KILLING MY OWN SNAKE: FIELDWORK, GYIL, AND PROCESSES OF LEARNING

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A Thesis

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This thesis is an account of my experiences studying the *gyil*, a xylophone played by the Dagara, an ethnic group located in Northwest Ghana, Burkina Faso, and Côte D’Ivoire. I spent six weeks living and learning with a group of Dagara musicians in Medie, a village north of Accra, Ghana’s capital city. While there, I studied with Bernard Woma and Jerome Balsab.

I explore the process of learning gyil in Medie beginning with my teachers’ instructional methods and ending with the ways in which I came to situate the music within my own Western framework. I examine the field work situations I experienced in Ghana, reflecting upon the challenges posed to me as an ethnomusicologist, a musician, a woman, and an individual. I relate the struggles of learning to play gyil music in a context that operated outside of the framework in which I normally perceived and learned music.

I present a self-developed transcription model, which I implement in the transcription of one gyil piece. I then analyze this piece, focusing on topics of meter and time conception. I propose an alternative means of framing musical understanding through the incorporation of dance rhythms, a relatively unexplored topic.

Finally, I investigate how gyil music is transmitted, from the traditional Dagara approach to Woma’s eclectic method, and to my own methods. I reflect on how teaching methods become more methodical as the music and dance move farther from their original context. I then develop a method—including transcriptions and coordination exercises—by which this information can be disseminated to Western-trained musicians.
I would like to dedicate this thesis to my grandfather, Sidney Salsburg, my ancestor spirit, who guides me every step of my journey. My grandfather was a man who possessed a deep love for knowledge, for learning, and for people. His spirit lives on in my heart, and in my words. I hope I have made him proud.
This thesis would not have been possible without all of the wonderful people in my life. First, I would like to thank my parents for years of endless support, love, and for reading to me when I was little. I would like to thank my grandmother for talking with me, for listening, and for sharing all of my moments, good and bad. To my friends and colleagues—Mark Gerolami, Corinna Campbell, and Steven Kemper—thank you for listening to me, encouraging me, and believing in me when I didn’t believe in myself. I would especially like to thank Chris Hale for sharing time with me in the field.

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CHAPTER 1.
INTRODUCTION

“Africa is very much like a mirror, and African scholarship often reveals more about the scholar than about the continent whose cultures and societies he seeks to describe.”
--Elliott P. Skinner, Peoples and Cultures of Africa: An Anthropological Reader (1973)

The Thesis

In the summer of 2006, I spent six weeks living in Ghana, West Africa, learning to play the gyil, a xylophone of the Dagara people. While there, I studied primarily with Bernard Woma and Jerome Balsab, both of whom have been active with the Ghana Dance Ensemble. Woma is also the founder of the Dagara Music Center (DMC), a school located in Medie, a suburb of Accra, Ghana’s capital city. This is where I studied and lived. Balsab is employed as a gyil teacher at the Dagara Music Center.

This thesis is the product of that field research. It includes the musical material that I learned, as well as my personal experiences in the field, including: the ways in which I was challenged as a musician, an ethnomusicologist, and individual. In Chapter Two I introduce the Dagara people, locating them within their traditional geographic context. Then I examine the gyil itself. Tuning, construction, performance practice, and performance contexts are all considered.

In Chapter Three I discuss several problems inherent with transcription in general, and then introduce other scholars who have developed methods of transcribing the music of West Africa. I engage with their methods and purposes, and address the benefits and drawbacks of their proposed solutions. I then present my self-developed transcription model. In Chapter Four I introduce my Ghanaian gyil teachers as well as the field site. I give an overview of both the Dagara Music Center and Medie.
I have organized my field research experiences into three distinct periods: my first week as a student in a group of six Americans, two additional weeks working alongside one other American, and finally three weeks studying alone. In Chapter Five, each period is examined in terms of the teaching methods employed by Woma and Balsab as they adjusted to the changing situations and my growing competence. I conclude this chapter with an examination of the processes of learning I underwent as I learned to play the gyil and an investigation into the musical experiences that shaped my perspective.

I employ my transcription model in Chapter Six to present transcriptions of one Bewaa musical piece, “Te Wana.” I transcribe the piece in several different ways in order to analyze time conception. I then propose an alternative means of examining time in the music by placing the dance rhythms centrally in the analysis.

In Chapter Seven I explore methods of teaching gyil music. I introduce traditional African teaching methods and then give a detailed account of Woma’s methods. I present my own teaching methods of both gyil music and dance. I provide rhythmic exercises, as well as a variety of teaching and learning suggestions. In this vein, I examine and incorporate the spectrum of teaching possibilities that I have encountered while learning this music, from Balsab’s traditional approach to Woma’s eclectic methods, and finally through my own experiences teaching this material to others in the United States.

This was my first time alone in the field, and the emotional and personal impact that accompanies such an event is seen throughout this paper. I have made no attempt to extract myself from my research. On the contrary I have tried to use my experiences as the springboard for the investigation of how one learns the music of another culture while in the field. Perhaps

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1 Dagara recreational-music genre. Bewaa is explained thoroughly in Chapter 2.
my struggles and the means in which I resolved them may be encouraging for others who someday find themselves in a similar situation.

**Who I Am, a Personal Reflection**

I am a female instrumentalist who has been trained in classical and contemporary percussion idioms. I have also had extensive experience performing in world music ensembles, beginning as an undergraduate at the University of North Texas. The first time I went to Ghana (2001), I was participating in a UNT study abroad program led by Dr. Steven Friedson that concentrated on Ewe music and spirit possession. The first part of my 2005 trip to Ghana was as a member of a study abroad program led by Dr. Steven Cornelius. My decision to study gyil music and dance came as a direct result of that experience. I was eager to learn and, once my research course was set, determined to acquire the information necessary to write a thesis.

Towards the end of my time in Ghana I was struggling with a particular rhythmic passage on the gyil. I was trying to get Balsab to isolate where the pulse was against the pattern, so that I could better frame the rhythm in my mind. Woma, who had been away for several weeks, had returned the previous day and came to my morning lesson in order to assess my progress. I played several pieces to his satisfaction, but when we came to the problem passage Woma quickly noticed that while I was playing the piece correctly, I didn’t really understand. Using Western terminology Woma was able to explain this passage clearly and quickly. I was disappointed that things had to be explained on my terms, but was pleased to finally comprehend the material.

I have thought about that moment a lot since my return to the United States. Had Woma not intervened, I eventually would have learned the piece correctly, but it would have taken
longer. Without a clear verbal explanation I would be forced, as I did in other pieces, to rely on aural clues and tactile information. Once I was shown where the pulse fell against the rhythmic pattern, and how many beats there were, I never actually counted out the rhythm (or wrote it down, until I got home), but I was provided instantly with a ready-built Western framework in which to place my musical comprehension. That framework was built over time, slowly and gradually. It is the framework for the intellectual house in which I live.

One of the most fascinating parts of this fieldwork experience was learning to clarify the lens through which I saw my musical world, and to try to build a new perspective, to gain insight into someone else’s understanding of music. Because I was being taught on a one-to-one basis, we were already operating outside of the norms of how the Dagara learn to play the gyil. I cannot call my experience “authentic” in the sense of being enculturated and absorbed over a long period of time. I had a teacher who explained things to me and showed me parts, and we practiced them over and over again. In that way, it was not a true Dagara way of learning, therefore I may not have gained a Dagara perspective. But I did learn in a way very outside of my original perspective. It was frustrating and painful and slow, but I learned a lot about how to learn, about patience, about who I was and what I was willing to do for the sake of what I wanted to know.

I used to practice my gyil in the evenings outside of my room very slowly and methodically. I would practice until my brain felt like it might explode, staring at my gyil, struggling to learn the days material so that we could move forward tomorrow. As I would play, I would talk to myself, tell myself that one has to suffer for knowledge, that I had to place myself in front of my fears repeatedly if I ever expected to not be afraid. I realize that all this had less to do with the gyil or the music itself, and more to do with me. It was my first time alone in the
field. I was very far from home and busy trying to become the kind of person I want to become. The experience was developmental. I sought the kind of personal growth that when you finish, you don’t recognize yourself in the mirror. It worked. I learned to believe in myself and returned home proud of my accomplishments. I know that there will be future struggles, and fears. But I also know that I will meet those times well fortified by my experiences in Medie. Perhaps in twenty years I will feel silly for having felt such pride at having conquered such a tiny mountain. But for me, at that time, it was my greatest mountain. I have loved many instruments in my life, but the gyil is the first one I feel that I really own. It has become like an extension of me. I learned so much on that trip, and the gyil was my catalyst for enormous growth and meaningful life experience. Confronting the gyil taught me a lot about myself.
CHAPTER 2.
INTRODUCING THE DAGARA AND THE GYIL

**Pronunciation**

In this thesis, I use several spellings and letters that may be unfamiliar to the reader. The following guide to pronunciation may be of use.

- **Gy**—as in gyil—pronounced J as in John or jog
- **Kp**—as in *kpagru*—pronounced by placing the K sound in the back of the throat, and the P sound on the lips, and pronouncing them simultaneously
- **Vowels:**
  - a —pronounced ä as in star or bar
  - e —pronounced ā as in stay or play
  - ε —pronounced e is in bed or end
  - i —pronounced ē as in speak or meet
  - o —pronounced ō as in bone or no
  - u —pronounced ü as in you or true
  - ɔ —pronounced ō as in saw or thaw

**Introduction to the Dagara People**

The Dagara people live in the Upper West Region in Ghana, as well as in neighboring Burkina Faso and Côte D’Ivoire, and are known by several names. They are frequently referred to as Dagaaba (also Dagaba). Also frequently found are the terms Dagarti or Dagati, although according to Bemile these terms are considered “pejorative” (Bemile 2000: 212). Nevertheless,
several scholars have adopted this term (Strumpf 1970, Mensah 1982, Lentz 2000, and Campbell 2005). Lentz uses the term Dagarti to refer to the Dagara ethnic group, as being separate from the Lobi, Wala, and Sisaala groups (Lentz 2000), while Campbell uses the term Dagarti to refer collectively to the Dagara, Lobi, and Dagaba ethnic groups (Campbell 2005). The negative connotation associated with the term Dagarti is unresolved and questionable. Bernard Woma explained that the term Dagarti is not offensive, but rather is inaccurate. He said that the term is used by people in Ghana who are not Dagara, and by scholars who applied the term without consulting Dagara people. Goody uses the term LoDagaa to refer to the Lobi, Birifor, Sisaala, LoWiili, Dagara, Dagaba, and LoPiel groups (Goody 1962).

Woma explained that the Dagara people can be broken up into three smaller groups, those from the North, around Nandom, those in the central area of Dagaraland, and those in the Southern area of Dagaraland. The northern Dagara people are known as Dagara, as is their language, the Southern Dagara people are known as Lobi or Birifor, their dialect is known by the same name, the central Dagara are called Dagaaba and the dialect they speak is Dagaare. All of these dialects are mutually intelligible, even across the political borders of Ghana, Burkina Faso, and Côte D’Ivoire. I use the term Dagara because the people I learned from are from the northern area, they speak the dialect of Dagara, and refer to themselves as Dagara. As I use this term, it does not include the Lobi or Dagaaba.

The ethnic groups in closest proximity to the Dagara are the Lobi, the Sisaala and the Wala. The Sisaala and Lobi peoples also play xylophones, however the Wala do not. Wala music culture is more similar to the Dagbamba people of the Northern Region, even though their language more closely resembles Dagara. Woma, a native Dagara speaker, understands Wala and
Lobi, but not Sisaala. These groups do not exist in complete separation from each other; neighboring villages may belong to any of these groups.

Among the Dagara, music is central to daily activities, life cycle events, religious ceremonies, and recreation. The main instrument of the Dagara is the gyil, an 18-key xylophone. The Sisaala and Lobi peoples also use similar xylophones. These three groups are the only xylophone-playing groups in Ghana (Mensah 1982: 139). The Sisaala xylophone is very large, which Mensah concludes is the reason the Sisaala xylophone has not gained the popularity or spread as widely as the Lobi-Dagara xylophones (ibid.:140). The Sisaala refer to their xylophone as dzensi or zen se, while both the Lobi and the Dagara use the term gyil (ibid.). The Lobi xylophone is slightly smaller than either the Dagara or Sisaala xylophones, having only fourteen bars. On some occasions, the Dagara also use a smaller, 14-key gyil, resembling the Lobi xylophone. Due to the geographic closeness of these ethnic groups, musical pieces are sometimes shared between them.
The number of keys on a gyil depends on the function of the xylophone and the ethnic group. The standard Dagara 18-key gyil is known as *Dagaar-gyil*, and is used for funerals and
for Bëwaa repertoire. The Dagaar-gyil is “widely regarded as the eldest of all xylophones” (Mensah 1982: 142). As Dagara people have moved throughout Ghana and taken Bëwaa with them, it is often performed on the smaller Dagara 14-key gyil. This smaller gyil is known as lo-gyil, and resembles the Lobi xylophone, but maintains a different tuning. The smaller lo-gyil is easier to transport because of its size and weight. It was on the lo-gyil that I learned to play, and that Woma uses at the Dagara Music Center and in the United States. The 14-key lo-gyil is traditionally used in the Dagara bagr-bine, traditional religious ceremonial music, and in announcing the death of community members in the Upper West Region. Lo-gyile (more than one gyil) are used when communicating with the spirits and ancestors, and are thus imbued with spiritual power.

The Lobi also have two xylophones. Both have fourteen keys, however they are tuned differently and are used for different purposes. The Lobi ko-gyil is used for recreational music and funerals while the bo-gyil is played for harvests and religious ceremonies.

The Gyil—Physical Construction

The Dagara gyil is made from natural materials, and is “considered a sacred instrument, as it is made from living things” (www.dagaramusic.com). Woma related that in the Dagara belief system cutting down a tree is like cutting down “the life of the universe” (personal communication, 5/2/06). He explained that trees are thought to contain life, as are gourds and animals. Since life was taken to create the instrument, it is sacred and must be shown respect. I would like to propose that there are alternative possibilities for the instrument’s sacred status. The fact that Woma did not confirm any of these possibilities does not the exclude their presence. The instrument is integral to the community on several levels. It is used in ritual
contexts as well as in socially important ceremonies such as funerals and recreational events. It is used in nearly all facets of community life, thus is necessary for social continuity. Without the gyil there would be massive reordering of most community events. Music is integral in Dagara society and the gyil is the instrument that provides the most important outlet for musical expression. I suggest that the reason the gyil is considered sacred is a combination of the cultural contexts in which it is necessary and being made from living things.

