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# Sounding the woods: the significance of *gyil* music in Dagara funeral ceremonies

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## Abstract

This article examines the musical meaning and role that the *gyil* (a pentatonic xylophone) plays during Dagara funeral ceremonies in north-west Ghana. It is based on several months of ethnographic fieldwork in the Nandom traditional area in Ghana's upper western region. Whereas Dagara funerary rituals have undergone transformation over time, *gyil* music remains a fundamental and essential aspect of them. What then makes *gyil* music so indispensable in Dagara funerals? This study establishes that *gyil* music is essential because of its affective nature: the music moves funeral attendants in certain powerful ways – an experience that the Dagara claim cannot be found with any other music. The music propels funeral attendants to express their emotions in culturally acceptable ways, and thus bestows both cultural identity and authenticity on the funeral as a true Dagara event. In this regard, the music is crucial for asserting 'Dagaraness' within the current milieu of cultural heterogeneity in contemporary Ghana.

## Introduction

Funerals are significant social events among the Dagara of Ghana. Each occasion offers families a space to mourn the deceased according to traditional religious and cultural practices. Music plays an integral role in Dagara funeral ceremonies. Almost every death triggers musical performances that stimulate typical and diverse emotional reactions during funerary events. Music essentially drives the symbolic behaviours which constitute Dagara people's endorsement of a deceased person, as well as validates the funeral as a public event (Saighoe 1988; Dankwa 2018). Funerals in Dagara society revolve around a pentatonic xylophone called the *gyil*, the use of which is paramount. Somé (1994:59), a Dagara spiritualist and scholar, captures this succinctly: 'without the xylophones [...] there is no funeral, no grief, and no death'.<sup>1</sup>

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1 However, not all deaths in Dagara society are publicly commemorated with *gyil* music. Distinctions between 'bad deaths' and 'good deaths' are integral to the Dagara. In principle, the demise of anyone except for an adult of considerable age is termed a 'bad death' and raises suspicions of supernatural interventions. Such deaths are usually not celebrated publicly and, therefore, do not require *gyil* music.

The cultural practices around death and dying among the Dagara have been transformed over time. Influences of Christianity, Western education, urbanisation, migration and internal transformation inspired by events within communities have encouraged significant changes to the content and process of Dagara funerals and associated rituals (Godsey 1980; Kuukure 1985; McCoy 1988; Woma 2012; Gbal 2013). For instance, funeral duration, which once lasted between four and five days, has been reduced to a single day in order not to hinder economic activities in Dagara communities (Gbal 2013:44–48). Similarly, coffins have replaced the mats and cloths that corpses were wrapped in and, therefore, this has changed the way that the Dagara bury their dead. Traditionally, dead bodies were buried by spiritually fortified individuals in chamber-like graves with round entrances. Today, however, corpses are buried in trench graves, a practice that is deemed an affront in Dagara culture (p. 49).<sup>2</sup> The conversion of many Dagara to Catholicism has also introduced a Christian religious dimension to funerals. A requiem mass, which would normally be supervised by a priest according to the ordinances of the church, may today be recited at funerals where the deceased were Catholic.

Despite the transformations mentioned above, traditional xylophone playing has remained one of the stable and venerable aspects of Dagara funerary practices (Goody 1962; Godsey 1980; Woma 2012; Gbal 2013; Dankwa 2018). The use of heavily amplified sound systems, which play recorded music at funerals in many parts of Ghana, is uncommon among the Dagara. Although other music types may be performed at Dagara funerals, *gyil* music remains paramount. The fundamental question is: What makes *gyil* music so indispensable in Dagara funerals? The answer to this question is based on an examination of the role of the *gyil* in Dagara funerals and, particularly, its meaning for the Dagara people. This article explores how *gyil* music constitutes a meaningful form of community experience and serves as an avenue for expressing communal sentiments during funerals. It situates *gyil* music as the fountain from which all activities germane to Dagara funerals flow. Communal wailing, dirges and dances performed to mourn and celebrate the accomplishments of the deceased are conducted around and through the *gyil*. Accordingly, the essence of mourning and celebrations of life in Dagara funerals are heavily linked to the *gyil*. The music does not only articulate the defining features of the funeral, but also shapes and transforms it.

This study is based on ethnographic research conducted in the Nandom traditional area located in the extreme north-west of Ghana. The area is comprised of small villages whose administrative, political, educational and religious centre is the town of Nandom. Between 2010 and 2014 I attended several funeral ceremonies of people of varying ages, each time in the company of one of three musicians who were central to my work. The paper relies significantly on participant observations, fieldnotes and interviews with articulate

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2 According to Gbal (2013:49), only slaves in Dagara society were buried in trench graves. This new development 'has in a way breached the social gap in the burial of the free man [and the slave] in Dagara society'.

