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"If the Gyil Has Died, Dagara Itself Has Died": On the Relationship of Dagara Music, Food, and Costume

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“IF THE GYIL HAS DIED, DAGARA ITSELF HAS DIED”: ON THE RELATIONSHIP OF DAGARA MUSIC, FOOD, AND COSTUME

by

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

As I write this now, I am reminded of the words of my *gyil* [1] teacher Jerome Balsab: "If the gyil has died, Dagara itself has died." While only nine words in length, it took me well over nine months to contemplate what my teacher meant by the gyil, a Ghanaian xylophone, "dying." More importantly, I started asking myself what it would mean to keep the gyil "alive" in my career and in Dagara culture as a whole.

The cultural landscape of Ghana is changing. Dagara communities, located primarily in the Upper West region of Ghana, are uncertain where tradition has a place, if at all, in their future. Recent developments to the gyil's design, practice, and performance have created concern for a lost or dying culture among not just Dagara communities, but audiences outside the African continent as well. For the Dagara, the gyil interacts with and is inherent in all aspects of their culture. If the gyil is experiencing change, then so too is the rest of Dagara culture. Or to use my teacher's words, if the gyil is "dying," Dagara itself is "dying."

Research for this project began in June and July 2022 at the Dagara Music Center in Medie, a small town north of Ghana's capital city Accra. I spent approximately three weeks learning recreational gyil repertoire, or *Bewaa*. I also participated in local Dagara traditions—attending a funeral, church celebration, and large weekend parties—all the while observing how gyil music-making is deeply connected to food and costume culture. The socialization aspect of the gyil is extremely important, yet unexplored in terms of scholarship.

Previous research focuses on the gyil in a musical context, noting how it is constructed, played, and transmitted across generations. The work of Trevor Wiggins and Joseph Kobom

[1] The gyil is the focus of this document and therefore the word itself, its plural form gyile, and the gyil player gyilimbwere will no longer be italicized in the text once they are introduced.

serves as a performance-oriented guide designed for individual and classroom use. It provides transcriptions of Ghanaian xylophone music but gives only limited background information on the gyil, Dagara performance practice, and Dagara culture in general.[2] Percussionist Valerie Naranjo has transcribed traditional gyil repertoire for use on the western marimba but does not explain the original material in depth.[3] Similarly, Royal James Hartigan studied gyil music and applied its rhythmic elements first to Ewe drums and then to the western drum kit, however, his work neither includes any gyil transcriptions nor presents a thorough study of the gyil as a complex cultural entity.[4]

Two notable contributors to research surrounding the gyil are Larry Godsey and Mary Seavoy, both of whom provide a thorough organological and ethnographic study of the instrument. Godsey's work is one of, if not the most, comprehensive resource on the use and cultural significance of the gyil; however, his work focuses solely on funeral music, omitting an analysis of recreational repertoire.[5] Seavoy examines gyil repertoire of the Sissala and while her work has proved invaluable to the continued study of the instrument, the Sissala musical tradition greatly differs from that of the Dagara.[6]

More recently, works such as Michael Vercelli's 2006 dissertation[7] and master xylophonist Bernard Woma's 2012 Master's thesis[8] provide a much-needed detailed description

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[2] Trevor Wiggins and Joseph Kobom, *Xylophone Music From Ghana* (Reno, NV: White Cliffs Media Company, 1992).
[3] A complete listing of Valerie Naranjo's transcriptions are available at www.mandaramusic.com
[4] Royal James Hartigan, "Blood Drum Spirit: Drum Languages of West Africa, African-American, Native American, Central Java and South India," PhD diss., (Wesleyan University, 1986).
[5] Larry Dennis Godsey, "The use of the Xylophone in the Funeral ceremony of the Birifor of Northwest Ghana," PhD diss., (University of California, Los Angeles, 1980).
[6] Mary Hermaine Seavoy, "The Sissala Xylophone Tradition," PhD diss., (University of California, Los Angeles, 1982).
[7] Michael Vercelli, "Performance Practice of the Dagara-Birifor Gyil Tradition Through the Analysis of the Bewaa and Daarkpen Repertoire," PhD diss., (The University of Arizona, 2006).
[8] Bernard Woma, "The Socio-political Dimension of Dagara Funeral Ritual, Music and Dirge," Master's thesis, (Indiana University, 2012).

of the gyil's role in Dagara and Birifor communities, with the former focusing on creating a historical and ethnographically accurate performance guide and the latter examining the socio-political dimensions of the Dagara funeral ritual. While expanding upon prior research and attempts at introducing the gyil to new audiences, both Vercelli and Woma do not directly address the gyil as it relates to and impacts other aspects of Dagara culture.

Existing literature on the gyil often examines it in a musical context, either for the purpose of performing it outside of its home in West Africa or understanding its significant role in traditional practices, namely funerals. I aim to not only bridge the gap between the two but offer a new perspective from which the gyil can be understood as both a musical instrument and cultural lifeblood of the Dagara's past, present, and future. Just as Dagara culture is evolving, so too must research adapt and change to better represent the state in which this culture exists.

The music presented in this document was taught to me primarily by Jerome Balsab. Supplemental gyil lessons were with Alex Woma and drum lessons with Eddie Green. On average, gyil lessons lasted anywhere from two to three hours a day. My teachers would break down each piece into sections and then slowly demonstrate, making sure I fully understood the structure and learned each note before moving on to another piece. Like many other researchers of gyil music, I have decided to transcribe the repertoire into western notation for ease of comprehension.

During my time in Ghana, I underwent a total immersion into Dagara culture, dancing to the sounds of the gyil at a funeral as my smock swayed back and forth, partaking in the communal consumption of dog meat, and sitting on the kitchen floor as I eat *saab* in the company of my host mother's children. All performances, meals, and clothing referenced in this

document are documented either in video, audio, or picture format. Videos and pictures were recorded on an iPhone SE. Audio files were recorded on a Zoom H4n pro.

This thesis explores the extent to which the gyil is more than just an instrument, especially as it owns decisive influence over Dagara culture in general. Two case studies illustrate this phenomenon. In chapter two, I examine the gyil through the lens of gastronomy, drawing comparisons between genres of gyil repertoire and traditional cuisine. In chapter three, I explore the smock as it relates to the gyil in performance and projecting identity. I view the gyil through two different lenses to not only reinforce the centrality of the gyil in Dagara culture, but reveal the impact change in gyil practice has had and will continue to have on the greater Dagara culture. Though, admittedly the change under examination in this document was not always apparent.

Dagara culture seemed very much alive to me while I was in Ghana. I tried dog meat for the first time, purchased and wore a smock much to the delight of the local townspeople, and was woken up every morning to the sounds of the gyil emanating from a nearby church. Dagara culture was not just a subject to be observed, but a living and breathing entity to interact with.

I was captivated by the obvious differences between Dagara culture and that of my own, so much so that I failed to see what was right in front of me the whole time. Traditional dishes are being served with not so traditional drinks, smocks are cast aside in favor of a football jersey, and gyil music is sharing the stage with recorded pop hits at funerals. Dagara culture is changing, but I would argue that does not necessarily mean it is "dying." My teacher uses death to describe change within Dagara culture because it indicates the situation has gravity and requires a sense of urgency. Death is sacred and funerals are acknowledged by all as a matter of importance.

For him and many other Dagara, changes to their culture is a death of sorts. Yet, as psychologists Michael Varnum and Igor Grossmann argue, "human cultures are not static." [9] Culture is a never-ending process of change, adaptation, and growth. It is not so much a matter of preventing change, but figuring out a way to embrace it so that it works to maintain the integrity of Dagara culture, ensuring its survival in the process. This document serves to identify the relationship between Dagara music, food, and costume traditions as a platform to better understand their evolution and the meaning it has for the future of Dagara culture in the communities from which all of this research stems, Ghana, the African continent, and the rest of the world.

[9] Michael E. W. Varnum and Igor Grossmann, "Cultural Change: The How and the Why," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 12, no. 6 (2017): 956.

CHAPTER 2. CONNECTIONS BETWEEN DAGARA GYIL REPERTOIRE AND FOOD

A. Overview and Introduction to Gastromusicology

It was the evening of Sunday, July 3rd, approximately one week into my stay in Medie, Ghana, when I was offered "grasscutter" meat for the first time. Like most food I tried in Ghana, I learned to eat first and ask questions later. Grasscutter, as I would later find out, are large African rodents recognized as a significant source of protein and popular specialty meat.[10] After enjoying my taste of grasscutter, and yes, I really did savor each bite, I was treated to performances on the gyil, as members of the community took turns demonstrating their knowledge of *Bewaa*, or recreational, repertoire. As I stood there admiring the skill and virtuosic talent of each and every player, a man approached me, pointed in my direction, and addressed the group exclaiming, "Here is *Bunbekpier*, the man who lets everything go in!" On the surface, he seemed to imply that I had a big appetite for all sorts of foods, but I appreciated the nickname because it also described my experiences in Ghana. While my trip initially centered on solely studying traditional Dagara music, I could not help but draw parallels between my experiences consuming food and listening to as well as playing the gyil. Over time as I continued to absorb "everything" in my surroundings, I came to discover that particular genres of music support certain styles of cooking and even specific foods.