The bars of gyile are made from a strong red wood of the Ligaa tree (Strumpf 1970: 2), and joined first to one another and then suspended above a wooden frame, which is held together by cowhide. Hollowed calabash gourds act as resonators for the bars, with gourds ranging in sizes that correspond to the size and pitch of the bars. Thus the largest bars are resonated by the largest gourds. These gourds act as sound amplifiers, and also provide a characteristic of the Dagara sound ideal, the buzzed timbre. In order to create this buzzed timbre, holes are cut in the circumference of the roundest part of the gourds, then covered with spider egg casings. The resultant sound is a buzz created by the vibration of the membrane covering the hole in the gourd. Not all bars buzz equally on any single gyil, although ideally they would.

Today a substitute material for the spider egg casings is the inside tissue-like paper of mailing envelopes.
Figure 2: Gyil frame and bars

Figure 3: Gyil frame and bars
Figure 4: Gourd resonators with thin, white membrane

Figure 5: Close-up of gourd resonators
The Gyil--Tuning

The Dagara 14-key gyil is tuned to a pentatonic scale. A xylophone maker will often tune glyile to one another, so that theoretically all xylophones made by that maker should be tuned close to one another. There is no standard set of pitches used in tuning, however, and glyile are tuned by ear, so the difference between them is often radical. A maker will usually keep one gyil and tune all of his instruments to that one; the master gyil used to tune the others changes frequently, however, so even glyile tuned by one maker can differ significantly. The instruments are created in pairs, one male and one female. The lower-pitched glyil is the male and the higher is the female. Gyile are tuned by scraping wood from the underside center and underside ends of wooden bars. To raise the pitch of a bar, wood is scraped from the ends of the bars, to lower the pitch, wood is scraped from the center.
The Gyil—Sections of the Xylophone

Each of the bars of a gyil is named, although the names that are given vary between xylophone makers. Mensah compiled a list of names given to him by nine informants (1982). The variety of names in the list was considerable, however a few patterns emerged. For example, the names tend to reflect familial relations and social order as well as ideas about registers of the gyil. A frequent name for the lowest, largest key is *gyil-saa*, meaning “father of the keys” (ibid.: 143). Another frequently used name for the key next to *gyil-saa* is *gyil-maa*, “mother of the gyil” (ibid.). Other names for keys translate as “first-born male,” “son of the first born,” and “youngest of the keys” (ibid.). This social hierarchy, while assigned different names, implies a hierarchy in the registers of the gyil. The lowest-pitched keys are always the father, mother, or eldest while the highest-pitched keys are further down on the social ladder; they are younger, smaller, and have a small voice. The registers of the gyil are given names as well. The highest-pitched notes are collectively referred to as *gyilipare* (“tail”), the middle section is known as *gyilinyaa* (“chest of the gyil”), and the lowest-pitched range is called *gyilzu* (“head”) (Mensah 1982: 146).

The Gyil—Performance Practice

Among the Dagara, the gyil is played with the lowest pitched bars to the player’s left, although left handed players (such as both of my teachers Bernard Woma and Jerome Balsab) play with the lowest-pitched bars to their right. A gyil player sits on a low stool and grasps the beaters between the pointer and middle fingers of each hand. Gyil beaters are made from wood, with tips made from tire rubber, although traditionally the tips were made from the rubber from the Sungsugle tree.
In performance the gyil is usually played in pairs and accompanied by a calabash drum with a lizard-skin head called a *kuɔr*. Other drums that are used are the *dalaar*, an earthen pot-neck drum with rat skin stretched over one end, and a *gangare*, a cylindrical wooden, double-headed drum with stretched cow skin heads (Mensah 1982: 147). Frequently gyile players attach metal jingles around the wrist of the hand playing in the highest register to add to the rhythm of the music.

Figure 7: Bɛwaa ensemble: two gyile players and kuɔr player
I have seen gyil players face each other (at a Dagara funeral) and also sit side by side (in a Bɛwaa performance). The leader will play on the male gyil and the supporter will play on the female gyil. One of the gyil players (the leader) will play the lyrical line and improvisations with his right hand (in the higher two registers of the gyil) and accompany himself with his left hand. The other gyil player will play the accompaniment (in the lowest and middle registers), or a variation of it, and also will turn his left mallet around, and beat out the *kpagru* ostinato on the edge of the lowest bar of the gyil. On some gyile, because the lowest bar is not used as a pitched key, but rather for this *kpagru* part, it does not require a gourd resonator.
The Gyil—Performance Contexts

Gyile are played in a wide spectrum of Dagara life events, including: funerals, festivals associated with the seasons and agriculture, religious ceremonies, and recreational events. The repertoire and style of playing varies in each context. Additionally, repertoire and performance rules change with genre. For example, in the Dagara bagr repertoire (music for traditional religious events) every fifth note of the gyil must be avoided. I inquired as to why that note is avoided, and what it meant when it was struck. Woma told me that such information was restricted to those who were initiates into a privileged group, and that he could not tell me. I asked Balsab, and he did not know either, because he was not a member. It was interesting that while I was able to learn the musical components of that particular piece, the secret meanings of the music remained privileged knowledge. At Dagara funerals, gyile play dance music and
accompany soulful praise singing. Gyile also announce the death of a community member, letting people know whether it is a man a woman or a child who has died (Nketia 1974: 84).

The gyil has been introduced into contemporary religious ceremonies, including Roman Catholic Church Services where it supplants the organ (Mensah 1982). I attended a Roman Catholic Church service in Koforidua, a city near Medie, where Woma and Balsab performed on their gyile during a Mass.

Bewaa is the main type of recreational dance music played by the Dagara. The genre is associated with harvest festivals, but is used at all social occasions except funerals and spirit possessions (Mensah 1982: 148). The term Bewaa comes from the word bewaare which literally means “they are coming” (Wiggins 1999: 68). This perhaps suggests that the music inspires the Dagara people to come together for an event or a communal activity (ibid.). Bewaa music, like much traditional African dance music, is communal, that is, the distinction between performers and audience is loosely defined; everyone participates, whether it be by playing, singing, dancing, or clapping. Not everyone plays the gyil, however; this is a specialization reserved for only a few musicians. The song lyrics to a Bewaa piece may be proverbial; they may “narrate a humorous incident, comment on someone’s behaviour, or give advice about how one should behave” (ibid.: 69). In a Bewaa performance, several songs will be performed in a row without stopping. In order to get from one to the other, there is usually a linking phrase that the lead gyil player initiates that connects one piece to the next.

The Bewaa repertoire can be broken into two major genres. The older genre is known as Sebkper, the newer genre is known as Piru. Each of these genres consists of thousands of songs that are unified by a similar cyclic pattern. The Sebkper genre has the cyclic pattern of AABABBBBAB, while the Piru genre has the cyclic pattern of AABB. Within the genres, there are
different melodic ostinato patterns by which songs are grouped. For each melodic ostinato pattern, thousands of songs can be played. A player can move easily from one song to another within any group by a connecting phrase because the melodic ostinato remains the same.

Pieces in the Bɛwaa repertoire are accompanied by dancers, who change dance patterns according to the lead gyil player’s cues. Bɛwaa dances are circular, alternating men and women in the circle. Bɛwaa dances involve clockwise and counter-clockwise movements, vigorous foot patters, and shoulder and arm movements. Dancers contribute to the soundscape by wearing metal jingles (kyiima) around their calves, and clicking metal castanets (nutura) in their right hands. The overall sonic atmosphere becomes very dense with the combination of two gyile, the kpagru part, a kuɔr, singing, clapping, metal castanets, and metal jingles.

Figure 10: Bɛwaa dancer with metal jingles attached to his leg, and holding metal castanet in his hand.
CHAPTER 3.
DEVELOPING A TRANSCRIPTION MODEL

Because African musical conceptions and scales do not neatly conform to those in the West, transcribing African music is problematic. In this chapter I review the problems of transcription in general and then discuss the work of scholars who have specifically dealt with African music transcription. I introduce their purposes for transcription, the problems they have encountered, and the methods they arrived at to attempt to solve those problems. Interestingly, while several of these scholars faced the same challenges and music, they found different methods of representation.

After this literature review, I propose an alternative transcription model and suggest a new way to evaluate time conception by incorporating dance rhythms into the transcriptions. Framing the metrical aspects of musical conception to dance is a relatively unexplored topic. By rethinking transcription in this light, I attempt to add another layer of understanding to what we know about African music.

The task of creating a transcription model for Dagara gyil repertoire has been both challenging and rewarding. I present my transcription model with the hope that it serves its purpose as a tool for learning and appreciating the beautiful music of the gyil, and that it finds its place within the timeline of those who have attempted, each in their own way, to represent the music of Africa.

The Problems of Transcription

Transcription has played an important role in the history of ethnomusicology. Its aims and methods have changed through time, as has its centrality to the ethnomusicologist’s skill set.
Early transcriptions in the first decades of the twentieth century by ethnomusicologists such as Hornbostel were used primarily as aids for musical analysis and description. Another concern was the preservation of folk musics. Transcriptions used in those cases, such as those by Bela Bartok, were rich with detail, nuance, and were representations of how a specific individual performance actually sounded.

Noting that transcriptions could help scholars achieve a variety of goals, Charles Seeger (1958) divided transcriptions into two categories: prescriptive and descriptive. Prescriptive transcriptions are guides for how a piece of music should sound. Descriptive transcriptions (like Bartok’s) are visual representations of how a piece of performed music actually did sound within a single performance. Eventually, ethnomusicologists developed transcription methods designed around the characteristics and needs of specific musics and in order to solve specific problems (e.g. Koetting 1970, Harnish 1985). Alternative models were utilized for specific purposes, some created with applicability to only one music culture. Ethnomusicologists now routinely tailor their transcriptions to purpose (i.e. transcription as memory aid, teaching tool, prescriptive or descriptive), cultural source, and audience.

Transcription poses a number of inherent problems. To begin with, music exists as it is performed. By transcribing one performance, the scholar has not captured the variations of the music or the different styles of many performers. No transcription system can adequately encompass all aspects of a musical performance. If several scholars are given a piece of music to transcribe, the variations of systems utilized, the musical elements highlighted or omitted, the amount of supplemental analysis given would vary radically (see England 1964). A series of careful decisions by the transcriber shape the result of the final product.
On an even more fundamental level, all systems of transcriptions are translations. Each system is a series of codes and symbols that we become trained to understand. They are only meaningful because we understand them and have assigned performative qualities to lines, shapes, and figures. Unless we are transcribing the music from a culture that already has a means of transcription, and we use their system, no matter what we do we enter into a series of translations that take the music farther away from its original context. The transcriber must decide how to most effectively translate one musical language into another, and how to assign symbols, numbers, or pitches to a musical system in which they do not exist. Several systems have been devised to transcribe non-Western music without Western biases and systems.

As scholars we most often accept an outsider’s point of view. Therefore our application of systems of transcription are fraught with conflicts. Scholars have tried to solve this problem by creating models that show aspects of the music that are central to the insiders’ way of thinking or are especially important within their context (e.g. Friedson 1996). Can we ever create a notation that will serve as an adequate translation? Probably not. No system created by an outsider will ever truly represent insider thinking—only insider transcription could do that.

**Review of African Music Transcriptions**

African music scholars have long been confronted with the challenge of representing African music with transcriptions that are easily understood by Western scholars and musicians, yet remain faithful to the African conceptions of time, rhythm, and feel. These scholars have dealt with several problems, many of which are inherent with all transcriptions. A recurring problem is the need to distinguish between providing a transcription that is easily readable for Western musicians and freeing the transcription from Western metric conceptions. Other
problems include how to clearly reference the time line pattern, and how to represent the various sounds of drum strokes.

In the following pages I review how several scholars have thought about these problems, the methods they utilized to solve them, and the challenges each has specifically tackled. Then I provide my interpretation of their varying degrees of success. I engage with transcribers who have significantly impacted the world of African-music studies and the way successive generations of students study transcription.

In his pioneering work *Studies in African Music* (1959), A.M. Jones used Western staff notation to transcribe a variety of traditional West African music genres. His goal was twofold. Most generally, he simply wanted to make the material available to the West. More specifically, he sought to create prescriptive charts, so that Western musicians could reproduce the African rhythms (1959). Jones’ transcriptions are highly detailed and informed by Western musical norms such as pitch conception (complete with key signatures for voices and drums), time signature, tempo markings, as well as phrase markings. He provided not only separate parts for all of the instruments and song lyrics, but also included clapping patterns, which are integral to African musical practices. Additionally, Jones identified and included the vocables or drum language syllables used for the drum patterns.

Unfortunately, Jones’ transcriptions are laid out in such a way that they are virtually unusable. Each part is written on a separate line, each moving independently of all the others. Barlines do not line up, and it is difficult to ascertain the relationship between parts. The bell pattern is the time line of the music, and yet the other parts are not clearly shown in relation to this part. Jones wanted to present African perceptions of phrasing, rather than those of the West. In so attempting, however, he lost sight of the larger picture. For all the transcriptions’
complexities, they fail to deliver on even the simplest of promises: it is impossible to figure out how the various parts fit together.

Dissatisfied with the transcription models based on Western staff-notation, James Koetting (1970) offered an alternative, the Time Unit Box System (TUBS). Koetting argued that a major problem of using Western staff-notation for transcribing West African drum music is that it forces the music into the framework of the Western music tradition, focusing on the musical elements that are similar, and neglecting those that are not (1970: 117). Furthermore, he argued that Western notation offered a poor format for representing the variety of African drum strokes. Finally, Koetting wanted to better represent the interrelation between drum parts. Through TUBS, said Koetting, musicians could approach “the music strictly on its own structural terms” (ibid.).

TUBS is comprised of a series of boxes, with each box representing one time unit of the fastest pulse in the music. In TUBS, each part can be seen as independent and based on an independent pattern, the aspects of the music that are fundamental to the overall unity can be seen as well. For example, TUBS allows for stacking, which provides a clear visual of the interconnectedness of each of the parts to each other, and to the time line. Each part can be easily placed against any other to analyze the interaction of patterns. By placing each part against the time line, not only are we able to visualize the two patterns, but we are also provided with an understanding of how these parts are learned within their cultural context, as most players learn their parts, and reference their specific patterns, to the time line. In this light Koetting’s TUBS was useful.

