

My Music, My Language, My Identity; Traditional and Contemporary Music of the Dagbamba

Abdulai Salifu

Tamale Polytechnic, Box 3ER, Tamale, Ghana

Abstract. The paper seeks to examine traditional and contemporary Dagbamba music in Dagbamba personal and public identity. It is my goal to also analyze the various ingredients that go into the music played in this setting, and look at the social functions they play. I will argue that the two forms contrast only in style, but they do complement, rather than compete against or even conflict with each other.

This paper further juxtaposes the two broad genres (old and new¹) by doing diachronic and synchronic analysis of with the This then, is a diachronic and synchronic analysis of Dabamba music aim to arrive at common threads that connect these forms.

The two broad categories of music from Dagbanj shall be considered in this paper: *traditional "drum"*² (and fiddle), and pop music sung on the local scene in the Dagbanli language.

Key Words: music identity metaphor Dagbamba life

1. Introduction

One of the basic characteristics of African music, and indeed music in general, is that it is a metaphor of life, and mirrors the happenings in the society; a kind of 'Little Community', through whose eyes the larger society's worldview is encapsulated. An artist in many instances uses his/her art to reference a certain identity he/she wishes to be associated with. The Dagbamba musician selects his

¹ These new musical forms have lyrics in the Dagbanli language, and make use of electronic instruments, rather than the hour glass drum or horse haired fiddles, and are often engineered in studios.

² By this I mean the musical traditions passed down from centuries of the ethnic group's history, and identified as Dagbamba rhythms. These are the tunes David Locke (1990) has collected in his *Master Drummers of Dagbanj*. Music and history are thus tied together.

material from the general corpus of cultural material, and then uses that as a slice through which he addresses societal issues. Redfield (1955) and Geertz (1973) search for clarity and understanding of the methods by which the ways of small communities can be described, with the ultimate goal of linking the (little community's) description to that of the larger (human) community, re-echoing the part-whole schema. As cultural commentators and historians, Dagbamba drummers (called *lunsi*³) pursue a means of livelihood by drumming at functions and being rewarded by patrons; and also act as tradition bearers in their keeping of the oral histories of the ethnic group. Their craft is thus both an economic endeavor (on the macro level) and a cultural responsibility on the micro level. These two roles can be broadly seen as synchronic and diachronic, respectively. While their art meets their current economic needs, the drummers in keeping us abreast of what went by in previous epochs serve as living archives, and the collective memory of the populace. *Lunsi*⁴, and their craft (*luntali*), is a caste institution, but one does not have to belong to this caste to be a pop musician, as practised in contemporary times. The drummer is a tradition bearer, who blends theory and practice in his performance. The pop musician does not necessarily have to be clothed in traditional garb. They are more of entertainers and social commentators, and they complement the efforts of the *lunsi* drummer-musicians, as we shall see in the content of the work of either category of artist in my analysis.

A key question is, how does music function as a metaphor of Dagbamba life? Two broad categories of music from Dagbambɛ shall be considered in this paper: *traditional "drum"*⁵ (and fiddle), and pop music sung on the local scene in the Dagbanli

³ Their role is akin to that of the Maninka *jeli*, the Wolof *gewel*, the Fulbe *gawlo*, all of whom were bardic traditions that had contact with the royals of ancient Ghana and Mali empires.

⁴ Plural of *luŋa* literally 'dom dom beaters' players of dom dom, a Dagbamba traditional music instrument.

⁵ By this I mean the musical traditions passed down from centuries of the ethnic group's history, and identified as Dagbamba rhythms. These are the tunes David Locke (1990) has collected in his *Master Drummers of Dagbambɛ*. Music and history are thus tied together.

language. According to Blacking 1995: 224 there is a lot of improvisation that goes on in “folk” music, but yet still they maintain their “uniqueness” and African identity. This identity crystallized out of the people’s migratory as well as cultural histories. I borrow Blacking’s (ibid: 225) description of music as “... a human capability, as a species specific set of cognitive and sensory capacities...” How “Dagbanli⁶” in character is the new breed of music? How does this contemporary Dagbamba pop music bridge the generation gap, considering the youth’s propensity for improvisation of their rhythms with infusions from hip-hop, reggae, and Indian and Arabic melismatic vocal as well as instrumental styles? Are there any departures from the traditional norms and expectations? If there are any differences, do these differences communicate any message?

