He establishes the themes around which the langkône and his chorus would orient their funeral dirges. Through speech surrogates, he communicates relevant information to the funeral participants, gives situational comments about the event, queries the organizers when things go wrong and give commendations when necessary. At most funerals, the role of the lead xylophonist is played by the gôbaa—a gyil player acknowledged in the community as master of the xylophone (Woma, 2013:45). The gôbaa earns this distinction because he is not just a gyil player; he is equally a composer, arranger, and conductor—not only of the funeral ensemble but also of the mourners and sympathizers who dance to his music. Moreover, he is very knowledgeable about the proceedings of the event for which his music has been conceived and formulated. The gôbaa, thus, plays a central role in all the rites publicly performed in a funerary situation in the community. His playing depends on, and in turn supports, the playing (and singing) of the other musicians in the ensemble. When a performance lacks intensity he may interrupt to ensure the security of the ensemble. Indeed, the soundness of the ensemble is what allows him to provide the community of mourners and sympathizers with meaningful performance.

One way to understand the gôbaa’s leadership role in the funeralensemble is in terms of his musical creativity. The gôbaa orders various melodic, rhythmic, and polyphonic patterns into formal structures and manipulate them in accordance
with precise structural and aesthetic goals. Contrary to the assertion that rhythm always takes precedence over melodic expressions in African music (Fryer, 2003:107; Nketia, 1974: 125), the richness of kuurbine music does not only lie in its rhythmic complexity but also in its melodic and polyphonic sophistication. Various gɔbaa in a Dagaaba funeral exhibit an intricate melodic and polyphonic thinking, evidently displayed in their ambidextrous style of play. One hand (and sometimes both hands) usually spells out the main melody while the other busily adds a counter-melody to produce intricate polyphonic patterns.

Another way to think of the leadership role of the gɔbaa is in terms of how he reinforces, intensifies, and sustains the emotionality of the funeral. Indisputably, the emotions that a Dagaaba funeral ceremony is supposed to convey are naturally created by the context itself. That is, the death of a family member or a loved one evokes grief in people and, hence, the funeral atmosphere is naturally reflective of the sad situation that has occurred. Whereas people attend the funeral with a heavy heart due to the loss, and may accordingly express some sentiments, the intensity at which such sentiments are expressed, nonetheless, highly depends upon the skill and artistic sensibility of the gɔbaa. The gɔbaa deepens the grief caused by the death by playing melodies with texts that praise the achievements of the deceased and comment on the inevitability of death and the harm it does to individuals, families, and society in general. He also expresses condolences to the mourners through speech surrogates. The surrogate speeches expressed on the gyil partly provides foundational ideas upon which the langkõne (dirge singer) improvises his funeral chants. The langkõne may pick up ideas from the gɔbaa and eloquently express them to produce elegiac chants that will generate
enthusiasm among mourners and sympathizers. In so doing, kuurbine music becomes the most significant intensity factor during the mourning rites.

Kuurbine music has three sections, each of which is distinguishable in terms of its musical characteristics. Each section is further distinguished by their significance in relation to the funeral, its specific repertory of pieces and themes from which the lead xylophonist can select stock materials to order a composition during performances. The three sections, in order of presentation, are as follows: *piira*, *degaar*, and *bilangni*.

**Piira**

The piira is the first section of the kuurbine performance cycle. It is a prelude, in free time and tempo, played unaccompanied on the daga-gyil by the gobaa. The piira, as observed by Mensah (1982:146), is an integral aspect of gyil performances, irrespective of the context. As a warm-up exercise, the first thing every gyil player does upon sitting down at a gyil is to try the instrument out by playing the piira for as long as he is inclined to continue, or as long as the occasion permits.

![Figure 3.4: An excerpt from a piira played by Gilbert Berese (10.10.2010)](image)

The above example was not played in the metric sense it appears to be in the transcriptions. It rather sounded freer in rhythm.
instrument. When playing the piira, the musician pays special attention to the timbral quality and tuning of the instrument since he may never have played that gyil before. He also tests the key spacing to judge his movements over the keyboard more accurately and develop a sense of the intervallic relationships needed for the playing of songs. Also, he searches out loose keys whose binding may need adjustment. Finally, he positions himself well at the instrument to ensure that he can assess the entire keyboard very well. By going through these preparatory procedures, the player exerts his control over the gyil and demonstrates his readiness for the performance.

Although the piira principally serves the purposes outlined above, it assumes a different significance during the funeral. The gôbaa uses the piira to express himself as a virtuoso and to personally mourn the deceased by emotively praising his or her achievements through speech surrogates. The deceased person may also be queried by the gôbaa if the death was too sudden or unexpected. He also expresses condolences to the bereaved family and appeals to the ancestors of the deceased’s lineage to render their assistance for a successful funeral for the current departed soul. Through proverbs, the musician philosophizes on the certainty of death and admonishes all and sundry to be cautious in life because death awaits all. After running commentaries on the event, the gôbaa selects songs and develops themes around which the next movement in the kuurbine cycle will revolve. He plays with an interpretive skill that will communicate its musical and contextual intensions most effectively to musicians in the ensemble and the general mourning public. Like lobri music, piira is essentially an improvisatory
procedure in which various speech-like figures are strung together, repeated or varied in an order unique to each musician.

The structural details of the piira, thus, varies according to the artistic proclivity of the xylophonist. In fact, Dagaaba xylophonists can identify the piira of other musicians even from a far distance. It’s a kind of signature tune. However, all musicians end the piira in a similar way by playing repetitively, a short melodic pattern in a descending mode. The gyil players verbalize this pattern as ti-gbe (see figure 3.5 below)\(^\text{19}\).

![Figure 3.5. Ti-gbe pattern.](image)

The ti-gbe pattern serves two important purposes. It first alerts other musicians in the ensemble to prepare for the next segment in the cycle. Secondly, it establishes the tonal center around which the vocal aspect of the subsequent section will be oriented. Except for the piira, the remaining parts in the kuurbine cycle include dirge singing, hence, the player orients his play around one specific key that functions as a central pitch reference for the singers. Gyil players are aware of the variability of ranges of human voices and, therefore, the ti-gbe pattern helps to take care of any tonal level problems that might otherwise arise from the differences. By playing the ti-gbe pattern for several times, the gyil player provides the framework for the dirge singer to ponder over the comfortability with the tonal range. If the range suits the singer, he indicates his

\(^{19}\) See introduction for notes on transcriptions
readiness to sing in a stylized shout of *woi! woi! woi!* to begin his chants. If it is not, he signals the xylophonist to play the ti-gbe pattern again, requiring him to transpose the motif a step higher or lower. Sometimes a singer may indicate his voice range on the instrument by himself, pointing to a specific slat the gyil musician must use as the central pitch, as shown below in figure 3.6.

![Image of langkône pointing to a key for tonal range. Photo by the author (Nandom-Brutu, 2010).](image)

**Figure 3.6.** A langkône pointing to a key for tonal range. Photo by the author (Nandom-Brutu, 2010).

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**Degaar**

Degaar is the second section of the kuurbine cycle. Unlike the piira, degaar demands the full ensemble and its rhythms are structured such that they impart a feeling of regularity of beat that can be articulated in bodily movements. As indicated elsewhere in the discussion, the rhythmic foundation in degaar music is provided by the supportive xylophonist (gyilkpaore) and kuor drummer (kuormniere). Both players play a repetitive rhythmic pattern. However, the

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20 The xylophonist can transpose a melody from one tonal level to another without necessarily affecting the relationships between the notes. Of course, since gyil tunings are not equally tempered, the intervals will not be precise for each pair of adjacent notes. The equidistance of the intervals, therefore, is an approximation.
rhythms are not of the same complexity. The gyilkpaorε plays a more fixed pattern that serves as the timeline. This pattern crystalizes the foundation pulse of the music and maintains a rhythmic ground throughout the entire performance. The kuor drummer on his part plays some more intricate patterns to enrich and strengthen the overall rhythmic complexity of the performance. The two rhythmic patterns in their basic forms have been illustrated in figure 3.7 below, showing how they interact with each other.

![Figure 3.7: Basic patterns of the kpagru and kuor drum in degaar music.](image)

The supportive xylophonist uses the wooden end of the gyil beaters to play the timeline on the last slat in the bass register of the instrument. That slat is referred to as sangbao and it has no gourd resonator underneath since it is exclusively reserved for such percussive purposes. Sometimes the supportive player may play his patterns with both hands, each hand articulating alternate notes. A good supportive xylophonist, in addition to articulating the timeline, may play short counter melodies with one of the hands to add to the richness of the melodic design of the lead xylophonist. The timeline played in this context is unique to degaar and that sets it apart from bilangni which also features a recurrent timeline. In degaar music, the timeline is organized in compound quadruple, and the entire performance is moderately fast in tempo. While its regulative rhythms may incite the dance tendencies in mourners and sympathizers,
degaar is usually performed without dancing because of the themes espoused in the songs and the intense grief they are intended to generate.

Degaar melodies are short in form, usually spanning between two and four cycles of twelve pulses as exemplified in figure 3.8. However, good musicians always play variations, add improvised interludes and manage to produce extensive forms. In fact, the gɔbaa’s musical skills is gauged by the depth of melodic, rhythmic, and polyphonic interests he can add to a known song. It is impossible to capture on paper all that a xylophonist may do with a degaar song since the quality of improvisations, the essence of xylophone music, differs from one performer to another. Even in the case of the same performer, what he does with a particular song is not the same in all performances. For exemplification purposes, therefore, what can be done here is to examine some of the most common resources of variation available to the xylophonist and thereby gain some insights into how a degaar melody may be manipulated within the boundaries of those resources and the musical aptitude of the performer. The example that would be drawn for analysis here is the figure 3.8 below recorded with Bernard Woma in Bloomington, Indiana.\(^{21}\)

\[\text{Figure 3.8: A popular degaar tune recorded with Bernard Woma.}\]

\(^{21}\) For his status as an internationally recognized gyil musician from the northwest of Ghana, there was the need to interview Bernard Woma as part of this study. However, his frequent absence from Ghana during the period within which field research was conducted for this study made it impossible. Nonetheless, visiting Bernard in Bloomington in October 2016 proved very useful. In addition to clarifying certain concepts and giving valuable information on xylophone playing among the Dagaaba, Bernard played several songs for exemplification purposes, which includes the one being used above to explain the patterns and procedures in varying gyil melodies.
Woma introduced the song by playing the melody in parallel octaves with the two hands as shown below:

![Figure 3.9: Melody in both hands](image)

He then repeated the song, but in the repetition, a few notes were varied. In gyil playing, the exact repetitions of musical patterns are said to have the potential of creating boredom, and they are regarded as the mark of an unskilled player. In certain contexts, however, repetition of patterns is not regarded as aesthetic weakness since it has structural strength which, when utilized properly, helps to establish a line of predictability among various players in the ensemble and other actors in the performance (see for instance Saighoe, 1988: 143). Notwithstanding, master musicians such as Woma use exact repetitions sparingly.

In gyil playing, variations could occur in either or both hands. It could take place in the melodic contour, rhythm of the melody, in the vertical relationships between the two hands, or in any combination of these elements. In the playing of the above melody, thus, Woma in one of the variations kept the original melody in the left hand while the right hand slightly varied it. The variation was achieved by changing some of the notes in the right hand in terms of their pitches and duration as shown in the following transcription:

![Figure 3.10: Variation I.](image)
In any performance situation, the xylophonist is not expected to play variations that have little or no relation to the given melody. The variation, thus, must develop from the original patterns almost imperceptibly so that, as Saighoe puts it, “each of them may have time to grow into the piece before another one is added” (Saighoe, 1988: 151). Usually, a variation must bear some resemblance to the one that preceded it and that which follows it. This way, the original melody is always present throughout the performance of that song. Woma, thus played the following variation as a sequel to figure 3.10 above:

![Figure 3.11: Variation II](image)

In Dagaaba indigenous valuations of excellence in gyil playing, ambidexterity is strongly emphasized. Hence, the aspiration of every gyil player is to be able to play intricate patterns in both hands. In most performances, a right-handed player (*doro*) usually plays the main melody in the right hand and, for variation purposes, creates a counter melody in the left hand. The opposite goes for the left-handed player (*goba*). As the Dagaaba put it, a good player makes both hands sing. Therefore, with master players, variation of melodic patterns can take place in both hands simultaneously, and Woma demonstrated this quality with the melody under discussion here. The following is how Woma varied the song in both hands:
It should be noted from figure 3.12 that the treatment of the melody in the right hand is different from the other variations. In the first two, the character of the melody was fully maintained. However, in figure 3.12, Woma selected only the first eight notes and repeated them in a descending sequence, and in the process, extended the melody. That is very typical with gyil musicians. Sometimes when the melodic identity of a song is established in its original form, it becomes a model for improvisation by the player. He develops ideas from the song and produce other patterns that would be of melodic or rhythmic interest to the listeners. The choice, sequence, and development of the structural elements of the song are at the discretionary judgement of the player, informed by contingent factors as well as his musical sensibility.

Degaar melodies are text based, and the underlying text may be known to most people at the funeral since they are derived from a vast corpus of repertoire composed and handed down over many generations. The melody quoted in figure 3.8 above, thus, has the following text: *Ne bon yaa, ne bon yaa, ne bon yaa, ne bo*
kuur ne bon yaa? In its literal sense, the text asks the question, “how can we seek death, and to interrogate it on why it kills people?”

![Figure 3.13: Ne Bon Yaa: The textual basis of figure 3.7.](image)

From the figure 3.13, it could be noted that the contour of the melody is shaped by the speech inflections of the underlying text. The inflection, which corresponds to the high and low tones of the Dagaare language, and the stress placed on certain words in a sentence control the intervals of the notes in the melody and dictates its rhythm.

While the text associated with degaar tunes, such as the one above, may be known to listeners, it is rarely sung. During the interview in which Woma played this song, he played all the variations before verbalizing the texts. He hummed the melody alongside the playing but did not utter any words until I asked of the meaning. Like the lobri tunes for death announcements, the text in degaar music is conceived of as speech surrogates, a practice that is very common among the various xylophone traditions in West Africa. In the Birifor xylophone culture of the northwest of Ghana, for example, Brian Hogan identifies a similar situation where texts associated with melodies played in funerals are not conceived of as song lyrics but rather as speech surrogates (Hogan, 2011:238). According to Hogan, the Birifor draw a difference between fitting words to music, as most popular song does, and speech surrogation. He writes: “When humming the melody of a popular song, it is possible to identify that song based upon its melody, and then apply its widely-known text. However, the difference in speech
surrogation is that it relies upon an established vocabulary consisting of musical and linguistic conventions, which can then be manipulated to generate new meanings” (ibid). How speech surrogates function in Birifor xylophone music, in that regard, “is not through the codification of a certain phrase as having a fixed meaning, but rather through a combination of musical practices which frame each note potentially discursively meaningful in context” (ibid). Zemp and Soro (2010) also discusses speech surrogates in balafon music of the Senufo in Côte d’Ivoire where every melody played on the xylophone is thought of as speech translated unto the instrument. A phenomenon characteristic of these xylophone traditions, then, is the musical setting of the language, consisting in following the tonal pitches of the syllables of the spoken language, which carry meaning. By this means, it is possible to a certain extent to transmit texts which are not sung unto the xylophone. Some of these concepts and how they relate to gyil playing in Dagaaba funerals form the basis of the next chapter where I discuss in some details speech surrogates in kuurbine music.

One important feature that distinguishes degaard from the other segments of the kuurbine cycle is its thematic references. As a fabric of kuurbine music, the dirges (langni) sung as part of the degaard are oriented around themes that will arouse intense emotions in the mourners. Detailed analysis of the langni, its musical features, performance behaviors, and the forms of emotional reactions it engenders are presented in the next chapter. However, it is worth noting here that the langni is not the same as the degaard songs played by the xylophonist as exemplified in figure 3.12 above. If for instance, the göbaa plays the melody in figure 3.12, the dirge singer will not sing the underlying texts. The texts rather
provide thematic ideas for the singer to produce his chants. In the largest sense, thus, the singer runs extensive verbal commentaries on the text underlying the gyil melody. As already noted, the text associated with figure 3.12 above, for example, raises the rhetorical question, “how can we seek death? “ (ne bo nya tuo kuur saa?), to capture the inevitability and seriousness of death as well as its inexplicability. Based on this theme, the langkône is inspired to make sense of death through reflections, through extrapolation from the material world in which the Dagaaba live, and through speculation about the spiritual world towards which human beings move daily. He may then, produce the following text as commentaries on, or an answer to the rhetorical question raised by the underlying text of the melody:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From the text</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dome ga ni a be.</td>
<td>You may wonder in the sky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuur saa kyen daa nyub</td>
<td>Death lies there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dome kyaa zi.</td>
<td>You may flee into the clouds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuur nye dome a</td>
<td>Death is there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A gbee miile to,</td>
<td>You go for a drink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A kuur nuu wogo,</td>
<td>But death sits waiting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuur yoo tintintin</td>
<td>Only death is the greatest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Performed exclusively by adult men, the langni combines singing and crying, and its language criteria make evident the central place of Dagaaba figurative expression, whilst projecting their worldview. Langni exploits speech-based rhythms, unique pitch collections, and a preference for declamations not usually encountered in other song genres of the Dagaaba. The essential verbal expression of the dirge carves a cosmology similar in outline to that of other Ghanaian ethnic groups, a belief that death exists for all and that it “marks the divide between two forms of life (hence a belief in life after death) and that both forms of life are regulated by a conceptual hierarchy of beings who remain active
within each community in their various material or spiritual forms” (Agawu, 1988:85; see also Arko-Acheamfour, 2012; Nketia, 1955). Degaar invokes intense emotional reactions among mourners when the accompanying langni especially captures and highlights the attributes and accomplishments of the deceased. When, for instance, the singer comments on the vacuum that the deceased’s death has created in the family, people unleash their emotions in more dramatic ways. Overall, the quality and contents of the dirge in degaar performance animate the entire performance to a higher intensity as people respond to the music in emotionally dramatic ways.

**Bilangni**

Much of what has been said about degaar, in terms of instrumental accompaniment and resources for improvisation in the gyil playing and dirge singing apply to bilangni as well. The accompaniment patterns played by the drummer and supportive xylophonist are specific to this segment of the kuurbine music and quite different from degaar. Due to its rhythmic organization and typical vigorous tempo, it can certainly be distinguished from degaar by even the unenculturated ear. Bilangni rhythms are also organized in compound quadruple time, albeit very fast in tempo and the accompanying dance movements are energetic. Each accompanist maintains or improvises within his given rhythmic motif (Figure 3.9 shows the basic kuor and kpagru patterns in bilangni). Bilangni is a celebratory music danced to by men and women especially in the funerals of older people. The models on which the lead xylophonist generates his intricate improvisational patterns are the repertoire of funeral songs well-known to
members of the community, as discussed in the degaar section. The same applies to the dirges whereby the langköne picks and elaborates on ideas expressed in the funeral song lyrics.

Figure 3.14: Kpagru and Kuor basic patterns in Bilangni. Transcriptions by the author.