In its visual presentation, TUBS attempts to avoid the application of the Western conception of meter. Simply by looking, there is no obvious or implied “hierarchy of stress or
accent” (1970:127). Koetting’s visual neutrality does not guarantee, however, that the reader will not supply her own sense of metric time once the various patterns have been internalized. Additionally, it is the transcriber, the Western musician, who decides the fastest pulse, thus applying her own sense of time, despite the notation’s neutrality. It is misleading to think that African music has no meter or accent as Koetting wished to avoid. In the end, Koetting’s attempt to avoid one problem simply replaced it with another. The real challenge for the transcriber is to determine where musical groupings exist within the African conception, not to avoid meter all together. By avoiding meter it indicates that Africans do not conceive music as structured, but rather as an endless stream of interrelated rhythms. While Koetting desired to represent the “native” way of thinking about music, he did no such thing. It is patently false that Africans think in terms of the fastest pulse as TUBS implies.

In *Drum Gahu: an Introduction to African Rhythm* (1998), David Locke clearly stated the purpose of his transcriptions. They were conceived as tools for aiding the Western performer and teacher of Ewe music (Locke 1998: 4). In order to achieve this purpose, he used a modified staff notation to transcribe the drum ensemble music of Gahu. Locke considered many of the factors integral to the understanding and accurate performance of Ewe dance-drumming music such as timing, timbre, ornamentation, dynamic contrast, articulation, dampening, phrasing, and the polyrhythmic interaction between parts. Locke was particularly concerned with the relationship between the bell pattern and each other part. In his analysis, he effectively writes the bell rhythm directly above each of the other transcribed parts. In this way, the performer is able to visualize and reference the bell pattern and easily situate herself against this pattern. Locke addressed issues of timbre and drum stroke by using different lines and spaces to represent the varying drum techniques and sounds of the Ewe music. This is coupled by the use of vocables, non-
lexical words that represent drum strokes, written beneath the rhythms. Locke’s transcriptions are clear, readable, and informative. The transcriptions are accompanied by a detailed explanation of the musical sounds, techniques, and analyses of the rhythms. The staff notation does not detract at all from the music. To the contrary, Locke’s treatment of issues such as phrasing were carefully considered and transcribed in a manner that remained true to the music while presenting the information in a way that can be meaningful and helpful for readers wishing to learn.

Ghanaian scholar Kofi Agawu chose Western-staff notation when transcribing African music “in order to render the material immediately comprehensible” (Agawu 1995: xx) and to better analyze “clear, definable musical attributes” (Agawu 1986: 65). His transcriptions are not intended as aids for performers or teachers of African music, nor do they fall into the Koetting lineage of attempting to avoid representing Western concepts. His transcriptions are utilized for their analytical merit; they facilitate the discussion of musical components. His framework has been criticized for being too thoroughly Western, and ignoring extramusical components (Stone 1986: 55). In addition to using Western-staff notation, Agawu employed Western musical terminology in analysis; his approach was consistent and filled a specific need in terms of musical understanding.

Trevor Wiggins transcribed the xylophone music of the Upper West Region in Ghana using several different models. In Xylophone Music From Ghana, he used both Western notation and TUBS notation (1992). Wiggins pointed out the difference between how a pitch is represented on the staff and the actual sounding note on the gyil (1992:22). The pitches of the staff cannot accurately represent the pitches played on the gyil because every gyil is tuned differently. He justified the use of Western staff notation because it the most familiar, and would
be the easiest from which to learn. (ibid.). Wiggins’ use of staff notation was convoluted. He assigned numbers using cipher notation to each of the bars, and then assigned pitch names for each number. It takes an unnecessarily long time to decide which bar you are meant to strike. In his model C=1, D=2, E=3, G=4, and A=5. The lowest bar of the gyil is assigned as 2, the next is 3, etc. When reading from the staff, after you determine which bar to strike, you cannot read the transcription like a normal score because the intervals are irrelevant. For example, the interval from C down to A should be a third, but in Wiggins’ model it is only one step, so as you read the score it is unclear which bar to strike next.

Wiggins completed another set of transcriptions of the same music, using a combination of TUBS and cipher notation (1992). Wiggins comments that in many ways this system is better than Western notation because “there are no bar-lines to divide the music into possibly inappropriate chunks or suggest an accent where none should be” (1992: 13). However, this logic falls short, as once the patterns have been learned, the player will apply her own sense of meter regardless of the notation. Also, gyil music is naturally divided into phrases. Applying bar lines does not necessarily distort these phrases; in fact it often clarifies where accents occur and the way phrases are shaped. Wiggins’ use of TUBS stemmed from two things: attempting to create a system that would be easily learnable even for children who have no prior knowledge of Western notation, and following in the lineage of Koetting’s transcription model that seeks to understand and represent music without the biases of Western music notation.

**Musical Terminology: Melody, Song, and Solo**

Before introducing my transcription model, there are several fundamental Dagara musical elements that need to be presented, as I use the following terminology when referring to parts of
the transcriptions. There are three parts to each Dagara gyil piece, which Woma characterizes as: melody (yangfu or lenu), song (zukpar or yilu), and solo (yangfu). Woma’s English designations only approximate translations of the Dagara language. Yangfu or lenu means “support,” said Woma. While zukpar means “song,” the term yilu specifically designates the verbal line. The solo section is also called yangfu, though Woma gave it the English designation for reasons related to the dance rather than the music. This section is for the dancers to have their solo. The terms “melody” and “song” were organic. He felt that “song” was an appropriate translation, and that a melody supported the song.

Melody refers to the ostinato played in the lower register of the instrument, what we might call the bass line. This part is the foundation over which the song and improvisation take place. In Woma’s conception of melody, it functions in the same way as does an accompanying part in Western music. This part can range from a simple pattern to a more complex one, with improvisational elements.

The term “song” refers to the musical part played above the melody, and is usually in the middle and upper registers of the instrument. The song is an elaborated instrumental version of the sung, melodic, textual part of gyil music. Jerome Balsab told me that these textual songs were created before the xylophone music, thus the gyil song is derived from the already present melodic and rhythmic patterns of the textual song. Songs, which consist of several musical phrases, repeat over the melody’s cyclical patterns.

The third section of a Dagara gyil piece is the solo section. The solo, like the song, is supported by the accompanying melody. The solo is arrived at through a small transition from the song to the solo. The solo is also in the middle and upper ranges of the instrument, but is less lyrical than the song. There are several possible rhythmic variations for the solo patterns. The
solo does not have a sung textual accompaniment. The transition to the solo is accompanied by a change in the dancers’ pattern.

The structure of a piece can be described as follows. The melody is the underlying foundation which remains consistent throughout. The song, which occurs over the melody, transitions into the solo, which transitions back into the song. This process repeats as many times as the musicians like. The cycles of the melody align with the cycles of song and solo, so that, like chord progressions in a Western song, they are always in the same place in relation to one another. A player may go around the song cycle as many times as he wishes before transitioning to the solo cycle, but he must always transition at just the right moment in relation to the melody. In my conception, these three musical components are analogous to the two wheels of a bicycle: the melody is one wheel, the song and solo are the other. They move around separately, but if one moves and the other does not, the bike cannot move forward. For the remainder of this thesis, I refer to the musical parts described above using Woma’s terminology of melody, song, and solo.

In addition to these parts is an ostinato (kpagru), or timeline, which is played by one gyil player by hitting the back end of a mallet against the lowest bar of the instrument. Woma maintained that there is no translation for the term kpagru. When gyile are performed in pairs, the player responsible for the melody will play this ostinato part as well. This kpagru part remains constant throughout a piece, and never changes its relationship to either the song or melody parts.
Choosing a Transcription Model

When confronted with the task of transcribing the music I learned during my field research, the first challenge became selecting a model. I first needed to decide what the purpose of the transcriptions would be and what musical elements I wanted to represent.

The transcription model was devised with the main purpose of disseminating Dagara gyil music to Western-trained musicians. After reviewing previous scholars’ models, I determined that none of them satisfied my particular needs. As I confronted the problems that previous scholars had when choosing their transcriptions methods, I decided that the most effective way to solve the problems would be to combine a number of transcription systems. When transcribing this music I was concerned with how to represent pitches, rhythms, meter, and octaves, while integrating the dance steps. I wanted a model that was suited particularly well for the instrument and the music, and that would be clear enough to learn each of the parts from and to see visually how the parts interact.

The first issue I chose to tackle was pitch representation. I wanted my transcriptions to be used by Western musicians, but I did not want to utilize the pitches of the staff, an option with which I became increasingly displeased after reading Wiggins. Assigning pitch names to the keys is arbitrary and no less difficult to memorize than assigning numbers. In that system, the keys of the gyil would be randomly designated a pitch and a line on the staff. I was struck by the effective use of cipher notation in gamelan music. Wiggins used cipher notation for some of his transcriptions, but combined the system with TUBS. Instead of using TUBS, which has many pitfalls I did not want to encounter, I decided that combining cipher notation with Western staff notation would be the best option. In my model, the gyil is broken up into three octaves. Each pitch is given a representative number, which is repeated in all three octaves. Numbers range
from 1-5, with 1 being the lowest pitch on the gyil. A diagram is provided that illustrates this concept.

![Figure 11: Gyil with numbers corresponding to pitches in all three octaves.](image)

The next element I was concerned with was rhythmic representation. My transcriptions were designed for Western-schooled musicians; Western notation, therefore, was the fastest, most effective option. Using staff notation allowed me to place each part on a separate staff. Students can learn each part individually, but the counterpoint between parts is also clear.

The next component I addressed was octaves. Since I decided to forego traditional staff notation, I needed another way to show the octaves of the gyil. I chose a three-line staff, one line
for each octave of the gyil. The song and solo parts exist in the top two octaves and the melody exists in the lower two octaves; each part is confined to two lines of the three-line staff so the student only has to read two lines at a time. Figure 12 illustrates the implementation of this three-line staff. Since the Dagara think of the three octaves as separate and distinct, each with its own character, this notation system gives visual representation to this Dagara way of thinking. Initially the student will need to learn to read from this new staff. When combined with cipher notation, the transcriptions may initially appear foreign, however they are no more difficult to learn that the arbitrary lines of the staff assigned to gyil keys; in fact they may be easier for students with less developed proficiency reading staff notation.
The foundation of my transcription model grows from my desire to show relationships between Dagara music and dance. Gyil music is dance music. The accompanying dance patterns, as I will argue elsewhere, are fundamental to the conception of time and feeling in gyil music. Thus, their representation in the transcription is integral to analyzing and understanding the music.
There is a belief among the Dagara-Lobi that a gyilimbwera (gyil player) is born and not socially produced. According to local legend, a prospective gyilimbwera is born with his fists closed. If he remains like that for three weeks, it is a sure sign that he is destined to play the gyil (Mensah 1982, 150). Bernard Woma, who was born in 1963 in the village of Hiineteng in the northern extreme of Ghana’s Upper West Region, had the described condition.

Woma began to play the gyil at the age of two, after his father purchased a pair of instruments. At the age of five, Woma met a man named Ziem Tibo, a xylophone player and maker who became his guide and mentor. As his talent developed, Woma was asked to play at funerals and weddings throughout the region.

In 1982 Woma moved to the capital city of Accra in order to find employment. When not working in his job as a houseboy, Woma would occasionally go to Mamobi, a section of Accra where many Dagara people live. There he found a new outlet for xylophone playing. His gyil playing eventually got him the attention of Professor Albert Mawere Opoku and Frances Nii-Yartey, the former and current directors respectively of the Ghana Dance Ensemble (GDE), a folkloric performance group. Woma was offered the position of solo xylophonist for the GDE in 1989, which is also when he began teaching the gyil. While performing with this group, Woma learned many musical traditions from other Ghanaian ethnic groups. In 1992 the Ghana Dance Ensemble moved from the University of Ghana in Legon to the National Theatre. At this point, Woma was appointed the position of master drummer of the GDE, while maintaining the position of solo xylophonist. At present, Woma remains active in the Ghana Dance Ensemble, he
performs with the Dagara Cultural Troupe, a group of Dagara musicians who perform traditional music and dance, and directs the Dagara Music Center, a school in Ghana where students come to learn about Dagara music, dance and culture.

Woma is largely responsible for the growing popularity of gyil studies in the United States. In 1999 he was invited to be a guest lecturer at the State University of New York at Fredonia. Woma has taught workshops, master classes, and lessons at many universities in the United States including Williams College, Oakland University, and Bowling Green State University. He continues to perform throughout the United States in university settings as well as clubs, concert halls, and festivals as both an ensemble and solo player.

Jerome Balsab

Jerome Balsab, who is also from the Upper West Region, began working at the Dagara Music Center in 2000. Balsab was a member of the Ghana Dance Ensemble. During that time Balsab diversified his musical knowledge by learning to play the musics of other ethnic groups from Ghana. He lives in Medie all year, and works at the Dagara Music Center. During my time in Medie, when Woma was away, Balsab taught me not only Dagara gyil music, but also Ewe drumming. Additionally, Balsab plays gyil with the Dagara Cultural Troupe. Balsab began his work at the Dagara Music Center by observing Woma’s teaching methods and learning how to break down phrases of the music and relate musical concepts to Western students. He drew from Woma’s methods while maintaining a more traditional approach. As a teacher Balsab was endlessly patient, supportive, and expressed great pleasure as I improved and embraced Dagara gyil music. He is what Woma called “a professional gyil player.” Woma qualified this statement, mentioning that to be a gyil player is not a profession in the sense of making enough money to
support one’s family or to rely upon it as the sole source of livelihood. He felt that Balsab was professional in the sense of reaching a certain standard of Dagara gyil playing. Balsab also works as a mason.

**Dagara Music Center**

The Dagara Music Center was founded in 1999 by Woma as a place where Westerners could come to learn Dagara music, dancing, and visual arts as well as study Ewe and Ga drumming and dancing. In the summer of 2000, a group of students from Bowling Green State University became the first students to attend Woma’s program. Since then Bowling Green State University has returned several times, and students from many other universities have attended as well. The DMC is also home to the Dagara Cultural Troupe.

The DMC is designed to provide Westerners with a traditional experience, but also to provide them with an educational experience that is not completely foreign to their Western sensibilities. Students at the DMC take gyil, drumming, and dance lessons. Woma has created a program that is flexible and can be tailored to students’ specific interests and goals. For example, if a student prefers playing music to dancing, they can choose to play an instrument with the instructors during dance class. The atmosphere resembles a school; students are expected to attend classes regularly, be on-time, and participate, but the mood is relaxed. When other activities arise outside of the school, such as opportunities to see traditional religious services, Bewaa performances, funerals, weddings, or any other cultural events, students are encouraged to attend. In the time that I spent at the DMC, I tagged along with the Dagara Cultural Troupe on all of their performances, I went to a traditional Dagara funeral, a wedding, a mixed ethnic group
church service which included traditional musics, a house warming party, a local Ewe religious service, and generally was encouraged to immerse myself in the culture as much as possible.

