Music-making Children of Africa

A Dagomba child learns social habits and personal discipline through music

Text and photographs by John Miller Chernoff

One of the things children everywhere love is music. Take your guitar to a park and begin playing; the first people to stop and listen will be children. Among the Dagombas of northern Ghana, it is the same. "When we are going to a house to play," a Dagomba drummer once told me,

> it is the children who meet us. Some of them will walk with us and lead us; the others will run ahead to inform the whole house, "The drummers are coming! The drummers are coming!" Don't you see that it's nice? It is one way that music adds to us. Music makes us happy, and music shows us things about ourselves, and again, music is something we can pass down to our children.

When we consider the different conditions in which human beings grow up and the role of artistic expression in life, we must acknowledge that "wealth" is an ambiguous word: a measurement of quantity for some people; a reflection of values in human experience for others. The children of the world share a love of music, but African children in particular enjoy the benefits of musical life; they are as involved with music as our children are with television.

In the traditional societies of Africa, children's musical activities are more than recreation. Through music, African children learn social habits and personal discipline. Among the Dagombas, music making gives children a chance to participate in important events, and for some children, musical training also encompasses the study of history and folklore.

Dagomba children begin working at an early age. By the time they are four or five, boys are already accompanying their fathers to the farm, where they may be asked to fetch drinking water or farming implements. In a few years, they can weed and plant. They also care for such domestic animals as cows, sheep, and goats, and they have special techniques for finding food—mainly termites and ants—for chickens and guinea fowls. After a farmer has planted his crops, he may build a treehouse on his plot, and his children and their friends are sent to it every day with *balankon*, a slit-drum made from a hollowed-out log. Their job is to drive off monkeys.

Girls work with their mothers, sweeping the compound, carrying water, cutting and grinding vegetables for cooking, and in season, collecting the shea nuts from which Dagombas prepare cooking and lamp oil. The children's work is difficult, but the Dagombas measure character in the willingness to do hard work, and parents are careful to match tasks with a child's ability and strength.

At night, after eating, the children have no work to do and are free to roam. If they live in a town, they might be given money to attend a movie, but generally they meet with their friends and play. Those children interested in learning more about their tradition sit with old people. It is typical of Dagomba life that people from neighboring houses gather after the evening meal and talk. The children sit quietly to the side; they sometimes massage the legs of a storyteller while he talks: "In the days of such and such a chief, this was what was happening" or "During the war between the Dagombas and the Gonjas, this was what happened." If a child is sitting alone with an old man, he may press the legs and feet of the elder until both man and child fall asleep side by side. In the villages an old man may relax with *jenjili*, a musical bow, or *moglo*, a guitar-like instrument; he sings songs to amuse himself and his grandchildren—songs that tell stories, illustrate proverbs, and sometimes recount history.

A sense of history is central to both Dagomba culture and musical tradition. The Dagombas have an elaborate political system based on hierarchical chieftaincies, and the paramount chief, called the *Ya-Naa*, sits at Yendi, about sixty miles east of Tamale, the most populous Dagomba town. Drummers know the most about history, and at certain times during the year, they sing and beat different parts of the Dagomba drum history outside the house of their town's chief, who sits with his wives and elders while the populace assembles around them. The drummers start in the late evening and play till dawn. The Dagomba drum history resembles no other art form so much as it resembles a Homeric epic.

A young Dagomba boy plays a toy drum. When a boy is about three years old, his father will make him a small drum by simply covering a tin can with skin.

Dressed in traditional hat, smock, and trousers, a young dancer practices his skill to the accompaniment of tribal drums. The dancer's movements cause the smock to bell out gracefully.

Most of the drum history tells of *Ya-Naas* and their accomplishments, lending meaning to Dagomba traditional dances, which are based on the proverbial praise-names of the paramount chiefs of Yendi and the chiefs of other traditionally important towns such as Savelugu and Karaga. Although a typical Dagomba's preference in dancing is not necessarily political, different dances have associations with family origins because most Dagombas trace their ancestry to former chiefs. Not every son of a chief can become a chief, however, and someone for whom the "door" to chieftaincy closed generations ago may still respect his family's line by dancing to the name of a great forefather.

