

SOUNDS OF DEVELOPMENT? RACE, AUTHENTICITY, AND TRADITION AMONG DAGARA FEMALE MUSICIANS IN NORTHWESTERN GHANA

by

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Introduction

I'd like to begin by sharing a story from my field research among the Dagara people in the upper west region of Ghana, west Africa, on the border of Burkina Faso.¹ My research project is about the ways Dagara women act and are prevented from acting, the ways they speak and how they are silenced. I ask: Who is listening to them and who is not? What are their current desires, goals, and needs, and how are they working towards them? How are their actions racialized, gendered, sexualized, and contained within concepts of ethnicity and authenticity? In what ways and for what purposes do people construct ideological boundaries around insider and outsider, African and Western, black and white, male and female? How do these boundaries both confirm identity and limit movement? By asking these questions I intend to reveal how Dagara women define themselves both relationally and individually, and how they demonstrate through their bodies and voices that, as Adrienne Rich wrote, "silence is not the same as absence" (Rich 1978: 16-20). The themes that emerge in this story point to questions about how Dagara women become gendered, racialized subjects, and how they critique the systems they live within. Embedded within this story are examples of the African female body as a site of both regulation and resistance.

In July 2008, I became friends with a Dagara woman named Rejoice.² At the time she was living in upper west Ghana's regional capital of Wa, and I was living in the small border town of Fielmua. I was visiting Wa for the weekend, when I met her through mutual friends. That night, in a small group of men and women, socializing in a private home, the topic of conversation eventually turned to Dagara gender ideology, specifically the gendering of Dagara musical life. I particularly remember commenting on my perception of certain gender discrepancies and one of the men

¹ My field research was conducted during the summers of 2005, 2007, and 2008, and from July 2009 to July 2010. I spent time in Dagara communities both in Accra and in the upper west region. During this time I participated in Dagara language courses in order to facilitate research with Dagara women, many of whom are monolingual.

² I have changed the names of all individuals in this story.

asserting that, “You only think that way because of your culture”. I was taken aback by this perspective because it implies that my observations are not only shaped by my background and my nationality, but that I was performing a “Western” reading of their cultural practices. As I continued my fieldwork, I noticed that people would sometimes mobilize homogenized versions of cultural authenticity with the result of denying agency and subjectivity to the people being spoken about. In other words, by presuming that perception necessarily belies an unarticulated cultural belief system, perceiving subjects are reduced to cultural codes and cast as objects unable to transcend this limiting structure. In this case, I felt that I was being denied subjectivity by being placed alongside a perception of how Westerners read and react to African cultures. Rather than being Sidra, the person who has opinions and nuanced perspectives on life, I was Sidra, an amalgamation of stereotypes about Western women.

This reaction perhaps speaks to a history of colonialism and the African state, and may also be informed by popular tropes of Western women. Historically, the processes of colonialism in Africa have denigrated local cultural models, and created a system of valuation that not only privileged Western ideology but also filtered all local knowledge and practice through the lens of Western perception. I internalized the statement that “you only think that way because of your culture” as a mechanism to refuse any perceived regulation by a Westerner. This theme would return to me many times over the course of my fieldwork, and would become an organizing principle of my experiences in Fielmua. That night in Wa, it was not clear to me exactly what the perception of Western women was, only that I fit inside of it. In the course of my fieldwork, I came to realize that the assumptions that many people make about Western-ness and whiteness – and their motivation for creating these boundaries – have a potent regulating effect on the psychology, behaviour and the material realities of Dagara women.

The next week, after I had returned to Fielmua, I was surprised to see Rejoice in my house, unaware that one of my housemates was Rejoice’s mother. She was in Fielmua to attend a funeral; her husband could not make it, so she came alone. Her mother had been ill, and Rejoice wanted visit her and make sure she was recuperating well. In the evening, Rejoice, myself, and another female friend went out to a local bar to drink and socialize. That night Rejoice told me a lot about Dagara marriage structure, gender ideologies, and the ways to negotiate marital problems. I learned so much that night, and so thoroughly enjoyed the company of the women that I asked Rejoice to stay one more night in Fielmua. She agreed, and after the funeral the next day we spent more time together. The morning she was to leave, I woke up, went outside and found Rejoice on the phone with her husband, who was furious. She explained to me that in Dagara culture, a woman marries into her husband’s home. This relationship entails the expectation that when she travels she must go and stay with her husband’s family. Going to her mother’s house violated ‘traditional’ cultural practices and raised concerns of another sort. Among the Dagara, women are not permitted to have sexual relationships outside of their marriage. If they do, or if they engage in any type of sexual contact with