*gyl* musicians and non-musicians possessing deep knowledge of Dagara funerary rituals. Since this study is primarily about xylophone music and its meaning to the Dagara people in funerary contexts, the way that ‘meaning’ is used as an analytical framework will be discussed first. The focus then turns to the Dagara people and their music by situating the *gyl* as the most important musical instrument in Dagara society. This will pave the way for a discussion on the significance of *gyl* music in Dagara funerals, especially considering its role in the organisation and performance of essential rites.

### *Conceptualising musical meaning*

It is widely acknowledged that music is meaningful to people in various respects (Merriam 1964; DeNora 2000; Turino 2008). The question of how exactly music has meaning, however, has prompted sharp debates. Whereas some consider meaning to be something intrinsic to the music itself, others argue that it derives from shared, socially-mediated experiences. Historically, the former position arose with the development of European music as an art form that could be appreciated for its own sake (Kramer 2001). Art music compositions were understood as autonomous and their meanings purely musical. Instrumental forms such as the symphony, sonata and string quartets particularly epitomised the concept of autonomous music. With their supposedly incomparable aesthetic greatness, meaning in these genres was considered purely in terms of the sound complex, independent of any social, cultural or historical contingencies.

By contrast, and specifically within ethnomusicology, there are approaches that emphasise cultural conceptualisations and social predispositions to meaning in music. Such paradigms go beyond the structuring of sounds to theorise meaning in music, and includes its engagement with things beyond itself, such as language, culture, religion, politics and other domains of life. The inclusion of these dimensions is crucial for a deeper understanding of music (Small 1998). Ethnomusicology has been influential in advancing interpretive approaches that foreground the cultural contexts of music-making as the foundation for understanding any music (see Merriam 1964; Nettl 2005 [1983]; Rice 2017). Following various interdisciplinary models of analysis, the approach to musical meaning rests primarily on how cultural and social processes confer meaning on music and vice versa. As Berliner (1978:xvi) notes, ‘it would be difficult to gain insight into the meaning of any music divorced from its culture’. In this regard, meaning in music is relativised as articulations of cultural or social concepts. Blacking expresses this idea more succinctly: ‘the sounds of musical instruments [and] patterns of melody or harmony [...] do not have absolute meaning in themselves. Their meanings are assigned to them by society’ (Byron 1995:41). From an ethnomusicological perspective, meaning in music is inextricably tied to the cultural practices that shape its production and usage.

These contrasting perspectives, however, are not wholly contingent on epistemological differences in music scholarship, but rather entail a practical problem of definition. The word ‘meaning’, whether used in a colloquial or philosophical sense, is a fluid term

that eludes precise descriptions (Ogden & Richards 2001 [1923]; Perman 2020:8–10). It is therefore important to explain what is meant by ‘meaning’ here. In advocating a coherent theory of musical meaning in music studies, Rice (2017:83–106) identifies at least three senses in which the word itself can be employed. These are ‘the signified, the intended, and the valued’. By approaching musical meaning in terms of the ‘signified’, emphasis is placed on the ‘structural, syntactical and semiotic aspects of meaning’ (p. 89). Here, the inner workings of music, what is referenced, indexed or communicated, and the experiences that are offered to the listener, form the central issues of analysis (see also Kramer 1990, 2001; McClary 1991). The second definition of meaning (i.e. ‘the intended’) subsists in the purpose for which music is created, performed and/or employed. While the above two definitions of meaning are relatively narrow in scope, the notion of ‘the valued’ offers ‘a basis for the broader conception of meaning’ (Rice 2017:83–106). This broad definition encapsulates music’s significance, function, importance, merit and value in human life. It also provides a broader spectrum to subsume the other aspects of meaning such as the ‘signified’ and ‘intended’. In this study, ‘meaning’ is applied in a broad sense as a vital interpretive tool for understanding the significance of the *gyil* in Dagara funeral ceremonies. This provides a valuable framework for discussing the cultural relevance that inspires the use of the *gyil* in funerary contexts, especially through analysis of the oral history surrounding the instrument, the sound complex, performers, song repertoire and aesthetics.

In what follows, I present a brief overview of the Dagara people, focusing on their ethnicity, music and funerary practices. In the north-west of Ghana where the Dagara live, the categories of ethnic identification remain poorly understood and, thus, fosters an inaccurate view of the peoples and their music. Several ethnic groups in the area play xylophones of an identical nature, as well as share many similarities in cultural practices. What ensues is that their identities are misunderstood and misrepresented in various discourses. Although the groups have common cultural traits including xylophone playing, there are distinctive features that differentiate them according to their specific ethnic identifications.

