

PERFORMING ADVOCACY: WOMEN'S MUSIC AND DANCE IN DAGBON, NORTHERN GHANA

by

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Introduction

The goal of this article is to provide a mediated experience of Dagbamba women's music and dance and to share some of the most rewarding aspects of fieldwork where music, dance, friendship, chance, and circumstance have all converged to illuminate particular moments of advocacy among women. While many Dagbamba women (and men) are Muslim, ancestral worship, herbalism, and spirit possession all coexist along with 'modern' medicine, Christianity, the internet, satellite TV, and cell phones. This article aims to highlight how women's music and dance interact within this complex cultural milieu by examining issues found in and around the music itself. This article argues that women's involvement with singing and dancing can create a transformative space where advocacy, agency, catharsis, and social critique can all take place. Several questions are of particular interest, including: What are the female roles in music and dance around Tamale? What kind of knowledge or critique is passed on or expressed through song? How does music create a transformative space for women in Tamale?

Addressing the various facets of the above issues necessitates a descriptive introduction to Dagbamba women's music and dance forms, specifically the genre called *tora*, in the context of the relatively urban area of Tamale, northern Ghana. The following will include background on scholarship, an introduction to the Dagbamba cultural milieu particularly focusing on women's experience, as well as a look at the women's specific genre, *tora*, and finally an exploration of the way in which music can create a transformative space for women where multiple modes of expressing and relating can all take place.

Background

The original impetus of this project was not my own; both the late Dagbamba musician Alhaji Abubakari Lunna, and his long-term collaborator David Locke, drew my attention to music and dance practiced by Dagbamba women. Upon arriving at the family compound near Tamale in 2006, Alhaji introduced me to a few musicians he wanted me to study with, namely renowned dancer and educator Fuseina Wumbei and virtuosic singer Ayishetu (or Amishetu) Nagumsi.



Figure 1. Amishetu Nagumsi and Fuseina Wumbei. Photo by author.

This initial encounter via a respected member of the musical community has had a particular effect on my experiences overall. Regardless, these first exploratory and formative months being taught by Madam Fuseina (as she is commonly called) and Nagumsi provide the foundation of my understanding of women's culture in Dagbon.¹ Daily song and dance lessons interspersed with the happenings of life (children coming and going, cooking of meals, running to the market, cleaning etc.) early in the field research were deceptively important for the development of an overall conceptual impression of the realities of women's life in Tamale.²

Because of the nature of my entrance into the Tamale music community, through Lunna and my two primary teachers M. Fuseina and Nagumsi, my experiences have been marked by a student/teacher relationship, rather than perhaps the more typical binary relationships discussed by many field researchers of insider/outsider or self/other that is reflected in much ethnographic work. Lunna and Locke have exemplified a kind of collaborative student-researcher/teacher-musician-culture bearer model that at least in part addresses some of the complex issues around neocolonial tendencies in

¹ David Locke told us (his students) that "the Dagomba live in Dagbon and speak Dagbanli." Dagbon, then, refers to the area in the Northern Region where the majority of Dagomba (or Dagbamba) live, and Dagbani (or Dagbanli) is the name of their language. I have chosen here to use "Dagbamba" and "Dagbanli" as these are the terms and spellings that the Dagbamba themselves use in their own language while "Dagomba" and "Dagbani" are perhaps more commonly used in English publications. See usage in Chernoff 1979 & 1997, DjeDje 1984 & 2008, and Locke and Lunna 1990 for examples in ethnomusicological texts.

² I have engaged in field research during several trips to Tamale from June-August 2006, January 2007, August-September 2008, March 2009, and December 2010-June 2011.

fieldwork especially in the African context. As a result I concentrate on my experiences as a student of M. Fuseina to examine issues around advocacy and women's performance in Tamale. Women's songs and performance in Dagbon in general have rarely been discussed in an academic setting and little has appeared in print, which prompted Lunna and Locke to bring the general subject to my attention in 2005.