Recently, scholars have been studying the ways music and food are intertwined in culture. The study of music and food is a relatively new field that emerged in opera studies. Musicologist Pierpaolo Polzonetti, in his novel *Feasting and Fasting in Opera: From Renaissance Banquets to the Callas Diet*, lists out seven fundamental laws of operatic

[10] "Grasscutter breeding," (Edinburgh: The University of Edinburgh, 2020), https://www.ed.ac.uk/vet/conservation-science/conservation-genetics/projects/grasscutter-breeding.

gastromusicology and five primary functions of food in opera.[11] Analyzing the associations between music and food in staged works, Polzonetti's argument operates within the cleverly dubbed subfield gastromusicology. Polzonetti's third law, "sharing a meal or drink is a socially cohesive event," and first function, labeled "social," are applicable to not just opera, but traditional Dagara music too.[12]

In fact, Polzonetti's seminal ideas are broadly applicable. Ethnomusicologists such as Kaley Mason and Ira Braus are already applying Polzonetti's principles to ethnographic studies. Mason's work in South Asia explores the use of culinary metaphors to express cultural intimacy through sound[13] while Braus' research has culminated in a book titled *Classical Cooks: A Gastrohistory of Western Music*, which argues music and food are close enough aesthetically that they can be enjoyed synaesthetically.[14] Currently, ethnomusicologist Alisha Lola Jones is in the process of completing her book entitled, *Ultrasonic Tastemakers: Towards a Critical Gastromusicology*, which discusses the pleasure and pain of gastromusicology that African American histories reveal.[15]

Music and food are universal modes of cultural expression. Musicologist Kofi Agawu claims music, "understood as organized sound with a (silent) choreographic supplement," is not only present but a defining feature of most human societies.[16] And Africa, Agawu argues, presents an authentic model to explore the close and intricate relationship between music and

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[11] Pierpaolo Polzonetti, *Feasting & Fasting in Opera: From Renaissance Banquets to the Callas Diet* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2021), 10-13.
[12] Polzonetti, *Feasting & Fasting in Opera: From Renaissance Banquets to the Callas Diet*, 10-13.
[13] Kaley Mason, "Sound Masala: Gastromusicology and Popular Music in South India," (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2012), https://humanitiesday2012.uchicago.edu/presentations/sound-masala-gastromusicologyand-popular-music-south-india.html.
[14] Ira Braus, *Classical Cooks: A Gastrohistory of Western Music* (Xlibris Corp., 2006).
[15] "Ultrasonic Tastemakers: Towards a Critical Gastromusicology," (London: King's College London, 2023), https://www.kcl.ac.uk/events/ultrasonic-tastemakers-towards-a-critical-gastromusicology.
[16] Kofi Agawu, *The African Imagination in Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 27.

society. Agawu finds the act of making music to be a "universal phenomenon" [17] much like author James McCann determines "African cooking is a part of the universal human experience." [18] The act of eating together, commensality, is not just rooted in nutritional values but also a measure of human values, merging family and friends around "tastes and sequences of taste" routinely expressing their essential nature: in short, cuisine.[19]

Agawu and McCann reached the same conclusions in their examinations of African music and food, respectively, as both elements of culture promote social cohesion, the essence of Polzonetti's third law of gastromusicology. In its fullest sense, social cohesion refers to the strength of relationships and the sense of unanimity among members of a community. [20] The more socially cohesive a society is, the more the wellbeing of all its members is taken into consideration. In an effort to sustain Dagara culture and nurture societal growth, recognizing first, the commonalities between cuisine and gyil music and second, actively participating in their creation and consumption effectively generating solidarity and cultural harmony, is of the utmost importance.

In examining Dagara culture, I noticed two instances in which specific foods and music styles were linked—funeral music together with dog meat as well as recreational music together with *saab*. In the following case studies, I will show how funeral music and dog meat encourage people to actively participate in their community, fostering a sense of pride and accountability crucial to cultural conservation. Moreover, I will demonstrate how recreational music and *saab* are both meant to be shared with company, reinforcing community values, while simultaneously

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[17] Agawu, *The African Imagination in Music*, 27.
[18] James C. McCann, *Stirring the Pot: A History of African Cuisine* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2009), 5.
[19] McCann, *Stirring the Pot: A History of African Cuisine*, 2.
[20] Ichiro Kawachi and Lisa Berkman, "Social cohesion, social capital, and health," *Social Epidemiology* 174, no. 7 (2000): 175.

resisting outside influence. An analysis of my experiences consuming dog meat following a traditional Dagara funeral or eating some variation of *saab* almost every evening for dinner, not only reveals the invariable connection between Dagara cuisine and gyil music, but also their critical role in sustaining Dagara culture as a whole.

B. *Bine* and Dog Meat: Structuring a Funeral

Discourse surrounding Dagara culture has established that "funerals are significant social events," arguably the most important rite a Dagara can experience in life and death. [21] Some researchers have even come to define the role of *gyilimbwere*, or gyil players, as initiators of the funeral. [22] In his description of Dagara funerals, Dagara spiritualist and scholar Somé argues, "without the xylophones…there is no funeral, no grief, and no death." [23] Noticeably missing in analyses regarding Dagara funerals is a common understanding of their wholistic structure, especially their ambiguous end. Just as there is an implied beginning of the funeral marked by the sounds of the gyil, so too is there an implied conclusion with the communal consumption of dog meat. In contrast with other ethnic groups in Ghana, Dagara have traditionally savored the taste of dog, believing it generates more energy in the individual who consumes it.[24] While the gyil initially attracted me to study in Ghana as it did in my decision to attend a Dagara funeral, it was Dagara cuisine in tandem with the gyil that truly elicited a deep appreciation in me for a culture far different from that of my own. The collective acts of eating, playing, and listening do

[21] John Wesley Dankwa, "Sounding the woods: the significance of gyil music in Dagara funeral ceremonies," *Journal of the Musical Arts in Africa* 18, no. 1 (2021): 1.
[22] Felicia Annin and Emmanuel Boahen, "Gyile as a Genre in Dagaabaland, Ghana," *Journal of Advances in Social Science Humanities* 1, no. 3 (2015): 22.
[23] Dankwa, "Sounding the woods," 59.
[24] Alex Woma, conversation with author, July 9, 2022.

more than provide structure for a Dagara funeral. By reinforcing communities as acts of solidarity, they provide a structure for Dagara culture at large.

Aside from their role in structuring Dagara funerals, gyil music and dog meat are depicted as possessing a rare and refined nature. *Bine*, or music performed at funeral rituals, is not only considered the most important genre in the Dagara musical tradition, but is also arguably the most extensive as its repertoire contains an infinite number of songs. [25] Its rare quality then, comes not from its size but rather its function. In comparison to its counterpart, *Bewaa*- which "represents the recreational music of the Dagara people and is commonly heard in almost any festival setting"- *Bine* is exclusively found in funeral performances.[26] According to ethnomusicologist John Wesley Dankwa, the *Bine* funeral genre is "discernibly unique" from other genres on the gyil for it moves "funeral participants in…powerful ways," [27] an experience the Dagara claim is unrivaled in any other music.[28] While certainly a bold statement, perhaps I can shed some light on the Dagara's claim through an account of my own personal experience attending a Dagara funeral.

Standing behind two gyilimbwere and a single *kuor*[29] player, I witnessed, up close and personal, how gyil music initiates and structures movement. The three musicians were filling the funeral grounds with energetic sound, accompanied in prayer song by two lead dirge singers standing directly to my left, when I noticed a visible change in the once solemn crowd as they rose to their feet to dance. (See Fig. 1.)

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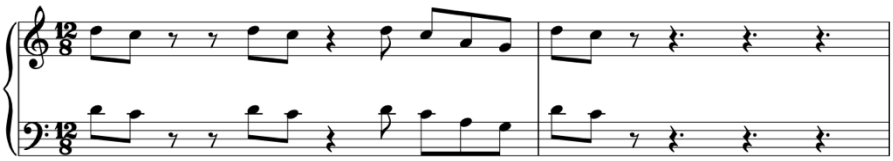
[25] Woma, "The Socio-political Dimension of Dagara," 52.
[26] Vercelli, "Performance Practice of the Dagara-Birifor," 87.
[27] Dankwa, "Sounding the woods," 73.
[28] Woma, "The Socio-political Dimension of Dagara," 60.
[29] The *kuor* is a drum constructed from a large, hollow calabash and lizard-skin head, used to accompany Dagara gyil repertoire.

Fig. 1. *Bine* performance at Dagara funeral

Their decision seemed less deliberate and more involuntary, as if the music of the *Bine* tradition compelled them to move their bodies in rhythm. In actuality, a *piira*, defined as an introductory component to *Bine* music comprising "arrhythmically improvised melodies that function as warm-up exercises for the lead gyil player," signals to the other musicians, dirge singers, and dancers upon its completion to join in the performance.[30] The *piira* is unique to the gyil player, yet will typically be repetitive both in rhythm and melody as seen in the example here. (Ex. 2.1.)

[30] Dankwa, "Sounding the woods," 68.

Ex. 2.1. *Piira* Example[31]



The dancers' joyous demeanors were a direct reflection of core Dagara beliefs about death. The Dagara people maintain that death is "not an end to life" but the "birth into another world." [32] The gyil is needed to start the rite, and the music is supposed to convey a mood of celebration.

As the music came to an end, the *gyile* now lifeless on the ground, I followed the party I arrived with back to the rendezvous in Medie. For nearly the entire journey back to town, the topic of conversation, much to my surprise, had nothing to do with the events of the funeral. The funeral was over, which meant only one thing: some freshly cooked dog. While *Bine* music may define the Dagara funeral for its attendees, the atypical, yet highly beloved dog meat served after is equally as revered. Paralleling the *piira* and its role in "warming up" guests for a funeral, dog meat serves as the unofficial "wrap up." The slow, improvisatory musical buildup at the start of *Bine* is mirrored by the gradual consumption of dog meat, passed around in a bowl until nothing remains. (See Fig. 2.)

[31] Dankwa, "Sounding the woods," 68.
[32] Dankwa, "Sounding the woods," 65.

Fig. 2. Dog meat and a Guinness

Similar to *Bine* music, which as mentioned earlier is reserved for funerals, dog meat is a delicacy consumed only during or after special occasions, like funerals. Overall, little meat is consumed in a conventional Dagara diet which consists mainly of "starchy foods such as yams, cassava, millet, maize, and rice." These staples are traditionally served with soups or stews occasionally containing meat or fish, revealing the traditional Dagara diet is "high in carbohydrates but low in protein" because meat is "prohibitively expensive and only small portions are served with most meals." [33] This insight into Dagara food culture is necessary in understanding the exhilarated perspective from which Dagara approach the consumption of dog meat. Their eager anticipation was infectious, even for a self-proclaimed dog lover such as

[33] Toyin Falola and Steven J. Salm, *Culture and Customs of Ghana* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002), 106.

myself, for their enjoyment in the consumption of dog, similar to the performance of *Bine* repertoire on the gyil, came not just from an attraction to the rare and refined, but rather the strengthening of a community that is a result of the collective acts of eating and playing music.

C. *Bewaa* and *Saab*: Connecting Generations

Prized features of traditional Dagara culture, *Bine* and dog meat are but a sliver of the full scope of music and food consumed in day-to-day life. In regards to gyil repertory, *Bine* is reserved exclusively for funerals while *Bewaa* represents the recreational music of the Dagara people and can be heard across a variety of settings. *Bewaa* repertoire exudes a joyous nature, fit for social occasions such as wedding ceremonies, annual harvest festivals, and naming ceremonies.[34] Considered music for the youth, *Bewaa* repertoire covers a wide range of difficulty, therefore, allowing for more accessibility in its performance. (See Fig. 3.)