### *The Dagara people*

The Dagara in Nandom belong to a larger ethnic group who speak Dagaare, which is a Mabia language of the Niger-Congo phylum (Bodomo, Abubakari & Issah 2020).<sup>3</sup> Historically, their identity has remained complicated, having been referred to as Dagarti, LoDagaba and Lobi by various authors. These exonyms follow a complex history of colonial encounters and anthropological explorations in Ghana’s north-western territory. Cardinall (1920) and Rattray (1932) were among the first to

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3 Due to the arbitrary nature of international boundaries in West Africa, Dagaare speakers are located across eastern Côte d’Ivoire, southern Burkina Faso and north-west Ghana.

conduct ethnographic studies within Dagaare-speaking communities. Commissioned by the British colonial administration of the Gold Coast (i.e. present-day Ghana), their research provided anthropological insights into how people could be assimilated into the colonial government system. Cardinall and Rattray called them Dagarti and Lobi, respectively.

In the mid-20th century Goody (1956, 1962) established 'LoDagaa' as an ethnic classification for the Dagaare. Goody's research classification of the 1950s was based on his observation that the people did not have a centralised political system. Therefore, 'settlements [did] not automatically group themselves into larger territorially defined units that one [could] call a society or tribe' (1962:2). Without a well-defined ethnonym, the people designated themselves by the names of the settlements in which they lived, including Jirbaale (a person from Jirapa), Losaale (a person from Lawra) or Nandome (a person from Nandom). Nonetheless, people in one settlement area distinguished themselves from those of other neighbouring settlements with a pair of directional terms: 'Lo' and 'Dagaa', which denote East and West respectively (Goody 1962:3). Based on these directional terms, Goody introduced the LoDagaa classification (1956), which referred to the continuum of cultural and linguistic practices that extended from East to West. The people who are today called Dagara fell on the Dagaa end of Goody's spectrum and were hence called LoDagaba (1962:5; see also Lentz 2006). Thereafter, LoDagaba became a popular exonym for other scholars, including Godsey (1980) and Hawkins (1996). The LoDagaba, Dagarti and Lobi labels are rejected today by the people for their distasteful historic associations and general inaccuracy (Lentz 2006). Instead, they identify as Dagaaba/Dagara (plural) or Dago (singular), which is based on a dialect of the Dagaare language (Mwinlaaru 2017). In this paper I refer to the people of Nandom as Dagara.

The Dagara are among several groups in north-west Ghana, including the Sisaala and Birifor, whose primary musical instrument is the xylophone.<sup>4</sup> In these societies, the xylophone occupies a position that is equivalent to the drum in other areas of Ghana and Africa. Regardless of some differences in size and number of keys, these xylophones share an almost identical construction. Specifically, the Birifor xylophone (*kogyil*) has 14 keys, while the Dagara *gyil* and Sisaala *jensi* have 17 and 18 keys respectively. The Sisaala *jensi* xylophone is bigger in size, and deeper and raspier in tone than the Dagara and Birifor instruments. However, they share common features in tuning, performance practice and contextual usages. There is also considerable cultural borrowing among the groups. The Dagara, for instance, also play a 14-key xylophone called a *lo-gyil*, which is an adaptation of the Birifor *kogyil*, whereas the Sisaala *jensi* is historically of Dagara origin (Seavoy 1982:41–50).<sup>5</sup> All these instruments belong to a rich culture of xylophones spread across

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4 Like the Dagara, the Birifor were historically mislabeled Lobi, an exonym that remains unchanged regardless of the people's own opinion (Hogan 2011).

5 The Dagara primarily use the 14-key *lo-gyil* for *bewaa* recreational dance music, while the 17-key *daga-gyil* is reserved for funerals and other important social occasions.

the breadth of the West African Savannah belt. They represent a pre-colonial past that predates arbitrary colonial borders and, therefore, points to a broader tradition of African expressive culture (Charry & Dankwa 2020:201–215).