While scholars from the continent and abroad have not focused much attention on Dagbamba women's song, dance, or general involvement in music, there have been many texts written about various aspects of Dagbamba musical culture. Notable ethnomusicologists have worked with musicians from Tamale, Northern Ghana, culminating most significantly perhaps in monographs, namely John Chernoff's *African Rhythm and African Sensibility* (1979), Jacqueline C. DjeDje's recent work *Fiddling in West Africa: Touching the Spirit in Fulbe, Hausa, and Dagbamba Cultures* (2008), and David Locke's applied and collaborative work with Abubakari Lunna *Drum Damba: Talking Drum Lessons* (1990).³ These three texts are important contributions to African musicology and ethnomusicology generally and provide a basis and grounding for continuing scholarship and engagement with Dagbamba musical culture. For me these texts provide not only a reference point but in part trace my own scholarly lineage.⁴

While the above studies are foundational, perhaps just as important to this article are recent texts on women and music. Beverley Mack's *Muslim Women Sing: Hausa Popular Song* (2004) provides an in-depth study of northern Nigerian Hausa women and their expressive culture of sung oral poetry. Similar to other monographs, Mack provides artist profiles throughout the text, which allows the reader a more intimate view of actual women's lives. Of particular note are two other texts that focus on women's music and dance in Ghana. Both *Female Song Tradition and the Akan of Ghana* (2005) by Kwasi Ampene and James Burns' *Female Voices from an Ewe Dance-drumming Community in Ghana* (2009) provide excellent models for in-depth work dealing primarily with women's involvement with song and dance traditions.⁵ Both of these monographs offer rich ethnographic detail along with a linguistic rigor that is refreshing especially in African music scholarship. They offer lengthy song lyric transcriptions with English translations, and it is clear that their writing benefits greatly from their language knowledge. Along with other strengths, from the very beginning of his text Burns points to a larger problem in African studies generally that his book helps to address, he writes "due to the prioritizing of certain elements of Ewe music in the collective scholarship ... there has not been adequate attention paid

³ For other ethnomusicological texts see Chernoff 1997, DjeDje 1984, Kinney 1970, and Locke 1996. For works particularly relevant to arts and musical culture written by authors from the continent and abroad see Abu 1994, Bierlich 2007, Der 1998, Mahama 2004, Oppong 1973, Staniland 1975.

⁴ I completed my M.A. at Tufts in 2007 with David Locke, and I am currently a Ph.D. Candidate at the Department of Ethnomusicology at UCLA with Jacqueline C. DjeDje.

⁵ A recent multi-book review in *Ethnomusicology* journal volume 56, number 1, by Kofi Agawu may be of interest as it deftly addresses both DjeDje's 2008 and Burns' 2009 monographs. Also see DjeDje 1985 and the article by Angela Scharfenberger in *African Music* volume 9, number 1, for an assessment of scholarship on women and music in Africa.

to the experiences of female musicians ... studies of Ewe music have almost completely overlooked gender" (2009: 9). I would argue that while recently more scholarly attention is being focused in diverse areas, this prioritizing of "certain elements", typically rhythm and drumming in the West African context, is a common issue in African musicology and ethnomusicology generally. It is my intention to contribute to a more recent trend that concentrates on gender, women's experience, and other more diverse topics as the focal point of research on the continent.⁶ The following begins with an overview of the cultural context, and approach of the research on Dagbamba women's music in Tamale.

Tamale, field research, and methodology

Tamale is a vibrant trade city at a crossroads, both literally and metaphorically. It is the regional capital of Ghana's municipal Northern Region and its center acts as a hub where travelers' paths cross as they make their way through the country and bordering areas.⁷ The Tamale-Techiman/Bolgatanga road heads roughly North and South and acts as the main thoroughfare for transport of commercial goods and personal travel from the coast and on to Bolgatanga then further to Burkina Faso; the Tamale-Yendi road heads East to the historical or "traditional" capital now district capital, and the Tamale-Tolon road goes West towards the White Volta and beyond. The city acts as a kind of center of activity as travelers and traders from every direction are funneled through Tamale. It is home to around 350,000-450,000 people, depending on the source, and is supposedly one of the fastest growing cities in West Africa.⁸