Apart from its rhythmic organization, bilangni differs from degaar by the thematic frame of reference in the dirges. After stimulating mourners and sympathizers to cry intensively during the degaar performance, dirges sung in the bilangni may prepare the mourners to come to terms with the misfortune that has occurred and bring them some psychological relief. Thus, dirges in the bilangni are more consolatory and uplifting. Issues ranging from the trivia to other important matters of public concern are all integrated in the rendition of the langní for diversionary purposes. That is, topics about sexual misconduct, stealing, gossip, alcoholism, deceit, laziness, and other behaviors considered awkward and unacceptable in Dagaaba society. While such langní may educate, and admonish the gathering, they are all intended to divert the attention of the mourners from intense grieving. Sometimes, bilangni text includes popular jokes that are meant to provide some comic relief. Thus, bilangni, unlike degaar is intended to provide a lively as well as a psychologically more relieving environment to celebrate the deceased.

Stimulated by its lively rhythms, consolatory, and playful themes, most funeral participants react to bilangni music in various bodily expressions, the most
common being dancing. During burial rites for an elderly man, for instance, men form a line and move rhythmically towards an open area between the musicians and the place where the corpse is seated to perform the Dagaaba funeral dance called *bine*. This style of dancing includes twists and turns, leaps and other symbolic gestures meant to honor and celebrate the deceased in a special way. At some point in the bine, elderly men perform a special movement called *vaarfo* in the dancing arena. They choreographically raise their walking sticks or folded umbrellas and break into half runs, leaping and stomping their foot in unison. By raising up the walking sticks or folded umbrellas during the *vaarfo* dance, the men are said to be disassociating themselves from activities they performed together with the deceased. Women also partake in the dancing. They form lines and perform some carefully synchronized dance steps consisting of rhythmical movements of the torso and hands. Unlike the men’s dance style, the women’s dance mainly comprises shuffling steps and lots of vigorous movements in the torso.

Despite its playful predispositions, dirges sung during the bilangni could sometimes be as mournful as they occur in degaar. In cases of unexpected deaths of young adults, grief, anguish, fear, and despair engulfs the funeral atmosphere. The event is customarily that of a frenetic mourning, devoid of dancing. In that regard, all the various segments of the kuurbine cycle—piira, degaar, and bilangni—provide a structure for people to express intense emotions. Both the lead xylophonist and dirge singer explore themes that will heighten people’s feelings towards the loss and stimulate them to lament and express all kinds of sentiments until the reality of death has been absorbed. From that point, intense
grief may subside, and the liveliness of bilangni may become more pronounced, turning the funeral into “a festive tragedy” (Somé, 1994:59).

Each section of the kuurbine cycle has typical structural characteristics distinguishable from that of other sections. The length of each section during a performance depends on the lead xylophonist. Apart from the piira that may sometimes last between three and five minutes, the remaining sections are longer, ranging between thirty and forty-five minutes each, depending on how animated the funeral atmosphere becomes. When the lead xylophonist observes that the performance lacks intensity, he interrupts with the ti-gbe pattern transcribed in figure 3.5. Such situations arise particularly when a dirge singer is not expounding well on a subject. Dagaaba xylophonists are always sensitive to the level of animation in a performance which partly rests on the dirge singer’s ability to express himself. Some dirge singers create boredom by repeating things they have said already, which can eventually cause a performance to lose its intensity. Therefore, to prevent any such occurrence, the aesthetically sensitive xylophonist interjects with the ti-gbe pattern to end the performance and to start afresh. The lead xylophonist, thus, has absolute freedom to determine the intensity and flow of the performance.

To conclude this chapter, the funeral constitutes one of the most significant rites of passage among the Dagaaba. The public burial rites offer the platform for the outpouring of emotions as well as paying tribute to the deceased. It is also the vehicle for supporting the bereaved in dealing with their loss. Music is the vital center of Dagaaba mortuary rituals. It serves the purpose for honoring the deceased, for mourning and praising him or her. But most importantly, music
provides a structure for mourners to externalize their emotions towards the loss in
diverse ways. The skills of the gyil musician during the public mourning rites is
gauged by his ability to meet the needs of the community of mourners. A good
player selects songs with textual basis that are appropriate for the occasion. As
shown in the examples provided, the kuurbine melodies have semantic basis that
are distilled to the audience through the process of speech surrogates. The
culturally primed listener can immediately understand what the gyil says. The
understanding of the textual or semantic implications of the melodies is very
crucial and a central aspect of the appreciation of the music. Hence, the next
chapter will examine this aspect of the performance—speech surrogates—in some
details.
CHAPTER FOUR

SPEECH SURROGATES IN KUURBINE MUSIC

It was a hot Friday afternoon in December 2010. The dry season was in full swing and a heavy wind had blown, filling the sky with dust to the extent that the rays of the sun were severely blocked. I was returning from Tom, a village about twenty miles south of Nandom, in the company of Francis Pelpuo, a master gyil player and one of my earlier acquaintances in Nandom. We travelled together early in the morning to Tom to visit Candida Kobkuu, one of the few known women gyil players in the area. Travelling back to Nandom on our bicycles under very poor visibility conditions, we approached Konyunga, a small village very close to Nandom. Tired from journeying under the severe harmattan weather, we sat under a small shady tree, resting and quaffing some cold pito (local beer) given to us by Candida to moisturize our dried throats. Then, we heard a xylophone tune coming from the Konyunga village. “A man has died in Konyunga”, said Francis, upon hearing the tune. “How did you learn of such news Francis?”, I instantly inquired. “Listen to the tune…it says it all…kuora gandaa bie ulenu kpi” (a strong farmer has died). A man has passed on in the village. The xylophone says it all, and the culturally trained ear can decode the message and act accordingly. I learned of this practice in interviews with musicians, including Francis himself, and also from other written sources. However, that was my first time experiencing it in context. As a great gyil player himself, and an illustrious son of Konyunga, Francis had an immediate obligation to go to the village to participate in the funeral. This psychological and physical response from Francis is a designed and
learned pattern of behavior, a pattern that is rooted in the experience of life in the villages that are accustomed to such tunes enunciated on the gyil. For me, it was an invaluable opportunity to witness the occasion in a more direct way through Francis, and to videotape the proceedings from its earlier phase.

We rode on our bicycles with a sympathetic zeal and arrived at the place in some few minutes. There we were, at Konyunga! The corpse of an old man dressed in a big smock (kparo) leaned up against a wall at the back of his family home, waiting to be mounted on a funeral stand for public viewing and mourning. As the xylophones continued to play, many people trooped in to participate in the funeral and to support the bereaved family. The atmosphere was densely cacophonic as xylophone sounds, drums, wailing, and speaking intermingled. All that transpired during the funeral follows the general descriptions given in chapter three. However, the contribution of this funeral to my understanding of communication by means of the gyil was so immense. Not only did it offer me a firsthand experience of hearing death announcement (lobri) tunes in context, but also a clearer understanding of the gyil’s communicative role in the public burial rites itself. The tunes for announcing death, in a broader sense, do more than merely send out information to people. They invite the inhabitants to act and influence their choice-making decisions. By hearing the tune, Francis and I, for instance, had to divert our way to Konyuga while it was not part of the plan. In the funeral itself, various players who took turns to perform the kuurbine music stimulated particular responses from the bereaved family and the audience through gyil surrogate texts. One of the most noticeable responses occurred when the chief mourner (kutuosobo), upon hearing a particular text played by a gyil musician,
brought a bunch of guinea corn, millet, groundnuts, and other farm products and threw them onto the xylophones. This act by the chief mourner was said to demonstrate how good a provider the deceased was. The items were kept by the musicians who later shared them together with moneys donated by sympathizers during the funeral. In another instance, the men from the deceased’s lineage simulated some warrior movements in response to a text played, indicating their readiness to avenge the deceased’s death if it was a battlefield.

While various gyil players took turns to pay tributes to the deceased old man, I was busily recording the proceedings on camera. After some time, my battery died and I was unable to proceed further with my recordings. But this would infuriate a xylophonist from the village to resent that I had intentionally discriminated against him for not videoing his performance. His resentments were not relayed to me directly verbally through spoken language, but rather through gyil surrogates. The text and its interpretation was made known to me after the funeral when I was discussing issues of speech surrogates in gyil playing with Francis. Below is how the whole thing unfolded.

Upon arriving at the funeral, Francis and I went through several protocols with the head of the bereaved family and we were allowed to record the event on camera. After recording for a couple of hours, my battery was almost empty. Francis was yet to play the gyil since we arrived, hence, I reserved the remaining power to record his performance. Unfortunately, I could record only some few minutes of his playing since the battery completely died. Henceforward, I only watched the rest of the proceedings, noting the most significant acts for later discussions with Francis. After Francis performed, another musician from the
Konyunga village, a senior gyil player who was very renowned in the area for his self-acclaimed superiority over other musicians, took over. He too expected that I would video his performance just as I did for all the musicians that played before him. But I couldn’t, regrettably, for the simple reason stated above. During the performance, the senior musician registered his displeasure by playing a text denoting that some players are considered more important than others. While some musicians like Francis enjoy support from “wealthy strangers” like myself, others are always overlooked when there is a sharing of a booty, in this case, the videoing. The following is part of the text played by the musician:

\begin{align*}
Ngmaanga da kong zoro baa & \quad \text{Why wouldn’t monkey fear dog?} \\
Baa nang taa poteere & \quad \text{Dog has supporter} \\
Ngmaanga poteere be? & \quad \text{But where is monkey’s supporter?}
\end{align*}

At the time, I couldn’t have understood what the man played. Naïve as I was, I could only enjoy the melody and the man’s dexterity at the instrument. I only got to know of the text and its interpretation in a later conversation with Francis. Therefore, the quote above was what Francis remembered, though the man might have said more. But Francis’s actions and facial expressions as the man performed should have suggested something to me. He would occasionally look at the man in a very disapproving manner. He would then turn towards me, silently giggle and wink an eye as if to tell me to listen to what the man was playing. Well, I was completely deaf to the gyil’s language.

From the short narrative above, one thing becomes obvious with the use of the xylophone in the funeral. The instrument is not only valued for its musical functions, but also for its ability to communicate information to people or make penetrating comments when the need arises. While the gyil “sings” (since gyil
tunes are also classified as *ayee*—songs, which shows the importance of its melodic capacities), the Dagaaba maintain that the instrument “speaks” words just as human beings do. There is a popular maxim used by gyil musicians to defend themselves against any criticisms that may occur when they make statements on the instrument that are considered too odd by listeners. The maxim goes as follows: *Maa be nu iere’i, gyil bir nokyolo ole nu iere’i*, meaning, “It is not me that spoke, but rather the pointed mouth of the xylophone keys.”\(^{22}\) From this popular saying, a couple of questions arise: How does the gyil speak, and, how do listeners decipher the language of the gyil? Answers to these questions demand a thorough examination of how verbal texts are conveyed in the melody of gyil music. The relationship between Dagaare speech tones and the textual basis of gyil melodies equally needs to be examined.

Tackling the broader question of the interrelatedness of music and language, thus, this chapter examines speech surrogates in kuurbine music. It discusses how gyil musicians, in the performance of kuurbine, encode messages in the songs they play and how those messages become intelligible to listeners. The nature of the messages conveyed, and the circumstances that necessitates their

\(^{22}\) I first encountered this expression in an interview with Gilbert Berese, a Dagaaba gyil player and teacher in the university of Cape Coast, Ghana. We had talked extensively about the role of the gyil in communicating the news of death in a community and I asked him to play some examples. Imagining the scenario of the death of an old woman, Berese played a tune with the following text: *tan tu maa na km, tumi da hu bi*. Berese literary translated the text as follows: "the old woman with wrinkled buttocks has died to spoil business." He explained that, by the old woman’s death, people cannot engage in their daily activities since the death brings to a complete halt all forms of socio-economic activities. The expression, "wrinkled buttocks", sounded a bit odd to me and I sought to interpret that as an unfair comment about the dead woman. Berese was quick to reply: *maa be nu iere’i, gyilbir nokyolo ole nu iere’i*, meaning, "it is not me that spoke, but rather the pointed mouth of the xylophone." Berese also explained that "wrinkled buttocks" is not an insult but rather symbolic compliments for a very old person.
usage will also be considered. The chapter seeks to argue that speech surrogates in kuurbine music is a creative process employed by gyil musicians to effectively engage with the various actors within the funeral ceremony. Musicians perform surrogate proverbs, riddles, and other figurative expressions on the gyil to either veil or disclose certain information, while communicating with, and engaging the mourners and sympathizers as well as other invisible beings. Generally, the speech surrogates function as a highly developed mechanism for creating meaning to shape both personal and group behavior. For those who understand the language of the gyil, it is the impetus for stirring up the emotions in them and rousing them for action in the specific situation that requires its usage. The organization of this chapter proceeds with a review of the concept of speech surrogates in the broader context of African music, taking into account the situations in which they are used, and the procedures by which texts are performed on the musical instruments. It then moves to how the concept applies in the context of Dagaaba gyil music, and to an assessment of how the verbal contents of the melodies closely match the contours of spoken language. Finally, I will reflect on the significance of gyil speech surrogates in the funeral ceremony, taking into account how problems of meaning in the surrogate texts may be resolved.

Speech Surrogates in African Music

In various cultures in Africa, sound substitutes for ordinary spoken words have been developed, using instruments such as trumpets, drums, slit gongs, bells, flutes and whistles to communicate verbalized messages, often at a distance greater than that which articulate human speech itself can cover (Ong, 1977).
Among the various talking instruments of Africa, nonetheless, the drum has been the most widely used for information dispersal (Nketia, 1976: 700). References to the drum for the transmission of information occurs not only in the writings of early European explorers, but also in the works of Arab authors, especially those dating from the eleventh century onwards. The Arab historian and geographer Al-Bakri, who explored sub-Saharan Africa in the eleventh century, is quoted to have said that Gao, the famous Songhai city in West Africa derived its name from the sound of the drums made and played by the inhabitants (Farmer, 1939: 570).

According to Al-Bakri, “Gaugau, as it used to be known, was the verbal interpretation of a sequence of drum sounds” used to assemble troops in times of emergencies, and from which the name Gao was subsequently derived (quoted in Farmer, 1939: 570). When the ruler of Gaugau sat for dinner, this was announced on drums (ibid), a practice found among other West African states of a later period (Nketia, 1963). Rattray (1923) also gives a detailed account on how the Asante in Ghana used the atumpan drums to communicate urgent messages to people in the community. The dundun of the Dagomba in northern Ghana (Chernoff, 1979), iya ilu hourglass drum of the Yoruba in Nigeria (Nketia, 1958), and the two-tone log-drums of the Lokele in Congo (Carrington, 1944), to cite some few examples, have also been used by their cultural bearers to communicate messages to people.

While drums are the most notable talking instruments in Africa, xylophones used to communicate speech are also found in some parts of the continent. However, this practice is not widely known, and it has only rarely been the subject of enquiry among Africanist scholars. Hugo Zemp and Sikaman Soro
attribute this to the assumption that “the instrument is used less as a musical substitute for words and, as it is, less immediately spectacular than the talking drums sending messages over long distances” (2010: 6). The Senufo, Sambla, Birifor, Sisaala, and Dagaaba of West Africa are among the few traditions found to use the xylophone to achieve communicative ends (Hogan, 2011; Zemp and Soro, 2010; Strand, 2009; Godsey, 1980; Seavoy, 1982; Saighoe, 1988).

In these African societies, messages communicated by means of talking instruments mostly have a verbal basis. That is, patterns played on talking instruments to communicate information to people are not abstract signaling codes, but rather a way of reproducing in a specially styled form, the sounds of words of a given spoken language (Bokor, 2014; Hogan, 2011; Ong, 1977:411). The verbal texts, nonetheless, come in two forms. One form comprises short texts played and repeated several times for signaling purposes. The other form involves a much wider range of texts used to convey detailed information to people. Based on these forms, some traditions distinguish between different modes of performing speech surrogates on musical instruments. Such an example occurs among the Ewe, Ga, and Akan who differentiate between the signal mode of drumming based on short texts and speech mode of drumming in which extensive vocabulary is used (Nketia, 1963: 17-31). The Akan also have trumpets (mmɛntia) which plays signals constructed from short texts, and talking trumpets (asɛsɛbɛn) with a much wider vocabulary (Kaminski, 2012:120).

Since the patterns played on talking instruments usually have verbal basis, in African terms, they are heard as a form of speech. Among the Akan, for example, when the atumpan drum is played in the speech mode, it is said that the
drum speaks, for initiated listeners hear its sounds and reinterpret them in terms of speech rather than in terms of music (Nketia, 1976: 701). The same occurs in many other African societies that use surrogate languages. Concluding his observations on the talking drums in Guinea, Wilson writes that:

The speed of the drumming, and its general rhythm is somewhat reminiscent of Morse code; the examples we have given will, however, have shown that the ‘talking drums’ of Guinea, as those of the Congo, do in fact transmit speech syllable by syllable, as accurately and economically possible by any other medium than the vocal organs (1963:213).

Surrogate languages in Africa coincide with linguistic or cultural boundaries. Theoretically, thus, transcontinental or trans-ethnic communication using surrogate words “is virtually impossible unless a given message is constantly reinterpreted and relayed by those familiar with surrogate languages of their neighbors” (Nketia, 1976:702). Even within the same culture, surrogate speeches may not be understood by every member of the community unless the person knows beforehand what the text is about. Kaminski (2012) discusses this phenomenon in some detail with Asante ntahera (ivory trumpet) music where even the chiefs, to whom the surrogate speeches are made, must go through rigorous processes of learning the ntahera language. Some chiefs learn the language through casual discussions of the texts with more knowledgeable chiefs. But most importantly, before a person is enstooled as a King of the Asante (Asantehene), he is formally given instructions on the surrogate texts of the ntahera, because he must be the ultimate authority of the cultural traditions of his kingdom. For many of the commoners, however, the ntahera texts are unintelligible because they are used for political and sacred reasons (Kaminski, 2012: 110).
Surrogate speech may function clandestinely in some contexts to pass on sensitive information to a circumscribed audience (Nzewi, 1976:94). Nonetheless, there are others that are generally intended for community use as a means of stimulating or guiding social action or behavior (Bokor, 2014). Repeated exposure to such surrogate patterns enables the community to respond anytime they are heard. Such texts include announcements and messages that are intended to warn, raise alarm, or rally people (Nketia, 1976: 702). Among the Lokele of Congo, Wilson observes that there are particular texts played on drums to announce events of the life cycle such as births, marriages, and deaths. The surrogate text used for such announcements ranges from plain language to metaphorical allusions (1963:209-211). Among the Akan of Ghana, a drummer performing at a durbar uses surrogate texts to communicate the arrival of the chief and other important personalities to the gathering. There are familiar texts played to call the assembly to rise when the chief approaches. Other texts may also call the assembly to be attentive when the chief is about to give a speech. At the end of the occasion, there are texts played on the drums to break up the assembly. Such texts are quite well known to the assembly. Some well-known surrogate texts may also function as invocations and prayers to deities as well as proverbial eulogies for notable individuals such as kings and queen mothers in the community (Kaminski, 2012).

In many instances where surrogate texts are used, they are transmitted independently by a solo performer who plays the texts in mostly free rhythms

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23 As a player of the atumpan talking drums myself, I have played many of such texts in social gatherings. Whereas to the cultural outsider the texts may be unintelligible, they are very well understood by the people who belong to the tradition.
(Nketia, 1976: 707). However, sometimes musical performances in a strict rhythmic framework and tempo may also call for the use of surrogate languages to address individuals or call other performers in an ensemble for action. This is a unique feature of some dances such as gahu, atsiabgekor, and adzogbo of the Ewe speaking people of Ghana where every sequence of dance movements is introduced by a spoken text reproduced in the rhythms of the leading drum (Bokor, 2014; Locke and Agbeli, 1981). There are also instances where verbal texts are used as the basis of musical rhythms. Nketia (1958a:20) likens this practice to the setting of words to music or reciting a text in such a way that its musical characteristics are much more pronounced than one finds in normal speech. In Akan fontomfrom music, Nketia observes that the style called akantam consists of proverbs organized rhythmically and played in a cycle for dancing (ibid). Likewise, the iya ilu hourglass drum of the Yoruba in Nigeria, according to Nketia, “can simulate snatches of song texts [and], indeed, there are occasions on which this drum takes the place of a cantor and plays texts to which a chorus responds” (Nketia, 1958b: 42-43).