The environment is family oriented as well. Woma and his family live at the DMC, so students get well acquainted with the people who live and work there. How much time one spends with these people is an individual choice. I wanted to get to know everyone as much as I could and make the DMC my home, especially after the rest of the group left. I spent a lot of time in the kitchen trying to learn to cook, playing with the children, going shopping at markets and in Accra with the women, chatting with everyone, and creating personal relationships. After awhile the DMC felt like home and the people who lived there became my friends and felt like my family.

**Medie, Ghana**

The Dagara Music Center is located in Medie, Ghana. A distant suburb of Accra, Medie is diverse in a variety of fashions. It is ethnically heterogeneous, yet controlled by a Ga chief. Many inhabitants make their living in traditional ways, such as agriculture, but perhaps more are locked into a market economy impacted by commuter traffic and internal modernization. Many different ethnic groups reside there and have formed subcultures within the village. The Dagara people with whom I lived and studied are from the Upper West Region of Ghana.

There are a myriad of activities available in Medie. Several people from the BGSU group took a lesson with the local blacksmith. There is a nice hill for hiking, markets filled with colorful fabrics, foods and spices are nearby, and the village is always bustling with activity, especially at night. There are several local bars, or spots as they are called, which provide an
outlet for drinking, dancing, and socializing. Villagers congregate near the local shops, food stands, and in the communal areas between homes.
Since the later half of the twentieth century, fieldwork has been viewed as integral to ethnomusicological study, as one of the defining characteristics of ethnomusicological research. The methods one utilizes in the field, the questions we ask, who we ask, and what we do not ask have enormous impact on the information received. Additionally, the lens we use to present and reflect upon the field research shapes the study. The possibilities of angles of thought are seemingly endless. Ethnomusicologists have drawn from linguistics, phenomenology, gender studies, anthropology, psychology, and numerous other disciplines as they study and write. This chapter presents my field research role and experiences, and examines my learning process and musical perspective.

One of the challenges of fieldwork is deciding what the objectives of the study will be, and how to position oneself relative to the subject being studied. Early ethnomusicologists often sought “objective” studies. Scholars worked without participating in musical events or gaining insiders’ knowledge into musical processes. Their main objectives included collection of data, preservation of musical styles, and description of unknown musical systems. In contrast to this approach, later studies were informed by such influential ideas as bi-musicality (Hood 1960), the ethnomusicologist’s role in fieldwork (Gourlay 1978), and reflexivity (e.g. Berliner 1978, Chernoff 1979, Keil 1979, Friedson 1996, and Kisliuk 1998). Ethnomusicologists have taken a variety of approaches in their studies, some seeking to provide a native point of view, others relating musical experience from the researcher’s perspective.

I have generally modeled my own work on the methods and ideas of these later scholars by placing myself within the text and reflecting upon my experiences as a musician and
individual in the field. My goals are to relate the experience of learning to play Dagara music from my perspective as a musician, student, woman, and individual who is considering the nature of fieldwork and the relationships, problems, and resolutions to the experience of learning another people’s music.

My primary role in the field was as a musician and a student. All of my research was conducted from the perspective of a student learning to play the gyil and dance. While I was concerned with gathering enough research data to write a master’s thesis, my focal point was the musical experiences I was participating in. In several instances I was in the position of observer rather than participant. These experiences also shaped my perspective of Dagara music culture and of my position to it. The majority of my musical experience was informed by participant-observation, however. By placing myself in these contexts, it has been possible to closely examine the processes of learning that I underwent, how I came to situate a musical system other than my own against my Western framework, and the challenges posed by learning to both clarify my musical perspective while stepping out of it to experience another perspective.

In my time in Ghana I experienced three distinct learning situations: with a group of American students, with one other American student, and by myself. These experiences were characterized by the teaching methods employed by my teachers, the fieldwork situation, and the challenges posed to me as an ethnomusicologist, a musician, and an individual. In this chapter I present those experiences, the unique challenges posed by each, and the ways in which I resolved the personal and musical problems for myself. I conclude the chapter with an exploration of my process of learning to play the gyil, and a detailed account of the perspective which has informed my way of thinking about and learning to play music.
Experience #1: Learning in a Group

One week of the time I spent at the DMC was with a study abroad group from Bowling Green State University. Woma taught gyil lessons for two hours each morning to our group, consisting of seven students, mostly musicians. The class was set up with Woma at the front and the group of us in a semi-circle facing him. In one week of lessons we learned four pieces of music, two of which are of the Bëwaa repertoire, one Sisaala piece, and one original composition.

On the first day of lessons Woma introduced us to the instrument by having us play a variety of short exercises designed to familiarize us visually, aurally and kinesthetically with the gyil. We were taught how to hold the mallets, and to how to physically produce sound correctly on the instrument. Woma also instructed us on the fundamental concepts of melody, song, and solo. This lesson presupposed no musical training or knowledge.

Woma has created a system in which intervals on the gyil are taught through kinship terms. “Friends” are keys that are adjacent on the instrument, “nieces” are separated by one key, “uncles” are separated by two keys, “cousins” have three keys between them, and “brothers” (the octave) have four keys between them. According to Campbell, “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” (Campbell 2005: 52). Woma explained this system to us, and then tested our knowledge by walking around the semicircle, quizzing each of us individually by pointing to keys and asking us to play the friend, brother, niece, uncle, or cousin of that key.

Next, we learned “Tomë Na,” a piece from the Bëwaa repertoire. Woma first taught us the melody to “Tomë Na” by rote. There are two distinct sections of the melody, phrase A and phrase B. Both of these sections are relatively simple and easy to grasp. Woma played a phrase
A, told us on which key to begin, and then had us play the section repeatedly. When teaching this section Woma employed the terms he had previously introduced: uncles, brothers, nieces, cousins, and friends. As learning tools, these terms are not especially effective. Woma checked for comprehension by walking around the semi-circle, asking each of us to play phrase A. When we had repeated the pattern enough to prove sufficient knowledge, we learned phrase B. After repeating this phrase for a while, we combined the two phrases. Woma had us play the first section twice, then the second section, and back and forth.

When we were comfortable switching between patterns, we were introduced to the cycle. Woma stepped up to a chalkboard and wrote AABABBAB. The first phrase we learned was deemed A and the second was phrase B. Woma drew a circle on the chalkboard and wrote AA at the top of the circle to signify that AA was the beginning of the pattern. We played this cycle repeatedly until we felt comfortable. Teaching the pattern in this way was a very effective strategy for beginning students of gyil. As Western musicians, we are familiar with the terms A and B being used to designate specific sections of a piece. As we played through the cycle, Woma would call out A, A, B, A, etc. In Western music, we frequently employ letters in musical analysis, and Woma’s method of teaching bridged the gap of understanding. Woma’s concepts were clear and easy to understand.

Figure 13: Melody of “Tome Na”
After we learned the melody, Woma taught us the song to “Tome Na.” There are several phrases of the song, which Woma broke up into smaller sections. He taught us phrase 1 by rote, employing the intervallic terms as he had before. We repeated the phrase several times and Woma checked for comprehension. Woma then taught us phrase 2 in the same manner, and then we linked them together. All of the phrases were taught in this way, and then they were all linked together. Once we knew the entire song we repeated it until we demonstrated proficiency. Throughout the lesson, if Woma heard incorrect notes he would isolate the person making the error and make corrections.

After we knew both the melody and the song, Woma explained where the song entered against the cycle of the melody, and how the two parts fit together. Then he split us into two groups: a melody group and a song group. We practiced playing together in our respective parts, and then we practiced switching back and forth between parts. The lesson became more difficult at this point because it required more focus to maintain one’s own part while hearing the other part. Woma played along as well, guiding students through their parts. We practiced this way until all the students were comfortable with both parts, and could switch between the two.

At this point, Woma introduced us to the text of the song and its meaning. “Tome Na,” we were told, is about being good at one’s chosen profession. The idea is that whatever it is that one chooses to do with his life, he should be dedicated and excel. Woma gave a brief lesson on pronunciation and letters that might be unfamiliar. After we were taught to sing the text, we played the song while singing a few times.

Woma then taught us the third part to “Tome Na,” the solo. This was taught in the same manner as the previous sections, and was repeated until we demonstrated understanding. Following that, we learned the transition from the solo back to the beginning of the song. We
practiced this part and then practiced moving from the solo to the transition and back to the song. Since we then knew the entire cycle, we practiced moving from section to section. We split up into our two groups again and practiced playing together and switching from part to part. Finally, Woma showed us the kpagru rhythm and how it lined up with the melody.

Woma utilized several methods that made learning to play an unfamiliar instrument more comfortable. Throughout this lesson he was careful to slow the music down to a speed that facilitated easy learning. Woma jokingly would correct students, fining them Cedis (the national currency) or Honey Brown beer for errors. This lightened the mood, prevented anyone from being embarrassed for being corrected, and ensured that everyone was staying on equal footing while learning the piece. He checked for comprehension frequently, making sure that the entire class understood the concepts and music. The use of repetition allowed students to grasp the material at their own pace; if you made a mistake, you could get back on and try again.

Throughout the week, Woma taught us the other pieces with the same structured methods. Each piece was broken into small sections, slowed down, and explained step by step. Woma clearly took the lessons and the music seriously, yet he was humorous and fun as well. The class behaved much like they would have in a Western classroom; we were respectful and orderly, and deferred to Woma’s expertise without questioning his methods or logic.

The field experience during this portion of time, for me, was like living in between two worlds. I could not fully feel like I was immersed in another culture because there were so many Americans around. It is more difficult to step outside of one’s comfort zone when there is a safety net available. I enjoyed playing with the children of the village and talking with people, but I was less likely to wander into town by myself, or spend long periods of time not speaking to a member of the group. I was also trying to figure out where to focus my energy, and was
frustrated with myself and lack of focus. I was looking forward to being more independent and to
finding what I was looking for. It was too easy to be there with the group, I would not be able to
get what I needed and wanted out of the trip with that many people around. I wanted to go and
explore, and to feel the thrill of being alone, and to struggle and resolve.

Experience #2: Learning with One Other Person

I spent one additional week at the DMC with another musician, Christopher Hale. Chris
and I met when we were both percussion majors at the University of North Texas; we had spent
significant amounts of time together through various ensembles, and had developed a very close
friendship. Chris is a very talented percussionist, and his presence with me in the field inspired
me to achieve a high level of performance and provided a soundboard against which I could
discuss musical problems and research ideas.

For one day, Chris and I took gyil lessons from Woma. It should have been three days,
however Chris and I both came down with slight cases of malaria, and were out of commission
for two days. I developed malaria on the day that the group left, and was sick for one additional
day before Chris became ill. The lesson was structured in much the same way as it had been for
the larger group. We were able to work more quickly because of our percussion backgrounds.
Before introducing us to new material, Woma checked our understanding of the pieces we had
learned the previous week. We demonstrated the ability to perform these pieces accurately and at
performance tempo. Woma then proceed to teach us two new pieces: “Yaa Yaa Kolɛ,” a Bɛwaa
piece, and one piece from the Bagr Bine repertoire (traditional religious music).

We began with “Yaa Yaa Kolɛ” which belongs to the Piru genre of Bɛwaa. Piru, as
explained in Chapter Two, is the newer of the Bɛwaa genres. Its melodic cycle is different, and it
comes from the Dagaaba people who live in Central Dagaraland. Its structural elements resemble the Sebkper (older) genre in many ways. It consists of a melody, a song, and a solo, and the dance for “Yaa Yaa Kolɛ” closely resembles that of dances in the Sebkper genre such as “Tome Na.”

Woma taught “Yaa Yaa Kolɛ” as he had taught other pieces, by breaking it into sections, teaching small phrases at a time, and checking frequently for comprehension. Once we had learned the piece, Chris and I practiced switching back and forth between parts. After learning the piece, Woma taught us possible variations for the song and solo sections. If either Chris or I had a question about an entrance, a rhythm, or a melodic pattern, Woma would isolate the problem, slow it down, and clearly explain the solution. Learning in that situation was very easy and comfortable.

Woma began to teach us “Bagr Bine” but was unable to finish, because he had scheduled a trip to the Upper West Region. Balsab would teach us for the remainder of the week, and we would continue to take drumming and dancing lessons. Woma had taught us the three sections for Bagr Bine, so Balsab reviewed us on these parts and helped us to connect them. This proved to be significantly more challenging because Balsab was less clear in his explanations. Several times either Chris or I had a question about an entrance or a rhythm, and Balsab was unable to verbalize an explanation. Chris and I were able to rely upon each other for information, and most of the time one of us would understand the music well enough to explain it to the other.

The experience was similar during our drumming and dancing lessons. If I was unable to grasp a rhythm or a sticking, Chris served as a translator for me. We related musical ideas to each other using Western terminology and Western concepts such as the idea of there being a beat one. During the dancing, Chris and Balsab played gyil while I learned the dances. Several
times, I was misunderstanding where to enter or how the dance fit with the music. Chris would give me an explanation that was clear and direct and fit comfortably within my framework of understanding.

In retrospect, I believe we both depended on each other more than we should have. I was not forcing myself to learn from Balsab in the way that he was teaching me. Chris provided an answer that was always easy and always clear. I was not challenging myself to think in new ways, even though I was learning new music.

Issues of gender came into play during this time period. They may have existed during the previous week, but it became clearer because it was only Chris and I taking lessons. During gyil lessons I never felt that Chris was granted privilege, but during drumming lessons we encountered several problems. Even when we were both playing the same part, our teachers would give Chris the larger drum to play on. At first, I did not say anything, but I wondered about why they were doing that. Eventually I said something, asking why Chris should always get to play on the big drum. They were bewildered by my question; of course he got the big drum, he was the man. We did not discuss gender issues with each other in class, and I was trying to mediate being treated equally with not wanting to seem overly aggressive or irrational. They seemed more confused that Chris was unable to control me and my opinions, and he became annoyed with me because it reflected badly on him that he could not shut me up. After a few days, they gave me the big drum. I believe this is a relevant part of my field experience and sheds a bit of light on gender issues during the learning process.