Including the diversity of people crossing paths, Tamale is also a city at the crossroads in terms of the complexity of the modes of life coming together. After explaining to someone in Accra that you are headed north to Tamale he or she is immediately surprised and usually mentions something about how far away it is, or asks why you would want to go out "to the bush." There is a definite perception, among many southern or more urban Ghanaians, of the north as being a remote place without many of the common comforts of modern life, when in fact much of this perception is perhaps a bit extreme. The important point is the multiplicity of realities that exist side-by-side in the north, but also in virtually all cities in Ghana. For example, many families live in round earthen homes with thatched roofs, no running water, with sporadic and rather limited access to electricity, while others have 'Western' style kitchens, air conditioning, tile or linoleum floors, satellite television, running water and so on. Islam, different forms of Christianity and local belief systems overlap and coexist. Some young people go to the colleges and universities while others struggle to finish primary education.

⁶ For example, see recent articles in *African Music* volume 9, number 1, especially by Kidula, Lawrence, Lucia, and Scharfenberger.

⁷ Tamale is pronounced with an emphasis on the first syllable (TA-ma-le). While it is now the capital of the Northern Region, which is home to a majority of Dagombas/Dagbambas, Yendi is still considered the traditional capital of Dagbon. See Bierlich (2007: 1-5) for more information.

⁸ I was told this by many locals and is mentioned in a short article on Tamale by Issah Fuseini Abaneh, <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/geography/tamale.php> (accessed 16 March 2012).

Walking through town from the market to the Tamale Center for National Culture, I have seen a Volkswagen or Jaguar driving alongside a donkey-drawn cart, or an entire family riding on a single bicycle. Like many other places in the world, Tamale is a complex and multifaceted city where disparities in wealth, education, and access seem to be increasing in recent years.



Figure 2. Map of Ghana and surrounding countries.

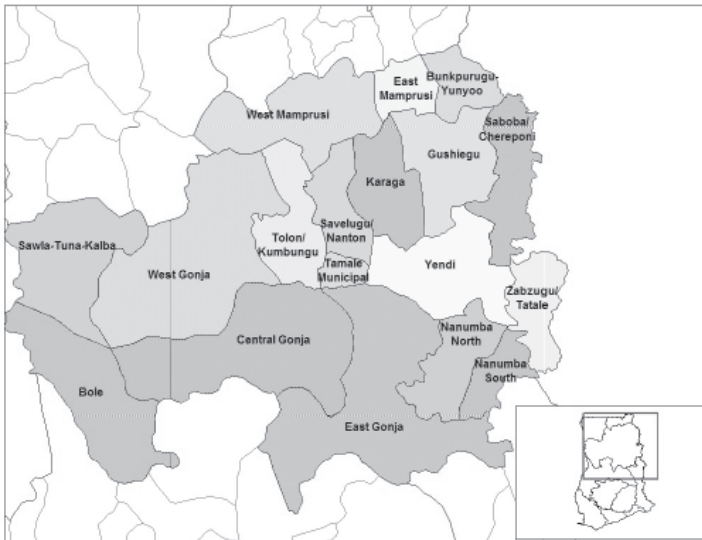


Figure 3. Map of Ghana's Northern Region.

Discussing Dagbamba culture, anthropologist Bernhard Beirlich writes: "Local ways are part of modernity, but people experience much ambivalence when confronted with Western culture and its notion of progress" (Beirlich 2007: xvi). That is to say, there is not a widespread, direct, or automatic correlation between 'Western culture,' or material wealth and notions of progress, 'modernity,' or success. The idea of the crossroads then resonates as a metaphor in various ways, both as a way to understand how individuals experience life and make decisions, but also in a more literal sense of the city itself being at a crossroads geographically and socio-culturally.

