GYIL MUSIC OF THE DAGARTI PEOPLE: LEARNING, PERFORMING, AND REPRESENTING A MUSICAL CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

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The *gyil*,¹ or xylophone, played by the Dagarti of Northwestern Ghana, Southern Burkina Faso, and Eastern Cote d'Ivoire, has steadily gained popularity in recent years. Although the land inhabited by the Dagarti is far from any major city, musicians have brought the gyil to national and international audiences. Communicating as performers and teachers across cultural divides is often challenging. It raises a host of questions about the nature of the music itself, its context, and what cultural outsiders are able to absorb.

This thesis is an exploration into the challenges that gyil players face in negotiating musical and personal identity when teaching and performing outside their musical culture. Specifically, I study these issues as they apply to master musician Bernard Woma. After providing background information on Woma, the gyil, and the Dagarti people, I divide the remaining chapters among performer, teacher and student perspectives on cross-cultural communication.

First, I contemplate several different performing scenarios; how they signify a change in presentation and audience expectation. I introduce the idea of gyil performance as concert piece, highlighting many of the adjustments made to fit this aesthetic.

Further adaptations must be made in the development of a gyil pedagogy. The role of gyil instructor does not exist as such among the Dagarti, rather musicians learn by and large independently, beginning at infancy. Thus, those who wish to teach the gyil to people outside of Dagarti society are faced with a daunting task: to create their own method of instruction, condensing years of knowledge developed in an environment of musical and cultural immersion,

¹ More than one *gyil* are called *gyille*. 
and restructure it into a framework to be digested by those with limited knowledge of its context, and varying degrees of musical skill. Here I examine several teaching methodologies. I likewise explore the meanings four American students have derived from their experiences learning the gyil. My research is based on extensive lessons and interviews with Woma, observation of concerts and workshops, and interviews with several advanced players from the United States.
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PROLOGUE

At the end of a long day, and not even forty-eight hours in country, my fellow students and I find ourselves in Medie, a suburb of Ghana’s capital city of Accra. As part of Bowling Green State University’s Ghana workshop, we await the beginning of a performance by the Dagara Dance Ensemble. Sitting on benches and plastic lawn chairs arranged in a semicircle around a square pavement “stage,” we ready ourselves for our first introduction to Dagara music and dance. Though the Dagara occupy the Upper West region of Ghana, some 300 miles away, to our group this performance marks a point of arrival. Here at last is a chance to see the music and dance performed by representatives of that culture, in a setting that feels more authentic than we could hope to find in Northwest Ohio.

The musicians start first. Two men wearing woven smocks begin playing xylophones with gourd resonators under each key, and a third joins in playing a gourd drum with a reptile-skin head. A line of dancers makes its way to the stage, alternating men and women. They all look young and strong, wearing brightly colored matching costumes. We are ready, cameras and video recorders in hand, searching for the perfect shot, trying to record an event we only marginally understand.

Two months later, while flipping through photo albums of the event, I noticed that my colleagues focused their lenses on a surprisingly diverse set of images. Where one person might have taken a group shot, another focused on a dancer’s feet stomping the ground, or on the musicians playing fiercely in the center of the dance circle. Some chose to take pictures of the audience, either the local school children that peered into the Dagara Music Center from the gate, or us, the paying customers.
During our stay in Medie, we all watched the same performances and studied with the same teachers, but every one of us got something different out of our interactions. Though we encountered the same people, the storylines carried out between each of us proved to be unique, and we would all give a different answer if asked that most unfair question upon returning from travel, “What was it like?”

In this thesis I confront questions of meaning and interpretation as the gyil music of the Dagara people travels into different spaces, both geographical and ideological. The music seems flexible in almost every imaginable way, able to adjust to commercial markets, classrooms and performance halls. Master gyil player and teacher Bernard Woma serves as a focal point, demonstrating the choices a musical representative must consider when introducing a tradition of music making to others. Through the process of presenting gyil music and Dagara tradition to cultural outsiders, the musical culture of an entire region is funneled through Woma and then disperses again among his students and audiences across continents. Every student or listener with whom he comes into contact interprets according to his or her own experience and ideas, and among these, a handful of students go on to become representatives of the music themselves.

I question the extent to which these recreations of Dagara culture resemble musical practice in the Upper West Region of Ghana. Likewise, I examine how Woma as mediator determines how best to represent the music that he loves, and the people that form so much of his own identity. I argue that gyil music can be conveyed as a local, national, or international phenomenon, alternately specialized or general, it’s meaning derived from social function or an intensely personal connection. While Dagarti music and music making are riddled with distinctive markers, they defy discussion in absolute terms. It all has to do with where a person
chooses to focus her gaze, and what personal experience and representation make it possible to see.
INTRODUCTION AND THEORY

Outline of Chapters

Chapter one serves as an introduction, providing information on the Dagara people, master gyil player Bernard Woma, and my own background and motivation for undertaking this research. In chapter two I address the ways in which Woma’s representations of himself and the Dagara shift as he moves between a number of local, national, and international contexts. In traversing these different frameworks, a number of oppositions become apparent, encompassing a variety of perspectives on time, community, scope, and social function. Rather than lending themselves to clear either/or binary divisions, such oppositions are fluid, adjusting in various increments as situations demand. Woma provides an apt example of how a single performer can represent a variety of different ideals depending on the audience and context. He plays an active part in this process, selecting repertoire and making artistic decisions that cater to the needs of a given situation.

Discussing how a musician navigates a variety of social frameworks has proven timely. “Preservationist” ethnomusicology has fallen out of vogue. Traveling to distant, inaccessible locations and studying people who live in cultural isolation is showing itself to be a glorified ideal. Current research must take into account musicians and musical traditions that are part of a vast system of interconnected contexts, facilitated by technology and advanced modes of communication. Heterogeneous identities and musical representations are a fact of most societies, and of most musicians within those societies.

Chapter 3 is devoted to various methods and approaches taken by accomplished gyil teachers as they introduce the music and culture to those with little background in either. The Western notion of private teacher does not exist as such within Dagara culture, and the process
of learning how to play cannot easily be replicated in Western music frameworks. A gyil teacher, then, is faced with both practical and philosophical challenges. A teacher must create ways of communicating differences in approaches to counting, expressing sonority, and a host of other issues. Here I refer both to interviews and written material, as well as my own observations. While Woma’s teaching method, which he titles the Dagara Music Center method, features prominently, I also discuss the approaches outlined by Trevor Wiggins and Joseph Kobom, Atta Annnan Mensah, Kakra Lobi, and several gyil players from the United States who are now trying to figure out their roles as teachers of a tradition that is not theirs by birth or upbringing. These different teaching methodologies go beyond communicating sheer technical know how to show the values and priorities of each instructor. What meaning and what understanding can cultural outsiders hope to attain through studying the gyil, and how does this echo the place and people from which it originates?

One can hardly talk about the significance of Woma’s influence without mentioning those he has influenced. In the fourth chapter, I provide biographical information on four of Woma’s most advanced American students and colleagues. Through interviewing these musicians—all creative, talented, and motivated people in their own right—I have come to better appreciate the variety of interpretation and approaches that can emerge from vastly different individuals coming to the music from similar backgrounds. In turn, each musician has found a different way of incorporating gyil music into his or her life and identity.

Theory

This study is necessarily reflexive, taking into account my own position as both researcher and gyil student. After all, although I may eventually come to know something of a
larger community—indeed, perhaps several large communities—I have done so as an individual learning primarily from another individual. The direction my study has taken me and the information given and absorbed is a direct result of who I am as a person. Various scholars in ethnomusicology and related fields have provided good examples of how reflexive writing can enhance the reader’s understanding of a given situation, while avoiding turning ethnography into autobiography. Maureen Mahon’s Right to Rock (2004), Gregory Barz and Timothy Cooley’s Shadows in the Field (1997), and Paul Berliner’s Soul of Mbira (1978) have all served as models for how to insert my presence into this study in a constructive way. This study is also a product of a certain place and moment in time, and as such it also borrows from phenomenological thought.

Also important to this discussion of mediating musical meaning is the notion of cosmopolitanism. Thomas Turino’s book, Cosmopolitans, Nationalists, and Popular Music in Zimbabwe (2000), has been particularly influential. Not only does Turino shed light on the both local and translocal nature of cosmopolitanism, he also highlights the processes whereby a local musical tradition interacts with national and international social structures.

**Defining the Field: The Role of Fieldwork**

I have undertaken of fieldwork on the gyil over the past year, but the notion of the field has been flexible. This is the study of a process of communicating and recreating community, the articulation of impressions of a place, a people, and a tradition by those removed from it or introduced to it from elsewhere. For me, the field has been a space where an idea of Dagara life has been recreated. I have made observations in the field, conducted interviews, and otherwise engaged in ethnographic activity both in the United States and Ghana, but distance from the
place of the gyil’s origin, the Upper West Region of Ghana, has remained constant. I am adding my impressions to others’ impressions of Dagara life, conjuring in some abstract way an environment that I have read about, that I can try to link to my experiences elsewhere in Ghana, that I have seen in home videos, but nonetheless, a place I have never visited.

Woma cannot substitute for fieldwork among a community, for he can only communicate through his own experience. We cannot know the Dagara people through our interaction with one Dagara person. All the information we get is filtered and singular. Instead, Bernard represents a type of interactive ethnography, sharing his lived experience with his students. He selects from images, sounds, and ideas that he deems somehow significant. Significance in this sense is not only a matter of what is important about the music of the Dagara, but in terms of Woma’s assessment as to what it is that we are after, what is important to us as students. In turn, I have added my own filter, taking from a year’s worth of study those aspects that have been meaningful to me.

**Literature Review**

Whereas Ghana is one of the African countries most frequently visited by ethnomusicologists, the amount of information available on the music in the Upper West Region remains scant. Two Ph.D. dissertations have proved helpful in this study, both out of UCLA: Larry Denis Godsey’s *The Use of the Xylophone in the Funeral Ceremony of the Birifor of Northwest Ghana* (1980) and Mary Hermaine Seavoy’s *The Sisaala Xylophone Tradition* (1982). While these works address the Dagara only peripherally, they nonetheless shed light on social and musical trends in the general area. Both Godsey and Seavoy refer to Jack Goody’s writings on social organization among the Dagarti, particularly concerning kinship and family makeup.
Carol A. Lentz has published a number of useful articles concerning a wide array of social issues, including the *bagr* spiritual practices, contemporary interpretations of Dagara origin myths, and various cultural festivals that take place in the Upper West region.

Determining which xylophone is used by which people in the Upper West can be confusing, especially since several terms can be used to refer to the same group of people, and there is a good deal of musical borrowing that takes place between ethnic groups. Atta Annan Mensah’s article “Gyil: The Dagara-Lobi Xylophone (1982)” has proven particularly useful in sorting through these differences.

In addition to theoretical and descriptive resources as to the xylophone traditions of the Dagara and surrounding groups, there are a handful of resources for the musician, performer, and music educator. In 1970, Mitchell Stumpf published a small volume of transcriptions, including an introductory section with a brief explanation of the instrument and its cultural context. Twenty-two years later, British ethnomusicologist Trevor Wiggins and gyil player and teacher Joseph Kobom collaborated on a similar work, although slightly longer and more in depth. Not only do Wiggins and Kobom provide information to help readers interpret the transcriptions, the authors also instruct the readers as to how to teach the material in a classroom setting. Valerie Naranjo and Mark Stone, two American gyil players who have worked with Woma, have also produced transcriptions of gyil music. The primary focus of their transcriptions is to make the music accessible to other percussion instruments, particularly the marimba.

As performing music from a wide array of locations and cultures finds its way into college music programs both in the United States and abroad, ethnomusicologists are confronted with issues of ethical teaching practice. Issues related to how these groups are taught, the context communicated, as well as the musical and performative aspects of the tradition negotiated have
become important areas of ethnomusicological enquiry. Woma and several of his students have addressed these issues regularly when teaching gyil music to an outside audience, particularly an audience situated in a college setting. *Performing Ethnomusicology*, (2004) edited by Ted Solis, has been particularly useful in highlighting several issues of cultural representation faced by performing ensemble instructors. The authors in this volume take a reflexive look at their roles as directors of performing groups, asking important questions about what their students can learn outside of a music’s cultural context, what can be achieved in these settings, and how that reflects the cultures they aim to represent.

Being that my research relies heavily on interviews with Woma and several gyil players from the United States, scholarship on personal narratives have been of particular interest. Veit Erlmann’s *Music, Modernity, and the Global Imagination: South Africa and the West*, (1999) has been a valuable resource in considering the construction of personal narratives as they relate to cross-cultural communication, and an array of social and political factors. Likewise, the *World of Music* Vol. 43(1) 2001 issue titled, “Ethnomusicology and the Individual,” lends many valuable perspectives on various individuals’ roles in shaping others’ impressions of a broader musical phenomenon as teachers and performers.
CHAPTER 1.
SETTING THE SCENE: INTRODUCING THE INSTRUMENT, PEOPLE, AND PLACES

Introducing the Dagarti

The inhabitants of the northwest corner of Ghana and neighboring areas of Burkina Faso and Cote d’Ivoire are known by many different names. Several scholars refer to the residents of this region as LoDagaa, whose subgroups include the Lobi (or LoWilisi), Birifor, Sisaala (or LoSaala), LoWiili, Dagara (also Dagarti), Dagaba, and LoPiel. According to ethnomusicologist Larry Dennis Godsey, the term LoDagaa is not indigenous but was created by anthropologist J.R. Goody, and has remained in use among subsequent researchers in the Upper West Region. Many people from the Upper West Region use the name Dagara as an overarching term instead of LoDagaa, referring specifically to the Dagara, Lobi, and Sisaala subgroups. While Goody’s term is in some ways less confusing, I prefer to use the latter distinction, both because it was used by the majority of my teachers and informants, and it is more specific than the classification, LoDagaa. For the sake of clarity, I use the term Dagarti when referring to the Dagara, Lobi, and Dagaba ethnic groups.

Further distinctions among subgroups can be made geographically. Woma, for example, will talk about being from Nandom. Nandom is the name of the city closest to Woma’s village, and is also used to refer more generally to the surrounding area.

While language and music are considered interconnected among the various ethnic groups of the Upper West Region, some share language similarities but use different gyil tunings, or vice versa. Atta Annan Mensah points out, “The Wangara, the Sisaala and the

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2 These include Larry Dennis Godsey and Mary Hermaine Seavoy.
4 Bernard Woma, interview, 9/19/04
Dagaba, neighboring groups speaking different languages from the Lobi, use the same tunings as the Lobi *kogvil* on their xylophones; but the LoBirifor who speak mutually intelligible dialects with the Dagaba have a type of tuning that is not usable by the Dagaba. In this paper, I use the term *gyil* in a general sense, unless otherwise indicating an instrument used by a specific Dagarti subgroup.