a man who is not their husband, they must confess right away. If they do not confess, according to traditional belief systems, they will die if they enter their husband's home, if they offer him food or water, or if they sleep with him. Rejoice explained to me that in her husband's perception, the fact that she went to her mother instead of to his family's home was an indication that she had been unfaithful.

When I travelled to Wa the next week, she called me and told me that she had been physically beaten. I was very upset, and I went to her house. The chain of events had profoundly rattled me. As she and I discussed what had happened, she said to me, "It's just this animal called culture". This statement has had a lasting impact on me, and continues to shape my understanding of the ways that Dagara women internalize and react to cultural codes that are inscribed on their bodies.

As Rejoice and I continued to develop our friendship, this narrative also developed, and revealed layers of complexity that included her husband's perception of my outsidership as threatening to Dagara cultural values. Rejoice and I would sit and talk about it – how her husband was convinced that my outsidership would influence her behaviour. In what ways precisely, we were never sure. Rejoice remained a good friend, but there were several moments in which her husband forbade her to see me. Both Rejoice and I had been reduced to the cultural codes that people mapped upon us, aware that many people were seeing us not as individuals but only through ideas about our bodies.

Among the Dagara, the construction of Western-ness is a racialized discourse connected to an ideological position. When speaking English, people use the term 'white' to describe a foreigner. The word is applied equally to people from America, Germany, Cuba, or Britain, for example. When speaking Dagara, people use the term *nasa-* to indicate white, for example referring to a white woman as *nasapɔg*.³ However, the prefix *nasa-* literally translates as outsider. The conflation of Western-ness and whiteness points to constructions of difference based on concepts of an unarticulated insider/outsider dichotomy rather than as connected to a more specific nationality, race, or ethnicity.

Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí (1997) writes that Western discourse about African women has written gender into cultures which did not traditionally rely upon differences between men and women. Michelle Kisliuk ([1998] 2001), in her work among the BaAka people of the Central African Republic, has experienced that the ethnographer can similarly "write gender" into culture by controlling the frame of the project. Kisliuk observes that her presence might have heightened men's envy and thus bad behaviour at women's events because they were jealous of "ethnographic attention" (*ibid.*). Similarly, my presence, and my research agenda raised questions of gender to the forefront of attention, where they might not otherwise have been. This does imply that I 'altered' the course of events, but that my presence might have caused certain individuals

³ In Dagara orthography the letter *ɔ* is pronounced *ô* as in saw or thaw.

to adhere to more rigid boundaries of ‘insiderness’ in order to counterbalance my perceived ‘outsiderness’.

Rejoice’s comment about her participation in “the animal called culture” frame the questions already raised in this paper. First, how are narratives of tradition, and cultural authenticity mobilized as regulatory tactics to control women’s bodies, and how are these concepts being held in opposition to Ghana’s national policies of gender mainstreaming? Secondly, how do notions of ethnicity and culture become racialized in order to demarcate boundaries of belonging? Third, how do Dagara women respond to the macro-conversations of gender equity and cultural authenticity through musical performance, and how can those performances be read as resistant strategies? Finally, I ask what contributions Dagara women’s narratives make to postcolonial feminist theory and African musical scholarship.

Dagara *gyil* music and gender ideologies

The Dagara people live in the upper west region of Ghana along the northwestern border to Burkina Faso, and across the borders of Burkina Faso and Côte d’Ivoire. In Dagaraland, music is central to a wide range of lifecycle, social, and religious customs; it is located both in public and private performance spaces. The musical lives of the Dagara people revolve primarily around an 18-key xylophone, known as the *gyil*. *Gyile* (plural) are performed at a wide range of events including religious ceremonies, weddings, funerals, recreationally, at public ceremonies such as the opening of a health clinic, and at annual xylophone competitions. Solo artists record and sell albums as well as perform live concerts.