Ruth Stone in her introduction to the Garland Handbook of African Music (GHAM) aptly captures the centrality of music in African life, the proliferation of ethnic groups across the continent notwithstanding. Music serves as the magnet that attracts all people to events, private and public, sacred or secular, royal or common; and also provides social commentary. For this reason, African music tends to be holistic, and brings together the three aspects of the theatre arts – music, drama, and dance. Each tune celebrates a certain element of the society: rites de passage, success, spurring members on to victory, praise-singing, or glorifying Mother Nature herself. Music certainly performs these functions among Dagbamba.

1.1 About the Dagbamba

Dagbambas (also called Dagbamba) an ethnic group from the Gur language family of the Niger Congo language family, speak the Dagbanli (or Dagbanli) language. The kingdom (Dagban) dates back to the fifteenth century, with its early warrior equestrian ancestors coming into the present north eastern location in modern day Ghana, from the Chadic region. The Yaa Naa is the King and overlord of the Dagban nation, and he has an ensemble of musicians whose duty it is to praise as well as entertain him. Music and musicians are thus of paramount importance to

⁶ Refers to both the language, and culture of Dagbamba. In this case it is the culture

Dagbamba cosmology, because the King is at the core of the tradition, as he is the embodiment of the people's soul. The history of the Dagban nation is invariably tied to the political history⁷ of the Kingship.

2. Dagbamba Music and Folklore

Nineteenth century folklorists classified folk songs they collected using criteria that were extrinsic to the musical material itself, basing their classification on whether they thought the particular song fit into particular thematic categories, or could be used for certain motor functions. Twentieth century ethnomusicologists, according to Olivier and Riviere (2001: 480) paid attention to native classification discourse where the social function and circumstances of organization were key foci. This according to them shifted the emphasis away from the music material. This suggests situating music within a contextual frame, a kind of globule within which a musical performance may be analyzed or categorized. It is in this light that I shall be looking at the material presented in this paper. I do not intend to do an in-depth content analysis here, though, for that is the subject of another study I shall be undertaking.

Drum music is as much an old ossified form as it is a revolving living artistic form. I also argue that the so-called "modern" pop tunes are not recent creations of the youth. They have evolved from everyday musical expressions; forms that were typically used in the love songs, work songs, lullabies, laments, etc, that people sung from time immemorial. One thus sees a graying of the boundaries between the lunsu's craft and that which was created by 'non-lunsa' singers. John Collins (2002: 60) has this to say of this latter category,

Because recreational music and dance styles are continually open to generational change and modifications, it is from these, rather than the

⁷ A history of the Kings is synonymous with that of the people. See Martin Staniland (1975) for more details.

more conservative and slow-changing ritual and court performance, that so much of Ghana's acculturated or transculturated popular dance- music arose.

I agree with Collins to the extent that, Dagbamba expanded their repertory of musical rhythms over the few centuries prior to twentieth century British colonization, by incorporating rhythms from neighboring ethnic groups⁸ they came into contact with. I only hope by his use of the term "acculturated" he means the positive aspect of incorporation, and not the associative aspect of "debasement" an Ur-form, as many people are wont on believing. Older musical forms and themes were reanalyzed and expanded. English and the newly introduced Hausa and Akan languages became targets of emulation by local artists, who came out with hybrid art forms in *goonje and chilibua* (Hausa codemixed with Dagbanli), Highlife (Dagbanli mixed with Twi). *Simpa*⁹ as a recreational musical genre emerged as a liminal stage in the "transformation" of pop music in Dagbanli, with the youth of each village employing percussion instruments to compose their own songs which were sometimes abusive of rival groups, or trying to reproduce Congo jazz, Twi high life, or English pop tunes.

Umar Janda, a pop musician in his *Mandeeya* (track 5) mimes Indian musical style, and uses lyrics which when divorced from the song looks more of a sermon than secular music. His theme is that God is the greatest, and if we worship Him He will grant our requests.

2.1 Song.

cheliya ka ti doli o.

Let us follow Him

o nam sa@ila o ko

⁸ Dagbambas have tunes (called *waa* (*wahi* pl) 'dance') they call *Kambon* (Ashanti) *waa*, Mampur (Mamprusi) *waa*, Gurun (Grushi) *waa*, Kpunkpaan (Konkomba) *waa*, Zambalin (a Mandinka language) *waa*, among others in the "traditional" genres.

⁹ See Collins (2002: 68).

He is the Greatest

kpEhlan Naawuni

God Almighty

O galisiya , o galisiya.

He is almighty

Ti jEmmi o.

Let's worship Him.