Now months removed from field research, reflexively struggling and confronting my own 'Western' ideals and social constructs has been a natural part of my process when thinking and writing about Dagbamba women's music and dance and has brought my positionality as a woman from the United States into sharp focus. Perhaps partially due to my extended exposure and engaged field research methodology, it has been difficult to find a theoretical framework that feels organic to the musical and cultural experience in Tamale. But for the purpose of this discussion, I would like to point to some of the ideas put forth by writings on post-colonialism, applied ethnomusicology, and women's studies that are particularly resonant with my experiences in Dagbon.

In her recent article on applied ethnomusicological work with Yanyuwa Aboriginal women in northern Australia, Elizabeth Mackinlay articulates what has largely been my ethnographic approach. Mackinlay works "towards decolonising ethnomusicology," she explains:

autoethnographic methods place emphasis on reuniting the personal with the physical, emotional, mental, social and cultural dimensions of everyday life. Relationship becomes central to the research process. This shift in focus towards the personal extends even further and has the potential—if we dare—to open up space for a new decolonised research agenda where words like ethics, justice, compassion, care and love are commonplace, and at the heart of all that we may do as ethnomusicologists. (Mackinlay 2010:97)

My experience of field research comes much closer to utilizing Mackinlay's "autoethnographic methods" than a more typical participant observer model. The space opened up by Mackinlay's kind of field methodology demands reflexivity and lends itself to context-derived interpretations. Oyèrónké Oyewùmí, a Yoruba sociologist writing on women and gender in the African context, writes: "It cannot be overstated that in African studies a careful evaluation of the genealogy of concepts and theoretical formulation must be integral to research. Ultimately, in research endeavors, I argue for a cultural, context-dependent interpretation of social reality" (1997: xvi).

Arguably Oyewùmí's assertions agree with much post-colonial writing. African music scholar Kofi Agawu identifies clearly what attracts me to ideas expressed in post-colonial studies: "Writings by [post-colonial] scholars ... clear space for the acknowledgment, indeed celebration, of the incongruities, contradictions, antinomies, and hybridity of post-colonial culture and experience as necessary elements in the adequate theorization of contemporary Africa" (Agawu 2003: xviii). These incongruities

and contradictions abound in contemporary life in Tamale and are manifest dramatically in the experience of many women.

The connection among the sentiments quoted above is the potential offered by specificity rather than generalization, the favoring of contextual social interpretation over imposed theoretical frameworks, a mindfulness and self-reflexivity over unconscious assumptions and applications of Western constructs. These are not new ideas, but they are pertinent especially in the West African context when working specifically with women, and are presented here to situate my general approach to the following questions: How is knowledge produced and transmitted by Dagbamba women through their participation in music, dance, and song? Why, or how do Dagbamba women express advocacy and critique through song? And lastly, what is the overall impact or efficacy of this form of advocacy in Dagbon?

***KaliTora*, women's social dance music, and the power of song**

M. Fuseina formed *KaliTora* as a small performance group for women who have been associated in some way with the Tamale Center for National Culture, where she was a dance instructor and choreographer for over 25 years. M. Fuseina, who is now in her 60s, began her dancing career at the age of 17 when she left her home town of Tamale to join the Ghana National Dance Ensemble based in Accra. After rising to be one of four top dancers in the group, M. Fuseina left after only seven years, and returned to Tamale. She has led a rather modern life for a woman of her age. Now married to her second husband, and with no biological children of her own, M. Fuseina has a rather alternative living situation where she sees her husband daily without co-habiting. She maintains her small home, owns property, lives alone, and has been quite independent and successful as a dancer and instructor. She has formed and been a part of various dance groups and women's organizations over the years and remains active in the community now, with groups like *KaliTora*, even after her official retirement from the Tamale Center for National Culture.