Although they occupy a relatively small region, the Dagarti are constituted by multiple national identities, spanning the borders between Ghana, Burkina Faso, and Cote d’Ivoire. As a result, a Dagara musician will often share more cultural background with a Burkinabe or Cote d’Ivoirian than with a Ghanaian from Accra or Kumasi. After decades of living with political boundaries that are largely irrelevant to their ethnicity, salient features of their ethnic identities, musical as well as linguistic, continue to cross fluidly over national borders.

**Bernard Woma**

Bernard Woma is from the Gbanne Clan of the Dagara people. He was born in 1963 in Hiineteng, one of the northernmost villages of Ghana’s Upper West Region, near the Burkina Faso border. Many Dagara believe that players are born with a predisposition to the *gyil*, and signs of their talent become apparent in early childhood; as Woma terms it, they are “perceived born” *gyil* players. Born with his thumbs clenched between his first and middle fingers at birth, as a player would hold the *gyil* mallets, Woma was predicted to possess great talent as a *gyil* player. His father purchased a pair instruments upon which he began playing when he was two years old.

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6 The information presented here draws on personal interviews with Woma, and also his biographical information posted on [www.bernardwoma.com](http://www.bernardwoma.com).
At age five, Woma was introduced to Ziem Tibo, a xylophone maker and player who became Woma's mentor and guide. Having no elder gyil player in Woma’s family, Tibo assumed the role of his “gyil father.” As such, Tibo helped guide Woma’s training as a gyil player, teaching him the history of the instrument, and seeing after all spiritual aspects involved in becoming a mature player. Such was his success that Woma soon became known for his talent and was invited to play at funerals and weddings throughout the Upper West Region of Ghana.

Preoccupied with farm work and xylophone playing, Woma did not begin school until he was ten years old. Even then, it took an older brother to convince his father that Woma should go to school. His father eventually acquiesced, providing that Woma would continue to work on the farm and that his brothers pay the uniform and school fees. While in school, Woma played at the local Catholic Church, where the gyil is used during services in much the same way that an organ might be in the West. There he began to set his own words to traditional melodies and compose his own music.

In 1982 Woma left school due to lack of funds and moved to Accra, where he found a job working long hours, seven days a week in a private home. Occasionally given Sunday nights off, he would go to Mamobi, a Dagara section of Accra, where he played the gyil among other Dagarti who had also moved south in search of the opportunities a large city might afford.

Eventually, Woma’s musicianship came to the attention of Professor Albert Mawere Opoku and Frances Nii-Yartey, former and current directors respectively of the Ghana Dance Ensemble, Ghana's national dance company. Woma was offered a position as the troupe’s solo xylophonist. He passed the tenure period in 1989 and has been a valued member ever since. While Woma was hired for his skilled gyil playing, he was able to advance in rank and thrive within the company by studying other ethnic groups’ musical traditions. Over the years he has
become well versed in a wide array of styles of Ghanaian percussion. In 1990, Woma was honored with the "Drummer of the Year" award, the only time such an award has been given to a mallet percussionist. In 1992, the Company moved from the University of Ghana to the National Theatre. Woma retained his title as solo xylophonist and was also appointed the master drummer. Woma continues to participate in the musical life of his hometown of Hiineteng, maintains his affiliation with Ghana Dance Ensemble, and directs the Dagara Music Center.

Few, if any, have contributed as much to the presence of the gyil in the United States as has Woma, who, from his base in Fredonia, New York, enjoys a distinguished and growing reputation as performer and teacher. He has been a teaching affiliate of the State University of New York at Fredonia since 1999. Woma continues to teach at SUNY Fredonia while working toward a degree in music business. In addition, he has cultivated working relationships with music departments at a number of universities throughout the United States.7

In workshops and lessons to groups and individuals, Woma has instructed hundreds of students in his lifetime. Some have no musical background while others come to the instrument as accomplished musicians already; some express a casual interest while others become dedicated apprentices, even successful performers in their own right. In the final section of this thesis, I focus on four of Woma’s most advanced students in the United States: Mike Vercelli, Valerie Naranjo, Mark Stone, and Kay Stonefelt. All four are accomplished percussionists who have studied the gyil over an extended period of time. Not only are they students, but each has integrated the instrument into his or her professional life in some way. While their stories are similar in some respects, all four engage with Woma and with the gyil in different ways. They have found different meaning in the repertoire, the instrument, and the resultant community, both among the Dagara and abroad.

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7 These include Williams College, Oakland University, and Bowling Green State University.
Myself

I happened upon studying the gyil as a direct result of Woma’s far-reaching network. Through professors Steven Cornelius and Rebecca Green, Woma has fostered strong ties with Bowling Green State University. The first group of students to attend the Dagara Music Center in 1999 hailed from Bowling Green. Cornelius and Green have brought groups there in subsequent years as part of a bi-annual summer study abroad course on Ghanaian art and music. I met Woma as a participant in the 2004 summer course, staying two weeks at the center. Upon my return from Ghana, I arranged to continue studying with Woma, and commuted to his home in Fredonia, New York, in order to take lessons with him and interview him about Dagara music, his ideas on teaching, and his life as a musical ambassador.

After deciding I wanted to write my thesis on the gyil, I suddenly found myself in a very uncomfortable situation. Here I was, having found an instrument about which I was enthusiastic, and in Woma, an accomplished and dynamic teacher. Yet, I felt at a loss as to what I could possibly write about with confidence. I have never been to the Upper West Region of Ghana. The only gyil performances I had witnessed were enacted for the benefit of cultural outsiders. Were I to focus on Dagara life, culture, and musical tradition as experienced in the Upper West Region, I could only hope to provide a secondary source. Instead, I have chosen to look at how information is relayed to those removed from a music’s context, and what conclusions students can hope to draw from learning in this way. Furthermore, although Dagara culture is an essential part of studying the gyil, the instrument is not isolated. Woma alone has performed on four continents; I discovered the instrument while going to school in northwest Ohio. Other individuals who have had direct contact with Dagara society provide valuable descriptions and
insights into gyil music. Meaning is constructed and internalized by students through their own experiences and understandings as well as Woma’s.

Although geographically, linguistically, and culturally removed from the Dagara, my position as a college student learning a foreign musical practice is hardly atypical. While some issues and challenges particular to us as individuals and the instrument itself are highlighted, others presented here transcend our specific circumstances, echoing the experiences of numerous teachers and students communicating across cultural barriers.

The Gyil

Construction

Instrument characteristics vary somewhat from one Dagarti subgroup to the next in terms of tuning and number of keys. While some subgroups may attach a carrying hoop or weave a basket at one end of the instrument to protect its largest gourd resonators, most elements of the gyil’s construction remain consistent throughout the region. Their keys are cut from a hard wood, and left to dry completely. Some instrument makers smoke the moisture out of the wood to speed up the drying process. The frame is bound together with cowhide. The keys are tied together and fastened to a self-supporting frame using antelope hide.

One of the instrument’s distinguishing features is their gourd resonators. A dried and hollowed out gourd is suspended below each key, with certain exceptions. Some 14-key

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8 Atta Anan Mensah addresses these differences among ethnic groups in his article, “Gyil: The Lobi Xylophone” Journal of African Studies, Vol. 9, no.3 (fall 1982) 139-154.

9 Apparently, different LoDagaa ethnic groups use different types of wood. Naranjo (www.mandaramusic.com) claims the Lobi gyil uses legaa wood for keys, while Mary Hermaine Seavoy claims the Sisaala are distinct in their use of butuma wood, while the Senegal (or African) rosewood is more widely used (1982:265). They are all, however, described as hardwoods.

10 Among the Dagarti, there are other types of xylophone that do not use self-supporting frames. These include pit xylophones, where keys are suspended over a trough that acts as a resonating chamber. However when discussing the gyil, players generally do not refer to these instruments.
instruments used in spiritual contexts will not have resonators underneath the 5th and 10th key, counting from the highest pitched key. These two keys are not meant to be played at all. On some other Dagarti gyille, the lowest pitched key is not used as a pitched key, and is only struck with the back end of the mallet, making a resonator below this lowest key no longer necessary.

Small holes are cut into the gourds and then covered with a thin white membrane, which produces a buzzing sound when the corresponding key is struck, much like the timbre produced by waxed paper in a kazoo. Traditionally, instrument makers use the membrane from spider egg casings. In recent years, however, alternatives have been used, including a certain type and thickness of paper found in some postal envelopes and packing material.

Instrument makers are themselves players, yet not all players construct their own instruments. Various types of gyil have different tuning systems, yet they are by and large pentatonic. Edmund Dorwana, who makes most of the instruments used at the Dagara Music Center and that Woma sells abroad, tunes the keys from memory, then compares the intervals between various keys. To attain a lower pitch, wood is thinned in the center of the underside of the key; at either end to raise the pitch.11

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Figure 1: The underside of a gyil key

Figure 2: Each gyil key is connected using twine, tied in such a way that it can be shifted toward either end of the instrument.
Figure 3: Keys are then stretched over the gourd resonators and fastened at either end.

Figure 4: View of the underside of the gyil. Note the white circles on the gourds; the thin membrane that produces the gyil’s buzzing sound.
The Ensemble

Different Dagarti subgroups use different gyil ensembles. The Lobis, for instance, have a traditional solo repertoire while the Dagara tend to play exclusively in an ensemble. A typical Dagara gyil ensemble will consist of two xylophone players—a lead player and a supporting player—and also a drum. The type of drum likewise varies from one ethnic group to the next. Among the Dagara, the drum used is called a *kuor*. It consists of a gourd body with a monitor lizard-skin head.

Beyond the Dagara ensemble of two gyille and the kuor, several other sounds contribute to the musical texture. The master gyil player will often wear a rattle around the wrist of whichever hand plays the highest pitched notes (usually the right), punctuating the rhythms played by that hand. When a musician is immersed in the music, he might emit a low, gravelly sound, almost like a growl. Other people in the community contribute to the musical texture in a number of ways as well. At a funeral, the instrumental music may accompany a dirge singer, or inspire wailing from the bereaved. At other times, audience members may join in singing with the gyil, or add a hocket style of handclapping. Dancers can contribute to the sonic environment as well, wearing metal jingles around one or both legs, or playing metal castanets. Likewise, they may encourage each other or indicate changes in the dance with shouts and ululations. These sounds combine to make a rich musical texture, to which everyone has a way of contributing.

Context

It is difficult to overstate the centrality of this instrument and its players within Dagarti social life. As American gyil player Valerie Naranjo notes, “The gyil is used for everything in
life; from weddings and funerals to dances and everyday recreation.”

Here I provide a survey of basic cultural context.

The Musicians

Among the Dagara, gyil players are important and respected members of society. They are essential to a variety of social and spiritual functions. As Woma put it, “They are the mouthpieces of the community; they are the problem solvers… That’s why when you go to funerals, when a gyil player is playing, you put money on his forehead or you put it in his pocket because you appreciate what he is doing. He is keeping the community together.”

The gyil player is also able to address awkward social problems, such as one time Woma recalled from his youth when a song was composed to criticize the behavior of a woman with a stealing problem. The music was played during the middle of the night so as to hide the musician’s identity. Criticisms can be aired in other contexts, too. Kuwabong mentions that a stingy relative may be chastised in a funeral setting by a xylophonist’s song. Likewise, Woma used a song to criticize public drunkenness, for which he was both applauded and reproached, depending on the audience member’s take on the issue. Such commentaries are “problem solvers,” he says.

Although gyil playing is an essential part of Dagara culture, it is not generally thought of as a career option. The work is deemed important, but monetary compensation is minimal. Most Dagara are farmers, a crucial activity during and after the rainy season, when the majority of the year’s supply of food is gathered.

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Musicians have a number of ways of distinguishing themselves as accomplished players. For the young musician, the invitation to perform at a public gathering is one such mark. There are also a series of performance competitions, ranging from school-wide or inter-school talent competitions to regional competitions for the mature player, such as the annual Kobine festival.

Cultural festivals provide interfaces where local and national politics come into contact, and also where innovations and ideas about local culture, performed by local, national and international parties, are dispersed. They focus around an expression of the local’s relation to the regional and the national and involve the coming together of political representatives of various levels, youth groups, and community organizations. Two of the most prominent of these cultural festivals are the Kobine and Kakube festivals, which anthropologist Carol Lentz discusses in depth.¹⁴ Lentz calls these festivals “neo-traditional” because, although based around traditional observances, they were formalized after Ghana gained independence as an expression of national versus local ethnic identity.

Northwest Ghana

In Ghana, where “every instrument talks,”¹⁵ the tonal language of the Dagara can be easily imitated on the gyil. The instrument acts as a “mouthpiece,” announcing the death of a villager, telling proverbs, or providing social commentary. As linguist Dannabang Kuwabong says of the gyil repertoire, “These songs warn, sympathize, blame, or praise but are never neutral. Xylophone pieces help the living to examine and re-order themselves.”¹⁶

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Spirituality

There are both sacred and secular instruments. No special preparation is needed before playing a student’s or a tourist’s instrument. However, for a gyil to be suitable for performance in certain settings—a funeral or a bagr spiritual ceremony, for instance—the instrument has to undergo certain forms of spiritual preparation. Likewise, the instrument has to be cleansed after such events, so as to properly attend to any spirits with which the instrument might have come into contact.

Additionally, some of the gyil’s spiritual contexts are made manifest in a player’s etiquette. After he is finished playing, the musician is supposed to leave the mallets resting on the instruments, should the spirits wish to play. Woma claims to have heard the spirits playing on several occasions while growing up in Hiineteng. A variety of other behaviors should only be undertaken by those who have undergone some form of spiritual fortification. A layperson should avoid stepping over a gyil. Likewise, to play a gyil with the highest pitched keys to the player’s left is considered risky behavior, due to the instrument’s spiritual associations.

Origin

During my first formal interview with Woma, I asked him about the origin of the gyil. Woma groaned in reply, telling me that everyone wants to know where the instrument came from, and that nobody really knows. There are several explanations as to how the instrument came to the Dagara, and as tends to happen with an oral tradition, there are many variations of each story. He relayed a few of these origin myths to me, the first one I had come across previously in Trevor Wiggins’s and Joseph Kobom’s book, Xylophone Music from Ghana, as follows:
A man was walking in the bush when he heard a fairy playing the xylophone. 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 capture 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 bars]. He must also find a special long calabash which grew by the river, cut it and put it into water until the inside rotted, then hollow it out [to make the resonators]. The man did everything he was 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. 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.  

