

Master Drummers of Dagbon

Group leader: Alhaji Ibrahim Abdulai

Recording and Notes by: John M. Chernoff

See also *A Drummer's Testament* for these and other recordings.

www.adrummerstestament.com

Through the efforts of African-Americans in the United States, the Caribbean and Latin America, Western popular music is now predominantly an African musical idiom. As Westerners become more aware of the variety of rhythmic resources in their own African musical heritage, the rhythms of the African coastal and forest cultures, which sent so many of their sons and daughters to the Americas, have now become somewhat familiar to many up-to-date music-lovers. The music of the savanna cultures is less familiar, although the cultures of what are now Guinea, Mali and Senegal can claim a profound role in the development of blues music.

The Dagbamba of northern Ghana share a number of musical traits with other savanna cultures, but they have also developed ensemble drumming to a high standard. Dagbamba music blends the clarity of the music of the savanna cultures with the driving power of the music of the forest cultures, and Dagbamba drumming is a resource for refreshing our appreciation of African music's rhythmic diversity. This recording contains beats that we can relate to. Some are rich in complexity; others exemplify the strength of simple repetition. Some are beautiful for the way in which the drums communicate with each other to build a fulfilling total sound; others offer models of aesthetic command and improvisational dynamics.

It would be difficult to find an indigenous African culture without an impressive musical tradition. Every African cultural group can look with pride at its own distinctive types of music and dance. In a relatively small country like Ghana, with a population of only about fourteen million people, there are seventy different tribal groups, and even a lifelong citizen can never hope to hear all the types of music in the nation. The depth of many individual traditions is such that there are many people who grow up and live their whole lives in the center of their cultural area but never hear some particular types of local music.

I can remember being overwhelmed by the diversity of African music at the end of my first year in Ghana. I had spent all my time going around to see and hear as much as I could, and I had spent time in several cultural areas learning to play different instruments, but when I took stock of what I had accomplished, I felt that I had made only a little progress toward becoming familiar with what that country alone had to offer. Within the individual traditions where I worked, I felt that I had taken only a tiny step toward mastery of only a fraction of what was there. I sat and fantasized about going to this town for three months to learn, that town for four months, another town for six months. It was a grim awakening when I calculated that I would need several lifetimes before I could move to Togo, the Ivory Coast, or Burkina Faso, to say nothing of Nigeria, Mali, Guinea, Zaire, or any place a map and a dart would send me.

“Drumming has no end,” one of my drumming masters told me, “and to talk of drumming, you cannot talk of it and finish. As we are drumming, every drumming has got its name, and again, every drumming has got its dance. Every playing is different, and in drumming everyone has got his hand. So no one can know everything about drumming; everyone knows only to his extent. If you want to know everything, what are you going to do and know it?” (*African Rhythm and African Sensibility*) My solution to the problem of Africa's abundance of musical riches started with the realization that I would not be alone among Western seekers of African music. I had only to go to the place where my heart took me, to the place where my spirit would fit and benefit. Others could follow their own luck. I returned to northern Ghana and began work on my legacy, a tribute to the musicians and the people of Dagbon, the traditional area of the Dagbamba people. In collaboration with the master drummer featured on this recording, Alhaji Ibrahim Abdulai, as well as several others, I have prepared an open-access website called *A Drummer's Testament: Dagbamba Society and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (www.adrummerstestament.com).

The Dagbamba are not well known to the Western world, and it has been one of my pleasures to think that my work will introduce the Western world to the rich musical heritage of Dagbon. The Dagbamba musical heritage is as diverse and complex as that of any better-known culture, including Ashanti, Hausa or Yoruba. On a continent where music generally has a significant role in traditional institutions, Dagbamba music illustrates a further elaboration of this tendency into the maintenance and validation of historical and political information. Compared

to the griots of other savanna cultures, musicians who also preserve historical and genealogical information, Dagbamba drummers are more organized and play a more central role in the social hierarchy.

An important and unique part of Dagbamba drummers' repertoire is the performance of the drum history, when as many as fifty to hundred drummers assemble to beat and sing selected parts the history of Dagbon. The history lends meaning to the proverbial praise-names which drummers bestow on chiefs and important people, and these proverbs become the roots of popular dance beats. Since many princes fail to obtain chieftaincy, many Dagbamba commoners are the descendants of past chiefs, and they often prefer to respect and remember their family's line by dancing to the name of a great forefather. Drummers also learn the genealogies of their community, and at any public occasion, they respect their neighbors by beating the praise-names of people's forefathers.