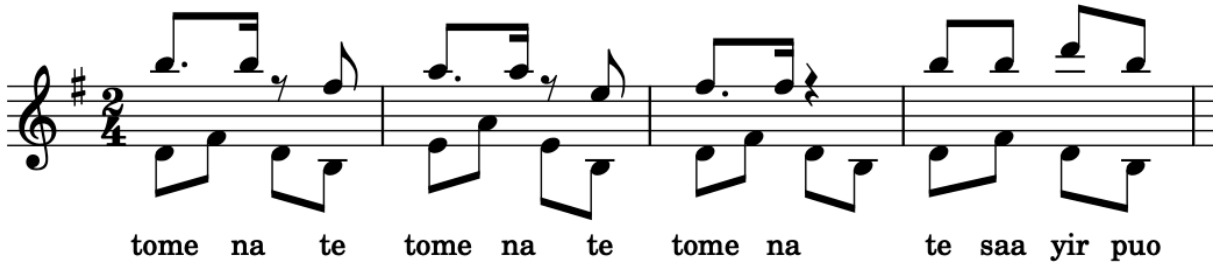
Fig. 3. *Bewaa* performance following church gathering

[34] Woma, "The Socio-political Dimension of Dagara," 55.

Ethnomusicologist Michael Vercelli offers historical insight into the progression of *Bewaa* from its origins on the *kpan kpul*, or pit xylophone, to the modern gyil, arguing that although the *kpan kpul* is now "primarily a children's instrument," the last fifty years has seen *Bewaa* make the transition from the *kpan kpul* onto the gyil, with the repertoire gaining culturally significant status.[35] Like many other musical traditions across sub-Saharan Africa, *Bewaa* is commonly accompanied by dance. A distinctive dance that involves "subtle runs, twists and turns, vigorous swinging of the body and heavy foot-stomping," *Bewaa* is symbolic of the "Dagara's youthful vitality." [36]

The accessible nature of *Bewaa*, in contrast to the anomalous yet sophisticated *Bine*, proved to be ideal as my introduction into the vast and utterly new gyil repertoire. The first song I learned, "*To Me Na*", was easy to grasp in large part because of its short length and simple, repetitive melodic patterns. As shown in the transcription below, the song is divided into two lyrical statements: a call and response. The call- "*to me na, te to me na, te to me na*"- translates to "Our profession is in our father's house," and the response- "*te saa yir puo*"- translates to "Everyone must work hard." [37] (Ex. 2.2.)

Ex. 2.2. "*To Me Na*" Call and Response



[35] Vercelli, "Performance Practice of the Dagara-Birifor," 88.
[36] Dankwa, "Sounding the woods," 65.
[37] Jerome Balsab, conversation with author, July 17, 2022.

The song itself is fairly simple but that does not necessarily mean it is any less valued in Dagara culture. Memorizing the lyrics and music were of no particular challenge, yet out of the many "children's tunes" I learned during my study in Ghana, some of which were more technically advanced, "*To Me Na*" remained my personal favorite. After observing the pure joy my adult teachers had teaching and playing "*To Me Na*" and comparing their attitude to that of the children I met who would, to no end, either play "*To Me Na*" or ask me to perform the song, I reached a critical understanding on the value of simplicity in Dagara musical culture.

If *Bine* and dog meat represent a high level of rarity and refinement within Dagara culture, then *Bewaa* and *saab* indicate accessibility and normality. *Saab*, a thick porridge "cooked from flour of either *puoke* (sorghum), *zie* (late millet) or *kamaan* (maize)," is considered the staple dish among the Dagara.[38] Enjoyed at all times of the day, *saab* is flexible in nature, often served with a variety of soups or stews. Ghanaian agriculturalist Linus Kabo-Bah shares the multi-step process required to make the "most popular meal of the Dagara ethnicity," first listing the only two main ingredients: *miiru-kuo* (sour water) and either sorghum, millet, or maize flour. The first step, labeled *miiru maalu*, consists of pounding either local tree leaves or dried fruits in a mortar and mixing in boiling water. Up next is *buul-yang*, where *miiru-kuo* is added in to the pot along with the required amount of flour. *Mob* is the third and final step in which porridge is stirred into the pot until all lumps have dissipated, leaving a thick, sticky paste ready to be served.[39] The cooking process takes hours of preparation and execution yet yields

[38] Evelyn Abei-Yel Bonye and Linus Kabo-Bah, "Indigenous Foods, Nutrition and Health of the Dagara Ethnicity," Slideshare, Center for Indigenous Knowledge and Organizational Development, December, 2011, https://www.slideshare.net/JohnBaptistKaboBah/indigenous-foods-nutrition-and-health-of-the-dagara-ethnicity.
[39] Evelyn Abei-Yel Bonye and Linus Kabo-Bah, "Indigenous Foods."

long-lasting results for it is not unusual for a Dagara household to make *saab* in large quantities to last upwards of an entire week.[40] (See Fig. 4.)

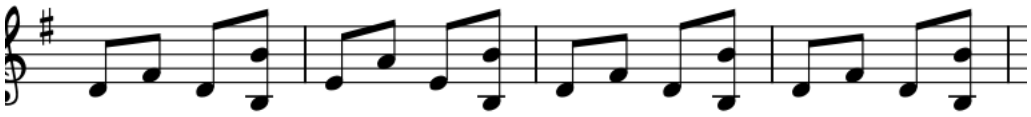
Fig. 4. *Saab* with stew

Although *saab* is widely recognized as the focal point of Dagara cuisine, its composition and texture may vary from one Dagara community to another, much like gyil repertory. During my first lesson, my gyil instructor informed me that he might teach me "songs other gyil players do not know" or that his "version of each song might be different." [41] At the same time, the parallels between cooking *saab* and learning to play the gyil are strikingly similar. In some cases, a hands-on approach is called for while in others its best to observe and practice from a distance.[42]

[40] Evelyn Abei-Yel Bonye and Linus Kabo-Bah, "Indigenous Foods."
[41] Jerome Balsab, conversation with author, July 17, 2022.
[42] Sean Williams, *The Ethnomusicologists' Cookbook* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 3.

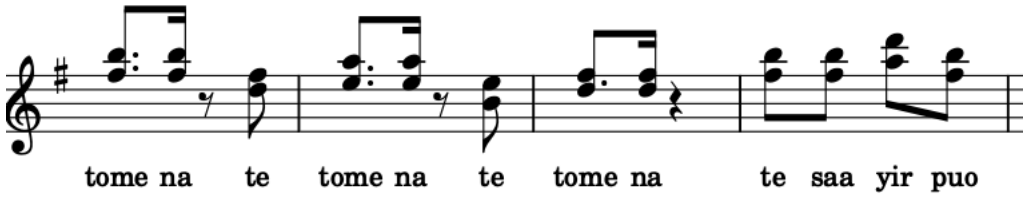
Just as there is a multi-step process required to cook *saab*, so too are there multiple steps in learning new gyil songs. Before learning "*To Me Na*" as it is arranged for solo gyil (See Ex. 2.2.), I was introduced each section individually. The first section, or "melody" as my teacher labeled it, is best conceived as a bassline or supporting harmony in the context of western music theory. (Ex. 2.3.)

Ex. 2.3. "*To Me Na*" Melody



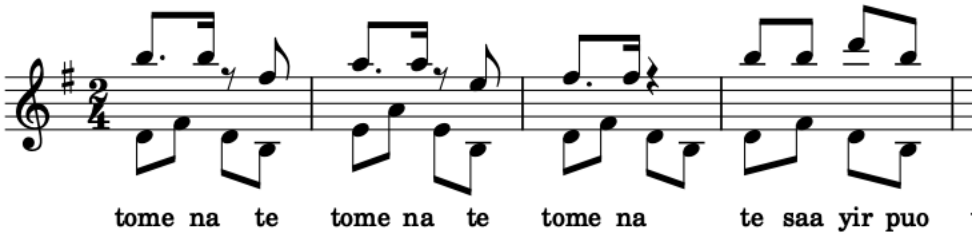
The next section I learned was the "song," or melody using western music theory terminology. (Ex. 2.4.)

Ex. 2.4. "*To Me Na*" Song



When separated, the two parts are filled out with supporting harmonic notes that are then stripped away once each part is joined together in a solo arrangement, leaving only an outline of the most important harmonic and melodic notes. (Ex. 2.2.)

Ex. 2.2. "*To Me Na*" Call and Response



Simple and bland in taste but versatile in function, *saab*, like *Bewaa*, is widely beloved in Dagara communities. During the mid to late 20th century, master xylophonist Bernard Woma experienced firsthand as a child the transmission of *Bewaa* repertoire from the *kpan kpul* to the gyil. Deemed inappropriate by other members within his community, Woma continued to push for the incorporation of *Bewaa* into the gyil repertory, eventually achieving success.[43] *Saab*, or at least some variation of it, has not only existed for hundreds of years within Dagara communities but has come to define Dagara cuisine as a whole. Some researchers however, dismiss the idea of an African cuisine altogether, in effect stripping *saab* of its culturally significant status worldwide.[44] Pushback then, has come not from within Dagara communities as it did with the initial performances of *Bewaa* on the gyil, but rather from a larger, global audience.

In his novel *Cooking, Cuisine, and Class*,[45] British Anthropologist Sir Jack Goody overly generalizes African cuisine as all stemming from a starch plus sauce model. Goody is surprised at the "lack of variety," especially the "virtual absence of alternative or differentiated recipes." [46] While there is some truth in Goody's assessment for I can testify to eating *saab* nearly every day for dinner while I was in Ghana, his argument is not without flaws. In an attempt to define

[43] Vercelli, "Performance Practice of the Dagara-Birifor," 88.
[44] McCann, *Stirring the Pot*, 183.
[45] Jack Goody, *Cooking, Cuisine, and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology* (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
[46] Goody, *Cooking, Cuisine, and Class*, 177.

African cuisine, Goody overlooks its most compelling component. That is, the rich culture of taste and value surrounding such simple foods as *saab*. He is correct to assume most sub-Saharan Africans, regardless of class, form the foundation of their diets around foods like *saab*, but he neither acknowledges the versatility such foods have in the way they are prepared nor fully explains their significance in relation to other aspects of culture. *Bewaa* and *saab* are deemed simplistic because of their accessibility, yet it is their accessible nature that contributes to their prominent place in elevating and sustaining Dagara culture.

D. Women and the Gyil: From the Kitchen to the Stage

During my time in Ghana, I was instructed on gyil repertory nearly every morning. My primary teachers, Jerome Balsab and Alex Woma, were not only skilled and knowledgeable musicians, but respected Dagara culture bearers. They were entrusted by their community to preserve and transmit the gyil tradition to others, Dagara or not. As their student, I would often find myself thrown into impromptu performance situations, in which local townsfolk would enter the Woma family compound to observe my gyil lessons. The experience was gratifying, but not nearly as rewarding as witnessing authentic gyil performances by my teachers and other local musicians. Whether it be at a Dagara funeral, a Catholic mass, a Saturday evening party, or even just my teachers playing together, each performance cemented my understanding on the significant value gyil music has as the focal point of Dagara culture.