Woma clarified that the fairies discussed by Wiggins and Kobom were elsewhere referred to as dwarves. They are not thought of as fanciful characters, like those described in Western fairytales, but rather almost as savages, or lesser-developed humans with spiritual powers. Both Woma and his student, Mike Vercelli, recounted stories of players who had allegedly been captured and raised by dwarves, only to come back into society years later. Upon their return, such individuals exhibit exceptional skill in their playing.

Another story Woma told me was of a village that had been raided in the Upper West. The inhabitants had fled the village itself and were scattered in the woods. One man, in search of a way to bring the villagers together again, came across a piece of wood. He suspended it over a ditch and hit it. Liking the sound, he amassed some other pieces of wood, and called his fellow villagers together through the xylophone he had made. The gyil is still used to call people together, most often in announcing the death of a villager. 

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Gender

In this study I refer to gyil players in general as being male. There are some Dagara women who have begun to play, but gyil playing has remained, by and large, a male activity. Part of the reasoning behind this division may be found in one of the stories of the instrument’s origin, given above, where fairy blood supposedly causes women to become barren. Woma adds, “What the men didn’t think about is that the men can be barren, too.”

In the past few generations, some women gyil players have emerged. According to Woma, most only play in the home, continuing to think of public performance as “a man’s thing.” Gradually, however, women are beginning to play in public and to gain recognition, participating in funerals, other cultural events and celebrations, and even competitions.

During my first visit to Fredonia, I asked Woma several questions about women’s relationship to gyil playing. His girlfriend, Lizzy, was visiting from Ghana at the time. At a few points during the weekend’s conversation, Woma invited Lizzy to play, which she declined. He then used these instances to support his point, that women just don’t seem interested in playing. Lizzy would protest, saying she knows she can play if she wants to, she just didn’t feel like it then. On the last day of my stay, while Woma was reviewing my notes, Lizzy came over to the gyil, placed directly in front of where we were sitting, picked up the mallets, and began to pick out a melody that Bernard had taught me that morning. While in Ghana, I had never seen Lizzy play a gyil. That day, she did not sit down to perform, or to play vigorously—she hit the keys very lightly. To me, this move seemed deliberate, the message being less about what she was playing and more in the act of picking up the mallets.
CHAPTER 2.
NEGOTIATING IDENTITY AND MEDIATING MEANING IN GYIL PERFORMANCE

As the gyil has traveled to different audiences, its musical and ideological significance has been renegotiated. Here I examine how, as this highly regional music is dispersed around the globe, its practice and performance gets reinterpreted and represented by both cultural outsiders and the Dagarti themselves.

Looking from a national or international viewpoint, the amount of land that the Dagarti occupy is relatively small despite the diversity of people who inhabit it, and it is easy to forget the cultural and musical diversity contained within the region. While as outsiders we might consider playing gyil music an inherently specialized activity, a cultural insider might easily find it otherwise. For instance, from a local perspective, Woma shows himself to have developed a broad musical base through combining musical elements from various subgroups of the Dagarti. While Dagara music is normally played on the 18-key gyilmo, and Woma teaches and performs largely on the 14-key logyil, an instrument associated with the neighboring Lobi tribe. In addition to performing the Dagara repertoire, which uses two gyille, Woma also performs and composes solo pieces.

When performing elsewhere, his choices serve practical purposes—the 14-key logyil is easier to travel with than its 18-key counterpart, and playing solo pieces affords him greater independence and mobility as a performer—however with an “insider” Dagara audience, using elements from a variety of ethnic groups provides exposure to other regional styles. Woma noted that few Dagara musicians can perform gyil music from neighboring ethnic groups like the Lobi or the Sisaala, and he prides himself on the breadth of his own repertoire.
Ethnomusicologist David Locke noted, “There are multiple versions of repertory among Ghana’s professional and amateur performing arts troupes, and striking differences between the ways these dances were done on stage and in their natural setting among the people. Through many changes, including costuming, choreography, adaptation to the proscenium stage, the Ghana Dance Ensemble modifies regional traditions to suit an urban environment and an audience that reflects a variety of backgrounds. Due to the group’s multiethnic makeup, they can claim a certain level of cultural authenticity, even if the dance or music does not represent the regional culture of the majority of performers. Thus modified to suit an urban context and disseminated among the musicians and dancers, a performance of a regional style may be used to signify a tradition without being representative of it.

Woma’s experiences with the Ghana Dance Ensemble’s representations of Dagara music and dance illustrate this situation. When he joined the company in 1989, the Ensemble represented the Upper West Region by performing Bewaa, a style of recreational dance. Though the dancers were skilled enough to execute the dance steps, they had difficulty following cues from the gyil, and instead tended to dance based on the supporting drum part, which, traditionally at least, does not dictate the progression of a dance. In the process of choreographing the dance moves for the Ghana Dance Ensemble, the dancers’ reliance on the kuor in turn changed the fundamental style of the music. In many other dance styles the Ghana Dance Ensemble performs, changes in movement will be communicated through a master drum, such as the Ewe atsimevu or the Akan atumpa drums. Perhaps due to dancers’ individual cultural backgrounds, perhaps because of the prominent positioning of musical styles that use a

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lead drum to cue dance changes, and likely due to both, the xylophone music of Northwest Ghana and the accompanying dances proved challenging for the country’s national dance troupe. Thus, when he gained authority and tenure as the group’s master drummer, Woma was faced with a dilemma: either perform a drastically modified version of the dance, or perform the music by itself, further sacrificing important aspects of its social function in order to provide a more accurate rendition of the music. Woma opted to represent his people through the music only, unaccompanied by dance. Through this process, the Ghana Dance Ensemble’s performance of Bewaa has been modified to account for both local and national audiences’ expectations, but it embodies neither.

The Dagara Music Center

Medie, a suburb of Accra, proves to be a very diverse place. Although located in an area traditionally occupied by the Ga ethnic group, the town itself is home to a variety of different ethnicities, among them the Ewe, Asante, and Dagara. The town hosts a Catholic Church and a Hare Krishna temple. On the outskirts of town, a person can buy what is reputed to be the best palm wine in the area, while in the opposite direction is a distillery for Voltic, one of the most widely distributed bottled water companies in Ghana. From the paved main road that runs through town diverge several dirt roads. One of these leads to a large complex, of an impressive size and solid construction. This is Woma’s home, and likewise the home of the Dagara Music Center (DMC). Hundreds of miles from the Upper West Region, the DMC has proven a nucleus for Dagara performing arts in the greater Accra area.

In the five years of the DMC’s existence, it has become a financial success. This is evidenced by constant additions and renovations to better accommodate the number of students,
most of who travel from abroad to take lessons in Woma’s compound. While the DMC is staffed largely by Dagara, it represents a variety of influences that extend far beyond the Upper West Region, reflecting a diversity that might seem at home in a place like Medie, where such a confluence of ideas and activities is almost characteristic. Whereas Medie is a mixture of the experiences of entire populations, the DMC most clearly represents the combination of experiences of its director and mastermind, Bernard Woma.

The DMC is successful for many of the reasons Woma has been so successful as an individual musician; namely, it has been designed to facilitate a variety of modes of representation (from local to national and even international contexts), and to accommodate visitors with interests both general and specific. It is not a strict recreation of Dagara life and culture, but rather a selection of Dagara ideas made accessible to non-Dagara with varying musical backgrounds. Performances by the Dagara Dance Ensemble are not unlike the Ghana Dance Ensemble in their presentation and costuming; music and dance lessons are scheduled in blocks and are taught systematically as a result of Woma’s many years teaching non-Dagara students. In this sense, the DMC is as much a product Woma’s experiences in Accra and outside of Ghana as it is a product of his Dagara upbringing.

The DMC’s teaching format is flexibly designed, catering to those looking for musical specialization in Dagara music and dance, and to those wanting a broader glimpse into the national culture. We can understand this strategy by looking at the differences between what was taught to two different student groups—one from Bowling Green State University, the other from Berklee College of Music—that came to the DMC in the summer of 2004. For the BGSU

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2 Facilities include flush toilets, even showers, and the recent addition of several extra bedrooms.
3 The musicians and dancers have adjusted their presentation to make it more accessible to a seated audience, and easily adaptable for the proscenium stage. Costuming includes uniforms made out of matching material, and even matching tennis shoes.
students—who came from backgrounds in music, art, and other areas—the curriculum was geared towards music and a variety of traditional arts, such as pottery, kente cloth weaving, batik, and blacksmithing. Here, Woma and his staff were acting as cultural representatives on a national scale, teaching Dagara cultural activities in combination with a number of traditions hailing from all over Ghana. A few weeks later, the DMC received students from the Berklee College of Music, all specialists who were very specific about what they wanted to learn. While these students were aware that Woma and several members of his staff were proficient at any number of styles, they came to learn what the Dagara know best—their own music. Thus, the first group achieved more breadth of information while the second achieved a narrower but more in-depth training. Likewise, with the Bowling Green Students Woma leaned more heavily on national identity and culture, while for the Berklee students he focused more on his regional identity.

Musical Modification and Dagara Values

Among the Dagara, the skills demanded of a gyil player go beyond technical prowess on the instrument. Perhaps of equal importance is a player’s ability to meet the community’s needs in a given setting. At a funeral, the player picks pieces that are appropriate to the time of day and the pitches of the dirge singers’ voices. The text of the song should be not only pleasing to the ear but it should also suit the situation, be somehow applicable to the person who has died and those who are bereaved, or otherwise comment on the event at hand. Texts might depict the solitude of the bereaved family, lamenting, ‘Who is left to work on the farm, now that the

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4 Some of the Berklee students took drum lessons in *kpanlogo* music, from the Ga people southern Ghana, but they learned from Eddie, a drum teacher who is Ga, not Dagara.

breadwinner of the household has died?" Referring to social commentary, Woma frequently mentions a somewhat controversial song he likes to play at funerals, criticizing the excessive drunkenness of the funeral attendees. Furthermore, in funeral, spiritual, and recreational settings, a performance’s success is measured in large part by a musician’s ability to get people dancing. Some songs may invite people to dance, others implore those present to dance vigorously. A gyil player can make beautiful music, but if the community is not dancing, the player is not doing his job successfully.

Modifying gyil music for cultural outsiders can be interpreted as a departure from Dagara values or an affirmation of them. Modification could be seen in terms of “selling” to a Western audience, taking the music out of its social context and disassociating it with its use-value, instead framing a concert in terms of its commodity value. However, we can interpret the same adaptations as a demonstration of a good gyil player’s ability to read his audience and meet their needs. By this logic, in the Upper West Region, people show their approval with their own participation, through song and dance; in the United States, they show it through applause, and through purchasing concert tickets, instruments, lessons, and recordings.

Regardless how we choose to interpret them, modifications do happen in moving from one context to another. Mark Stone related a particularly telling experience he had while accompanying Woma on a visit to his hometown of Hiineteng. When Woma started to play his newer compositions that he performed widely while in the U.S., Stone noted,

I saw him play these pieces in the Upper West, and it’s funny because these pieces weren’t designed for that audience, and I think they appreciated it but it was sort of different and they were like, ‘Oh! What’s he doing?’ Bine and

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7 For example, both types of texts exist within the recreational Bewaa repertoire.
Bewaa flow, they are dance pieces, but these pieces that he’s created are concert pieces.\(^8\)

**The Modifications Themselves**

Interestingly, when asked about differences between the music played in these two settings, Woma was reluctant to allow that there was any significant difference between the music performed in the villages and that performed on the concert stage. Instead of focusing on the differences in the music and its presentation, Woma much preferred to highlight what qualities were shared between the two contexts, for instance the ability of the instrument to speak, and the traditional content of individual songs he performs in the United States. However, his students did not share his ambivalence in identifying ways that the music had been adapted to a Western audience. What is more, Stone, Vercelli, Naranjo, and Stonefelt pinpointed many of the same modifications.

According to Woma’s students, there are a number of ways that gyil music played in its traditional setting might vary from what Stone terms “concert pieces.” Issues of song length and repetition were among the first to be mentioned. All four students mentioned that pieces were shortened. Stone was perhaps the most specific, noting that Woma appeared to impose more of a form, and likewise introduced a greater amount of dynamic contrast to differentiate between sections and downplay the element of repetition.\(^9\) In justification of downplaying the repetitive element of gyil music for American audiences, Naranjo noted, “When you’re playing for dancing people [as is the case in most Dagara contexts] you don’t have to worry about repeating yourself. Of course it’s repetitive; it’s for dancing.” In a concert, where dancing is seldom present, and even less frequently geared toward audience participation, a musician can draw on different

\(^8\) Mark Stone, *Interview: Personal Experiences and Background Studying the Gyil*. Oakland, MI. 2/21/05.

\(^9\) Mark Stone interview, 2/21/05.
aspects of the repertoire. “When you play a concert, all these pieces have so many different variations and sections that can draw a more direct response. I try to [make use of] that if I can.”

In addition to limiting repetition and imposing more of a form in his playing, there are performative aspects of playing that Woma tends to highlight when in the United States. For example, Stonefelt noted that he uses the end of his beaters to play the gyil keys much more frequently when performing in the U.S., and that hand gestures and flourishes become much more exaggerated. Such techniques could be implemented to provide more visual stimulation in absence of dancers, dirge singers, and various modes of community participation that are culturally learned and cannot be carried out among an uninformed audience.

**Representation and Advertising, On Stage and Off**

May 15, 2005

Walking into the Center for Creative Arts in Pontiac, Michigan, The Bernard Woma Trio is finishing up a concert. The Creative Arts Center is a small space, with roughly fifty chairs set up facing a modest stage. The space has high ceilings and on the crisply painted white walls there is a wide array of children’s art. The crowd is likewise small, made up of only about twenty people, many of whom appear to be friends of the group. Of those present, roughly half are out of their seats dancing in the back of the space.

Woma had called me the night before to make sure that I knew about the concert. Likely, the trio made several such calls that night, as they do their own publicity, operating primarily through email list servers and word of mouth. This was the second of their performances that I

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10 Valerie Naranjo. *Telephone Interview: Relationship to the Gyil, Teaching, Performing.* 04/15/05
11 Kay Stonefelt. *Interview, Meeting Woma.* Fredonia, NY. 03/11/05.
had attended, the first occurring two months prior in Brooklyn, New York. The two had in common their small venues, and likewise their small, family-oriented audiences.

After the show, Woma came up to greet me. He had been there all day, having given a children’s workshop at 2:00 p.m. before this performance started at 4. He told me about how the DMC was doing, how they are working to get centralized water on the center’s grounds, and how excited he was to return there in the upcoming week. On a table by the entrance, Woma had set up a display of printed cloth, clothing, jewelry, and music for sale. He showed me the new T-shirts he’s made to help raise funds for the DMC and urged me to buy one. He turned to another bystander and helped him pick out a CD from three of his recordings. Another audience member approached Woma, having heard about the DMC to enquire about how it is run and what people do there.