Needless to say, drummers master a vast amount of information relating to proverbial wisdom, oral tradition, and family history. “Anyone who is going to learn drumming,” one drummer told me, “always starts by praying.” However, praise-drumming, the drum history, and praise-name dances are only a part of the music of the area. There are types of drumming connected with death and funerals, with the installation and activities of chiefs, with various occupational groups, with festivals, and with surviving pagan religious ceremonies. There are as well a number of special dances done by various members of the community. These dances — Takai, Baamaaya, Tora, Jera, and many others — are normally performed at social occasions to enhance participation and respect. Each such dance is composed as well of several different types of drumming. Finally, Dagbamba drummers learn music from other cultural groups so that strangers who are resident among them will be able to dance and participate at social events, and many Dagbamba have adopted several of these dances as their own. The thirty-odd praise-name dances I learned to play did not even make a dent in the repertoire of such dances; I also learned many beats that were part of Takai, Baamaaya, Tora, and so on; and I learned how to play dance beats for Mossi, Kotokoli, Hausa, Bassari, Dandawa, Kassena, Mamprusi, Guruma, Yoruba, Gonja, Zambarima, and other people. Besides all this drumming, the Dagbamba have young people's groups which use drums locally made of metal to resemble conga and trap sets. The Dagbamba also have fiddlers and rattle-players. They have people who play a musical bows called *jenjili* (*jenjili*) that resembles a Brazilian

birimbao. They have flutes, guitars, Ashanti-style *ntumpan* drums (called *timpana*), square frame-drums, and horns.

The traditional Dagbamba drum ensemble is composed of two types of drums that hang from the shoulder and are beaten with a curved stick. *Lunga* (*luŋa*) is a tension drum shaped like an hourglass, with thin skins over each mouth laced with leather strings. Westerners often call this type of drum a “talking drum” because the drummer can change the pitch and resonance of the drum by squeezing the strings. There are several sizes of *lunga* in an ensemble to provide a supporting beat for solo playing, and the lead often shifts among the drummers as if in a chorus of singers. The pulsating overtones of the supporting drums also sound something like humming because of the way the drummers work the strings to modulate the voice of the drums. A large tomtom called *gungon* (*gungɔŋ*) serves as the bass drum. It has a single snare made from a leather string along the upper part of the face of the drum. The *gungon* drummer uses his stick and his free hand along the edge of the drum to make a delectable buzzing sound that sounds almost like rattles. Muting the bass beat by turning the stick against the center of the *gungon* also adds to the dynamics of the bass rhythms. Two *gungons* are used in a typical ensemble: sometimes one *gungon* supports the other with a responsive rhythm; sometimes they beat in synchrony or improvise together in response to the talking drums. The peculiarities of the sounds should not confuse a listener into thinking that there is something wrong with the recording. Such blurred sound effects are common in many African musical idioms.

The selections on the Rounder Records albums were recorded out of context for the purpose of allowing listeners to hear the music of Dagbamba drumming first and foremost as music. In 1981 I assembled a number of Dagbon's finest singers and drummers and took them to an open field on the outskirts of the town of Tamale. The twenty beats originally released on *Master Drummers of Dagbon*, volume 1 (Rounder Records 5016), are drawn from the sixty we recorded and add seven to the thirteen originally released as a record, and sixteen others were released on *Master Drummers of Dagbon*, volume 2 (Rounder Records 5046). The selections on those releases, as well as many other recordings of Dagbamba music, can be found in the open-access web publication mentioned above, *A Drummer's Testament*. There was no ululation, no crowd excitement, and no flute, but the two sessions were magical. There are heavy spiritual repercussions when masters of drumming express themselves in a tradition of artistic genius.

The singing of the drums resembles the breathing of the wind, and when the sound of the drumming dies, it moves away like exhaled breath. The bass drums vibrate inside the earth. I have heard drumming in the night in Dagbon and gone to search for it, but as I moved toward it, it seemed to come from a different direction. It would not be until the next day that I would learn that the drumming had come from a village two or three miles away.