While in Ghana, I also had the opportunity to try new foods, becoming particularly familiar with the taste of *saab*, the focal point of Dagara food culture. I ate *saab* with nearly every dinner, yet contrary to my experience with gyil repertory, I never quite learned how *saab* is made. The women of the house, including my temporary mother and her daughters, were responsible for preparing multiple batches of *saab* for the entire household to consume. They

would also serve me my food, insisting I be at ease and enjoy my meal, work-free. Although a guest in the house, I am sure my gender had some influence on their choice to serve me first, for besides the elderly members of the household, all men would eat before any women, all boys before any girls.

There are many similarities between Dagara food and music culture, so much so that any differences stand out. The preparation, serving, and consumption of music contradicts that of food, with gender serving as the primary distinction. Men make up the majority of gyil musicians, a result of the instrument's mythical origin explicitly forbidding women to perform.[47] Musicologists Trevor Wiggins and Joseph Kobom detail the mythology surrounding the origins of the gyil:

> A man was walking in the bush when he heard a fairy playing the xylophone.[48] He was so fascinated by the music that he went home and called his friends to make preparations to go and catch the fairy. He knew it would be difficult as the fairy could only be controlled by people with special powers, not just ordinary men. The man went back into the bush with his friends and because he was so brave and strong he was able to catch the fairy. He then threatened to kill the fairy unless it showed him everything about making and playing a xylophone. The fairy told him he must first make a strong medicine using certain leaves. Next he must collect certain sticks, break them, then carve them (to make the bars). He must also find a special long calabash which grew by the river, cut it and put it into the water until the inside rotted, then hollow it out (to make the resonators). The man did everything he has told and gradually he learned all the secrets of making and playing a xylophone. The man then took an axe and killed the fairy and built a fire to roast the meat which he ate with his friends. When they took the xylophone home and started playing it the women were completely mystified by the music until the men told them to dance to it. But in spite of roasting the fairy, its blood remained part of the instrument, so the xylophone cannot be played by women because they menstruate and their blood would not mix with that of the fairy.[49]

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[47] Sidra Lawrence, "Sounds of Development?" *African Music* 9, no. 1 (2011): 209.
[48] Other versions of the myth substitute "fairy" for "dwarf." For more on gyil mythology, see Michael Vercelli's dissertation "Performance Practice of the Dagara-Birifor," pp. 144-152.
[49] Wiggins and Kobom, *Xylophone Music From Ghana*, 3.

According to Dagara myth, if a woman were to play the gyil, she would become infertile. This does not stop some women from attaining proficiency on the gyil, but it does serve to discourage the vast majority. More than a story, the gyil's mythology functions as a device of social control, prohibiting women's participation in percussion performance, thereby removing them from the lineage of musical knowledge bearers and subjecting them to traditional positions in society and in the household. In other words, men belong on stage whereas women belong in the kitchen.

Living in tight quarters with a Ghanaian family, I observed how "women are trained by their mothers to cook" from a young age, a skill that will prove useful as they look to marry. Eventually, women undertake more responsibilities, assuming full control over cooking and family food budgets, not to mention their role as the primary caretakers of children.[50] Like male gyil players, whom work to preserve Dagara music culture through performance and oral instruction, women are held responsible for handing down years of knowledge and skills on indigenous foods and vegetables, which proves necessary for cooking and the security of Dagara food culture.[51]

It is not to say men lack the ability to cook and women to play the gyil, but to highlight cultural constructions of gender engrained in Dagara society, cultural constructions that are slowly dismantling as foreign influence promoting gender equality shapes perceptions on what a man and woman can and cannot do. Men, traditionally the teachers and performers of gyil repertoire, are entering the kitchens, no longer viewing cooking for themselves as a reflection of their tarnished manhood. Women, traditionally the teachers and cooks of Dagara food, are

[50] Audrey Pereira and others, "Joy, not sorrow: Men's perspectives on gender, violence, and cash transfers targeted to women in northern Ghana," *SSM- Qualitative Research in Health* 3, (2023): 1.
[51] Evelyn Abei-Yel Bonye and Linus Kabo-Bah, "Indigenous Foods," 2.

playing the gyil, performing publicly at festivals and transmitting their knowledge to the youth in their community. Some women have already achieved a great deal as gyil players and researchers. My teacher Jerome Balsab grew up listening to and observing his aunt perform the gyil in settings ranging from intimate family gatherings to large community festivals.[52] Outside of the African continent, percussionist Valerie Naranjo[53] and ethnomusicologist Sidra Lawrence[54] have established themselves as gyil experts in performance and research, respectively. More on the complex relationship between women and the gyil will be discussed in the following chapter on costume. Gender stereotypes will continue to form a divide between Dagara food and music cultures, yet it is only a matter of time till impending change turns their greatest difference into their strongest connection, for the betterment of Dagara culture as a whole.

E. Food for Thought: Changing Culture

In the last 70 years or so it has become the norm amongst researchers in their critical examinations of traditional African culture to address the impacts of colonization and globalization. In an attempt to understand the impact of colonialism and on-going effects of globalization, researchers often approach their study with nostalgia for "a lost, if little-known African past." Musicologist Kofi Agawu argues, "it is as if the faint traces of Africa's ancient musical history point to a magnificent era now permanently inaccessible, an era to be desired, invented, and reinvented as often as is necessary." [55] One of the pitfalls of African scholarship

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[52] Jerome Balsab, conversation with author, July 17, 2022.
[53] Shane Jones, "PAS Hall of Fame: Valerie Naranjo," (Percussive Arts Society, n.d.), https://www.pas.org/about/hall-of-fame/valerie-naranjo.
[54] "Lectures in Musicology: Sidra Lawrence, Bowling Green State University," (Ohio: The Ohio State University, 2023), https://music.osu.edu/events/event-lectures-musicology-sidra-lawrence-bgsu-sp23.
[55] Kofi Agawu, *Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions* (New York; London: Routledge, 2003) 22.

has been the illusion of constancy. Recent scholarship has begun to focus on the complex interaction between modern and traditional cultures and the resulting changes.[56]

Africa is the most diverse, multi-cultural continent, constantly evolving and reacting to inter- and intracontinental influences. I went to Ghana to study traditional music on an instrument that is thought to be at least a thousand years old. I also ate traditional dishes and was told that the recipes had been passed down for generations. However, I was surprised to see firsthand how the traditions are evolving. Dagara have consumed the "traditional" dishes of dog meat and *saab* for generations; the same cannot be said for the coke and Guinness malt drink they wash it down with. I learned how to play "traditional" gyil songs by breaking down each individual part and then gradually piecing them together, a process designed by Ghanaian gyil players to accommodate western-musicians. A process, in my observations, not used by Dagara themselves.

Labeling these meals and musical genres as "traditional" reflects their firmly rooted place in Dagara culture, but does not necessarily reflect their current, changed state as a result of globalization. A change, that for some, presents a concern, as best illustrated by my teacher's sentiments regarding the gyil's death, expressed at the beginning of this study.[57] My teacher is not referring to a literal death, as in no one will ever play the instrument again, but rather a transformation in style, practice, and performance—which for him and many other Dagara is a death of sorts. If the integrity of *Bewaa* and *Bine* music is compromised, it will affect more than

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[56] Examples include, but are not limited to, *African Traditional Religion in the Modern World* by Douglas E. Thomas which discusses the resilience of African traditional religion in the face of invasion and colonization; *Political Change in a West African State: A Study of the Modernization Process in Sierra Leone* by Martin Kilson which examines political movement out of colonialism; and *The Bright Continent: Breaking Rules and Making Change in Modern Africa* by Dayo Olopade which explores how Africa can tackle increasingly globalized challenges with systems already in place.

[57] Jerome Balsab, conversation with author, July 17, 2022.

just the Dagara's musical culture. How food is prepared and served, even the food itself that is being consumed, will change—or more accurately, is changing.

Some Africans actively combat foreign influence in fear of cultural change. Cameroonian composer, performer, and musicologist Francis Bebey shares his encounter with master gyilimbwere Kakraba Lobi as he confronts this identity crisis as an African musician, explaining how Lobi was persuaded to abandon the "primitive" music he performed on his gyil prior to a recording session.[58] After having composed and performed four new pieces, "using borrowed jazz rhythms" and a "delicate ballad style," Lobi was asked to play traditional gyil repertoire to which he reluctantly complied.[59] Only after listening back to his recordings did Lobi understand the value his culture's music has in comparison to western traditions.[60] That is to say, there is value to both. Lobi's work both in the studio and in live performance earned him considerable fame, but it also marked a pivotal point in which gyil traditions became globally shared.[61] One of the first and to this day most impactful ambassadors for the gyil, Lobi's efforts in bridging traditional and modern, African and western music traditions presents a model for future generations of culture bearers to follow.

The "infiltration of foreign influences" may represent a certain danger, but they can "also be a source of artistic enrichment." [62] According to Bebey, the key to sustaining Dagara culture can be simplified into three core components: transmitting cultural knowledge from the older to younger generations, obtaining a thorough understanding of the music in one's own social

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[58] Francis Bebey, *African music: a people's art*, Translated by Josephine Bennett (New York: L. Hill, 1975).
[59] Bebey, *African music*, 34.
[60] Bebey, *African music*, 34.
[61] Peter Cooke, "Defending Kakraba: Promoting Intercultural Curiosity," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 23, no. 1 (April 2014): 96.
[62] Bebey, *African music*, 38.

environment and that of other African societies, and finally a detailed study of non-African music, especially western music. The definitive goal is a synthesis or "marriage" of cultures, yet the timeframe for completion has been rushed due to the recent explosion of technology as a vehicle to disseminate knowledge on a global scale. In an attempt to keep up with the rapid change occurring within traditional African cultures, previous research has misinterpreted the value of cross-cultural synthesis in paving the path towards sustainability.

The synthesis of cultures is ever-present in musical history. The accordion is synonymous with Balkan music and culture, but it also has a foothold in German, Italian, and Brazilian traditions.[63] Likewise, the darbuka, or goblet drum, is one of Egypt's oldest instruments; however, it is now at the center of percussion traditions across North Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East.[64] We live in a world of interdependence, in which musical traditions are subjected to transnational processes. At present, the gyil is experiencing gradual dispersion to increasingly multi-cultural settings. For the Dagara to avoid a gyil "famine," the answer may lie in a group of new gyil players, of which I believe I am a part of.