**Patterns and Procedures**

Due to its novelty, speech surrogates, in the broader context of African music, have been described invariably as a form of “cultural ingenuity” (Hogan, 2011: 233), a creative strategy of communication (Rattray, 1923: 226), or a form of communicative indirection (Nketia, 1963). The fundamental question, nonetheless, has been how the messages are transmitted via the musical instruments. In the attempt to examine or answer this question, several theories
have been adduced by scholars. Primarily, the tonal patterns of the words which make up the languages have been identified as the basis of surrogate speeches.

Rattray’s article, “The Drum Language of West Africa” (1923), is amongst some of the earlier works that has dealt extensively with this practice. Using the Akan language of the Asante in Ghana as a case study, Rattray analyzes how tonal patterns of the language enables the Asante drummer to replicate spoken texts on the atumpan drums. As Rattray indicates, Akan is a two-tone language, meaning, each syllable in a word has a high or low tone. The tones serve to lexically distinguish the meanings between words with the same combination of consonants and vowels. Unlike the English language, for instance, where tones may be employed “chiefly as a means of oratorical or emotional expression, or to give a word or a sentence a shade of meaning” (Rattray, 1923:219), tones in the Akan language enables distinctions between words that have the same combination of vowels and consonants. The atumpan is recognized as the principal talking instrument of the Akan people, and it comes in a pair, named male and female. The tone quality of the male and female drums corresponds to the low and high tones of the spoken language, hence, spoken texts can successfully be replicated on the drums. Speech surrogates on the atumpan drums are characterized by beats with no apparent meter, but distributed within the two-tone framework to represent the spoken language.

_24_ In my capacity as a native Akan speaker, I can provide the following examples to show how tones work in the language. The two-syllable word *papa*, for instance, can mean several things depending on how it is pronounced. It can mean “father”, when the vowel sounds in the first and last syllables are pronounced in the following order LH (i.e. pàpá). The same word can mean “good”, when both vowels in the syllables are pronounced HH (i.e. pápá). It can further mean “fan” when they are LL (i.e. pàpà). Lastly, it can also mean “palm branches” when the tones are LH (as in pàpá), but with the last syllable nasalized.
In localities in which drum languages have been documented in Africa, the
tonal qualities of the language involved determines how the surrogate patterns are
played (Sebeok et al 1976; Wilson, 1963; Armstrong, 1954; Herzog, 1945;
Farmer, 1939 etc.). In some drumming traditions, however, not all the speech
tones can be distinctly replicated as it occurs with the Akan atumpan drums. This
happens particularly in instances where the surrogate patterns are played on a
single drum. An example is the atsimevu drum of the Ewe in Ghana where the
lead drummer imitates various speech patterns on a single headed drum with
varying stick and hand techniques (Locke and Agbeli, 1981:25). In contrast, other
drums such as the lunga of the Dagomba in Ghana (Chernoff, 1979) and the
dundun drum of the Yoruba in Nigeria (Akpabot, 1975: 37) can play many pitches
as well as slides and bring to the fore all the diacritical elements of the spoken
language replicated on the drums.

Beyond word tones, there also exist several techniques through which
meaning is packaged in the surrogate patterns played on the musical instruments.
These range from representation of complete spoken phrases or sentences (Nketia,
1976), to forms in which spoken utterances and concepts are abridged or
abbreviated (Stern, 1957). In surrogating texts on the instrument, the words—
guided by their tonal inflections—are played in a series of rapid notes grouped in
certain sequences than can be identified as complete grammatical units. Though
they may usually be delimited by pauses of longer duration than they may appear
when spoken, the surrogate patterns usually reflect the structural units of the
spoken language (Nketia, 1976: 703). Such is the case of many of the drum
surrogates among the Akan of Ghana (Nketia, 1963: 35-43), and Manjaco of
Guinea-Bissau (Wilson, 1963: 211). In the West African xylophone cultures, such as the Senufo (Zemp and Soro, 2010), Birifor (Hogan, 2011), and Sisaala (Seavoy, 1982) where speech surrogates are practiced, complex grammatical structures can be played by the musicians.

Surrogate forms in which abbreviated or abridged texts are used are commonly found in the trumpet and horn traditions in Africa. Joseph Kaminski provides us with some examples from the Asante ntahera (ivory trumpet) tradition where “the surrogate-spoken phrases are not actually syllable-to-syllable correspondences to vocally spoken texts [but] are abstractions of the tonal syllables from their vocally spoken equivalents” (Kaminski, 2012:108). As Kaminski explains, certain syllables or words in a grammatical unit are omitted since they are not required for giving tonal shape. Syllables mostly omitted are vowels adjacent to another on the same tonal level. When that occurs, either of them is contracted since it may not be required for maintaining the tonal shape of a phrase. Similar practices occur in the ihembe horn signaling among the Hutu of Rwanda. In this tradition, Jos Gansemans observes that the surrogate speech is not a one-to-one correspondence of the syllables of the spoken language surrogated. Every now and then, vowel elisions occur in the surrogating to disguise the texts (Gansemans, 1988: 106).

**Gyil Surrogates in Kuurbine Music**

Having given a background of instrumental surrogate languages in Africa, I will now turn attention to how the concept works in Dagaaba kuurbine music, taking into account the structural characteristics of the texts transmitted by the
The appreciation and enjoyment of kuurbine music at the funeral requires not only familiarity with its formal characteristics, but also a grasp of the implications of the underlying texts. To the Dagaaba, the gyil can and does speak. Accordingly, words, phrases, and sentences may be transformed into gyil sounds by the musicians, which are then reinterpreted in verbal terms by the listener. Like the other African cultures, the basis of speech surrogates in gyil playing is the Dagaare language. Dagaare, like other Mabia languages in West Africa, primarily has two tonal levels, high and low (Bodomo and Mora, 2007: 4). The tones serve to lexically distinguish the meanings between homonyms (different words with the same combination of consonants and syllables), as in the Dagaare verbs dá (push), and dà (buy). The pentatonic sequence of the gyil scale allows the players much flexibility to map words onto individual slats to optimally replicate speech patterns on the instrument.

The aural impression of a gyil surrogate text is a series of notes struck in grouped sequences with brief pauses at the end of each sequence. For convenience of reference, I will describe the grouped sequence of notes as “melodic groups”. Underlying each melodic group are the verbal texts that can be perceived as identifiable grammatical units. The melodic groups and the corresponding text, thus, reflects the gyil player’s consciousness of the structural units of the Dagaare language. For example, in surrogate texts that laments the death of a farmer, a melodic group can comprise any of the following:

a) A simple sentence:
   i)  *Kuora gandaa kpi.* A strong farmer has died.

25 This term is adopted from Nketia (1976:703). He describes similar groupings in Akan drumming and labels them “rhythmic groups”. Each rhythmic group, as Nketia describes, comprise verbal linear units that make a grammatical sense.
ii) **Nyangala gaa sabol.** A great man has passed on.

iii) **Gandaa le n aka kyi.** The strong man has broken the guinea corn.

b) A compound sentence:

i) **Kyεn wiε;** Went to the farm;  
   **ε belε wa’ei.** he never returned.

ii) **Gandaa le na;** The strong man lies forlorn;  
    **o dendɔmɔ ne la.** his enemy is so happy.

iii) **Kukur ka kple-kple;** The farming how is broken into pieces;  
    **A pɔg zeng gu** his wife must  
    **mong tan sab** eat soil for food.

From the few examples given above, it can be seen that texts forming a melodic group comprises a stretch of utterances that, in and of themselves, make grammatical sense. In playing the text, the player introduces pauses at the end of each utterance to distinguish one structure from the other. They are also intended to make the text played near enough to speech to enabler the listener to reinterpret what he hears in verbal terms.

Speech surrogates on the gyil may be brief or extended depending on the circumstances that necessitates its usage. Brief texts may take any of the structural forms described above. It may consist of one or two melodic groups repeated as much and as often desired. Such brief texts are commonly found in death announcements. In announcing the death of a woman, for instance, the player may play the following short coded messages:

i) **Saadabie mono;** The best cook has made a mistake today;  
   **a na la mong ka vorokporo.** and the meal is watery.

ii) **Tan tu maa na kom;** The woman with wrinkled buttocks  
    **tu mi da ho kpi.** has now died.

Short texts may also be used in announcing the death of a man, as in the following:

i) **Be na ngma gandaan ne.** We will mark out a strong man’s strip today.
ii) *Be yiri boona saab.* The household will no longer eat.

iii) *Gandaa yina e kye dekpol kome.* The strong man has left an empty house.

Extended texts played on the gyil may consist of several melodic groups of similar or different grammatical structures. For example, the whole or a section of a text inviting people to join in mourning a deceased person could be a series of appeals played in a combination of simple and compound sentences, as in the following example:

- *Konoo waa na yee;* Come along and mourn;
- *Fo nang wat aa saa ne ma* You who no longer have parents.
- *Kyo meng konoo waa ne le.* Come along to mourn with the others.
- *Konoo waa na yee* Come along and mourn.
- *Bekpee wa taa saa ne na;* Orphans as you are;
- *Kyelnyε waa na yee* Come along and wail.

Whereas the verbal texts quoted above reflect the structural units of the spoken language, it must be noted that they can stylistically be distinguished from texts used in ordinary social discourse. As shown in the above examples, texts announcing death, eulogizing or mourning the deceased, or lamenting the consequences of death on a household, are more proverbial in form than similar texts that may be conveyed by word of mouth. For example, the expression, “the woman with wrinkled buttocks”, when used in announcing the death of a woman symbolizes old age. Under no circumstance would such an expression be used in announcing the death of a young woman. Similarly, the expression, *gandaa yina e kye dekpol kome* (the strong man has left an empty house) means that there are no immediate descendants left in the family.

Other features not commonly found in ordinary spoken language are also used in gyil surrogate texts. The most common of these is repetition, a device
which gives a distinctive quality to the melodic groups and helps the listener to establish the right association between the gyil sounds and verbal texts. Repetition of melodic groups may occur when a statement is short, when it must be highlighted, or when it is intended to create an impression of urgency. A melodic group may be repeated in its entirety several times as an intensifying device, and then concluded with other statements that may illuminate the initial repetitions, as in the following piece played by Francis during the funeral of the old man in Konyunga:

- *Kuur yo teng teng teng* Death, only, only.
- *Kuur yo teng teng teng* Death, only, only.
- *Kuur yo teng teng teng* Death, only, only.
- *Kuur yo teng teng teng* Death, only, only.
- *Kuur nan waa gandaa* Death is the ultimate hero
- *Yong ka ba kuur man wa so* It is only death that cannot be controlled.

By the repetition in the above example, the attention of the listener (who understands the texts) is drawn to the supremacy of death in society and the fact that it holds the ultimate power to subdue human beings regardless of their strength, status, achievements, and age.

Another feature commonly found in gyil surrogate language is the use of rhetorical questions intended to generate some dramatic effects in the performance. A typical example is a text recorded with Bayuo Digre, a gôbaa of regional repute from Nandom Kogri, by Adams Bodomo and Manolete Mora (2007). In the surrogate text, Bayou Digre laments his predicament in the hands of a supposed enemy. Performed regularly as one of his favorite pieces at funerals, Digre’s text reflects the Dagaaba belief that people are always surrounded by enemies (*den domɔ*) who suppress their progress in the various endeavors of life.
These enemies, usually comprising witches and other supernatural agents, hover around everywhere, including the funeral, seeking to devour someone. Being vulnerable to such spiritual agents himself, thus, Digre plays the texts to question the authority and motive of the supposed enemy. Such texts, according to Bodomo and Mora (ibid.) elicits some emotional responses from listeners who understand them. The text runs as follows:

- **Ka N’ ta yoorɔ**
  - **My enemy won’t let me walk freely**

- **Dendɔmɔ e la a Naamwin bee?**
  - **Is my enemy God?**

- **Dendɔmɔ e le N’ ta yoorɔ welle**
  - **My enemy simply won’t let me walk freely**

- **Fo moo e la a Naamwin bee?**
  - **Are you God anyway?**

- **Fo moo e la a tengan bee?**
  - **Are you the Earth God anyway?**

- **Gbonggbori yeli ko wa booro boo**
  - **Hyena says he doesn’t like goat**

- **Wenaa yeli ko wa booro boo**
  - **Lion says he doesn’t like goat**

- **Yen koo ngmaa bare ka boo yooro?**
  - **Where have you set aside for goat to roam?** (Bodomo and Mora, 2007:14).

On the syllabic level, the pitch of a surrogate text is matched in kuurbine music by individual notes from the pentatonic sequence of the gyil. The configuration of syllables with notes played on the gyil can be seen clearly in Woma’s performance in Figure 3.12 in chapter three, in which he vocalizes the text of the melody. The subtle rhythmic nuances heard during the playing, as well as how Woma controls the resonance of the gyil keys cannot be translated on paper. However, those features all help to establish the instrument’s sonic resemblance to syllabic units. Thus, when a gyil melody is meant to be translated as text, each slat sounded corresponds to a syllable which when assembled according to the melodic-textual groupings described above, becomes intelligible to the trained ear.

As already mentioned, meaning in Dagaaba gyil surrogates heavily depends on the tonal features of the Dagaare language. However, there exists
many monosyllabic and disyllabic words in Dagaare that exhibit the same tonal qualities. To cite some few examples, words such as *sáá* (father), *báá* (dog), *kúúr* (death), have the same phonological features. Virtually, such words, when played on the gyil sound homophonous, a situation that could obscure the meaning of the text. Therefore, to disambiguate meaning in such words, the listener places the word in the immediate context of other words used in the melodic groupings. Disambiguating words in the surrogate texts is just like what happens in regular language use where situational and contextual factors and other clues help distinguish between words that sound the same. In gyil speech surrogates, thus, exact replication of the sound of speech may not necessarily be so crucial in conveying the meaning of spoken language. Instead, the surrogate text effectually approximates spoken language by relying upon many of the same strategies used in interpreting spoken words. Commenting on similar issues among the Birifor, Brian Hogan observes that surrogate speech in *kogyil* playing is analogous to a mumbled phrase of a spoken language where meaning is extrapolated by the listener based on prior experiences (Hogan, 2011: 237-238).

In a study of Birifor kogyil (xylophone) speech surrogates, Hogan identifies three fundamental processes by which kogyil players replicate spoken texts on the instrument: “direct transmission, contraction, and enphrasing” (2011:238). Direct transmission, Hogan writes, “involves the close mapping of sound phoneme to musical sound” (ibid). The second process—contraction, includes abridgements of lexical units, such that multisyllabic words can be represented by a single note. The third process, enphrasing, involves putting a syllabic unit in a larger phrase to clarify its meaning. Speech surrogates in
Dagaaba gyil music, viewed as a lexical representation, involves these three processes Hogan identifies among the Birifor. Direct transmission is the primary process through which texts are transferred onto the gyil, and it is made possible by many of the single syllable words of Dagaare. The following text, *tan tu maa na kom, tu mi da ho kpi* (the woman with wrinkled buttocks has died), played by Gilbert Berese, demonstrates how each syllable in the spoken text is matched to a note and spaced according to the rhythmic framework of Dagaare speech:

![Figure 4.1. Text announcing an old woman’s death.](image)

Although direct transmission of text is the dominant approach in gyil speech surrogates, certain situations demand that words with more syllables are abbreviated to enable easy play. Contraction, thus, is occasionally employed in gyil surrogates, especially when the multisyllabic words involved fall at the end of a phrase, as exemplified in the following text played by Victor Ziem during an interview session at Nandom Piiri: *Saadabie mono; a na la mong ka vorokporo* (the best cook has made a mistake today; and the meal is watery). It should be noted from the figure below that the word *vorokporo* (watery) has four syllables—*vo-ro-kpo-ro*. However, for musical expediency, the first two syllables, *voro*, as well as the last two, *kporo*, are combined and assigned single notes each.

![Figure 4.2: Text announcing the death of a good cook.](image)
As noted already, some Dagaare words which are distinct in normal speech could become homophonous when converted into speech surrogates on the gyil. Words such as sáá (father) and báá (dog) can sound the same since both contain high vowels and in surrogation, represented with one note each. These two words could, thus, be ambiguous, and to help resolve ambiguities of this sort, musicians employ enphrasing. By enphrasing, each of these words would be couched in a large phrase to clarify its meaning. For example, a gyil player framing an utterance with the word sáá (father) will typically precede with the nasal sound /n/, followed by other words to distinguish its meaning, as shown in the following text used in lamenting the loss of a man: "N saa yina e kye dekpol kome" (The father is leaving behind an empty house). Similar processes of emphrasing would occur when báá (dog) is surrogated on the gyil. These three processes—direct transmission, contraction, and enphrasing—represent three different ways in which language is transmitted into surrogate texts in Dagaaba gyil music.

Other Stylistic Distinctions

Speech surrogates in kuurbine music find their greatest expression in the piira (the first section of the kuurbine cycle)\(^{26}\). However, it is not confined to it. Melodies of the second and third sections of the kuurbine cycle (degaard and bilangni) are equally based on surrogate texts. In general, there are differences in the range and importance of the texts to which the melodies are linked. In the piira, the texts are employed mainly for their communicative value. The texts are played in free rhythm to crystallize the talking abilities of the gyil as well as the

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\(^{26}\) This occurs also with the lobri tunes for death announcements. Since that has been discussed in some length in chapter three, it is excluded from the present analysis.
message it intends to convey. It would be recalled from chapter three that the piira is indispensable to any gɔbaa who plays at the funeral. It provides the player with everything he needs to know about the instrument, including its sound quality and key spacing. But most importantly, the gɔbaa utilizes the piira to express himself as a virtuoso. He performs texts that comment on the situation at hand, and eulogizes the deceased and other dead people of the deceased’s ancestral lineage. He also expresses condolences to the bereaved, and invokes the spirit of the ancestors to lend their support in the funeral ceremony. The texts performed for the purposes mentioned above all occur in free rhythm to amplify their communicability. At the end of each piira also comes a pattern that serves as a call signal to the other members of the ensemble to get ready for a full take off. In contrast, musical considerations come first in the texts performed for degaar and bilangni melodies since they constitute the danceable segments of the kuurbine cycle. As such, they are organized in specific rhythmic frameworks.

In discussing gyil speech surrogates in kuurbine music, thus, it is possible to distinguish two main modes: a) the speech mode, in which the verbal texts played are rhythmically free, and b) the singing mode, in which the surrogated texts are musically organized in strict rhythms. We may also consider a signal mode where the player plays some nonsense syllables as alert patterns for the other members of the ensemble, as exemplified in figure 3.5 in chapter three. These styles of surrogation are analogous to the modes of drumming that Nketia identifies among the Akan of Ghana (1963).