Most samplers present music recorded in actual performance contexts to heighten a listener's sense of participation in the music. But because it is difficult for anyone to imagine the actual setting of ethnic music, the ambient sound of a social event often has little meaning for most people. The sheer variety of music in Dagbon would make any sample selection somewhat specious, and this release makes no claim to include representative types of Dagbamba music or even the most important drumming from a Dagbamba perspective. I have merely tried to give listeners music to enjoy, and the choice from my field recordings was difficult enough with that single criterion. The particular selections on this release are meant to convey the genius of Dagbamba drumming. Actually, it is the spectators who hear the ambient sound at a Dagbamba musical event; the praise-name dances are danced individually inside a dance circle, where the drummers surround a dancer to beat their rhythms through his or her body so that, as the Dagbamba say, "the body is enlightened." The experience of dancing with drummers on all sides is incredible, for the sound is more than quadraphonic: those who seek the feeling of authentic participation may begin to appreciate the technological prescience of the Dagbamba drummers by using headphones at high volume.

The group leader of the ensemble was Alhaji Ibrahim Abdulai, playing *lundaa*, the medium-voiced lungu featured on most selections. The gungon leader was Fuseini Alhassan Jeblin. Also featured on second gungon during the sessions were Mahamadu Fusheni, Yisifu Alhassan and Abdulai Seidu. Other featured drummers were Abukari Alhassan (all Dagbani singing and also playing *lundogu* [*lundɔyɔ*], the low-voiced lungu), Abubakari Wumbee (playing *lundogu*), Adam Iddi (playing *lumbila*, the high-voiced lungu). Playing lungu and singing on Hausa and Kotokoli songs were Yakubu Gomda (Gaabite Zamaduniya and Lua on volume 1, and Madadaazie and Suberima Kpeeru on volume 2), and other singers of Hausa and Kotokoli songs during the two sessions included Napari Kanvili, Yinoussa Adam and Sayibu Alhassan. Other lungu drummers on one or both

sessions included Issahaku Alhassan, Zakari Alhassan, Yakubu Alhassan, Alhassan Dogorli, Yakubu Adam, Sogu Lun-Naa, Dokurgu Mahama, Mumuni Issaka Choggo, Issahaku Mahama, Mumuni Alhassan and Baba Kalangu.

Selections:

Master Drummers of Dagbon, volume 1

GBADA is a dance of Kotokoli origin which is beaten particularly when Dagbamba display their horsemanship by making their horses dance. Suberima Kpeeru on volume 2 also is noted as a good beat for horse riders.

GAABITE ZAMANDUNIYA (*Gaabite Zamanduniya*) is one of several distinct forms of this dance — Hausa, Kotokoli and Dagbamba. This version is of Kotokoli origin but is the most common and currently popular form; it is generally danced individually by women. “Zamanduniya” is Hausa referring to people “sitting in the world,” and the meaning of the drumming is that one must have patience to live in the world. Zamanduniya was introduced to Dagbon several generations ago in the early twentieth century. Formerly it was a dance of a type that Dagbamba call Taachi. Taachi was the main form of social dancing in the early- to mid-twentieth century before the dances based on praise-names of Dagbamba chiefs became preeminent. Taachi refers to praising and praise-names, and is a word similar to the Hausa “taake.” Most of the Taachi dances have Hausa, Kotokoli or Dandawa origins from which Dagbamba have modified or adopted the rhythms. Some of them like Zamanduniya have different forms identified with these various groups. Kondalia was also a Taachi dance. In Taachi dances, the singing is often in both Hausa and Dagbani, and occasionally in Kotokoli. The Hausa singing in Dagbamba Taachi dances is not a pure Hausa; it displays Dagbani and regional variations in pronunciation. Taachi dances in volume 2 include Gado, Madadaazie, Sikare, Suberima Kpeeru and Kasu Nkura.

DIKALA (and NAKOHI-WAA [*Nakohi-waa*]) are related to occupational groups, though anyone can dance them. Dikala is for blacksmiths, but it is also common at funeral houses during the first phases of funeral observances, when it is danced by the deceased's grandchildren.

YORUBA-WAA, the Yoruba Dance on this recording is one of several which Dagbamba drummers played for the Yorubas who formerly resided among them; nowadays many Dagbamba dance it either because they have friends or in-laws who are Yorubas or they just like it for themselves.

GUMBE (*Gumbe*) is a prototypical Highlife beat which has evolved into Simpa, the young people's music played on Western-style trap and conga drums made of metal by local blacksmiths. Gumbe was introduced to the Dagbamba in the early twentieth century by Kotokoli people from Togo, who still use square frame-drums to beat it. Traditional drummers such as those on this recording also use their instruments to beat Gumbe when requested.

