THE SOCIO-POLITICAL DIMENSION OF DAGARA FUNERAL RITUAL, MUSIC AND DIRGE

Bernard Woma

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Master's Thesis Committee _____

Dr. Daniel Reed

_____

Dr. Ruth M. Stone

_____

Dr. Samuel Gyasi Obeng

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

Page

Introduction:

Funeral music and dirge are forms of public discourse through which Dagara oral history and traditional beliefs are expressed and communicated to the ritual participants by the musicians and dirge singers. As public rhetoric, the textual themes of Dagara funeral music and dirge are deeply rooted in proverbial language that addresses issues of moral values, social conflicts, and local politics. Because of their political themes, funeral music and dirge are considered by the Dagara as the single most important form of public discourse. This thesis examines the socio-political dimensions of the Dagara funeral ritual by focusing on the textual interpretations of *gyil* music and *langni* dirge as political discourse. The temporal organization of the Dagara funeral ritual primarily centers on the playing of gyil music and dirge singing. An elderly person's funeral and/or the funeral of an important personage may include dancing and other esoteric rituals performed by the family or the deceased's social group in the community. Such performances symbolically reenact the deceased's life history as well as their social status in the community. Thus as public rituals, funeral ceremonies call for a communal responsibility not only to organize a befitting rite of passage for the departed soul but also for people to celebrate the life of their community member. The occasion also provides the opportunity for the Dagara people to re-enact their ancestral beliefs and cultural practices through music, dance, and dirge singing. In sum, funeral rituals reflect how the Dagara people reaffirm their traditional customs and social values.

Taken in the political context, Dagara funeral rituals provide the medium for people to negotiate their social space. It is through funeral ceremonies that chiefs and prominent figures demonstrate their social status, men and women establish gendered space in music

performance while musicians and dirge singers reaffirm their roles as the cantors of Dagara tradition. The performance of gyil music and dirge singing as well as the rituals of *kuor-yab* (the collection of cash donations) by the bereaved families from funeral mourners to pay the performers are some of the social activities at funeral celebrations that can be highly political because of the interaction of social groups involved in the performance these ritual activities. I use the term "political" to address the contested ways in which group identities and individual power dynamics among social groups are negotiated at funeral ceremonies. Given the above background, Dagara funeral ceremonies are therefore characterized by rituals and costmary activities that call for extensive public participation and critical social analysis.

Thesis Overview

Although Dagara funeral rituals have received some scholarly attention, the sonic dimensions which are the main features of this public ritual, especially, the textual essence of the music and dirge with their political implications have received little scholarly analysis. The work of Jack Goody (1961, 1962), Malidoma Somé (1994), and Anthony Naaeke (2005), among others, provide important information on certain aspects of this social ritual. Yet, none of these authors consider the important role of funeral music and dirge as a political discourse. In fact, without music and dirge singing, Dagara funeral ceremonies would fail to convey the very essence of this important life cycle ritual. My emphasis on the political aspects of funeral music and dirge is central here because funeral ceremonies not only offer the opportunity for musicians and dirge singers to performatively express their artistic talents, but, as cantors of this performance genre, the occasions of

funeral rituals also provide them the platform to communicate their feelings about issues of a public nature.

One may ask, as a political discourse, what happens to the voiceless non-musician majority who are part of this social ritual? To answer this question, I quote Norma McLeod's assertion about music as a social product. Music, she says, "should be a group activity that supports cultural norms, displays them in symbolic forms by forcing their performance in a public arena through the agency of activity on the part of the culture-bearer, ensure that acceptance and reinforcement of a basic ethos" (McLeod, 1974). This is the function and social purpose of Dagara funeral music and dirge. It is important to note that Dagara traditional norms of reproach make music the acceptable medium through which issues of public concern are expressed. For example, issues of individual moral ethics are considered by the Dagara as personal or private affairs and should be dealt with as such. However, social problems such as chieftaincy conflicts, land disputes, or any conflict that threatens peace and stability in the community can be expressed in any form of musical discourse. As social commentary, funeral music and dirge are highly political because dirge singers and musicians communicate issues of social iniquities. This thesis therefore seeks to analyze and contextualize the political impacts of funeral music and dirge, establishing how these musical genres can shape public opinion.

Fieldwork Experience

My research on this topic has been informed by the actual occurrences of funerals in all the three areas in which I conducted interviews. During my first trip in the summer of 2010 to Magang Gueguéré, one of the oldest Dagara settlement communities outside of Dano in Burkina Faso, I was greeted with a funeral in the village. In Burkina Faso, I

concluded my research in the village of Kolinkaa at the funeral of an elder diviner. Because of the temporal order of esoteric rituals that needed to be performed by the family members as well as the deceased's social groups this funeral lasted an unusual four days instead of the normal three day ritual. The deceased was an elder of the *bagr* religion and because of my distant maternal relationship with the deceased's family clan, I was asked to play for one of his social groups (the *bagr-kyur* initiation group). This ritual rite is performed at a member's funeral to signify their departure from the corporeal to the ancestral world.

When I returned to the Nandom area across the border in Ghana, I was greeted with four funerals in three communities of close proximity. Just two months into my fieldwork, the memory storage of both my recording device and my mind was fully loaded with recorded materials as well as vivid accounts of the actual funeral ritual ceremonies. On return to my home in Accra to unload the information and digest my field experience, I was greeted with a colleague xylophonist's funeral; and one month later two deaths occurred in my own family. As I grappled with the reality of death, my daughter was born in the midst of all these calamities. In fact her naming ceremony was ruined by the sudden death of my nephew who was supposed to perform the naming ceremony for the newborn baby. Due to this tragedy in the family, the naming ceremony of my daughter was not performed on the actual day she was supposed to receive her name; thus, one wonders how and why the power of death could overshadow the birth of a new life. The birth of my daughter could be viewed as a replacement of my nephew, but to the Dagara people, the pain of death outweighs the joy of a new birth. Indeed, when death occurs, all other rituals, including social activities, can wait until the funeral ritual is over.

Given the concrete experiences that I encountered in the field with the actual funeral rituals, I view their occurrence as a blessing from the ancestors. Although tragic, these funeral events provided the opportunity for me to document their musical functions as well as other elements of these important social rituals. The ancestors indeed evoked and revealed the mystery of death to me in unbelievable ways. Many of my research questions were answered, not only by my direct participation in these ritual events, but I also had the opportunity to witness first-hand the actual funeral ceremonies as a participant-observer. This ethnographic representation of the Dagara funeral ritual therefore conveys the echoes of *gyile* (xylophones, plural), the yelling sounds of the *lang-konme* (dirge singers), and the weeping voices of the women's *lang-muoli* – all viewed as Dagara modes of communication that express the individual's emotions and feelings about the mystery of death. As a musician, I have participated in numerous funeral ceremonies since childhood, but documenting their sonic dimensions in this ethnography is a contribution to the scholarly work on this important ritual.

Theory and Methodology

As every research process begins with a question, each disciplinary standard sets the way for how we conduct research. This research is a contextualized, cultural representation of a musical tradition that takes into account its social function at funeral rituals. Margaret LeCompte and Jane Schemsul write that, "Ethnography is a way to create theories of culture. It is rooted in the concept of culture—the end result, the story or narrative, constitute a theoretically informed interpretation of the culture of the community, group or setting" (2010: 11). I have mentioned that scholarly works on this topic have not considered the central role of gyil music and dirge singing at funerals as a political

discourse. Therefore, I argue here that the textual essence of Dagara funeral music and dirge need contextual analysis. Much as the funeral dirges are communicated through songs, the musical themes played on the funeral gyil are signaled texts that can be understood by the Dagara people. These textual meaning are the core of my theory and I contend that the political themes embedded in these songs make funeral music and dirge the most important public discourse among Dagara people.

I am aware that building theory for a research topic that is under-represented in academic scholarship is a challenging task and I know that my theoretical approach and ethnographic documentation will be contested and measured by existing theoretical canons. In this regard, I argue that cogent theory can only be built on one's experience with the study object. Hence the methodological approach that informs my theoretical rendering for this thesis is similar to that of James P. Spradley's "ethnographic semantics," the primary focus of understanding the cultural meaning of the people (Spradley 1979: 7). Drawing on extensive fieldwork including interviews with culture-bearers, musicians, and native scholars about the function of funeral dirge and gyil music in ritual context as well as my own participant-observations in funeral rituals, I build a theoretical framework that appropriately addresses the political impacts of funeral music.

As public discourse, the Dagara people assign deep meanings to funeral music and dirges because it is through this form of musical communication that public knowledge is disseminated. For example, during Ghana's political instability in the late 1970s, songs were composed to sensitize the local population about the impacts of national politics. A funeral song with the title, "J.J. Rawlings mwier ke bangni mɛ," literally means, "J. J. Rawlings as your army fire their guns, please be mindful that some of us are innocent." J.

J. Rawlings was Ghana's last military leader who overthrew the previous military government in 1979, citing instances of social injustice among the political elite. For the Dagara, issues of such public nature can only be effectively communicated through music. Thus public occasions such as funeral celebrations provide a socially sanctioned platform for people to express and widely disseminate their sentiments about such political events. It is through these musical discourses that my work seeks to explore and contextualize the performance aspects of this particular musical genre.

In developing the methodological ideas to carry out this ethnographic research, I thought about current debates and contentions in relation to research epistemology. To paraphrase Daniel Reed's quote regarding Babirachi (1997) and Rice (1997), fieldwork is not a partially or temporally bound experience but rather a broad conceptual zone untied by a chain of inquiry (Reed 2007: 29). Regarding fieldwork and ethnographic documentation, Reed states that, "over the past several decades, many ethnographers have made effective use of narrative forms of representation" (Reed, 1993:13). Drawing from historical literature, Reed points out that, "The contemporary use of narrative in ethnographic writing grew out of the reflexive movement which blossomed in the 1980s in which ethnographers objective perspectives and authoritative representational styles seemingly were removed from the field experience with individuals upon which ethnographic writing is based" (see Clifford & Marcus 1986; Jackson 1989; Crapanzano, 1998). Furthermore, as sociologist Kwame Gyekye writes, "within the Akan frame of reference, "objectivity," distanced observation no matter how well informed with secondary literature, how thoroughly immersed in archival documents does not constitute "knowledge" in its fullest sense. ([1987] 1995: 62-63).

My cultural knowledge as a musician of this musical tradition has significantly informed my understanding of this topic. I have deeply immersed myself in this music since childhood and I view the ethnographic representation of this musical tradition as a re-telling of a musical story that needs to be told. My theoretical representation will therefore utilize descriptive narrative. As Jeff Todd Titon points out, "Narrative, of course, is the way we habitually tell ourselves and others about our experience, and so it emerges as a conventional form in phenomenologically weighted representation of people making music" (in Barz and Cooley 2008: 34). From a phenomenological viewpoint, my representation of this musical complex draws on my experience as a member of this social group, a lived experience in a musical culture of which I am a part. Titon explains that, "Phenomenology emphasizes the immediate, concrete, and sensory lifeworld; and it attempts to ground knowledge in the world of lived experience" (Barz and Cooley, 2008: 28). My knowledge of this musical complex is shaped by my experience as a native musician and therefore I write as a member of a socially constructed cultural practice.

In his phenomenological theory, Harris Berger argues that, "To do a phenomenological ethnography is to understand how musical meanings are shaped by and have the potential to influence practices and experience from other domains" (in Barz and Cooley, 2008; 72. The social world of the Dagara people informs the experiences of their daily encounters and interactions with one another and the larger world. Politics, power, and identities thus become a process of interactions and negotiations; a practice that Dagara musicians and dirge singers engage at the local level as agents of this musical discourse. By their participation and performance at funeral rituals, musicians and dirges singers do not only use their music as a tool of power to negotiate their identities in their social world but

in this context, their agency as cantors of their tradition is honorably acknowledged by the people in the community. As Berger concludes, "however accurate or inaccurate, this broad sense of a social world is the context in which people forge their musical meanings, and their meanings are the ones that might affect their practices in other domains of their lives" (in Barz and Cooley, 2002: 72).

Like Titon and Berger, I ground my musical knowledge in the practice of music. However, I am writing as a native musician who was born into a family of gyil players and dirge singers. My grandfather, Nallɛ Bina was a great *gyil mwiere* (gyil player) and dirge singer. He was born with many natural gifts as a musician, blacksmith, and a diviner. In my generation, I inherited his legacy as a *gyil mwiere* and dirge singer. I am fortunate to be the custodian of the eighty-six year old instrument he left behind for me. I was initiated by him at birth when I was not old enough to speak with him or understand his intentions. Little did I know he saw my natural talents as a *gyil mwiere* at birth; and so he performed the ritual of the *gyil tii* (*gyil* medicine) on me, opening the way for me to start playing at the age of two. Therefore, it is through these experiences and years of knowledge as a musician that my representation of this musical complex will be narrated. By utilizing descriptive narrative, I am positioning myself as a *griot*, a custodian of this musical culture as well as a researcher whose work is to represent and document this musical complex in its proper context. And if I may conclude with Jeff Todd Titon's assertive view, "At its best, a narrative weighing in a descriptive ethnography of a music-culture invites the reader to share imaginatively, in the experiences that are represented" (see in Barz and Cooley 2008: 34].

Finally, my theoretical rendering is further informed by secondary and primary sources including individual and group interviews I conducted in Magang Gueguéré, Dano, Kolinkaa, Wassa, Fielmuo, and Hiineteng. I have learned a lot from my informants about the stories of funeral rituals as well as other important Dagara customary practices that are associated with funeral celebrations . Such stories express Dagara history and cosmology, especially a myth told by an elder in the village of Langle explaining why Dagara funeral music is structured numerically according to gender identities. These stories will be discussed in detail throughout the thesis because they are deeply associated with Dagara cultural beliefs and they significantly determine how funeral ceremonies are organized. I owe a debt of gratitude to these informants because their stories will be shared in this ethnography not only with the Dagara people but also with those who are interested in learning about our history and musical tradition. My analyses of the song texts in the following chapters will illuminate the ways in which funeral music can profoundly shape public opinion about Dagara traditional values and local politics.

Chapter Overview

In Chapter One, I discuss the historical background of the Dagara people – their geographical location, family structure, as well as their socio-economic activities and cosmological beliefs regarding music and ritual. The musical practices of the Dagara, and its subgroups, especially at social rituals such as funerals are distinctively varied. This is important for my case here because colonial misrepresentation of Dagara people and its neighbors in this region has obscured the distinct musical identities among these culture groups. Thus, I discuss the linguistic differences and other customary practices pertaining to funeral rituals among the four sub-dialects – the Dagara, Dagaaba, Losaale, and Birifor.

Chapter Two is a literature review in which I examine existing scholarship on the Dagara, especially discourse on music and funerary rituals. This chapter also examines colonial and missionary representations of the Dagara people as well as their encounter with colonialism. In this regard, I expand the discussion about colonial misrepresentations by looking at post-colonial deconstruction of Dagara scholarship by native scholars as well as other ethnographic representations of the Dagara music in particular.