In his book, *Drumming in Akan Communities* (1963), Nketia distinguishes three modes of drumming: “the signal mode, the speech mode, and the dance
mode” (Ibid: 17). The signal mode contains short, repetitive rhythms played on a single-headed drum. Such patterns usually function as call signals and by their continual usage, people can easily interpret them. The instrument used for this mode of drumming is called twenesin (a signal drum). The texts played on the signal drum closely correspond to the rhythms and tones of the Akan spoken language. However, they are played at one level of pitch. The speech mode of drumming, in contrast, is characterized by rhythmic groupings of texts played on two pitch levels. This mode of drumming requires the use of a pair of drums that have distinctive tone contrast. Therefore, the atumpan drums—male and female, are usually used for the speech mode. As Nketia explains, the musical characteristics of the speech mode of drumming is distinctive and many people can recognize it even though they may be ignorant of the implications of the underlying text (ibid). Verbal communication is the ultimate goal of the speech mode, and though people may be oblivious of the text, they never lose sight of the fact that the rhythms have the implication of utterances. In the dance mode, musical considerations are fundamental. Though they are equally predicated on language, the verbal texts are always subservient to the rhythmic regularity, speed, and other stylistic aspects of the drumming (ibid: 31). The dance mode, however, is not mutually exclusive of the other modes. Since there is a musical ground, the master drummer can move freely into the repertory of the signal mode, and to change his style from the strict form of the dance mode to that of the speech mode of drumming in order to give directions to drummers, greet or praise dancers, convey message of sympathy, or quote a suitable proverb if the situation requires it. But for most listeners, what seems to be more important with the dance mode is
to make the appropriate body movements to the rhythms than to translate the words played on the instrument. Nonetheless, the appreciation of the music, and the pleasure given by the drumming as well as the depth of response are increased by understanding the texts (ibid:49).

The foregoing descriptions of Akan drumming modes are equally characteristic of gyil playing in the context of kuurbine performance. In the speech mode, as it occurs mostly in the piira, certain musical aspects (especially rhythms), though important, are usually subservient to the texts played because of the emphasis on verbal communication. The reverse occurs in the singing mode where the texts are arranged to achieve much more musical interests. Talking of its musical emphasis, it is worth adding that not everything played on the gyil in the singing mode is meant to be translated into words. After playing a melody with some specific texts, the player may move into other patterns that are purely instrumental without any textual basis. Such non-semantic melodies—which may be referred to as signals—are mostly employed as alert patterns in cuing dancers, or mimicking the movements of a dancer, or just to intensify the melody of the music. It is equally worth noting that the two modes of surrogating texts on the gyil are not completely independent of each other. Like the dance mode in the Akan drumming, “xylophoning” in the singing mode may be interspersed with terse statements played in free rhythms to communicate specific information to the gathering or comment on the proceedings of the funerary event. Grounded by the strict rhythms of the supportive gyil player and the kuor drummer, such occasional play with free rhythmic speech patterns does not obstruct the flow of the music. Rather, it enhances the aesthetic quality of the music since one can
perceive different melodies of varying rhythmic motions going on at the same
time.

In some related studies, Zemp and Soro (2010), and Ciompi (1983) draw
similarities between the Akan modes of drumming and Senufo xylophone playing.
Whereas Zemp and Soro (2010) find the analogy useful, and conclude that there
exist several parallels between these two distinct instrumental traditions, Ciompi
(1983) rather reaches a negative conclusion. Ciompi (1983) argues that there is a
sharp contrast between the Akan drum speech surrogates and that of the Senufo
xylophone music. His argument is based on four major points, which have been
summed up by Hugo Zemp and Sikaman Soro, as follows:

1) Polyphony [in Senufo xylophone music] prevents a melodic line from
   being associated with the tones of a language.
2) The soloist’s phrases are not as time-flexible as speech, as they are subject
to the pattern of cycles and pulses.
3) [In Senufo xylophone music] there are numerous differences between
   linguistic tones and musical formulas [and finally],
4) The fact that most pieces are limited to one or two phrases goes against the
   idea of the primary procedure of conveying language information (Zemp
   and Soro, 2010:20).

From the above points, Ciompi (1983) concludes that xylophone pieces “are
simply instrumental versions of songs which the Senufo can recognize, just as a
European listener can recall the words of a song played on a musical instrument if
he has known the song before” (Zemp and Soro, 2010:20). On their part, Zemp
and Soro (2010) reach different conclusions as follows:

1) In practice, identifying the words in Senufo balafon music (for those who
   know them) is not a problem, as they are essentially played by the soloist,
   just as in an Akan drum orchestra.

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27 Ciompi (1983) is written in German, and so these points outlined above are directly lifted from a
review of the work by Zemp and Soro (2010:20).
2) Temporal flexibility in order to imitate the flow of the spoken language [in the balafon music] is not a requirement, no more than in the Akan [drumming].

3) Differences from linguistic tone equally exists in drum language, just as they are also frequent in sung melodies in Africa.

4) Many of the words of Senufo balafon tunes are never sung (Zemp and Soro, 2010:20).

My own analysis of surrogate language in Dagaaba gyil music in relation to the Akan drum surrogates follows the same conclusions drawn by Zemp and Soro (2010:20). As mentioned elsewhere in chapter three, the Dagaaba do not conceive of the underlying text of a kuurbine melody as song lyrics. The texts are rather regarded as instrumental processing of language, a procedure that is considered more powerful for transacting “business” in ritual contexts.

**Understanding Gyil Surrogate Speech**

The practice of speech surrogation among the Dagaaba seems to be as common as it might have been many years ago. So long as gyil music permeates almost every aspect of ritual life, including Christian rituals, bagr rituals, and the funeral, the use of speech surrogates continues. However, Dagaaba gyil musicians are also deeply aware of the limitations of speech surrogation, which they describe in personal terms. During interviews with some musicians, I inquired how speech surrogation operates practically, and whether audiences fully understand the messages transmitted via the gyil. The musicians admitted that people do not always fully comprehend the texts they play on the gyil. Victor Ziem, for instance, noted that at funerals, not everyone can pick up on the meaning of the texts he plays, saying, “when I play, some people understand, and some don’t.” However, Victor acknowledged that there is, perhaps, one exception to that, which is the
lobri tunes for death announcements. According to Victor, many people understand what the gyil says when the lobri tunes are played. He attributes that primarily to the constancy at which such pieces are heard in and around the villages. The lobri tunes are the basis of knowing, especially from a far distance, that someone has died. To ascertain the veracity of Victor’s claim, I put this to test one afternoon by asking him to play any lobri tune that comes to mind. The intention was to observe how many people in the house could at least verbalize the text he played. After playing the tune transcribed in figure 4.3 below, those present responded by saying the following text almost in unison: *tutu kpi ri daa don daa don daa don* (the woman whose children are like millipede legs has died). The result showed that not only did the people around immediately know the texts of the song, but also the texts were vocalized such that they perfectly aligned with the instrumental melody Victor played.

![Figure 4.3: Death announcement tune played by Victor Ziem (Piiri, 12.15.2010).](image)

To my amazement, a couple of young men within the immediate vicinity also ran to Victor’s house upon hearing the tune. Such tunes are never played out of context. Victor explained that if he had played the tune ad libitum, it would have turned into something else. By repeating it several times, it would have meant that someone was indeed dead. As indicated in chapter three, lobri tunes are never fixed and they vary in style and length. However, constancy in playing a particular

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28 The text denotes how fertile the woman was, since her children are almost uncountable. They are plenty like millipede legs.
style in one’s village enables the inhabitants to grasp the implication. That differs with the kuurbine tunes played during the funeral ceremony. Musicians compose new tunes frequently and they try them out at various funerals. For a tune and its words to be understood by people, it should be repeated several times at different places. Even with that, people sometimes ask for the interpretation to understand. This was confirmed in a different interview with Ralio Yiryella.

Ralio Yiryella is a master xylophonist with an in-depth knowledge of Dagaaba gyil repertoire. During an interview with him at Nandom Konyunga, he described several instances where he did not understand the meaning of another xylophonist’s surrogate speeches, even though he remembered some of the melodies to which the texts were associated. Ralio indicated that when he liked a particular melody played by another xylophonist and wanted to add it to his repertoire, he would ask for the interpretation from the xylophonist that played the song. He explained that as follows: “When I hear a new song and I like to play it too, I go to the xylophonist who played it and ask that, this piece that you played, what does it mean? Once the person explains it, I memorize it, then I add it to what I know already” (Interview Yiryella, Konyunga, 11.28.2010). Some significant meanings could be read into this statement by Yiryella, regarding the scope of limitation of gyil surrogation. That another musician’s surrogate texts are unintelligible to a senior gyil player like Yiryella implies that the act of surrogation, as Brian Hogan says of a similar situation in the Birifor tradition, “requires a certain competency and fluency with the particular tonal and rhythmic conventions of communication through the xylophone, and that only certain phrases have established meaning in the sense of being fixed [emphasis mine]”
(2011: 243). The implication here is that, it is possible for people to give different interpretations of what they hear when the gyil speaks. Gyil speech surrogates, thus, involves a kind of a discursive strategy where people can manipulate what is heard to generate several meanings. Perhaps Yiryella’s comments also reveals that using speech surrogates for communication could be imperfect since errors are possible both in transmission and reception.

With these limitations, why would the Dagaaba employ gyil surrogates as a means of communication instead of a more direct form such as human speech? This question has partly been answered in the discussions of lobri tunes in chapter three. To reiterate, a lingual communication processed through the gyil—whether fully comprehensible or not—is believed to be more persuasive than ordinary human speech. In addition, it must be understood that speech surrogation is a form of ritual language practiced by the Dagaaba. Like most cultures around the world, ritual observances in Dagaaba society tend to demand highly marked uses of linguistic resources (cf. Keane, 1997; Asad, 1993; Bell, 1992). Since the funeral is one of the major rituals that involves a meshwork of interaction between humans, ancestors, and other spiritual beings, the use of language that has been disguised or veiled is pragmatically crucial, hence, the practice of the gyil surrogates. That aligns quite well with Andrew Apter’s conception of deep knowledge in African rituals where the language employed could be very indeterminate in meaning because it belongs to “indigenous forms of critical practice” (Apter, 2007: xi). Commenting on how Apter’s idea works in Birifor funeral music, Brian Hogan notes that the meaning of the messages encoded in the musical patterns of the Birifor xylophone are usually “fluid and not fixed, circulating in a discursive
space that allows the negotiation of conflicting meanings” (2011:244). Hogan’s work focuses specifically on blind xylophonists among the Birifor of the northwest of Ghana. In Birifor society, blind persons, according to Hogan, are viewed as cursed and not of the same importance as the sighted. Consequently, blind xylophone musicians do not receive the same recognition as their sighted contemporaries. Through the performance of dondomo yiel (enemy music), the blind musicians challenge that status quo, and they are able to do so more effectively through speech surrogates. Hogan writes: “For blind Birifor xylophonists, speech surrogation in ritual contexts enables statements that would otherwise be silenced or ignored, statements that dangerously challenge the socio-spiritual status quo [to be voiced]” (ibid). That observation applies to Dagaaba gyil music too. Speech surrogation in Dagaaba gyil playing, as a form of coded language, creates a space for the reconfiguration of power dynamics as much as it conveys concrete meanings. When something needs to be said on the gyil, Dagaaba gyil players do not care about who is involved. Through speech surrogates, they can publicly insult, rebuke, or chastise any individual, regardless of social status. These occur as a form of “permitted disrespect” (Apter, 2007: 67) ritually sanctioned among the Dagaaba.

Such “permitted disrespect” extends beyond gyil playing to the singing of the funeral dirges (langni). Like the gyil musicians, the dirge singers—langkônme (sl. langkône) also have the license to scorn and reprimand people in the performance of the langni (dirges). The next chapter focuses on the performance and significance of the langni in the funeral. In terms of ornate and disguising use of language, it can be argued that the langkônme, perhaps, are only second to the
gyil musicians, if not at par. They can mask, disguise, or protest sensitive issues through dense language. By the same means, the langkône can also reveal and disclose important information and, to use Apter’s words, “[give] active voice to hidden passions and secrets that are otherwise repressed” (2007:67). Having foreshadowed here what the langkône can do with words, I will proceed to the next chapter for a comprehensive excursion of that phenomenon.
CHAPTER FIVE

THE LANGNI (DIRGES) AND THE PERFORMANCE OF EMOTIONS

In chapter three, I discussed the significance and organization of funerals in Dagaaba society. I observed that the funeral is by far the largest public ritual of the Dagaaba, celebrating and effecting the passage of the soul of the dead into the state of ancestorhood. The ceremony revolves around the relationship of the deceased with the lineage, and of the lineage with social groups outside it, such as reciprocal burial groups and musicians. The length, mood, complexity, and detail of the funeral differ from one to the other, depending on the deceased’s age, sex, specialization, and popularity as well as the wealth, power, influence, size, and accomplishments of the family and individuals who are responsible for its organization. Regardless of the variations, however, all funerals are carried within a common framework of which symbolic and expressive acts form an integral part. Individually and in groups, all mourners express their relationship to the social and metaphysical situation brought on by death through wailing. Further, most funeral roles are fulfilled at least partially through music, dance, and other ritual behavior.

One of the funeral’s most striking features is the continuous flow of musical performances. Kuurbine music is the most important channel through which the Dagaaba express grief, hence, an extended discussion of this practice is worthwhile. The aspect of the music that will form the focus of analysis in this chapter is the langni (dirge). The langni is the sung component of the funeral music and is distinct from all other Dagaaba song genres in terms of musical
qualities and performance style. It is an outstanding example of an interplay between language, music, and emotional expressions, occurring as a fluid mix of speech, song, and wailing. This description is not exclusive to the langni and is reminiscent of accounts in the anthropological literature on dirges and funeral laments in other parts of the world (Gamliel, 2015; Allard, 2013; Sanka, 2010; Finnegan, 2001; Tolbert, 1990; Urban, 1988; Nketia, 1969). The performance of the langni involves a very delicate verbal activity conducted through music, and it utilizes texts on subjects relevant to the death at hand. Its text may focus on the deceased, surviving lineage, and moral issues among others. The langni is not only meant to mourn or praise the dead, but also criticisms and condemnations are allowed, even expected in the rendition. Therefore, one of its primary functions is to offer public commentary on personal, social, and ritual matters pertinent to the funeral. The text may suggest a cause or assign blame for the death, predict, chastise, insinuate, and may involve the deceased, the lineage, and individuals or whoever, always to restate and reaffirm norms of the Dagaaba way of life. The langni, thus, reflects the society’s social conscience on the death that has occurred.

Michael Doggu describes the langni as “the culminating point of Dagaaba oral culture” since the verbal eloquence displayed by its performers is unparalleled (2015: 135). The art of langni singing is a means of showing that one knows and has the competence to perform with the right words as well as with good vocal, rhetorical, and emotional weight in the rendition. Just as xylophonists are acknowledged as musical specialists, so do skillful dirge singers become renowned for their ability to compose dirges with poignant sentiments. A good
dirge does not only have to contain appropriate words that suit the occasion, but equally important are the manner of delivery, and the strength of the singer’s voice. The more persuasive a dirge singer (traditionally male) is at his mode of rendition, the more recognition he achieves for his “communicative competence” (Bauman, 1977:23). The efficiency of his oratory skills also determines how dramatic the community of mourners responds to the performance. The most appreciated performer, thus, is the one that makes people cry when they had the least intention of doing so. When the performer stimulates the mourners to cry loudly, he is said to “have made things happen” (Saighoe, 1988: 201).

This chapter discusses the langni and the performance of emotions in Dagaaba funeral ceremonies. It examines the affective quality of the langni by analyzing its lyrics, mode of performance, and the emotional responses it engenders among the funeral audience. A Dagaaba funeral is by no means the solemnity of a quiet atmosphere but rather the turbulence of a festival deprived of its patent jollity. It is an occasion for expressing emotions and, in fact, at no other ceremonies are emotions displayed so openly and vigorously than this context. However, the conventionality of form and rule-governed nature of the funeral ceremony presents some interpretive challenges on the nature of the emotions displayed. The ceremony imposes a requirement of emotional behavior on all funeral goers, regardless of social status, to which are attached values that continue to govern its practice. Crying is mandated by custom due to the belief that the soul of the deceased swims in a stream of tears to reach the land of the ancestors (Doggu, 2015: 139; Somé, 1994:57). Thus, denying the deceased a passionate flow of tears is tantamount to denying the soul an expeditious entry
into dapaarewie, the spiritual world of the ancestors. An individual whose eyes
remains dry during the funeral is considered ill-mannered or worse, branded evil
or a cruel person. Crying is socially expected and is the means through which
people demonstrate that they have the ritually appropriate sentiment.

Given its mandatory nature, therefore, must we consider crying in the
funeral as a make-believe gesture or a manifestation of intense grief? This
question certainly borders on the ambiguous character of emotional expressions in
rituals, a situation that has received some considerable discussions in the
anthropological literature on emotions (Lutz and White, 1986). It has mostly been
argued that crying at funerals occurs as a social obligation, hence, any impression
of spontaneous crying could prove very simplistic and misleading (Gamliel, 2015;
Michaels, 2012; Magowan, 2007). While this perspective seems quite convincing,
it also obscures the evidence that musical performance in funerals can stimulate
powerful emotions in the audience, and indigenous evaluations of the
manifestation of emotions usually concern their efficacy rather than their nature.
For instance, Briggs (1992) investigated wailing rituals among the Warao in
Venezuela, and commenting on the development of his research, he speaks to the
question of emotional authenticity in rituals by alluding to the ambiguous
potential of wailing. By participating in some funerals of the Warao, Briggs
became acquainted with its musical features and the powerful emotional impact
the music had on the mourners. Consequently, he was able to see Warao wailing
ritual as “a powerful form of social action” (1992:338). Until that point, he had
considered wailing a manifestation of intense sorrow and rage experienced by the
mourners (Ibid). In a related study, Allard (2013) demonstrates how the evocation
of intense grief is inherent in Warao funeral dirges and how that becomes a manifestation of affection, “a proof of the measure of one’s love [for the deceased]” (2013:547).

Crying in funeral ceremonies, thus, may not be just dismissed as false theatricality since its significance does not necessarily lie in its authenticity but rather on its usefulness. It is in this sense that crying in Dagaaba funeral ceremonies must be understood. Indeed, the Dagaaba do not maintain that people must express authentic or genuine emotions. Rather, the expectation is that people must produce tears that would facilitate the transition of the deceased’s soul unto the otherworld to restore the social equilibrium disturbed by the occurrence of death. The realization of this socially required behavior, the Dagaaba argue, mostly hinges on the performance of the dirges (langni). The langni is attributed with the power to loosen people’s emotional inhibitions and enables them to prove that at least “they share the socially correct emotion” (Gamliel, 2015: 32). The passion at which the langni is delivered by the singers and the kind of words they say are among the several aspects of the performance that awakens a sense of sorrow in people and upon which they burst into tears. In that sense, the langni is part of a symbolic system that embodies the essence of Dagaaba cosmology. That is demonstrated in the purpose for which it is performed as well as in the music itself, which in its structure is expressive of, and instrumental to stimulating the basic emotions needed to facilitate the deceased’s soul to the land of the ancestors.