Creating an Audience

A significant portion of Woma’s income comes from his role as a musical and cultural educator. In addition to performing, Woma has to create an audience that is equipped to process and engage with his music. As with the claque of the café conç around the turn of the twentieth century, Woma has to create an awareness of and desire for his music. Jaques Attali explains, “When representation emerged as a new form of the relation to music, it also became necessary to produce the demand for it, to train the spectator, to teach him his role.”¹² Unlike claquers, or any artist securely situated within today’s mass music market for that matter, Woma must act as an ambassador of a group of people and a musical genre in addition to his own self-promotion.

He has to establish an interest in Dagara music as a whole while asserting his mastery over the instrument.

Woma’s commercial success can be attributed to a variety of skills. Not only is Woma a performer; he is also a teacher and skilled promoter. By “plugging” his culture, Woma helps to formulate a demand for Ghanaian products and handiworks such as cloth and jewelry, various instruments, and lessons on how to play them. Along with his considerable talent as a musician and teacher, Woma’s professional success results from his skills as a salesman and his ability to organize himself and his time.

**Changing Contexts**

One of the gyil performances that stands out in my mind took place at the Brooklyn Center for Ethical Arts in New York. That night, two groups were featured—the Bernard Woma Trio, consisting of Woma, supporting gyil player Mark Stone, and Kofi Ameyaw on the kuor, and later Imaginary Homelands, a jazz fusion group of which Stone was also a part. During the Bernard Woma Trio’s performance, a woman approached Woma in between songs, indicating that a friend of hers, a Brazilian man, would like to come up and play with the group. Woma appeared surprised at the request, but the trio obliged, assigning the man a drum to play for the following few pieces. He emulated what Ameyaw was playing on the kuor to the best of his ability, although he was clearly a newcomer to the music. I exchanged disapproving looks with Gordon, a friend of mine and also a friend and business partner of Woma’s. Both of us were surprised at the woman’s behavior. We interpreted her actions as rude, if not ignorant, imposing her own agenda on a performance for a paying audience, introducing an amateur into a cast of accomplished musicians. She seemed to ignore that the concert was taking place at all.
In hindsight, my thoughts frequently return to that situation; how the woman and her friend behaved, but perhaps more significantly the way both Gordon and I reacted to it. Gordon and I have both been to Ghana multiple times, and consider ourselves African music enthusiasts. While in Ghana, we had striven to participate as fully in the music and dance as we could, and recognized participation as a distinguishing feature of the music. Even as we sat in the Brooklyn Center for Ethical Culture, Gordon readied some dollar bills to “dash” the performers. “Dashing” is when an audience member shows his or her appreciation for a musician or dancer by placing money on their forehead during a performance. If the performer has worked up a sweat, the bill will often stick for several moments before falling to the ground to be collected later. Gordon “dashed” all three musicians earlier in the evening, and when the audience was invited to dance, we both headed to the front of the space so we could move freely. Clearly, we both still highly valued the aesthetic of participation and wished to engage with the music ourselves. Why, then, had we found this other woman’s attempts to engage with Woma and his trio inappropriate?

The difference involves several changes in context and in audience. The venue had changed dramatically. Whereas a group of musicians in the Upper West would typically draw an informal crowd, able to interact with each other and move around of their own free will, this audience was clearly defined and for the most part stationary. Woma, Stone, and Ameyaw were introduced to us not as community members who happened to be musicians, but rather as established performers. While among the audience there were several of us who consider ourselves personally involved with either the instrument or the instrumentalists, the performers were taken as the bearers of musical and cultural knowledge beyond what we as an audience
possessed. Their separate status was further established by the mandatory $10 fee for the concert, in addition to any voluntary donation through CD sales, or “dashing.”

Along with this distinction between audience and performer, additional expectations are imposed on the performer as far as preparation. Although there was no formal concert program, there was an understanding that the musicians had at least a rough idea of the pieces they were going to perform, and that those pieces had been rehearsed as a group prior to the concert. They were not three musicians who had happened to come together for a purpose—a celebration of some sort, or perhaps a funeral—Woma, Stone, and Ameyaw were an established trio, having concertized together throughout the U.S., and having recorded a commercially produced CD.

**Jazz**

For American audiences, jazz music often serves as a useful point of departure in understanding Dagara music. American students Kay Stonefelt, Valerie Naranjo, and Mark Stone, all noted similarities with the way that jazz is structured and learned in comparison with their experiences with the gyil. Naranjo noted that many jazz musicians start experimenting with the style on their own. As with transcription, improvising on the gyil within the musical style was a skill she had first encountered as a jazz musician. Naranjo also found the two styles often used the same general form: “Many [gyil] pieces are played in much the same manner as jazz standards: first the "tune"; improvisation; then, to finalize, the "tune" again.”13 Furthermore, while Imaginary Homeland’s Detroit audiences have limited means for making sense of gyil music, they are much more accustomed to jazz. As Stone says,

> There’s a jazz scene, so when you’re playing for an audience even of non-musicians they hear things… you always are pushing yourself because you know your audience is

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informed and there are always other jazz vibes players, but when you’re playing gyil it’s like they have nothing to compare it to.\textsuperscript{14}

Possibly, with fusion projects such as Imaginary Homelands, Stone gives his audience greater access to the instrument and the music. By introducing new musical sounds and structures in combination with a more familiar style, the audience can engage with something new to them while not having to process all of the differences at the same time.

\textbf{Alternative Identities}

On April 29-30 in 2005, Woma participated in the first annual African Xylophone Festival (AXF), held in New York City. Xylophone traditions from Ghana, Guinea, and Uganda were represented, as well as several ensembles fusing African xylophone music with other instruments and musical styles from around the world. The performers represented a wide range of ages and ability levels, from St. Ann’s African Xylophone Ensemble of Brooklyn, made up of third graders from New York City, to the headlining master musicians, Woma and Guinean balafon player Famoro Dioubate. Though all the performing groups were from the United States, the AXF united a wide variety of musical styles under the shared African identity of the music they loved.

The festival served to demonstrate that a musician’s personal heritage does not always run parallel with the music’s lineage, though many musicians consider both to be important. Even without sharing a cultural history, many mallet percussionists feel that they are participating in a musical lineage. Musicians Mark Stone and Valerie Naranjo both indicated

\textsuperscript{14} Interview, Mark Stone, 2/21/05.
initially being drawn to gyil music in part out of a desire to connect with the history and lineage of the Western mallet percussion instruments.

The gyil has gained a tiny pocket in the world music industry, which is made up of several large-scale performers, but it also has numerous fringe markets with different concerns and audience demands. It is into this second niche that gyil music fits. With an audience too small to have any significant sway in the business of or the thought behind commodified music as a whole, the gyil’s localized and specific interests instead adjust to fit existing commercial frameworks. For everyone involved, gyil performance offers a variety of potential meanings, presentations, and interpretations that are anything but generic and impersonal.

While cultural connections are special and provide an inimitable relation to music, there are ways of relating to music without knowing about its role within its place of origin. Watching Woma play among a variety of audiences, it is plain to see that they engage with the sound of the gyil, its melody and rhythm, and with Woma’s skill as a player in a very strong way, even in absence of other cultural markers.
“My method of studying the music was to learn to play it myself, and therefore on the
crucial issue of judging the appropriateness of my participation in the context of my
research, I could rely on the judgment of my teachers. They had the problem of choosing
and organizing the basic rhythms of their music for me to learn, and as they paced my
exposure, they revealed their notions of difficulty and complexity...they presented a
more authentic approach to the relevant issues of music-making in the African context
than I might have obtained arbitrarily or ethnocentrically through my own observations.\textsuperscript{1}\textsuperscript{1}

While ethnomusicologist John Chernoff wrote this passage to highlight his research
methodology, the quote also makes clear the degree of control the master musician can have, and
likewise how a teacher’s input is sometimes used to signify the perceptions of an entire society.
The teacher’s role is multifaceted, involving not only the technical aspects of music making, but
also the communication of musical context and aesthetics.

For example, Valerie Naranjo described to me her first lesson with master gyil player,
Kakraba Lobi. She recalled that he presented her with a choice: she could learn in the American
or traditional fashion.\textsuperscript{2} Using an American method to learn a Dagarti musical style seemed
unfavorable, and Naranjo opted for the “traditional,” approach. This involved various practices
and musical selections that are generally avoided when teaching Westerners, starting in
Naranjo’s first lesson with \textit{piiru}, a musical style she describes as being slower and more
meditative than the traditional dance pieces. According to Mensah,\textsuperscript{3} the piece is used as a warm-
up, and is highly individualized in style. Likewise, Naranjo was taught to honor the spirits
associated with the gyil by pouring libations for them.

\textsuperscript{1} John Miller Chernoff, African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Actions in African Music
\textsuperscript{2} Interview with Naranjo, 4/25/05
\textsuperscript{3} Mensah, Gyil: Dagara-Lobi Xylophone, 146.
Although Kakraba Lobi’s teaching practices may have been laden with cultural information, even taught in a way that emphasized traditional musical practice, the teaching process itself was nonetheless a construction. After all, Naranjo was not perceived born a gyil player, and she had not been socialized as a Dagara. Regardless of the teacher or the method of learning, coming to the music as an adult and a Westerner, some aspects of “the traditional way of learning” were impossible.  

In the Upper West Region of Ghana, becoming a gyil player is a time intensive process that starts when the musician is an infant. Growing up surrounded by fellow musicians, a child learns without formal lessons, absorbing and attempting to recreate what other players are doing. As they advance, players develop their own style and musical repertoire. Thus, gyil players develop as a result of growing up immersed in the music, learning the necessary technical skills largely by themselves. Whereas this type of learning spans several years, starting from infancy, and is in many ways a process of self-discovery, teaching those outside of their society presents gyil players with a number of challenges. Each teacher must devise a method of communicating and breaking down a piece of music separate from how they learned how to play growing up. Like Kakraba Lobi, they might aspire to represent the culture through their methodology, yet a number of creative decisions must nonetheless be made. In this chapter, I examine how gyil players and scholars have approached the challenges of teaching the gyil across cultural boundaries. I first address written resources that suggest different approaches to the learning process, and then examine Woma’s teaching strategies in detail.

Written resources concerning gyil pedagogy are useful in indicating a systematic method of presenting musical material. Atta Annan Mensah and co-authors Trevor Wiggins and Joseph

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4 In fact, we could question whether, had she grown up as a Dagara woman, she would have been encouraged to play at all.
Kobom approach teaching from two distinct angles. They take two different audiences as their starting points; Wiggins and Kobom use their book to educate teachers and musicians about gyil music while Mensah offers guidelines for learning from a knowledgeable gyil player without any teaching experience.

**Wiggins and Kobom: Educating the Educators**

Trevor Wiggins and Joseph Kobom’s, *Xylophone Music from Ghana* (1992), is geared specifically toward music teachers and percussionists. Intended as a study guide and teaching aid, the book includes several transcriptions. An accompanying cassette is available, providing the student with aural examples of the music. The musical examples are presented in two parts. The first contain “simple” versions of three songs, written both in Western notation and the Time Unit Box System (TUBS) that has proven popular in a variety of percussion transcriptions. These versions are meant as classroom adaptations of more complex pieces. The more advanced versions of these songs are introduced in the following chapter, along with new material, meant for the teacher’s own education and practice. The authors also suggest ways that the music can be adapted, “with some loss of character,” to conventional Western instruments.

These selections are taken from various ethnic groups among the Dagarti, including the Dagara and Sisaala people. In addition to music from the Upper West Region, Wiggins and Kobom include transcriptions of kpanlogo and highlife music. While these musical styles did

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7 Wiggins and Kobom, 12.
not originate in the Upper West Region, nor do they characteristically include the gyil, their national popularity has prompted many gyil players to incorporate them into their repertoires.  

The multiple transcription methods and varying degrees of difficulty accommodate a variety of skill levels and modes of learning, yet several dimensions of the music are not addressed. The book’s format eliminates the potential for dialogue, making it difficult to demonstrate the diversity of musical material that can exist even within a single piece. The authors included two separate versions, but these scarcely hint at the musical potentials within a given piece. Zimbabwean *mbira* player Ephat Mujuru described similar musical potential within his own tradition, saying, “If I feel like it, I will play one piece all night long…Listen to what I am playing and the come back in a half hour and I’ll be playing altogether differently [on the same piece].”  

Whereas the main melodic material (what Woma would call the “song”) is typically fluid and improvisatory, in Wiggins and Kobom’s version it remains fixed. Although gyil music is typically tied to language, no lyrics accompany the transcriptions, leaving the student to guess whether it is connected to any specific message, and what that might be. In these ways and others, the focus of the book is squarely placed on musical sound, and not context.

### The University of Cape Coast Approach

In his article, “Gyil: The Dagara-Lobi Xylophone,” Atta Annan Mensah includes what he titles a “Working Procedure for Individual Lessons,” outlining a list of steps to facilitate the learning process. This procedure is based of “The University of Cape Coast Approach,” developed by experienced Dagara players and teachers who found themselves operating within a

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8 We should also consider that Kobom and Wiggins collaborated in Accra and not the Upper West. This choice in music could also reflect the urban environment, where kpanlogo and highlife music are well known.

university framework. Mensah’s method indicates what values he holds as important components of musical practice, and also his awareness of a variety of difficulties that are common when the music is taught in a formal setting.

Curiously, Mensah addresses his instructions not to the teacher, but to the student. Possibly, he does this in recognition that the expert musician is a product of an educational process that cannot be replicated within a university setting, and that playing the music and teaching cultural outsiders how to play involve altogether different skills. A teacher faces many challenges, including: organizing musical information, breaking a piece down by either isolating the roles of the individual hands or by playing a section at a reduced speed. The University of Cape Coast guidelines assist students in their own instruction by explaining when they are confused, and articulating their own limitations. Mensah’s methodology sets up an interesting power dynamic, where both novice and expert give instruction.

Mensah’s method includes singing the lyrics as an initial step, thus enforcing the connection between sound and linguistic meaning. He suggests the musician go through the piece, breaking the lyrics up into short phrases, and later utilizing the same approach when demonstrating it on the gyil. The student is then supposed to make clear her need for time to practice. Mensah instructs, “Do not wait to perfect the whole piece; after establishing one or two phrases, ask the expert to give you time to practice and master them.”