As someone who is now a carrier of the tradition, I feel responsible to share my knowledge with the intention to preserve and generate interest in this tradition. By structuring my performances not in concert formats, but rather in more participatory contexts, I can try to combine both food and music to serve the greater Dagara culture. As a musical ambassador, I aim to expand the tradition's value and meaning for our contemporary world with the

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[63] Omer Turkmenoglu and Faruk Mehinagic, "Ethnomusical approach to the accordion: Analysis from the perspective of the Balkans, the Caucasus and Turkey," *Journal for the Interdisciplinary Art and Education* 3, no. 3 (Sept. 2022): 84.

[64] "Darbuka," (Duke University Musical Instrument Collections: Duke University, 2023), https://sites.duke.edu/dumic/instruments/percussion/middle-east/darbuka/.

understanding that ultimately, the Dagara are the culture bearers who live and breathe this music in the communities from which it stems.

My analysis of Dagara culture supports two distinct pairings of food and music—funeral music together with dog meat as well as recreational music together with *saab*. On the surface, any connections made between food and music in Dagara culture may appear more adjacent rather than directly correlated. Lots of cultures eat both special and staple foods as well as listen to both rare and well-known music. The accordion and cevapi go together at a Serbian party[65] much like the darbuka and molokhia[66] (Arabic: ملوخية) at an Egyptian banquet. Yet for the Dagara, and only the Dagara, everything revolves around the gyil. [67] In the words of my gyil instructor Jerome Balsab, the "gyil is the central instrument for the Dagara and is connected to everything."[68] The gyil is not just important to Dagara culture but necessary for life, much like food. In Dagara culture, there exists a greater appreciation for food and music and the ways in which both interact, in large part because of the essential sustenance they provide. Without food, the human body dies. Without the gyil, all else that makes up a human—the mind, soul, and spirit—dies. Food and music are universal modes of cultural expression and values, yet their unique place in Dagara culture makes their connection that much more powerful or deep.

Constantly evolving yet simultaneously rooted in tradition, the relationship between *Bine* and dog together with *Bewaa* and *saab* reflects an unrecognized, resilient nature inherent in Dagara society. To continue the transmission of Dagara food and music culture—traditional or

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[65] "Serbia: Nema problema—no problem!" (American Field Service: AFS, 2023), https://www.afsusa.org/countries/serbia/.
[66] Abdelhadi Halawa, "Influence of the traditional food culture of Ancient Egypt on the transition of cuisine and food culture of contemporary Egypt," *Journal of Ethnic Foods* 10, no.11 (2023): 6.
[67] Jerome Balsab, conversation with author, July 17, 2022.
[68] Jerome Balsab, conversation with author, July 17, 2022.

modified—is an ambitious mission that I, along with the new “menu” of gyil players, are actively pursuing, hoping others join in “the feast.”

CHAPTER 3. CONNECTIONS BETWEEN DAGARA GYIL REPERTOIRE AND CLOTHING

A. Overview of Clothing Studies

Nothing, and I mean nothing, can top the instant validation I felt as an American in Ghana when I was told "I have style." Sporting my recently acquired smock, I joined a group of musicians and dancers as they socialized over food and drinks before heading to a funeral. My smock was greatly admired, even envied, by local Ghanaians for its unique combination of patterns and colors. My smock enabled personal expression, as if I did not stand out enough already, but it also helped me fit in with a people and culture far removed from my own background. Many people were wearing smocks, and every smock was a different blend of colors, patterns, and styles. (See Fig. 5.)

Fig. 5. Smocks in a variety of shapes, sizes, and colors

Through the act of wearing a traditional piece of Ghanaian clothing, I simultaneously attracted and avoided the attention of those around me. In his novel titled *Material Culture*, Folklorist Henry Glassie argues, "To be human is to be alone and not alone, at once an individual and a member of society." [69] To be human, I argue, is to experience the formation of personal and collective identities through music and dress, or in some cases costume.

Derived from ethnographic studies, there are noticeable differences between clothing labeled "dress" or clothing labeled "costume." Differences in "form, materials, and construction" as well as in "intended meanings and contexts of wear" discourage the interchangeable use of costume and dress to refer to what is being worn.[70] Anthropologist and fashion scholar Joanne B. Eicher distinguishes dress from costume, defining the former as a general indication of an individual's overall appearance.[71]Applying Eicher's definition to my own study, the smock could be described as a form of dress.

However, one could also think of the smock as costume. Eicher defines "costume" as garments of many types, often used for special events like Halloween or masquerade balls. Costume differs from dress in that it transcends the ordinary and mundane. For many people, getting dressed in the morning is necessary and requires little to no thought. In my experience attending a traditional Dagara funeral, I wore a smock as part of a conscious decision to participate in a shared tradition. People getting dressed in the morning are putting on clothing, but in my case, I was getting dressed for the effect my smock would generate. I was putting on costume.

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[69] Henry Glassie, *Material Culture* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999), 51.
[70] Pravina Shukla, *Costume: Performing Identities Through Dress* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2015), 3.
[71] Joanne B. Eicher, "Clothing, Costume, and Dress," In Steele, *Berg Companion to Fashion*, 151.

Ultimately, the primary difference between costume and dress "lies in the ability of garments to differently project identity." Most individuals establish a connection between certain forms of dress and a particular identity, especially in relation to occupation, sports, and religious affiliation. Costume, on the other hand, is typically differentiated from dress in its "rarity, cost, and elaborate materials, trims, and embellishments, and in its pronounced silhouette or exaggerated proportions." [72] All dress is an expression of identity, but when the identity being expressed is singular and significant, the clothing is considered costume, "or special dress that enables the expression of extraordinary identity in exceptional circumstances." [73] Costume, like improvisation in music, aids individuals in displaying identities normally hidden and not expressed through daily dress. In costume, people are literally engaged in some sort of "performance." In performance, both costume and music rely on collaboration within a social network, a process which in turn strengthens social relationships in a community.

The intended meaning of clothing depends on the specific context in which it is worn. Similar garments, or even the exact same garment, can transmit different messages in different contexts. A smock worn by a man on the streets of Accra in Ghana is daily dress; the same garment worn by passive participants in traditional ceremonies, such as myself at the Dagara funeral, is a uniform; worn by gyil players the smock becomes a costume. Folklorist and anthropologist Pravina Shukla, in her novel *Costume: Performing Identities Through Dress*, argues "costume–as opposed to uniform–is defined by the wearer's intentions and behaviors." [74] Shukla reasons wearing a French maid uniform to work on Halloween is acceptable, and even daring, yet on any other given day is perceived as inappropriate and outright preposterous.

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[72] Shukla, *Costume: Performing Identities Through Dress*, 4.
[73] Shukla, *Costume: Performing Identities Through Dress*, 14.
[74] Shukla, *Costume: Performing Identities Through Dress*, 5.

While the smock fluctuates in meaning as most garments do in different contexts, it treads the line and perhaps could be perceived as a costume and uniform simultaneously. The word "uniform means 'uni-form' (one form, all alike)." [75] Gyil players and male attendees of a funeral are expected to wear smocks, marking the garment as a uniform; yet, smocks also help both groups "elect, embrace, and display special identities that are not expressed through daily dress," designating the garment a costume.[76] Contrary to dress but in agreement with costume, uniforms rely on a shared clothing code to project certain identities.

Some identities, such as those constructed by others and ascribed to a particular person or group, are natural and uncontrollable. By contrast, elective identities—accentuated through costumes and in some cases uniforms—are deliberate, the result of personal or collective motivations.[77] In her novel *Costume: Performing Identities Through Dress*, Pravina Shukla discusses seven types of motivation that lead to costumes expressing elective identities. One motivation, sociability, is particularly applicable within the framework of this analysis. Shukla defines sociability as the process of forming a cohesive social unit through a shared clothing code. "Uniforms," Shukla argues, "are meant to replace personal identity with a collective one." [78] To all intents and purposes, musicians and dancers wear smocks to a Dagara funeral much like members of a sports team wear matching uniforms to a game. Baseball managers wear the same uniform as the players they coach, effectively creating a perception of equality, while hockey coaches traditionally wear suits and ties, distancing themselves from their players, whom are underdressed by comparison. All Dagara musicians, no matter their rank, wear smocks.

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[75] Jane Tynan and Lisa Godson, *Uniform: Clothing and Discipline in the Modern World* (Great Britain: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019), 1.
[76] Shukla, *Costume: Performing Identities Through Dress*, 5.
[77] Shukla, *Costume: Performing Identities Through Dress*, 250.
[78] Shukla, *Costume: Performing Identities Through Dress*, 251.

However, just as there are discrepancies between different sports, so too are there clear differences in clothing codes at Dagara funerals, which will be discussed more in the following section on the smock and gender.

Intertwined in Dagara culture, gyil music and smocks are extensions of the self. Gyil music, like the smock, expresses either personal or collective identities, with practices such as improvisation generating distinction between performers and performances. Both enable the construction of fresh identities and in doing so elevate one's self-image, rather than lower or alter it in its entirety. On one hand, wearing smocks and performing standard gyil repertoire is key to the formation of a cohesive social unit and sense of collective identity amongst the Dagara people. On the other hand, the inherent variety in smock colors, patterns, and styles alongside the improvisatory nature of gyil performances promotes the creation and outward expression of personal identities. Identities that are not fixed but rather take form as a result of context.

For the sake of this study, the smock will be theorized as both a uniform and costume to fully understand the extent to which it interacts with the gyil in Dagara society. Special attention will be given to costume and its perpetual contribution to the expression of identity, especially in the context of a Dagara funeral. Smocks are carefully chosen by gyil players to not only elicit meaningful communication but to aid in the successful execution of a performance, which should involve engaging with the audience. An analysis of my experiences playing, learning, and listening to gyil repertoire in addition to wearing my smock to a traditional Dagara funeral reveals the connection between clothing and music, uncovering their potential to preserve Dagara culture through promoting the expression of elective identities.

B. Smock and Gender

Smocks, while crucial in reinforcing Ghanaian and Dagara identities, are typically reserved for males, implying a distance between genders. Women generally wear either a *lapa* or *kaba*, the former functioning as a skirt tied around the waist or entire body and the latter a combination of a blouse, skirt, and cover cloth.[79] When playing the gyil, women either have to wear pants, reposition themselves in relation to the instrument, or cover their laps with a cloth.[80] Gyile are positioned low to the ground and played sitting on a stool, with performers resting their hands between their legs; for this reason, the female body poses a challenge to aspiring female gyil performers, demonstrating how the performance practice of the gyil is gendered. With a difference in clothing comes a difference in privilege. In particular, a reference to the limited extent to which women can participate in the musical performance of a Dagara funeral.