A dance called *Nanto Nimdi* can serve as an example. *Nanto Nimdi* is a praise-name for *Naa Yakubu* (ca. 1850), and it means that meat that has been touched by *nanto*, a very poisonous creature, cannot be eaten or even approached. In addition to obvious respect for the power of chieftaincy, the name implies that whatever a chief's hand touches becomes a dangerous thing; thus the name cautions that citizens should not do anything bad or become involved in a matter that will come before the chief. Drummers beat the name *Nanto Nimdi* and improvise on its rhythm, and people dance to it. Dances such as *Nanto Nimdi* are danced individually inside a circle of spectators. Drummers call a person to dance by beating praise-names of his or her forefathers. A dancer may dance several dances inside the circle, while friends and relatives press coins onto the dancer's forehead or place coins into the dancer's hands. The children of some drummers may dart in and out to pick up the money falling from the dancer and give it to the drummers, who later share it according to status.

In such a context, drummers must possess not only musical skills but also a detailed knowledge of a 500-year-old history and a familiarity with individual genealogies within their communities. Among the Dagombas, therefore, drumming is a professional calling, and to insure the continuity of professional excellence, Dagomba drummers maintain distinct lineage groupings and their own hierarchical chieftaincy organization. Not every son of a drummer is compelled to follow the vocation, although most do so for enjoyment and respect, but every daughter of a drummer must give at least one of her sons for training. Because drumming is knowledge as well as music, the Dagombas say that drumming has no end and that no one can know all of drumming. Each drummer can learn only his extent, and even old drummers characterize themselves as "still learning more." Their main instrument is an hourglass-shaped tension drum; the skins that cover both mouths are sewn to rings of bound reeds and laced with leather strings. A Dagomba drummer secures the drum under his armpit with a piece of cloth, and by squeezing the drum, he can produce notes ranging more than an octave. Commonly known as a "talking drum," this instrument is played in many West African societies. Dagombas call it *lunga*. The bass beat is provided by *gungon*, a large tom-tom with a thin leather string that acts as a snare; like *lunga*, it is hung from the shoulder.

When a drummer's wife gives birth, he takes his drum outside his house and beats praise of God and of the chiefs of Yendi. When the child is about three years old, his father will make a small drum by attaching two half calabashes back to back or by simply covering a metal can with a skin. At age five or six, a child is given a small version of

The beat for the dancing woman is provided by gungon, *a large tom-tom hung from the shoulder. Like the smaller drums (at right),* gungon *is played with a curved wooden stick.*

lunbila, the small-sized *lunga*, and among the first things he is taught to beat are the proverbs every drummer beats when picking up a drum throughout life: A bachelor is a child, and a married person is the elder; the person who has an owner will eat, and the person without an owner should sit down; the person who says there is no God should look to his front and his back (his ancestors and children).

Next the child learns to beat the names of his parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, as far back as his father knows. From his family, the child moves to the names of the past chiefs of Yendi up to the present, and after learning the Yendi chiefs, he progresses to the chiefs of other important towns such as Savelugu, Karaga, Mion, Kumbungu, Tolon, Tamale, Nanton, Gushegu, Voggo, Sunson, and also the chiefs of villages in his area. When a child is about ten years old, he will accompany drummers to functions, carrying their drums for them. There the drummers' children collect money from the ground and also learn to recognize the various people of their community and how the drummers praise each of them with the drum. In a few years the young drummers can begin beating and following the other drummers. By the time they are teen-agers, they may get *lundaa*, the medium-sized *lunga*, and they are distinguishable in the extent of their knowledge. When they meet their contemporaries at functions, they bluff each other. One young drummer will beat the chiefs of Yendi and Savelugu, only to be embarrassed when another youth follows him all the way and then goes on to beat Kumbungu and other towns.

Learning drumming is difficult work, and the Dagombas say that if a person's heart is not in it, he will not learn. In describing the act of beating alone, Dagombas say that it is the heart that talks and the arm that does what the heart wants; only a child with a "bright heart" can gain wisdom. In the evenings, drumming children go to their master and massage his legs and feet while he lectures to them and teaches them singing. Some children learn everything easily; Dagombas say that these are "born with a drum." Those who are unwilling learners may be beaten or knocked on the head with a drumstick to motivate them. Some drummers can display scars on the top of their head; they remember their suffering but are happy that their masters did what was necessary, for they treasure the satisfaction their eventual mastery has given them. Beatings are not common, however, and children without talent or desire are generally left to achieve their own level.