Another main focus in the University of Cape Coast Approach involves the selection of appropriate pieces. Mensah stresses that, at first, these should be the easiest available. This might be for the benefit of both student and the novice instructor. In recalling his first experiences teaching, Woma noted that he learned how to teach using the easiest possible

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pieces—pieces that he would not teach even beginning students now that he is an experienced instructor. While Woma still starts his students with relatively easy material, his beginning pieces have become more advanced than they once were due to his improved teaching skills.

Finally, Mensah encourages his students to transcribe what they have learned after each lesson. Although he clearly values transcription as a learning aid, his instructions quickly become confusing due to the incompatibilities of gyil music and Western notation:

Use two five-line staves—with or without treble and bass clefs. Do not use key signatures; regard your instrument as a transposing instrument. The Lobi-Dagara group use a standard pitch, which will sound approximately a major third higher than that written without a key signature. Note that the interval values on your staff do not coincide with those implied by the G and F clefs.\textsuperscript{11}

All of these authors address ways of adjusting gyil music to fit a more cosmopolitan teaching structure, but little attention is given to the ways a student can benefit by stretching his or her comfort level to accommodate more traditional aspects of gyil musical practice. Altering ingrained practice techniques can prove a rewarding experience. Michael Vercelli, for example, noted that by being held accountable for maintaining a gyil part, he was able to conceptualize performance and practice differently than he had through his percussion training in the United States. Part of this had to do with practicing in an open space. While studying at the Dagara Music Center, the immediate community of staff members, and even nearby Medie residents, could hear Vercelli practicing. Often a player would join in with a complimentary gyil line, or someone would sing or dance in relation to what he was playing. Thus, if he stopped playing, it would disrupt what everyone else was doing as well. Eventually, Vercelli came to see performance and practice as being interconnected. By the time he was faced with a “real” performance situation, much of the anxiety about playing in public was gone. After all, those

\textsuperscript{11} Mensah, “Gyi: Dagara-Lobi Xylophone,” 153.
living and working at the Dagara Music Center were already familiar with his strengths and weaknesses. Thus, he felt freed of the anxiety of proving his musical capabilities and was able to enjoy the experience. Because Vercelli was willing to step outside of his comfort zone as a student, he arrived at a new understanding of musical process. A situation that could have been seen as distracting and invasive instead became a valuable part of his education.

Vercelli found that feeling challenged, even confused by the intrinsic elements in the music can be beneficial. Now, as a teacher in Arizona, Vercelli tries to find a balance between spelling everything out for his students and leaving them frustrated and lost. Vercelli commented that, when introducing his students to a piece, “It’s important that they struggle with it first. That’s part of the beauty of oral tradition. First, make it seem abstract. [Then I’ll tell them] by the way…here’s where the beat is.”

Likewise, Valerie Naranjo found her lessons with Kakraba Lobi a refreshing challenge, demanding more of her musicianship and intellect by moving to the next lesson before the previous one felt comfortable. Kakraba Lobi expected her to be able to finish learning material on her own. Naranjo asserted, “One of the most important things I learned is how limited Euro-American pedagogy is. My mind was stretched in such a way that I had never took it for granted that I was smart enough to move forward without having to analyze. My mind is broader than any other teacher had given credit for.”

Vercelli and Naranjo both provide convincing examples of how stretching a student’s boundaries can lead to valuable insights and rewarding musical experiences. Musical adaptation, therefore, does not have to be a matter of conforming gyil musical practice to accommodate a Western-style learning system. Value can be found in musical practice as well as the sounds themselves.
Woma’s Teaching Method

In colleges and universities throughout the United States, master musicians from all over the world have been invited to give seminars, to sign on as an adjunct faculty or guest performers. They share not only their talent, but also something of what it means to be a musician in their society. Thus a single performer becomes a mouthpiece for a community, selecting from her experiences what bits of information are deemed useful, excluding others, reshaping and rephrasing information in such a way that somebody from an often radically different lifestyle might be able to understand. Below are only a few of the methods and choices Woma has made in communicating about gyil music and Dagarti culture.

Woma keeps his role as teacher separate from that of gyil father. A teacher concerns himself with producing sound, while a gyil father concerns himself with the history, practices, and spiritual matters that pertain to gyil playing. In his lessons, Woma focuses most of his time on conveying musical material, keeping spiritual and social elements in the periphery. Possibly, such matters do not get much attention because they fall under the already established role of gyil father, and need not be combined with this new, constructed position of teacher. Despite this separation between gyil musical and cultural practice, Woma’s lessons bear signifiers of his life experience, cultural values, and his own distinct personality.

Dividing a Piece: Melody, Song, and Solo

For teaching, Woma uses the terms, “song,” “melody,” and “solo” to outline musical structure. While the terms are familiar in Western musical practice, Woma gives them very specific meanings, and therefore they merit some description. Whereas the melody of a Western
composition will likely make up the song, the two terms being more or less synonymous, these terms function differently in Woma’s system.

The melody refers to a piece’s ostinato pattern, usually played continuously on the lower pitched keys under the left hand of the solo musician, or emphasized by the supporting player when two musicians perform together. This pattern can serve as a means of identifying what kind of piece is being played, and the dance patterns that accompany it. The Bewaa repertoire provides a good example. Bawaa songs constitute a recreational genre that shares a common melody, made up of eight phrases following a repeating AABABBBAB form.

The “song,” as Woma terms it, is more closely linked to what Western musicians would recognize as the melody of a piece. If a composition has words that correspond to the notes, they are featured in the song. The song and the melody are often played simultaneously, whether there are one or two musicians. It frequently occupies the higher-pitched notes on the instrument, though there are exceptions. Whereas the timeline and the melody are cyclical, the songs seem to progress in a more linear fashion. One song can easily flow into another, providing variation in both the song’s sound and meaning. While the songs Woma teaches have corresponding lyrics, the words are seldom incorporated into a gyil lesson. Woma will introduce a new piece, stating its name and explaining what it means, sometimes even singing along with the song, but the lyrics themselves do not play a major role in the learning process as they do in Mensah’s University of Cape Coast Approach.

Lastly, once a song has been introduced, a solo section will often follow shortly thereafter. Whereas solo sections in a sonata or concerto provide a player the opportunity to show his or her own virtuosity, a gyil solo line is marked by astonishing regularity and stability.

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12 Woma told me, for instance, that the song in the piece, “Kontombiliwe” occupied the middle range of the instrument.
13 See Mensah’s first guideline, Appendix A.
both rhythmic and melodic. In fact, of all the parts of a given piece, the solo might seem the least soloistic. This is not on account of a difference in understanding, or a shift in the meaning of the word, “solo.” Rather, it is a matter of who is doing the soloing. The solo section in a gyil piece provides the dancers an opportunity to show off their talent and dance more vigorously.

One of Woma’s main philosophies is that you cannot teach a student many things at once—students will not be able to make sense of a complete song if they can’t hear the cycle first. He begins by isolating the song, melody, and solo. He uses versions of all three parts that use two hands. After learning the song and melody, Woma has his students practice switching between the two, careful not to lose the tempo or rhythm in the process. The song is then combined with the solo, and then all three are synthesized.

Structuring Musical Transitions

Often, Woma will have his students play a certain number of repetitions of one part before switching to another. Woma dictates the progressions of variations, which are neither fixed nor arbitrary in a traditional setting. Due to their lyrical content, some combinations of variations make little sense, yet the progression of variations is left to the performer’s discretion. Whether he chooses to favor structure or lack thereof, some Dagara attributes are retained and others are lost. By indicating the progression of variations, Woma is ensuring that the lyrics’ messages progress logically, though more mechanically; if he let students dictate their own order, they would maintain a more free form, but not necessarily make much sense.

Just as the order of variations is significant, so is the duration—the number of times a pattern is played before switching to the next. Among the Dagara, there are some distinctions as to the amount of time a certain section of a piece should occupy, but these are vague, based on
social function and dance as much as musical imperatives. For instance, in playing the solo part of a dance, the player needs to sustain that section long enough to satisfy the wishes of the dancers. While the gyil player can dictate what the dancers do, and can exercise a great deal of control over the performance as a whole, the player is accountable to the dancers. Likewise, in a funeral the gyil player must consider the needs of the dirge singers, who might need the music to center around a certain pitch register to suit their vocal range.

Woma’s dictated number of repetitions should not be seen exclusively as a sign of limitation, for it has pedagogical advantages as well, proving a useful indicator of a student’s progress with a certain part. When learning the piece, Kontombiliwe, I had a difficult time transitioning from the higher pitched variations to the lower parts. Woma would have me play the beginning patterns four times and then switch. Were it up to me, I would stay on the first variations for a longer period of time, giving me more time to prepare for the transition to the second set of variations. Making this switch in variations still took a lot of attention and concentration on my part, and I would use the more comfortable pattern on the higher notes to prepare. Woma forced me to shorten my preparation time by imposing a structure. On this occasion, structure pushed the limits of what I felt was comfortable, while at the same time giving Woma an indication of where I was at in the learning process. If by the fourth repetition of the first part I did not go down to the lower pitched variations as directed, Woma would know that I lacked the confidence or facility for that particular part.

Structure has further benefits for teaching group lessons. It helps the teacher pick out mistakes and to identify individuals who are having trouble. When a group is playing more than one part simultaneously, Woma will make them switch at regular intervals to another part. In so doing, they can get used to transitioning from one section to another while keeping the texture
full and both parts heard. In these ways, structure is not just a way that gyil music is artificially conformed to Western aesthetics. It can actually move Western students out of their comfort zones. Additionally, it might serve to maintain a fuller, possibly even more “authentic” musical texture in group lessons.

Situating Keys

Situating notes on the gyil can be a somewhat complicated process. All the keys on a given instrument have a more or less uniform appearance, and the simple matter of figuring out which ones to hit can become time consuming, especially in a group setting where no one student has the teacher’s full attention.

Even determining which direction to move one’s hands becomes confusing, as up and down mean different things in a Dagara and a Western musical context. Up and down, or high and low, are frequently used by music teachers in the United States and Europe when referring to pitch, while Dagara players use the same ideas to indicate the physical space the gyil occupies. By Dagara reasoning the lowest pitched keys, which are highest from the ground in order to accommodate the large gourd resonating chambers, are the highest. Likewise, with their smaller gourds, the highest pitched keys are the nearer to the ground, thus lower. Because of many such differences in word use, several teachers have developed different ways to help locate notes on the gyil.

Woma has created his own system of classifying intervals using kinship terms. “Friends” are keys that are next to each other, “nieces” have one key separating them, “uncles” have two, “cousins” three, and “brothers” are separated by four keys.
Fig. 5: Woma’s kinship terms, listed from top to bottom: brothers, cousins, uncles, nieces, and friends.
Fig. 6: Woma instructs the third graders of St. Ann’s African Xylophone Ensemble during a visit to New York City. Suzie Sokol, the group’s director and Woma’s student, looks on and takes notes.

Sometimes Woma refers to the keys’ spatial relationship to each other, while other times the relationship is derived from the sound produced. For instance, according to Woma, friends are next to each other because nobody is as close to you as a good friend, while brothers (which correspond with the octave in Western classical music) take their cues from the stability of that sound. These relationships serve as markers of relative space and are not connected with any specific keys.

Woma developed his system based on analogies found within Dagara musical practice, but the system and the names assigned to the intervals are his own. Kinship terms are also used among a number of Dagarti ethnic groups with reference to specific keys. In a survey he conducted among gyil players throughout the Upper West Region, Atta Annan Mensah chronicled the note names assigned the gyil by several players from various regions, many of
who indicated a key was named “father” or “mother.” In his list of findings, however, none of the players interviewed assigned a kinship term to every key on the instrument. Instead, key names utilized a mixture of imagery—some names referred to musical function, others to kinship, and still others to parts on the human body. Additionally, familial terms are often used among the Dagarti to describe a person’s playing. Woma noted that a particularly gifted performer might be told he has “a fatherly hand,” or his playing is “as sweet as a new wife.” These indicate a type of sound and a style of playing instead of a specific pitch.

For the sake of efficiency when teaching her New York City third graders, Suzie Sokol, Woma’s former student, would mark individual keys with chalk or colored tape. Distinguishing the individual keys from one another saves time, particularly in group lessons where the teacher’s attention is divided. Unlike Woma’s approach, where students must count from one end of the instrument to find the starting note, Sokol’s system allows students to immediately identify the right notes. There are disadvantages as well. For instance, if a student becomes dependent on these learning aids, relying on visual instead of aural cues, she might encounter difficulty playing the same piece on a different instrument. More happens in Woma and Sokol’s methods than simply locating a note. The two different approaches apply vastly different ways of thinking about space. Sokol’s approach keeps the relationship between keys isolated, whereas Woma’s highlights the intervallic relationship of one key to another as well as the physical distance between them. Writing numbers on the keys puts that key in relation to the instrument as a whole, while identifying intervals relates the player’s hands to each other.

15 After playing on one instrument for a while, beginning students often have difficulty switching to a different gyil even if the keys are not marked, having grown accustomed to differentiating between the grain and finish of certain keys on one particular instrument.
Proverbs

Woma uses many proverbs and phrases in lessons. Some of these might be specific to the Dagara, others are used more widely throughout Ghana, if not West Africa, and yet others are particular to him, his individual experiences and frames of reference. Some sayings, including, “Bad dancing will not hurt the ground,” and, “Every mistake is a new style,” are used among several Ghanaian teachers to encourage students. Woma is also fond of the sayings, “Kill your own snake,” and, “If you’re going to babysit, don’t ask the name of the baby.” He uses the first to tell his students to overcome their own obstacles, and this in turn usually means they need to spend some time working to get a part down before he can help. The reasoning behind the latter proverb is that the babysitter is bound to learn the name of the baby at some point, and a student has likewise asked a question whose answer will become apparent later.

In an effort to facilitate communication, Woma will sometimes modify a saying to fit points of reference he has in common with his students. An interesting example of this involves Woma’s “fining” system, which is a mild chastisement that never results in an actual fine. When one of his students does something wrong, musically or otherwise, Woma is likely to tell him or her, “That’s 5,000.” Originally, this referred to cedis, Ghana’s national currency. While teaching in the States, Woma will often modify his saying, “fining” his students $5,000 (a considerable price increase) or 5,000 of his favorite beer, Honey Brown. These sayings all serve to instruct students while injecting some humor into the situation.