### *The gyil in Dagara society*

The word ‘*gyil*’ in Dagara language literally means ‘gather’, referring to the traditional context of music-making where people gathered around xylophones (Woma 2012:36). The Dagara attribute the origin of the *gyil* to the *kontombile*, a mystical being of human-like appearance often interpreted as a dwarf or fairy. According to Dagara mythology, a hunter discovered the *gyil* through a supernatural encounter with the *kontombile*. Several versions of this myth have been recorded by Wiggins and Kobom (1992:3), Vercelli (2006:19) and Woma (2012:36–41). According to this narrative, a hunter saw a *kontombile* (dwarf) playing the *gyil* in the bush during one of his hunting expeditions and, captivated by the music, wanted to bring the *gyil* home for human use. Through extraordinary magic ploys, the hunter overpowered the *kontombile* and forced it to teach him how to make and play the instrument. After he had learned all that there was to know about the *gyil*, the hunter eventually killed the *kontombile*, roasted and ate its meat. In the process of roasting the meat, some of the blood spilled on the *gyil* and so it ‘cannot be played by women because they menstruate and their blood would not mix with that of the [*kontombile*]’ (Wiggins & Kobom 1992:3). This myth, which is often told to young people during early training in *gyil* playing, has deep meaning for the Dagara. The *kontombile* is not considered an ordinary being in Dagara cosmology. In the words of Woma (2016), ‘the *kontombili* [plural] are intermediaries between human beings and *Naamwin*, the Supreme Being [God]’. Thus, the Dagara attribute the origin of several things to them, including divination, magic, medicines and xylophone construction (Somé 1994:69), which are considered divine gifts from *Naamwin* to benefit society. The Dagara assert that the *gyil* has a divine origin and a sacred value in society because of these myths (Woma 2012:36–40). The *gyil* is therefore indispensable to many events with a significant spiritual dimension such as funerals and traditional religious worship. The sound of the instrument, as Woma notes (p. 41), ‘does not only invoke cognitive healing to the listener [...] but [also] serves as communicative link between [humans] and spirit mediums’. At funerals, the sounds from the *gyil* support the community’s capacity to mourn the dead, as well as guide the deceased’s spirit on its journey to the afterlife.

The pivotal role of the *gyil* in Dagara society is enabled by musicians who are both part-time music specialists and full-time subsistence farmers. Their specialisation is also recognised by society as a divine gift, since the Dagara claim that ‘*gyil* players are born and not made’ (Chemougo 2010). Those who are elected by divine providence to become xylophonists may attain the level of *gɔbaa*, a Dagaare word for master xylophonists (Dankwa 2013). Individuals who do not have a divine calling but try to become xylophonists arguably end up as mediocre musicians (*gɔbgau*) and rarely attain proficiency

in the art. *Gyl* playing in Dagara society is also traditionally conceived as men's work because of the *kontombile* myth. Skilled musicians usually come from families with a history of xylophone playing. The men in such families develop musical skills from an early age, yet many without 'divine calling' never develop their talents to the degree necessary for performances in public and, particularly, at funerals. Unlike the griots of the Mande in Mali and Guinea, who are full-time musicians and depend on support from the noble class for their economic livelihood (Charry 2000:96–105), Dagara xylophone musicians are freelance practitioners. Incentives from performances at funerals and other social occasions may provide supplementary income.

*Gyl* playing in Dagara society manifests in a variety of contexts. For example, it accompanies a common dance genre for Dagara youth called *bewaa*. The dance involves subtle runs, twists and turns, vigorous swinging of the body and heavy foot-stomping symbolic of the Dagara's youthful vitality. Young women wriggle their torsos effortlessly while men stomp on the ground heavily and fearlessly, raising a fair amount of dust into the air. Dagara adults have a similar dance called *bine* that is performed with the xylophones during festive occasions. The *gyl* is also played in Dagara Catholic churches to accompany singing during celebrations of the mass (Rau 2015). Xylophone music features prominently in the annual Nandom Kakube festival. The festival, which occurs in the last week of November to celebrate a successful farming season, presents various music and dance groups in a competition of traditional dances as well as xylophone performances with specific prizes.

### *Gyl music in Dagara funerals*

Of the several integral contexts of xylophone playing, funerals are by far the most important. In Dagara society, death is an occasion of the gravest crisis. Funeral ceremonies involve several stages of immense religious significance for the Dagara people, a detailed discussion of which is beyond the scope of this article. To appreciate the centrality of *gyl* music in this context, however, an overview of Dagara traditional beliefs about death is essential. The Dagara people believe that death is not an end to life. It is 'a kind of new birth into another world, where one lives on as a changed, transformed person, [modified] in status and power' (Kuukure 1985:111). This change in status is accomplished through funeral performances. At death, and according to the Dagara, *sie* (the person's soul) leaves the body and becomes *nyaakpiin* (a ghost). *Nyaakpiin* hovers around in a liminal state belonging neither to *tengzu* (the physical world) nor *dapaarewie* (the spiritual world of the ancestors), and thus poses potential dangers to the surviving kin and community at large (Somé 1997:76). At the completion of the funeral rites, however, *nyaakpiin* is transformed into *nikpeεε*, an ancestral spirit-being that eventually becomes beneficial to the family and ensures a sense of continuity between the living and the dead. The significance of the funeral thus lies in ancestral beliefs, facilitating the transcendence of departed souls to the