DAKOLI N-NYE BIA (*Dakoli n-nyɛ bia*) is a series of proverbs. The first proverb is: a bachelor is a child, and a married man is senior. Some other proverbs in the song are: the one who has someone to hold him will eat, the one without someone should sit down; the one who says there is no God should look at his front and his back. Dakoli N-nye Bia is beaten as an introduction to the drum history. It is one of the first types of drumming taught to a child who is learning.

LUA is a Dagbamba dance for women and young girls. When it is danced, the women form an oval: one will enter and dance her style, then she is picked up by three women at one end of the oval, lifted and thrown to the other end, where she lands on the beat.

KURUGU KPAA is a praise-name for Dakpema Sungna (*Dakpema Sunna*), a former market chief of Tamale. Like Zhim Taai Kurugu, it refers to the strength of its namesake. “Kurugu kpaa” means an iron spike, which termites cannot eat.

TORA (*Tɔra*) is a Dagbamba dance for women. An account of its origin is occasionally sung in the drum history, where it is linked to the paramount chief of Yendi, Naa Yenzoo, a dating that would make it about four hundred years old. The women form a line. One dances out in one direction, another in an opposite direction, and they mark the accented beat and spin and turn toward each other, knocking their bottoms at the next accented beat. The Hausas also have Tora.

HANKURI ZAMANDUNIYA is a Hausa form of Zamanduniya common in Taachi dances. The chorus sings, “Hankuri,” which means patience. Hankuri

Zamanduniya is typically the form of Zamanduniya used in praising, while Gaabite Zamanduniya is mainly a women's dance beat. A Dagbamba form of Zamanduniya is called Ayiko.

JERA (*Jera*) is a circle dance for men. The dancers are gorgeously costumed. Jera seems to be a dance of strength and rootedness to the earth, and it appears to be an old dance, for its drummers beat an archaic form of the gungon. Today Jera is generally danced at funerals. Only several villages have Jera groups.

AMAJIRO is a popular women's dance, and Dagbamba children also dance a special dance they call Anakulyera (*A na kul yera*) to the beat of Amajiro.

ZUU-WAA means the dance of the first-born son, the *zuu*. It dates from the early eighteenth century, when it was first beaten for the chief of the village of Tong, Tonglana Yaamusa, first-born son of the paramount chief of Yendi, Naa Sigli (*Naa Siyli*). It is also known as Dogu (*Doɣu*).

NAKOHI-WAA (*Nakɔhi-waa*) is the butchers' dance. Arm movements indicate whether the dancer's place in the butchers' line comes from the mother or father.

POHIM ZHERI (*Pɔhim ʒeri*) is a praise-name of an early nineteenth century chief of Savelugu, Savelugu-Naa Ziblim, who was a son of the paramount chief of Yendi, Naa Andani Jengbarga. The name means: wind is blowing clay pots; calabashes should not be proud.

ZHIM TAAI KURUGU (*ʒim taai kurugu*) is a praise-name of Naa Alaasani, a paramount chief of Yendi in the early twentieth century. “Zhim Taai Kurugu” (easily heard on the gungon and supporting drums), “ka jengbarsi wolinje” means that when blood touches iron, rats will try to eat it but will fail.

TAKAI

NYAGBOLI (*Nyayboli*)

KONDALIA

NUN DA' NYULI (*Nun da' nyuli*)

Takai, Nyagboli, Kondalia and Nun da' nyuli are danced, with several other dances, as a suite. An intricate dance of elegance and dignity, Takai is danced in a large circle by men who spin in alternate directions and knock sticks as they turn. Various forms of this dance can be seen in other West African societies. It is easy for Western listeners to get off-track in Takai itself: the chorus beats the downbeat, and the lead drum is on the offbeat. The other Takai beats are less tricky. Nyagboli is also part of Tora, and it has been added into Baamaaya, another popular dance. Kondalia is also danced individually by women; as noted above, it has Hausa connections and was one of the Taachi dances. The drum chorus in Kondalia is on the offbeat. Nun da nyuli was originally part of an earlier form of Baamaaya called Tuubaankpili (*Tuubaankpili*), and it is beaten in Tora as well. It has only recently been added to Takai, as have several other beats (such as Num Bie N-Kpan [*Num bie n-kpan*] from volume 2). Much of the Takai beating is jocular: “Nun da' nyuli” means: the one who buys the yams (also buys the buttocks of the woman who sells them).

Master Drummers of Dagbon, volume 2

GADO, along with Mazadaji, Sikare, Suberima Kpeeru and Kasu Nkura, is a dance of a type that Dagbamba call *Taachi*. As noted above with regard to Gaabite Zamanduniya, Taachi was the main form of social dancing in the early- to mid-twentieth century before the dances based on praise-names of Dagbamba chiefs became preeminent.