Even during gyil lessons, Chris and I interacted in a way that was friendly but also charged with healthy competition. We would poke fun if the other was having trouble, or made mistakes. We both enjoyed this interaction; being hard on each other was part of our dynamic as
friends. Balsab often seemed surprised that Chris was allowing me to be so aggressive and irreverent to him. They had assumed that Chris was my husband, and that he was supposed to maintain some level of superiority, or at least be able to stop me from making fun of him in front of other men.

These issues were never resolved or discussed in an open forum. Further research would need to be completed before a balanced and thorough discussion of gender issues among Dagara gyil playing could be presented. My belief is that while I was never mistreated or openly discouraged from musical performance that my interaction with Chris and my insistence on being thought of as equal in some ways challenged their conceptions of gender relations. As I moved into the time period where I was studying by myself, my personality as an aggressive and assertive woman was not met with resistance; rather the more I insisted on learning, the happier they became to share knowledge with me. In other words, eventually, I believe my status as a musician and serious student overrode any pre-conceptions about my gender.

Another factor worth considering is the amount of prior exposure that Balsab had with women musicians and professionals. Gyil playing is traditionally a male art form and profession. His conceptions of women’s behaviors, in my speculation, were more limited to traditional gender roles. Woma on the other hand, has interacted extensively with professional and ambitious women who defy the conventional Dagara gender constructs. Also, Woma displayed knowledge of Western views on gender issues. In one lesson, a few days before my departure, Woma sat in on my lesson in Balsab. Balsab’s baby son was hanging around us and seeking attention. Woma asked Balsab where the baby’s mother was, that it was her job to care for the baby. I did not respond or indicate any sign of disapproval at his statement. He quickly turned to me and explained that he understood that in the West women were capable of holding jobs and
being empowered, but that it was different in this situation. Whether or not Woma holds any strong opinions about gender roles, his indication that he understood what he was sure was my perspective reflects on his awareness of gender issues as they are viewed in the West. Balsab never indicated any such awareness, and I did not take it upon myself to inform him of my perspective directly.

The time that Chris and I spent together in the field was positive because it allowed me to transition into the next field experience smoothly. He was an outlet for me to express my ideas and problems to, and he served as a bridge to my Western musical world. Chris listened patiently as I shared my ideas about fieldwork and my research, and his keen insights often helped me to see more clearly. He was endlessly supportive of my goals, and he helped me to develop the confidence I would need to enter the next stage of my research. His presence was too comfortable however, and I needed to be able to challenge myself further by being in the field alone, and learning alone.

When Chris left, he expressed that he was ready to go home. I also remember thinking that I was not ready to leave. I took this as a positive sign, that I was happy and excited to continue my stay and to be alone. I went with Chris to Accra, to drop him off at the airport, and on the way back to Medie I felt slightly nervous. I felt alone. This feeling was short lived. I remember as I stepped back into the DMC having the same feeling that one feels as she walks into her apartment after a long trip. I was relieved to be home, I felt comfortable, safe, and happy.
Experience #3: Learning by Myself

For the remaining three weeks of my trip, I was studying alone at the DMC. Balsab was my gyil teacher for this entire time period, except for the few days before I returned home when Woma returned from the Upper West Region. Balsab and I met in the mornings for two hours to play gyil, I then had drumming lessons for two hours, and in the evenings I studied dance for two more hours. During this time, Balsab taught me four pieces, three of which belong to the Bɛwaa repertoire and one Lobi funeral piece.

For the first few days, my teachers asked me about where my husband (Chris) had gone, and why I was staying without him. Eventually I was able to explain that Chris and I were friends, and did not even reside in the same part of America. At this point, I believe they began to view me as separate from Chris and did not ask me about our relationship again.

We began our lessons with the Lobi funeral piece, “Gandaa Yina.” It is used traditionally to announce the death of the man of the house. This piece was never performed within the Bɛwaa repertoire, or at any Bɛwaa events that I attended. Aspects of the musical structure are similar to the Dagara Bɛwaa music. “Gandaa Yina” consists of an accompanying melodic line, a song, and a solo section in which the dance changes. There are layers of complexity within the piece as well. There is a simple song line as well as a melody, and there is what Balsab referred to as the “master part” which is more complex and elaborates on the basic song line.

First Balsab taught me the melody, song and solo by rote. He broke the piece into smaller sections as Woma had done, however, he did not verbalize concepts or use terminology. After he taught me the three sections, we repeated the piece many times. If I made a mistake, he continued to play until I got back on. He did not provide a clear explanation of the cycles or parts; we just played. In the evening I was practicing this piece outside my room and Balsab
walked by. He came over to play with me, and asked if I would like to learn the “master part.” I agreed and he taught it to me by rote. The master part is an elaboration of the simpler song line. I would learn a few notes of the master part, and then play the rest of the cycle on the simpler song line. I gradually would add a few more notes at a time of the master part, by watching Balsab, and eventually learned the entire part. We played this for a long time, and he seemed pleased that I had demonstrated desire to learn the more complicated part and was willing to pay close attention to what he was doing.

The next day in class, Balsab asked me if I would like to learn more advanced Bëwaa repertoire. Perhaps I had earned this by proving my initiative and genuine interest in the music. We learned three pieces: “Te Wana,” “Kan Kan Lile,” and “Sembru Bam Balabala.” We began with “Te Wana.” Balsab taught me the song first phrase by phrase, which did not take long. Then, he taught me the melody. After I had mastered both parts, we began to combine them. This proved to be more difficult. This was the first piece I learned in which the left hand continues to play the melody while the right hand plays the song. It was difficult to focus on both parts at once. I asked Balsab to slow down the music and to play just a few notes at a time. Eventually, upon my request, we ended up breaking up each phrase into many small pieces. I would memorize the sticking for the combination of parts. After learning an entire phrase, we would go back and put all the small pieces together. We played very slowly. Balsab had trouble playing the music at such a slow tempo, and thinking of each phrase in so many pieces. He had never played the music in that way, but it was what I needed. After a few cycles, he had the tendency to speed up to performance tempo, and I would need to ask to slow down again. After a while, we would get through the entire song. At that point, we played through the cycle many times; he played with me, and if I made a mistake he kept playing until I was able to join back in. After learning
the entire song reasonably well, Balsab taught me the solo and the transition from the solo back to the beginning. “Te Wana” took me several days to learn. I would be able to play each of the phrases in isolation, but had trouble connecting them. Balsab was patient with me, and eventually I was able to play the entire piece. Learning the next two pieces was considerably easier because I had discovered how to go about learning; the process was the same.

An additional part of Dagara teaching style that was outside of my previous experiences was learning in front of an audience. In my past, I have performed in front of many audiences, but generally, was not exposed to learning in front of people. At first it was very strange. It added pressure, and exposed my weaknesses and vulnerability to members of the community that I did not know. A few members of the village returned frequently to watch my lessons. I got used to their presence, and I grew to enjoy showing them my improvement. The older men especially liked to watch me play. Balsab said that they liked to watch me learn their traditions, that it made them proud of their music and culture.

Now that Chris was gone, I had no translator to the Western musical world. Balsab used no terminology or clarifying concepts. I had to follow what he was doing and imitate it. I really enjoyed learning in this manner, because I had to figure out everything for myself. If I asked a question, he usually did not know how to answer, so he would play the section for me until I figured out the answer for myself. It was frustrating at times. Sometimes I wanted an answer that he could not provide clearly enough. Eventually, I was able to work out most problems, and felt more satisfied for having done so. It was during this time that I began to take Woma’s advice and “kill my own snake.” What he meant was that each of us had to learn the music and dance for ourselves without relying on anyone else for help or for answers. Each of us should be able to internalize the music, and solve the problems in our minds. It was during these three weeks that I
began to think of ways to help myself learn; I had no one to ask for help. Even during dance lessons, I was forced to solve problems and answer questions without guidance. It was healthy. I would not have thought that I would have been able to do it. In the past, I think I allowed myself to lean on others for answers and not challenge myself or push myself to see how far I could go. In these three weeks, I learned to kill my own snake in music, in dance, and in life.

My happiest moments in the field were during my lessons. Although at times they were frustrating and challenging, when everything came together and I finally understood a piece well enough to play it with other people it was very special. We would laugh and tell jokes and be silly. During down times we would talk about ourselves and our lives and music and life. I shared funny stories from my past and Balsab told me funny stories about past students. He especially delighted in a story I told about my South Indian music teacher who had a trademark humorous phrase he would say during rehearsals. For some reason Balsab found the phrase hysterical and began to teach my lessons with an Indian accent.

All of the musical moments in the field were priceless for me, but it is the human component that warms my heart now. When I reflect on my time in Medie, I am grateful for having made such genuine connections with Balsab and with the drum teacher, Eddie. They were teachers, but they became friends, and I am thankful for their part in my life. When I entered the field, I was focused on learning, not on the relationship between me and my teachers. As time went on, our relationships became a wonderful aspect of being in the field. We became bound by shared experience even though there was a teacher-student divide. That time was defined for me by the people I was with.

In my final lesson with Balsab, the day before I left Ghana, I remember that as we sat in the morning, playing our gyile as we had every other morning, tears were streaming down my
I was trying very hard to conceal my pain at the thought of leaving; I was unsuccessful at doing this. He asked me not to cry. He told me that it gave him too much pain to see me that way. I dried my eyes, he told one of our running jokes to make me laugh, and we finished the day’s lesson by recording all of the pieces I had learned in my time in Medie.

On that day I learned something about my relationship with Balsab. The teacher-student relationship is similar in many ways to our other meaningful relationships in life. The best ones are not built when two people always get along and always agree. The strongest relationships are those built out of friendship, respect, shared struggle, overcome frustration, some argument, some laughter, joyous moments, and the willingness to be vulnerable in front of one another. He saw me when I was weak, frightened, nervous, frustrated, happy, pleased, proud, excited, and silly. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to study with him, and for the two of us to share something with each other.

Our relationship as teacher and student seemed to have a unique dynamic because I felt the need to be vocal about my learning needs. I was not shy about asking Balsab to slow the music down, or to repeat a section that I felt needed more work. He was certainly in charge of the direction of the lesson and the material learned, but I took a hands-on approach to my own experience. Balsab and I, especially as time went on, developed an understanding of how to interact. He grew to know my needs, and I gained an awareness of his methods and purposes. I became less vocal about expressing myself as I internalized his teaching methods and he became more sensitive to my needs as a student.

Balsab told me once that it made him very sad to see me go; he thought I should stay. He told me that he would not be able to watch me leave, that instead he would go up onto the hill and sit until he knew I was gone. I did not believe him. Although it can be painful to part ways, it
is always nice to have those final moments together. The day I left, he was nowhere to be found. I never had the chance to say goodbye.

**Processes of Learning**

After reflecting upon my learning experiences in the field, I have determined the order in which I came to comprehend the musical material presented to me. The first level of understanding I reached while situating gyil music was kinesthetic. I learned by the tactile sensation of how the melody and song parts interacted, or how the melody and kpagru combined. I would consciously think: left, left, right, left, right, together, together, etc. On this level, I applied my experience as a percussionist who felt comfortable learning and memorizing stickings. I had not yet achieved full comprehension of the rhythmic or melodic aspects of the music; I was operating in a contained sphere of tactile understanding.

After comprehending the patterns on that level, I moved on to a second level, mentally determining the composite rhythms of the two patterns. I applied my background as a Western musician to arrange the rhythms into meaningful patterns in my mind. Once organized, the music took on new meaning, as it was clarified by my pre-constructed understanding of familiar rhythmic patterns. Unfamiliar gyil music became situated within a framework in which I felt comfortable and confident in my understanding. At this stage, I was beginning to think musically and not solely out of tactile awareness. I include in this level my attempts to apply ideas about time and meter to my musical conceptions. I utilized familiar tools such as transcription to clarify difficult passages and took notes that I felt would aid in memorization and further understanding.

The third level in my process of learning gyil music was developing visual pattern recognition. At this stage I became aware of the music as it looked on the gyil. Each hand traces
out a pattern in space, and the two hands together create a large visual pattern. I began to rely less upon the previous stages and thought of the music in terms of maneuvering around the gyil. Sometimes when I practiced, I would have a strange, almost meditative connection to the correct notes. My hands would flow effortlessly from pattern to pattern as I observed, as if from afar, the music. When I first began to think this way it would only last for a few cycles before my concentration would break and I would make a mistake. I could only hold the “meditation” for short periods of time. After a while, I could last longer while focusing on the visualization.

The next level in my learning process was to be able to separate the musical lines in my mind. Since I was playing two parts simultaneously, I wanted have the ability to focus on either or both. While playing both patterns, I would listen to just the song for a cycle, and then listen to just the melody. Then I would try and comprehend the combinations of the patterns as they existed aurally. Until this stage, the aural aspects of the music were farthest from my mind, but in this stage I brought those aspects to the forefront to deepen my understanding and appreciation of the music.

The final stage in my process of learning gyil music was to focus less on myself and more on the entire sound world around me. I would pay attention to the kpagru or the sung text; I tried to open myself up to the broader sensory experience of playing music. Unfortunately, this stage was the least developed because of my beginner skill level. If I removed my focus from myself for too long, I would make a mistake. Gladly, I was able to experience the joy of music making. I reveled in creating music with other people, to work together to produce something rich and full of character, to enjoy the gyil music and my participation in it.

Based on my process of learning, I suggest that there are several aspects to gyil music that combine to create understanding of the music. These could be learned in an order outside of
the way in which I learned them, but they all are important components of comprehension. The first is a kinesthetic knowledge of the music, an understanding on a physical level. The second is a visual awareness of the shape of the musical patterns as they move around the gyil. The third component is an aural knowledge, an ability to listen to the patterns, to recognize errors, and to hear the music in a variety of ways. The fourth component is an application of musical concepts familiar to the musician. In my case, this meant situating the music within my Western framework to deepen my understanding of the musical elements. The final component to understanding gyil music is having an awareness of the entire sound world being created. Gyil music has so many delightful and beautiful components, and by tapping into the complex relationship between the various gyil parts, the kpagru, the dancers with their leg jingles and metal castanets, the kəor, and the singing, the musician exposes herself to a rich and meaningful sonic atmosphere.

This process of learning may be unique to me, or it may be applicable for other musicians with similar backgrounds in similar learning situations. It is most likely a combination. Each musician, even if trained in the same manner, has strengths and weaknesses, ways of hearing and thinking about music that are individualized. As a percussionist, my background included the most rigorous training in the rhythmic aspects of music. While I received training in melodic and harmonic elements as well, I excelled in kinesthetic and rhythmic components. Additionally, my performance experience created a foundation of confidence and strength in the percussive qualities of music. Even when I played mallet instruments, I gravitated towards understanding rhythms before pitches. From my background performing in percussion ensembles, I learned the necessity to be able to play the correct rhythms on first reading and to master pitches later. I
learned to rely upon my strengths understanding rhythms and ability to quickly learn music kinesthetically.