‘otherworld’ for the restitution of balance in society. Based on such beliefs, a funeral is usually held as soon as a person dies.<sup>6</sup>

The *gyil* has a crucial function at Dagara funerals. When death occurs in a village, the *lo-gyil* is used to communicate the news to the immediate neighbourhood and surrounding villages using special tunes called *lobri*. The music includes specific repertoire easily identified by the community as a sort of ‘death-announcement’. Public mourning rites, which make out the most important stage of the funeral, are accompanied by a relatively elaborate xylophone ensemble in a genre called *kuurbine* or ‘funeral dance music’. The *kuurbine* ensemble is comprised of a pair of 17-key xylophones (*daga-gyil*), a gourd drum (*kuor*) and a chorus of singers led by a dirge cantor (*langkōne*). The mourning rites acquire their essence from *kuurbine* music entirely, with the social status and popularity of the deceased and, sometimes, of the family indicated by the intensity of the performance. Based on the significance of *lobri* and *kuurbine* in the organisation and performance of Dagara funerals, these genres are examined for their relevance to the discourse. It is argued that *gyil* players inspire collective behaviours, direct proceedings, and pace rituals and emotional displays, thus forming an essential part of the human life-cycle, especially the final transition beyond the physical world.

### *Lobri* tunes

Announcing death through *lobri* music has been a longstanding practice among the Dagara. *Lobri* tunes spread the news of death in Dagara villages as a kind of proto-telegraph, and also indicate the gender of the deceased. These short and repetitive instrumental tunes have underlying and implied texts that many Dagara can understand and verbalise. Contextual experience further enables people to distinguish between melodies that announce the death of a man or a woman, with the words underlying the melodies explicating gender roles in Dagara society. For instance, tunes announcing the death of men may have words about farming. Women, on the other hand, are generally responsible for housekeeping, with texts announcing their death mainly focused on culinary activities, motherhood and marital roles.

The words in *lobri* music are usually not expressed in plain language, but in the form of proverbs and metaphorical allusions. A *gyil* player may play the following text to announce the death of a man, for example:<sup>7</sup>

<i>Gandaa kukur ka kple kple</i>	A hero’s farming hoe is broken
<i>A pog zeng gu, mong tan saab</i>	His wife must eat soil for food

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6 My observations in Nandom suggest that the Dagara arrange to bury the dead quickly. While some Dagara may preserve their dead relatives in morgues, which is not forbidden by tradition, such instances are rather rare.

7 This practice has been called speech surrogacy in African music (see Nketia 1971). The tonal nature of the Dagaare language allows *gyil* players to map words onto the instrument’s individual slats for the communication of messages.

The Dagara draw meaning through connections between the words and daily communal life. *Kukur* (farming hoe), for instance, does not only denote a specific economic activity among the Dagara, but also the category of people (men) with whom that activity is associated. The hoe is the major implement that Dagara farmers traditionally use for tilling. Given that farmers work hard with the *kukur* to provide food for their families and society, they are regarded as heroes (*gandaa*). In a sense, the text laments a farmer's broken hoe, and while a broken hoe can be repaired or replaced, such damage to a farmer's implements is a relatively private affair. Upon hearing the text, listeners perceive a condition that is more serious than just a broken implement. The *kukur* signifies the farmer's strength in a metaphorical sense, and by announcing that it is broken (*kukur ka kple kple*), 'it implies the irretrievably broken strength of the farmer' and serves as 'an idiomatic expression for his death' (Chemougo 2010).

Similarly, a xylophonist may figuratively announce the death of a woman as follows:

<i>Birkpakpa dugre</i>	The great matron of sour leaves sauce
<i>Dan kon dug dambil zier</i>	She who would cook palatable soup even with minimal ingredients
<i>Samonbiin mong sakere</i>	The best cook has failed
<i>A vuur ka kple</i>	Her stirring stick has broken in the process (Kuutiero 2006:111)

This text focuses on a woman's culinary responsibilities in a household. The *vuur* (stirring stick) is one of the most important implements in a Dagara woman's kitchen and, like the farming hoe, signifies a woman's strength. The broken *vuur* is therefore a proverbial statement that a woman has died. When the above text is played on the xylophone, the Dagara interpret it as a lamentation for the loss of a woman's culinary expertise.

Within the context of mass communication in contemporary Ghanaian society, it may be necessary to question the usefulness of the *gyil* in broadcasting obituaries. In Nandom, for instance, there is a local radio station that families patronise to announce the death of their relatives. However, the belief that news of death is more effectively disseminated through transcendental means keeps the *gyil* relevant. The sound of the *gyil* is considered spiritually powerful and thus more effective in broadcasting the news of death in a village. In addition, the semantic contents of *lobri* music is considered more impressive, imperative and compelling in relation to the verbal utterances in ordinary human speech (see Nzewi, Anyahuru & Ohiaraumunna 2001:91–92). The use of figurative expressions in the announcements is a powerful tool that excites emotions, promotes collective empathy and encourages essential support actions that make the sorrows and misfortunes of the bereaved family communal. For these reasons, the performance of *lobri* may begin as soon as someone has died and end only after the public phase of burial rites.