Chapter Three is an overview of the musical tradition of the Dagara *gyil* (the principal instrument used for funeral rituals), including the accompanying instruments in the funeral performance. In this chapter, I discuss the various *gyil* musical genres, the role of the *gyil-mwier* (*gyil* player) in Dagara society as well as the manner in which music is organized around the temporal structure of the funeral ritual event. Dagara funeral music is called *bine* but when it is performed without the accompaniment of dirge singing, the music is meant for social dancing. Thus, *bine* music can be performed at social occasions such as weddings, festivals, and other recreational gatherings. I will explore the binary function of bine music in sacred and secular contexts as it takes on different forms and meanings when the music is performed at funeral ceremonies. I also discuss other musical genres that use the *gyil.* The recreational genres of the *bewaa* music in particular have received scholarly attention by ethnomusicologists and other researchers of Dagara music. Also important is the *bagr r*eligious music in which the *gyil* is the principal instrument. All these musical genres can be performed at funeral rituals to reenact the life history of deceased and therefore, they are part of the musical organization of the funeral ritual. Finally, I conclude this chapter with the argument that Dagara music requires a holistic approach; that is, one

that imbeds it within its history, cultural context, and performance styles of the various *gyil* musical genres.

In chapter Four, I explore the socio-political dimensions of the Dagara funeral ritual music. In this chapter, I analyze and contextualize the political themes in funeral music and dirge, illustrating how musical texts and sound can shape people's opinions on issues of public discourse. As a discursive analysis, my evaluation of this musical complex is based on the interpretation of the song texts as the Dagara people understand them. The meanings assigned to Dagara funeral music and dirges are varied because of the proverbial nature of their texts. Thus, the oratorical themes of this musical genre do not only speak about the doldrums of death but the music also educates the general public on a variety of matters. This chapter closes with the recapping of the concluding themes for this thesis. In this chapter, I posit some possible areas of Dagara musical scholarship that need ethnographic attention, especially for future scholars in the disciplines of folklore, ethnomusicology, and performance studies. Anthropological literature on Dagara culture has unfortunately paid little attention to these musical forms that are inherently part of the cultural production of this people. Similarly, available ethnomusicological scholarship on Dagara music has only given spiral analysis of the recreational genres of the *gyil* music (see Strumpf 1970; Mensah 1982; Saigboe 1984; Wiggins 1992, et al.). The vast majority of women's music, children songs, folkloric tales, hunters' music, the religious *bagr* music, and even Dagara Christian church music remain an area of scholarship that has the potential to contribute significantly to the knowledge production of the Dagara people. The doors are open.

Chapter One: A Historical Background of the Dagara People

An ethnic group of approximately 800, 000, the Dagara people live in a remote section of Ghana's Upper West Region. The demarcation of colonial borders has divided the Dagara people in this geographic area into three countries – northwestern Ghana, southern Burkina Faso and northeastern Cote d'Ivoire. Located in the Upper West region in Ghana, there are three linguistic sub-dialects consisting of the Dagara in the northwest corner of region, the Dagaaba in the center-east and the Losaalɛ in the southwest corner of the region. Since there are variations in the spoken language and terminology of the various Dagara, Dagare, and Losaalɛ dialects, I prefer to use the Dagara dialect in the spelling of names, things, and places to represent the language of the Dagara people. Thus much as I acknowledge the presence of linguistic differences among these culture group, I have maintained the name "Dagara" throughout the text because my research is focused on the funeral rituals of the Dagara subgroup which cuts across the northwestern corner of Ghana into the southwestern corner of Burkina Faso.

Although the linguistic differences among these groups are not as great, it is the difference in rituals and musical practices that set the Dagara people apart from the other subgroups. Alexis Tengan, writing about the ethnic diversity in this area, points out that, "their distinctive names are a reflection of their group division within the population as well as their linguistic difference" (2000). In funeral rituals, for instance, the Losaalɛ who are linguistically and spatially closer to the Dagara do not play the *dega-gyil* nor do they sing dirges to the *gyil* music at funerals as their neighbors, the Dagara and Dagaaba (see chapter three). In recreational genres, however, one comes across some similarities in the performance of the *bewaa* music and dance among all the three subgroups. These

differences in musical practice serve as cultural boundary markers and they significantly inform the social identities of each subgroup. It is along these lines that the focus of my research is on the Dagara people.

Like most Africans, the Dagara people trace their oral history and cultural background through myths and oral narratives. Before I proceed with the history and social organization of the Dagara people, let me first discuss a cosmological story on the literal translation of the term "Da-Ga-Ra" as narrated to me in an interview with a Dagara elder in Mangang Dano, a town in Burkina Faso. Indeed, this term has received different linguistic interpretations both by native scholars and in other published literature, marking a distinctive identity of the Dagara and their cultural beliefs as well as their ritual practices (see Goody 1962; Godsey 1980; B. G. Der 1980; Tengan 2000; Hawkins 2001). According to the legend narrated by Yokyar, "the linguistic syntax of [Da, Doo or Dɛb] represents the literal translation of male or man among the three Dagara subgroups. The syllable [*gaa* or *gara*] means *to go, to move, to walk* or *to roam*. Hence the term "Dagara" for its subgroup has come to mean "man goes or man migrates" (interview on July 29th 2010). As such, these legends are associated with Dagara historical beliefs and migration experiences. Some of the legends are not only integral ritual makers, but they also inform Dagara social organization and cultural norms, significantly shaping the way public rituals are organized.

Dagara Cosmological Beliefs and Cultural Practices

Before the introduction of Islam and Christianity to the Dagara people in the nineteenth and twentieth century, the cosmological figure to whom the Dagara people profess their spiritual beliefs was the *konton* – the omnipotent deity of the Dagara *saakumu* (tradition). Tradition is widely understood by the Dagara as a collective knowledge of

cultural practices, customs, religious beliefs, taboos and other social virtues. As such, the Dagara people widely believe that knowledge of their cultural history, religion, and rituals are those of the *konton*. Anthony Naaeke writes that, "*kontome* [plural] are the brain behind the discovery of many aspects of Dagara culture -- art music, magic, hunting medicine, and so on" (Naaeke, 2000: 36). The konton, having passed down all knowledge and cultural beliefs to the Dagara *saakum* (the grant ancestor and repository of all Dagara *saakumu*) is expected to share this knowledge with his people. In fact, Dagara *gyil* players usually trace the origin and invention of their instrument to the *konton* who is believed to have given this specialized knowledge to a Dagara hunter (*nabaglɛ*) to use as their traditional instrument (see chapter three).

As in many African societies, the Dagara social structure is patriarchal with ascribed gender roles. Dagara gender identities are tied to numerical cycles; hence, Dagara funeral music is structured numerically in line with the gender of the deceased. In an answer to one of my questions regarding this ritual rite, an elder in Langle, a village near Hamile, recounted the numerical significance associated with funeral music as follows:

> The reason why the Dagara funeral music is numerically structured is that the destiny of man is believed to have three lucky numbers and four lucky numbers for a female. When a male child is born, he is introduced to three life choices that are believed to guide his accomplishments whether they are successes or failures. As Dagara tradition prescribes, the destiny of a male lies in his ability to use the bow as a weapon to protect himself, the hoe as a tool to work the land, and a wife to establish his family. The bow does not only serve as a weapon of protection and defense, it is also a tool that a man needs in hunting to provide food for his family. The second tool that ensures the destiny and accomplishment of a male comes from the farming hoe which he uses to cultivate the land to feed his family. The third and most important need of a male is his ability to marry a wife and have children before he departs this world to join his ancestors (story narrated to me by Debuo, July 21st 2010).

In line with these cosmological beliefs, boys must be trained by their fathers on how to use the bow and hoe so that in their adult life they will be able to use them to fend for themselves and their family. Farming the main occupational activities among the Dagara extends beyond the physical activity of working the land. Successful occupational activities such as farming and hunting, are considered an important part of their religious ritual. Successful farming is believed to be in good harmony with nature and the spirits of the land (*tengan*), rivers (*baa*), forest (*wiɛ*) as well as the spirits of the ancestors (*kpime*) (see Tengan 2000; Stoller 1989). In this regard, people often make sacrifices to the spirits of the land preceding each farming season for a good harvest. The Dagara people strongly believe that failure to perform these rituals may result in consequences of poor yields and, consequently, one's family may face starvation and public ridicule. Thus, the annual harvest ritual called *bagr-maal daa* at the end of every farming season is a thanksgiving ritual that is performed by famers to honor the ancestors and the gods of the land.

The final destiny for a man's accomplishment in life is a wife who serves as a partner in building a family and gives a man his social dignity. For the Dagara, the end of the mortal journey of an unmarried man is considered incomplete and, because of this, certain rituals cannot be performed at his funeral. The funeral ritual of a childless bachelor is viewed by his family and friends as a curse – a failure to fulfill the third destiny in life. I witnessed this myself at the funeral of my older brother in 2004 where the widow ritual known as *pɔg-ganɛ sɛb* as well as the *kpii-daa kyɛb* (the coronation ritual) was forfeited because my brother had no wife or children. Even though my late brother has transitioned to the ancestral world, in accordance with traditional customs, his soul is not counted among the ancestors when rituals are performed by the family to the ancestral spirits. The

symbolic significance of this cosmology does not only tell us about Dagara cultural notions of gender identities, but the cosmology also informs us about Dagara conception of time and space. This is the reason why the music at a male's funeral is structured in threes to signify the three stages of his life.

Consequently, the Dagara people believe that when a man fails to complete a task successfully in three attempts, it means that he might have, in some way, offended his guardian spirits and this may require him to consult his ancestors for pacification. The same explanation applies to a Dagara female in her desire for feminine endeavors; failure to complete a task after four unsuccessful attempts results in the same fate with the ancestral spirits. For the Dagara female, four working tools are introduced to them at birth as their destiny in life: 1) an earthenware pot for cooking and storing food, 2) a calabash for fetching and serving water, 3) a cooking pot and, 4) a ladle for her to serve her husband when she gets married in adulthood. The possession and use of these tools are essential to the grooming of a girl into womanhood, and mothers take priority in raising their daughters to learn about the use of these utensils as well as other female cultural and social manners. As a consequence, it is imperative on family heads to ensure that this form of traditional tutelage is imparted to their children. That is why at Dagara funeral ceremonies, the funeral pyre is always adorned with these implements and utensils to show the achievements of the deceased (see Naaeke 2000).

The numerical attachment to cultural practices among African people and their essence in the structure of ritual music is considered a symbolic practice. In her analysis of the function of music in ritual performance, Ruth Stone observes that, "for the Kpelle of Liberia, starting in the period immediately following birth, the number four is tied to males

and the number three to females throughout their lives" (Stone, 1994). Similarly, for the Dagara, this practice is not only ubiquitous in the way funeral music is organized, the practice is very much part of the musical function in other rituals such as the *bagr r*eligious music. Because of these cosmological beliefs in numerical cycles, the musical organization of Dagara funeral rituals is not structured numerically only to convey this cosmological meaning and essence but this idea also helps maintain the temporal order of the ritual proceedings. The numerical structure of the funeral music will be discussed in detail in the following chapters.

Traditional Politics

Colonial penetration in Dagaraland did not only introduce new social systems, but also these social transformations brought significant changes in the traditional structure of Dagara kinship. Until the latter part of the nineteenth century, when institutional chieftaincy evolved and was later imposed on the people by the British and French colonial administration, broader Dagara communities functioned under a system of councils of elders as discussed above. Because of historical trajectories of migration, some Dagara communities maintain traditional ceremonial chieftainships; although sometimes contested (see Carola Lentz 2007), traditional modes of authority still derive their influence from family clan heads. In her anthropological work on the chieftaincy institution in northern Ghana, Lentz observes that,

> One of the major shifts in the traditional lives of the Dagara people was the introduction of a chieftaincy system imposed on the area, then known as the Northern Province, by colonial British administrators. The issue of chieftaincy in northwestern Ghana was one of the momentous colonial innovations which gradually re-ordered, or at least overlaid, older local concepts of belonging and authority. In order to legitimize their claim to authority and expand their influence, these new chiefs not only re-interpreted oral tradition but also appropriated the British tribal discourse. (Lentz 2007:2)

The traditional social and political structure of the Dagara and its subgroups is well documented in recent literature (Bodomo 1994; Tengan 2000; Somé 1993). Alexis Tengan observes that the internal organization of the Dagara family clan system is based on legends of common origin; he argues that the Dagara have developed a house-based system of social organization that is different from other African social structures. Significantly, he points out that, "based on this social structure, the organization of Dagara communities as well as their social institutions cannot be understood from a political perspective" (2000: 18). As he rightly observes, "the communal structure organized around the Yir family-clan-household system stems from Dagara modes of thinking and therefore is important in fostering family and community belonging" (Tengan, 2000: 21). Indeed, traditional Dagara communities, including the other subgroups mentioned earlier, are based on the *"Yir" (*sub-clan or household group), a series of which are clustered into the *tengan* (an earth deity shrine area). Writing about this system of socio-political structure, Adams Bodomo states that,

> The tengan system, a constellation of roles usually inherited within the same household group, is called the tengan-tie-pɛr. The head of these shrines known as the tengan sob, is the one who fulfills the role of a community elder and priest, along with the tengan dem, the ritual custodians and maintainers of the ritual center. Other priestly/elder roles within the tengan dem (who are also the landowners) include the suo sob who performs the ritual animal slaughter to the earth deity, and the wiɛ sob who is a ritual leader among hunting societies. These people command considerable power and influence in Dagaaba communities among other things in society such as, the community perception of land as held in spiritual custodianship and other community resources falling under the custodianship of the different authorities, lineages and/or spiritual forces (Bodomo, 1997).

Also, within these organized social structures and family units are patri-clan and matri-clan family groups, as well as the extended family clans referred to as "uniclans" by Tengan. Patri-clans are groups of families who share common legends of origin. Matri-

clans on the other hand are lineage groups of inheritance (cf. Goody 1962). According to Tengan, "uniclan groups share similar legends of origins but there is one family association" (2000: 21). In cases where these similarities are very close, members of these uniclan groups cannot marry each other. Conversely, in situations where there are larger common legends of origins among uniclan groups, each clan maintains their associated relationships but members can intermarry within the larger uniclan group. For example, the Gbaanɛ, Berwuolɛ and Ganɛ patri-clan share legends of common origin; however, these three uniclan groups can intermarry and still maintain their social group identity as one large uniclan group**.**

To maintain social stability, however, these family and social clan groups are further organized into clan-joking-partnerships in which certain clans are paired as *lonluorbɛ* or *deɛdeɛnmɛ*, (joking partners or mediating groups). This unit is very important in promoting peace – physically, spiritually, and politically. In the physical context, clan-joking-partners serve as mediators in settling disputes among in-family or inter-family quarrels and fights. In the spiritual realm, individual members from the opposite joking partner clans can be called in times of crisis to act as mediators or intermediaries in sending the pleas of offending family members of the other group to their ancestor spirits. Jack Goody observes that the operation of these "cathanic" services reciprocally serves to relieve affliction and also to create bonds of a political kind (Goody 1961: 69). As he points out, "in funeral ceremonies for instance, the interaction of social groups do not only serve to promote this sense of affliction to ritual, but the sense of reciprocity tend to strengthen the political bonds among these social groups" (1961: 72). Thus, for the Dagara and its linguistic subgroups, the Dagaaba, Losaale and Birifor, this system does not only help in

fostering familial bonds at the local level but politically the system supports the stability of their social structure.