As a keyboard player, one of my most frequently employed tools was visualization. Often I spent time in the practice room or before a performance mentally playing the notes as I would if I were physically playing them. I did this both standing over the instrument and away from the instrument, challenging my mind to reproduce the visualization of the keys and of the music. I feel that by doing this, I added another dimension to my musical understanding, that I was not relying upon muscle memory alone. When I close my eyes I can replay musical pieces I have not performed in years, as they have become ingrained deeply in my brain. The last musical component that I focused on was the melodic aspect. I rarely learned music by ear; I always felt more comfortable utilizing the more finely developed kinesthetic and visual skills. As a keyboardist, melodies and chords create natural shapes and patterns that are more natural for me to memorize and think about than the way it sounds in my ear. The next stage of learning music was to combine the previous elements, adding musical nuances, dynamics, phrasing, accents, and experimenting with the push and pull of time. The last component to learning music in my Western background was being able to step outside of myself and my own part, to be able to focus on the musical fabric, the texture woven out of the many parts. That stage was always the most enjoyable, as it allowed me to perform music while being aware of the larger picture, to internalize the spirit and emotional qualities of music, and to add energetic and expressive performance qualities to my playing.

The resemblance between my learning process in my Western background and that in gyil music is clear. I have developed an order in which I situate music in my brain, my body, and emotionally. Learning to play the gyil brought light to the way I operate as a musician. Where
previously I followed a pattern I was not aware of, by being forced outside of my comfort zone and having to purposefully organize music for myself against an unfamiliar backdrop, I gained insight into my own perspective and musicianship. It was like seeing myself for the first time.
CHAPTER 6.
TRANSCRIPTIONS AND ANALYSIS

In this chapter I transcribe and analyze the Bëwaa piece “Te Wana.” My analysis focuses on examining how musical time is conceived by both players and dancers. In particular, I am interested in perceptions of meter. With this goal in mind, and unlike previous scholars, I have fully integrated dance rhythms into my transcription and analysis. I believe that including the dance patterns is crucial to understanding time conception in “Te Wana,” particularly because musicians and dancers do not seem to perceive in the same way, we will be able to explore another layer of musical complexity.

“Te Wana”

I learned to play “Te Wana” during my field research at the Dagara Music Center, and also taught it to the Afro-Caribbean Ensemble at Bowling Green State University. “Te Wana” is in the Sebkper (older) genre of Bëwaa music. It is a welcome piece, danced at the beginning of a Bëwaa performance to announce the presence of the group. “Te Wana” literally translates as “We are Here.” The song lyrics are: Te Wana Yee Te Wana/Te Wana Yee Te Wana/Te Wana Yee Te Wana/Te Waara Te Wa Bin Gbe Le e Kule (“We are coming to display our dance, and go back.”). This piece maintains the formal structural elements of other Bëwaa pieces. There are three sections (melody, song, and solo) and two transitions, and the dancers respond to the gyile by changing dance patterns. As in many Bëwaa pieces, the melody follows the cycle A A B A B B A B. “Te Wana” is performed by two gyil players, one plays the melody and kpagru and the other plays the melody and song parts.
Transcriptions

As I played and danced “Te Wana” I noticed that my sense of time did not remain constant throughout the piece. I felt the pulse during the song in a different way than during the solo. My first step was to try and understand this shift in time conception. In order to discover where the shift occurs, I transcribed the entire piece several different ways. By transcribing the piece in several meters, I sought to determine if the whole piece could be felt in any one meter, if it changed meter within the piece, if different parts are operating in different meters, and which part was dictating my perception of time.

First, I transcribed “Te Wana” in six-four meter, which is how I understood the pulse during the song section. The piece can be seen transcribed this way in Figure 14. Next, I transcribed “Te Wana” in six-eight meter, which reflects my perception of time during the solo section. This can be seen in Figure 15.

After transcribing “Te Wana” in these two separate meters, I was dissatisfied with both transcriptions. Neither meter remained satisfactory throughout the piece. Triple-simple (six-four) meter was appropriate during the song section. The dance rhythm lines up straightforwardly with the melody and kpagru parts. Each step of the dance is on the pulse, or subdivides the beat in eighth notes as in the last beat of the measure. The phrasing of the melody also makes sense in triple-simple time. On every pulse, the melody returns to either pitch number 4 or 5. If the other notes of the melody are removed, the on-pulse skeleton becomes 4 4 4 4 4 5 5 5 4 4 4 5 5 5 5 5 4 4 4 5 5 5. In duple-compound meter the on-pulse skeleton is 4 1 4 1 5 2 4 1 5 2 5 2 4 1 5 2.

Clearly, the skeleton in triple-simple is more stable and regular. The kpagru part is felt in this meter as well. To verify my concept of the pulse against the kpagru I asked Woma to
provide a pulse as I clapped the kpagrui. He located the pulse in the same place as I had perceived it and transcribed it in six-four meter.

During the solo section triple-simple meter does not work as well, however. While the song, melody and kpagrui parts remain comfortable in this meter, the dance rhythm feels contrived and cumbersome. The dancer is forced to awkwardly subdivide the pulse in order to maintain the correct rhythm. Duple-compound meter makes more sense as a way to conceive the gyil’s solo section, for although the left hand maintains the triple-simple ostinato feel, the more dominant right hand plays a part that is clearly in compound meter feel. The gyil player’s right hand matches the dancers’ steps in groupings of two rather than three. After analysis of these two transcriptions, I determined that the entire piece could not be felt in any one meter, that there must be a meter change somewhere during the piece.

The next step was to investigate which part—gyil or dance—that was controlling my perception of time. After reflecting upon the transcriptions and my experiences performing the music, I decided that it was the dance rhythm that most strongly effected my conception of the pulse. Even though the kpagrui and melody remain constant throughout the music, it is the dance rhythm that dictates the change in meter. When the dance pattern changes from the song to the solo section the meter shifts from triple-simple to duple-compound. Then, when the dance pattern changes back, so does the meter. When the dance rhythms fit in the pocket of time properly, the music moves forward more naturally. The following figures (14, 15) are transcriptions of “Te Wana” in six-four and six-eight, respectively.
Te Wana
Figure 14: “Te Wana” in six-four meter
Te Wana

Song

Melody

Kpgru

Dance

L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L

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There are two transition sections in the piece: one transition from song to solo, and another from solo back to song. After examination of the music and dance, I determined that these transitions also functioned as liminal metric zones, both simple and compound simultaneously. Accordingly, I have transcribed these transitions in both six-four and six-eight meters to more closely examine them. These are shown in Figure 16. These metric transitions
sections act like pivot chords in Western harmonic studies, that is, they exist simultaneously in both meters, bridge the separate time worlds. The final way I transcribed “Te Wana” represents these meter changes during the transition measures. This is seen in Figure 17.
Figure 16: “Te Wana” transition measures in six-four and six-eight meters.
Te Wana
After determining that I perceived a meter shift during the transitions, I wanted to understand how the Dagara perceive time in Bëwaa music. Woma explained that in his perception, neither the pulse nor the meter changes during Bëwaa pieces. Both Woma and I agree that the kpagru pattern dictates time. For him, the pulse remains constant against this pattern throughout. In my perception, while the kpagru also remains stable and central, the pulse changes against this pattern, creating a meter shift.

**Conclusions**

After analyzing “Te Wana” in various ways I discovered that no single metric conception makes sense for all of the performers for the entire piece. Meter is based on perception. Woma’s conception of time was different than mine, just as my conceptions changed depending on whether I was playing the gyil or dancing. The dancers’ world and the musicians’ world exist
and operate simultaneously, yet with some degree of independence. This polymetric possibility makes sense in the larger picture. Frequently in African music the listener’s perception of meter and rhythm can change depending on the part to which she listens. Meters and rhythms can also shift ambiguously, like aural illusions. As a gyil player it is possible to hear the music in multiple ways, the phrases and rhythms simply take new shapes in each metric perspective. As a gyil player, meter and pulse can be ambiguous between the left and right hands as well. The performers and listeners can hear the music in different ways by focusing on the polyrhythms created by the various parts, or by shifting their listening between sound worlds. Thus, the meter of “Te Wana” depends on which particular sonic layer the performers and listeners choose to operate.
CHAPTER 7.
TEACHING METHODS

In this chapter I provide an account of the various teaching methods employed when teaching the gyil, from the traditional Dagara methods to Woma’s methods, and finally to my own teaching methods. As the instrument moves farther from its traditional context, teaching methods become more methodical. The traditional context relies upon social circumstances and learning over a long period of time. Students in the traditional Dagara context are not expected to absorb large amounts of material quickly or in a regulated fashion. Woma’s teaching methods are drawn from two musical worlds: the Dagara music culture and the Western music culture. His teaching is a reflection of both of these musical worlds, and he developed a system in order to present traditional music in an authentic manner effectively to Western-trained students. I present techniques that I have found useful as I learned to play this music and techniques that I have developed that I believe would be useful to other Western-trained musicians studying Dagara gyil music. I also provide an account of my experiences teaching the dances that accompany the gyil music, and situate these experiences against the more traditional methods in which I was taught. Finally, I present what I hope to create as a teacher of Dagara gyil music and dance, the type of experience I desire for my students, and the goals I wish to achieve by actively promoting this music.

**Traditional African Teaching Methods**

While I did observe some traditional learning contexts, the majority of my experiences learning to play the gyil in Ghana were outside of the traditional native manner. Since I did not experience in a firsthand manner the traditional Dagara teaching methods, I asked Woma to
relate for me how people learn to play gyil within the traditional context. He told me that in Dagara society musicians are believed to be born. Not everyone who is born a musician nurtures that gift to become an excellent gyil player, however. The talent must be cultivated. Cultivation comes in the form of early exposure to the instrument, observing master gyil players and their technique, the repertoire, and the appropriate socio-cultural contexts in which the music occurs. By watching experienced players and practicing on instruments, children gradually acquire the skills needed to become a gyil player. Part of experiencing the traditional contexts is attending Bewaa performances and funerals as well as traditional religious rituals and contemporary performance venues such as Catholic Church services. Over time, the repertoire and its appropriate extra musical contexts is ingrained into players’ conceptions of the instrument.

I have seen children approach gyile and experiment in an open and unregulated way. In this way they learn how to hold the mallets, the feel and sound of the keys, and the sensation of playing the instrument. Over time, these pre-musical experiments develop into learning songs and rhythmic patterns. Children build the confidence and comfort of playing the gyil from an early age. Their musical learning is guided by players who show them the repertoire and aid in the gradual accumulation of the necessary information. Music is integral to community events, and the child grows up listening to, and experiencing all the extra-musical aspects of gyil music as well. The learning process of enculturation allows for students of the gyil to gradually develop their skills in an unregulated, low pressure situation. As in any music culture, different students develop at different rates, and with varying ability levels. As Woma mentioned, not all who are born with the innate talent become great musicians. Dedication to the instrument, as well as the ability to apply taught and observed knowledge are important factors to the developing musician.
Teaching Gyil in a Non-Traditional Setting

Another example of teaching methods comes from Mensah (1982: 153). He gives an outline for the gyil teaching method at Cape Coast University in Ghana. This method is not based upon the traditional enculturation model; rather it is formulated to teach students who have not grown up with gyil music. This method is already more methodical than traditional gyil teaching methods. Aspects of this method are different from the traditional mode of teaching in four distinct ways. First, pieces are learned phrase by phrase rather than slowly absorbed over time. Second, each phrase should be mastered before continuing on to the next. Third, lessons with a master player are scheduled and regular rather than as a spontaneous part of everyday life. Finally, this method advocates transcribing the music using staff notation while traditional modes of teaching are strictly oral and aural. The following is Mensah’s organization of the teaching methods used at Cape Coast University. I provide the list as an example of yet another teaching model, which is clearly more structured than the traditional Dagara method of teaching.

1. Let the 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 the 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 specially ask for very easy pieces; choose these 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-Dara group use a standard
pitch, which will sound approximately a major third higher than that written without a key signature. Note 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 (Mensah 1982, 153).

Woma’s Teaching Methods

Woma’s teaching methods are a hybrid of his experiences learning to play the gyil in a traditional context and his experiences living and teaching in the United States. His experiences in the United States helped him to structure the manner in which he taught gyil music and to develop a teaching methodology that he felt would be effective in presenting this material to Western-trained musicians. He observed the manner in which Westerners organized written music and the manner in which they organized teaching principles. Part of this included observing how teachers and students broke down rhythms and phrases to acquire gradual understanding of complex ideas rather than presenting large amounts of material at once. He drew upon these ideas, but wanted to do so in a way that was authentically Dagara and did not change the music. He expressed the importance of maintaining the authenticity of the music, and the musical experience. He wanted his students to be able to play Dagara gyil music to a Dagara person, and have the music and the feeling be recognizable as Dagara, not Western. He said to me, “if you play ‘Te Wana’ for any Dagara person the way you learned it at the [Dagara Music] Center, they will be able to sing along, and they will know the piece.” I believe that he is correct. When I performed for the visiting guests at the DMC, I did play “Te Wana,” and the dancers sang as Balsab and I played. The manner in which I learned the piece, and in the ways it was organized in my mind did not really change the performance of the music. It was authentic because the music was the same.
Woma’s desire to incorporate Western ideas into his teaching without altering the music led him to re-examine some aspects of the music. He had to focus on the nuts and bolts that held the music together and decide in what way he could most effectively explain those concepts to Westerners. He used the example of the cycles in the Bewaa repertoire. He said he had to pay attention to where the cycles were, how many times the “A” phrase repeats, how many times the “B” phrase repeats, where the song enters against the melody, and how many counts of rests exist between one phrase and the next. His examination of these aspects allowed him to construct a teaching method that remains faithful to the music while reframing those musical elements in a manner easily grasped by Western students.

Woma’s teaching methods are significantly more methodical than traditional Dagara teaching methods. Woma has deconstructed the music and purposefully developed teaching practices that present material in a structured and organized manner. While at the DMC, students are working on a limited time schedule. Thus, his teaching methods are organized to effectively present material quickly and thoroughly, in a carefully organized series of steps. Woma did not verbalize the organization of his teaching steps. I, however, constructed based upon my experience with him, an outline of his teaching methods.