The *KaliTora* group is made up of five central women who teach and facilitate groups of ten to fifteen additional young women for larger performances. Lead singer Amishetu Nagumsi, shown here in the center of the group, is a widely renowned vocalist in Dagbon known for her pleasing "melodies" and infectious energy. More so in the past, but even now Nagumsi is hired as a singer for local events and at work sites where a singer is employed to lead the workers in song to keep them motivated and rhythmically in time with each other. The *KaliTora* chorus is made up of four women, Sanatu Mutala, Fuseina Wumbei, Ayishetu Mussa, and Zeliatu Mohammad.

Turning now to the musical example included on the accompanying CD [CD track 1], you will hear Nagumsi leading *KaliTora* while the chorus responds and claps along with a small drum ensemble in the background. The songs included on this recording are structured like many *tora* songs with a call-and-response between the lead solo singer (Nagumsi) and a larger group of singers (Wumbei, Mussa, Mohamma and Mutala). *KaliTora* hired a small drum ensemble for the recording session consisting of

two musicians each playing a *lunga* (an hourglass tension drum), Lun-Kurli Baba and Jeleru Baba, and Abdul Rauff playing the *gungong* (a double-headed bass drum with snare).⁹ The first song heard briefly, “*Zara Je*”, is about a stubborn woman who refuses to eat meat. The second song “*Yi ni to*” begins at 0:48 on this recording, and reflects a kind of openness or inclusiveness found in much of Dagbamba female culture. A repeating refrain is sung first by the lead singer, then the chorus. The Dagbanli lyrics are as follows: “*Yi ni to yin tomiya yeei / Yi yaa ku to yin cheliya, / Sama bi kanita barimaana.*” This translates roughly into English: “If you will dance, come dance with us. If you will not dance then stop. A stranger doesn’t turn away a beggar.”¹⁰ I have chosen this excerpt from a longer recording to hopefully show not only the momentum and energy of this group of singers but also the meaning of the lyrical content. In addition, *KaliTora* as a group was particularly enthusiastic about singing “*Yi ni to*”, so it seemed appropriate to include it here.



Figure 4. *KaliTora* from left to right: Fuseina Wumbei, Ayishetu Mussa, Amishetu Nagumsi, Zeliatu Mohammed and Sanatu Mutala. Photo by author.

During my latest stay in Tamale (December 2010 to June 2011), the *KaliTora* group asked me to make audio and video recordings for their own promotional and personal use. The audio track included here was recorded on 14 May 2011 outside the Zoo-Simli Na Palace near Tamale. During rehearsal and preparation for the *KaliTora* recording sessions, I witnessed these five women making time in their complicated and busy lives to sing and

⁹ See Locke 1990: 26-37, for description of instruments, playing technique, and photos.

¹⁰ Linguist and Dagbanli teacher Zenabu Rosina Abdul-Rahaman provided the Dagbanli spellings, and English translations.

dance together. This time created space for socializing and relaxing in a rather private all-female setting that had little external pressure. When singing *Yi ni to*, and during most other songs as well, these women all lit up. M. Fuseina has told me over and over in lessons, interviews, and in personal conversations that you cannot be sad and dance, you cannot sing and feel bad, and that when you sing or dance you feel happy! Nagumsi for example, is classically sleep deprived and will literally fall asleep during a lesson if she is not actively singing, but she immediately becomes animated and joyous when singing. During the *KaliTora* recording sessions when working on *Yi ni to* conversations started sprouting up about “the old days” when dancing and singing would bring disparate communities together and resolve conflicts. The five core members of *KaliTora* have known each other for years, and their time together offers a kind of catharsis, a time where venting about their husbands, or jobs, or financial difficulties, reminiscing about the past, or discussing each other’s children is common.

Describing the *Dzibordi* performance group in a southern Ghanaian Ewe town, James Burns writes of a similar phenomenon: “Within this context, we will find that singing songs is an important way in which women demonstrate and renew their beliefs. Music associations build alliances between women, based upon common descent, beliefs and interests” (Burns 2009: 1). While *KaliTora* is not the same kind of musical association as the *Dzibordi* group, through participation in *KaliTora* the members have formed alliances and have a sense of solidarity when faced with personal problems. For example, M. Fuseina regularly takes a senior position in the group discussions and advocates on behalf of other group members. She helped Ayishetu Mussa with procuring her job as a secretary at the Tamale Center for National Culture. She often negotiates allowances for performances to include transportation costs, and accompanies her friends to important meetings or family gatherings when they need her support. In this way the relationships formed through the *KaliTora* music and dance group have provided a context outside of extended family networks for solidarity and advocacy among the members.