Economic Activities

Because of the semi-arid geographic location, communities in Dagara homelands remain primarily small-scale farmers. Although agriculture remains the primary occupation, economic activities in post-colonial Dagara have introduced some form of market economy, including wage income occupations such as government salaried workers, small-scale private enterprises, and trading as supplementary income to farming. With improvement in educational facilities and social infrastructure by the central government of Ghana, Dagara people are less dependent on agricultural life. The development of rural communities into towns and trading centers has created viable opportunities for people to participate in cash economy, and there is a promising emergence of private entrepreneurship in big commercial towns. The six day week cycle, based on the traditional market days, in some larger towns are flourishing with trade in local goods as well as other businesses found in the major cities across Ghana.

In the rural areas, many Dagara villages still combine the cash trade with the traditional form of trade, sometimes using cowrie shells as the currency of exchange. As Adams Bodomo correctly observes, Dagaaba communities are notable to be among the few West African communities to still use cowrie shells as currency, alongside the Ghanaian national currency, the cedi "Cowries are used not only for traditional ornamental and ceremonial purposes as other West African communities do, but also as an inflation-proof form of internal savings and as a safe medium to trade across national and currency boundaries which may divide Dagaaba communities" (Bodomo, 1997). Indeed, cowries are

symbolic goods of exchange for sacred occasions and they are used for divination rituals as well as other traditional customary rites. Their use has long been associated with funeral rituals as the common form of paying musicians and dirge singers. Up to present, Dagara people continue to recognize cowries as the official form of exchange in marriage dowries and bride price payment. This form of customary exchange demonstrates that a wife cannot be bought with cash in marriage. Thus, the symbolic payment of bride price with cowries is a formal recognition of officially married couples in Dagara society.

In conclusion, the Dagara and its linguistic groups share common histories and complex knowledge of cultural practices. The common use of the gyil among these culture groups has created significant ambiguity in colonial scholarship and this continues to influence contemporary writing especially on the use of certain terminologies that obscure the identity of each subgroup. The next chapter examines the diversity of scholarly representation of the Dagara people including their rituals and diverse musical culture. Because of dialectical differences among the Dagara and its subgroups discussed above, colonial representations of the Dagara people have inspired contentious scholarly debates and criticisms among native scholars, especially on issues of ethnic identity and cultural appropriation. My take on cultural appropriation centers on colonial misrepresentation in which I join the debate on the deconstruction of colonial representation of the Dagara people. The Dagara colonial encounter and resulting socio-cultural influences are reflected in post-colonial Dagara social systems including their musical practice. These influences and subsequent changes represent a major transformation in the musical traditions of the Dagara people.

Chapter Two: Literature Review on Dagara Scholarship

There is significant documentation in historical literature about Ghanaian musical and ritual practices by Europeans explorers since the 14th century. European, missionaries, anthropologists and colonial officials have published accounts of their encounter with the people of the then Gold Coast including the musical practices of the indigenous population (see Schauert, 2005). However, Ghanaian music scholarship began to gain visibility in the mid twentieth century when native scholars such as Dr. Ephraim Amu and J. H. Kwabena Nketia began publishing texts on Ghanaian music (Nketia, 1958, 1959). Nketia and many others continue to publish an impressive body of work up to this date and their work has inspired many scholars to explore the musical traditions of Ghana. Thanks to the pioneering work of these scholars, postcolonial scholarship on Ghanaian music has blossomed to include the study of other cultural art forms among the diverse ethnic groups.

Despite the colonial influences in the early twentieth century that resulted in major shifts of the social organization as well as the traditional practices of many indigenous cultures, missionary work in Dagaraland in the late 1920s with the introduction of Christianity and Western education saw the production of indigenous scholars whose work have contributed significantly to the knowledge production of Dagara scholarship. As a result, research on Dagara social history and musical practice has recently gained ground in academic scholarship. The work of B. G. Der (1980), Malidoma Somé (1994), Alexis Tengan (2000), Anthony Naaeke (2005), and numerous missionary and anthropological works, including those cited here, have documented

various aspects of Dagara social history and their cultural practices pertaining to music, religion, and ritual.

It is worth briefly exploring the pioneering work of some authors who have documented the historical significance of Dagara religious and ritual practices, including the social purpose of funeral rituals among the Dagara and its related linguistic groups in northwestern Ghana. The work of British anthropologist Jack Goody during the 1950s was the first ethnographic research done on the indigenous *bagr* or *bagre* religions as well as the various aspects of funerary rituals among the Dagara and Birifor people. Before the arrival of Islam and Christianity in Dagaraland, *bagr* was the only religion practiced by the local population. Like many indigenous African religions, the Dagara *bagr* religion is practiced by family clans with common legends of origin. In many communities of Dagara where Islam and Christian conversion has not gained ground, *bagr* remains the religion of the Dagara people. Jack Goody's study of Dagara religious and ritual practices led to his publication of the various ritual rites pertaining to funeral celebrations of the Dagara and Birifor people (Goody, 1961). Although his extensive ethnographic study and documentation of these ritual practices served as a good historical source of reference for that era, his representations of the ethnic identities of the Dagara and Birifor people in this area continue to be the target of critiques by recent scholars.

In fact, Jack Goody's appropriations and categorization of the Dagara, Lobi and Birifor people whom he collectively identified as "LoDagaa" has created some discord in contemporary scholarship concerning postcolonial discourses on ethnic identities. In joining this debate, I find his categorization of these distinct culture groups very problematic. I used the term problematic to argue against the fact that colonial biases in

the invention and spellings of indigenous names and terminologies do not constitute grounds for proper representation of their ethnic differences. The geographical boundaries of these indigenous populations may overlap and their social distance may be boundless, but this does not establish the fact that the Lobi, Birfor, and Dagara can be seen as belonging to a single ethnic group. The Dagara people and the other subgroups mentioned in chapter one may demonstrate some linguistic similarities, but their cultural practices also differ significantly in terms of music and religion, including rituals and customary rites. Native scholars have argued that these socio-cultural differences illustrate the failures on the part of colonial ethnographers to identify the unique traditions of these diverse culture groups (see Tengan, 2000).

Writing on colonial misrepresentation of the Dagara and its subgroups, Carola Lentz states that, "the lack of agreement on the part of locals regarding the choice of terms does not justify simply imposing an observer's name particularly when it is one that the locals themselves actually reject" (Lentz, 2007: 18). Jack Goody's categorization of the Dagara, Birifor, and Lobi under the name LoDagaa is one example of colonial misrepresentation, which the local population in this area continue to reject. Even though there were attempts at standardizing the dialects of the three subgroups by the Catholic missionaries for religious reasons, these moves indeed contributed to more ambiguity in the use of terms and spelling of names. Thus, regarding local scholars' attempts to deconstruct colonial representation, Lentz writes that, "many people still use their personally preferred spellings in ethnographic work as does much of the archival and other written materials in Dagara" (Lentz, 2007: 19).

Because of the flaws in colonial representations of the Dagara and its subgroup, scholarly work by colonial ethnographers in this region continues to receive widespread criticisms by native scholars including contemporary researchers who have done work in this area. I draw from the work of B. G. Der, (1980), Sean Hawkins, (2001), and Malidoma Somé (2004) whose work has not only provided revealing accounts of the colonial exigencies but also show how the colonial encounter has transformed Dagara cultural practices including their social organization and local politics. It is particularly important to note the work of Sean Hawkins regarding the impact of colonization in Dagara-land. His critique of how colonial Britain used writing and naming to invent, appropriate, and categorize the three sub-cultural groups in this area is by far the most important work yet written to debunk colonial misrepresentations of the Dagara and their neighbors. The invention of colonial names, Hawkins argues, has affected the people's sense of identity as these representations were purported to turn the people into colonial subjects. Indeed, the power of writing was used as a leading instrument of colonization in Africa" (Hawkins, 2001). In the case of the Dagara people and their neighbors in northwest Ghana, Hawkins writes:

> History was indispensable in legitimizing colonial political engineering and post colonial theological arguments. When the British pacified this region they not only suppressed cultural norms but they also attempted to suppress forms of local knowledge that posed at least potentially or even more fundamental threats to their rule. In both instances, writing became the source of legitimacy and ultimate power of representing these people in the "world on paper (Hawkins, 2001: 4).

Unarguably, the Dagara and its subgroups' encounter with the British colonial "world on paper" was an important feature of their experience of colonialism. Indeed colonial writing did not only suppressed Dagara cultural norms and local knowledge; the

power of writing was used to reorganize a local political power structure through the establishment of the chieftaincy and Western legal systems that made it possible for the colonial administrators' indirect rule. Oral history has it that before the arrival of the European colonial administrators in this area, there was no organized political structure among the Dagara people. The oral histories of the Dagara people are well documented in early missionary writings. As Father McCoy, one of the first Catholic missionaries who introduced Christianity to the Dagara people in 1929 recounts in his personal memoir:

> The Dagaaba had come originally from northeastern Gold Coast from among the Mamprusi and the Dagomba tribes. They migrated westward some three or four centuries earlier out of discontent with oppression and exactions of the Mamprusi and Dagomba chiefs. So strong had been their discontent that when they reached their new home they vowed not to have any chiefs ever again. Disputes among them would be settled by the elders who were also responsible for drawing up the rites and regulations governing the group's traditional customs and way of life. Theirs was a traditional patriarchal system of life; communal living, communal farming, and communal granary. It was only when the white men came in the form of British colonial officers to set up their administration in the Northwest in 1913 that chiefs were introduced for the first time among the Dagaabas. (McCoy, 1988: 35-36)

Consequently, the introduction of this political power changed not only the indigenous social structure but also the power vested in the hands of the new local chiefs, helped legitimize the colonial authority over the local population. Also, the influence of Western education and Christian missionary work during the period of colonization was purported to change local cultural practices and discard certain traditional beliefs as well. Converts to the Catholic religion were forced to abandon certain traditional practices deemed primitive and ungodly – i.e., polygamy, the performance of esoteric rituals at Dagara "Christian" funerals, and, to some extent, the total adaptation of Christian names in place of indigenous names. The observance of the seven day weekly cycle of the

Christian calendar replaced the centuries-old Dagara traditional system of a six-day calendrical cycle that regulates their cosmology of time and space. This created further confusion as Dagara converts were told by their Christian doctrine to observe Sundays as a day of rest or be forced by the chiefs who were not Christians to work for the colonial administrators on Sundays.

Indeed, these revolutionary changes occurred simultaneously at all facets of Dagara social life. The introduction of the political and legal system as well as the civil marriage enforced by the missionaries greatly altered Dagara social practices. Marital disputes were no longer settled by family heads but instead, these cases were brought to the local or paramount chiefs for settlement. Finally, with the creation of some legal jurisdictions, the *tenga-sob* (the custodian of the earth deity shrine) by law, and on religious grounds especially on the part of the Christians, could no longer require the performance of certain communal or public rituals from their subjects. As Hawkins writes,

> Before colonial conquest, the LoDagaa had been highly mobile. Colonization slowed down this mobility by creating borders, but it also created new patterns of movement. However, this new mobility was temporary and only partial. Ritually sustainable and socially complete communities could not be created outside the district; for this reason the land drew back to those who moved away. (Hawkins, 2001: 8).

The Dagara colonial encounter as witnessed here did not only change their cultural, social, and political structures, but also their local rituals and musical practices were significantly suppressed by the colonial influence. As an integral part of Dagara ritual ceremonies, and indeed their cultural identity, colonial representation of the Dagara people had little to say about their music, especially the *gyil* and its integral role in ritual

events. In his analysis of the "LoDagara" funeral and *bagr* rituals, Jack Goody failed to discuss the important role of *gyil* music in these ritual events. As this issue will be addressed in detail in the following chapters, I want to point out here that music in any form is ubiquitous in Dagara ritual events and they serve to restate publicly the cultural identity of the people as well as help redefine the network of social groups. The performance of *gyil* music and dirge singing by men, the lang-muoli dirges sung by women groups as well as music of the various esoteric rituals that is performed at Dagara funerals by social groups do not only serve to strengthen bonds of social networks, but they also publicly reaffirm these group identities. When the missionaries attempted to bar Dagara Christians from celebrating funerals according to traditional customs, their attempt was instantly rejected on the grounds that the proper manner to honor the dead is to perform the traditional funeral rites which include music and dirge singing. Although the performance of some esoteric rituals at funerals such as the *betirb* (the reenactment of the spiritual and moral legacy of the deceased) are no longer performed at Dagara Christian funerals, the performance of many esoteric rituals such as *zanu, kuor-peb* and *bog muulu* are performed by social groups to honor their relationship with the deceased (see chapter four).

Present State of Dagara Music Scholarship

The Dagara *gyil* and its musical traditions have been examined from anthropological, sociological, and ethnolinguistic viewpoints without taking into consideration the various performance aspects, especially the funeral music and its ritual dimensions. There is a plethora of literature on Dagara music in the form of books, journals, published articles, some theses and dissertations by native scholars as well as

significant ethnographic work conducted by anthropologists and ethnomusicologists. The literature that will be examined here provides a broad perspective of postcolonial Dagara musical scholarship. While some authors documented other (non-musical) aspects of Dagara social history and cultural practices, the purpose of this literature review is to bring to light how Dagara funeral music is under-represented in contemporary scholarly writing. I find it relevant to discuss these sources in wider scope because the musical representation of the Dagara funeral is part of a cultural phenomenon that deserves proper contextualization.

Following the anthropological work of Jack Goody are scholars whose research on Dagara musical functions focused prominently on the performance genres of *gyil* music. While some scholars focused their work on comparative studies of the various *gyil* musical styles among the Dagara and its subgroups (Mensah, 1982), others worked on transcription and analysis of some recreational genres of the Dagara *gyil bewaa* music (see Strumpf, 1970; Wiggins, 1992). The few scholarly works on Dagara music scholarship that provide critical analysis of the various representational practices and specifically on ritual music are the works of Denis Larry Godsey (1980, 1984) as well as Malidoma Somé's books *Ritual, Power, Healing and Community* (1993) and *Of Water and the Spirit* (1994). Indeed, Malidoma's work is noteworthy here because the author has not only provided relevant information on the various cultural aspects of the Dagara people, but his work is one of the few publications by native scholars that discusses the social dimensions of Dagara funeral rituals in proper detail. Combining his cultural experience and knowledge as a diviner, Malidoma's work is one of highly appraised scholarly documentation of Dagara ritual practice including funerals. Scholarly works of

this nature are important because they serve to establish that Dagara musical and ritual scholarship is at the point of critical reflection.