Of particular importance in this chapter, thus, is addressing the issue of how the langni moves people into a collective expression of grief, taking into consideration its manner of performance, text, and improvisatory musical form.
As a fabric of the kuurbine music, the langni springs from the same musical base as the gyil repertoire and, thus, the parameters that structure its tonal, rhythmic, and temporal organization are rooted in the gyil playing. Therefore, by examining the langni in this chapter, the basis for understanding the gyil repertoire itself would also be established. Dirges have been at the center of an interesting nexus of issues relating to emotions and performance in the anthropological literature. They are known throughout the world, and despite wide cultural variations, they show striking similarities in structure and context, often exhibiting a manner of performance characterized by icons of wailing (Gamliel, 2015; Briggs, 1993; Urban, 1988). One of the important reasons to examine the langni in this chapter is that it provides a case study of the symbolic processes by which musical forms become invested with emotion, and therefore meaning. Insight into the langni performance may also help illuminate related theoretical issues such as the place and nature of emotions in rituals.

The Langni

From a typological point of view, the langni belongs to a tradition of songs and poems referred to in the anthropological and folkloric literature as the elegy or lament (Boadi, 2013; Finnegan, 2012; Sanka, 2010). It is, nonetheless, worth noting that the Dagaaba make a subtle but valid distinction between the dirge and the lament (Nanbigne, 2003: 26). The difference primarily centers on the context of performance and organization. The lament, which the Dagaaba calls komuorɔ (a word which literally means to passionately express one’s feelings), in the ideal sense, is meant to be sung at funerals. Nonetheless, it is also sung at non-ritual
occasions with strong overtones of emotions, such as when an individual feels lonely due to the loss of many relations through death, or as a complaint about the hardships of life. People who have lost many of their relatives and now live alone may burst into lamentations anytime they are overpowered by loneliness or by some chance event reminded of their loss. Likewise, a farmer who experiences poor harvest may sing laments to express his sentiments. In any occasion of failure in life, a person may show disappointments by singing the laments. At funerals, the laments are mainly sung by women, especially those who are closely related to the deceased. Since it is not an organized performance, individual women sing laments of their choice, often without regard to what others are singing or how they sing them. Thematically, the laments usually explore one’s personal sentimental connections with the deceased and, therefore, its content mainly focuses on the deceased’s virtues mentioned in the form of praise names (Nanbigne, 2003:27).

The dirge (langni), in contrast, is strictly a funeral genre and under no circumstance is it performed outside of that context. It is performed by a spontaneously organized group of men in a call and response fashion. The group comprises adult males who consider their participation in the performance as a means of fulfilling a social obligation, of actively helping to dispatch the deceased to the hereafter in the desired, proper and befitting manner while at the same time helping the bereaved and the entire community to deal with the loss. Thoughts about death and the havoc it causes in society are presented in the form of musical expression arranged in a particular style and sequence to arouse, deepen, and sustain the emotions that a funerary ritual must convey. As an integral aspect of
the kuurbine music, the langni has marked correlations in matters of form and content with details of the funeral rites. Langni performance begins as soon as the funeral is officially opened and, reinforced by the music of the gyil and kuor drum, remains its mainstay throughout the ceremony. Its content emphasizes the pathos of the occasion, invoking sorrow as well as sympathy for the unfortunate situation. The Dagaaba attribute much ritual significance to the dirge than the lament because it acts simultaneously as an emotional force and a commentary on the intricate ritual proceedings.

Several conventions guide the composition and performance of the langni. First and foremost, a langni, by its text, must be pointedly relevant for the death being mourned. Secondly, there is a standard format for its beginning and ending. Furthermore, a long langni rendition must be interspersed with terse statements carefully chosen and patterned to suit the conditions of the present occasion. Like the gyil surrogates, the language of the dirge is not that of the common medium of everyday speech, but speech inlaid with metaphorical expressions. It comprises riddles, proverbs, and other figurative terms that are composed on the spot and chanted in a high tenor voice to the funeral audience. The musicians draw their content from an extensive repertoire of stock phrases and concepts, and modify them to suit the occasion. Many, if not most, dirges are addressed directly to an individual, a lineage, or even the entire community. Quite often, family members and other people are castigated for the death that has occurred. However, if genuine praise is directed at anyone, it seems to be reserved for the deceased and other notable dead persons from the lineage.
The Performers

The performance of dirges among the Dagaaba is traditionally men’s activity, and lead roles are assumed by individuals who are specially gifted in oration. Such people are referred to as langkõne, a term derived from langni and kõne (cry). In a literal sense, langkõne means dirge crier or simply, a person who “cries with words” (see Tolbert, 1990). However, the term kõne (cry), as used in this word formation context, is not synonymous with weeping or the shedding of tears. It rather designates the mode in which the words in the langni are articulated. The langni is more declaimed than sung. Hence, the langkõne is said to cry (kõne) out the dirge instead of singing (yieelu). Perceptually, the articulation of the words has a tinge of crying in it, yet, the performer himself does not necessarily shed tears as the term “cry” (kõne) would imply. Instead, the langkõne crafts the experience of grief, sensing of loss, and the sorrow of parting in his voice, blending language and music into an irresistible expressive force that stimulates people to cry. As the Dagaaba argue, a good dirge by a langkõne is too strong to be resisted by any individual at the funeral. When people are directly confronted with a dirge that expresses poignant sentiments, they find it uneasy to look undisturbed or strong-hearted and consequently burst into tears.

In any funerary occasion, the langkõne’s ability to perform well centers on his in-depth knowledge of Dagaaba oral art forms, including knowledge of which proverbs or riddles are suitable for what context, and his ability to string them together to form a coherent composition. The use of metaphorical language is an essential prerequisite for langni performance. So, it is not unusual that most of the langkõne I interviewed, and whose performances I witnessed at funerals in
Nandom were men belonging to the senior generation in the community. Verbal eloquence and metaphorical expressions are central to langni performance, and these skills, the Dagaaba maintain, are not commonly found in young people. The composition of meaningful dirges hinges on one’s social maturity, a quality that comes with old age and life experiences accumulated through a long process of enculturation. Most langkône are senior men who, per their biological age, have acquired wisdom in the Dagaaba way through life experiences and can assume social and ritual responsibilities within their lineage. Such individuals are regarded as yangsọb (men of great wisdom), a quality that develops when one advances in life (Kuupuo 2010)29.

While maturity and experience can be expected to guide a langkône in the composition of meaningful dirges and provide him with an adequate background for appropriate content, it is also important to mention that quality langni—those that accomplish their purpose—are not guaranteed on every occasion. Some langkône, unquestionably, are exceptionally and consistently good in their performance and are valued by their peers as well as the funeral audience. However, there are others that are very uninspiring. These include the langkône that have little or no verbal competence and are unpersuasive. As one interviewee remarked, such musicians end up proclaiming nonsense. Others are also too slow in inspiring people, and they keep the performance going on for unusually longer

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29 Kuupuo (2010) discusses yangsọb (wisdom) as a function of the learning process by which a child begins to know the difference between right and wrong, gradually acquires moral sense, makes himself useful to society, and assumes social responsibility. As he points out, it is through biological age and life experiences that one comes to acquire wisdom in the Dagaaba way, and can come to know tradition and custom (2010: 42-51). Wisdom, thus, is a product and indication of social maturity, an essential prerequisite for performing dirges at funerals.
periods without moving the crowd into action. Such performers are cut off by the lead xylophonist to give way to others that are verbally competent. Verbal competence in dirge performance implies the ability to create songs in context, at the spur of the moment. The verbally gifted langkône can come up with, time after time, concise statements that are appropriate to the context, and are musically so well set that mourners are moved to a heightened and sustained emotional response. The most appreciated langkône is the one that never says the same thing repeatedly, (at least in the same performance), and the audience knows when they are copying another singer’s ideas, or repeating old ones. The langkône is even more valued when he can translate the surrogate texts of the accompanying xylophone in the rendition. There is also a practical side to langni performance that does not escape the enterprising langkône. Well-set and germane riddles generate not only an emotional response from the mourners but a monetary outcome as well. The possibility of extracting favorable reward motivates every act of performing langni, and some langkône are not above hustling to get it. Occasionally one finds them jabbing the mourners for not rewarding their performance with some cash incentive.

Dirge performance at funerals has long been the domain of men. However, in some Dagaaba villages, women have now convincingly entered this field of musical specialization, utilizing it as a platform to gain crucial access to Dagaaba indigenous political and religious discourse. Nanbigne (2003) describes how Dagaaba women langkône use the dirges to negotiate gender equality in society and redefine the terms of their significance in general social discourse. As he observes, gender ideologies have been so crucial in Dagaaba social stratification
and women have often been prohibited from engaging in some activities due to certain traditional beliefs and cultural practices. Nonetheless, playing lead roles in dirge performances at funerals now affords women the rare opportunity to interact intensively with the rest of society, redefining themselves and discovering outlets for the expression and outpouring of emotions emanating from their daily experiences with people of the opposite sex. By performing the dirges, they fight for recognition in society, arguing that they too possess the gift of oration, a gift equally distributed among the opposite sexes by Naamwin (God). Like the male langkône, the women performers also have financial considerations in mind and the novelty of women singing, according to Nanbigne, attracts more donations from the funeral audience (2003: 26).

Although I did not personally experience any such performances by women langkône in Nandom, interviews with musicians revealed that indeed some few women in the area perform dirges at funerals. However, they quickly alluded to certain mystical beliefs to justify that it is risky for women to engage in such acts. As renowned langkône themselves, the interviewees held that the funeral ceremony sometimes provides the ideal context for all sorts of wizard wars, something in which women are considered too fragile to be involved. The most common of such wars is the throwing of spiritual projectiles called lobr (plural lobie) by some nefarious individuals to harm others (see also Somé, 1994:52). A person hit by a lobr knows it through some strange bodily sensations. The most common is the feeling of a little itch on the particular part of the body affected by the lobr. Then, the itching becomes severe and transmogrifies into a
sharp awful pain until the victim is debilitated. If a spiritual healing is not sought for within the shortest possible time, the victim could eventually die.

Because of the important role music plays within the funerary context, the musical specialists—langköne and gëbaa—are often a target for such lobr attacks. Sometimes, the musicians themselves are the perpetrators as they seek to test each other’s spiritual potency. Apart from mourning the dead, the funeral also becomes a site for contesting musical competence and spiritual power amongst the musicians. There is always a search for supremacy by the musicians which leads to an enormous jealousy amongst them. That ultimately results in the throwing of the lobr at each other. A musician’s career, thus, could end prematurely through such contests if he is not spiritually fortified. Since women are traditionally not initiated into performing these art forms (i.e. gyil playing and dirge chanting), it is argued that they do not have any spiritual protection. On the contrary, the male musicians, as part of their training undergo some initiation rituals that equip them to overcome or live in equilibrium with such mystical forces that they would inevitably encounter during funeral ceremonies. For the same reasons, there are also no child prodigies in this area of specialization. Young men would not even attempt to perform dirges at funerals until they have advanced to senior generation status. In Nandom, thus, recognition as a langköne is as much a social as a professional statement about one’s spiritual maturity.

The Features of the Langni

One of the most remarkable qualities of the Dagaaba dirge is that it can simply be regarded as a verbal genre with features that may be studied
linguistically or as literary expressions. Nevertheless, there is a high degree of interdependence between the linguistic and literary features as well as a standard medium of expression—a singular musical form that gives it a unique identity. In that regard, the langni also shares similar qualities with funeral dirges in other African traditions such as the Sisaala of northwestern Ghana (Sanga, 2010; Seavoy, 1982:202-251), Yoruba of Nigeria (Ajuwon, 1980), Akan of southern Ghana, and the Abanyole of the Western Province of Kenya (Alembi, 2002) to cite some few examples. In discussing the langni, however, the Dagaaba mention two qualities that are of emotional significance to the funeral audience and which various langkône tend to explore and accentuate during a performance. These include the lyrics and the mode of performance. Hence, the following analysis will dwell on these two essential qualities. The lyrics, it proves to be the case, are so significant to the funeral because they ignite and sustain people’s interest to fully participate and engage in the mourning rituals. The words are persuasive, and they have the effect of heightening the emotiveness of the mourning that is taking place.

While the langni makes its emotional impact by blending music and speech, the Dagaaba scarcely mention its melodious quality as an emotional stimulant. Rather, an emphasis is placed on the quality of voice used in articulating the lyrics and the speed at which the words are articulated to fit in the overall rhythmic framework of the accompanying instruments. Thus, in addition to the carefully patterned lyrics, timbre and tempo are the most significant criteria for assessing the emotional qualities of the langni. The fact that the Dagaaba do not give prominence to the langni’s melodic quality, as far as its emotive potential
is concerned, is not surprising. In fact, based on my personal engagements and experiences with this music, a melodic analysis of the langni could prove daunting for any scholar that would attempt to make a tuneful sense of it since its pitches are so indeterminate. To make sense of how the melody is structured, for the purpose of this study, is to treat it processually, emphasizing the procedure at which the words are articulated within the rhythmic structures of the instrumental accompaniment. In the following, I will first present and analyze some few examples of the langni, taking into consideration its themes and lyrics as I explore the basis of its importance in the funeral ceremony. Subsequently, its rhythmic organization will be dealt with, examining how the durational structure of the kuurbine instrumental patterns absorb the speech-like patterns of the langni, controlling and directing its flow in the performance.

The examples of langni that will be drawn for analysis in this chapter are from recordings I made during fieldwork in Nandom and other documented sources. It is, however, important to mention that most of the dirges, as performed by the langkône, are too lengthy for our purpose. The performance of a single dirge may span between ten and fifteen minutes. Therefore, the examples that will be presented will only focus on the aspects deemed relevant for a particular point made. The langni is mainly sung in Dagaare, and to provide a clear presentation that would facilitate our understanding of the lyrics, translation is necessary. Nevertheless, I must acknowledge that representing one language in another is a complicated process and, as noted by scholars such as Finnegan (2001) and Feleppa (1988), the chances are that meaning could be obscured. To resolve this challenge, I am following an approach adopted by Gamliel (2015) in her recent
study of the wailing culture of Yemenite Jewish Women. In translating the Jewish
women’s lamentation lyrics from Hebrew to English, Gamliel uses a model that is
tailored to the linguistic and cultural circumstances of the research population,
taking into consideration the contents of the arguments that she is making. She
notes that there is a distinction between a translation that focuses on actual
contents and one that highlights a collection of ideas. Gamliel adopts the latter
point of view in her work, presenting the translated wailing words with their
patterns of meaning and their nature “as a configuration of discourse” (Gamliel,
2015:106). As she explains, this view allows one to approach translation from one
language to another as more a social than a technical endeavor. I adopt Gamliel’s
approach for this work as I translate dirges sung in the Dagaare language to
English. In so doing, I am also following Schulte (1987:2) who sees translations
as not merely a presentation of words from one language to another but rather a
transfer of situations and ideas from one culture to another.

Themes and Lyrics

From the context that defines its purpose and usage, the langni is
essentially Dagaaba discourse of death. The themes that a dirge may espouse
explicitly depend on the nature of the death being mourned. The age of the
deceased, gender, social status, and manner of death are all taken into
consideration before the langkône composes a dirge during the funeral. At one
point, a dirge may celebrate the accomplishments of the dead person and lament
the consternation that his or her demise has created in the family and community.
At another point, it may criticize, lampoon, or condemn the deceased, bereaved
family, and the entire community for their actions or inactions that resulted in the
death of the individual. To facilitate our understanding of the place and affective
power of the langni in the funeral, it will be prudent to group them into two broad
categories: praise, and non-praise. Dirges that fall under the praise category
includes all forms of which praise names and the qualities of the deceased person
constitute a key structural device. On the other hand, those that fall under non-
praise will include dirges that are abusive, either towards the deceased person or
the bereaved family, as well as those that may console and assuage the pains of
individuals deeply affected by the death. While such an approach would prove
worthwhile, I must acknowledge that the Dagaaba themselves do not necessarily
categorize their dirges per the terms of references I have proposed above. In fact,
any such classifications are inexistent. The only categories they have in relation to
the funeral music occurs in the lobri tunes for death announcement where there
are specific melodies indicating the sex and social status of the deceased.
Therefore, the classifications drawn here are based on my personal survey of the
lyrics and are only for analytical purposes.

**Praise**

Ideally, the purpose of the langni in any funerary occasion is to mourn the
deceased person, eulogize his or her accomplishments, extol his or her virtues, and
to console and commiserate with the bereaved. Personal attributes of the deceased
such as benevolence, altruism, bravery, endurance, and magnanimity among
others are mentioned as and when the langkône deems fit. The wealth of the
deceased and number of offspring left behind continually receive tributes in the
dirges. In a man’s funeral, the langni praises his achievements and touts his socio-economic successes and masculinity. As noted elsewhere in chapter one, the Dagaaba society is highly stratified, and gender ideologies play a crucial role in their social organization. Male dominance is continually present, and men serve as leaders of the community as well as the household. They provide an economic livelihood for their wives and children. Their roles as fathers, husbands, and breadwinners essentially make them the backbone of the family. Thus, the death of a man is considered a major disaster to the household and the entire community. In the occasion of a man’s funeral, the langni eulogizes his personal achievements in metaphorical terms. In one of the funerals I attended in Monyupelle, the langni conveyed sentiments of praise to the dead man as follows:

- *Ti kpee nu lo*  The mighty tree has fallen
- *Nidere nu lo*  A great leader has fallen
- *Mbgarbie mur*  A bright star has set
- *Dieo weg nu lo*  A solid pillar has collapsed
- *Nikpee nyi na bare*  A great one is gone
- *A yir paa lon daa daa*  The house has fallen forever

(Personal recordings, Monyupelle, 04.12.2012).

After bringing into a sharp focus the personal attributes of the deceased and celebrating his status in the family, the langni goes on to lament the extent of the loss and its consequences on the surviving household as exemplified in the following excerpt:

- *Kuora gandaa nu lo*  The great farmer has fallen
- *Gandaa yi na*  The bread winner is gone.
- *U kyen wie sbele waei*  He went to the farm and never returned
It should be noted from the above example that the dirge does not only comment on the despondency that awaits the bereaved family for the man’s death but also his professional achievements are extolled. Farming is one of the central activities of a man’s life, and because it is the primary method of increasing wealth among the Dagaaba, it receives some emphasis in the dirges sung in honor of men. Such dirges are not peculiar to any individual but celebrate men’s role as farmers, and their task for providing food for the household. Farming is a universal role that all men may fill at some point in their lives and are therefore celebrated quite impersonally for any male member of the community who dies. A man who becomes rich through farming is known as a *kukur na* (master of the hoe handle), or *kuora gandaa* (strong farmer)—as shown in the example above. These are general appellations that reflect the farmer’s value in society.

In the case of a woman’s funeral, her roles as mother and as wife receive praises in the dirge. Whereas men engage in farming, women largely play housekeeping roles. They perform domestic chores such as cleaning, laundry, fetching of water and firewood, and caring for infants. Besides these, one of the woman’s significant roles is to cook for her husband. In commemorating a woman’s death, therefore, her culinary prowess becomes the subject of commentary in the dirges performed by the langkône. In one funeral that I attended in Nandom, the langkône praised the woman as follows:

*A pog be sora nen*  
*Ô ma do’ vovo ti kpi.*  
*A sire paa lo na*  
*Fu yuon tin tin na tse*  
*A kuur na ko a*  

This woman never asked for meat  
She who cooked well is now dead  
Her husband has suffered a heavy loss  
You are left alone  
Now death has taken her  
(Personal recordings, Nandom, 11.27.2010).
Although the above example praises the dead woman’s cooking skills, it can also be observed that greater emphasis is placed on how the death affects the husband. That is very typical with most dirges sung to praise women at their death. The anguish which a woman’s death causes her husband takes precedence over her personal accomplishments in the performance of the dirge. This practice, as noted by other scholars, is largely a reflection of the position of women in Dagaaba society (see Goody, 1962:81; Saighoe, 1988:192). Analyses of death and marital relationships among the Dagaaba goes beyond the purview of this study. However, it seems reasonable to argue that Dagaaba traditional marriage practices tend to exert much influence on how the woman is perceived in society. Marriage transactions involve the payment of hefty dowry by men. The dowry typically comprises cows, fowls, cowries, cash, and bundles of millets, guinea corn, and other materials. By paying the dowry, the woman essentially becomes the man’s “property.” The woman, thus, becomes marginal in the household and the society generally since she is always under the full control of the man. Because of her marginality in society, a dead woman is usually not praised for what she was as an individual but rather for what she was to the husband—a great cook in that regard. Therefore, when a dirge makes references to the woman’s cooking expertise, it is not purposely meant to praise her domestic achievements but to underscore the loss to the husband for whom it is her duty to cook.