Gyile are performed primarily by men, although some Dagara women also know how to play. Women are excluded through a number of operative social taboos including an origin myth explicitly forbidding women to perform. The mythology surrounding the origins of the instrument is provided by Wiggins and Kobom (1992: 3):

A man was walking in the bush when he heard a fairy playing the xylophone. He was so fascinated by the music that he went home and called his friends to make preparations to go and catch the fairy. He knew it would be difficult as the fairy could only be controlled by people with special powers, not just ordinary men. The man went back into the bush with his friends and because he was so brave and strong he was able to catch the fairy. He then threatened to kill the fairy unless it showed him everything about making and playing a xylophone. The fairy told him he must first make a strong medicine using certain leaves. Next he must collect certain sticks, break them, then carve them (to make the bars). He must also find a special long calabash which grew by the river, cut it and put it into the water until the inside rotted, then hollow it out (to make the resonators). The man did everything he has told and gradually he learned all the secrets of making and playing a xylophone. The man then took an axe and killed the fairy and built a fire to roast the meat which he ate with his friends. When they took the xylophone home and started playing it the women were completely mystified by the music until the men told them to dance to it. But in spite of roasting the fairy, its blood remained part of the instrument, so the xylophone cannot be played by women because they menstruate and their blood would not mix with that of the fairy.

Wiggins and Kobom note how the story has been translated into a mechanism of social control, writing, “If a woman were to play the xylophone, according to Dagaare myth, she would become unable to bear children” (*ibid.*).

In addition to the origins of the instrument a number of other factors contribute to the infrequency of female *gyil* performance. *Gyile* are played while seated at a low stool; the performers sit in front of the *gyil* and play with their hands between their legs. Dagara women typically wear skirts and dresses; when they play *gyil* they either have to wear trousers, alter their physical position to the instrument, or cover their laps with a cloth. Figures 1 and 2 contain images of two Dagara women performing on the *gyil*, Candida Kokum and Georgina Waabe. As illustrated in the pictures, Candida wears trousers, while Georgina repositions her body to the instrument to keep her legs together. The necessity of this literal repositioning of the female body demonstrates how the performance practice of the instrument is gendered. In fact, during my time in Fielmua, Georgina asked me for a pair of trousers so she could play the *gyil* more comfortably.



Figure 1. Candida Kokum playing *gyil* in Tom, Ghana.



Figure 2. Georgina Waabe playing *gyil* in Fielmua, Ghana.

Among the Dagara, the sexed body governs gender-appropriate behaviour, gender roles, and gendered expressions. These coded norms are usually framed in terms of ‘man’s work’ and ‘woman’s work’. Women engage in certain prescribed activities and are restricted from others, such as performance on the *gyil*, which is considered ‘man’s work’. As a primarily agricultural community, both men and women are responsible for working on the family farm. Women’s work also includes taking care of the home, cooking, cleaning, feeding children, washing laundry, and fetching water. Even those women with professional careers are expected to complete the tasks assigned to women. It is unusual to see men doing women’s work or women doing men’s work – these boundaries are fairly codified, although not impermeable. *Gyil* performance, regarded as man’s work, thus belongs to the gendered domain of men.

Despite the division of gendered labor, some Dagara women do perform on the *gyil*, although there are considerably fewer female players than male. During my field research I worked closely with four female *gyil* players. Each of these women experienced social resistance differently, and their perspectives about the instrument and Dagara gender ideologies were varied. I wondered, why don’t more women play this instrument? Some told me that if a woman wants to play, she will find it difficult

to find a husband. Others added that a woman who plays the *gyil* will receive the most resistance from other women, not from the men. Some women cited the origin myth of the instrument, mentioning the possibility that if they play they will become infertile. I also heard that if a Dagara woman approaches the instrument, people will ridicule her and instruct her to stay with appropriate female activities.

When I asked female musicians whether or not they would perform publicly, all of them but one said they would not like to play in public. The one who does perform publicly does so at funerals, or at events in which male players were absent. When I asked if she would enter a competition, she said that she would not like to, as she feared male players would become jealous or harm her. This was a common response I heard from female players – public performance opened them to opportunities for ridicule or abuse. Whether or not this took the form of physical, spiritual or other types of retribution was never made clear, nor did I hear of an example in which someone was ever directly threatened or harmed.