Musical performance often has transformative power by bringing participants vividly into the present moment creating space where past baggage is forgotten and through these musical connections, alliances and advocacy naturally emerge among members. The topics and content of song texts can also play a role in this cathartic experience. The more current, or pertinent topics usually lead to heated discussions in the moment as singers commonly use contemporary issues and occurrences as inspiration for writing new songs or song lyrics. As I was discussing this with one prominent lead singer, Amishetu Katariga, she described a disturbing event of rape that happened in her community, and how she then wrote a song warning young women to listen to their mothers and not stand by the roadside at night. M. Fuseina similarly recounted an experience when she was on tour with the Tamale Center for National Culture dance troupe and the men and women were not getting along. During the trip the group came up with a new teasing song that alternately blamed men and then women for all of life’s problems.

Like the above examples where the lyrics reference an ethos of female inclusion in music and dance, or pass on knowledge, advice, or teasing, the dance *tora* illuminates yet another aspect of how Dagbamba women express their own underlying social principles through music. The dance itself is performed simultaneously alongside drumming and singing. Women form a semi-circle or horseshoe shape and clap and sing together while they wait their turn to move to the center of the dance space, turn, and knock buttocks together with another dancer. Then they turn and knock again. In this way each dancer knocks twice before moving to the end of the line again. The dancers are typically women of all ages, but primarily younger or unmarried women. The drumming on the hourglass *lunga* and bass *gungong* is often provided by local young men in the recreational context, and at times by more established small groups for funerals or cultural troupe performances.

There are many explanations for the history or meaning of the *tora* dance genre, one being that it is simply a display for men to choose a wife! Ghanaian music scholar A.A. Agordoh writes: “*Tora* is a Dagomba women’s musical type. ... Some elders believe that the musical type was brought down from Northern Nigeria by the royal immigrant settlers. Others state that *Tora* evolved from the *Takai* musical type for men hence it has the same rhythmic features” (1994: 131). Abubakari Lunna’s account describes the beginning of a foundational, or primary *tora* song “*Oh ee yeei*”, as the wife’s crying lament (Locke ed. 1989: 13-16). The ‘original’ *tora* song then, according to Lunna, was not only based on a general story but came directly from Galiban’s crying. Lunna goes on to explain how the *tora* dance originated; “People started to take the dead bodies into the palace. Women were holding the child; the mother wanted to see his body; they didn’t want her to see the child’s face again.”¹¹ What became the *tora* dance is described in more detail:

If she [Galiban] rushed to see the son, the woman bending down to pick up the corpse would push her with their buttocks. If she ran to see the husband, they pushed her away. If she ran to see the junior husband [brother-in-law], they pushed her back. This is why the dance has knocking together of buttocks. Anytime Galiban would remember the death of these people, she began to cry. The women would gather. She would sing that song out and then instead of knocking her, they turned their buttocks to knock each other. It became a dance.¹²

This story itself could arguably be read as a display of agency, protection and solidarity among women. Historically, and even today, *tora* is typically danced at funerals, but it has also crossed over as a more popular social dance form among young women and has been choreographed for stage performance in cultural dance troupes like those at the Tamale Center for National Culture. This female dominated song-dance genre also creates alliances among young women and is at the same time an

¹¹ David Locke ed. (1989: 19.) “The Story of *Tora*” Told by Dolsi-naa Abubakari Lunna May 26 and June 3, <https://wikis.uit.tufts.edu/confluence/display/DagombaDanceDrumming/Tora+Suite> (accessed 11 January 2011).