Every musician and dancer with whom I attended the funeral was male and wearing a smock. Nearly every male in attendance, barring some few exceptions, was wearing a smock. The performance, led by the gyil and including elements of song and dance, was orchestrated and carried out by men. The women in attendance, of which none were wearing a smock, did partake in dance, but never as initiators, only as followers. Much of the existing gender norms surrounding the structure of musical performance in Dagara funerals can be attributed to the gyil's mythical origin.[81] Knowledge concerning the construction, performance, and repertoire of the gyil is thought to have been gifted to the Dagara people from a male hunter who inherited the tradition from dwarves, or *kontomble*.[82] This theme of lineage, as presented in the myth, exists in contemporary Dagara society for knowledge of the gyil is transmitted within "families with a

[79] Falola and Salm, *Culture and Customs of Ghana*, 114.
[80] Lawrence, "Sounds of Development?" 210.
[81] Dankwa, "Sounding the woods," 65.
[82] Jerome Balsab, conversation with author, July 17, 2022.

history of xylophone playing." [83] Men, as I came to realize while engaging with gyil music across multiple settings, both private and public, not only make up the majority of gyil instrumentalists but are expected to maintain the masculine nature intrinsic to the instrument.

That is not to say no woman has ever played or will play the gyil. Percussionist, writer, and avid gyil performer Valerie Naranjo is a pioneer in the percussion world for her role in breaking down boundaries of gender and genre. Naranjo's performance on the gyil for Chief Abeifa Karbo III of the Lawra people stirred up controversy and disrupted longstanding traditions, arguably for the better. Following her performance, Chief Karbo III declared "From now on, women will be allowed to play the gyil!" [84] My gyil instructor Jerome Balsab recounted his experience observing and learning from female gyil players, declaring "My auntie was a great gyil player" and "so good she played at big festivals." [85] While women are not entirely prohibited from performing the gyil in public settings, the general consensus that the instrument is of masculine origin and should exclusively be played by men persists in the vast majority of Dagara societies.

The same can be said for smocks, of which women seldom wear but rather participate in their production for men. Smocks and gyil music, or more broadly speaking costumes and music, are intrinsically linked in culture and therefore an absence of one affects both. In Dagara culture, women either play the gyil or wear smocks, never both at once and generally outside of public spaces such as funerals. Wearing costumes and playing instruments are acts of performance that rely on a larger social network to express one, unified identity. Collaboration from all members

[83] Dankwa, "Sounding the woods," 65.
[84] Shane Jones, "PAS Hall of Fame: Valerie Naranjo," (Percussive Arts Society, n.d.), https://www.pas.org/about/hall-of-fame/valerie-naranjo.
[85] Jerome Balsab, conversation with author, July 17, 2022.

of a community, regardless of age, class, or gender is essential in articulating and establishing a collective identity, that when viewed in an interactive context, contributes to sustaining culture by and large. The desire for social connection and interaction is innate to the human experience and made possible through the collective act of wearing costumes.

C. The Weight of Wearing a Smock

Unfortunately, the most noteworthy element of smocks cannot be derived from a picture. Smocks are heavy, much heavier than any piece of clothing I am familiar with. My smock weighs in at just over four pounds. To put that into perspective, an average medium sized t-shirt made from cotton weighs approximately one third of a pound. On the day of my first Dagara funeral, I would come to wear my smock for nearly eight hours. Although created using heavy fabrics, smocks are "sewn to appear as loose garments to allow fresh air to circumnavigate around the body." [86] While this may be true for most smocks, including my own, I was nevertheless drenched in sweat and exhausted from the day's activities. (See Fig. 6.)

[86] Emmanual R. K. Amissah and Osuanyi Quaicoo Essel, "Smock Fashion Culture in Ghana's Dress Identity-Making," *International Institute for Science, Technology and Education* 18, (2015): 34.

Fig. 6. Wearing my smock to a funeral

Reflecting upon my experience, I arrived at a critical realization: I did not play the gyil nor did I dance much, yet I felt worn down. For hours, the gyilimbwere, wearing their smocks, masterfully filled the funeral grounds with song, only taking one hydration break during their entire three-hour performance. For hours, the dirge singers rotated between singing and dancing, their smocks swirling in dramatic style, adding beauty to the overall performance.[87]

Captivated by the performance, I lost sight of the extensive effort the performers were exerting. An effort that reaches far beyond wearing a smock in performance, but rather reflects long-standing traditional Ghanaian values. Ghanaians are hard-working, so much so that in 2018, a report by Bloomberg financial journalist Justin Fox found Ghanaians to be the most hardworking immigrant group in the United States.[88] After having lived with a Ghanaian family

[87] Amissah and Essel, "Smock Fashion Culture," 34.
[88] Justin Fox, "Want Educated Immigrants? Let in More Africans," (Bloomberg, Bloomberg

for nearly a month and interacting with the local townspeople of Medie, this report comes to no surprise. Often times I would find myself in disbelief as my teacher Jerome would depart a regular weekend social gathering around 1:30 a.m. only to be up and ready at 5:30 a.m. for work the next day. Jerome's days were typically crammed with a mixture of rigorous house work, teaching, and performing, much like the day of the funeral.

Over time, I found that most Ghanaians, no matter their age, approach every day much in the same way. That is, *carpe diem*. To seize the day as a Ghanaian is to give everything one does one-hundred percent. When they work, they work from sun up to sun down. When they eat, they make enough food for family, friends, and passerby to enjoy. As for the Dagara, when they play the gyil, they "constantly try and push the limits of your ability to match their own endurance." [89] Fatigue, and even pain, are signs of effort, critical to a meaningful performance. The frustrations of daily life fuel an energetic performance characterized by blistering tempos and powerful volumes. When Dagara wear smocks, either as casual dress or a costume for a special occasion, they are displaying much more than exquisite patterns and eye-catching colors. Their smocks symbolize a larger Ghanaian identity rooted in determination and resiliency.

Dagara take pride in their musical and costume cultures as it is a reflection of themselves, their people, and Ghana as a whole. Smocks are heavy and playing the gyil creates unimaginable blisters, but Dagara do not view these things as a burden but a privilege. Ethnomusicologist Deborah Wong reflects on her experiences with taiko drumming, asserting, "It's not the aural damage I'm proud of—it's the fact that taiko has left its mark on me."[90] It is a privilege to carry

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L.P., May 16, 2018). https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2018-05-16/let-in-more-africans-if-you-want-educated-immigrants#xj4y7vzkg?leadSource=uverify%20wall.

[89] Vercelli, "Performance Practice of the Dagara-Birifor," 136.

[90] Deborah Wong, *Louder and Faster: Pain, Joy, and the Body Politic in Asian American Taiko* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 160.

on years of tradition. It is a privilege to play music and wear smocks with friends and family, as much as it is to work and eat good food. With more Dagara, especially the younger generation, opting out of wearing smocks to special occasions like funerals and more women assuming a place behind the gyil at public events, there is a fear that "traditional" Dagara culture is at stake of being compromised.

The tradition is evolving; however, Dagara have yet to lose sight of their collective identity formed around values like hard work and determination, despite what some Dagara may think. Wearing a football jersey to a funeral disrupts the tradition of wearing a smock, yet still is evidence of hard work as jerseys are expensive and for many Ghanaians I interacted with, would take time to acquire the necessary money. Women playing the gyil opposes the instrument's masculine nature and history, yet is another example of the result of hard work and perseverance in expanding this tradition to wider audiences. Ultimately, it will take hard work to diminish the value smocks and gyil playing have in symbolizing traditional Ghanaian values and forming a collective Dagara identity.

D. Collective Dagara Identity

Smocks are not only representative of Dagara culture, but rather the Ghanaian nation as a whole. On March 6, 1957, Kwame Nkrumah and his fellow pan-Africanist compatriots declared Ghana's independence from Great Britain, setting forth a new, post-colonial trajectory for the entire African continent. Nkrumah, who would become Ghana's first president, addressed the newly formed nation wearing not a Euro-centric suit nor even a highly popular and revered, traditional Asante kente cloth, but just the opposite—a simple smock.

His choice of costume for such a momentous occasion reflects both his desire to freely express himself, free of the constraints of European colonialism, and establish a collective

Ghanaian identity built upon rewriting the "misconstrued history of Africans as people without history." [91] Nkrumah's act generated a collective dress identity within Ghana, bonding the peoples of the savannah in the north to those living off of the coast in the south, while simultaneously encouraged personal expression—as a Dagara, northerner, Ghanaian, and African.

Like the groups of people found in Ghana, smocks come in a wide variety. The Dagomba, a neighboring ethnic group to the Dagara, classify smocks into six categories: [92]

1. *Yanschichi/Dansichi* (sleeveless smock)
2. *Bingmbaa Bari* (smock with sleeves)
3. *Kpaakuto* (smock with wide and large sleeves)
4. *Sandan Yibu* (translates to "leaving early morning")
5. *Yebili* (for title holders)
6. *Kparigu* (chiefs' smock for enskinment[93])

Each of the above six classifications of smock is then differentiated even further through varying design and stitch patterns. Although color frequently possesses symbolic connation in culture, there is no clear motivation for Dagara when selecting the design of their smock, other than aesthetic appeal. Yet, like other art forms, especially music, aesthetics are crucial in defining taste as an indication of personal and collective identities. Our taste can help "form social groups and signal to others who we are and where we stand in society." [94] Some

[91] Amissah and Essel, "Smock Fashion Culture," 32.
[92] Amissah and Essel, "Smock Fashion Culture," 34.
[93] "Enskinment" is a term used in Northern Ghana to describe the installment of chiefs. See *Undesirable Practices* by Jessica Cammaert for more information.
[94] Fingerhut, J., Gomez-Lavin J., Winklmayr C. and Prinz J.J, "The Aesthetic Self. The Importance of Aesthetic Taste in Music and Art for Our Perceived Identity," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11, (March 2021): 2.

sociologists and aestheticians preach the idea of aesthetic tribalism. That is, "taste choices come in groups." Shared aesthetic commitments within a social group often lead to an unknowing adoption of more of their tastes and choices, which "gives our aesthetic participation a highly social touch." [95]

African music, in particular the Dagara gyil tradition, "mirrors and inflects the collective profiles of its land, people, material and spiritual resources, and overall culture." Musicologist Kofi Agawu contends African music has "collectively inscribed" and "interrogated sets of values in which a manifest plurality subtends a deep, internal singularity." [96] Dagara music and costume, in tandem with aesthetics, are dynamic and expressive in their balance between individual and collective expression.