NAANIGOO is a praise name for a late-nineteenth century paramount chief of Yendi, Naa Andani: promise with thorns. The name refers to a situation in which trust has been betrayed.

ZAMBARIMA-WAA, or Zambarima dance, is beaten for Zambarima (or Zaberma) people from northeastern Burkina Faso and southwestern Niger.

KULNOLI is a praise-name for the late twentieth-century chief of Yendi, Naa Mahamadu: the place where water is good will gather water-drinkers.

DAMBA is the signature dance of the Damba Festival which celebrates the birth of the Holy Prophet Muhammad. The Damba Festival coincides with the Maulud festival period in the Islamic world. Damba is almost an obligatory

dance for Dagbamba chiefs, and it is one of the Dagbamba dances well-known to outsiders.

GURUNSI-WAA, or Gurunsi dance, is beaten for mainly Kasena people from northern Ghana near Navrongo. The Dagbamba refer to many people from the Upper Regions of Ghana with the term "Gurunsi."

BAN NIRA YELGU (*Baŋ nira yelgu*) is a praise-name for a former chief of Karaga, Kari-Naa Alhassan: I will not know a person and allow him to know me.

MAZADAJI: a Taachi praise-name dance (see note for Gaabite Zamanduniya).

SIKARE is a Taachi praise-name dance (see note for Gaabite Zamanduniya).

SUBERIMA KPEERU is a Taachi praise-name dance (see note for Gaabiti Zamanduniya). Suberima Kpeeru is most often beaten these days when Dagbamba horseriders approach a gathering and display their horsemanship.

NAYIG'-NAA ZAN BUNDAN' BINI (*Nayiy' Naa zaŋ bundan' bini*) is a praise-name for a recent chief of Diari, Diarilana Mahama: the chief thief has taken a rich man's thing and turned around to put it at the rich man's sleeping place. The name refers to someone who tries something he is not suited for.

WANGARSI-WAA, or Wangara dance, is beaten for people of Mande origin, from Bobo-Dioulasso in Burkina Faso and northwest into Mali, whom the Dagbamba refer to with the term Wangara.

MAMPRUGU-WAA, or Mamprusi dance, is also known as Tohi-waa (*Tohi-waa*), or hunter's dance. The Mamprusi are the northern neighbors of the Dagbamba and share a common ancestor.

NUM BIE N-KPAN (*Num bie n-kpaŋ*) is a praise-name for a nineteenth-century chief of Savelugu, Savelugu-Naa Yakuba: the one who has recovered from sickness does not want the one who is sick to be cured. The name sometimes has another form: the one who is recovered from sickness is the one who says the medicine is finished.

KASU NKURA is a Taachi praise-name dance (see note for Gaabite Zamanduniya).

NANTOO NIMDI is a praise-name for a mid-nineteenth century paramount chief of Yendi, Naa Yakuba: meat poisoned by nantoo (anthrax). The meaning is that whatever goes into the hands of the chief has become something dangerous.

Other Recordings:

NAGBIEGU (*Naybieɣu*) is the praise-name of the late-nineteenth century chief of Yendi, Naa Abudu, celebrating his victory in a war: Bad Cow.

GURUMA-WAA is beaten for Guruma people from southeastern Butkina Faso.

NANIGOO (2nd version)

DAM' DUU is a praise-name for a twentieth-century chief of Tali, Tali-Naa Alhassan: noise in room lets a mouse get a ban name.

TAKAI: full Takai Suite including DIBS' ATA (28:54)

Continuous recording with the dance changes as noted below:

00:00 Takai

08:18 Nyagboli

13:08 Kondalia

18:54 Dibs' ata

24:15 Nun Da Nyuli

References:

John Miller Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

John M. Chernoff, Alhaji Ibrahim Abdulai, Kissmal Ibrahim Hussein, Benjamin Danjuma Sunkari, Mustapha Muhammad, Alhaji Mumuni Abdulai, and Daniel A. Wumbee. *A Drummer's Testament: Dagbamba Society and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (www.adrummerstestament.com).

Production Notes:

Recorded by: John M. Chernoff in Tamale, Ghana

Remastered at HeartSong Studios and Aircraft Communications, Pittsburgh, PA

Engineer: Henry Yoder

Photographs by: John M. Chernoff

Rounder Records Design by Scott Billington

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