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16 5,000 cedis are currently worth slightly more than 50 cents in the United States.
Learning with Others, Learning by Yourself

Individual practice provides its own obstacles, but playing with other people provides different challenges and rewards. With two people, even beginning students can produce a rich musical texture. Timing the switches between song, melody, and solo is difficult to practice alone, when the student has to imagine the other part in his or her head. Playing with another person can also be distracting, however. It is easy to lose track of your own part while trying to hear the overall musical texture. This ties into the notion of having “sweet ears,” a saying familiar to musicians of varying ethnic backgrounds in Ghana. A player with sweet ears loses his or her place in the music when paying attention to what others are doing. Some performers extend these musical ideals into more general social ideals. Each member of society should be aware of how they relate to their environment, but should not be so influenced by others that they lose their own distinct voice.

Woma combats students’ “sweet ears” in lessons, challenging them to maintain a stable while he improvises over what they are playing. If they are able to stay situated within the music while he manipulates the pulse and texture of the music in a variety of impressive and distracting ways, the student is ready to move on to the next lesson. Rhythmic stability seemed to matter more to Woma in these settings than did accuracy of pitches, so long as a player understood what the correct pitches were. The reasoning here is that a person can fix note mistakes individually more easily than problems that arise during musical interaction.

Whether a student is spending a week or two at the Dagara Music Center, taking a lesson as part of an academic course load, or fitting in a private lesson as Woma’s schedule permits, time always seems to be in short supply, and part of Woma’s teaching strategy includes

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18 These include Dale Massiasta of Klikor, Ghana and Kwesi Brown, a performer and instructor hailing from Cape Coast, Ghana.
discerning what a person can learn on his or her own. By dividing a piece among the song, solo, and melody, Woma equips his students with the musical material necessary for them to teach themselves to play the parts simultaneously. After learning the Bewaa cycle and one or two Bewaa songs and solos, I was surprised to discover how little outside help I needed in learning to play the songs and the cycle together. Although it still took a great deal of time, I already knew how the parts lined up, and how to combine them. By minimizing the amount of teacher supervision necessary, Woma’s students maintain some connection to self-realization and independent learning. Without a teacher present, with no notation or recording to guide them, a student can nonetheless continue to learn new skills by revisiting and combining material already absorbed.

Methodology: An Improvisation

As a composer, Woma has developed pieces that cater to his own skills as a performer, but he has also developed pieces to be used as teaching aids. Nii Wasep is one such composition. It begins as a very simple eight beat pattern, enabling students to develop hand coordination. From this basic first variation, Woma adds variations of increasing difficulty, and thus he is able to accommodate an array of skill levels. From the instrument’s middle register, the variations gradually spread out to both lower and higher pitch registers, giving students the option of playing one variation while one or two complimentary variations are played at a higher or lower pitch center. These variations act in place of more complicated song, melody, and solo parts.

Woma also adjusts his teaching methodology to account for the challenges of a specific piece or musical style. For instance, while the AABABBAB melody cycle in a Bewaa piece
requires a lot of attention for a beginning student, the overall framework of the Sisaala Harvest piece, Yiila, involves more simple repetition, allowing Woma and his students to focus on the piece’s several variations instead. In both pieces, improving hand coordination proves to be important, but it is approached differently depending on whether the hands are moving together to produce one musical line (as in Yiila), or whether they are playing two distinct parts (as in a Bewaa song).

Despite differences in approach specific to a given piece, Woma’s teaching method has characteristic elements. Woma teaches a given piece in small segments. Students should learn in a cumulative fashion, adding new parts in small increments and synthesizing them with what has gone before. Transitions from one part to the next should be organized and clearly indicated. Just as he adapts his methodology to suit the character of specific pieces within the gyil repertoire, Woma also applies many of his ideas to teaching other things. Woma calls his approach the Dagara Music Center Method, articulating his hopes that other staff at the DMC will apply it to their own classes, including Ga and Ewe drumming, and dance styles from a variety of ethnic groups within Ghana. Throughout the busy summer months at the DMC, Woma helps his staff refine the DMC Method, coaching them on speaking loudly and communicating clearly, preparing lesson plans, and above all having patience and a good sense of humor.

Just as he encourages his staff to continually improve their teaching skills, Kay Stonefelt noted that Woma’s willingness to learn and improve on his own work contributes to his success as a teacher. Over the years, Stonefelt has seen him pick up on students’ questions and incorporate that information into his future teaching. She noted that he has begun verbalizing more when he teaches than he did when she first started taking lessons, and that his vocabulary has changed. He uses more terms familiar to a Western music student, for instance talking about
octaves or an ostinato pattern. As a result, Stonefelt finds his teaching style more straightforward.

Sharing

Woma stresses the responsibility of sharing as being characteristic of Dagarti society. Having taken the time to learn and refine their musical skills, Woma urges his students to apply them to their lives in whatever way they can, whether through performing, teaching, writing, or daily conduct. As he put it, “You don’t learn how to drive a car and then go out and buy a boat.” It might seem paradoxical that many of Woma’s advanced students have chosen to share through teaching the gyil. Encouraged by a set of values that Woma attributes to the Dagara way of life, they perform a role that has no counterpart within Dagara society. As such, Woma demonstrates that, in addition to the sound itself, ideals and behaviors can characterize a culture’s musical practice.

Practice

When I asked Woma what makes a person an advanced player, his immediate response was, “Practice.” At first I was disappointed with his answer, assuming he had not understood what I was asking. I was looking for indicators or landmarks that would demonstrate that a student had reached a certain ability level. I tried asking the question a different way, and still he insisted, practice makes the best player. This time, seeing that I did not understand, he followed it up with an example. That November Woma had gone to Arizona to visit his student, Michael Vercelli. While there, Woma had a busy schedule of lessons and performances, which included the two of them playing several pieces together. Woma commented how he didn’t have to go
over the pieces with Vercelli—they could just go in and play them. Sure, Vercelli made mistakes, but he knew what he was doing because he had continued practicing in the months since they had last met. I asked Woma a question based on a blanket skill level of the performer, irrespective of how it was achieved, and Woma answered by indicating an activity and a work ethic that allows for the student to succeed. In other words, I asked a question aimed at content and received an answer that dealt with process.

Both within Dagarti society and outside of it, to be an accomplished player requires both natural talent and the discipline to realize that ability. How far a person can go on the instrument is to some degree dictated by inherent ability—gyil players gain a right to the instrument when they are quite young by being “perceived born” with an affinity for the instrument, however they have to develop their natural talent. A player is limited by two factors: the extent of the talent he is given and to what extent he applies himself to the instrument. Thus at some point, a student’s limitations are not up to the student. What can be controlled is how he or she gets there.

**Conclusion**

Gyil instructors face a number of obstacles in teaching across cultural boundaries. They have to identify and organize the salient characteristics of the music and the learning process for themselves and their students alike. Teaching is an art in its own right, involving a wide range of creative decisions, problem solving skills, and possibilities for representation.

Through studying with Woma I have come to appreciate the balancing acts involved in teaching. Instead of articulating notions of context outright in his lessons, Woma often inserts them into the teaching process, using ideas that he derives from his home region and his own experience, instilling them within the lessons themselves. He does not tell his students that dance
is vital to his musical culture (even though it is absent from his own performances) yet dancing is included in the pieces’ titles; many of the texts accompanying the songs beginners first play are invitations or commentaries that refer to dance. Woma uses kinship relations and proverbs in his own way, keeping family ties and local ideas as part of musical practice. Although most of Woma’s students have a limited knowledge of gyil music, he manages to equip them with the musical building blocks needed so they can continue teaching themselves.
CHAPTER 4.
STUDENTS

Dispersed throughout the United States, among college students, percussionists, and travelers are a number of students, each with his or her own motivations for learning to play the gyil. Every skill level is represented among them, from students with no prior musical background to professional musicians. There are casual learners, whose impetus for learning might not extend far beyond curiosity and a desire to try something new. Some approach the gyil as a hobby, and yet others are musicians and dedicated students who might desire to gain competence in the instrument, possibly incorporating the gyil into their major area of musical study. They have learned under a variety of teachers in many different settings. Some students took up study while in Ghana—whether at the DMC, the University of Ghana,¹ or among the Dagara in the Upper West Region—while others have learned in their hometowns or universities, be they in the United States or Europe. Students come away with different impressions of gyil music, its musical possibilities, and its cultural context.

Here I focus on four advanced students in the United States: Mark Stone, Kay Stonefelt, Valerie Naranjo, and Michael Vercelli. Although each has a very different story of how they became involved with the gyil, and each has a different and distinct personality, similarities in their stories emerge. All four have become teachers and representatives of the musical tradition in their own right, and thus see themselves as carrying ever-increasing responsibility for the tradition they are learning to embody. Through a series of interviews, I asked each player about their relationship to the instrument, and how working with Woma and other gyil players has helped shape their experiences. Curiously, although none of these four players consider

¹ Teachers at the University of Ghana have included Woma, Joseph Kobom, and Kakraba Lobi
themselves ethnomusicologists, many of the issues ethnomusicologists face regarding ethical representation and musical meaning are concerns of theirs as teachers and performers.

**Mark Stone**

Mark Stone’s living room is taken up almost entirely by a set of steel drums, as well as assorted percussion instruments from various countries, including his gyil. A percussion instructor at Michigan’s Oakland University, Stone is Woma’s first American student. He engages with the instrument in a variety of ways. He plays the gyil and other African xylophone instruments in his own jazz fusion band, Imaginary Homeland, has arranged and recorded adaptations of gyil music for a variety of ensembles, teaches gyil and African percussion classes, and plays the supporting gyil part in the Bernard Woma Trio, as time permits.

Stone was first exposed to the gyil in 1992, while participating in an undergraduate exchange program in Ghana that was offered through the University of Michigan. A percussion performance major, Stone studied a number of musical styles, both at the University of Ghana in Legon and on his own. Among the people he met at the university was gyil player Joseph Kobom, who became his first teacher. Their interaction inspired Stone to study the gyil in the Upper West Region where, through his connections with Kobom, he arranged for a two-month stay in order to study with the well-known performer, Ralio Yiryellah. By the time he began lessons with Woma, Stone had already studied the gyil for six months.

Stone had met Woma some time earlier, while visiting Nima, a part of Accra with a high population of Dagara immigrants. Stone remembers, “You knew immediately [Woma] was a great gyil player because as soon as he walked in to the funeral site, they told the people who were playing the gyil to get up and Bernard sat down.”
By taking lessons with Kobom, Yiryellah, and Woma, Stone had the advantage of studying the gyil with several teachers and in several different settings. He acknowledges the strengths of each teacher and learning situation, and yet he speaks of Woma’s and his teaching style with particular admiration. There are several ways that Woma distinguished himself from Stone’s previous teachers. Recalling his past lessons, Stone calls particular attention to Woma’s ability to teach at various tempos. “One of Bernard’s gifts is the ability to break things down to the most basic level without changing it. Joseph Kobom was a great teacher, but you’d have to learn things at speed. You could slow it down to get the notes, but as he slowed it down he would change the rhythm, and then he’d speed it up and it would be something totally different. Ralio would never slow anything down—it was just go! Go!” Another important part in the process of breaking down a piece was Woma’s ability to isolate what each of his hands was playing. Stone recalls hearing of gyil players who could not separate one part from another and, when asked to demonstrate one hand in isolation, would resort to putting a sock over one beater, so only one hand’s part would project.

After Stone returned from his stay up north and began taking lessons with Woma, they had to meet at 6:00 in the morning because of scheduling conflicts. This sacrifice became a defining aspect of their relationship. Stone took it as an indication of both Woma’s dedication to teaching and his professionalism. Woma took it as a sign of Stone’s dedication as a student.

Upon returning to the United States, Stone collaborated with fellow percussionists who shared his interest in African music. Stone also fell into an informal teaching role, mostly out of a desire to continue playing the music he had learned. It wasn’t until he was hired by Oakland University, however, that he truly felt like a gyil teacher. Initially, the limited number of instruments placed many limitations on Stone’s teaching, but the school’s collection has grown
over the years. A highlight for Stone, both as teacher and student, was when Woma completed a residency at Oakland University in 2002. At that time, the students that Stone was teaching were at a beginning level. Nonetheless, Stone was able to notice several innovations to Woma’s teaching technique since he began taking lessons from Woma ten years prior. For instance, Woma would orient the students to the gyil with what Stone loosely terms, “scales.” These constituted running various intervals (brothers, nieces, uncles, etc.) the range of the instrument, from the highest pitched notes to the lowest.

Woma’s residency enabled Stone to make significant progress in his own playing. During this period, The Bernard Woma Trio produced its first commercial recording and Stone was able to learn Bine, one of the most challenging pieces in the traditional repertoire. When I asked Woma if there was any music that he doesn’t teach, Woma’s initial answer was, Bine. “Stone is the exception to the rule.”

Stone had begun studying Bine many years prior, during his stay in Ghana in 1992. In this initial stage of his education, Stone received a compliment that he considers particularly meaningful. When first exposed to Bine, it seems to defy any kind of musical structure, and yet to see the men and women dance to it, they all somehow manage to bob, dip, and jump in unison, able to hear aural cues that can easily baffle an untrained listener. While attending a funeral in Accra, Stone tried to move his body in time with the music. A Dagara man sitting next to him noticed Stone and reacted with surprise. He congratulated him, saying, “You understand our music!” Stone was met with approval not because of his playing ability, but his efforts to make sense of the music going on around him. While Stone was still in the beginning stages of learning, and no doubt there was a great deal he did not comprehend, the compliment demonstrates that being able to react to the music, even embody it, is an important part of
understanding it. Although Stone’s knowledge of the music may have been incomplete, this man obviously approved of how he was directing his efforts.

For Stone, developing hand independence has proven the most difficult technical aspect of gyil playing. Due to students having to reckon with both the gyil’s pitches and hand independence, Stone usually starts them out with drumming from different ethnic groups in Ghana, for instance the Ewe and the Dagomba. Those who pick up the rhythms well might then begin learning the gyil.

When teaching or giving a demonstration on the instrument, Stone plays a variety of traditional pieces, mindful of maintaining cultural fidelity. When the Bernard Woma Trio gets together, they play traditional pieces as well as Woma’s own compositions. Recently, Stone began learning Woma’s solo repertoire. Having picked up many of the Bewaa songs and succeeded with Bine, progressing to Woma’s solo compositions attests to his level of achievement, and Woma’s respect for him as a musician in his own right. These are the same pieces Woma uses when he performs by himself; they represent the Dagarti, but even more so Woma’s personal artistic expression.

Stone has performed with Woma in a number of different contexts. They have recorded and performed together in the United States with Kofi Ameyaw; Stone has also accompanied Woma to his hometown of Hiineteng, where they have performed in the Kukubar xylophone festival. Stone remarks that, “Every time I go to play with him it’s like a lesson in front of an audience.” He recalled one performance when he had played the very complicated Bine cycle particularly well. When he asked for feedback after the concert, Woma remarked that the concert had gone very well… but Stone had missed a note. This scenario demonstrates his level of criticism and expectation for Stone. It is also remarkable in that, even while he was
performing the demanding lead part for the piece, Woma was able to pay attention to what Stone was doing, to the point where he could take into account even slight errors.