Yet sheli yi mu isi a

If anything worries you

zang ti kpenlan naa maa

Give it to the Almighty one

Dama nguni m maana

For He solves problems

Nyama! a kpee yi ning a nyin cheli o

Look! If another offends you ignore him

Kpeng lan naa maa yuuni o

The Almighty one watches him

Dinzugu a yubu yin a bi ning

So, if your wish has not yet been granted

Nyin suhima

Be patient

Ningmi serious jemmi naawuni o ni deei

Be serious in worshiping God, He'll accept (your prayers)

Ninsali yi ningda man lari o mi

Mischievous beings amuse me

N duuma zaligu man zorili

I hold God's commandments in awe

doomin m bori alijanda

because I want (to go to) Heaven

n zori n duuma

I fear my Lord

a kpee yi kuhira nyin foma

be quiet when a colleague grieves

ka pa lala a dini be yoma

Else yours is close by

Cheli zamba cheli tehigu,

Eschew wickedness,

ningmi tuba

Repent

Nyama! ningmi “serious”

Look! Be serious

jemmi Naawuni.

Worship God.

o ni deei li

He will accept

(cheliya ka ti doli o)

N suhiri a pam n duuma

I ask fervently, my Lord

Baligimi yellikam n ti ma

Ease everything for me

Ka n lihi m ma ka lihi m ba

So that I take care of my mother, and take care of my father

Ka bi vuhi yaa

And they will be comfortable

Nyama!

Look!

Kpenglan naawuni larigimi ma

God Almighty, make me prosperous

Ka n da salima ti m ma

So that I buy gold for my mother

Ka o 'feeli' yaa,

And she will (feel) be happy

Ka suhi aduwa n ti ma yaa

And ask for blessings for me

Ka n tihigi

And I shall prosper

A dim yi tuhira nyin cheli o

Ignore your enemy

A biegu yi neei di ni gari o

When your day comes he will be surprised

Suhimi pam ka galimi gom

Be ceaseless in prayer

Di yi pa lala bi ni chirim a

Else their evil will overwhelm you

(rap in English.)

In the chanted portions he mentions the following:

Almighty Jah Jah

Holy Qur'an

Holy Bible

Mother fucker tripper.

He breaks off and second rapper comes in to ask the audience to shun evil. It is better to be a victim than a sinful, evil person.

Influences from Indian film music, hip hop, to reggae styles of presentation are all to be seen within this song. The artist also alludes to the major religions practiced in the region – Islam and Christianity, and of course the substrate traditional system of worship. The song in a single swoop enjoins all to live in harmony and look to a divine source for solutions to our problems. This fulfils the musical

function of addressing spiritual problems, even though the song is a secular song. The mention of *Jah*, and *Mother Fucker Tripper* obviously is a sign of the times, a mark of the singer's youthful identity. He belongs to the reggae-hip hop generation, and has to find a way of making this come through. The mixing of musical genres here also brings to the fore the kind of musical intertextuality Daniel Reed (In Press)¹⁰ refers to. The artist alludes to reggae's thematic lambastes of ills within the society. Elsewhere, Memunatu Laadi continually quotes verses from the Qur'an, to lend some authority to her statements, a kind of appealing to tradition in the Baumanian¹¹ sense.

2.2 Musical Style and techniques used

Many pop musicians here spice their songs with lexical items and Arabic quotations, and switch between electronic versions of the classical Dagbamba tunes, soukous, and hybrid reggae forms. Mama Rams, one of the new musicians, in her album *Dooyili* "matrimonial home" makes use of *laahira* (from Arabic *aakhir*) "judgment day", *hasada* (Arabic *hasada*) "tragedy". Memunatu Laadi likewise quotes from the Qur'an,

Kulli nafs dhaaikatul maut

Every human soul shall taste death

to support her theme of the inevitability of death.

They sing both as soloists, and in partnerships, where they employ the call- and-response style which is so popular with African music. Whereas the females generally have a bright, high timbre to their vocalizations, the males employ a low vocal quality.

Most pop singers started as youths who competed at local rap contests, who tried to either mimic African American pop stars or Jamaican raga/ patois rap styles to the accompaniment of pre-programmed computerized beats. This is how their music got shaped into what Collins (ibid: 71) calls *techno-pop*. Sherrif Ghale, who was

¹⁰ Article submitted to *African Music in the 2000s*

¹¹ See Bauman (1978)

voted Ghana's reggae star of the year 2004, reproduces the classical *kuraya kuraya*, a popular local rhythm using electric instruments rather than the local hour-glass drum. The tunes are cyclical in form, with oft repeated danceable patterns.