I chose my smock just as a gyil musician picks the appropriate repertoire to play at a Dagara funeral. In choosing a smock with wide and large sleeves, I was joining the musicians, dancers, and other male attendees in their costume tradition. In choosing a piece to play at a Dagara funeral, the gyil player will pick a piece from the standard *Bine* repertoire that respectfully honors the deceased, while pleases those living and in attendance. Attracted to its combination of red, white, and blue stripes, in large part a reflection of my American identity, my smock best suited my "style," in both my obvious outward and maybe not so obvious inward appearance. (See Fig. 7.)

[95] J. Fingerhut, et. Al, "The Aesthetic Self," 2.
[96] Agawu, *The African Imagination in Music*, 3.

Fig. 7. A closer look at my smock

In selecting a piece to play at a funeral, a gyilimbwere looks for material that will allow the greatest extent of improvisation for themselves, despite the fact that other musicians are involved in the performance.

E. Costume, Personal Expression, and Musical Improvisation

The act of costuming encourages individuals to form larger social units, bonding through a shared clothing code; yet it also supports personal expression, for even uniforms may display slight differences in style, color, and size, not to mention every costume's image is influenced by its wearer. Gyil music functions much in the same way as standard repertoire is differentiated in performance through the "quality of improvisations" from each and every performer.[97] There are many ways in which to define improvisation in a musical context. It can either be affiliated with composition as found in definitions such as this: "to compose (verse, music, etc.) on the spur of

[97] Dankwa, "Sounding the woods," 69.

the moment," or contextualized in performance, as seen in this definition of improvisation: "The art of performing music spontaneously, without the aid of manuscript, sketches or memory." [98] While similar in their explicit meanings, the latter definition suggests improvised music is created out of nothing. Still, both definitions indicate improvisation is directly related to personal expression. That it is perceived to be a straightforward and personal statement from the performer.

In regards to Dagara improvisation, the resulting product resembles dialogue, and as it happens, in more than one way. Like a conversation between two people, there are a particular set of stock phrases comprising a musical improvisation's overall structure; however, just as there is room for personal expression and creative interplay in speech, so too can a Dagara musician combine established musical phrases with inspired musical licks to form an improvisation that "vocalizes" a personal viewpoint to the community. On one hand, some art forms, especially free jazz, demand musicians form a unified sound by playing melodic and rhythmic phrases without any inhibition.[99] On another hand, other musical traditions, including many in Sub-Saharan Africa, rely on a set of learned procedures from which improvised patterns can be assembled in real-time. For example, in the Southern Ewe Atsiagbekor dance, the lead drummer's patterns contradict those of the other instruments, denoting a "freer" and more speechlike character grounded in improvisatory roots. The patterns do not materialize out of "an empty head" but rather are formed from memory by "certain stock phrases" associated with the particular dance.[100]

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[98] Philip Alperson, "On Musical Improvisation," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 43, no. 1 (1984): 19.
[99] Phillippe Carles and Jean-Louis Comolli, *Free Jazz/Black Power*, Translated by Grégory Pierrot (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2015).
[100] Agawu, *The African Imagination in Music*, 184-185.

Improvisation has had a "steady role" in the practice of Western music arguably as far back as the fourth century and in Dagara music, improvisation has been placed squarely in the center of their musical, social and political activities for as long as the gyil has existed.[101] According to gyil master Bernard Woma, "*Bewaa* music is the community mouthpiece through which people engage in dealing with issues of their daily circumstances." Serving to inform and educate, *Bewaa* music is prized for its "compositional flexibility…ubiquitous in Dagara music making." [102] *Bewaa* music, though structured, is subjected to improvisational practices as carried out by the performer. More often than not, *gyilimbwere* will use their improvisations to share their experience about an everyday circumstance. For example, the *Bewaa* song, "*Eissie Baalu*"—meaning HIV-AIDS sickness—was composed by a Dagara woman in response to the then ongoing 1980s HIV-AIDS pandemic afflicting her village. A personal reaction and honest expression of her identity, the unnamed woman composer used her song to explore sexual morality within Dagara culture, specifically focusing on sexual promiscuity among young women. Although no longer a pressing health issue for Dagara communities, "*Eissie Baalu*" remains as popular as ever. A standard repertoire of *Bewaa* songs existed in the 1980s and still does to this day, yet not one existing song could properly express on a personal level the challenges young women were facing amidst the pandemic.

Another popular *Bewaa* song that enables personal expression, one I learned how to play on the gyil, is entitled "*Yaa Yaa Kole*", which simply translates to "begging."

Yaa yaa kole. Zelle x2

Beg small or keep begging.

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[101] Alperson, "On Musical Improvisation," 17.
[102] Woma, "The Socio-political Dimension of Dagara," 50.

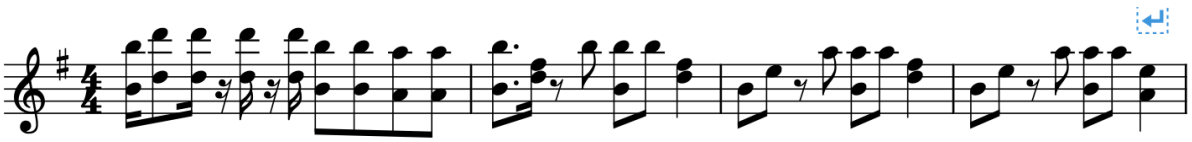
Yaa yaa kole. Zelle yaa yaa o puo wa pelle o i kop.

When she is happy, she will give it to you.

The lyrics, although simple, effectively inform Dagara of traditional norms concerning "protocol, morality and etiquette" in traditional dating.[103] It is custom in Dagara communities for a man to seek the assistance of a close friend or family member to propose to a lady of whom he wishes to marry. Often times, the process requires patience and perseverance of all parties involved. Thus, "*Yaa Yaa Kole*" serves two functions in Dagara culture: first, to remind men of the high level of etiquette and patience expected of them during the courting process; and second, to be used as a form of communication by both men and women to express their personal experience during courting.[104]

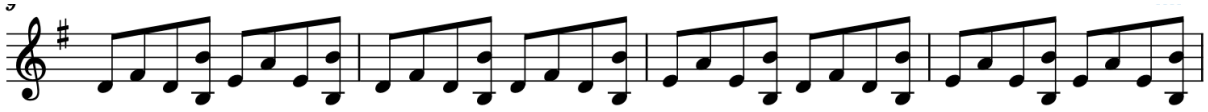
"*Yaa Yaa Kole*" not only promotes communication through the lyrics but in the improvised variations played on the gyil. Similar to other pieces found in the *Bewaa* repertoire, "*Yaa Yaa Kole*" is constructed in a song-melody-solo format. It is important to note that "*Yaa Yaa Kole*" as I learned it and am presenting here now, was arranged by my gyil teacher, designed specifically to teach non-Ghanaians. (Ex. 3.1a.-c.)

Ex. 3.1a. *"Yaa Yaa Kole*" Song

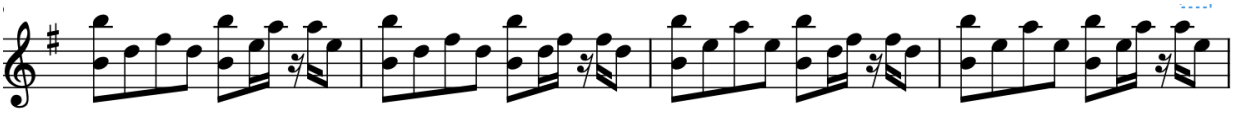


Ex. 3.1b. *"Yaa Yaa Kole*" Melody

[103] Woma, "The Socio-political Dimension of Dagara," 51.
[104] Woma, "The Socio-political Dimension of Dagara," 52.

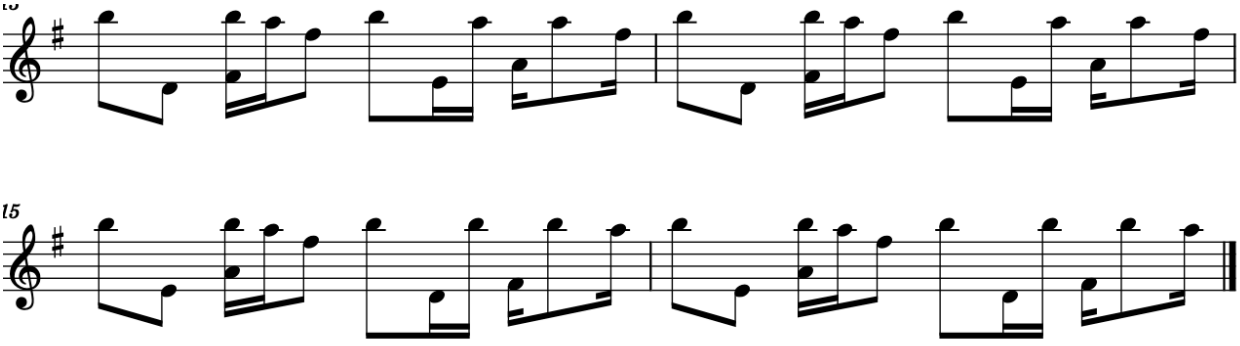


Ex. 3.1c. *"Yaa Yaa Kole*" Solo



Regardless of its simplified nature, it is equally subjectable to the same level of critique and analysis an accurate rendition of this piece would undergo. The melody and song sections, reversed if thinking in terms of western music theory, are straightforward in their performance by both of my gyil teachers, Jerome Balsab and Alex Woma. (See Ex. 3.1a.-b.) Where the two differ are in their approach to the solo section of "*Yaa Yaa Kole*," with Woma expanding upon the variations taught by Balsab. (See Ex. 3.2.)

Ex. 3.2. Improvised Variations on *"Yaa Yaa Kole*" Solo



Notice how Woma utilizes both rhythmic and melodic variety as tools to expand upon what is really just a basic template for a song. His energetic and youthful personality emerges through the music, emphasized by means of faster rhythms and added chord voices. It is in his

improvised embellishments that his "voice" on the instrument is heard and distinguished from other gyil players.

Any musician performing in an ensemble understands the concept of "one band, one sound" and will assume their participatory role; yet in that same sense, every musician understands individual musical expression is key to unlocking the full emotional potential of a piece. While perhaps not intending to comment on the subject of "*Yaa Yaa Kole*" himself, Woma is certainly inviting those who hear his emotional, personal performance to reflect on and react to the piece themselves. The fluid, interactive dynamic between personal and communal identities exists on a smaller, focused scale in gyil ensembles, but is also reflective of the greater aggregation of Dagara societies. The formation of personal identities is crucial in the development of gyil music and performers as well as Daraga people in general. Amidst a growing trend of foreign cultural customs merging with Dagara traditions, Dagara people find themselves at a bit of an "identity" crisis so to speak.