Even when Woma is not around, Stone tries to keep him in mind, always wanting to play up to a standard that he would feel comfortable performing for Woma. When he makes recordings of his performances, he will often send them to Woma for feedback. Here also, Stone describes him as supportive, but at the same time an honest critic.

Beyond playing musical representations of the Dagara, Stone exercises greater creative license in the jazz fusion band, Imaginary Homeland, led by saxophonist David Rogers. Both Rogers and Stone have studied with master musicians from various ethnic groups in Ghana, including Dagomba drummer Abubakari Lunna\(^2\) and gyil players Bernard Woma and Ralio Yiryellah over the course of several years. Through these experiences, both musicians are capable of playing a number of pieces from the traditional repertoire. Indeed, each musician does so in other capacities with different performing groups. In Imaginary Homelands, however, these musicians rely instead on impressions they have of their experiences in Ghana and other African countries. These impressions are strongly tied to a sense of place, but they are also reflections of personal experiences as Westerners traveling abroad, incorporating these “African” sounds with their other musical influences, including jazz and Appalachian fiddling.

Kay Stonefelt

State University of New York - Fredonia percussion professor Dr. Kay Stonefelt came to study the gyil as an extension of her training in mallet percussion at Indiana University. Her interest grew with exposure into the amadinda xylophone repertoire of Uganda, her studies on women and power in Africa, and a lively series of lectures given by an array of Ghanaian

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\(^2\) Abubakari Lunna is perhaps best known in the West through the writings of his student, ethnomusicologist David Locke.
intellectuals on the Indiana University campus. When she later applied for a Fulbright scholarship to research African percussion, studying the gyil struck her as an exciting option, pertinent to her work with mallet instruments while at the same time differentiating her from the many other musicians eager to study percussion in Ghana, and from future competitors in the tight American college teaching market. Her application accepted, Stonefelt spent the 1993-94 academic year studying the gyil, primarily with Woma. She has made several subsequent visits of shorter durations, usually during the summers when SUNY Fredonia was out of session.

Stonefelt has taught at SUNY Fredonia since 1994; Woma’s affiliation with the school began that same year. The two worked out a mutually advantageous system, whereby Stonefelt provided Woma’s airfare through grants and personal loans. Once Woma was in country the two gave presentations and concerts, the fees covering travel funding with any extra going to Woma. Since January 2003, when Woma matriculated as an undergraduate at Fredonia, the two have worked as colleagues in the music department. Woma provides instruction on an array of West African percussion; Stonefelt helps guide Woma’s academic pursuits.

Because of time constraints, Stonefelt has not kept up with her own gyil playing. She comments, “I think that I’m a good interpreter of what happens in the teaching process and I can point things out. But as far as being a good player, I’ll have to wait until I retire.” Yet even without having the time to devote to her own playing, Stonefelt’s experiences playing the gyil have had a lasting impact on her personal life and career. Stonefelt hopes to leave a legacy through her work developing Fredonia’s small world music department. She stresses the many benefits of learning music from outside the Western tradition, insisting that every percussion major take the African drumming class in order to improve their sense of musical time and listening skills. “It gives [the students] a sensitivity to one another, whether it’s playing or
walking down the hallway. The more sensitive as a listener you become, I think the more sensitive you become as a human being.” This holistic approach resonates with her own experience as well. She commented that, as with her students, it has improved her own sense of timing and her ability to listen to what is going on when playing with others, sometimes on a conscious level, but often on a subconscious level.

Just as she noted how musical lessons extend into students’ extra-musical lives, Stonefelt has been able to make sense of several aspects of life in Ghana through her understanding of musical processes. For example, she mentioned that her first impression of both Ghanaian social and musical structure as being chaotic. She found value in being able to organize her experiences, learning how one voice fits into another and how some form of order is manifest. She further links the idea of gyil music heightening a person’s sensitivity to the ability of people in Ghanaian society to maintain such a high degree of physical closeness in their lives, whether through holding hands and other frequent signs of physical affection or being able to share space on the crowded trotro bus system. Even the sound of the instrument itself triggers a reaction for Stonefelt that is very tied to a sense of place. In particular, she talks about the buzzing timbre of the gourd resonators. This sound resonates in her body; she finds it therapeutic, connecting her with her memories of the Upper West Region and the people and places that were such a large part of her experience there.

Stonefelt also noted the extreme interrelatedness of music and language in Dagara society. When figuring out what is acceptable to play on the gyil, the rules are very much connected to their message. At times, she would play a passage a certain way and Woma would correct her, saying, “No, you can’t say that,” reinforcing that the music is closely tied to verbal communication. Among the other facets of gyil playing that Stonefelt has explored is how
dialect and linguistic difference affects gyil playing. These in turn impact the gyil player’s connection with and portrayal of space and upbringing. Stonefelt recounts how, when she was taking Dagara language lessons in Ghana, she played a phrase on gyil that made linguistic sense according to her language teacher, but that Woma nonetheless said was incorrect. Woma reminded Stonefelt that, although both he and her teacher were Dagara, her language teacher was not brought up in the village; he had participated in the more Westernized missionary-run school system, and as a result was not as privy to the local colloquialisms and turns of phrase, both spoken and played.

It has been a decade since Stonefelt’s language lessons, and she claims to have forgotten all of what she learned except a few generic greetings. She remembers the learning process, and many of the distinctions made in communication, for instance, how to greet someone at a funeral as opposed to a person coming home from working in the field. As she put it, “While I have forgotten the language I haven’t forgotten the principles of why we communicate.” Similarly, while Stonefelt has effectively stopped playing the gyil, the meaning that her experiences playing the gyil have carried for her are evident in the way she talks about the instrument and the people that its study has brought into her life.

While Stonefelt highly values her experiences learning in Ghana, she also values a student’s space and distance while learning. As she developed more connections to her community, her social obligations likewise increased, leaving less time for her own studies. She had difficulty finding a suitable place to practice and absorb the material from past lessons. “For me in hindsight, what I needed was more time away from the teacher to discover on my own, which is kind of how we do it here [in Fredonia], where you go once a week for your lesson and you have your goal.”
This presents a rather interesting paradox between the essential aspects of Dagara socialization and the needs of the outsider student. One of the main observations of all of those I interviewed about studying in the Upper West Region is that the music is everywhere; it permeates the entire fabric of Dagara life. This sentiment is usually expressed as a benefit. Stonefelt points out that proximity to a gyil is assumed, and that all members of the society have an engrained understanding of the instrument, regardless of whether they are players. Their musical education starts even prebirth, their mothers dancing to the music while pregnant. In this case, however, Stonefelt suggests that the things that make learning in its traditional setting so effective for native musicians is one of the biggest drawbacks in learning the instrument as an outsider. She hints that, without this socialization to Dagara music, an outsider student needs space and quiet to be able to process and make sense of what she is hearing. In this way, immersion, a process systematically idealized in music, linguistics, and ethnographical endeavors, might not be the best solution for learning the gyil as a cultural outsider. Since, as non-Dagarti, our socialization is incomplete, our needs as students are better served by a Western or cosmopolitan system of learning with clearly defined objectives and time limitations than by an attempt to partially take part in the traditional way of learning. While many teachers, including Kakraba Lobi, strive to keep Western teaching frameworks as close to traditional learning processes as possible, Stonefelt questions the efficacy of such an approach. She suggests that, by departing from the traditional system in order to fit the needs of foreign students, for instance by changing the structure of musical learning and developing certain songs specifically as pedagogical tools, teachers may, in some ways, allow us to understand and engage with Dagara musical tradition more fully.
Stonefelt seemed somewhat unsure to what extent a Western musician can embody the Dagara tradition, transcending the role of technician to that of an artist and interpreter. Nonetheless, she did posit that the education students get through working with Woma is sufficient to give them the tools whereby they would be able to make some sense of the music in Ghana, should they at some point go there and experience it first hand.

Valerie Naranjo

I interviewed percussionist Valerie Naranjo over the phone on her way back from a performance in New Jersey. Known as a performer and transcriber of gyil music, member of the Saturday Night Live Band and collaborator for the Broadway production of *The Lion King*, Naranjo maintains a varied and hectic schedule. That night she had played gyil music. She told me that she had prefaced her performance by saying, “This is not from *Saturday Night Live* and it’s not *The Lion King*, but I love it and I think you’ll love it, too, if you listen with an open heart and an open mind.”

By the time Naranjo sought out a gyil teacher, she had already been learning Dagara music on her own for some time. She began learning to play by transcribing recordings of gyil music on her own, taking an approach to learning that she likens to the way that jazz music is typically learned. In some ways, Naranjo’s strategy might be considered close to the way that learning happens in the Upper West Region, where a player is largely self-taught. Despite the disadvantages of learning as an adult, using recordings and sparse printed resources in place of an interactive social and cultural network, Naranjo was able to learn a great deal. Eventually, however, she was met with her own limitations and sought instruction from the reputed gyil player, Kakraba Lobi. As noted in the previous chapter, Naranjo found her experiences learning
from Kakraba Lobi deeply rewarding. His teaching process and the pacing of their lessons seemed to her more fulfilling than any she had encountered studying percussion in the United States.

In addition to their private lessons, Naranjo and Kakraba Lobi have become collaborators on several transcriptions of gyil music for the Western marimba. Naranjo was able to contribute her own skill and experience in transcribing, facilitating communication between her teacher and a new audience of which she had an insider’s understanding. These commercial transcriptions can serve to diversify a marimbist’s repertoire, or perhaps to provide other percussionists with a point of access to an unfamiliar musical genre.

Curiously, many of the aspects of Naranjo’s learning process that she holds most valuable are omitted in learning from her commercial transcriptions. When, as a beginning player, Naranjo began transcribing gyil music from audio recordings, her education was informed by repeated listenings, from which she gradually figured out how to play the parts herself. She raved about her experiences learning from Kakraba Lobi, commenting on how much she had gained from his pacing, and from the exploratory, reflexive process of learning the piiru. Naranjo expressed her frustrations with the more restrictive Western modes of learning, yet inevitably these are the same learning processes that will be used to disseminate her own transcriptions. In absence of audio examples, or the guided practicing she experienced as Kakraba Lobi’s student, her transcriptions rely on—even enforce—a learning process with which Naranjo disagrees. In this case, Naranjo sacrifices valued elements of musical process in the hope of exposing new audiences to an instrument and repertoire they might otherwise have missed.
Naranjo has gone beyond interpretation of a musical style to take steps to change the way the music is actually played in the Upper West Region, and who has access to it. As previously mentioned, playing the gyil is typically thought of as a male activity. Naranjo’s interaction with the Dagarti community has brought about changes for women gyil players. On one of her early visits to the Upper West Region, Naranjo planned to perform at the KoBine xylophone festival in Lawra. When the chief and elders found out about her arrival and intent to play at the festival, they summoned her to a council meeting. She went and played for all those present. At one point the chief got up and danced to show his approval of her playing. As Naranjo found out later, this was actually a very big deal, being that women were discouraged from playing the gyil publicly. In order to allow for Naranjo’s presence in the festival, the chief passed a formal decree that women be allowed to play in public. The following year, at the Kakube xylophone festival that takes place annually in the town of Nandom, a woman was awarded second place in the gyil competition. As Naranjo noted, this woman had obviously been playing longer than the eleven months that had elapsed since Naranjo’s performance in the KoBine festival, yet Naranjo maintains that the opportunity to showcase her skills was facilitated by this event.

Naranjo keeps a very open, positive outlook on the role of outsiders studying a type of music.

I will never be a Ghanaian woman and that’s just the way things are. I love this music but I’m not a Ghanaian. There’s a certain amount of respect that you have to have if you’re studying this music as a guest. It doesn’t upset me that I’m not a Ghanaian. Each one of us has something very unique to contribute. I’m also being a lot of things by being an American and studying what I study. It’s a double edge.

Through her involvement in events such as Kakube, Naranjo can act as an important presence, both musically and politically. While she stressed the importance of giving credit
where it is due, Naranjo asserts that a musician’s outsider status is not necessarily a handicap; rather, it is only a different perspective, with great potential for creativity and individuality.

Michael Vercelli

Michael Vercelli has been to Ghana twice. His first visit was in 2002, when he spent six days at the DMC as part of Bowling Green State University’s summer program. During this time Vercelli became oriented to the instrument and the transplanted Dagara culture that the center fosters. He went back and stayed at the DMC for six months in 2003-2004 while working toward his D.M.A. in percussion performance from the University of Arizona.

Vercelli recalled having heard various people play the gyil while he was a student, but it wasn’t until he saw Woma perform that he realized the instrument’s capabilities. Vercelli describes himself as a drummer, intentionally distinguishing himself from percussionists, whose interests include playing a wider variety of percussion, possibly including mallet instruments and an array of idiophones. To him, the gyil stands out among mallet instruments because it retains highly rhythmic and percussive qualities despite its melodic capabilities.

His second visit to Ghana differed on several levels from his first. Staying for an extended time, mostly while Woma was out of the country, made a huge difference. The DMC depends on the business of visiting college students and other academics, such as the Bowling Green groups. Due to academic schedules, which now affect Woma as well as the visiting students, the busiest time at the music center is unquestionably the summer. Within a couple of months, the center makes most of its revenue for the year. Without this high volume of students and Woma’s formidable presence as an overseer, the atmosphere at the center becomes much

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3 Vercelli is adept at a wide array of percussion instruments of varying types; claiming to be a drummer is a largely political move, based on how he chooses to identify himself rather than the parameters of his skill or musical education.
less formal during the “off peak” months. Of course, by staying at the DMC for several months, Vercelli’s education was carried out by the other staff members affiliated with the center. During this off peak, extended stay, Vercelli worked primarily with Edmund Dorwana, a gifted musician and friend of Woma’s from the Lobi ethnic group.

Vercelli noted that among the most difficult obstacles in learning to play the gyil was overcoming his own frustrations. As a percussion student in the West, he talked about being able to formulate his own expectations. Due to his familiarity with a Western learning system, and with the aid of a visual score of what he was undertaking, Vercelli was able to estimate how much time would be needed to learn a piece of music. With only his limited experience playing the gyil, and a likewise limited understanding of the repertoire, Vercelli found it difficult to gauge what expectations or goals were reasonable. He explained, “There’s no benchmark…if I was [practicing Western percussion] and I had six months, I know that I could learn so many pieces in a week. But here [at the DMC] there’s no way to judge that.”