Equally important are the works of Mitchel Strumpf (1970), A. A. Mensah (1982), Francis K. Saighoe (1984), Trevor Wiggins (1992), and many contemporary writers who have documented the various performance practice of Dagara music (see Michael Vercelli, 2006 and Sidra Lawrence 2011). Mitchel Strumpf's work is one of the earlier ethnomusicological publications that specifically discussed the musical functions of the *gyil* in Dagara social ceremonies as well as its prominent role in their religious ritual music. Although the author's work provides useful information, including methodological approaches to how *gyil* music should be studied by non-natives, his documentation of some performance aspects—especially those of the Dagara funeral rituals—require more contextual analysis. Focusing on transcription and analysis, the author devotes much of his work to the notations and transcriptions of some selected *gyil* songs for first time learners. As he points out; "Our ultimate goal is to have an exact xylophone notations and this method of course tries to progress toward this goal" (Strumpf, 1970).

Following Mitchel Strumpf is another ethnomusicologist, Trevor Wiggins, whose work in the 1990s broadly discussed the cultural significance of Dagara recreational music as well as the processes of *gyil* musical compositions. After documenting the trajectories of the oral histories of the *gyil* and its social performance context, the author's ethnography discussed Dagara traditional modes of musical compositions and transmissions, arguing that *gyil* musical compositions generally utilize the rearrangement of existing traditional tunes. In fact arguments like this, to some degree, have exposed the

weaknesses in the study and the spiral analysis of the Dagara musical scholarship by these ethnographers. Dagara composers, both musicians and non-musicians, create their music out of their daily experience to address their social and personal concerns. *Gyil* music is dynamic and always in constant change in conformity with the socio-cultural changes of Dagara society; therefore, its compositional base is fluid and composers use both traditional and contemporary elements. Nevertheless, Wiggins' work is the only focused study of a specific musical genre [the *bewaa* music] in which he thoroughly examines how this recreational music is composed to address Dagara social problems.

Regarding the present context of Dagara musical practice, A. A. Mensah's work provides a comprehensive analysis of the musical practice of the gyil, including some important information on scholarly debates about the origin of the African xylophone. The author does not only contextualize the various use of the instrument, but his study also provides an informative account of the material and cultural knowledge of the instrument. Of particular import is the detailed information on the construction and tuning of the *gyil* as well as its performance aesthetics, styles, and some of the traditional values associated with the performance of gyil music. The author also refutes claims of the Indonesian origin of the *gyil* by earlier scholars and supported his argument of its African origin with accounts of the instrument's wide distribution among African culture groups. Indeed, Mensah's study of the Dagara-Birifor *gyil* is by far the only comparative study of the two musical traditions that discusses the distinct musical variations and performance styles among the two culture groups. His critical analysis and documentation of the musical scales, timbral values, and pitch tones of the different types of the *gyil* tuning systems are useful information for the cultural understanding of *gyil*

musical structure (see Mensah, 1982; 141). For any scholar or researcher, consulting this ethnographic work is a good place to start because of the methodological concepts employed in this comparative study.

Ritual Music

There is a substantial literature on the role of music in African rituals (see Nketia 1969, Agawu 1988, Glaze 1981, Hampton 1982, Besmer, 1983, Stoller, 1989 and Zemp, 2000). Although these scholars have documented the integral role of music in West African rituals, their works have posed many questions regarding the function of music and ritual. As van Gennep observes, "The study of rituals has made progress in recent years, but we are still far from knowing either the function or the manner of operation of every single rite, and we lack the knowledge necessary to construct a definitive classification of rites" (1963:.4. Indeed, music is ubiquitous in African ritual events and as an aspect of ritual action, it does not only help reinforce the stated purpose of the event but it also serves to inform the social significance and cultural values that people assign to these rituals. At Dagara funeral rituals for instance, music performs various roles and functions; first, the performance of music is the appropriate way through which people honor the transitioning of the dead into the ancestral world. As stated by Anita Glaze, "The constant musical vigil at Senufo funeral is intended to comfort the grieving relatives, to honor and please the dead and above all to communicate and reinforce public discourse" (Glaze, 1981).

This is the stated purpose of the performance of *gyil* music at Dagara funeral rituals. Music indeed serves as a means through which people reenact their ritual meaning and therefore, it sets the tone for the performance of esoteric rituals such as the

reenactment of the deceased's life history including the display of other customary rites (see chapter four). Its function at funerals do not only maintain the emotional balance of a public grief but it also communicates the essence of the ritual event-- reinforce the social purpose of the ritual ceremony, and provide a platform for Dagara public discourse through the dirge singing that usually accompany its performance.

Although many scholars have written about other aspects of Dagara rituals, the important role of music in funeral rituals has not received adequate discussion. Jack Goody's comparative study of the various temporal ritual rites of the Dagara and Birifor people including funeral rites is undoubtedly a good historical documentation of these rituals. However, his study provides little attention to the musical aspects which are the most important elements of these rituals. Referring to funeral music in particular, the author describes it as chanting and provides snippets of general information about its function at funeral ceremonies. For his part, Malidoma Somé's significant work on this topic devoted only a chapter in his book on Dagara funeral ritual music (see Somé, 1993). While the author spends a fair amount of his narrative on the essence of esoteric art at funeral rituals, his analysis sidestepped the ubiquity of the music that usually accompanies the performance of these esoteric rituals.

Anthony Naaeke's analysis of the symbolism of the *paala* (funeral pyre) is of equal importance and his discourse analyses provide important information on its ritual role and function as the transitional abode of the dead. But like his fellow compatriots, the author sidestepped the display of the paala as a rhetorical symbol of the funeral music and dirges. In fact, the *paala-per* (pyre space) is the center of the music making at funeral rituals. It is the place where the people attending the funeral must pay their respect to the

deceased and the bereaved families. That is why at funeral ceremonies, the musical instruments are usually set in front of the *paala,* which allows the musicians and mourners to share their grief musically with the bereaved families. As Naaeke correctly observes, "the *paala* is the most important symbol at funerals and is the center of intense rhetorical display of grief and consolation" (2005: 27). In addition to the performance of music around the *paala,* some of the most sacred ritual music such as hunters' music, lamentation dirges, and the *bagr-mweb* (a musical recitation by the deceased's initiation group) are performed around the *paala* as a public display of Dagara esoteric ritual customs.. Thus, discourses about Dagara funeral rituals that neglect the socio-cultural relevance of these musical elements seriously take the discussion of the ritual meaning of funerals out of context.

Scholarly representations of the Dagara people and their ritual practices, therefore, require further extensive ethnographic work. The literature examined here nonetheless is a significant contribution to the knowledge production of the Dagara social history and musical scholarship, and I draw much inspiration from the work of these scholars. However, the ethnographic approaches employed by some authors in their representations has not only posed serious questions of misrepresentations but also some of the works expose considerable issues for critical debates about this musical tradition. To the Western music scientist, the application of Western musical concepts such as notation may be important in the analysis of any musical tradition, I contest that the transcription of *gyil* music greatly obscures its performance practice. In any view, notating or transcribing a musical genre that is dynamic as well as complex in texture, timbre, and rhythmic embellishment may be of some use to the music literate but I argue

that notation of *gyil* music takes away its performance aesthetics and other cultural nuances that are associated with this music.

Many scholars have written about the implications of notating indigenous music. In her article, Ruth Stone cites Kubil's disinterest in the use of mnemonic syllables as "nonsense" musical notations (see Stone, 1994). In this regard, Stone emphasized that mnemonic syllables derived from language should cause us to look more carefully at the use of language within songs (Stone 1994; 89). In my view, *gyil* music do not only serve as coded language but the expressive freedom of highly syncopated rhythmic embellishment with off beats and asymmetrical time and pulse makes it difficult to put the music into staff notation. As *gyil* musicianship demands strict observation to certain musical conventions such as pitch and rhythmic embellishment, good *gyil* playing is judged by how players incorporate these dynamics into their performance.

Furthermore, *gyil* music is performed with other percussive instruments and when one listens to the funeral *gyil* orchestra, the combination of the cross-rhythms of different instrumentations creates a musical density that makes orchestral notation difficult. Thus, any attempt to notate *gyil* music, especially the bine genres, will remove the fluidity of the improvisation and take away the essence of player dexterity and individual musical expression that are significantly part of the musical taste and value of *gyil* music. As Atta Annan Mensah observes, "Transcription and analysis are vital aspects of the work of researchers, but *gyil* music is complex and the *gyil* player's special endowment is beyond dispute; scientific work needs to be done to show its precise base and limits" (1982: 145).

This scientific approach I suggest should not limit the study of *gyil* music only to transcription and analysis but rather a synthesized (or combine) practical methodology

that takes into account the experiential components of this musical knowledge as well as the theoretical approaches that include the study of the cultural context in which the music is organized. The failure by some of these authors to write about the essence of *gyil* music in their funeral narratives demonstrates the need for contextual analysis of the central role that music plays in funeral rituals. As I have argued, Dagara funeral music scholarship requires a holistic study of the history, the ritual context in which the music is organized, and the performance styles of the various genres. My focus on the performative aspects of this musical complex is not only to discuss the role of *gyil* music in funeral rituals but through this theoretical approach, I draw on cultural references that adequately discuss the social function of funeral music as well as the textual interpretations of *gyil* music and dirge singing as a political discourse.

Chapter Three: The Dagara Gyil: (Xylophone) Musical Repertoire

There is a substantial argument and counter-argument in scholarly literature about the origin of the African xylophone. Some authors have theorized that the African xylophone has its origins in Indonesia or Thailand (see A. M. Jones, 1971; Cooke, 1970; Hood and Fleming. 1996). However, the wide distribution of this mallet instrument within Africa, especially south of the Sahara, can be found in many cultural traditions. As Mensah writes, "the spread and incidence of usage of the instrument in Africa, the existence of wide range of constructional sophistication, combinations in ensemble and the high level of skill in performance of the instrument in Africa would make it difficult to dispute a theory of the African origin of the xylophone" (Mensah, 1982; 139). Indeed, the different names of the instrument among the diverse culture groups in Africa confirm its large ethnic representations. While there are immense varieties in the instrument's tuning system, scales, pitches, and timbral qualities, there is a considerable overlap in standard pitch among its culture groups, (see A. A. Mensah, 1982).

Although African xylophone music has steadily gained national and international recognition, little scholarly attention has been given to the Dagara gyil and its musical functions, especially the funerary genres. Among the various kinds of xylophones across Africa, and indeed in the world, the gyil is one of the most popular musical instruments in many parts of West Africa. In Ghana, the instrument represents the musical traditions of the Dagara and its linguistic subgroups – the Dagaaba, Losaale, Birifor, and Sissala people who live in the northwestern part of the country. As Hugo Zemp (2000) describes the Senufo balafon, the gyil is emblematic of the Dagara people and it plays a prominent

role in their musical practice, including their social and religious rituals. Most importantly, the gyil is the symbol of Dagara cultural identity.

Oral history has it that the Dagara people trace their musical connection with the gyil to some mythical inhabitants of the forest called *kontombili* (dwarfs). According to the legend, a Dagara hunter (*nabagle*) was on a hunting expedition when he heard the *kontombili* playing the gyil. Drawn to the beautiful sound of the gyil, the hunter consulted the *kontombile* (singular) to learn the art of making the instrument and all the knowledge associated with the performance techniques of the gyil. Hesitant about the hunter's request, the kontombile taught the hunter how the gyil was made as well as all the mysteries and taboos associated with the instrument. For the purpose of this thesis, I will not go into detail about cultural taboos that are associated with the gyil. After learning the art and knowledge of making and playing the gyil, the hunter with the help of his fellow hunters, used their magical powers to kill the kontombile and took the gyil to their people, claiming that God gave it to them as the musical instrument of the Dagara people. Up till this day, the kontombili are still attracted to the sound of the gyil, but also harbor animosity toward humans (cf. Vercelli, 2006).

Drawing from its mysterious history, the name gyil, in Dagara and its linguistic groups mentioned above, translates as "gather." When the hunters brought the instrument to the community, the people were so baffled with its amazing sound that they began gathering around to listen to its wonderful music. As the hunters began playing the instrument, they told the gathered crowed to dance to the music. In amazement, the men started jumping and leaping high in the air while the women danced gently and gracefully to this "sweet" music (story narrated to me during my *gyil-tii dib* initiation by Ziem Tibo,

my gyil mentor). Up to today, *bine*, the dance to the gyil music is gender-specific as the men still jump and leap in their version of the dance called *vaafu* (leaping) while the women maintain their gracefully coordinated dance steps to the music. As the name "gyil" implies, anytime there is gyil music celebration in Dagara community, everyone gathers around the performance space to hear the music or join the performance celebration. In funeral performance, it is still the practice for mourners and dirge singers to gather around the *gyile* (plural) at funeral rituals to sing their dirges and dance to the music.

The legend of the gyil has always been part of the ritual of gyil making; therefore, makers of the instrument believe that a newly made gyil should be purified to cleanse both the bad spirits in the wood that constitutes the instrument as well as the magical spirits of the *kontombile* that gyil makers believe hover around a newly made gyil. The purification ceremony of a new gyil also offers the opportunity for non-initiate gyil players to eat the *gyil-tii* (gyil medicine), a ritual ceremony that confirms their induction as *goba* (the recognized official title of a *gyil-mwiere*). I will return to this in detail when I discuss the social status of the gyil player in Dagara community. In this binary ritual, a black or red hen is sacrificed and the blood is poured over some gourds of the gyil as a marked sign to ward off any unseen spirits around the gyil. The meat is then used to prepare the *gyil-tii* for the initiate to eat.

The Dagara gyil is a pentatonic scale instrument constructed on a wooden frame with gourd resonators as the amplification of the instrument's sound (see figure 1 below). Its mystical sound is produced through the buzzing vibration from the membranes of spider webs called *pampiɛ*. The *pampiɛ* are used to cover holes drilled through the gourd

resonators to provide this distinctive sound. The buzzing sound is believed to invoke the spirits of the *kontombile*; however, the sonic vibration of the gyil is believed to generate some kind of a therapeutic feeling of happiness, joy, and healing. Scholars of ritual studies, music therapy, and other psycho-analysts have widely documented the healing sound of many indigenous musical instruments in Africa (see van Gennep, 1963; Besmer, 1983; Stoller, 1989; Somé, 1994; et al.). For the Dagara, the sonic elements of gyil music do not only invoke cognitive healing to the listener, but, in ritual events such as funeral ceremonies, gyil music also serves the purpose of controlling grief (Somé, 1993). In the *bagr* religious ceremony, it is the effects of gyil musical sound that serves as communicative link between the people and the spirits mediums.