F. A Change in Wardrobe, A Change in Culture

Smocks are changing, just not in the way one would think. For the most part, the materials, patterns, and styles that make up smocks have changed little if at all. Their use in Dagara funerals as a costume persists, enabling the expression of personal and collective identities. Their use as daily dress is as common as the sandals and flip-flops they pair it with. Where there lies any discrepancies is in their classification as a uniform in Dagara funerals. Like the traditional dog meat I enjoyed with a not so traditional Guinness malt drink, it is just as possible to see a t-shirt, emblazoned with the word "Nike" across the front at a funeral as it is a *Bingmbaa Bari*, or smock with sleeves.

While some Dagara, especially the younger generation, may choose to wear casual, "urban" clothing to a sacred event, their decision, besides angering those wearing smocks, reflects the cross-cultural interactions taking place in contemporary Africa. The participation of women as gyil performers or smock wearers not only denotes an evolving tradition but disrupts the masculinity associated with such music and clothing. Now more accessible than ever before, gyil playing and smock wearing better promotes collective expression, while simultaneously dismantles cultural constructions of gender. Uniforms are most effective if all members of a particular group are participating, unchanging in form and character. However, where uniforms fail is in their ability to enable personal expression. Perhaps, by rebelling against tradition, women and the younger, "t-shirt wearing" generation, are in fact exploring the greater depths of their inner selves, in turn displaying it for all to see.

Folklorist Pravina Shukla argues "all clothing is significant" in a particular context; however, "daily dress is a solo act whereas costume comes of collaboration." [105] Daily dress is an ordinary product derived from an ordinary process. That is, it moves from maker to seller to consumer. Costumes are produced for special occasions, or in Shukla's words, a "spectacle." [106] Smocks, while both daily dress and costume, are at their most effective when worn as a costume for a spectacle that brings together its participants to escape the monotony of daily dress. Moreover, costumes inherently carry a transformative quality that suits them for ritual. Dagara wear smocks for transformative rites of passage, for naming ceremonies, marriage, and funerals. Costumes and rituals elevate daily dress and life to a place of new meaning and beauty. All

[105] Shukla, *Costume: Performing Identities Through Dress*, 269.
[106] Shukla, *Costume: Performing Identities Through Dress*, 269.

clothing is worn to achieve the personal needs of the self, and it is through studying costume the function of all dress in life is understood to a greater extent.

The introduction of different clothing into established rituals has and will continue to shape Dagara society's perception of identity, both personal and collective. "Colonialism…" Ghanaian musicologist Kofi Agawu argues, "…has produced a complex musical society in Africa." [107] Not only exclusive to music, colonialism has greatly impacted costume and dress. In a new environment, foreign modes of expression, both through music and clothing, will either retain their original forms, transform indigenous forms, or in some cases have no impact at all on indigenous forms.[108] Postcolonial Africa is therefore best thought of as a unique array of cultural practices. Improvisation is inherent in the Dagara gyil tradition, despite its evolution and adaption of western improvisation techniques and sounds, akin to jazz. Smocks will come and go, and come again. Clothing will always support the expression of personal identities and in regards to the smock, personal expression will never "fall out of style" as long as the gyil keeps sounding and smocks are still worn.

[107] Agawu, *Representing African Music*, 22.
[108] Agawu, *Representing African Music*, 22.

CHAPTER 4. CONCLUSION

Spending time in Ghana, as short as my trip was, taught me two decisive things about Dagara culture: first, I acquired so much information, yet know so little; and, second, dog meat tastes like lamb. Upon my return from Ghana, I struggled to fully comprehend the experience, equating it to an otherworldly adventure. None of my immediate friends, family, or classmates have traveled to Ghana, let alone immersed themselves in its rich, diverse musical traditions. To them, I was a gyil expert. To my friends and instructors in Ghana, I had barely scratched the surface.

After I shared my experiences with others, describing the funeral for what must have been the umpteenth time, I began to see my stories and experiences in a new light. It was at the Dagara funeral that I wore my personal smock and at its conclusion, tried dog for the first time. While my purpose in attending the funeral was to observe a gyil performance, I also participated in Dagara costume and food traditions. The rest of my experiences with the gyil, as I would later conclude, panned out in much the same way. I was constantly surrounded by the gyil, whether as a participant or observer, and in every instance I was wearing clothing, thank goodness, and either had just eaten, was actively eating, or eagerly awaiting a meal. Just as gyil repertoire is selected depending on the context, so too is clothing, when functioning as costume, and food, when prepared as a delicacy or an everyday meal. For the Dagara, music, food, and clothing are universal modes of cultural expression, bound together by the gyil.

My unique experiences in Ghana helped me to form different lenses through which to examine the gyil. Clothing and food studies highlight the extremely important socialization aspect of Dagara music culture, yet to be explored in-depth in terms of scholarship. While a step towards progress, my work represents but a fraction of what is possible through studying the gyil

in a variety of cultural contexts. One avenue for future research concerns studying the gyil as it relates to social hierarchies within Dagara society, comparing the relationship between gyil teacher and student with that of a Dagara parent and child. Another path could explore how and why Dagara culture coalesces around a certain set of values, particularly determination and authenticity, in both gyil performance and everyday life. Finally, research into the evolution of gyil repertoire through language has yet to be explored in-depth, in particular how the rise of Twi in recent years as the region's lingua franca will affect future Dagara gyil compositions and performance practice.

The most exciting aspect of my research was realizing I have only just begun. How can I claim to know a lot about a culture that not only has an oral history dating back a thousand years, but is currently evolving and adapting to foreign influence? The integrity of traditional Dagara music, food, and clothing is challenged as cultures collide resulting in pop music played alongside the gyil, dog meat enjoyed with a Coke, and Nike apparel worn amongst smocks.

The Dagara ethnic group is entering new territory and has been in the process of doing so since the rise of globalization. In traveling to Ghana and completing this project, I too found myself in new territory. Like the Dagara, I struggled to process a wealth of new information and change; however, I eventually found my footing in simple truths. Dog meat tastes like lamb, smocks are unbearably heavy, and the gyil is the focal point of Dagara culture. I first had to identify what I knew to be definitively true before I could assume control over my situation.

Despite dealing with an issue far greater in scale and magnitude than my own, perhaps it would behoove the Dagara to identify their own common truths. They know they enjoy eating dog and wearing smocks just as they do drinking a coke and sporting some new Nike. They recognize their culture is transforming, regardless of whether or not they support such changes to

their music, food, and clothing traditions. Above all else, they know the gyil to be the focal point of their culture and foundation for the formation of their personal and collective identities.

Reiterating the words of my gyil teacher Jerome Balsab, "If the gyil has died, Dagara itself has died." Change is inevitable yet too often construed as negative. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, traditions are the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation. Nowhere is it written or implied that traditions are unchanging. Culture is a process. It is the manifestation of change and continuity within a society. It has no conclusion and neither does the gyil. No matter the context in which it is used, the songs that are played, or the frequency in which it is heard, the gyil is the lifeblood of Dagara culture, and therefore cannot "die."

I am not a gyil expert. I barely qualify as a novice, but in my little time spent in Ghana and much more researching and speaking with gyil players, both in the United States and abroad, I realized my experience was far greater than learning some notes. Learning how to play the gyil demands total cultural immersion. A knowledge of *Bewaa* and *Bine* repertoire is not an understanding of Dagara people and their culture. It would be easy to teach and perform a solo arrangement of "*To Me Na*." It would be difficult to describe the sweet taste of saab after a long day of wearing a heavy smock and playing the gyil under the brutally hot Ghanaian sun.

The notes that make up gyil songs mean more than what is played. It takes the Dagara voice and spirit to infuse them with deeper meaning. Ideally, anyone interested in learning how to play the gyil could travel to Ghana as I did, totally immersing themselves in Dagara culture. Unfortunately, travel is expensive and relatively few gyil players reside outside of Ghana. A dose of realism and it is back to square one.

The challenge is figuring out how to respectfully present Dagara culture outside of its home. Although I have no definitive answer, I do see a few approaches gyil researchers and performers could take in their display of Dagara culture. I would first like to restate that there is truly no substitute for learning gyil repertoire from a master Ghanaian musician. For those able to make the journey, understand there is no equivalent experience. My goal is to expose audiences outside the African continent to Dagara traditions with the help of a group of new gyil players, of which I consider myself a member.

As a carrier of the tradition, I do not intend on taking the instrument out of its context for a performance at the risk of jeopardizing its history and cultural significance in the process. Instead, I plan on structuring my performances not in concert formats, but rather in more participatory contexts. With the intent to serve the greater Dagara culture, my performances will act as interactive demonstrations, in which audience members are encouraged to participate and ask questions. Stories from my time in Ghana will be shared in between pieces, providing much-needed context for an audience most likely unfamiliar with Dagara culture. Smocks will be worn and their function in displaying identity made known, reflecting both individuality and collectivity inherent to Dagara performance yet foreign to the western custom of "concert attire." Perhaps not dog meat, but *saab* and other Dagara dishes will be served either before or after a performance. At the very least, recipes will be distributed to each attendee. Incorporating Dagara food together with music invites concertgoers to not only make the connection between the two but reflect on the notion that for the Dagara, gyil music is food for their culture. My efforts to highlight the relationship between Dagara music, food, and costume traditions stem from a responsibility I feel to use knowledge and experiences I obtained while in Ghana to their fullest

potential—namely to preserve and expand these traditions' value and significance for our contemporary world.

Dagara culture is like a beautiful symphony. The tragedy myself and many other members of the new generation of gyil players face is that we only get to hear it wearing earplugs, with all the distorted melodies and muffled sounds. We only get a hint at the true beauty that would be experienced if we could hear the orchestra free of any obstruction to our ears, as the Dagara do. I am not a Dagara, nor do I live full time in a Dagara community. Ultimately, Dagara—those who live and breathe their culture as it exists in their communities—are the culture bearers and therefore are in control of their culture's future, the writers of their own story.

My experience with their culture is comparable to that of putting on a costume. When I was in Ghana, I "wore a costume" that enabled me to play on the gyile they do, eat from the same pots, and buy clothing from the same sellers. Now away from those surroundings, I aim to assemble similar costumes to recreate the environment I experienced for audiences outside the African continent, the same environment where gyil music, smocks, *saab* and dog meat all thrive. It is a choice to wear a costume, and whether or not you are Dagara, that choice will be difficult. Though it is my hope that any reader of this document understands that the decision to fight to keep Dagara culture alive, to put on such a costume and embrace it—music, clothing, food and all—should not arise from fear for its death, but love for its life.

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