Typically, young drummers reach the highest standard by traveling to different towns and staying with great drummers. There is no charge for the teaching, but a young drummer gives his elder many gifts when he has finished learning from him. Dagombas say that two wise people cannot stay together; to learn drumming, therefore, one should make oneself a fool, put aside what one has already learned, and add the knowledge that the master can give. For the Dagombas, wisdom comes from saying, "I don't know," and then asking. Dagomba drummers do not reveal their hard-earned knowledge to those who are not serious, and to learn drumming requires patience and respect. Because drumming has no end, drummers move into maturity with the promise of continued growth in the practice of their art and the appreciation of their heritage.

Drumming by traditional drummers, however, is not an everyday occurrence but is reserved for events such as weddings, funerals, festivals, the installation of chiefs, and the public "outdooring" of newborn babies. Besides drumming, such events are likely to feature the music of *goonji,* fiddles with strings made of hair from a horse's tail. The music of fiddlers is given an extra punch by a number of gourd rattles in cross-rhythmic accompaniment. Fiddles were introduced into the Dagomba tradition about two hundred years ago, but unlike drummers, fiddlers do not restrict entry into their profession by family origin. Although not as knowledgeable as drummers, fiddlers also sing songs of praise, and children who learn fiddling follow an apprenticeship that involves singing and rattle playing as a prelude to learning the main instrument.

The participants at social functions relate to the beat of drums and the tune of fiddles by dancing, and Dagomba children learn their traditional dances by watching and later practicing when they meet their friends to play in the evenings. The children are such avid fans of music that they think nothing of setting out after dinner and walking several miles to a neighboring village if there will be drumming and dancing to watch. Often, when the children return in the early hours, they find the doors to their houses locked because their parents have assumed that they fell asleep at a friend's house. Afraid to wake up the neighborhood by knocking on the door, the children climb over the walls of the compound. Climbing over the walls of their houses after musical events is something older Dagombas recall fondly as a part of childhood.

Dagombas who remember their childhood love of music often organize occasions for their own children to dance. *Tora, Takai,* and *Lua* are three popular dances for children and young people.

Tora is a dance for girls. The girls stand in a line, and two jump out in opposite directions, then turn and run toward each other, knocking their buttocks when they meet; the first girl out goes to the end of the line, and a new girl comes out to bump the second. Our teen-agers may think that the "bump" is a new dance, but Dagomba girls have been doing it for more than a hundred years. Much of the drumming for *Tora* is the same as the drumming for *Takai,* a dance for young men and boys. The *Takai* dancers knock sticks or metal rods as they spin in alternate directions in a circle around the drummers; their traditional smocks bell out as they turn gracefully, offering a lovely spectacle. *Lua* is an athletic dance in which girls form a small circle, and one girl dances in the center. When the drummers reach a certain rhythm, she runs to one side of the circle, where three girls pick her up and throw her in the air so that she lands at the other side of the circle.

Baamaaya is probably the beat that Dagomba children first learn to recognize, and it is especially popular when mosquitoes are out in force. *Baamaaya*'s meaning is that mosquitoes should not find a place to rest, and *Baamaaya* dancers twist their waists continuously as they circle around the drummers. Metal shakers on their ankles add complementary beats to the drumming, and they wear striking headdresses and earrings and also carry fans that they use while dancing. I tried to dance *Baamaaya* once, but I sat down in minutes, my stomach knotted in pain, and I had to content myself with watching the others while I swatted at what seemed an inordinate number of mosquitoes, which had, I suppose, no other place to land.

Many Dagombas continue to dance *Baamaaya* or *Takai* into their adult lives, but young people also organize their own type of music, called *Simpa,* through neighborhood clubs. Club members pay dues and may be fined for missing rehearsals or performances. A tourist on an evening stroll in a Dagomba town would have a good chance to meet different *Simpa* groups practicing for one of their competi-

tions, singing songs with flute or harmonica and drum accompaniment. *Simpa* originated about fifty years ago from a Kotokoli dance called *Gumbe*, but the young Dagombas have transformed *Simpa* into an eclectic style that includes high life, rumba, soul, merengue, blues, bossa nova and other generic beats. Different groups use different types of instruments, from traditional Dagomba drums to sets of square-frame drums to sets of conga and jazz drums fashioned of metal by local blacksmiths. In an active *Simpa* club, members come every evening to sing in the chorus. The songs are often based on Dagomba proverbs, but the singers also comment on community issues and satirize rival groups. The dancing is done by twelve- to fifteen-year-old girls who come out, one or two pairs at a time, to dance matching, studied steps with intense concentration. *Simpa* groups usually participate in Dagomba funerals, and newly installed chiefs call them to help the young people celebrate.

