About the Dagomba

Introduction

The Dagomba, or as they call themselves, Dagbamba, are an ethnic group based in the Northern Region of Ghana. The Dagomba have a rich, intricate musical and oral tradition that has allowed them to preserve their history and origins in the form of what can be referred to as "dance-drumming," which is the focus of this site. Many of these dance-drumming compositions, including the majority of the ones presented here, tell the stories of important events or people in the history of the Dagomba. As is the case with many societies in Ghana and throughout Africa, music has an integral place in the ceremonies and day-to-day lives of the Dagomba, and it is through their music that they remind themselves of who they are and from whom and where they came.

The Dagomba inhabit a traditional kingdom known as Dagbon and speak a language called Dagbani or Dagbanli. As Professor Locke is fond of saying in class, "the Dagbamba speak Dagbanli in Dagbon." Dagbani is part of the More-Dagbani subgroup of the Gur languages, a group that stretches across the Sahel from southeastern Mali to northwestern Nigeria. As of a census taken in the year 2000, there are about 656,000 Dagobas. Islam was introduced into Dagbon society towards the end of the 1700s, and while it has exerted a strong influence on their customs, they still retain many of their pre-Islamic beliefs; Islam can be seen in the way they practice their tradition and likewise their tradition is evident in the way they practice Islam.

Origins

The story of the beginnings of Dagbon is a long, complicated, and deep narrative, and presenting a comprehensive history of the Dagomba is not the purpose of this site. However, it is important to provide some rudimentary framework about where the Dagomba came from. As recounted by Staniland, the people who would eventually become the Dagomba did not originate in Ghana, but rather in what is now northern Nigeria. These people traversed the Sahel, moving from Nigeria through the present day countries of Mali, Ivory Coast, and Burkina Faso before settling in Ghana. Toha-zie, the Red Hunter, is the ancestor who led the final southwestern migration from Bawku, at Ghana's northeastern border, to present-day Dagbon. His grandson, Naa Gbewaa, is considered the common ancestor of the Dagomba and two related groups, the Nanumba and the Mamprussi. Sitobu, Naa Gbewaa's son, is the father of Dagomba and the man who begat the royal lineage of the chiefs of Dagbon.

The Kingdom of Dagbon

The modern-day nation of Ghana is divided into ten geographical regions and the Dagomba live in the Northern Region, which is further subdivided into districts. The traditional kingdom of Dagbon in Ghana predates colonialism, but in terms of today's administrative boundaries, Dagbon encompasses the Northern region districts of Tolon-Kumbungu, Savelugu/Nanton, Tamale Municipal, Yendi, Karaga, Gushiegu, Saboba/Chereponi, and Zabzugu/Tatale, and covers an area of 8,000 square miles of dry savannah.

The picture below is a map of the Northern region of Ghana and its districts.

Chieftaincy

One of the major and most conspicuous features of Dagomba society is chieftaincy. There has been a line of paramount chiefs that stretches back to the days of Naa Nyagsi, the son of Sitobu. Their system of chieftaincy is very hierarchical, with the Yaa-Naa, or paramount chief, at its head and a tiered system of rulers below him. In Dagbon, chiefs traditionally sit on a stack of skins. For this reason, when a person assumes a chief position, they are said to have been "skinned," rather than enthroned. As an example, to say that so-and-so is "sitting on the Savelugu skin" means that the person is chief of the town called Savelugu.

Chieftaincies are generally associated with towns or villages and are categorized by who is eligible for them. Staniland outlines 5 levels of chieftaincy, the first four of which he labels "royal" chieftaincies. Royal chieftaincies are only available to those who can trace themselves through the male line back to Naa Nyagsi. If a man is not appointed to one of the royal chieftaincies, his descendants lose their royal status. The first group of chieftaincies is reserved for the sons of Yaa-Naa. The second group of chieftaincies is for grandsons of Yaa-Naa. The third group is reserved for daughters of Yaa-Naa. The fourth group is for sons of the sisters of Yaa-Naa. The fifth group, which are not considered "royal," are for court elders. These often have some specific responsibility attached to them. For example, the chief of Tolon is traditionally the head of the Dagbon's cavalry.

Chiefs are generally chosen by the Yaa-Naa who is aided by a council of elders situated in Yendi, or in the case of smaller town chieftaincies by the divisional chief above him. The Yaa-Naa is chosen by a set of elders and chiefs from around the kingdom, referred to as the kingmakers. Because a person's ability to become chief depends on the level achieved by their father, competitions for certain chieftaincies can become very fierce. Something else that contributes to the intensity of this competition is that Dagomba society is polygynous. As powerful men, chiefs tend to have many wives. As a result, a chief can die with a large number of surviving siblings, children, and nephews, all of whom have a vested interest in who ascends to that position. Once a man dies without having reached a certain position, his line becomes ineligible for that post and his descendants lose some of their status. This has the potential to generate immense conflict when it comes time to skin a new chief and often does.

Many of the history stories on this site deal with how specific men came to sit on their skins. The proverbs attached to these dance-drumming compositions are often warnings to would-be challengers of these chiefs. They have demonstrated their power by attaining their position, and to go up against them would be considered foolish for most men to attempt.