### *Kuurbine* music

While *lobri* music is crucial for obituaries, Dagara public mourning rites are accompanied by *kuurbine* music. *Kuurbine* is a genre that inspires communal expression of grief through wailing, lamentations, dancing and other emotional behaviours. Dagara mourning rites commence when a corpse is displayed on a platform usually erected around the deceased's compound. This phase of the funeral may span a whole day and is mainly sustained through *kuurbine* music. Dagara funerals usually bring together many *gyil* players who then take turns to lead the performances and thus ensure a continuous flow of music. Funerals may sometimes become a site for negotiating musical competence among *gyil* players. They demonstrate their expertise through appropriate song selections, musical improvisations, running commentaries on the funeral proceedings and the stimulation of active participation in the mourning activities. A musician whose performance engenders active involvement in wailing or dancing is said to have 'made things happen' (Saighoe 1988:167), and is rewarded in cash or kind. Xylophone players are traditionally not paid for their services at funerals, since it is part of their social obligations, but they can be rewarded voluntarily by funeral participants. Xylophonists often ensure that they give their best performance in order to sustain the desired atmosphere of typical Dagara funerary events.

*Gyil* players demonstrate their intent to 'compete' at funerals through the *piira*, an introductory part of *kuurbine* music. The *piira* comprises arrhythmically improvised melodies that function as warm-up exercises for the lead *gyil* player of the *kuurbine* performance. The player uses the *piira* to familiarise himself with the tuning and range of the instrument. On a deeper level, however, the xylophonist plays the *piira* to announce himself and declare his readiness to mourn the deceased. While proving himself as a virtuoso, the *gyil* player personally laments and praises the accomplishments of the deceased through proverbial language. He may also console the bereaved family, and philosophise on the inevitability of death and the havoc it causes in society. The length and musico-semantic content of the *piira* depends on the artistic proclivity of the player. All musicians, however, end the *piira* with the following phrase (Example 1):<sup>8</sup>

Example 1: The end of a *piira*



This phrase serves two important purposes: it is firstly a signal for the entire *kuurbine* ensemble to prepare for performance and, secondly, establishes the central pitch around

8 All music examples were transcribed by the author.

which dirge singers orient their funeral chants. When the ensemble starts to play, the music continues as the mainstay of the funeral, with occasional transitions from one performance group to another.

### Some aesthetic features of *kuurbine* music

*Kuurbine* music derives its beauty and affective power from a combination of melodic and rhythmic patterns. The setting and seating arrangement of the ensemble follows a familiar hierarchic organisation found in many West African music events (see Jones 1959:51–71). A supporting xylophonist (*gyilkpagre*) maintains a recurrent rhythmic motif called a *kpagru*. The *kpagru* approximates what Nketia (1974:131) calls the ‘timeline’ in African percussion music. It externalises the regulative beat of the music, helps to keep the metre and serves as a reference point for the rest of the performers. Sometimes the *gyilkpagre* plays the timeline in one hand and a counter-melody in the other, reinforcing the polyphonic texture of the music. To provide a solid rhythmic ground for the performance, the *kuor* (a semi deep-tone, close-ended gourd drum) is assigned a relatively elaborate rhythmic pattern. Depending on expertise, the *kuor* drummer may play subtle variations on fixed rhythmic structures to reinforce and intensify the overall vitality of the music. The drummer and *gyilkpagre* together provide a solid rhythmic basis for the lead xylophone to play patterns.

*Kuurbine* melodies are relatively short and usually span between 1 and 2 cycles of 12 pulses (Example 2). The lead xylophonist may, however, improvise on a given melody to produce extensive forms, with the player’s skill gauged by the depth of melodic, rhythmic and polyphonic interests added.

Example 2: A popular *kuurbine* tune



It is not possible to accurately capture in text all that a xylophonist may do within a *kuurbine* piece, since the quality of improvisations differs from one performer to another. Even in the case of the same performer, what is played in a particular piece is not the same in all performances. What is viable is to examine some of the most common resources of variation available to the xylophonist for insight into how a *kuurbine* melody may be developed and simulated. The following examples were recorded with Bernard Woma, an internationally renowned Dagara xylophonist. In performing this melody, Woma begins by playing in parallel octaves with both hands:

Example 3: Melody in octaves between hands



He then repeats the melody with some variation (Example 4). In *gyil* playing, the exact repetition of musical patterns can potentially create boredom and is indicative of an unskilled player. In certain contexts, however, repetition of patterns is not regarded as an aesthetic weakness, since it has structural strength which, when properly utilised, helps to establish a line of predictability among various players in the ensemble.