Figure 1
Gyil, The Dagara Xylophone. Picture by Becca Templeton 2011

The Performance Ensemble of the Gyil

The Dagara people use two types of *gyile:* the degaar and the *logyil.* The *degaar gyil* has eighteen keys while the *logyil* has fourteen keys. *Daga-gyil* is a major pentatonic

scale instrument played either in pairs or solo at funeral and recreational ceremonies. The *logyile* (plural) are minor pentatonic scale instruments used for religious ceremonies and to make funeral announcements. There is a version of the *dega-gyil* called *kpankpol.* The *kpankpol gyil* is constructed over a dug out trench on the ground and the instrument is used by children to develop their playing skills. It is also the musical instrument used for recreational moonlight dancing at night by the youth. The *dega-gyile* that are constructed on the wooden frames usually come in two pairs known as *gyil-daa* (male xylophone) and *gyil-pog* (female xylophone) as shown below in figure 2. The gendered element in the construction of the gyil comes from the Dagara belief that the gyil, as a symbol of creativity, is linked to the creation of humanity.

Although gyil performance is highly individualized, the music is generally performed in song-medley format. The traditional performance context of gyil music primarily centers on the socio-cultural practice of the Dagara people, e. g., social rituals such as funerals, religious ceremonies, recreational festivities, and occupational activities. In recent decades, gyil music has steadily gained recognition in contemporary settings and its performance can be found in Christian church music, other folkloric music, and in the orchestral art music world (see the orchestral concertos of Bernard Woma and David Rogers, 2008 and 2011, and Derek Bemel, 2006). Also there is a strong presence of gyil music in local Ghanaian contemporary recordings such as the work of Hiwale Sounds, (2007) as well as some international Ghanaian pop-stars (see Princess Cynthia, 1999). The funeral ensemble usually consists of two gyile (plural) with other accompanying instruments – the kuor drum, and *gyil-buule* (a metal hand band with jingles). In a

performance where there is only one gyil, the player is supported with the percussive instruments mentioned above.

Figure 2
The gyil ensemble with gyil-daa on the right and gyil-pog on the left.
Picture by Becca Templeton 2011

In a duet performance, the music is typically divided into two parts: melody and bass. The *gyil-daa* usually play the lead role while the *gyil-pog* plays the support part, sometimes with one hand playing a repetitive baseline with little improvisation while the other hand provides a timeline called *kpagru* with the back end of the mallet (see figure 3 below). *Gyil kpagru* is an important component of this highly rhythmic music. For gyil players, *kpagru* is the foundation of upon which the music enjoys its rhythmic flow and density. Just as the bell serves to keep rhythm and timing in most West African music, kpagru serves the same purpose for gyil music and, without it, the music loses its rhythmic power and musical taste.

Figure 3
A gyil player playing the kpagru timeline with the back end of the mallet
Picture by Becca Templeton

Equally important in the musical organization of the gyil is the *kuɔr* drum, an instrument widely used in most Dagara music making (see figure 4). The *kuɔr* is a drum made out of a large gourd covered with a monitor lizard skin. Used as a support drum to accompany gyil music, many Dagara dancers acknowledge that the piercing sound of the *kuɔr* drum in funeral performance enables people to dance to the music from a distance. This confirms a Dagara saying that, "a dancer with good ears does not need to dance only to the gyil music." The *kuɔr* drum may be seen as an accompanying instrument to the gyil music, but it has a prominent role as a solo instrument both in funeral performance and other musical practices. For instance, in the funeral of an unearned child, only the *kuɔr* drum is played along with the mourning and funeral dirges. Gyil music is not performed in such funeral rituals because of the young age of the deceased. Similarly, in some

religious and recreational performance, such as the *dalari* music, *bewaa* dance music, and Christian church worship, the *kuɔr* has a leading role as a master drum.

Figure 4
The kuɔr Drum. Picture by Becca Templeton 2011

The Social Status of the Goba Gyil Player

While the craft of gyil-making is by vocation, gyil musicianship is by natural gift. Due to this ascribed knowledge, the Dagara people believe that a gyil player (*gyil-mwiɛreɛ* or *goba*) is not socially produced, but rather born with the musical gift. There are strong mystical beliefs associated with the art of gyil musicianship. Thus, the artistic development of a gyil player involves many steps before one becomes a *goba*, (the recognized title of a *gyil-mwiere*). For example, if a child is born with clinched fists, this is a sign of a fated musicianship. Immediately, if these visible signs are noticed at birth, certain rites are performed for the child to signify their advancement as a musician. This includes the *gyil-tii dib,* an initiation ceremony for gyil players. The *gyil-tii* is a medicine that is prepared in the traditional meal called *saab* with herbs and remnants of gyil materials by a senior

expert *gyil-maale* (gyil maker) for the new initiate. This ritual normally takes place during the purification of a newly made gyil as discussed earlier in this chapter.

According to the mystical beliefs associated with the history of the gyil, this initiation ritual is important for the protection of the *gyil-mwiere.* After eating the medicine meal, the initiate is given some taboos as well as spiritual powers of protection for their musical endeavors, especially in funeral rituals where *lobie* ("invisible projectiles"), as Malidoma Somé describes them, are thrown at gyil players to test the potency of their *gyil-tii* (Somé, 1994: 62). Thus, the *gyil-mwiɛrɛ goba* is a gyil player who has gone through the initiation ritual and has attained a certain level of musicianship and recognition as an accomplished player. Of greater importance is their ability to perform all the genres of gyil repertoire, especially the *bine* (funeral music). By their ability to play *bine* music at funeral rituals, a *gyil mwiɛrɛ* is acknowledged by the Dagara as a professional musician. Therefore, to earn this musical recognition and social status, a *goba* must be initiated and be given the *gyil-tii* by their musical mentors.

Gyil Repertoire: Bine Funeral Music

The traditional repertoire of Dagara gyil music includes *bine, bewaa, logyil, bagr-bine* as well as other social and contemporary genres such as occupational music and Christian church songs. *Bine* is the traditional music that is performed at funeral rituals. It is also performed as dance music in social occasions such as life-cycle celebrations, weddings ceremonies, and other seasonal festivities. The funeral repertoire of *bine* music is considered the most important musical genre, not because of its ritual function, but because of the socio-cultural history that is attached to this particular music. As will be seen in my analysis in chapter four, the textual reference of *bine* music is linked

to Dagara cultural philosophy, social history, and moral virtues. When this coded language is played on the gyil, the musical lyrics are well understood by the Dagara people.

In funeral performance, there are two genres of *bine* music – *degaar* and *bilangni* – that serve as the song corpus during the entire funeral celebration. These two musical genres contain a repertoire of infinite songs and the *gyil-mwiere* (xylophonist) has the privilege of choosing within this large genre the songs he/she wants to play. Indeed at funeral rituals, it is the musical structure of *bine* that sets a temporal order for this ritual ceremony. For example, at funeral ceremonies, the performance of music usually involves groups of three musicians and two dirge singers who will alternate turns at performing. At a male's funeral, the structure of the music is set for three *degaar* and three *bilangni* songs for each group of musicians and dirge singers, the duration of which can last about an hour or more before another set of musicians and dirge singers takes their turn. For a female's funeral, the song corpus of *degaar* and *bilangni* is four sets for the performance groups to take turns.

Degaar is an introductory music for the dirge singers to announce their arrival and share their condolence and sympathies with the bereaved families. Therefore, *degaa*r music is very consolatory as well as highly emotional. *Bilangni* music on the other hand is highly textual with thematic references to issues in the public domain such as social ethics and politics. Because of their philosophical commentary, themes of gyil songs are considered by the Dagara people to be powerful speech performances that address issues in ways that no other public discourse can elucidate. Lyrics of gyil songs are coded with fragmented verbal phrases and proverbs that can be well understood by every Dagara; hence, the music's ability to invoke emotional response and other sensual expressions such as

weeping, dancing, and *kotuolu* (a symbolic emotional response to the music by the bereaved families at funerals).

Malidoma Somé points this out by stating that, "at Dagara funerals it is always necessary that members of the immediate family be accompanied by a group of friends in order that they not injure themselves in the paroxysm of their grief" (Somé, 1994: 96). Indeed, the ritual of *kotuolu* (restraining the bereaved families) is performed by the *tampɛlu-dɛm* or the *lonluorbɛ* (a social group of the deceased's family clan known as joking-partners; see chapter one). These joking partners act as companions of the grieving relatives during the entire funeral ceremony and occasionally engage in performing series of acts that help to detract the mourners and adjust them to the loss (Goody, 1961: 69). At funeral rituals, skilled musicians and dirge singers may choose certain musical renditions to praise and console the bereaved families or channel their musical communication on social issues confronting the daily lives of the people. The following songs are examples in which musicians engage Dagara funeral mourners about the reality of death and the unknown afterlife for the deceased in the ancestral spiritual realm.

Nebo nyɛa nebo nyɛa te bel nyɛ

Let's seek the cause of this calamity beyond the physical realm.

These musical texts elucidate Dagara beliefs that the quandaries of death are linked to everyday realities in life. When death occurs, its cause must be sought both in the physical and spiritual realms to determine why the person died. As Dagara tradition maintains, themes of funeral music and dirge are hints of information that can help one to seek the cause of the death of their relative; therefore, it is through the musical discourse at funerals that the bereaved family may find clues to the death of their relative. Because of

these beliefs, bereaved family members always pay close attention to the music and dirge singing at funeral ceremonies. And thus, as the song below suggests, by seeking the cause of death, social vices such as witchcraft, sorcery, and hatred can be explicated.

Dagara nyɛ siɛ ɛ kun bang wul. Dagara nyɛ yel ɛ kun bang yɛr

Dagara people are self-protective of bad deeds such as witchcraft and sorcery.

The above statement is synonymous with the daily experiences of the Dagara people. Traditional norms of reproach about individual actions considered by the Dagara as sensitive matters in society may be addressed through music. Thus, the song texts above serve as evidence to support the implication of sensitive issues such as witchcraft and sorcery that are not commonly discussed on a daily basis. In this way, funeral rituals provide the suitable platforms for public discourse against these social vices. At least through the music, social vices like witchcraft can be exposed and the perpetuators deterred from its menace. Indeed, the Dagara people may be protective of these social vices as this song suggests, but in cases where there is a suspicion of witchcraft or sorcery regarding someone's death, the suspect may be summoned by the *tengan dem* (custodians of the earth shrine) who oversee matters of public adjudication for the suspect to defend themselves or be charged with murder.

As I stated earlier, funeral rituals reflect Dagara social ideals and, as such, offer an opportunity for people to express their views about issues of personal or public concern. The following song texts are musical references that speak against hatred and envy.

I dondomɛ te nia Naamwin I kuu mi nyu kuoi

If my enemy was God I wouldn't even get water to drink.

Whether political or personal, social issues such as envy or hatred permeate the thought processes of everyone; and Dagara people are fully aware of the circumstances that confront their daily lives. Jealousy and hatred are social menaces that the Dagara people constantly engage in their daily endeavors. Thus by deploying pertinent commentary on everyday realities and social problems, funeral music then becomes a social integrative mechanism through which both the performers and audience can express and communicate feelings of their social circumstances.

The Recreational Genres of the Gyil

The recreational dance music of *bɛw*aa is for joyful celebrations at social occasions such as wedding ceremonies, annual harvest festivals, and naming ceremonies. *Bɛwaa* is considered music of the youth and, therefore very few adults partake in its fokloric performance in Dagara communities. Because of its popularity among the youth, community *bɛwaa* performing troupes constantly create new music and dance styles to outdo their neighboring groups. As much as *bɛwaa* focuses on dancing, the music also communicates issues of current affairs concerning social deviance, sexual promiscuity, and youth delinquency. In fact, *bɛwaa* music is the community mouthpiece through which people engage in dealing with issues of their daily circumstances. The music does not only inform and educate people, but its compositional flexibility is ubiquitous in Dagara music making.

Like the Dagara sacred ritual music, individuals engage *bewaa* music in negotiating their identities, social and cultural boundaries, as well as power relationships. As a result, *bɛwaa* music is always under constant change and people can compose *bɛwaa* songs out of any situational circumstances to inform, educate, or rebuke individuals whose actions are

considered unethical questionable. The following song, "*Eissie baalu*" (HIV-AIDS sickness) is an example of *bɛwaa* music that questions the sexual morality of the Dagara people. It specifically addresses sexual promiscuity among young girls, not only at the local level, but also a national fight against the social cancer of the HIV pandemic

Pogle na pola lɛ Eisie baalu na kuu na.

A beautiful girl is infected with HIV-AIDS.

Ghana pogle na pola lɛ Eisie baalu na kuu na.

A beautiful Ghanaian girl is going to die with HIV-AIDS.

Eisie baalu na kuu naa. Eisie baalu na kuu na.

HIV-AIDS will kill her, AIDS will kill her.

Gbɛ miilɛ baalu na kuu naa.

The disease that makes one's legs lean will kill her.

Eisie baalu na kuu na.

HIV-AIDS disease will kill her.

This song was composed by a woman in a tiny Dagara village in the late 1980s in response to the pandemic of the HIV-AIDS disease and, because of it national appeal, the song is still popular up to now. As evident in the texts, the song seeks to educate the youth, especially girls, about the consequences of their sexual conduct. Another *bɛwaa* song of national appeal is "*yaa yaa kole*," which simply translates as "begging." The textual translation of this song may be simple but its ethnopragmatic import and its metaphorical meaning can be interpreted to inform traditional norms of protocol, morality, etiquette, and norms concerning traditional dating. Traditionally, a man does not propose directly to a lady he wants to marry; it is his close friend or a family member who does the job after the

man finds his potential wife. Through this process of dating, there is a great deal of patience and perseverance, both on the part of the man and the one doing the courting to win the heart of the woman. Thus, "*yaa yaa kole*" does not only remind men of their traditional etiquettes when courting a lady, but it is also a communicative statement that is frequently used by both the ladies and the men during courting. Conversely, the song also has double meaning as regards to traditional protocol for persuasion. We all beg for things we want, but we must be mindful as to how we beg.

Indeed, it will be proper to contextualize *bewaa* music in broader scope. Given its dynamism, *bewaa* is one of the few Dagara dance/musical genres that has received local, national, and international exposure. Popular *bewaa* ensembles have been earning good income with their music and dance in villages and towns as well as in concert halls around the world. This exposure has contributed significantly to the popularity of the Dagara gyil, inspiring non-traditional Dagara music groups to incorporate gyil into their music making. One such group is the Pan-African Orchestra led by a well-known Ghanaian composer Nana Danso Abiam who used the gyil with other African orchestral instruments in his compositions. Similarly, the gyil has a prominent place in the performance repertoire of many folkloric groups in Ghana, including the Ghana Dance Ensemble and the National Dance Company of Ghana. Moreover, numerous cultural groups and popular music bands are utilizing the gyil to expand their performance traditional repertoire and contemporary music. As a result, gyil music is part of the teaching curriculum and music programs of the four major universities and other music conservatories in Ghana. Indeed, through the teaching of music at the Dagara Music Center, gyil repertoire is now widely taught in many universities and its music performed around the world.