Young singers all employ what Eric Charry (2000: 94) calls the "beautiful" youthful voice, while the old musicians of the bardic tradition employ the "powerful" voice. This contrast in voice quality comes into sharp focus when the songs of Yakubu Salifu, a young *baamaaya* singer are juxtaposed with those of the older Timobli and Timom. Yakubu, like his compatriots on the pop scene employs electrophones. Typical *lunsi* like Abdul-Rahman and Banvim Lunnaa Ibrahim on the one hand, and Dakpem Lunnaa Alhaji Baba, Adam Gbagu and Nyoligu Lunnaa Issahaku Moglo also fall into the two age categories, respectively. This latter category is akin to the *jeliya* of Mande land both in *modus operandi* and in societal function.

In a typical cultural performance setting, there could be as many as a hundred drummers, who will all follow a lead master drummer called the *lundaa* 'male drum'. This drum calls and the rest of the drums in the ensemble respond. There is a second drum that cues the other drummers as they go along, and the master drummer continually improvises. There is so much cross- and poly- rhythms going on that many westerners may misjudge the sound as cacophonous. The drums will "talk" among themselves as well as to patrons. They are said to talk because they mimic the tonal patterns of the Dagbanli language.

2.3 Dress Code during Live Performance

There is no strict dress code for drummers during live performances but any dress that one can conveniently put on in public. But for the dancers, the most appropriate ranges from the smock, the *Yensichi*, *Tolole*, *Kparigu* to modern shirts are used in that order of appropriateness. I must add that there can be a combination of these on top of the other until the *Kparigu* is finally worn on top (if the dancer is a title holder). But the more of the smocks are worn on one another the better for the dancer.

2.4 Context of transmission

In the context of cultural transmission, we find both categories of musicians relying heavily on the traditional channel of praise uttering, naming, and the use of proverbial language to comment on happenings in society. Their themes range from the mundane to the spiritual, light-hearted to serious, praise to abuse. They perform at social events to entertain, punctuate the rhythm of ritual occasions such as burial, funeral celebrations, enskinment¹², and the veneration of ancestral spirits and sanctuaries. *Luntali* requires a range of abilities, and I agree with David Locke (1990:14) that,

Those with the keenest minds for proverbs, history, and genealogy become singers, lead luna players and reciters of the epic chronicles, while those with the most talent for instrumental performance gravitate to the lead luna or gun-gon [the bass drum]

Drummers, especially those who are particularly gifted in decanting the genealogies are courted by royals, and are referred to as 'lover' to the king.

It used to be the case that the newly returned Muslim scholars who had studied in Saudi Arabia preached that music was the handiwork of the Devil, and they saw music as being non-Islamic practice. The voices of women should not be raised so high, lest they enchant their male folk. To quote verses from the Holy book in a secular song therefore, in their view smacks of sacrilege. This of course is not the mentality of the whole ethnic group, hence the large patronage this syncretic musical genre now enjoys.

2.5 Musical Culture.

As can be seen in times of yore one had to be born into a drummer family in order to be a practitioner of their trade. It was their traditional responsibility to educate, entertain, inform, and critique society. They did not need anyone's invitation to any

¹² Kings in Dagbaj sit on skins, so the term enskinment is used to denote the ascension to high office. The King is not only a traditional ruler, he is also a spiritual leader of a sort.

event. They attended functions irrespective of who held them, and they were rewarded materially. Their economic needs are catered for by the society in the monetary reward they get at these occasions. In addition to this they could have other means of livelihood – farming, trading, etc. The importance of the drummer cannot be overemphasized, for they are indemnified against rebuke as a result of what they say during performance.

Many children from these families were enrolled in schools and have gone on to expand their horizons into other musical flavors. Some do not play the hour glass drum anymore, they have moved on to electric and electronic instruments. It is a fact that the newly found local pop music industry is booming, because in spite of piracy of artists' music albums they still make a decent income from their sales, and are indeed local celebrities.

Music is serious business. So a drummer will always begin a session with an invocation of some sort. Many cry out *yeligu* "Speech", *jeliba yee* 'spirit of *jeliba*' (I wonder if this has a relation to the *jeli* of the Mandinka), and *kali* 'tradition' as a prelude to performance. This I believe is a kind of invocation of the Muse. They are very conscious of the possibility of non-delivery and are keen on maintaining face.

3. Conclusion

Music in Ghana is an activity that cannot be divorced from everyday life. It sets the tone, and demands a collective experience. While the musicians are playing, people are called to dance, and as they dance they are joined in the circular arena by a participating audience who under the pretext of pressing money to the foreheads of dancers, also get to dance. Music in Dagban cosmology, therefore, is an avenue for social bonding, and it is not surprising that *Damba*, which is an annual festival of music and dance, is unarguably the favorite among the five festivals in Dagban. I neither see the emerging techno-pop tunes as debased forms, nor do I foresee the dying of the classical Dagbanli genres. Whichever way we look at any song, it is music.

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