1. Introduce students to the instrument—how to hold mallets, intervals, familiarize students with gyil layout
2. Introduce the fundamental concepts of melody, song, and solo
   a. Begin with the A phrase. Repeat until satisfactory. Check for comprehension.
   b. Move on to B phrase. Repeat until satisfactory. Check for comprehension.
   c. Switch back and forth between the two phrases. Repeat until satisfactory.
4. Introduce common Bɛwaa cycle—AABABBAB. Move between A phrase and B phrase using Bɛwaa cycle. Play slowly. Go around the cycle until level of comfort is established.

5. Introduce the song.
   a. Teach phrase 1. Check for comprehension. Play until level of comfort is established.
   b. Repeat for each phrase of the song.
   c. Link phrases together. Repeat entire song until satisfactory.

6. Break students into two groups: melody and song.
   a. Practice two parts together. One group plays melody, the other group plays the song.
   b. Practice switching back and forth between melody and song.
   c. Play until all students are comfortable with both parts.

7. Teach song text and meaning.
   a. Practice playing while singing.

8. Teach solo part
   a. Practice playing until comfortable.

9. Teach transition back to beginning.
   a. Practice moving from solo through transition, back to beginning.
   b. Practice playing the entire cycle.

10. Teach kpagru rhythm as an additional part.

    Woma’s methods reflect a methodical organization. He slows the music down to aid in the learning process, a technique not employed in the traditional Dagara teaching methods. By slowing the music down, the students are able to learn visually what their hands are doing and
are able to wrap their brains around the sometimes confusing cycle of the patterns. Another technique employed by Woma that is outside the traditional teaching norms is periodically checking for comprehension. When he is teaching a large group he regularly walks around the semi-circle to check each student’s knowledge of the previously learned parts. When the lesson is one-on-one, he asks the student to play by herself so that he may assess her progress and comprehension of the material. An important aspect of his teaching methods is the use of repetition. Each phrase is repeated many times. If a student makes a mistake she is immediately confronted with another opportunity to do it correctly. Woma breaks each section of the music into small parts; this allows the student to fully grasp small sections before stringing them together. One of the ways Woma’s teaching differs from traditional teaching is in his verbalization of concepts. Playing the music is supplemented with verbal reinforcement of A and B phrases, and clear verbal markers of when to switch patterns. If need be, he demonstrates the beat.

My Teaching Methods

My teaching methods are a combination of Woma’s methods and my experience as a Western-trained musician. I have tried to incorporate elements from my background as a percussionist and student of classical and contemporary percussion idioms, while blending Woma’s teaching methods and terminology with more traditional Dagara teaching methods. Elements derived from my Western background include the use of transcriptions, specific practicing techniques, and the use of Western musical terminology. I have incorporated Woma’s musical terminology of melody, song and solo, as well as his designation of phrases termed A and B. Since Woma’s methods themselves have been influenced by Western musical ideas, some
of our methodological ideas are similar. For example, when teaching, I find it best to slow the music down significantly from performance tempo, and I check frequently for comprehension. I find repetition to be the best way to practice this type of music and dance. Like Woma, I break each piece into smaller sections, and teach the sections thoroughly before linking them together. I prefer to verbalize musical concepts more than Woma does, as I believe it creates meaningful connections for Western students. The element of imitative learning is authentically Dagara, and I believe it is healthy for students to attempt to situate the music and dance in their minds before I provide a framework for them.

It has been my experience that the farther the music and dance are removed from their original context the more structured and methodical the teaching must become. I see myself as a link between the traditional context for Dagara gyil music and dance and the Western academy. By blending my Western background with Dagara teaching methods I hope to effectively present this material to Western students.

**Teaching Gyil Dancing**

Teaching gyil dancing has been especially challenging at times because my learning experiences in Ghana did not rely upon verbalization. Rather, the dances were taught through imitation and repetition. The contrast between how I learned and how I present the material to my students has forced me to examine precisely how the music and dance go together, how I might best verbalize the relationship between music and dance for students, and how I can express aesthetic qualities of body movement and dance style effectively. Since those concepts were never verbalized for me, I have had to create my own methods of teaching not relying upon my teacher’s methods.
In my experiences learning and teaching dance, I have witnessed the process of how teaching changes from traditional to more structured and methodical. I learned the dances in Ghana by watching experienced dancers and imitating their movements. My teacher expressed disapproval when I made mistakes such as stepping with the wrong foot or incorrect upper body motion. As time went on I was expected to perform at higher levels and with greater ease and enthusiasm. The only unforgivable mistake was dancing without energy and conviction; these qualities were expected at all times. As I learned the dances and progressed, I was asked to display knowledge by dancing solo for the musicians. If I was able to dance correctly and convincingly by myself in coordination with the music, my teacher and the musicians were pleased and we would move on to the next lesson.

During this process, if I asked a question pertaining to how the dance fit with the music, the only answer I was provided with came in the form of more repetition. At times this was intensely frustrating. Often I was unable to find the dance pulse to know when to put my feet down. I could imitate other dancers’ feet, but this did not help me to understand the dance myself. I knew I needed to be able to dance it well enough to explain it to someone else. The fact that I was learning the music and the dance simultaneously was an enormous help, as I had an intimate relationship with the unfolding of the phrases and the rhythms, and this facilitated learning the dances. If I simply could not figure out where the pulse was, I could spend that night in my room with my gyil and work out the pulse of the music and where the dance belonged accordingly. Once I knew where the beat was I could concentrate on imitating upper body movement and aesthetics.

This process forced me to situate and solve the problems of the music to dance relationship on my own. When I teach the dance to Western students, they do not have the
experience of learning the music or the context to draw from. It has been challenging to find ways of explaining concepts that I thought were basic. One problem is that since they have never played the music, their understanding of the rhythms must be taught as well. Since I was learning the music and the dance together, I was cognizant of their co-existence. Inter-relatedness is a concept that I needed to pass on to my own students.

For Western students, getting them to feel the pulse can be difficult. Often the pulse is not where it first appears to be. Accents are frequently placed on off-beats, creating a syncopated rhythm unfamiliar to many students. There is usually not enough time to explain the music in detail, so students need a simple way to identify where the pulse is. Hopefully my struggles with similar problems have made me a better teacher, more equipped to explain these relationships.

When I dance, I understand the overarching shape of the music so I am not bound to strictly defined limits on my dancing, because I know where I need to end up in relation to the music. For example, the dance can be transcribed in exact relation to the music. This overly restricts the dance, however. The reality of performance is that dancers sometimes intentionally move in and out of sync with the music, thereby creating a less rigid rhythmic arc. For an experienced dancer, it is possible to dance across the barline, so to speak. Dagara dancers do not think about the precise timing of their motions. The music and dance are two worlds that operate simultaneously, but each is an individual sphere of expression. The more experienced the dancer, the farther they can stray from the rules without breaking the connection between the two worlds.

Another problem is deciding how to teach the music and the dance at the same time. In my experience in the BGSU Afro-Caribbean ensemble, this problem was solved by teaching the music to players outside of class. That way, during class time, I could focus on the dancing, and use the music to structure the lesson. An important part of teaching the dance is imitation, thus it
is important for me to be able to dance and not play the music in the initial stages of learning. In another teaching experience with kindergarten students, I was the only person with knowledge of the music or the dance. In that case, I played the music for the class first to gain familiarity of the material. Then, while I played the gyil, I taught the song to the class. After they had learned the song, I taught the dance while we sang. It was not an ideal situation, but I was able to negotiate the problem and teach both the music and dance.

When teaching a dance, I first break the piece into sections. In the Bewaa repertoire this is fairly easy, as it has a built-in split between song and solo sections. The portion of the dance that belongs to the song section is usually fairly uncomplicated and repetitive. I introduce the basic steps and then practice it using imitation and repetition. If there is a problem I can explain the steps by verbalizing (left, right, left, right, etc). If this is still a problem, as it sometimes is, it can be slowed down further. Sometimes it is helpful to count the number of steps before the pattern repeats. For example, in the piece “Te Wana” there is a series of six alternating steps before the left foot repeats and the entire pattern begins again. This seemingly simple pattern poses a number of problems. By verbalizing either right, left or one, two, three, etc, most students are able to grasp the pattern.

The next step is to get students to hear the transition between song and solo on the gyile. I dance the pattern once or twice and then do it again while counting the number of steps in the pattern. Motions in the transition can be easily verbalized as stop, shake, kick, or twist. Once these two sections are learned, it is best to practice transitioning back and forth. The final section is the solo section, which contains the most difficult dance movements. The first thing I teach is the foot pattern using verbal cues and imitation. These range in difficulty depending on the piece of music. If there are several sections, I break down into even smaller bits. Next I teach the upper
body motions, which usually have to be broken down slowly. One of the most complicated aspects of the dance is achieving the proper aesthetic of spine and chest motion. This motion should be isolated and repeated. Once all of the components are taught, the next step is to combine them. At this point, I do not focus on aesthetics as much as simply putting all the motions together properly. After all three sections of the dance are learned, they can be cycled repeatedly. During this entire process I field questions about the order of steps or foot work. Once the dance is learned fairly well, I find it helpful to observe rather than dance, so as to more easily assess individual or group problems which can be corrected accordingly.

Betwaa dances are very repetitive and can be boring unless the dancers convincingly portray energy and enthusiasm. One of the most difficult aspects of these dances is getting students to exaggerate even simple motions so that they become interesting. The best way that I have found to do this is to dance the way that I would like them to dance, and remind them of interesting ways to move their bodies. The better the group knows the dance, the more minute details can be addressed. Hand position, head position, shoulder movements and facial expression are all important, but subtle details.

**Teaching Gyil Music**

When teaching gyil music I use a combination of Woma’s methods and methods derived from my experiences as a Western-trained musician. Throughout this section I will use “Te Wana” as an example in order to better illustrate the process of teaching the Betwaa repertoire. Like Woma, I separate the music of the Betwaa repertoire into three sections: melody, song, and solo. Before beginning on these sections some context of the instrument should be given and
basic technique, such as how to hold the mallets, should be demonstrated. Following that, I introduce the numbering system for the gyil that I use in my transcriptions.

The first section I teach is the melody, comprised of two parts: phrase A and phrase B. Both phrases are easily learned by rote. After a student knows both phrases the most common Bewaa cycle (AABABBAB) should be taught. This can be practiced while verbalizing A A B etc. Another method is to verbalize the numbers of the melody: 4 1 4 1 4 3 4 1 4 1 4 3 5 2 5 2 5 3 4 1 4 1 4 1 etc. It is important to familiarize students with these concepts because they will return repeatedly.

The next section I teach is the song. This is taught by rote phrase by phrase. I use the numbering system here as well, letting students know which pitch a phrase begins on by its number. The song should be repeated until it is learned sufficiently.

The next step is to combine the melody and the song. Because this can be a difficult task, it is best to focus on small sections at a time. I begin with the first phrase of the song, playing the song and melody together to present the sound combination. Then, by rote I teach small sections of a phrase. One phrase can be divided into as many small sections as necessary.

There are several ways to teach combining the parts. The composite rhythm between the left and right hands can be derived and taught away from the gyil. The sticking can be practiced to this composite rhythm and applied later to the instrument. Once the rhythms are learned, go back to the gyil and play while verbalizing stickings. Since the left hand must remain constant in its cycle, using verbalization to point out phrases A and B is helpful. After all of the song phrases have been taught in isolation with the melody, they can be linked together. This should be done slowly and in steps. For example, begin by linking phrases one and two together, and then add 3, etc. Once the entire cycle has been learned and linked together it should be repeated many times.
As we play the same part, if the student makes a mistake I keep playing and give him a chance to get back on. If the student is struggling, verbalization can aid as a reminder of the melody cycle or the pitch numbers.

After the student seems to be able to play these parts together his comprehension and accuracy can be assessed by asking him to play individually. This also makes sure that he is not dependent on another player for his part. It is unnecessary to use transcription during this process, but for some people it is needed as a memory aid. I have no problem with students writing down rhythms; they should not be reading while playing the gyil, however.

While learning the song and melody together, the music should be slowed down well below performance tempo\(^3\). It should begin at a tempo that is so slow, it would be impossible to miss a note. Before they strike a note, they should look and make sure it is correct. As the tempo is raised, make sure that accuracy remains high. If they begin to miss notes, it should be slowed back down. Repetition is a key factor in the successful learning of this music.

Next, I teach the solo section by rote. Here, it is also helpful to use pitch numbers. The solo, like the melody, employs the common Bɛwaa cycle. The solo can be broken into two phrases, A and B, and isolated if necessary before applying the cycle. Then the transitions in and out of the solo are taught. Students should practice getting into the solo by beginning one or two phrases before it and playing the first phrase of the solo. The entrance to the solo should be repeated until it is smooth and comfortable. The same technique can be used for practicing getting out of the solo.

After all three sections have been learned they should be linked together. After the student has demonstrated fluidity, he should play by himself. After he is very comfortable he can

\(^3\) This is quite different from the traditional African approach of learning material at performance tempo.
play the lead gyil part and I can play the melody and kpagru parts. The song text and meaning can then be taught and sung while playing.

Teaching the kpagru part is likewise done in small sections. The first task is to teach the kpagru pattern by rote. This pattern is shown in Figure 18. By itself, the kpagru is fairly simple and easy to master. This part is not performed in isolation, however, and needs to be combined with the melody. This can be accomplished through a series of small steps. The first task is to learn the composite rhythm of the melody and kpagru parts away from the gyil. The sticking remains the same both on and away from the instrument. This composite rhythm with correct sticking is shown in Figure 19.

![Figure 18: Kpagru pattern.](image1)

![Figure 19: Composite rhythm of kpagru and melody for “Te Wana” with correct sticking.](image2)

After this pattern has been learned sufficiently, the student should apply the same principles to the instrument. What makes this more challenging is that the player must focus on both the rhythmic patterns and on the correct cycle of the melody. Before applying the kpagru to the entire melody cycle on the gyil, the pattern can be broken into two smaller sections that will repeat throughout the cycle. The first pattern (the first half of the kpagru rhythm against the
melody) will be referred to as P1, while the second pattern will be referred to as P2. These two sections are illustrated in Figure 20. Since the student has already learned the composite rhythm, applying the same rhythms to the instrument should be smooth. If it is difficult to play both patterns in succession they can be isolated and practiced on both the A and B phrases of the melody. The final step is to combine the kpagru with the cycle of the melody. P1 and P2 alternate throughout the cycle. This is illustrated in Figure 21.