Dagara women transgress gender boundaries: racializing behaviour

Here I will briefly turn to the narrative of one female *gyil* player, Georgina Waabe, whose experiences are instructive for elucidating notions of resistance and empowerment, and whose perspective offers insight into how Dagara women dialogue with the mobilization of cultural parameters. Although Georgina's story reveals much about the gendering of Dagara musical life, it is important to remember that the Dagara female voice is in no way monolithic. Each of the Dagara women I worked with experienced individual responses to cultural codes, to localized constructions of status and power, to the internalization of gender and racial ideologies, and the hierarchies of power that constrict people's actions. Each individual has a different relationship to these structures, and to the meanings assigned to her gendered body. Several Dagara female musicians utilize many of the same strategies for resource and community building, and often share similar language with which they describe their relationship to the *gyil*. On the other hand, their differences productively instruct on how to theorize individual reactions to societal structures.

Although many facets of their lives are shaped by similar social conditions and life goals, they resist being categorized into homogenous or easily defined terms. In fact, their narratives describe the social conditions, challenges, and desires of many Dagara women, but also portray a highly nuanced, individualized reality. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) urges postcolonialist feminist scholars to view women not as products of a social condition, but as actors within one. In this way, Georgina, and other female musicians, are agents who respond to often restrictive, patriarchal realities, but whose subjectivities are not comprised of them entirely. In the time I spent listening to Georgina's stories, I was transformed by her capacity to simultaneously empower herself and women in her community, and to reshape the configuration of the Dagara world. For me, she is emblematic as much as she is unique – she defines and reaches

beyond local realities to illustrate broader African feminist strategies, and indeed, the possibilities for transnational female networking.

Although my background in African and postcolonial feminist literature provided me with a strong foundation through which to interpret my experiences in Dagaraland, I also was forced to reconcile my subject position as an outsider in the community, and wrestled with how conventional ethnographic methodologies unintentionally reinforced subject/object boundaries. Although I entered the field with intentions of conducting a feminist ethnography based on deconstructing power hierarchies between the researcher and the researched, I had to consistently and consciously monitor if and how my presence was affecting my relationships. Part of what emerges in this paper is my conscious adoption of research methodologies that are centred on informal conversation and relationship building. Thus, what follows is a description based upon extended conversations and informal socializing with Georgina. I also had to learn new ways of listening that did not project my expectations of what constitutes resistant and political action. In opening myself up to forms of resistance that I had not previously considered, I became increasingly aware of operative transnational feminist agendas. Georgina's experiences re-writing local histories and subject positions are instructive in re-imagining the possibilities of a multi-valenced feminist project.

Georgina's father was a *gyil-mwiere*, a xylophonist, so she grew up with the instrument in her home. In Dagara culture, relatively few people can play very well on the *gyil*; it is a highly specialized instrument. She describes herself as being drawn to the instrument, which resonates with the Dagara concept of being 'born with the *gyil*' which refers to a person's natural ability to play, a special connection between the person and the instrument. According to Georgina, the men in her family never discouraged her from playing, although she was aware that it is a male-dominated musical activity.

In Dagaraland, when a woman gets married, she moves from her family's house into her husband's family house. The Dagara people practice an extended family system, which includes polygamy. Family homes are large structures that are occupied by all the male family members and their wives and children. The women who live in the house together are co-wives, sisters-in-law, mothers, daughters, grandmothers, and sisters. When Georgina was married, the other women in the house discouraged her from playing the *gyil*, telling her that, because it's men's work, she shouldn't play. Additionally, Georgina has seven children, and is responsible for raising enough money to feed her family, and to pay for school fees and clothing. She works in the town market making *sense*, fried cakes made from ground bean flour. Between her personal work and the family work in the home and on the farm, her time for playing *gyil* is very limited.