From the examples given so far, dirges that praise the achievements of dead persons also indicate their gender roles. That reflects the sharp division of labor between the two sexes. As a man is praised for his farming abilities, so is a woman praised for her cooking skills. In addition to farming, men until recently
played important roles as hunters and warriors. As warriors, they had the task of defending the community against their foes, and with their hunting skills, provided meat for the nourishment of the community. The bowstring (tamyuur) was the major weapon for wars and hunting. Hence, a person with excellent shooting skills was known as tamyuur na, master of the bowstring. Whereas hunting has been reduced to the barest minimum due to the extinction of game, and inter/intra-ethnic wars are recently nonexistent, men’s role as hunters and warriors still receive tribute in dirges performed in their honor. A deceased man may thus be given accolades such as “great warrior” and “great hunter” in the dirge to reminisce about the dominant roles men filled in the past:

- A nyaagala gan: A great warrior lies dead
- Ka zaa baara: All is finished
- A taamyur be ko: A great hunter has been killed
- Te loora bio: And we shall fight tomorrow (Saighoe, 1988:191)

Based on the examples given above, the purpose of praise dirges in the funeral becomes apparent: to eulogize and elevate the dead person by indicating that he or she was not without some precious qualities even if he or she was not perfect or outstanding in the community. It should, however, be mentioned here that such praise dirges are performed in the funerals of older people who have lived their lives to the fullest and are said to have died a “good death.” As the popular Dagaaba saying goes, “a good deed deserves praise,” hence, when people die “good death,” their good deeds become their monument. By praising the qualities and accomplishments of the deceased, the langni draws attention to the significance of the loss to the community and the immediate family in particular. The death of a hardworking, indefatigable, and an industrious man is a grave loss...
to those who have enjoyed the fruits of his labor or have grown to depend on him.
Likewise, the death of a woman is a huge loss to the husband and children who rely on her for their daily meals. That is the meaning and purpose of many dirges. They evoke images of hopelessness for the future due to the death of a breadwinner or a grand matron in the household. The fact that no one can be a perfect substitute for one’s father, mother, husband, or wife compels dirge performers to utter words of despair to stress the family’s bereavement.

**Non-praise**

An inescapable feature of Dagaaba funeral dirges is the criticisms and chastisements frequently unleashed on either the deceased person, relatives, and other individuals. Reproaches and rebukes may predominate the dirges especially when death occurs while it is least expected. The Dagaaba recognize the vulnerability of human beings in the face of death and the fact that death is an inevitable phenomenon (Doggu, 2015: 15; Gbal, 2013: 23; Kuukure, 1985:110). However, when sudden deaths occur (the type of death the Dagaaba describe as *kuur faa*—bad death), no langkône would eulogize the deceased person. Much of the sentiments expressed in the langni are rather words of abuse directed towards the deceased. The dead person is rebuked for having deserted relatives, friends, and loved ones in an untimely manner. Saighoe (1988:197-198) gives an account of one such instance during his research in Nandom. As Saighoe describes, the funeral was for a woman who had died only after a few hours of illness. It was said that the woman had returned the previous day from Kumasi, one of the largest cities in southern Ghana, where she had gone to visit her husband. Early
that morning, as Saighoe recounts, the woman had complained of abdominal pains, and by mid-day, she had died. The quickness of her death did not only spark fear in the immediate relatives but also devastations and worries over the effect of her death on her husband and children who she had left behind. Therefore, at the funeral, one langkône, as Saighoe narrates, did not mince words in expressing this anxiety to her. Instead of praising the woman’s role as mother and wife, the langkône saw only the problems her death had created for the husband and children and furiously queried her as follows:

When you took leave of your husband in Kumasi,  
Did you tell him you were coming to die?  
Did you say a final good-bye to him?  
If you did not, you tell us:  
How are we going to do that now?  
And about your children—  
You know who I am talking about, don’t you?  
Did you warn them of this desertion?  
Who is going to be their mother now?  
Do they know what to expect as motherless children?  
Did you prepare them for the hardships ahead of them? (Saighoe, 1988:197).

Hostility and bitterness expressed in the langni against the deceased are also prevalent at the funeral of adults who die before their parents. Dagaaba parents consider it the duty of their progenies to give them a befitting burial. The demise of a person whose parents are still alive is seen as a hitch to the natural course of events. Thus, the deceased progeny is blamed for abandoning his duties. Such was the case in one of the funerals I attended in Nandom of which the deceased was under forty years old, and his parents were alive. At the funeral, a langkône who was closely related to the bereaved parents took to the floor to lead the performance of the dirges. After a brief historical narration of the
achievements of the deceased’s ancestors, and praises for their noble deeds, the 
langkône began to reprimand the deceased:

\[
\begin{align*}
Bie \ nu \ m \ &\ 'kõ \ u \ sää \ ni \ u \ mã; \quad \text{It is the son who mourns his parents;} \\
Bie \ nu \ a \ seř \ kë & \quad \text{It is the son who must pay them} \\
u \ yaw \ be \ jirme. & \quad \text{his last respect.} \\
A \ yel \ na \ na \ i \ a \ ka \ a, \ yel \ faa \ nu & \quad \text{What has happened here is condemnable} \\
Yel \ bier \ u, \ ti \ be \ no \ u \ e. & \quad \text{It is unusual, and we despise it.} \\
Fu \ yuor \ i \ Kuurbeterzie & \quad \text{Your name is Kuurbeterzie} \\
\text{E fû zi ni yel-ktê} & \quad \text{And you are sitting there with a big problem} \\
Mâa \ nu \ na \ ㎛u \ a \ fû \ sää \ ni \ a \ fû \ mâ \ bu? \quad \text{Must I see to your parent’s burial?} \\
Ayi, \ fû \ tô-νuɔr \ a & \quad \text{No, it is your duty!} \\
Fû \ na \ kpi \ ece \ ber \ be \ a, & \quad \text{You have died and left them behind.} \\
Ăa \ nu \ pâa \ na \ tô \ a \ fû \ tô-νuɔr \ a? \quad \text{Who will perform your duty now?} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(Personal recordings, Nandom, 02.24.2012).

When the deceased was posed the question, “Ăa \ nu \ pâa \ na \ tô \ a \ fû \ tô-νuɔr \ a?” (who will perform your duty now?), emotions were deepened, and the 
devastation of the parents was so glaring. The mother couldn’t stand on her feet as 
she paced to and fro, clasping her hands firmly behind the neck and wailing. The 
mother’s response to the dirge created a kind of emotional contagion among the 
funeral audience as many people were moved into joining the wailing. Queries 
and statements like the ones above, as one langkône mentioned in an interview, 
carries a massive emotional weight and, thus, are always greeted with passionate 
responses. The poignancy of such dirges sometimes provokes parents to express 
emotions that go beyond and above the common expression of pathos. In the 
funeral of their children, some parents may go to the extent of committing suicide 
due to the poignancy of the langni, and few examples of such instances were 
given during my interviews with musicians in Nandom.
While the Dagaaba acknowledge that death is a certainty for everyone, and it could occur at any time, they believe that it can also be caused by a power in the spiritual world triggered by human actions or inactions. Some langkône, therefore, may allude to this connection, suggesting which human factors or actors might be involved, castigating or challenging those assumed responsible during dirge performances. I witnessed one of such performances in Nandom-Sentu. The young man, in his late twenties, was said to have died from a snakebite, an occurrence that was so much linked to some spiritual agents. In the performance, one langkône from the village furiously admonished members of the deceased’s household to scrutinize themselves diligently. At some point, he singled out the head of the family and accused him of personal negligence as a cause of the young man’s death as shown in the excerpt below:

\[
\begin{align*}
Nayiri! Nyê a fô yîr a & \quad \text{Nayiri! Look after your house} \\
A fô yîr lore ni v za & \quad \text{Your house is dwindling to emptiness} \\
Nyê a fô yîr a & \quad \text{Look after your house} \\
Nayiri! Ê bâw ni a fô yîr ngmme & \quad \text{Nayiri! I know the gods in your house} \\
Ë nû wa yel a, & \quad \text{But if anybody talks about it,} \\
Bê na ber v ni zawla lê? & \quad \text{Will they let him go free?} \\
Nayiri! Nyê a fô yîr a & \quad \text{Nayiri! Look after your house} \\
\end{align*}
\]


The fact that there had been several instances of death within six months in the same family as the young man’s, for the langkône, required some action from the head of the lineage since it was possible that someone might have offended the family gods. This particular dirge provoked an exceptionally intense wailing since the performance moved almost everyone present. Its effectiveness was not only because the deceased was young but also for the personal mode in which the langkône delivered it. Such direct admonishments to the bereaved family...
concerning the cause of certain deaths are often a mark of an affective relationship between the langkône and the deceased person or the bereaved family. Commands and rhetorical questions from the langkône, as they appear in the above example, have a highly evocative power, and that is how the langkône indicates his connection to the deceased, and of giving added intensity to the dirge. Through a frequent reference to other sudden deaths that has occurred in the same family within a short period, the langkône provoked a great deal of soul-searching on the part of the family since the implication of human complicity was too strong to ignore.

Non-praise dirges also characterize the funeral of adolescents. However, the resentments expressed in the dirges are usually not directed at the deceased person but at death itself. To express resentments against death, for the Dagaaba, is to suppress or completely ignore its reality. When a teenager dies, therefore, it is said that he or she is only sleeping or preoccupied with some house errands. In the dirge performance, the langkône dwells only on some standardized proverbial comments associated with children and their roles in the family as shown below:

- **O saa tu anga** | The father has sent the boy to go and fetch his loads
- **ko wa de yerme** | They pull up the good gross and leave the bad ones
- **Ba vuona a kalinyaa** | His father spoke of a sacrifice and he has gone to ask about it
- **Ti tseh sambala** | They will all finish and then you will grieve till last
- **O saa mine nihe** | We came to the house
- **‘yer bo’or ko kyen soro** | But could not find him anywhere
- **Ba na baara ti nye** | A dog always lies quietly on his master’s midden
- **Ngme nuru ka baar** | We’ve come, so jump up and welcome us
- **Tiw a yiri ba** | (Saighoe, 1988:198-199).
Again, when the death of a person seems to have occurred too suddenly or to have happened under mysterious circumstances, the blame is often laid at the doorsteps of a supposed enemy (dendɔmɔ). The alleged practices of the so-called enemy generate fear and sow seeds of distrust amongst people. The collective fear, distrust, and suspicion of the known or unknown enemy becomes the theme in most of the langni, as exemplified in the following:

*Fo nong salom foo luore*  
You may fly to the sky

*Dome ga ni a salom zu.*  
The enemy lives there

*Fo bang a sagame foo luore*  
You may flee into the clouds

*Dome ga ni a be.*  
But the enemy is there

*Foo saa kyen daa nyub*  
You go to the beer bar for a drink

*Dome kyaa zi.*  
The enemy sits waiting

*Foo nye dome a*  
The enemy, you know

*A gbee miile to*  
Thin-legged

*A nuu wogo*  
Long-handed

*A pour kpeluu*  
Distended-belly

*A nuor kyoluu.*  
Protruding mouth

(Personal recordings, Konyunga, 12.15.2010).

Whereas the object at which the above langni is directed could be a common human adversary, the qualities of the supposed enemy go beyond that of a human. Though the enemy is said to have human features—thin legs, long hands, distended belly, and protruding mouth—he is omnipresent, and as much as a person may want to avoid him, he is unable to do so. Due to its omnipresence, one can “fly to the sky” or “flee to the clouds” but will still meet him. The enemy (dendɔmɔ) in this context, thus, could be death itself. The dirge, therefore, underscores how futile one’s measures to escape death could be.

In some instances, a deceased person can be accused of being responsible for his or her own death. When that occurs, the sentiments are directed at the deceased. Kuutiero (2006) presents us with an example where a langkõne
interrogated a young teenager's corpse for causing her own death. The langkône wanted to ascertain whether the deceased was aware of the consequences of certain actions she took that eventually led to her death:

\[
\begin{align*}
\textit{Bibibewone nyog dopan zoor} & \quad \text{A naughty child has caught a viper’s tail} \\
\textit{O nie na maal bang a gbâa?} & \quad \text{Does she really know what a cobra is?} \\
\textit{O nie na maal bang a dopan’î?} & \quad \text{Does she really know what a viper looks?} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(Kuutiero, 2006:113)

As the dirge depicts, the destructive nature of the cobra and viper is well known among the Dagaaba, and a bite from either of them could result in death. Therefore, for one to hold them at the wrong spot, especially the tale, is to put oneself at risk. By using these imageries in the context of mourning the teenager, the langkône was perhaps alluding to a rejection of advice on the part of the deceased as the cause of her death. Though the deceased is the target for criticism in the langni, it is also an admonishment to the living, implying that whoever does not listen to sound advice should be prepared to bear the consequences of his or her actions.

The essence of the praise and non-praise dirges is to stimulate mourners and sympathizers to cry to produce the imaginary stream of tears needed to transit the deceased person’s soul into the spiritual world of the ancestors. Therefore, when dirges with poignant sentiments are performed continuously, it reaches a point where mourners and sympathizers do not need extra encouragement to cry or wail. The crying gets more emotional and uncontrolled and, in fact, additional rendition of such provocative dirges would only make it more so. Thus, at some point in the proceedings, that is, after the corpse has been removed from the funeral stand for burial, some langkône may begin to perform dirges that comfort
and soothes the sorrows of the bereaved family. In fact, some of the langkõne start
by turning the heat on their colleague performers for rubbing salt in the wounds of
the family afflicted by death, as exemplified below:

\[
\begin{align*}
Tierfo tiere & \quad \text{Deep you are in thoughts} \\
Nir za be bang baar’e & \quad \text{Yet, the ignorant insults you} \\
E nie toor. & \quad \text{They humiliate you} \\
Naamwin song fo, woi! aa! & \quad \text{May God help you, woi! aa!}
\end{align*}
\]

(Kuutiero, 2006: 114).

Some langkõne may also remind the bereaved family of their present
predicament and advise them not to be overcome by worries since agonizing over
the death of a loved one could also breed more deaths in the family as shown
below:

\[
\begin{align*}
Nirnang be ter ba e & \quad \text{The lonely has no friend} \\
Nirnang be ter ba e & \quad \text{The lonely has no friend} \\
Nirnang be ter yeb e & \quad \text{The lonely has no friend} \\
Nirnang be I bontiera fo tier’e & \quad \text{Loneliness is not a thing to worry about} \\
Tiero na kub’a & \quad \text{Worry will only kill you (ibid).}
\end{align*}
\]

To further diffuse the intense wailing at the funeral, a langkõne may allude
to other topics that remotely relates to the funeral. Deviant behavior of people
often proves to be a useful subject for such dirges. By commenting on other issues
unrelated to the funeral, the intention of the langkõne is to digress people’s
attention to something else, and it serves as an important tactic for alleviating the
plight of the bereaved family and other mourners and sympathizers. The following
is an example of such dirges:

\[
\begin{align*}
Na mil mil niru & \quad \text{It is a traitor who} \\
Zore lane nibe & \quad \text{Mingles among people} \\
Wone yele mile be bere & \quad \text{Hears them and embroils them in disputes} \\
Gyagyu mila no & \quad \text{He is the swift moving tarantula (ibid).}
\end{align*}
\]
A person who maliciously gossips about individuals in the society is condemned in harsh terms among the Dagaaba since such acts can destroy people. In the above example, thus, a gossiper is considered a traitor whose speed at entangling people in conflicts is likened to the fast-paced tarantula that bites whoever it meets as it moves. As one langkône remarked in an interview, people hear such dirges, and they are moved to laughter, momentarily dissipating the intense emotionality of the funeral ceremony.

**Performing the Langni**

One distinctive feature of the langni is the mode of singing and quality of voice used in its performance. Two modes of singing are usually employed in langni performance. In one mode, the langkône combines singing and wailing, employing what Nketia refers to as “the wept-sung voice” (1969:113). In the other mode, the langkône declaims the words in a recitative manner. These two forms are always present in the same rendition and they show correlations to the musical structure of the langni.

As a highly-patterned form of verbal behavior, langni performance follows a standardized procedure. The performance begins with a particular melodic phrase sung as greetings to the deceased, then follows a lengthy narrative that details the background of the deceased, praises or criticizes him or her. Also, there is a chorus that serves as a response to the narratives declaimed by the langkône. Following the standardized performance pattern, thus, the langni can structurally be divided into three sections: opening, narration, and chorus. In the following, I will discuss the sections in the order they occur during a performance, taking into
consideration how they fit into the tonal and rhythmic structures of the accompanying instruments. For the analysis here, the opening section, henceforward, will be called the wept-sung section to reflect the mode of singing employed by the langkône. The long narrative, for want of a better word, will be called the recitation section since it is declaimed rather than sung. The last part will be called the chorus. But before I proceed to discuss the sections, a brief comment on the quality of voice used by the langkône in performing the langni will be worthwhile.

In all vocal performances, the Dagaaba have a predilection for a highly tensed voice quality with a tinge of nasality. This quality is achieved when the singer adopts a falsetto style of singing whereby tone production is concentrated in the head. With a slight constriction of the larynx in a higher pitch coupled with a subtle vibration of the nasal cavity, the desirable tensed nasal tone quality is generated. A person is said to have sung sweetly (yieelu vula) when he or she can project the voice in a sustained high pitch to crystallize the required vocal quality. A vocal performance that lacks that nasal quality is unappreciated, and is described as u beveele (unattractive) or yieelu faa (bad singing). To enable the langkône to perform the langni with the desired vocal quality, the lead xylophonist usually establishes a tonal center that would place the langkône’s voice in a high range. Most of the time, thus, the slat around which the langkône orients his singing is either the second or third highest pitched of the gyil.

The Wept-Sung Section

The performance of the langni begins with the wept-sung section which comprises some short melodic patterns used as greetings to the deceased person.
In the greetings, the performer also declares his willingness to eulogize the dead person. The greetings involve specific statements that indicate the langkône’s relationship with the deceased. When there is a kinship relationship between the langkône and the deceased, the greetings involves kinship terms such as *saa* (father), *ma* (mother), and *ma bie* (mother’s child) among others. If there is no kinship relation, the langkône shouts the general emotional outcry *woi!* (alas!) several times to signal the beginning of the performance. The most common greetings used by the langkône includes the following:

**Woi! Woi! Woi!**

Meaning “alas! alas! alas!”, this is a common sensational expression used in greeting the deceased when there are no kinship ties between the langkône and the dead person. Goody (1962:98) refers to this as “a cry of general applicability.” For the remainder of our discussions here, thus, the term “cry of general applicability” will be used in reference to this form of greeting.