Variations in *gyil* playing may occur with either one or both hands as well as in the melodic contour, rhythm, vertical relationships between hands or in any combination of these elements. In some of the variations, Woma keeps the original melody in the left hand, while the right hand slightly modifies it. The variation is achieved by changing some of the notes in the right hand as shown in the transcription below:

Example 4: Variation I



The xylophonist is not expected to play variations that have little or no relationship with the given melody. A variation develops from the original patterns almost imperceptibly so that it grows into the piece before the next variation is added. A variation usually bears some resemblance to preceding and succeeding ones. In this manner, the original melody may be felt throughout the performance. Woma played the following variation as a sequel to that illustrated in the previous example.

Example 5: Variation II



Ambidexterity is strongly emphasised in Dagara evaluations of excellence in *gyil* playing; ‘a good player is the one who makes both hands sing’ (Ziem 2011). The objective of every *gyil* player is to develop the skill of playing effectively in both hands. A right-handed player usually plays the main melody in the right hand and creates a counter melody in the left, and vice versa. Among ambidextrous players, variation of melodic patterns can take place in both hands simultaneously. Woma’s demonstration of this, which is based on the set melody illustrated in Example 2, is illustrated here:

Example 6: Variation III

The image displays two systems of musical notation for piano accompaniment in 12/8 time. Each system consists of a treble clef staff (right hand) and a bass clef staff (left hand).  
 System 1: The right hand plays a melody of eighth notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4. The left hand plays a counter-melody of dotted eighth notes: G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5.  
 System 2: The right hand plays a descending sequence of the first eight notes of the original melody: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4. The left hand continues with the same counter-melody as in System 1.

It is notable that the treatment of the melody in the right hand is different from that in earlier variations. While the character of the melody was fully maintained in Variations I and II, here Woma selects only the first eight notes and repeats them in a descending sequence, thus extending the melodic material. This approach is very typical for *gyil* musicians. After the melodic identity of a song is established in its original form, the melody often becomes a model for the creation of a new varied version. The player develops ideas from the original song, producing alternative patterns that would be of melodic and rhythmic interest to the listeners. The choice, sequence and development of the structural elements of the song are at players’ discretion, and are informed by their musical sensibility and other contingent factors. The continuous orderly permutation of melodic, rhythmic and harmonic structures not only allows musicians to vary their performance in accordance with Dagara musical practices, but also to make a personal artistic statement.

Improvisation in xylophone playing is deemed an essential feature of *kuurbine* music because of the experience that it offers funeral participants. It inspires vigorous dancing and loud singing of funeral dirges and lamentations in particular. When xylophonists intersperse their playing with terse commentaries on death and its consequences in society, it equally generates wailing among those who understand the text. Dagara xylophone players are acutely aware of this and place much emphasis on this aesthetic singularity. The Dagara funeral is an occasion for expressing a melange of emotions, the intensity

of which can be pulsating for an alien observer. The realisation that a person has lost a parent, spouse, child or friend may result in emotional responses of various kinds. *Kuurbine* music stimulates mourners to externalise these feelings in a dramatic way, especially when it ‘enters deeply into their bones (*kpen nzi poɔ*) and they feel to the core (*wokpe nena*) the pathos of the occasion’ (Yiryella 2010). The music deepens people’s anguish when the reality of loss is lamented through the musicians’ improvisatory musical structures and textual commentaries. It is for this reason that Somé (1994:57) describes Dagara funeral musicians as ‘invaluable engineers of emotions’.

In addition to the xylophone improvisations, *kuurbine* music derives its affective power from the interplay between the xylophones, drums and dirge singing. As a fabric of *kuurbine* music, the dirges are primarily recitatives with highly emotional words. Only its emotional efficacy is mentioned here, while a more in-depth discussion on the musico-semantic analysis of Dagara funeral dirges is included in Dankwa (2018:206–263). Dagara dirge singers (*langkōne*) explore speech-based rhythms and unique vocal timbres to heighten emotions at funerals during the initial stages of public mourning, providing extensive commentaries on death, dying and the afterlife. Crafting the experience of grief, a sense of loss and sorrow of parting, the *langkōne* blends linguistic virtuosity in a sharp voice with accompanying xylophones and drums into an irresistible expressive force that stimulates intense wailing. The wailing becomes particularly louder when the dirge singers extoll the achievements of the deceased and lament the resultant consternation for families. People may run up and down with their hands raised in despair, no longer being able to contain themselves upon hearing the dirges. For Dagara dirge singers, arousing such intense displays of emotion through music is critical for grief management. Outward expression of emotions is considered the most significant means through which loss can be tamed and assimilated into a form with which one can live (see Somé 1994:56). By wailing loudly and running helter-skelter people embrace their sorrow and eventually arrive at a catharsis. Unexpressed emotions over death is considered dangerous to a person’s health, hence the necessity to let out one’s feelings with the help of music. *Kuurbine* music contributes to the management of bereavement and ensures a systematic and positive adjustment to loss in society.