After developing a friendship, she and I played together sometimes at her brother's house. Sometimes the other women in the family would come out and dance, and they would show me the various styles of dancing. Often the women would sit in the

shade of a tree talking, sometimes drinking, sometimes plaiting each other's hair. The women in the family would move between dancing and completing their work. It was usually just before the sunset that we would play together. Georgina always had work to do during the day, and would come and get me before she had to return to her home to prepare the evening meal and complete the day's work. So, as we were playing, the women in the family were preparing their evening meal, bathing their children, and fetching water; in other words, the performance took place within the context of women's spaces and was woven into the fabric of women's work. I asked Georgina why she continued to play despite the negative reactions from the women in her husband's family. She told me that it was a source of pleasure and joy for her, that when she couldn't play she thought about it, and missed it.

In Dagaraland, the restriction of certain behaviours or gendered expressions tends to be couched in the language of tradition and culture. Likewise, prescribed actions, gendered roles, and gendered expressions are referred to as traditional. Here, concepts of culture and tradition become ahistoricized; they appear as a homogenized set of indisputable codes that are applied equally to all bodies. Yet, despite the mobilization of traditional or cultural parameters about *gyil* playing, women do perform on the instrument.

Dagara women repeatedly told me that when they act to challenge static notions of tradition, they are accused of "behaving like white women". I believe this serves as a mechanism to regulate the female body and dismiss "outside" behaviours by referencing ahistoric cultural codes and racializing gendered actions. What does it mean to "behave like a white woman"? This statement is diffuse because it doesn't refer to a specific action, but it points to a perception of the links between race, gender, and the concept of outsidership.

The concept of outsidership is mobilized in order to demarcate boundaries of belonging. It locks individuals into assigned belief systems shared by imagined homogenized culture groups. All Dagara women are Dagara; it is an ethnicity. Within the broad category 'Dagara women', there are layers of variation based on educational level, social class, family background, age, religion, personality, and whether the person lives in an urban or rural area. There is no one emblematic or authentic Dagara woman. So whose purpose is being served by constructing difference based on ethnicity, gender, and race? Obioma Nnaemeka (2005: 31) writes:

In this day and age of globalization with massive population and cultural flows that are increasingly blurring the line between the inside and the outside, African women do not have the luxury of contending with a distinct outside and grappling with a clear-cut inside. The internal and the external are ever evolving, always contaminated and contested, mutually creating and recreating each other.

Through the conflation of outsidership, race, and gendered behaviour, Dagara ethnicity is constructed as a homogenous social category in order to undercut Dagara women's

attempts to negotiate complex and overlapping boundaries.

In order to analyze performativity among the Dagara it is necessary to both locate both the internal and external categories of difference that are mapped onto their bodies. For example, there is a tendency in ethnomusicological literature to represent African subjects as inherently different from Western subjects (Agawu 2003). These “notions of difference have been employed by scholars seeking to exercise a certain form of power over African subjects” (*ibid.*: xx) and to contribute to a body of knowledge that makes sense of African bodies as “different”. It is necessary not to reinscribe notions of difference onto African bodies by assuming that the social category of gender, and performances of gender are not affected by the intersecting categories of age, race, ethnicity, class, status, and educational background, as well as larger socio-political power structures, the postcolonial landscape and colonial legacies. It is also crucial to recognize that the creation of internal categories of difference is no less regulatory than the creation of externally based ones.

I ask, how are musical performances as well as performances of everyday actions moments in which we can analyze systems of difference and sameness? Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) similarly writes that the construction of “Third World women” as a monolithic category viewed through the distorting lens of Western feminist scholarship, relies upon narratives of difference that contrast the “liberated”, autonomous, educated Western woman to the powerless, voiceless, victim – the category in which all “Third World women” are contained. I suggest that, through accusations of “behaving like white women”, Dagara women are being constructed through narratives of difference: not externally, through the Western imagination of the African subject, but rather internally, through deployment of the notion of cultural authenticity.