**N’ Saa Woi!**

This means “alas! my father”, and the langkône uses that as greetings for a deceased person who belongs to his (the langkône) own paternal lineage. Sometimes the phrase is also used for a member of the langkône’s father’s maternal relatives. The Dagaaba perceives any matrilineal relative of his father, man or woman, as “father”, hence the langkône’s use of the same greetings for them (Saighoe, 1988:201).

**M’ Ma Woi!**

Meaning “alas! my mother!”, the langkône uses this greeting for his mother (whether the biological mother or step-mother). The same greeting is used for other senior women of the langkône’s matriclan.

**M’ Ma Bie Woi!**

“Alas! my mother’s child!” is used for members of the langkône’s mother’s relatives if the deceased is of the same or younger generation than the langkône. This greeting is also applicable to both male and female members of the maternal lineage.

**Gandaa Woi!**

“Alas! strongman!”, is used in greeting an elderly man who has lived his life to the fullest. Such are the individuals that the langkône eulogizes.

In addition to these forms, there are other greetings that indicate the affective relationship between the langkône and the deceased. **N’ Sen Woi!** (Alas!
my lover!) and *M’ Ha Woi*! (Alas! my friend!) may be used by the langkône as greetings for a dead woman he was very fond of, or who was a close friend.

Technically, the wept-sung greetings are one of the two aspects of the langni that have some semblance of a melody. The other segment that is also quite melodious is the chorus. The number of pitches to which the words in the wept-sung greetings are articulated ranges between two and three, depending on a particular greeting the langkône performs. In the cry of general applicability, the words –woi! woi! woi! —are sung to three pitches as shown in figure 4.1 below. It should be noted, however, that the transcribed pitches are only approximations and not exactly as the langkône intones them. In real performance terms, these pitches could be quite indistinctive, depending on who is singing them. Again, each note—except the last one—is prolonged beyond the duration represented here, since the langkône wails each of them to make the performance more mournful.

![Figure 5.1: Cry of general applicability.](image)

The other greetings such as *N’ Saa Woi* (Alas, my father!) or *M’ Ma Woi* (Alas, my mother!), are sung to two pitches as illustrated below.

![Figure 5.2: Greetings indicating kinship ties](image)

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30 All unattributed transcriptions by the author.
Likewise, *M’ Ma Bie Woi* (Alas, my mother’s child!) and *Gandaa Woi* (alas, strongman!) take on two pitches, except that the first notes are repeated according to the number of syllables as exemplified below:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{A} & \quad \text{B} \\
\begin{array}{c}
\text{M’ ma bie woi!} \\
\text{Gan daa woi!}
\end{array}
\end{align*}
\]

**Figure 5.3: Greetings indicating kinship and affective ties**

In singing the greetings, the word that establishes the relationship between the langkône and the deceased is sung to the higher pitch and the rest take on the lower pitches as shown in the above examples.

In any performance situation, variations may occur in the greetings, but it happens more so in the cry of general applicability—*woi! woi! woi!* After intoning *woi! woi! woi!* the langkône may follow up with other expressions such as *ayi ee; oyi ee*; and *ayee*, before proceeding to declaim other texts to the deceased (see figure 4.4 below). The langkône does so more especially when he wants to capture the attention of the audience to listen to what he has to say. The langkône may also use these varied expressions to buy time as he ponders on what to say to generate intense responses. When performing the greetings, the /i/ sound in each *woi* receives emphasis in the articulation only in the last one. That is, in the first two *woi* shouts, /i/ is not articulated. It occurs only in the last *woi*, and the voice is made to glide into it, making it sound more wailed than sung.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{A} & \quad \text{B} \\
\begin{array}{c}
\text{A yi yei!} \\
0 \text{ yi yei!}
\end{array}
\end{align*}
\]

**Figure 5.4: Variations in the Cry of General Applicability**
After the greetings have been sung, they repeatedly appear in the recitation section. A member of the chorus group may use these greetings to punctuate the recitations by the langkône to underscore provocative statements made. The langkône also shouts them at some points as breathers, but more importantly, as interjectory elements that help to connect his ideas and declarations which otherwise would sound incoherent or unrelated.

*The Recitation Section*

After performing the greetings and gaining the attention of the audience, for the rest of the performance, the langkône declaims words to whom it may concern (the deceased, bereaved, ancestral lineage, etc.). This part forms what I term as the recitation section. The same voice quality used in performing the greetings is employed for the recitation, only that, this time the pitches to which the words are declaimed have no feel of a melody. The pitches are guided by the speech tones of the words. Hence, the recitation does not stay on the same level all the time. It rises and falls according to the speech contours of the words. However, any perception of a melody is challenging, and it is this quality of indeterminate pitches that sets the langni apart from other Dagaaba songs. The quality of a langkône’s performance is also judged by the substance of his messages. The more interesting the lyrics are, the more it moves people, and therefore, the stronger the enthusiasm he creates in the entire funeral performance. Lyrics declaimed with emotional intensity at the right point in time animate the funeral atmosphere since it generates an equally intense emotional response from other musicians, mourners, and sympathizers. Because the recitation lacks
melodic intonation, its musical interest lies in its rhythmic organization. The ensuing paragraphs, therefore, will briefly look at how the recitation is rhythmically organized to fit in the core structure of the accompanying instruments.

**Rhythmic Organization**

It may be recalled from chapter three that the kuurbine music of which the langni forms part is dance music, and kuurbine itself is divided into three sections: piira, deegaar, and bilangni. Apart from the piira which is solely instrumental and features only the lead xylophonist, the remaining two sections are played by the entire ensemble, which includes the langni. Except for the piira, which is freer in time and tempo, the rest have their rhythms organized so that they impart a feeling of a regularity of beat that can be articulated in bodily movements. The rhythmic organization includes various recurring linear patterns distributed among the kuor drummer and gyilkpaorε (supporting xylophonist), and upon which the lead xylophonist (gɔbaa) superimposes his improvisations. In both deegaar and bilangni, the rhythms are organized in a fixed cycle of twelve pulses, and the characteristic regularity of the cycle forces each linear pattern to keep to the same time and tempo. Therefore, being a fabric of both deegaar and bilangni, the langni partakes in the rhythmic regularity of beat and strictness of tempo in the performance. All the sections of the langni—wept-sung greetings, recitation, and chorus—are organized in phrases conceived in relation to the fixed cycle established by the basic rhythms of the supporting xylophone and the kuor drum, as illustrated in figure 4.5. As noted in chapter three, the Dagaaba refer to the
supportive pattern of the xylophone as *kpagru*, a term which literally means “to support.” In the following transcriptions, thus, all parts labelled as kpagru refers to the rhythms of the supportive xylophone.

**Degaar**

![Degaar Rhythms](image)

**Bilangni**

![Bilangni Rhythms](image)

**Figure 5.5: Degaar and Bilangni basic rhythms.**

Within this framework, the langkône, when performing the recitation, organizes his ideas into verbal units that may fit within the length of the rhythmic cycle. Let us, for instance, consider how a langkône may express the following praise text to fit the rhythmic cycle of *degaar*: *Nikpee nyi na bare* (a great one is gone); *a yiri long daa daa* (the house has fallen forever)\(^{31}\).

---

\(^{31}\) As already mentioned in our discussions on praise dirges, this text is performed to eulogize the contributions of an elderly man to his household, emphasizing the hardships that lies ahead for members of the family whose economic livelihood depends on him. Because it laments the havoc that the death is supposed to bring on the household, the text is classified as *degaar*, which differs from *bilangni* texts that are more lively and deal with a wide range of topics.
While in the above example, the verbal phrase fits well into the cycle, it does not occur always. Sometimes, overlaps arise depending on the number of syllables or words in a verbal phrase articulated by the langköne as well as the internal rhythmic motion of the words. Let us consider, for instance, the following non-praise dirge text, and how that may be articulated within the basic rhythm of *bilangi*: *Tiero fo tiere, nir za be bang baar’e* (deep you are in thoughts, yet, the ignorant insults you). It must be noted that some of the words spin over the present rhythmic cycle into the next.

From the foregoing, thus, the length of the verbal phrase may not always be confined to the boundaries of the rhythmic cycle. The verbal phrase may be longer or even shorter depending upon the number of words that may express a
particular idea. It may, thus, be plausible to infer that for the langkône, the rhythmic cycle of the accompanying instruments merely serves as a standard phrase length which he may manipulate to suit the length of the verbal idea he expresses as well as the internal speech rhythms of the text. At the same time, however, this manipulation is guided by the constraints of the rhythmic regularity and tempo of the instrumental accompaniment.

**Interpolations**

To generate more excitement as the langkône chants his text within the rhythmic framework described above, there is always a member of the chorus group who interpolates the langkône’s recitations to either encourage him or emphasizes some evocative statements made. There is no Dagaare term for such an individual. Hence, I will refer to him as an assistant langkône. The assistant langkône assumes a critical role that ensures that the addressees to whom the langkône’s declarations are being made, and who are preoccupied with other aspects of the funeral ceremony, are called to attention. The most obvious interpolations made by the assistant langkône are derived from the cry of general applicability—woi! woi! woi! These are the same sounds used by the langkône to greet the deceased and declare his intent to perform the langni. To make the interpolations more dramatic, the assistant langkône presents a varied form of the cry of general applicability. In doing so, he omits /w/ and enunciates only the /o/ sound in the first two of the words, retaining /w/ only in the last, as exemplified below:
To make the sound above distinctly wailful, the assistant deliberately emphasizes the /u/ sound by prolonging it. That is, shortly after enunciating /o/ in a strong accent, he then glides into /u/ to create a kind of diphthong (i.e. /ou/). In performance, thus, the figure 4.8 above would actually sound more like the following:

Since the assistant’s role is to draw people’s attention to the messages declared by the langkõne, sometimes he uses more specific words as interpolations instead of the sounds quoted above. The assistant, thus, may shout fo ye na! (listen to that), requesting the attention of the individual or group to whom the message is meant. When the langkõne says something about the deceased and it is an apt statement that describes the latter’s lifestyle and achievements, the assistant may shout yelminga! yelminga! (truly! truly!) to underscore that point. In other times, he may repeat a statement made by the langkõne for purposes of emphasis. Apart from the /ou/ sound in figure 4.9 above that has a tinge of melodic interest, the rest of the interpolations by the assistant are also lacking melodically.
The Chorus

The chorus section comprises a short melodic pattern sung by a group of men as a response to the langkône’s declamations. Like the wept-sung greetings, the chorus has some melodic sense. The chorus, in its standard form, comprises three pitches as illustrated in figure 4.10 below:

![Figure 5.10: The chorus in its standard form.](image)

The chorus usually sings in a deep voice, hence, the use of the F clef for the transcription shown above. The men sing approximately an octave below the pitch level at which the langkône declaims his messages. The contrast in the register is intended to bring into focus the declamations of the langkône, which sounds high and tense above the low response of the chorus.

Anytime the langkône finishes a phrase, the chorus responds with the melodic pattern transcribed above. However, at times, variations occur in the singing due to a couple of factors. The chorus (and even the entire funeral ensemble) is not a formally organized group. Adult males who attend funerals spontaneously gather around the instrumental ensemble to offer support in the performance of the dirges. This lack of formality in the organization is reflected in the way the standard chorus phrase is sung. Most significantly, not all the men can sing an octave lower of the langkône’s register because it may be too low for them. Therefore, uncomfortable for their vocal ranges, those concerned transpose or shift the melodic phrase some steps above the lower range. The most common
shift occurs four steps above the lower range, and that creates some parallel progression in the chorus as shown below:

![Figure 5.11: The chorus in multiple voice ranges](image)

While the pattern above may be generated due to differences in the voice ranges, in performance, they sound more heterophonic than parallel. The heterophony arises because each person may give his own rendition of the standard pattern. When that occurs, several variations are heard at once. Some individuals may alter the contour of the melodic phrase and introduce additional pitches to make it more tuneful. Others may also change the rhythmic patterns by breaking down some of the long notes to increase the rhythmic density. Figure 4.12 (A and B) shows how the standard phrase may be melodically and rhythmically altered.

![Figure 5.12: Variations of the chorus.](image)

Sometimes other singers of the chorus virtually wail the melody instead of sing. Those who wail the melody are the individuals who have some level of affinal or friendship relations with the deceased. By their closeness to the deceased, such persons are also affected by the occurrence of death and, hence, in the performance of the langni, they tend to wail their phrases, particularly in
response to an emotive outburst by the langkône. Those who wail their phrases
tend to expand the range of the standard phrase both upwards and downwards.
Because of the wail, their initial pitch may start from three or four steps higher
than the first note of the standard phrase as if to scream off the anguish in their
hearts caused by the death. As they sing on, they are subdued by this same
anguish so that their energies are temporarily depleted, and they drop to the lowest
level of their voices, going beyond the lowest pitch in the standard phrases and
thereby expanding the range of the entire chorus melody. On the contrary,
members of the chorus who are there as sympathizers and observing the protocol
of transiting the deceased to the hereafter, and to lend emotional and
psychological support to the bereaved, sing their phrases. In so doing, they are
mostly able to maintain the strictness of time and tempo of the rhythm which,
otherwise, would be blurred by those who wail their phrases.

**Performing Emotions**

Having discussed the lyrical contents, mode of performance, and some of
the structural features of the langni, I will now consider the various emotional
responses it generates in the funeral ceremony. As it may occur in other ritual
contexts, emotions expressed in Dagaaba funerals are conventional since they are
socially expected and may not necessarily reflect the individual’s personal
feelings towards the death that has occurred. Nevertheless, the Dagaaba argue that
the quality of the kuurbine music and more so the words of the langni can
stimulate intense reactions in individuals, such that an expression that may begin
as a ritually required action may metamorphose into a profound experience as the
music unfolds. Also, people who may not feel the urge to express the expected emotions would be moved into doing so when touched by the music. When the music deeply affects the individual, reactions are embodied in some particular cultural codes. These comprise wailing (kyelnye) and dancing (yawr).

In the funerary context, the Dagaaba speak of being emotionally moved by the langni with the axiom a langni kpen nzi poɔ, meaning, “the dirge has entered deeply into one’s bones.” For the langni to stimulate people into action, the Dagaaba say that it must be felt to the core (wokpe nena). Hence, the most appreciated performance is the one that carries with it certain qualities that generate a wide range of profound feelings in people. Evoking deep feelings through the langni involves several factors of which some have been mentioned already. To reiterate, the lyrics must emphasize the pathos of the occasion by lamenting the qualities of the deceased and the havoc that his or her death would cause the community and more specifically the bereaved. In the circumstances of “bad deaths”, the non-praise dirges must ignite guilt or shame among the bereaved, individuals or the entire community whose actions or inactions resulted in the death. The voice (kɔkɔr) used in articulating the lyrics must also embody the highly tensed nasal tone quality for which the Dagaaba have a predilection. When a performance embodies this quality, the langkône’s voice is said to be emotionally inducing (kɔkɔr ne baaro) and auditorily captivating (nome yaga). As one interviewee remarked, “a good lamenting voice is enough to set one’s emotions ablaze on any funerary occasion” (Interview Yiryella, Konyunga. 12.28.12).
Since the langni forms part of the kuurbine music, and kuurbine itself is a danceable genre, the accompanying instruments must also carry certain qualities that would move people into dancing. That is, the tempo of the entire performance must “walk well” (*u kyere ne vula*), meaning, it must be rhythmically steady. For the Dagaaba, the tempo is not just speed. It is a quality, something that defines the character of the music. Therefore, in every performance, tempo fluctuation is strongly despised. A performance that is unstable in tempo is termed as *u in fanfan*, meaning, “not beat-steady.” Hardly would any such performance incite the dance tendencies in people. On a general level, however, when the instrumental rhythms “walk well”, the lyrics are apt for the death being mourned, and the voice used in articulating the lyrics is charming, the music becomes emotionally persuasive. It “enters deeply into one’s bones” (*kpen nzi poɔ*). When that happens, the individual wails or dances to the music.

The emotions displayed in response to the music, therefore, operate in a manner similar to what Magowan (2007:71) refers to as “performative emotions”\(^32\) in that they are publicly recognized expression of sentiment, channeled in some culturally specific ways. These responses may be distinguished from personal feelings expressed outside ritual contexts since they are regulated by the context and proceedings of the funeral. As I will soon demonstrate, when

\(^{32}\text{Building upon the concept of performative utterances outlined by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), and a subsequent application of this concept by Tambiah (1968, 1973, 1979), Magowan (2007) adopts the concept of “performative emotions” in her study of Yolngu funerary rituals to examine how the Yolngu, through musical performances at the funeral, experience emotional transformation, and how the performances are structured to achieve certain effects. She observes that emotions performed in Yolngu funeral ceremonies function like performative utterances espoused by Austin and Searle for the reason that they do not merely describe people’s emotive states of being but feelings are manifest and transformed in their display.}\)
an individual—especially from the bereaved family—bursts into wailing or dancing in response to a langni, the rest of the gathering must join the action for the procedure to be effective. This relates to the communally held belief that dispatching the soul of the deceased to the hereafter requires a collective participation and not the efforts of a single individual. In the following, I will examine these forms of responses to the langni, highlighting the conventional procedures they follow as well as the general effects they are intended to achieve. The order of presentation here does not imply that the responses occur in a certain specific order. They are being presented in this sequence only because of limitations imposed by narration.

**Wailing (Kyelnye)**

As the langköne’s highly pitched, tensed nasal voice touts the accomplishments of the deceased or laments the consternation and anguish the death has created, persons that are afflicted most by the death burst into wailing as a response to the performance. This act characterizes as well as validates the extent of the loss to the individuals concerned. People that often respond to the langni in this way are the kotuodeme—the closest kin to the deceased. These include parents, children, spouse, and siblings among others. They are presumed to lose most by the death and, thus, are easily stimulated into action when their bereavement is highlighted in the langni.\(^{33}\) When responding to the langni, the individual wails *woi! woi! woi!* (alas! alas! alas!) just as the langköne does in the

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\(^{33}\) It would be recalled from chapter three that in every funeral ceremony the *kotuodeme* are easily identified since, per the demand of custom and tradition, they are secured with fiber, hide, twine or string in the waist, ankles, wrists or necks.
opening greetings to the deceased. In its daily usage, the word *woi* may be deployed as an exclamation of pleasure, surprise or strong feeling towards something. Therefore, it functions similarly to the English exclamation "wow" often used to express a range of emotions or as a reaction to something. In the funerary context, however, it serves as a mournful outcry, and its vocalization depicts the extent to which the person has been affected by the specific thing (in this case the music) to which he or she reacts.

Because wailing centers on the emotional outcry *woi*! and the amount of energy exerted in its execution is stronger, it can subtly be differentiated from the “normal” crying required as part of the ritual act. The ritual crying, as demanded by Dagaaba funerary custom, covers a wide spectrum of expressions ranging from silent flow of tears to moans and sighs. Wailing, on the other hand, involves a distress vocalization of the word *woi* (alas!), emitted on a very high-pitched tone as a tangible evidence of one’s inward feelings towards the death being mourned, which has been made possible by the poignancy of the accompanying music. When the music "deeply enters one’s bones", the person responds by exclaiming several "wois!" in quick succession. In so doing, the wailer causes others to experience the anguish reverberating through his or her voice. The emotionality required of the occasion, then, is brought into fruition as other people join in the wailing.