Simpa styles are diverse and open to influence and change. In recent years, popular movies from India, romantic musical fantasies, have caused a sensation among young Dagombas, who remember the songs and set their own words to them. The melodies also provide inspiration for long improvisations on plastic flutes. To fit the music, one young Tamale man called Ali Bela, after the swashbuckling hero of some of the films, created a new style of drumming, using the fingers of one hand on different parts of the bottom of a five-gallon oil drum while using

Surrounded by curious young spectators, above left, Atikatika *children practice for one of their competitions. The metal drums are made by local blacksmiths. Two Dagomba girls, above, "bump" while dancing* Tora. *The one on the right will rejoin the line, while in the background, another dancer prepares to step out. Left: Pressing coins onto the forehead of a dancer is a sign of respect and appreciation. The infant on the back of one of the women is no doubt absorbing, indirectly, some of the excitement of the occasion.*

A Dagomba chief arrives at a festival. The elaborate decorations on the horse are made of leather. The Dagombas are great horsemen, and typically, horses are taught to "dance" to the beat of drums.

the other hand to play accents on the rim with an empty can of evaporated milk. The music is beautiful, and I was impressed by the notion of walking in the streets of Tamale and coming across a musical group with a name like Bombay, singing Dagomba homilies fitted to Indian tunes, with instruments acquired from Western oil companies and food processors and from Asian toy manufacturers.

But it is the small children who have most recently astounded Dagomba society with their musical inventiveness. *Atikatika* is a new dance that started in Tamale and swept through the other towns. A few young adults help the *Atikatika* groups solve organizational problems, such as acquiring uniforms and arranging transportation, but it is the children who plan the music, songs, and dancing. The children, of course, are true believers, and only rain—or an Indian film—can make them miss their nightly practice. The drummers are boys eight to ten years of age. The dancers, boys aged from four or five to eight, dress in white singlets with matching colored shorts and beanies; they tie metal shakers to their ankles, and dance precision acrobatic steps in a circle, using the shakers in various ways to cross the heavy, characteristic 12/8 beat of the drums. The chorus of young girls is led in high-spirited singing by an older girl, perhaps in her early teens.

Because the *Atikatika* children sing witty political songs, they are often in trouble with local authorities, who periodically ban their music. The chil-

Baamaaya *dancers begin their dance, which can last several hours. Besides drums, the* Baamaaya *beat calls for flute and rattles. Metal shakers on the dancers' ankles add a complementary beat.*

dren respond by planning new songs and dance steps and starting up again—only to be banned again. Some songs abuse pretentious prominent figures or are obscene commentaries on adult hypocrisies; sometimes, they resemble "children's rights" manifestoes, featuring complaints about such matters as being given yesterday's food.

Atikatika began during the political and social turmoil that followed the overthrow of the Nkrumah regime in 1966 and, on a local level, the escalating crisis in a continuing dispute over the Yendi chieftaincy. Many of the old people who object to *Atikatika* feel that the inflammatory songs the children sing are contributing to current problems, but *Atikatika* is popular with young people who consider themselves modern. Many young people, alienated economically or disturbed by the inequities of the modernization process, encourage the children to continue speaking out through their provocative, humorous songs and dances. When an *Atikatika* group practices, young spectators gather to be entertained, waiting to see what new things the children will do next; many old people stay away and mutter among themselves, until they take action.

Whatever happens in the future to change Dagomba society, music and dancing will continue to be a vital part of Dagomba life. Dagomba children will continue to learn their traditional dances and to find musical means to express their ambivalence about the world in which they are growing up. Music, for them, is a source of continuity in their own lives, a link to the past and a path to the future. Older Dagombas, even those who look at *Atikatika* and wonder what today's children are coming to, acknowledge that children give meaning to tradition. As one Dagomba told me:

> If you want to see our way of life, you will see it from the children. Even when we watch them play and we watch how they are with each other, we know how they will end up. So it is the children who make our culture, because the children can do something and it will come to stand as something for the old people. All our old dances, the children didn't start them, but when children play, they dance them. And the new dances we have not seen before, it is the children who started them, and when these children grow up, these dances will become an old thing to them. And so, as for our way of life, it all starts from the children. □