Thus, mapping concepts of authentic behaviour onto sexed, raced, bodies is a silencing technique. It is an attempt to assign a fixed quality to culture and ethnicity so as to prevent ‘outside’ behaviours or actions that are considered transgressive or undesirable. As it is not linked directly to a concrete definable action, it is deployed strategically as a means of asserting power by referencing deeply ingrained notions of cultural belonging and insiderism. By reinforcing binary structures of Western/African, white/black, and outsider/insider, this static notion of ‘cultural authenticity’ is being held apposite to the lived experiences of Dagara individuals. Agawu (2003: xviii) writes that postcolonial theory “clear[s] space for the acknowledgement, indeed the celebration of the incongruities, contradictions, antinomies, and hybridity of postcolonial culture and experience as necessary elements in the adequate theorization of contemporary Africa”. This approach recognizes an actuality of lived experience in contemporary Africa that is not compartmentalized into ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ ways of living, acting, eating, dressing, thinking and performing music. According to Agawu (*ibid.*):

To describe an individual molded within such a culture as hybrid, to invoke the metaphor of *métisse*, is to undercomplicate the dynamics of identity formation. For only an aggressive

and largely irrational postulation of the purity of origins will sanction a description of such individuals and experiences in terms of deviations from what are in effect less-threatening norms. Postcolonial theory normalizes hybridity and thus makes possible a truer, more ethical mode of identity construction. In the hands of its most imaginative practitioners, postcolonial theory dramatizes the complex convergences as well as divergences that constitute African life.

In Dagaland, the construction of cultural authenticity does not reflect the actuality of experience. When the women I worked with are excluded from group membership through notions of “behaving like white women”, they are prevented from fully participating in the postcolonial landscape within which they exist and denied the control of terms through which they might refer to themselves.

National gender equity policies – “why is equality for white women?”

The employment of concepts of tradition and cultural authenticity as tactics to regulate bodies is at odds with the national policies of gender equity and gender mainstreaming. In Ghana, the Ministry of Women’s and Children’s Affairs (MOWAC) oversees the implementation of all gender-related policies. The mission of MOWAC is not necessarily constructed in direct opposition to traditional practices. The mission is to ensure equal access to health benefits, and economic and educational opportunities, and to work against practices, such as domestic violence, that are damaging to women and children. Although MOWAC operates on the national level, regional offices have been created in order to better address localized practices and ideologies.

I interviewed the Regional Director of MOWAC, Mrs. C.A. Bob-Milliar, a Dagara woman from Nandom. During our conversation we discussed the resistance that national gender equity policies were receiving in the upper west region. I had heard from several people that gender mainstreaming and equality programs strove to “emulate Western standards”, to “change tradition” and that women whose behaviour and attitudes were perceived as apposite to traditional culture were told they were “behaving like white women”. I asked Mrs. Bob-Milliar for her response, and she said to me, “Why is equality only for white women?” In my observation, both the dismissal of gender equity efforts as “Western importations” and the accusation of “behaving like white women” aimed at Dagara women rely upon the same divisive tactics that serve to construct ideological differences based on race and nationality.

Conclusions

Georgina’s perspective on the operative nature of Dagara gender ideologies, and how she verbalized her experiences as a woman and a musician, forced me to reconsider the frame of my project. I had originally expected female *gyil* performance to be a site of resistance, and it is, but not in the way I thought it would be. Georgina never verbally articulated that *gyil* performance is a political strategy but rather spoke of it as “God’s gift” and as a source of joy and personal pleasure. In fact, my desire to hear her state political claims directly was due to my own expectations for the project. Not

all forms of resistant action will be identical, nor will women utilize identical language with which to describe their goals. Over the course of our relationship I became aware of the political implications of Georgina's actions and how *gyil* performance among women is a strategy of community building and empowerment. Georgina opened my eyes to more expansive possibilities of what constitutes political action and the potency of contextualizing ethnomusicological research within everyday, extra-musical acts.

Gyil performance is deeply imbued with Dagara signifiers of ethnicity, group history, and shared values. As a male-dominated musical instrument which is most frequently performed in the context of a male space, the performance by Dagara women demonstrates how gender is negotiated. Female *gyil* performance becomes a heightened gendered performance space, as well as a place for the renegotiation of ethnic identities. Through performance, Dagara women challenge the gender ideologies they move within while actively reshaping contemporary Dagara narratives. They call attention to who is allowed to mobilize narratives of cultural authenticity while at the same time re-defining what that "authenticity" means. For Georgina, the personal pleasure she experiences when playing the instrument is not constructed in direct opposition to hierarchies of power, to male voices, to female voices that encourage her not to play, to exclusionary tropes of race, authenticity, and tradition, or to systematic regulation by gender ideologies.