Instead, Vercelli had to discover his own technical, and physical limitations as he went along. He described his experience as sheer mental overload. While at the DMC, he would have a gyil lesson for several hours, followed by an equally long drumming lesson; after a point, he was incapable of absorbing anything more until he had given his mind a rest. As a result, Vercelli gauged his progress not by how much music he had covered, but rather ascertaining, “This is about as much as I can take in a day.” In response to his anxieties as to whether he was doing enough, or getting enough out of the experience, he concluded, “Whatever I bring back I bring back.”

Vercelli is also looking forward to designing a University of Arizona-sponsored Ghana workshop for the summer of 2006. He sees the project as a means to expose students to another
culture while acting as a mediator in control of the ways in which those experiences unfold. Vercelli compares the Arizona-sponsored trip to BGSU’s—they share many of the same locations and teachers—yet his trip will no doubt reflect his own priorities and interests.

Through his interaction with his teachers, Vercelli saw gyil players as being in a position to contribute to their home community and to make tradition seem viable in the modern age. In our discussions, he mentioned both Dorwana’s and Woma’s impact on their home communities many times. Both men have given back in significant ways. Dorwana built a school in his home village of Kalba Saru. Woma has funded the construction of water pipes in his hometown of Hiineteng. Although both musicians spend a great deal of time outside of the Upper West Region, they continue to recognize their ties to their families and overall communities, and make efforts to share their success. Vercelli commented that seeing artists like Dorwana and Woma succeed by performing Dagarti traditional music may encourage other Dagarti to take an active interest in their own music and culture.

While maintaining a connection with their hometowns struck Vercelli as being significant among his teachers, he was also impressed by the respect Woma accorded the gyil itself. He found one incident particularly telling. Disappointed with the work ethic of one of the gyil instructors Vercelli was supposed to work with at the DMC, Woma called a meeting for the three of them. Vercelli recalled how Woma had chastised the instructor, asking him why several aspects of his life were not going well. He answered his own line of questioning, charging, ‘You don’t respect your instrument. You could better your whole situation and those around you. Without the respect for the instrument, you might as well be on the farm waiting for it to rain.’ Respecting the gyil in this sense seems to go beyond respect for the physical instrument to include a show of discipline and dedication, cultivating a relationship with the music itself.
Me

It has now been over a year since I first took up the gyil. I alternately feel that I have accomplished a great deal and that I have accomplished almost nothing. It is the same perplexing feeling I get at the end of most lessons, when hours of practice are boiled down to adjusting a few notes in a pattern. Physical coordination often seems disproportionately difficult in relation to the simplicity of the musical idea.

I get frustrated that I still forget the names of pieces I have been playing for months; I marvel at how little context I can give. I seldom know all the words that I am playing, or what the corresponding dance would look like. What I have learned is framed more in terms of sound production than musical meaning.

Despite these shortcomings I feel I am approaching a different phase in my lessons with Woma, having learned all the standard variations to a handful of pieces that are normally taught to his students. We are now at a point where Woma’s standard beginning repertoire is giving way to pieces that, if not more difficult in some regard, are nonetheless taught infrequently.

Physically and mentally, I confront my own limitations every time I sit down at the gyil. I feel that I am still at the tip of a vast and subtle web of musical communication. When playing, I am seldom comfortable enough with the notes to focus on musicality or, if playing with other people, the way my part relates to theirs. If I make it a point to imagine what it might be like if I were playing in the Upper West Region, I remember what I have seen on videotape and at the DMC. I think of the strong arm and shoulder movements of the dancing, the popping rhythmic lines of the kuor accompaniment. I cannot confidently say that I have a sense of what Dagara life and Dagara performance means. Yet I can tell that my mind shifts when I play. I have come to know some of the ideals of playing, and what makes playing so difficult. Listening to the
music, I can now pick out patterns in the music that I couldn’t before, and I know roughly how they relate to each other. Sometimes, after a long weekend of playing the gyil and listening to others play, I feel that I have truly internalized a part of the music; I might even hear the gyil in my sleep.

In addition to changes in perception and technical facility, I also gauge my progress by my ability to overcome physical limitations involved in playing. A beginning student must get used to playing on short stools, close to the ground. Though it may seem like a minor inconvenience, it proves a very real limitation for those unaccustomed to it. Perhaps the most painful part in the process is developing calluses on the fingers used to grip the beaters. Calluses form on the inside of the first finger of each hand, due to the friction of the beater against the skin. Likely, a beginning player will develop painful blisters after a short time playing the instrument. With dedicated practice over a long period of time, the skin will harden and become callused, yet a novice player’s blisters will disappear after only a few days without playing the gyil, only to reform when next he or she practices. Woma proudly reveals the thick calluses on his hands, referring to them as his “Ph.D.”, and indeed they are hard earned, representing a lifetime of dedicated music making. Just as, in the previous chapter, Woma identified practice as an indicator of a student’s achievement, I have come to take the developing calluses on my hands—the result of continued practice—as an indicator of my own progress.

In an interview, Kay Stonefelt told me that, in trying to get inside the music, she was amazed at how much “inside” there really is. After a year of practicing, interviewing, listening and observing gyil music, its richness and depth continue to astonish and overwhelm me. Although I am still very much an outsider to the tradition and to Dagara society more generally, I
feel that I am always moving in the “inside” direction, and the music continues to make more sense inside of me.

Conclusion

Vercelli, Stone, Naranjo, and Stonefelt have all studied in similar settings. They have all spent a period of months, some even years, in Ghana, and although the spots they have visited and their interactions may vary, they assuredly share many similar experiences. Out of these similarities emerge a variety of ways of incorporating the music into their personal and professional lives—no two players relate to the music in quite the same way. Perhaps as a result, while all four were curious about what other musicians were doing, Vercelli, Stonefelt, Naranjo, and Stone did not appear competitive with other players; rather they seemed genuinely enthusiastic that other performers and audiences shared their passion for the gyil.

Interviewing these four players about their experiences with the Dagarti and with gyil music, each commented on lessons they had learned that extended beyond technical know-how into more social and experiential realms. Mark Stone talked about listening in a Dagara way, hearing a rhythmic cycle as a complex unit, consisting of overlapping patterns that can be heard as one entity instead of being organized by the brain at times in groups of, say, threes and others in groups of twos. Kay Stonefelt talked instead about the embodied experience of gyil music; the close relationship of the sound, particularly the way the buzzing gourds affect a person’s body, to a notion of place and of culture. The sound takes her to the Upper West Region in a process as much physical as mental or intellectual. Valerie Naranjo illustrated how gyil players and the Dagarti community more generally can maintain active dialogue with outside musicians and musical styles, renegotiating musical practice in their own lives. Michael Vercelli observed
the ways his teachers invested financially and emotionally in their home communities, and
likewise the respect given the instrument itself.

Over time, and as a result of close interaction and hard work, these musicians have been
able to tap into Dagarti culture and the musical experience of the gyil, not just a practical or
technical knowledge of the instrument. Lessons provided a gateway into that experience, which
they were able to expand by visiting the Upper West Region and see the music in action, serving
a variety of social functions.

Gyil music, its setting, sound, and the people who engage with it are all part of these four
musicians’ lived experience, despite being cultural outsiders. Stone, Stonefelt, Naranjo, and
Vercelli each expressed that the time spent in dialogue with gyil music and its practitioners has
changed the way they think about teaching, learning, and music making. Though none are
Dagarti themselves, all have forged personal and professional identities that tie them to their
teachers, experiences in Ghana, and the various people with whom they have come into contact
as gyil music enthusiasts. Having been introduced to the gyil as adult musicians educated in the
United States, they are able to describe problems and challenges specific to musicians working
across cultural divides.
CHAPTER 5.
CONCLUSION

Just as when taking a picture, focusing on a specific point causes the periphery to blur, and when taking a group shot some level of detail is lost, trying to convey the essence of a musical practice is constantly subjected to two pulls—on the one hand, making the music accessible to the audience, on the other, a desire for cultural authenticity. In trying to strike a balance between the two, terms and ideas—among them tradition, participation, and authenticity—remain fluid, changing their meaning as the audience and setting demands.

Change is unavoidable when introducing a musical style to a new audience. Responding to cosmopolitan audiences and concert venues, Woma and other performers have developed ways of modifying the music to fit a concert piece format. As demonstrated by his experiences performing Bewaa with the Ghana Dance Ensemble, cultural fidelity and the maintenance of some form of authenticity remain important and complicated issues, even when the performance format is an artificial construction. Alternative avenues of self-identification are created to help outsider audiences engage with a musical style, for instance highlighting connections gyil music shares with jazz, or focusing on the instrument’s ties to other xylophones.

While cultural significance and the performer’s role have to be reevaluated and renegotiated when playing the gyil for outside audiences, teaching the music involves changes that are even more drastic. Teachers do not adapt a preexisting methodology so much as they invent one altogether. Many musicians and scholars, among them Trevor Wiggins and Joseph Kobom, Atta Annan Mensah, Kakraba Lobi, Edmund Dorwana, and Bernard Woma, have derived methods whereby a person born outside the tradition can still learn how to play. These instructors strive to present musical material in a way that a student will be able to make sense of
it, carefully selecting repertoire, pacing the learning process, isolating certain parts or breaking a piece into sections. Many struggle with the additional challenge of remaining faithful to the character of the music as they learned and experienced it. Varying teaching methodologies reveal what aspects of gyil music and practice each instructor values most; Mensah, for example, makes sure to keep a piece’s lyrical content as an integral part of the lesson, while Woma strategically incorporates concepts, such as familial ties and notions of sharing, into his own methodology. Ultimately, each teacher finds a different balance of technical know-how and cultural context in his methodology.

It is impossible to replicate a Dagarti learning process through private instruction, however there is still a great deal a Westerner can learn. A constructed methodology is capable of showing many truths about a musical style and its social context. As Vercelli, Stone, Stonefelt, and Naranjo have all shown, lessons learned about the gyil go beyond what a teacher states outright; musical meaning develops in numerous ways from self-reflection, observation, and engaging with the instrument directly. Playing the gyil has impacted a significant part of their personal and professional identities; they identify with the instrument in complex ways, as student, teacher, representatives of a musical culture and creative artists in their own right. Often, their personal histories with the music would run parallel to each other, yet each found meaning in different facets of their experience.

A Final Note

Several times over the past year I have loaded one of my two gyille into the back of my car and driven the four hours from Northwest Ohio to upstate New York. Arriving in the evening, I would bring my gyil inside and Woma would give it a “tune up” while we updated
each other on what had happened since our last lesson and discussed our plans for the upcoming weekend. Watching Woma take the instrument apart, repositioning the gourds and adjusting the keys, I came to realize how many factors are involved in making any one note sound the way it does. Inevitably, by the end of the evening my instrument would sound completely different than it had when I left Ohio earlier that day. Keys that had sounded weak before now reverberated with a gratifying buzz; the product of a gourd being a certain distance in relation to its corresponding key, the key held tautly in position by twine, and struck with a particular amount of force.

As players adjust each key on their instrument to sound more fully, musicians and representatives likewise adapt expectations and meaning, both musical and cultural, searching for a way to make a sound, image, or idea resonate within someone else. It is a process that involves great sensitivity, creativity and patience, but the result is well worth the effort.
APPENDIX A.
ATTA ANNAN MENSAH’S “WORKING PROCEDURE FOR INDIVIDUAL LESSONS”

1. Let teacher play the chosen piece. This will initially be the easiest available.
2. Find out if this can be sung.
3. If this can be sung, let player teach the song; gently request teacher to proceed slowly and preferably phrase by phrase.
4. Ask player to help you to learn this piece in the same systematic way as you have learned to sing it.
5. If there is no verbal basis, or burden text, proceed to learn the piece with the player’s assistance, after asking to hear it through a few times.
6. Do not wait to perfect the whole piece; after establishing one or two phrases, ask the expert to give you time to practice and master them.
7. During your next turn with the expert ask him to take you through a few more phrases, remembering to learn a few phrases at a time; you may need quite a few turns with the expert to master one short piece well.
8. After learning one piece, tackle another with the expert. In this workshop you should specifically ask for very easy pieces; choose through negotiation with the expert.
9. In between the lessons and practicing, try to write the piece down in staff notation; use two five-line staves—with or without treble and bass clefs. Do not use key signatures; regard your instrument as a transposing instrument. The Lobi-Dagara group use a standard pitch, which will sound approximately a major third higher than that written without a key signature. Note that the interval values on your staff do not coincide with those implied by the G and F clefs.

10. A session will normally be two hours long. Discuss your work with your supervisor during the last half hour of each session.

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1 As listed in Mensah, “Gyil: Dagara-Lobi Xylophone,” 153.
APPENDIX B.
TRANSCRIPTIONS

The following are transcriptions of two pieces that I have studied with Woma. Unsatisfied with the implications of using Western notation, I have developed my own method of transcription, an adaptation of the Time Unit Box System (TUBS). I use fourteen vertical lines, numbered from right to left, each indicating a corresponding key on the gyil. I further group these keys into sets of five to represent the instrument’s pentatonic tuning. Time is subdivided along the y axis, and is read from the top to the bottom of the page. Notes played with the right hand are marked with an “0;” the left with an “X.” This system provides a visual representation of the movement of the player’s hands in both time and space. A note’s duration need not be indicated in gyil transcriptions; after it is initially struck, a key’s sound decays naturally, unaltered by the player.

**Kontombiliwe**

The text of this piece concerns fairies, whose connection to the instrument is discussed in Chapter 1. While the notation here indicates only one player, two people can play the piece together, one playing the higher pitched variations while another plays variations in the lower register. I introduce the patterns in the order they were introduced to me, but the sequence is somewhat flexible, particularly in the initial higher pitched variations. The final variations, starting on the bottom of page 83, are to be repeated many times; they are the “solo” variations, and should be held long enough to give the dancers the opportunity to dance vigorously.
**Tomena**

The second transcription, Tomena, is a Bewaa recreational piece, inviting the community to come and dance. It is included here because it demonstrates many musical features of Woma’s teaching style. Represented here are the “melody” (played continuously in the left hand), “song” (played in the right hand in pages 86 and 87), and “solo” sections (beginning on page 88 in the right hand). Woma’s students begin playing each of these three parts using two hands. I demonstrate how these parts are put together beginning on page 85, whenever there are two “X”s or “O”s on the same horizontal line. When playing the “song” with the right hand, always use the higher pitched of the two notes. Likewise, Woma would use the lower pitched of the left hand notes, except during the “solo,” where the higher pitched note fulfills a musical function in both the “melody” and “solo” parts. Tomena uses the AABABBAB format typical of Bewaa songs. The cycle occurs in the left hand, and its progression is indicated in the left margin.
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