The Sacred Repertoire of the Gyil

The *logyil* is a unique musical instrument and its music is reserved for Dagara sacred rituals. However, I must quickly point out that because of the advent of Christianity, *logyil* music is disappearing in most Dagara communities where Christian conversion has deeper roots. Because Christian missionaries have discouraged their converts from taking part in such musical rituals, which religious leaders consider anti-Christian, many Christian gyil players do not know the repertoire of *logyil* music. The *bagr-gyil, bagr-bine, lobri,* and *logyil-bewaa* comprise the vast repertoire of Dagara ritual music that is performed during the *bagr* religious initiation. Because Christianity denounces the *bagr* as a pagan religion, converts tend to disassociate themselves from these ritual activities; hence, the lack of interest by Christian musicians in taking part in its performance. The *logyil* repertoire listed above is a rich musical tradition and their lyrical themes contain good repository of the ancient knowledge of Dagara religious history. In sacred context, its musical power can and does evoke trance and/or even death. Due to these fears and the strong emotional command in this music, many Dagara family clans have forbidden the playing of *lobri* (the music used for announcing the funeral of elderly people).

But *logyil* music is not all about sad emotions. The *bagr-bine* repertoire played on this instrument is a celebratory music that is performed to mark the final celebrations of the *bagr* initiation. *Bagr-bine* songs can be funny as the texts sometimes tease people found guilty of social misconduct, including spreading false rumors. The popularity of *bagr-bine* songs rarely lasts more than a year because the music is situational and circumstantial to each *bagr* ritual ceremony. As ritual celebration music, *bagr-bine* is recitative as well as repetitive, with call and response that is usually led by a lead singer with the ritual audience

doing the response. *Logyil bewaa* is the sacred version that mirrors the recreational gyil *bewaa*; and it is a vibrant music in many Dagara communities. As a *gyil mwiɛrɛ,* I am deeply drawn to this particular musical genre because I enjoy playing *logyil* music. I recall my childhood days in the village when I would trek from village to village during the *bagr* festival periods in search of *bagr* rituals at which to play this music. I have extensively recorded this vast musical genre as it is my favorite music.

As I stated earlier, *logyil* music is sacred and because of this, *bagr-gyil* (the *bagr* religious worship music) is the preserve for any *gyil-mwiɛrɛ* who is initiated into the *bagr* religion. In *bagr* religious ceremonies, *bagr-gyil* music is usually circumscribed in a sacred space both in the ritual room or a bounded space when the ritual event is taking place outdoors. Anyone who is not an initiate can watch but they cannot join in its performance, dance or even sing along with the music. This restriction exists as an acknowledgement that this sacred music is the preserve for its custodians, the initiated members of the *bagr* religion. Because of this, the performance responsibility of the *bagr* ritual celebration is always assigned to a selected group of initiated musicians who must make it their duty to be present at the three-day finale of the final *bagr* ceremony.

Bagr music like the other gyil genres discussed here has a binary function in that its performance serves the musical function in both the sacred and secular domains. Initiated musicians can perform certain repertoire of *bagr* music such as the *bagr-bine* and *logyil-bewaa* for recreational celebrations. But considered as sacred music, religious elders of the Dagara *bagr* are careful about the performance of certain songs they considered too sacred and cannot be shared in public domain. My recording of one of the *bagr-gyil* songs [*bara de nyuɔr*] in 2006 for commercial distribution sparked mixed feelings of rebuke and

acceptance by elders of the *bagr* religion. Even though this piece of music is played at the end of the final *bagr* initiation ceremony for mass celebrations by the general public, some elders are divided on its commercial distribution arguing that these songs should only be performed within the context of the *bagr* religious ceremony. I will use another medium to discuss why some Dagara elders think this music should not be performed in the secular domain. But it is important to note that these are the issues of everyday politics that are contested and negotiated not only in funeral music but in other musical contexts by both musicians and non-musicians. The following chapter will elaborate in detail the music of the Dagara gyil vis-à-vis the *langni* dirges as a musical discourse through which people publicly engage in negotiating their individual and group identities in the context of the funeral ritual.

Chapter Four: Dagara Funeral Ceremony: The Political Impacts of Music and Dirge

The traditional ceremony of the Dagara's funeral known as *kuor* is an essential ritual that does not only call for the celebration of the deceased's life but also a public event that provides the medium for social interaction among community groups. Apart from celebrating the transitioning of the departed soul, funeral ceremonies also provide the platform for public discourse, a suitable place where musicians and dirge singers can exchange views about the mystery of death through the performance of music and dirge singing. Indeed, music and dirge singing at funerals is one of the most important form of public discourse through which cantors could communicate and express their sentiments about issues affecting the lives of their community members. This chapter explores in ritual context the political dimensions of Dagara funeral ceremony, focusing on the analysis of the political themes in funeral music and dirge.

As the name *kuor* implies weeping or grief, funerals are therefore moments of public grief and the music that accompanies the three day ceremony helps bereaved families and community members express their collective emotions about the quandary of death. Malidoma Somé writes that, "The Dagara people believe that one experience that all humans share is grief, and it takes the right kind of music and poetic dirges to set grief ablaze at funeral ceremonies." He continues, "Grief unleashed without the help of ritual drummers, musicians and dirge singers runs the risk of producing another death; this is why the griot chanter, the guardian of the nythopoetic doors of the tribe is an invaluable engineer of emotions" (Somé, 1994: 61). Indeed, Dagara funeral rituals provide the moment for people not only to mourn and grieve, but also to reestablish social relations, make amends, and speak about the problems of their community through the music and

dirge singing. Whether it is to pay tribute to the deceased or to make an offering on behalf of one's family, everyone in the community has something to contribute through their physical participation in the funeral ritual activities. To ensure the proper celebration of this communal ritual, Dagara funeral ceremonies usually take place in an open air field, a public setting that serves the multiple purposes for the celebration of the deceased's life as well as the display of Dagara traditional customs.

Before I proceed with analysis of the social impacts of funeral music and dirge vis-a-vis traditional politics, it must be emphasized that themes of Dagara funeral music and dirge are deeply rooted in social realism. Social realism as discussed by Catherine Cole is associated with certain pertinent issues confronting the ordinary person, such as poverty, hunger and unemployment (Cole, 2001). The prevalence of these social issues sometimes helps to explain how and why people engage in the discourse of provincial and national politics at the local level. For the Dagara people, local politics fit within the power hierarchies at funerals through which chiefs and prominent figures can demonstrate their social status, men and women negotiate their group identities and musicians and dirge singers reaffirm their roles as the cantors of Dagara tradition.

In fact, occasions of funerals provide a platform for contentious exchange of musical rhetoric between performers and their audience members. As cantors of this social genre, the *langkonmɛ* (dirge-singers) exercise considerable power at funeral ceremonies and community members see them as agents of peace and counsels capable of defusing tensions and resolving disputes at funeral rituals. Conscious of their traditional role as representatives of the peoples' voice in the community, musicians and dirge singers carry these expectations with them at funeral ceremonies. People expect them to speak their

mind, speak the truth, and speak with wisdom. Since the intent of their performance is to shape public opinion, good musicians and dirge singers always articulate their musical speech such that in the performance, there is always a great deal of direct verbal exchange between dirge singers themselves or between dirge singers and audience members.

As a social commentary open to any topic or issue of public concern, the essence of *bine* music and *langni* dirge thus becomes what the African philosopher V. Y. Mudimbe describes as "memory text," a narrative combining history and myth, performance and reality—a non-textual way of remembering, recording and communicating culture, history and identity (see in Jeannette Allis Bastian, 2006). In the context of funeral rituals, these memory texts activate the political themes embedded in funeral music and dirge, and serve as means through which cantors engage in communicating history, culture and the negotiation of power dynamics. In fact, Dagara funeral music and dirge can be described as public rhetoric that performers used in communicating their views about issues of history and the present. Issues of politics are emphasized here because they are part of the phenomenon of social changes in contemporary Dagara. Thus, funeral ceremonies provide a platform for public discourse where issues of local and national concern are performatively expressed and communicated through music and dirge singing.

I argue that postcolonial influences on modernity and cash economy have created new economic possibilities in which the emphasis on wealth and power over-ride the values of old customary beliefs. Modern aspirations in postcolonial Dagara have brought to people the desire for Western education, modern life-styles, new faith and new beliefs. These social changes have no doubt had a significant impact on cultural practices including the local politics of social rituals such as funerals. Furthermore, postcolonial influence in

Dagaraland did not only introduce new types of social authority but these social transformations resulted in the reorganization of traditional politics and power structure, a system that creates space for contestations. Indeed, the new political system established some social hierarchies that set the ways in which local power and authority is negotiated. Thus I argue that the political system of chieftancy introduced by the colonial administrators in the early nineteenth century gave chiefs and the educated elite considerable authority and power over their subjects in contemporary Dagara. Whereas traditional power structure in the past was in the hands of family clans, political power in the hands of chiefs has created new musical discourses in which funeral music and dirge have shifted from the emphasis on praise singing to a rhetorical display that saw the incorporation of politics as dominant musical themes. As chiefs attempted to legitimize their claim to authority and expand their influence, funeral music and dirge became the medium through which cantors engaged in public discourses about the new socio-political system. As Carola Lentz writes

> Since the 1940s, it has been almost exclusively educated family members who succeeded to the paramount and important divisional chieftancies in Dagara. Neo-traditional thus fused with modern political offices and elites, making chiefly office convertible into positions within the modern political system, a practice that continues to this day (Lentz, 2007: 180)

In the past, the textual references of Dagara funeral music and dirge have always centered on epics of Dagara cosmology, oral poetry, and *dano* (praise singing). Given the acephalous nature of the Dagara society in that era, song texts of funeral dirge promoted effective clan solidarity more than referencing issues such as power, wealth or social prominence of individuals. In his anthropological work, Jack Goody refers to funeral dirge

in pre-colonial Dagara as chants with references to traditional beliefs on totemic taboos, avoidance, shrines and legendary incidents peculiar to descent groups. He writes,

> The sentiments expressed in funeral chants are often bitterly hostile to the deceased who is accused of abandoning those whom he leaves behind in the world of the living. And whereas members of the other descent groups generally chant songs of abuse, the deceased's own lineage sing praise chants (*dano,* or *konbie,* literally "crying words" belonging to their own clan (Goody, 1962: 101).

Another change in postcolonial Dagara regarding funeral celebrations is the level of elaboration connected with the organization of funeral rituals. Family members nowadays organize funeral rituals according to the social status of the deceased. In a situation where a rich person dies, their corpse may be preserved in a morgue in order for the family to adequately prepare for a grand funeral celebration. In this case the extolment of the death by the living is a display of social prestige rather than a ritual ceremony. This is contrary to Dagara traditional customs of celebrating funerals. Even in modern Dagara society, a traditional dress at funerals communicates various roles and power identities; and therefore they serve as benchmarks for one's social status. These public displays may not only celebrate an individual's prominence in society but their displays reinforce discourses about how people negotiate their influence and power in society. It is against this background that funeral music and dirge are highly politicized because musicians and dirge singers duely appropriate their musical speech to address these socio-political issues.

Therefore chiefs, political leaders and eminent citizens who use funeral rituals as suitable occasions to exercise their influence for public recognition must be mindful because their virtues and integrity could be questioned by cantors. In funeral performance, musicians and dirge singers may direct their statements toward an individual for their declining sense of community, or question their social ethics pertaining to moral integrity

and the responsibility of their actions. Malidoma Somé writes that "a person's failures are brought out in the course of funeral ritual and as a result, death reminds the person who is not paying his or her social dues to the community that he or she must repent" (1993: 104). As communicated to me in an interview, the moral position of a traditional chief was questioned by a dirge singer on grounds of his juxtaposing views between Christianity and Dagara customary practice. His reaction to this public query cost him his stool and power as chief of the village (story by Tuota, July 27th 2010). These are themes of musical communication purposely articulated by musicians and dirge singers to assert their voice in the larger discourse about issues affecting the lives of individuals and the community as a whole.

Death and the Funeral Ceremony

When death occurs in Dagara community, the linear flow of life is altered. The separation of life by death creates a vacuum that requires a communal grief in order for people to heal. Without the performance of the proper rituals and customary rites, the separation between the living and dead is incomplete and calamity looms over the minds of the people in the family and the community as a whole. In Dagara, the belief in death marks the beginning of another life in the ancestral realm; therefore, funeral rituals involve the performance of several rites as a way to prepare the journey for the departed soul. One of the basic beliefs strongly held by the Dagara people is that, the proper way to send the dead to the ancestral world is through the spirit of music. Thus the occasion of death calls for the performance of music and dirges not only to pay tributes to the deceased but also to send messages to the living about the realities of our corporeal world.

Immediately following the death of an elderly person, initial rituals are performed by the deceased's family to mark the transitioning of life from the living world to the world of the ancestors. This ritual, known as *kyobru* (preparation), involves the sprinkling of ashes by an elder in the family as a sign of appeasement to the ancestors. Death sets off anger among the living as much as it does to the ancestors. The ritual of appeasement is believed to calm down the emotions of both the dead and the living in the family, especially the deceased's loved ones and direct relatives. It is also to keep away any evil spirits from coming around the compound because death invokes all kind unseen spirits. The next step after the *kyobru* ritual is the preparation and dressing of the corpse for public viewing and mourning, the organization of the funeral paraphernalia and the formal commencement of the ritual proceedings with music and dirge singing.

When grief strikes in the form of death, men and women express their emotional pain in specific ways. Again, the Dagara people believe that death is attributed to several causes or suspicions. Through old age, one receives the calling of the ancestors to a second realm of existence. This is natural death. All other deaths are attributed to human causes through the social evils of witchcraft, sorcery or the consequences of one's own actions. When death occurs all these options are cultivated in the minds of the bereaved family; thus in their emotional expression, people would direct their anguish toward the ancestors with certain symbolic cries in the hope that the ancestors would grant mercy upon the family so that death should not happen in the family again -- at least not soon. The first people to mourn when death occurs are the women who normally cry in the form of a loud wailing. Through this formulaic wailing they are sending out the news to the community and nearby villages that death has taken place. Women usually mourn by calling on the names of their

maternal ancestors in a unique form of weeping as follows: "*n maa, n maa, n maa."* By the same repetitive calls, men express their emotional pain by calling on the *"saa"* (the father or the ancestor clan name) as they mourn in the following manner: *nsaa woi*, *nsaa woi*, *nsaa woi*. These emotional expressions are symbolic communication that sets the stage for public mourning. In fact mourning at funerals are musical poetics that can inform a listener about the feelings of the mourners. When the cause of the death is obvious, people will express and communicate their sentiments in words though the way they mourn. Some may sing lamentations dirges to the deceased for abandoning them and other will question the circumstances surrounding cause of the death.

While the music of the *logyile* (instruments used for funeral announcements) are played amidst the wailing and lamentation by women and immediate family members, the funeral parade, which usually involves the young grave diggers and some senior elders whose duty is to supervise and direct affairs, prepares the *paala* (funeral pyre) for public display of the corpse. Once the pyre is completed and the corpse, adorned in traditional regalia, is placed in a sitting position, then the formal proceedings of the funeral ritual begins. The positioning of the funeral pyre symbolically tells Dagara funeral participants about the gender of the deceased. In accordance with traditional beliefs, the viewing position of a male deceased should face east while that of a female faces west. This symbolic positioning of a male deceased toward east shows that a man in his mortal being rises up with the sun in the morning and a female finishes her feminine chores at sunset before she goes to bed. Figure 5 below shows the funeral pyre of a male deceased with funeral mourners and dirge singers gathered around the musicians in front of the *paala* to commence the formal proceedings of this public mourning.