Georgina's desire to experience pleasure through musical performance, and her valuation of the private sphere are instructive in re-theorizing the possibilities of transgression and resistance. Her experiences indicate that rather than being directed outward – *reacting* to and against others – resistance can be in *acting*. This does not negate the significance of her actions, their impact, or her capacity to transgress. Through musical performance, Georgina creates possibilities for other Dagara women, even as she redefines the terms through which she is perceived; her response to restrictive voices is not to oppose, but to continue to act out of her personal needs and desires, formed by her experience. She does so regardless of the gender or racialized ideologies mapped on her sexed body. By doing so, she creates a space into which other Dagara women may also act.

Georgina never expressed to me any unhappiness about not playing *gyil* publicly. She is not contending with the valuation placed on the public sphere, or the lack of value attributed to the private sphere. While I heard male *gyil* players comment that women could never play in public, Georgina's intent was not to overturn an order that prevents her from acting in public. In fact, to presume that a woman's power in the private sphere is less valuable because she lacks power in the public sphere relies upon some masculinist assumptions about the concerns and goals of Dagara women. In playing *gyil* together at her brother's home, surrounded by the women in the family singing and dancing, strong connections were formed and enjoyed between all the women. Furthermore, through performing in the private sphere, which takes place around other Dagara women, she demonstrates how relationships between women are

a source of pleasure and power.⁴

Rather than construct differences based on race, ethnicity, or nationality, incorporating postcoloniality into our visions of Dagara women's actions will allow the complexities of identity to emerge. Just as "acting white" is a diffuse statement, "acting Dagara" is similarly essentializing – the narratives of female *gyil* players illustrate the multiplicity of selfhood, and the possibility of plurality. Part of the challenge of writing about women in Dagaraland is in mediating the tension between tradition and modernity, and in representing the contemporary narratives of Dagara women, which are equally informed by the local and the global. Dagara women are both local and transnational actors.

Returning to my friend Rejoice's comment that culture is an animal, I would like to make several observations. First, there tends to be a general perception about culture as something that exists around us, that shapes our lens on the world, but that we operate within, unable to control. Rejoice's remark deconstructs this version of the culture concept. Her metaphor of the animal is apt; culture is living, moving, and shifting; it is only the *application* of culture, mobilized by people towards certain ends that allows it to become reified. She also illustrates an important point, which has been discussed extensively in postcolonial and African feminist literature (Minh-ha 1989; Mohanty 2003; Nnaemeka 2003, 2005, 1998; Oyèwùmí 2003, 1997) – African women are frequently portrayed in both popular and academic discourse as victims of universal systems of oppression, as powerless, and as unable to recognize the structures they operate within. To the contrary, Rejoice is one example of a woman who has a clear vision of the ideological structures in which she is asked to participate. Her words are particularly resonant because they capture one instance of how the rhetoric surrounding tradition and culture is not neutral – that not everyone has equal opportunity to mobilize these concepts for their benefit – and there is power at stake.

Obioma Nnaemeka (2003) writes that African feminist scholarship and action has to be "built on the indigenous". Beyond recognizing and critiquing hierarchical power structures that silence resistant narratives, we have to locate and dialogue with non-oppositional strategies of resistance, and to consider the ways that bodies engaged in musical performance are critiquing oppressive systems. For Dagara women, the category of gender and its connections to the sexed body are mediated – these mediations occur through musical performances that redefine the boundaries of the body in terms of the culture in which it acts. This includes negotiating the language of cultural authenticity, which is expressed through terms such as 'tradition'. Beyond this, acting through the spectrum of possibilities provided in a postcolonial landscape confronts the dichotomy of tradition/modernity that is reinforced through such language. Actors such as Georgina thus redefine the meanings of the Dagara female

⁴ See Nnaemeka 2003 for further discussion on how female-female relationships constitute a source of power for African women, and the importance of exploring non-oppositional forms of resistance.

body by actively participating in a mediation of multiple categories of belonging. Ultimately, Georgina reminds us of the importance of listening to what women have to say about themselves. She demonstrates that those voices which are often excluded from cultural narratives are, in fact, re-writing cultural possibilities.

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