Drumming and Drummers
The Dagomba have a variety of types of music and to discuss them all properly is beyond the scope of this site. Suffice it to say that while the drumming discussed here plays a major role in Dagbon, it is only a portion of the rich musical culture possessed by the Dagomba.

Music plays a central role in Dagbon. It is in musical form that Dagomba history has been preserved over the centuries. At events called sambanlunga, knowledgeable storytellers weave together intriguing narratives that can stretch from sundown to sunrise the following day and go deep into the history of Dagbon. At the more routine level, drumming is used to remind people of their familial connections. Dagombas can trace themselves back to important figures in their past and swell with pride upon hearing the praise-names of an important ancestor.

Dagomba drums are referred to as "talking drums," a term attributed to drums across much of West Africa and the rest of the continent. The drums are not just making musical sound, but are speaking literal words. Dagbani is a tonal language, which makes it conducive to being played on drums. While not the only ones, the quintessential drums associated with Dagbon are the lunga and gungon (for detail about them, see lunga and gungon.)

Drummers enjoy a special status in Dagbon society. The story of how drumming began in Dagbon is another deep, intricate narrative that is not supposed to be discussed freely. Therefore, please recognize that the following story is a distilled version appropriate for this forum, and know that I put this here because I believe some context is helpful. According to the oral tradition, the first drummer was Bizung, a son of Naa Nyagsi whose mother died while he was young. As a motherless child, he had no choice but to wear torn clothing, was only given leftovers to eat, and was picked on by the other children of the household. His only solace in this miserable existence was the pleasure he found in banging on a calabash drum outside the family compound. Eventually, Naa Nyagsi appointed him as the court historian and the role of the drummer in Dagbon was created. All drummers today trace themselves back to Bizung, who they call "grandfather." For a fuller version of this story, refer to Drum Damba.

Because Bizung was offered the paramount chieftaincy but declined, the drummers, or lunsi, consider themselves royalty, and have a hierarchical system of chieftaincy that parallels the royal one. Every chief in Dagbon has his own set of drummers. In the olden days, a chief would not walk or go anywhere without an entourage behind him, including drummers. When a chief is on the move, his drummers play to announce his presence and ancestry to those within earshot. The relationship between drummers and chiefs is reciprocal; drummers convey an air of power to the chiefs, and the drummers also receive prestige from their status as important figures in a chief's court.

Drummers in Dagbon are first and foremost storytellers and keepers of history. In written literature, such musicians have been termed griot. While musicianship is also an important component of the drumming, a primary charge of the drummers is to preserve the history stories, which are stored in musical form. Drummers know and understand the relationships between the people who live in their towns, and know for example can look at a person and know who their parents and grandparents are. The most prized drummers are those whose hands are quick enough to make the music enjoyable and whose minds are capable of remembering large numbers of people and their extended family trees.

The clichéd saying that examining the past allows us to navigate the present and predict the future pertains to the role of drummers in Dagbon, who serve as advisors to chiefs and the general populace. It is their job to be aware of people who are behaving in ways outside of accepted social norms and through the use of talk, music and proverbs to remind that person of what proper behavior is, or remind them of the consequences of another person who behaved in a similar way. An example of this can be seen in Jenkuno (see <here>), in which the drum language talks about the eternal relationship of cats and mice. The drum language in Jenkuno refers to a mouse sneaking into a room where there is a cat that appears to be sleeping. The ambiguous ending implies that the cat eventually catches the mouse and eats it. This song was composed as a warning to a figure in a chief's court who was using his control of access to the paramount chief as a way to extort money from people trying to visit him. Frustrated with the situation, people eventually tried to sneak around this man. The song chastises both the man, or "cat," for trying to cheat people and the people, or "mice," for violating traditional protocol. While the people for whom this was originally composed are no longer alive, the moral of the story is easily applicable to current situations.

About the Author

My name is Elana Cohen-Khani, and I am graduating senior in Tufts’ Class of ’08. I have been a been member of Kiniwe, Tufts’ African Drum and Dance Ensemble, since my first semester at Tufts. I became interested in Dagomba culture after completing some of Professor Locke's assigned readings for the class, and over the years I have worked towards increasing my own understanding of Dagomba culture as well as the cultures of some of Ghana's other ethnic groups. In the fall of 2006, I spent a semester studying abroad at the University of Ghana at Legon in Ghana's capital city, Accra. After the semester was over, I traveled to Dagbon and spent a month and a half living in Alhaji's household.

This page was written as part of my project for the Africa in the New World minor at Tufts. It is not intended to be an exhaustive or definitive account of Dagomba culture. Rather, my intention is to introduce the Dagomba to fellow students in an approachable way, and hopefully to clarify some of the things that I found confusing when I first began to approach the drum histories found here.

The main sources I used for this information were The Lions of Dagbon, by Martin Staniland (1975), Growing up in Dagbon, by Christine Oppong, (1973), and Drum Damba, by David Locke. Anything below that interests you can be found in much greater detail in these works.