Figure 5 The funeral pyre: Picture by Bernard Woma 2009

The funeral pyre is a symbol of death; it does not only confirm the death of a person but it also serves as a transitional abode of the deceased. Its display also offers the means for people to pay their last respect to the dead and demonstrate their sympathies to the bereaved families and relatives of the deceased. People demonstrate their support and gesture by making offerings of material value to the bereaved families or they may make the offerings to the deceased for their journey to the next world. Offerings made at funeral ceremonies include fowls, animals, farm produce, cowries and monetary donations. Since these items are displayed around the *paala* for everyone in the community and those coming to the funeral from far away to see, they serve as symbolic ways of communicating the social status of the deceased as well as their family prominence. Anthony Naaeke writes that, "the ceremony of the dead affirms the values of society and as such, the display of things around the *paala* are rhetorical displays that symbolically convey meanings on Dagara cultural virtues" (2005; 68).

Rhetoric in this context includes not only the grief and lamentations shared by the bereaved family and funeral mourners around the *paala,* but the *paala pɛr* (pyre space) is a

circumscribed ritual space in which most of the ritual actions such as the performance of the gyil music, dancing and dirge singing can take place. It is a place of turmoil, chaos and the display of esoteric rituals. Indeed it is a sacred place where disorder must be acted out (see Somé, 1994; 101). As a performance space, the *paala pɛr* is the place where musicians, dirge singers and funeral mourners can display their social group identities and demonstrate their influence for public recognition. I will return to this in the next section but the *paala pɛr* also serves as the place where the *kowel* (funeral dismissal), ritual is carried out to mark the end of the funeral ceremony. This ritual of closure involves intense display of music and dancing that reflects Dagara beliefs that once the *paala* is dismantled and the place is stomped with music and dancing, there is hope that the chasm of death is defeated and celebration of the deceased's life is formally ended.

The Political Impacts of Funeral Music and Dirge

Barbara Hampton describes music performance in rituals as an "interpretation of symbolic phenomenon which does not merely articulate the defining features of the ritual but in fact constitutes a ritual reaction that both communicates and expresses the feeling of the people" (Hampton, 1982). Although it is through *gyil* music and dirge singing that individuals can adjust themselves to the loss of their community member, funeral music is a public discourse through which *gyil* players and dirge singers *c*an c*ollective*ly express and communicate their views about Dagara cultural history as well as their social problems. As cantors of this social genre, dirge singers will usually begin their performance by first acknowledging their ancestral clan, the lineage of their family origin for people to know which clan or social group they represent. Next is the call on *tengan,* (the spiritual force of the land) to protect them against any evil, and finally, the call on God (*Naamwin*) for

guidance through their performance. By calling on the protection of supernatural forces, performers of funeral dirge have the license to freely express themselves on any issue without fear or hindrance.

As the ritual celebration gathers momentum and the xylophones take center stage in front of the *paala* (funeral pyre) and begin to play along with other musical accompaniment involving the *kuor* drum, (a drum made out of gourd calabash to accompany the *gyil* music), dirge singers and audience members who are mostly men will gather around the xylophones for the formal commencement of the funeral proceedings. From the melodic chants and response by people to the music from the *gyil daa* and *gyil pog* (male and female xylophones), dirge singers can sing the genealogy of Dagara ancestors and mythologies from top to bottom. Cantors can also communicate grudges and personal differences they hold against individuals in the community. They will openly express these sentiments in their performance without fear or any recourse. On the other hand, the one who is being addressed can refute the allegations by countering the singer with their own dirges or verbally question the substance of the musical speech. In fact there are instances where audience members would intervene in the exchanges of verbal confrontation between dirge singers at funeral rituals.

There is no passive participation in Dagara funeral music. In the heat of this intense musical interaction of playing, dancing and dirge singing, individuals who feel they cannot absorb the emotional power of music anymore will simply withdraw from the performance scene to regain composure and return later. This is why Malidoma states that "direct relatives of funeral mourners should never be left alone in the expression of their grief because grief being an expression of the pull toward death and eternity, the vulnerable state

of a mourner predicates him or her to sudden death" (Some, 1993: 105). As music and dirge at funerals regulate people's emotions, any provocative lyrics that are directed toward individuals can heighten tensions between the singer and the accused person. Some of these tensions are built into the social life of the community and they become generative impulse in the performance of funeral music and dirge.

Figure 6
Dirge singers and funeral mourners around the funeral pyre.
Picture by Bernard Woma 2009.

The following chants mark the beginning of the funeral proceedings known as *kuor wuofu.*

nsaa wou – wou – wou nsaa

nsa wou – wou – wou nsaa bɛ nyog mɛ na yee

Ah! my father [referring to the ancestors] I am in trouble.

wou – wou nsaa bɛ nyog mɛ na yee

Ah, ah, my father I am in trouble

These textual recitations are sung at the commencement of the funeral proceedings to draw the attention of everyone at the ritual ceremony. Upon hearing these chants funeral

mourners will gather around the *paala* and the *gyil* players for the formal ritual proceedings. According to traditional customs, gyil players and dirge singers from the deceased's family must set the ceremony in motion with musical appellations confirming publicly that there is grief in their family. The dirge singers who are usually two people singing in a call-and-response manner, would ask the community to join them and their family in mourning the loss of their family member. At the same time, they would use their musical dirges to implore community members and the public to see the tragedy in the community as a moment of reflection, and not the time to incite tensions. In addition, the lead singer will invoke the spirits of the ancestors to watch over misdeeds on the part of anyone who might bring them to the funeral ritual. In a way, he is casting a spell on anyone who may try to play the devil's advocate at their funeral ritual as the following song texts suggest.

Nir wa wan pu faa za a ka, a saakum minɛ ni a tengan bɛ iru wul

> Anyone who is here with any misdeed or concealed intentions, the ancestors and the spirit of the land should expose their bad intentions.

There are three types of funeral dirges; *degaar-langni* (the introductory dirge), *lang-wogo* (the long dirge) and *lang-muoli* (lamentation). The introductory dirge is performed alongside the degaar *gyil* music while *lang-wogo* is performed during the *bilangni* song cycle (see chapter three). Themes in *degaar-langni* usually center on condolence and sympathizing with the bereaved family on the loss of the deceased. Dirge singers also use the moment in *degaar-langn*i to announce their presence as well as the people that accompanied them to the funeral. It is during the performance of *lang-wogo* through the *bilangni* song cycle that dirge singers express and communicate their feelings about socio-political issues. This genre of music is so intense that the heightened speech

from the dirge singers usually invokes intense verbal interaction such as yelling responses from the audience members to the calls of the gyil music that it is common to see physical and emotional display of weeping and dancing.

Dancing at funerals is not only a demonstration of how one understands the musical speech but also, it is a way through which people can express their emotional feelings. For example, *bine* (the male version of the funeral dance) has formalized gestures and men dance at funerals to demonstrate threats against those who may attempt to challenge their power. Men perform *bine* dance with masculine gestures, sometimes using clubs, bows and other props to demonstrate their masculinity as well as symbolically communicate messages to the viewers and adversaries. As Jack Goody observes, the men dance of war gives way to the women dance of peace (Goody, 1963: 147). Dance gestures of bereaved family members may even communicate messages and threats to suspects connected to the death of their relative. That is why at Dagara funerals, it is the immediate relatives of the deceased that should dance first before anyone can do so.

Contrary to the two genres of dirges discussed above, *lang-muoli* are lamentation dirges sung women at funerals as a way of demonstrating their solidarity. While Dagara women do not sing dirges to the gyil music at funerals, *lang-muoli* has its own performance space in which women can also express and communicate their feelings about the mysteries of death while reinforcing their social bonds. A group of *lang-muoli* singers will normally gather around the funeral pyre where the deceased is seated to sing their lamentations. The textual expression of women dirges references deep metaphors that draw their themes from myths as well as issues concerning women in society. They use these songs at funerals not only as an expression of their group identities but as what Sidra

Lawrence describes as “”non oppositional strategies of resistance” (see Lawrence, 2011. Through *lang-muoli* dirges, women will communicate issues of abuse, resentment and mistreatment in families and marriages.

The following song texts are examples of funeral dirges with political themes and commentary on issues commonly addressed by dirge singers. The dirges selected here for interpretation are compilations of over one hundred hours of recordings at seven funeral rituals during my fieldwork in the summer of 2010 in Magang Gueguéré, Kolinkaa, and Langle, all in Burkina Faso and in Fielmuo, Hiineteng, Guo and Nandom in Ghana. They represent major themes of social discourses about agency, power and the daily aspirations of the Dagara people.

Your ni naa bɛ i beene

Fame and wealth are not the same.

As I argued throughout this chapter, modern aspirations in contemporary Dagara society have resulted in individuals’ emphasis on power and fame through monetary wealth. The introduction of cash economy has created social mobility in which people nowadays command fame from monetary wealth, and as a result, they exercise power in society. This is contrary to the traditional emphasis on fame and power as an achieved social status for those who command human wealth and not monetary wealth. The word *“naa”* for example refers to both chief and wealth; but when viewed through the lens of the Dagara conception of wealth, the attributes between the two are not the same. In the view of many Dagara, human power and material wealth cannot be measured as the same. *Naalu* (material wealth) is thus considered by the people as an exclusionary social mobility because it does not promote the collective ideals of communal progress. Therefore, a wealthy person cannot

necessarily command the same respect as fame does. Thus the song texts below elucidate Dagara traditional values on what is considered wealth and fame, a metaphor that references individual wealth as loneliness.

Ninang bɛ viɛllɛi

Loneliness is bad.

Kakura yagre ninang dirɛ nu

A wealthy farmer is a loner.

Indeed, contemporary Dagara society still places greater value on the family unit as recognition of one's social status. In the past, men demonstrated their influence by how many wives and children they have. However, the shift from what Jack Goody described the Dagara social structure as "communal family and communal granary" is reinforced in the musical themes of this dirge. For many Dagara people, human wealth establishes one's influence in society through which their power is measured not by how much money they have but their ability to fend for a large family. As the head of a large family in the community, one's influence is recognized by how far and wide their family name expands. Therefore a wealthy farmer is seen as a loner because he does not command the same fame as the one with many dependents. I became a target at the funeral of my colleague gyil player in Kolinkaa when one dirge singer, Nalle Baaman referred to me the flying goat with a rope my neck.

Bu yagra migr mi vure ni teng

A flying goat forgets that his rope is on the ground.

Weaving proverbs into funeral dirges, the dirge singer who praised my efforts as a representative of Dagara culture also cautioned that if I choose to live in the West, I should

remember that the rope on my neck is the "tradition" of my people and they can always pull me back home. For him, the confluence of tradition and modernity has created a social disjuncture in which fame and power are now driven from wealth, social mobility (the flying goat), forgets his traditional roots and the unprivileged majority viewed by the powerful as voiceless and disgruntled. These musical expressions could not resonate more in me than it did with the people at that funeral. Although I view my work both at home and in the West as central to the promotion of my traditional culture, the locals see me as one of the "rich" ones who could share more of my wealth with the community.

Indeed, funeral dirges are channels of communication that performers use to inform their targeted audience about various issues. Whether political or personal, the proverbs embedded in these songs are commentaries drawn human experiences which permeate the thought processes of the ordinary person. Thus considered as social commentary, musicians and dirge singers become commentators drawing from these human experiences to address issues of public concern. As true as the metaphors embedded in these songs may be, it is also true that in the context of funeral ritual, these musical engagements are part of the larger political discourse through which performers are able to adjust the music's performative power to their own realities and concerns. Finally, the metaphor in the song texts below speaks about the challenges of visionary members of Dagara community. As individuals who strive to succeed or act as change agents, dirge singers have a message for them to beware of their enemies.

Fuu wa i teng maalɛ-a a fu domɛ mi yangmɛ na

If you are a leader or visionary, be mindful about your enemies.

The textual interpretations of this song can be explained as having multiple meanings. First, the song speaks about Dagara notions of leadership and their vision for change. For some people, change through which tradition and modernity become incongruous can create feelings of social animosity. As I have argued, the re-ordering of Dagara social system as a result of colonization has affected some of their traditional beliefs and cultural practices. Christian influence on Dagara has led to the discontinuation of many socio-cultural practices including the performance of some customary rites at funeral rituals. When Christian missionaries introduced monogamy as an "ideal" marriage institution in Dagara, the concept did not go down well with some people. Similarly, the introduction of Western political and legal systems as a means to regulate Dagara traditional practice has created social discord in which proponents of the old tradition are divided with their Christian counterparts on the performance of certain musical rituals such as the playing of *logyil* music as well as the performance of esoteric rituals at Dagara Christian funerals. In fact some people view these influences as a suppression of local knowledge and cultural beliefs (see Hawkins, 2002).

As a result, these social changes have witnessed new ways of public discourse and funeral ceremonies serve as one medium through which the local population engaged in an ongoing expression of their daily circumstances. In the context of funeral rituals, this form of public discourse provides a contested zone for people to negotiate their position within society. Apart from their emphasis on cultural values, the literary expressions of Dagara *langni* and *gyil bine* music reference issues of agency, power, and identity. Thus taken as political discourse, funeral music and dirges have the ability to shape public opinion because these musical themes can significantly impact the listeners' opinions on the

speaker's intention. For some people, funeral music activates experiences of shared histories and common cultural beliefs; but on the other hand, it is also the transient moment through which the aim of this communal ritual is fulfilled. In the funeral context, it is through the performance of music and dirge singing that people foster group solidarity, display their social status and express a culture that is uniquely theirs; and for musicians and dirge singers, funeral occasions offer them the platform as performers and public speakers to speak on issues that few public occasions would grant them the platform.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

I have argued throughout the thesis that colonial influences on the Dagara people as well as postcolonial social changes have significantly transformed many cultural practices including funeral rituals. The sweeping transformation and growing consciousness of modernization have affected many indigenous ways of life and as a result, most ritual practices and their music are in rapid change or near disappearance due to lack of interest in their use at ritual events. Seduced by modernity, some people contend that the performance of certain types of music at funeral ceremonies is both primitive and unimportant; they think that these musical rituals are uncivilized and should not be used again in funeral ceremonies. This opinion requires critical scholarly attention because as Malidoma points out, "individuals espousing modernity sees death as an end, while the traditional world see death as a transition" (Somé, 1993). As a result of these contesting views, some people are concerned about the sustenance of certain traditional practices in public rituals such as the performance of the proper traditional funeral rituals and giving the proper burial according to traditional customary beliefs. For many people, the performance of a proper traditional funeral is important not only in honoring the wishes of their ancestors but it is equally relevant as the only way to keep alive the tradition of a people.