Figure 20: Sections P1 and P2. Melody rhythm and kpagru rhythm.

Figure 21: P1 and P2 kpagru against the cycle of the melody.

After learning all the parts using these techniques a student should have comprehension of any given piece on several levels: aural, kinesthetic, and visual. These teaching methods have been designed to aid in the strengthening of understanding gyil music in a variety of ways and
hopefully deepening the student’s connection to the music. The more ways a student can hear and play a piece, the better the performance will be. The more experience he gains, the less he will need to focus on the nuts and bolts, and the more energy he will be able to deliver to performance quality and musicianship. After he is comfortable with the music, the tempo should be raised to performance level, variations can be introduced, and the student should be asked to play energetically and with conviction. Gyil music requires strength and enthusiasm to be effective; students should demonstrate those qualities.

**Situating the Keys on a Gyil**

One of the challenges of gyil playing for a beginner is finding the right note to strike. Initially it can be difficult to differentiate between keys because they all resemble each other, so when learning or performing a gyil piece one must develop a method for recognizing the correct key. There are a few possible solutions to this problem. The first solution is to count keys, for example, you can say, this piece begins on the second note from the top. This proves to be an inefficient solution, as time rarely permits the performer to be constantly counting keys. The next, more practical solution is to rely on one’s aural skills. If a student is able to recognize the pitches of the keys, learning a gyil piece becomes significantly easier. A teacher will play a pattern, and the student will be able to repeat the pattern. Not all students will be able to learn this way so alternate methods may need to be utilized.

One of the marvelous things about the gyil is the stunning uniqueness and beauty of the wood used to make it. Each bar of each gyil has a unique wood grain pattern. Some bars are lighter, some darker, some have lovely swirls or patterns. Learning to recognize the patterns of light and darkness on your gyil can be an effective learning tool. On my gyil, for example, the
sixth bar down from the top is blackened. I call it “the black key.” When learning a piece, I situate patterns in relation to the black key. Maybe a pattern will begin one up from the black key, or the two bars on either side of the black key will be struck, etc. It is a constant that I learned to recognize. I know what it looks like when I play “uncles” or “brothers,” as Woma would call them, anywhere on the gyil against where they are visually against the black key.

There is, however, a potentially hazardous flaw to this solution. If one becomes too reliant on key recognition, when asked to perform on another instrument, the beginning student will have difficulty. Fortunately, with practice, a student will learn to recognize patterns separate from the instrument.

I know, because this happened to me. During my field research, after weeks of performing only on my gyil, I felt perfectly comfortable maneuvering around my instrument. I knew where everything was and I had my friend, the black key. My last night in Ghana, after my gyil had been packed, wrapped, and tied with a string ready for the journey home, my worst nightmare came true. A group of Westerners was visiting the DMC to see what it was all about, and to consider sending students to the Center, or possibly even flying the Dagara Cultural Troupe to the United States to perform. As the event unfolded Woma played, and the dancers performed Bewaa repertoire as well as works from the Ewe and Ga repertoire. Eventually, someone thought it would be a good idea for me to play the gyil for them, as a representation of what a Western student could learn in six weeks. I could not say no, although I wanted to. Since my gyil was unavailable, I would have to perform on another instrument. My first instinct, and what I whispered to Balsab was, “we probably have time to unpack my gyil.” That was not going to happen, however. So, with my heart in my throat I reluctantly performed the entire repertoire I had learned in my time in Ghana. Balsab played with me, playing the melody and the kpagru
pattern. I surprised myself by realizing that I did not actually need the black key after all. I had become familiar enough with the instrument that the patterns and shapes of the songs were all I needed. Don’t get me wrong, I made plenty of mistakes, but none of them were because of the missing black key. The moral of the tale is that allowing a student to become too dependent on one gyil is not good. But, over time, as a student becomes familiar with the layout of the gyil, he will become less reliant on the patterns in the wood and use his other faculties of visual, kinesthetic, and aural recognition.

**Practicing Techniques**

I would like to suggest a number of practice techniques that I utilize while learning gyil music. Several of these were drawn from my experiences operating within Western music idioms. One of the fundamental components to understanding and performing gyil music is pattern recognition. A possible way to foster pattern recognition development is to practice on other instruments, or to develop a neutral model. I have a gyil model that I keep on my desk, which I drew on a piece of paper. I practice the patterns of a song or melody with my fingers, by tapping on the piece of paper with my fingers. What I’m practicing is the kinesthetic component of a piece, what it feels like in my hands to put two patterns together while looking at this instrument. This helps me to recognize the patterns of the piece on another level, which facilitates my overall understanding of the music. It seems to work very well as a practice aid while away from the instrument.
Another helpful practice and learning aid is visualization. The tool of visualization has been employed in a multitude of situations. Public speakers are often told to visualize how they will speak, how they will carry their body, what they will do with their hands, etc. I use this tool before I teach. I visualize what the room will look like, what I will be wearing, and how I will perform. This technique is just as applicable to instrumental performance. As a percussionist, I would often close my eyes and imagine the bars of a marimba or vibraphone, and then practice pieces by mentally performing on these invisible instruments. It can work either by imagining mallets striking bars, or by visualizing the correct notes lighting up one by one. This technique is especially useful for when a student is away from her gyil. It allows any time to become practice time, whether bedtime, flying on an airplane, or riding in a car.

One of the practice techniques that I began to implement while still in the field, and that I have found most helpful, is shifting. Shifting is a concept frequently employed by marimbists
and other mallet keyboard players. Shifting was developed as a means to most efficiently move from one struck note to the next. In this concept “the stroke and the shift must merge into one [sic] gesture: the shift becomes an uninterrupted lateral extension of the recovery of the previous stroke” (Stevens 1993: 19). Instead of raising the mallet from one stroke and then moving it over to the next note in two motions, the motions are combined into one curved, fluid movement, thus conserving energy and time, and aiding in pitch accuracy (Stevens 1993). The movement makes use of the natural velocity of the mallet returning from striking one bar, and channels it into moving the mallet immediately over the next bar to be struck. It takes time for this motion to become natural and relaxed, but once it does the muscles become trained to move from one note to the next quickly and precisely. As the musician raises the tempo of the music, the movement remains the same; moving quickly and accurately from one pitch to the next becomes second nature. When practicing this technique, begin at a slow tempo. Strike one note, complete the shift in a curved gesture, wait to strike the next note until the mallet is squarely over the correct bar and continue. The technique remains the same for both mallets, which move simultaneously in curved motions around the instrument. I have found this technique particularly helpful when practicing gyil music because frequently the two mallets are moving in opposition and there is not enough time to think about where they are going. By practicing shifting, a player acquires fluid, accurate motion around the instrument.

Another technique is to practice the composite rhythms created out of the interplay between left and right hands. By learning the composite rhythm, the player better understands the interaction between parts, and can more efficiently perform the music by developing kinesthetic proficiency. The composite rhythms are different for each piece, and will be different for the lead gyil player and the supporting player. Figure 23 shows the song, melody, kpagru, and dance
rhythms of “Te Wana.” The song and melody parts are performed by one player, while the melody and kpagru parts are performed by another. For the lead gyil player, the song is in the right hand and the melody is in the left hand. For the supporting player the melody is in the right hand and the kpagru is played by the left hand.

Figure 23: Melody, song, kpagru and dance rhythms of “Te Wana.”

Out of these separate lines, the composite rhythm can be determined for each player. For the lead gyil player performing the song and melody parts, the composite rhythm is shown in Figure 24. After determining the composite rhythm, the player should practice the section using
the correct sticking. All of the notes normally played with the left hand (the melody) remain in
the left hand; those played by the right hand (the song) remain in the right hand. The correct
sticking for this composite rhythm is provided in Figure 25.

Figure 24: Composite rhythm between song and melody for “Te Wana.”

Figure 25: Correct sticking for composite rhythm between song and melody for “Te Wana.”

The composite rhythm can be determined for each sections of a piece, and for both
players. These rhythms should be practiced slowly initially; as proficiency increases the speed
should be raised to performance tempo. I find it useful to practice the composite rhythms as I am
learning a piece because it aids in memory and kinesthetic ability. Once my hands can play the
correct rhythms with the correct sticking, the final step is to apply the same knowledge to the
instrument. Performing the correct notes is significantly easier once the rhythmic component is learned.

These practice aids were designed to aid in the visual and kinesthetic components of learning to play gyil music. The techniques of practicing on a neutral model and visualization strengthen pattern recognition skills and memorization. Practicing composite rhythms and shifting strengthen kinesthetic skills and improve accuracy and fluidity on the instrument.

**Final Thoughts**

My desire is to create a musical experience that is meaningful, significant, and educational for Western students while accurately projecting the music and dance of the Dagara people. I have taken great care to teach the music and dance as they were taught to me by my African teachers. While the manner in which I teach is different, I have tried to remain faithful to musical interpretation. That is not my tradition to alter. In some ways, I feel as though I have sought to re-create for my students the same love of the music, the same feelings that I get when I play the music, when I dance. I’m not sure this is possible. Without having been to Ghana and shared in all the sensory experience, perhaps that feeling can never be completely re-created here in the United States in a classroom. But, maybe in a small way, the spirit and energy of the music carries through to these students as they learn to play and dance. Locke revealed his views on the key to authenticity when he wrote, “if you feel the power of the music, if you apply yourself wholeheartedly to the challenge of learning then your results will be genuine” (Locke 1998: 130).

My last night in Ghana during the same event mentioned previously, I was asked to dance with the Dagara Cultural Troupe as they performed for a group of villagers and visiting guests.
One of the dances I was asked to join in on was Yiila and Guola, one of my favorites. The memory of that experience is vivid in my mind. One of the particularly striking aspects of that dance is the beauty of the arms as they are stretched out gracefully back and forth in the air seeming to float delicately around the body. The dance always made me feel lovely and graceful, like a ballerina. On that night, the wind blew a cool crisp breeze on us as we danced. It was the perfect end for my trip. Dancing with the Dagara on such a beautiful night in such a beautiful dance was like the perfect conclusion to my journey. When the Afro-Caribbean ensemble at Bowling Green State University performed the same dance in the Spring of 2006, as we danced on the stage for our concert I could feel what it felt like to be back in Ghana dancing with the Dagara. The dance always rekindles the same emotions and senses for me. I can even feel the cool wind blow. That is an experience, a feeling I wish I could share with other students, so that they too could love the music in the same way. It is not realistic; I cannot do that for them. But I hope that my love of the music and dance will shine through, inspiring others to dance well and with feeling, to play with spirit and strength, to listen with big ears to the beautiful gyil music and feel the connection between the interwoven melodies and the grace of the dance.
CHAPTER 8. CONCLUSIONS

This thesis is the product of field research conducted in Ghana learning to play the Dagara gyil. The experience in the field profoundly impacted me both professionally and personally. As I explored the challenges of field research and presented my experiences, both as a musician and an individual, I gained insight into the rewards and struggles that one encounters through such experiences. I relate the challenges of learning to play music from a perspective other than the one I am accustomed to, and share the manner in which I was able to reframe the music for myself and came to clarify my own musical lens. This field experience has better equipped me to resolve musical and personal struggles, and has revealed to me much about the nature of fieldwork as well as myself.

I developed a transcription model that was informed by previous scholars’ attempts to transcribe West African music effectively, yet was tailored to the specific needs of teaching gyil music to other Western-trained musicians. After carefully considering the many options for transcription, I decided on a model that I believe can be effective for this purpose. A significant benefit of my model is the incorporation of the dance rhythms, which have been largely neglected in previous research. By integrating the dance rhythms into the transcriptions, I have suggested an alternative perspective by which to frame Dagara gyil music. Through analysis of “Te Wana,” I explored the possibilities of understanding time conception from the perspective of the dance rhythms. This reveals another layer by which to hear, learn, and perform Dagara gyil music. This method deserves further treatment in the literature, and should be explored within the contexts of previously researched West African musics. By examining music in this light,
perhaps we can attain a more complete understanding of the complex and multi-faceted nature of West African music.

As I have shown, there are a variety of ways in which gyil music can be disseminated to students. I have created a teaching method for gyil music and dance that is a combination of my experiences both learning to play gyil music in Ghana and as a Western-trained musician. I have developed strategies that enable students with Western backgrounds to learn to play Dagara gyil music. Curiously, as this music moves farther from its original context, teaching becomes more methodical. As students grow in ability, the rules become more flexible, playing less methodical.

Perhaps we can come to understand Dagara music even from far-removed contexts if we can get inside their musical perspective. Because we are far away from Dagaraland, it would be easy to alter the music and dances as we please. While this freedom may seem appealing, I believe it is important to respect the traditions as they exist in their original contexts. The amount it is appropriate to change depends on the type of music, whether it is sacred or secular, and the extra-musical associations involved with specific musics and dances. By creating an awareness of not only the music, but the people and the culture as well, our perspectives of Dagara music are enriched, and our students will learn more than movement and sound.

For each of us, our backgrounds, strengths, and weaknesses inform our understanding of music; we can only see through our eyes, and hear through our ears. Through time and effort, we can expand our awareness to see and hear music from another perspective; by doing so, we lend strength and value to our musical understanding. After reflecting upon my own strengths and weaknesses, the process in which I came to understand gyil music is clearer to me. Confronting one’s weaknesses is not a pleasant exercise, but it sheds a lot of light on how we learn, understand, think about, and perform music. It has been fascinating to examine how I think about
and play music, and to reflect upon the experiences that have led to the development of my musical perspective. I believe that it is not until we understand ourselves that we have hope of understanding someone else. As I continue to learn and grow as a scholar, a musician, and an individual I will strive to maintain the sense of self-awareness that has begun to develop as a result of this field experience. As I continue on my journey, the lessons I learned in the field will be recalled as I seek to understand not only my musical lens, but that of others.

Final Thoughts

As I was nearing completion of the writing process for this thesis, I began to reconsider the title of the work. I wondered how applicable “processes of learning” are to the broader conclusions at which I arrived. Within the context of my paper, “processes of learning” are contained to learning to play gyil music. After much reflection, I realized how much more that means and what a central idea “processes of learning” has become in this thesis. Learning is not an event, it is a journey, a process. I began the journey when I left for Ghana to learn to play the gyil, and as I arrive now at this artificial conclusion, I realize that the entire experience has been a process of learning: learning to play the gyil, about fieldwork, about musical perspectives, about myself, and how to share all of that with others. Now I know that learning to play the gyil is like searching for understanding of oneself and others, it has no conclusion; it is a process.
REFERENCES


_____. Interview. 5/2/06.