Whereas both men and women may wail *woi* in response to the music, there are some structural differences regarding how the vocalization is performed. Firstly, the tone and the level of the pitch at which the wailing is performed differs among men and women. Women, by their thin voices wail in a much ear-piercing
pitch than the men. However, they all rise and fall in pitch as the wailing ensues.
Also, the intensity and the number of the word woi uttered in a sequence differs in men and women’s wailing. In a rhythmic sense, the men usually elongate the /o/ sound in woi, hence, producing a few sequences of the word in a single wailing phrase. In contrast, the women wail woi in a short-short fashion, hence uttering many of them in a single wailing phrase. That also creates some rhythmic density in the inner motion of the word sequence. Sometimes, audible gaps and breath inhalations also become consistent stylistic feature of women’s wailing. After emitting several woi in a fast sequence, they lose their breadth, and hence, systematically insert some gaps at the end of every phrase to gather momentum for the next.

Wailing responses to the langni are always not without a spectacle. Some individuals, when moved by the music wail with the moderate and elegant rocking of the body and the head. Such people may slowly pace right and left, forward and backward as they like. They may also break into a half run towards the corpse as if to question the deceased for leaving loved ones behind. These acts are all meant to convey the individual’s anguish to the entire gathering, which in turn inspires many people to join in the wailing. Other persons, especially, those close to the deceased are more dramatic in their wailing. While the musicians perform, they may run up and down in front of the compound, and holding their hands behind the nape of their neck in the accepted manner of grief, perform the wailing. Sometimes, the person may break into a trot, even a full run. When that happens, a bystander must intercept him or her to prevent the individual from causing harm to himself or herself. When the music deepens an individual’s grief, they can be so
violent, running to and fro, and hence, must be restrained from harming themselves.

Occasionally, the individual moved by the music goes to the musicians to offer them money in appreciation of their performance. After offering them the money, the person stands in front of the musicians with outstretched hands and open palms and wails profusely to indicate how the music has reminded him of his vulnerability. When the person is in that posture, an intense emotional chain reaction is set into motion. The instrumentalists become more animated in their playing, the langkône declaims his messages with more vigor, the chorus responds loudly, and many people join in the wailing, running to and fro on the compound. Since the action is also perceived as a request for donations, sympathizers give money to the person. That money eventually goes to the musicians, and it is shared among the lead xylophonist, kuor drummer, and langkône.

**Dance (Yawr)**

This aspect of the performance is more a direct response to the accompanying instruments than the langni lyrics itself. As the wailing gathers momentum and gains intensity, and the performers run to and fro, one of them may break into a dance to momentarily relieve himself or herself from intense grieving. When that occurs, people of the same sex as the dancer join in the performance. The closer the kinship ties one has to the person who first initiates the dancing, the stronger one feels obligated to participate in the dance. That is, when for instance, a man breaks into dancing, all the men belonging to his lineage must join the dance, and the same applies to the women. Once introduced, dancing
then becomes a constant spectacle and an integral part of the ceremony instead of being an intermittent response to the music. I must, however, reiterate the point that dancing occurs mostly in the funerals of old men and women who have accomplished something in life. In young people’s funeral, mourners usually wail to the music for longer hours and dancing is rarely performed. For the elderly, however, dancing becomes a great spectacle, a means of showing the quality of life one lived. As soon as the dance is initiated, the large part of the funeral becomes celebratory, and the music turns out to be festive, contrasting with the tense and mournful lyrics performed in the funerals of young people. Men and women perform different dance moves. Both sexes form separate files and dance towards where the corpse is seated. When they get close enough to the body, they break off, and each dancer retires to his or her sitting place. This pattern is repeated as long as people are motivated by the music to do so.

From all that has been said so far, the intensity of emotional expressions during the funeral is contingent upon the music that accompanies the ceremony. A good langkône wins in emotional appeal by moving his audience. The nature of the dirges he performs are also contingent upon several factors: the social status, importance and popularity of the deceased and the bereaved family. The emotionality displayed in the funeral could also be complex since there could be shifts in affective meanings as the ceremony unfolds. At one point, people may express intense grief, and as the ceremony progresses, the intense mourning transitions into a celebration of life, as it often happens in the funerals for the aged.
CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS

In this dissertation, I have endeavored to describe, examine, and interpret some aspects of Dagaaba musical culture. The funeral has been the primary unit of analysis, with the gyil and the music it is used to perform for the funeral serving as a point of reference. Following the Dagaaba people’s claim that without the performance of kuurbine music in their funeral ceremonies, “there is no funeral, no grief, and no death” (Somé, 1994:59), this study set out to address the following: How unique is kuurbine music among other musical forms in contemporary Dagaaba society? What is its role in Dagaaba funerals, and what exceptional qualities does kuurbine music possess that lends itself so peerless in moving Dagaaba funeral participants to action? Searching for answers to these questions, the general aim of the study was to examine the nature and purpose of music in Dagaaba funerary rituals, factoring into the narrative the processes by which certain indigenous music forms become invested with emotions and, therefore, meaning. Having discussed in detail the organization and performance of Dagaaba funerals and the place of music in the ceremonies, in this chapter I will summarize the salient points about Dagaaba predilection for kuurbine music in their funeral ceremonies.

The discussions in the preceding chapters all feed into providing some answers to questions on the significance of kuurbine music in the funeral. However, the answers can be summarized in two basic points. The first point is that kuurbine music embodies the very essence of mourning in Dagaaba society,
which is particularly evident in the vocal component of the music. The dirges chanted during kuurbine performances comprise highly patterned verbal statements that are affective in intent and production. As described in chapter five, the dirge singer, langkône, blends linguistic virtuosity with music to produce an irresistible expressive force that stimulates people into intense display of emotions. Inspired by the pathos of the occasion, the langkône crafts the experience of grief, sensing of loss, and the sorrow of parting into an expressive art form which, when chanted in a highly-tensed voice, becomes too strong to be resisted by the funeral participants. To state this colloquially, people just burst into crying upon hearing a quality langni (dirge), or even get angry at death itself for whisking their loved ones away. Those unable to withstand the poignancy of the dirges run hither and thither to demonstrate the extent to which they have been affected by the death. Dagaaba dirge performers are aware of the capacity of their music to evoke deep responses from the funeral participants, hence, they know what to say or when to declaim a langni that will stir up people’s emotions. Every chanter attempts to lay emphasis on the loss by relating the contributions of the deceased to the enhancement of his or her personal life and to the development of the community. By praising the achievements of the deceased, they put the community of mourners into a certain frame of mind so that when the vacuum that the death has created is lamented in the dirges, they evoke appropriate levels of responses from them. In that regard, the music is central in stimulating as well as shaping both personal and group behavior in the funeral.

The second point is that, kuurbine music validates and legitimizes the Dagaaba funeral as a communal event, precisely because of the gyil. The use of
the gyil for the funeral is so crucial among the Dagaaba due to certain musical rationalizations and cultural meanings ascribed to the instrument. The Dagaaba maintain that the funeral of a deceased person is the final episode of his or her entire life and existence on earth, hence, it must be accompanied by their most revered instrument. The reverence ascribed to the gyil emanates from its mystical origins, a phenomenon discussed in chapter two. Believed to have originated from the *kontobili*—spiritual beings of the wild—it is held that the gyil has a supernatural power that lends the Dagaaba the ability to mourn, and to guide the spirits of their dead to the hereafter. The gyil and its music also symbolizes the community’s endorsement of a deceased person as being worth celebrating. The playing of the gyil enables the chanting of the dirges. Though the dirges are so significant for their affect, they cannot be performed without the gyil, and it is these musical forms that sanction a funeral as a communal affair. Beyond endorsing the funeral as a public event, the gyil is particularly valued for its ability to communicate messages to people within the funerary context. For the Dagaaba, the gyil can and does “speak”, and for those who understand its language, it is the impetus for rousing them for action and enabling them to show their sentiments towards the death. When a person dies in a community, it is communicated to the inhabitants through the gyil. Thus, the title of the dissertation, *When the Gyil “Speaks”: Music, Emotions, and Performance in Dagaaba Funeral Ceremonies*, was chosen in reflection of this important aspect of gyil music in Dagaaba society. The question of how the gyil speaks and how people derive meanings when it speaks were examined in chapter four. Situated within the larger context of instrumental speech surrogates in Africa, I showed how speech surrogates in gyil
playing among the Dagaaba is both a literal process of encoding syllables and phrases into musical sound, and as a ritual language that involves a complex strategy of communication that constitutes deep knowledge in Dagaaba society.

In discussing music and emotions in Dagaaba funeral ceremonies, two interrelated theoretical points can be established. The first point is that, emotional expressions in Dagaaba funeral ceremonies are not just normative or customary behaviors mandated by tradition, but involve deeply-felt sentiments made possible by music. This is particularly evident in the indigenous aesthetic terminologies such as wokpe nena (to feel to the core), and kpen nzi poɔ (to enter deep into one’s bones), among a few others, employed by the Dagaaba to describe their feelings towards music in the funeral. When the music “enters deeply into one’s bones”, it enables him or her to feel the pathos of the occasion, which often leads to an intensive wailing and other expressive behaviors. It is not uncommon to see individual mourners running to and fro when a song moves them. Such individuals must be chased after by people to prevent them from causing harm to themselves. However, that is not to deny the fact that expressive acts, especially wailing or crying, in the funeral follow certain obligations borne out of the Dagaaba belief system. As noted in chapter three, the elaborate mourning ceremonies held by the Dagaaba are the means by which the living strives to effect harmony with the dead. The Dagaaba believe that death marks the end of only the bodily existence of an individual. The spirit of a dead person is believed to live on in another world called dapaarewie (i.e. the world of ancestors), and the funeral effects the transition of the spirit to that world. To enable a successful transition, enough tears must be produced to form an imaginary stream of tears.
through which the spirit of the deceased swims into the otherworld, hence, the obligations placed on wailing, crying, sobbing, or weeping. Nonetheless, this study has shown in several ways that emotions are not only conventionally expressed in the Dagaaba funeral; they are felt as well. Music functions as an important affective mechanism that enables the funeral participants to react to the occasion of death with intense emotions, and from the few Dagaare evaluative terms mentioned above, the participants actually feel what they express.

The second theoretical point is that, the intensity of emotional expression in the Dagaaba funeral, facilitated by music, results in increased involvement in the collective practices that take place at the funeral and the shared beliefs expressed in the ritual space. Actively participating in the funeral affects people’s dedication and allegiance to the community in which the death has occurred, and ultimately strengthens social integration and bonds within the community. This claim is consistent with other claims on the functionality of emotions in rituals by various scholars such as Durkheim (1965[1915]), Turner (1967), Tambiah (1985), Michaels and Wulf (2012), and more particularly Knottnerus (2010). In his essay, "Collective Events, Rituals, Emotions" (2010), David Knottnerus addresses the issue of how events such as religious ceremonies, ethnic festivals, political rallies, military celebrations, and weddings etc., operate and influence people’s emotional states and commitment to a group. He argues that, “the greater the emotional state or feelings experienced by actors in ritual events, the greater [is] their commitment to and, therefore, integration within the group” (2010:4). Building upon a body of theory that examines the role social interaction plays in rituals, Knottnerus (2010) proposes four factors that are crucial in engendering intensive
emotions in collective events. The first is “shared focus of attention”, which refers to the degree of attention participants in collective events direct to certain objects. The second, “interactional pace”, refers to the degree to which actors are engaged in a sequence of interconnected acts and how those acts recur or are repeated. It also involves a rhythmic motion which determines the degree physical movements in the interaction recur in a uniform manner. The third, “interdependence of actors”, deals with how various participants in the ritual rely on one another to achieve emotional experiences. The fourth and last is “resources”, both human and non-human, needed to facilitate social interaction amongst actors in the collective ritual events.

As shown especially in chapters three, four, and five, these four factors outlined by Knottnerus (2010) are reflective of the Dagaaba funeral. First, music provides a shared focus of attention for the funeral participants. To reiterate a point already made, the success of Dagaaba funeral is gauged by the intensity of emotional display by the various actors in the ritual space. Since people depend mostly on the kuurbine music to externalize their feelings towards the occasion, the music becomes the focus of attention, “the very terms of existence from which all else flows” (Friedson, 2009:8). Also, the more animated the musical performance, the more it generates a meshwork of socio-musical interaction within the ritual space. If someone from the bereaved family bursts into wailing, other members from the lineage as well as non-relatives who are there to support the occasion join in the wailing. A wailing by an individual often translates into a communal affair since communal involvement in matters of death is always the focus of the funeral. Likewise, when someone from the bereaved family initiates a
dance in response to the music, people join in. The dancing always occurs in a line with the individual that initiated the dance in front. Those that follow, dance in uniform with the person leading the line. Malidoma Somé offers some explanation to this practice: "it is understood in the ritual that the feeling of the person in front of the line will be transmitted to every person as they dance together in one line. This sharing of personal feeling is a form of silent and physical support to the person grieving" (1997:83). There is also interdependence among the musicians and other participants of the funeral ceremony. While the mourners and sympathizers rely on the musicians for the display of emotions, the musicians also rely on them for efficiency of performance. The performance becomes intense when the emotional responses are intense. In essence, the musicians and the mourning community in general, within the ritual space, live in a kind of feedback loop (see Shannon, 2003) where each ‘party’ influences the other to achieve emotional intensity. Finally, the musical instruments—gyil and drum, and the musicians form the important resources needed for effective social interaction among the funeral participants. In fact, all activities at the funeral centers around the musicians and the instruments they play.
APPENDIX—GROSSARY OF DAGAARE TERMS

The following is the list of Dagaare words used in this work. These words, as listed here, are without tonal markings. Therefore, many of them could mean different things depending on the tonal contour in their pronunciations.

Ayiee: songs
Baa: a dog
Baaro: sorrow
Bagbugre: a diviner; divination specialists.
Bagrugure: a grave digger.
Bewaa: literally means “come together”; it is the name given to the gyil recreational repertoire and dance for the youth.
Bilangni: the third section of the funeral music cycle.
Bie: a child or children.
Beveele: unattractive; ugly.
Buulo: a wrist band to which bells are attached and worn by a xylophonist.
Daa: a male.
Daga-gyil: a seventeen or eighteen key xylophone.
Dagawie: the land of the Dagaaba, both inhabited and uninhabited.
Dansu: praise poetry performed by women.
Dapaarewie: the spiritual world; the dwelling place of the dead.
Deblu: melodies played on the xylophone to announce the death of a man in a community.
Degaar: the second section of the funeral music cycle.
Deghr: dirt.
Dendɔmɔ: an enemy.
Doro: a right-handed person.
Faa: bad.
Gaa: a flexible wood used to connect the four poles of the xylophone frame.
Gandaa: a strong man.
Gyil: xylophone.
Gyilɔɔre: xylophone mallets.
Gyilɔgan: a hard rope from a leaf-less creeping plant used in tying the gourd resonators of the xylophone.
Gyilɔgɔrmin: xylophone shrine.
Gyilɔmaale: a xylophone maker.
Gyilɔmaa: literally means “the mother of the xylophone slats”; it is the name given to the lowest pitched bass slat.
Gyilɔngmiere: a xylophonist.
Gyilkpaɔre: a xylophonist that plays a supportive role in ensemble performance.
Gyilkpiiru: a ritual performed to cleanse a newly constructed
xylophone.

**Gyil-per:**
the lower end of the xylophone; i.e. the part of the keyboard that contains the high-pitched slats.

**Gyil-tii:**
xylophone medicine.

**Gyilzane:**
xylophone learner.

**Gyil-zu:**
the higher end of the xylophone; i.e. the part of the keyboard that contains the bass or lower-pitched slats.

**Goba:**
a left-handed person.

**Gɔbaa:**
master of the xylophone.

**Ha**
a friend.

**Kambuur**
the reside of a shea butter. It is used in the funeral to ritually cleanse the corpse.

**Kontobili:**
fairies; dwarflike beings of the wild.

**Kontonteg:**
the dwelling place of the fairies.

**Kɔkɔ:**
voice; specifically, the singing voice.

**Kukur/kuri-kuri:**
farming hoe.

**Kukur-na:**
literally means “master of the farming hoe”; chief farmer.

**Kомуoro:**
laums.

**Kõne:**
cry or to cry.

**Katuosobo:**
a chief mourner; the person who oversees the burial and funeral rites for a deceased member of the family.

**Kotuodeme:**
close relatives of a deceased person.

**Kuor:**
a gourd; also, the name for the gourd funeral drum.

**Kuormniri:**
the player of the funeral drum.

**Kuur:**
death; funeral.

**Kuurbine:**
funeral music; also, the dance that accompanies the music.

**Kuuryiri:**
a funeral messenger; a person sent to break the news of the death of a person to people especially in far distances.

**Kyelinky:**
to wail or wailing.

**Kyeeme:**
ankle bands with metals.

**Kpara:**
the recurring rhythmic patterns played by the supportive xylophonist.

**Kpara:**
a big smock.

**Kpen nzi poɔ:**
to enter deep into one’s bones.

**La pera:**
a socketed adze used to carve, shape, and trim the xylophone slats.

**Langny:**
funeral dirges.

**Lang yin:**
an innate musical aptitude.

**Langkɔne:**
a dirge singer.

**Ligaa:**
rosewood; the wood use for the xylophone slats.

**Lobrie:**
melodies played on the xylophone to announce the occurrence of death in a community.

**Lobr:**
spiritual medicines (pl. lobie).

**Lo-gyil:**
a fourteen-key xylophone.

**Maa**
mother.
Maa bie
a mother’s child.

Naamwin
God.

Ngme:
to play a musical instrument as, in ngme gyil—to play the xylophone.

Nikpes:
the ancestors.

Nupura:
Metal castanets worn on the fingers by dancers of the bewaa creational dance music.

Nuru:
recreational dance music for women; it is not instrumentally accompanied.

Nyaakpiin
a ghost.

Paala:
the stand on which dead bodies are displayed for mourning.

Paapir:
the white, smooth and flat material in a spider’s web that protects the eggs; this is used to cover holes bore into the xylophone gourd resonators for buzzing effects.

Piira:
warm-up exercise for xylophone players. It is the first section of the funeral music cycle.

Pito:
a potent beer brewed out of millet, guinea corn, or maize.

Pɔgnaa:
a woman chief; a derogatory remark for women who are considered headstrong.

Saa
father.

Semandem
groups of members of the same family that attends a funeral together in a community.

Susule:
hard wood used for the four poles of the xylophone frame.

Sie:
the spirit of a dead person.

Suobo:
a witch.

Suoboba:
a wizard.

Tamyyuur:
bow-string, used for hunting.

Tamyyuur-na:
an adept at handling the bow and arrow; a master huntsman.

Tengan:
the earth shrine

Tengan sob:
custodian of the earth shrine

Tengzu:
the physical world.

Tii tuo:
medicine for grave diggers

Vuur:
a stick used to stir food.

Vula:
good.

Wie:
farm.

Wokpe nena
to feel something deeply.

Wuofu:
the mandatory crying by bereaved families during funerals.

Yaga:
to taste very sweet.

Yangsɔb:
wisdom. It is also used for people endowed with great wisdom.

Yawr:
to dance.

Yila:
hard thin woods used as battens on which the xylophone gourd resonators are suspended.

Yiila:
one’s paternal clan.

Yieelu:
singing; to sing.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yieelu vula</td>
<td>to sing good; that is, to sing sweetly.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yidaando:</td>
<td>clan head.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yiri</td>
<td>a household.</td>
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