In Dagara, tradition holds that funeral rituals are the most important communal homage that the living can pay to their dead and as such, occasions of funerals offer the opportunity for the people to make amends with their neighbors as well as their ancestors. This is why Malidoma Somé notes that, "in funeral rituals, the villages take the opportunity to bring their own unfinished business with their dead relatives to the next ritual (Somé, 1993: 103). In order words, the ritual is not only about this one dead person but a ritualized

process that requires the living to honor the needs of all the dead in their community as well as reexamine their lives and the realities of their corporeal world. Furthermore, funeral rituals offer the opportunity for people to demonstrate their moral values, negotiate their social boundaries and power relations as well as show their communal spirit through the performance of music, dirges and esoteric rituals. Therefore to discourage the performance of the proper funeral rituals to the dead is at least denying them an honorable journey to the ancestral world. Indeed, it is through the singing of funeral dirges and music that confirms the end of an existing life in the world and marks the beginning of a new life in the ancestral realm.

My approach to contextualize this musical complex as a political discourse therefore seeks to bring an understanding of the stated purpose of this public ritual. It is for this reason that I argue here that a scholarly documentation of the sonic aspects of the Dagara funeral is important not only for conveying the socio-cultural essence of ritual and music but also to preserve the sustenance of this musical tradition. In recent years, the sacred repertoire of the gyil music has been documented by both non-Dagara Ghanaians and Western scholars in ways that sometimes ignore or obscure the political dimensions of this musical tradition. Indeed, an understanding of the socio-cultural significance of Dagara funeral rituals and their music is a way through which one can learn a great deal about the Dagara people and their traditional culture. The performance of traditional music and dirge singing at funerals should not only be seen as the proper way to honor the transitioning of an existing life to the next, but a ritual function that provide the means for people to display their traditional values. Values that introduce ancient practices such as

those discussed throughout the thesis are part of the holistic celebrations of funerals in Dagara.

In Dagara today, one can make the argument that modernization and socio-cultural changes have resulted in the decrease and even the disappearance of certain ritual practices at funerals including music playing. More concerning is the introduction of foreign music at traditional funeral rituals. This approach is a move away from the use of traditional music as ready-made technology music seems the preferred music at funerals. Due to the diminishing use of traditional music at social events especially in urban cities, the art of making in these areas is also disappearing as gyil makers are less motivated to make gyil for commercial use. A. A. Mensah points this out in his article way back in 1982 with the concern that:

> The evolution of Western xylophone followed the pleasure of the Western musical ear in timbral clarity, scale, intervallic structure, and even physical arrangement of the keyboard. Inspired by Carl Off's examples, African experiment met the need of Western major-minor melodic and harmonic interval values and ignored those of the Dagara-Lobi gyil. If experiment of this nature gain ground, especially with the new prospects of instrumental technology development at the Center for Cultural Studies, University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, an important musical value will be rapidly atrophied and lost; for successful products at these centers will capture the national and perhaps international market. The concept of the gambɛra and it melodic implication will also be lost. A large repertoire of Dagara-Lobi gyil music cannot be repeated on the new xylophones which are likely to drive the old out of existence by sheer economic advantage. (Mensah, 1982: 152).

Reasoning along similar lines, I want to reiterate that some of the gyil rituals associated with Dagara funerary rituals are disappearing. The discouragement of the *logyil* music at funerals by some Dagara family clans and the disappearance of the gyil-tul music, [a ritual music that is performed at a senior gyil-mwiɛrɛ gɔba's funeral] in which the gyil keys are rearranged and mixed up in certain ways for gyil players to play certain songs to

honor the deceased gɔba's legacy are the few examples that support this concern. There is also a concern that the funeral performance aspects of the instrument are also in danger because elder players are less motivated to perform at funerals, and young players are turning their ears and minds toward recorded popular music. As influences of modernity dawn on the Dagara people with the forceful presence of media and communication technology, it is eminent that some of these musical repertoires will be lost. Thus I urge that as postcolonial Dagara strive to embrace aspirations of modernity, there is a need for scholarly research and documentation of Dagara musical practices especially those that are in danger of disappearance.

Scholarly motivation in the research and documentation of Dagara music such as the vast repertoire of women's music, children songs, folkloric tales, hunters' music as well as the religious *bagr* music, and even Dagara Christian church music could contribute significantly to the knowledge production of the Dagara people. Many of the musical genres discussed throughout the thesis can be performed at funeral rituals. Even the recreational genres of the *bɛwaa, bagr-bine* and many other genres are performed at funerals not only for the reenactment of the deceased's life history but most importantly for people to publicly reaffirm their group solidarity. For example, if a deceased once belonged to a *bɛwaa* group during their life time and they die, the music is performed by members of their social group as a mark of separation with their departed member.

Taken as a whole, Dagara gyil music encompasses notions of tradition as well as innovation. As society changes, music as a transformative process is also under constant change in its social context and performance style because performers incorporate influences of these social changes into their musical creativity. Therefore, I suggest that

there is a need for cross-cultural interactions among culture groups because it is beneficial in gaining familial connections and knowledge in the local context. Any collaborative work among culture groups is a good step toward reviving and revitalizing disappearing musical cultures and sacred rituals. Also, strong enthusiasm on the part of culture-bearers is another way forward in the revival and teaching of indigenous music and dance including the exposure of sacred rituals to sensitize the younger generation on the cultural relevance of these rituals.

One important step to help perpetuate Dagara traditional music is to encourage its performance at social rituals including the revival and teaching of some of the repertoire mentioned here. The Dagara Music Center and its resident dance company, the Saakumu Dance Troupe has been in the forefront in the revival of some rare Dagara musical genres such as the dalari music through the making of the drums and performance of the music and its dance repertoire. Also indigenous artists should not view their work only in the domain of playing for traditional rituals but take their trade as an income-earning profession. Unlike other traditional musicians who have enjoyed the fruit of their labor as royal court musicians, *griots* and *jalis,* Dagara musicians have provided their musical talents and services freely as a social good. The Dagara Music Center holds a strong view that it is time to recontextualize and professionalize the performance of Dagara music whether sacred or secular. Notwithstanding the concerns raised in this closing chapter, traditional Dagara music still has its honorable place in the sacred and secular performance context. Ritual music such as the funeral *bine* and the religious *bagr-bine* music remain potent because of their integral role in these ritual ceremonies. The musical rituals discussed in this thesis, show that there is a strong confidence and hope that Dagara music

as a medium of education, entertainment and communication can survive in its sacred and secular domains so long as contemporary Dagara society considers the social function, cultural values and religious significance of these musical traditions.

Glossary

Bagr-bine: The Dagara bagr religious music
Bagr-mwɛb: The sacred music of the bagr that is performed at the funeral of an initiated member.
Bɛtirb: An esoteric ritual that is performed at an elder's funeral as a reenactment of the spiritual and moral legacy of the deceased.
Bɛwaa: The social recreational music of the Dagara people
Bilangni: The long funeral song cycle that is performed alongside with dirge singing.
Binɛ: Dagar funeral music and dance.
Birifor: A linguistic sub-group of the Dagara ethnic group. The Birifor people also play the gyil similar to the Dagara gyil.
Bog-muulu: A funeral ritual rite in which children are asked to look inside the grave of their grandfather or grandmother before the burial takes place. The ritual rite signifies the separation of the physical bond between the deceased and the children.
Buule: A metal wrist band worn by gyil players to add more percussive sound to the music.
Dagara: An ethnic group that lives in the Upper West region of Ghana as well as Southwest of Burkina Faso and northeast of Cote d'Ivoire.
Dalari: Clay pot drums with a goat or snake skin stretched over the opening of the broken clay pot. Dalari music is believed to possess cursing powers that can spoil a good harvest. Thus the music can only be played after the harvest of the millet, the main staple of the Dagara people.
Degaar-langni: An introductory funeral music that is performed to commence the formal proceedings of the funeral ceremony. Gyil players and dirge singers also use this music to announce their arrival to the funeral ceremony.
Dega-gyil: The 18 keys major pentatonic scale of the Dagara xylophone. This is the instrument used for funeral celebrations.
Gangaar: A cylindrical wooden drum used to accompany the Birifor gyil music.
Gang-bɛra: Two gyil keys known as odd keys on the logyil (the minor pentatonic scale of the Dagara gyil). These keys are only played during the invocation of the sacred bagr religious music.
Gɔba: A musical title for professional gyil players.
Gyil: A wooden African xylophone. Gyil is the principal musical instrument of the Dagara people.

Gyil-daa: The male instrument of the gyil ensemble. The normal ensemble of the gyil orchestra consist of two instruments—a male and a female. In a performance, the male instrument plays lead part while the female plays the support part.
Gyil-mwiɛrɛ: The gyil player or musicians who play the gyil.
Gyil-pog: The female version of the gyil orchestra (see above).
Gyil-tii: A medicine that is prepared with food and remnants of gyil materials for gyil players to eat as a mark of their initiation as professional musicians.
Gyil-tul: A sacred music that is performed at the funeral of a senior gyil-mwiɛrɛ gɔba (an elder gyil player) in which the gyil keys are rearranged and mixed up in certain ways for gyil players to play certain songs to honor musical legacy of the deceased gɔba.
Kontombile: The human fairies sometimes referred to as dwarfs. Mythology has it that it is through the dwarfs that Dagara received the gyil as their musical instrument.
Kotuolu: Restraining and calming down the emotional outpour of immediate bereaved relatives at funeral rituals (see the work of Jack Goody, 1963).
Ko-yaar: The funeral ritual of closure—the final funeral rite.
Kpagru: The supporting rhythm to the gyil music in which one player use the bud end of the gyil mallet to play a time line to the music.
Kpangkpol: A gyil mounted over a dug out trench on the ground for children to practice their gyil playing.
Kuor: A gourd drum that is used to accompany the Dagara gyil music.
Kuor-wuofu: The formal commencement of the funeral ritual.
Kuor-yab: The collection of money by bereaved family members at funeral performance to pay the musicians and dirge singers.
Kyobru: The preliminary preparations for the funeral ritual. This includes preparing the corpse for public viewing and mourning.
Langni: The funeral dirges that are performed alongside with the funeral gyil music.
Lang-konmɛ: The official title for Dagara dirge singers.
Lang-muoli: Women funeral dirges (see chapter four).
Lang-wogo: A long recitation dirge that is performed recount lfe history of the deceased.
Lobie: Certain harmful projectiles are that people use at funeral to harm their enemies (see Malidoma Some, 1993).
Logyil: The minor pentatonic scale of the Dagara gyil.
Lobri: The music that is played on the logyile to announce funerals to nearby communities. This music is gender-specific and when played at funerals, one can tell the gender of the deceased.
Naa: A term for a rich person or a chief.
Naalu: wealth or riches.
Naamwin: The name for God.
Nabaglɛ Hunter
Paala: The funeral pyre. The paala is a palanquin on which the corpse is seated for public viewing throughout the entire funeral celebrations.
Paala pɛr: The ritual space surrounding the funeral pyre where the performance of music, dancing and other esoteric rituals take place.

Pampiɛ: Spider webs or spider egg sacks used to cover holes drilled over the gyil gourds. They provide a distinctive buzzy sound that gives the gyil a unique tembral quality.

Pog ganɛ sɛb: A widower ritual in which the wife of a deceased wears a rope around their waist during the funeral celebration. This clearly identifies them to the people who are attending the funeral.

Saab: The traditional meal of the Dagara people made from corn and/or millet. This is the meal with which the gyil medicine is prepared for new initiate gyil players.

Sissala: An ethnic group that lives among the Dagara people in northwestern Ghana. Although their language is different to the Dagara language, they also play an instrument similar to the gyil.

Tengan: The earth shrine or earth deity where religious and other sacred sacrifices are performed by the custodians of the land in bounded Dagara communities.

Tengan-sob: The chief priest of the earth shrine. He is the custodian of the land and is in charge of the distribution of land to new settlers as well as the religious head of his community.

Zanu: The reenactment of the life history of a deceased.

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Bernard Woma

800 N Smith Rd. Apt K 5
Bloomington, IN 47408
(716) 785-3348
www.bernardwoma.com
bbwoma@yahoo.com

Professional Interest:

- Teaching in African music, Ethnomusicology, African History and International Studies. Specialized in African hand drumming percussion and xylophone music.
- Performing artist, composer of African music, and music teacher for 20 years.

Education:

- Bachelor of Science in International Studies, with minors in Art Administration and History, May 2008 State University of New York at Fredonia.
- Masters of Art in African Studies, Indiana University.
- Graduate Student, Masters in Ethnomusicology, Indiana University.

Computer Experience:

- Average working knowledge in Microsoft Office Applications.

Summary of Qualifications:

- State Ceremonial Drummer for Ghana, (performed as the Atumpan welcoming drummer) on international television for former United States President Bill Clinton, Nelson Mandela of South Africa and Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain. Cultural resource artist to the children of the United States President, Barack Obama 2009.
- International concert artist and visiting scholar to England, Germany, Japan, South Korea, France, The Netherlands, Indonesia, Martinique, United States, Denmark, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast and Zimbabwe since 1989 – present.
- Wide experience in academic teaching for 20 years.
- Lecturer and visiting artist in African Music at State University of New York Fredonia, NY 1998 - 2009. Bowling Green State University, Ohio, 2002-2003. Oakland University MI 2003 and Williams College, MA 2003-2005, University of Akron, Ohio 2006, 2008, 2009- 2011. Hamline University, MN 2008, 2009 and 2012.
- Assistant Instructor African Music, Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology Indiana University, 2010-2012.
- Compositions for Orchestras, Chamber Orchestras, Modern dance companies, Composed for Young Audience at Carnegie Hall, 2006, Avery Fisher Hall Lincoln Center with the New York Philharmonic, NYC

2007, South Dakota Symphony Orchestra 2008, Minnesota Orchestra, 2009 and Albany Symphony Orchestra 2011.

- Founder and Director of Dagara Music and Art Center, Accra Ghana, 2000 - present.
- Artistic Director, Saakumu Dance Troupe 1997 – present.
- Band Leader, Bernard Woma Ensemble 2005 – present
- Co-Founder and Partner, Jumbie Records.

Publications, Recordings and Career Related Experience:

- Publications of my music work in Arts & Entertainment newspapers. Reviews in the New York Times and various local and international magazines in Ghana and the United States.
- Released seven CD albums, two dance video recordings and six cassette albums. Guest Artist on five CD albums.
- Submitted works for documentaries to major TV stations in Ghana, and collaborated with international music film makers in New York City, Brazil and London.
- Established the first private music and art institute in Ghana, the Dagara Music Center and Arts Center.
- Established the only Children African Xylophone Ensemble in the world based in New York City.
- Advocate on HIV-AIDS, Community Health and Sanitation Awareness, and Music Education for young age.

Honors and Awards:

- Leader of the three times award winning Saakumu Dance Troupe 2001, 2003, and 2005.
- Kakube Music Festival Award, Best Xylophonist of the Nandom Tradition 1997.
- Drummer of the year, Ghana National Dance Company 1994.
- Nominee for the Landford Presidential Award for graduating seniors at the State University of New York, Fredonia, 2008.