While the music deepens the pathos of the occasion at the initial stages of the public mourning rites, the atmosphere gradually lightens up as the ceremony unfolds. The musicians begin to explore more consolatory and uplifting texts, shifting attention to social issues of the day. With a change to the use of more trivial elements and jokes, individual wailing subsides and dancing takes over. These aspects of *kuurbine* performance underscore the artistic sensibility of Dagara funeral musicians. They know when to stimulate intense wailing and when to relieve the atmosphere with more heartening and playful songs. The mourning eventually turns into a celebration of life with spirited dance movements. Dancing takes on a commemorative meaning through symbolic gestures that honour and celebrate the deceased in a special way. Men, for instance, dance with raised walking sticks or folded umbrellas, break into half runs, and leap and stomp heavily on the ground. Through these gestures, they disassociate themselves from the activities they performed with the deceased before their demise. Women also perform

similar gestures to sever ties with the deceased through carefully synchronised steps consisting of rhythmical movements of the torso and the hands. Music in Dagara funerals and the emotions that they generate are essentially more multivalent than static and closed.

To summarise, *gyil* music plays a significant role in Dagara funeral ceremonies, from the announcement of death to public mourning rites. Its importance in funerals is perhaps understood better when considered within the dynamics of music-making in contemporary Dagara society. The Dagara are by no means immune to the impulses of current musical trends in Ghana and the rest of the world. They are part of the vast system of interconnected societies facilitated by migrations, advanced modes of transportation and technology, to mention a few influential factors. The Dagara are not monolithic as far as music-making is concerned, with coexisting and overlapping music systems forming an integral feature of musical experiences today. In the Nandom traditional area where this research was conducted, Ghanaian popular genres such as highlife, hiplife, hip hop and reggae fill the daily soundscape. These genres, which are often blasted through loudspeakers in pubs and provision stores, as well as on portable radios and mobile phones, support nightlife in many Dagara villages. The youth entertain themselves with popular music in pubs or specially organised disco jams. Many adults also spend part of their evenings in pubs, drinking and dancing to popular music genres. These musical experiences bridge the gap between people of different ages, social status and gender in a society where gerontocracy and patriarchy are obvious markers of social stratification. Music in contemporary Dagara society evidences the common phenomenon in many African societies whereby different music genres coexist (see Arom 1990; Nketia 2005; Agawu 2016). Despite this musical plurality, *gyil* playing continues to be practised as an integral part of funeral ceremonies because of the significant meanings it holds for the Dagara people.

### *Conclusion*

This article explored the importance and meaning of the *gyil* during funeral ceremonies of the Dagara. The Dagara believe that a funeral is the final episode of a person's life in the physical world (*tengzu*) and must be accompanied by the *gyil*. Commemorating funerals with *gyil* music conveys great respect for a deceased person in Dagara society. Considering that *gyil* playing is excluded from certain categories of death ceremonies, its presence in a funeral symbolises the community's endorsement of the deceased and what they stood for. As an interviewee claimed, 'it is the music that enables the community to publicly mourn and to identify with the deceased' (Berese 2010). In addition to these cultural considerations, there is an ascription of meaning to the style and structural patterns of *gyil* music associated with funerals. While xylophone music is a vital aspect of Dagara daily musical experiences, the *lobri* and *kuurbine* funeral genres are discernibly unique. They do not sound like other xylophone music types such as *bewaa* recreational music for the youth or *bagr-bine*, which is associated with traditional cult rituals. *Lobri* and *kuurbine* move funeral participants in more powerful ways, an experience that the Dagara claim cannot be found in any other music (Woma 2012:60). This experiential meaning is deeply grounded



in the Dagara people's familiarity with, and therefore understanding of the musical style. The Dagara prefer the *gyil* and its music at funerals because of its constancy of usage and predictability of emotional affect. As participants express their emotions in culturally acceptable ways, the music fosters community, renews familial and social connections, and ultimately reinforces Dagara ethnic identity. Xylophone playing is one of the critical elements of a funeral that enables the people to assert their 'Dagaraness' within the cultural heterogeneity in north-west Ghana.

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