¹² Ibid.

outlet for women to share in this joyous and boisterous song-dance. Today *tora* takes many forms; it is still danced at funerals in a more 'traditional' form, but it is also played at Chief palaces around Tamale on Saturday nights, for example, as a social event. M. Fuseina discusses how *tora* has evolved:

So those days it was for funerals. But these days I think it is recreational - we can use it anywhere. And we have changed the style of dance. During those days, okay when you come I will do the old one and then we are now doing the newer steps. [...] now it is recreational, you can dance it any time. Whether adoring [outdooing], funeral, wedding, we dance it. (Fuseina 2006, Interview)

Throughout my time in Tamale I witnessed *tora* being danced in the evening in several different settings: at a local Chief palace, partially lit open spaces in neighborhoods around Tamale, as well as at local staged cultural folkloric performances. In these different venues there were different styles and forms of *tora*. It seems that the most 'traditional,' or representational form of the dance is found at funerals and sometimes at Chief palaces depending on who is drumming and dancing. At the folkloric dance troupe performances there is a more choreographed, 'modern,' and usually faster tempo *tora* performed in front of an audience. While the dance may seem different in these varied contexts, the essence of the style is arguably the same in all of the venues.

In an interview about *tora*, M. Fuseina described the different movements, or sections, that make up the traditional *tora* dance; "[...] it was formally Tora, Nyoboli, Nwundanuli, Tora Yila, just the four rhythms. But now we have added, Zamadunia - Intro in" (ibid). As M. Fuseina describes here, the sections are based on the different drum rhythms played in succession during a performance of *tora*. The drummers do not have to play four, or five rhythms or movements, they may decide to skip one for example. In the more choreographed performances the sequence is typically decided before the performance starts so that the troupe can rely more on a memorized choreography rather than focusing on the particular rhythmic changes in the music. For our purposes here though, it is important to note that specific drum rhythms, or sections, dictate how the dancers dance and what songs they sing. For example, there are specific songs for each of the different rhythms played for *tora*. In every context the rhythms are played for different periods of time. In a cultural performance, they may play through five rhythms in succession with a choreographed dance to go specifically with particular songs. M. Fuseina explains:

When it is at funeral we do not dance it for a short period. You will dance, you will sing all the songs, and you will not change the rhythm. When you get tired, when they get tired, they stop and rest. And then you start again with the same *tora*. So the songs are more than the other rhythms. So when you sing a couple of songs, when they get tired and will stop, then when they start again you will change another song. But on our stage here, we dance it for a short period and then we change, that is why we cannot sing all the songs (Fuseina Wumbei 2006).

M. Fuseina also talked about her own experience of learning the *tora* as a young girl:

You know I told you of my story, when I was young - younger, I used to go to *tora* in the night when they are drumming it anywhere I would go. When I just hear the drum -ohhhh. I will go and then before the elder women will start the dancing you the younger ones will choose your partner and then you will run in and out and will knock, and you are learning it through the rhythm. We learn from our infancy, the *tora* (ibid.).

This kind of community teaching and general transmission of cultural knowledge is still happening today, although apparently not as frequently as in the past. M. Fuseina comments on the conflict she feels between the traditional culture and the Muslim religion:

Yeah, they are now learning it, but some don't know it from their infancy. And then our religion too is beating us down, beating the culture down. That when you are dancing they either will call you a flirt, or they will call you bad names. They say that our religion doesn't allow us, especially women, to be dancing out-side, to be singing outside. So they are just beating us down. But we are struggling. We do not want them to be beat us down, especially me. (Fuseina Wumbei 2006).

One can almost hear the passionate defiance in M. Fuseina's voice as she comments on the state of transmission in Dagomba culture. As a practitioner and teacher, she has a lot at stake, the thought of *tora* not being passed on through the generations was obviously upsetting to her.

While in Tamale and the surrounding area, I was first taught the dance itself at daily rehearsals at the Tamale Center for National Culture in 2006, commonly called "the cultural center," in downtown Tamale. These daily meetings of the dance group were led by Fuseina Wumbei and Mohammed Ofei Wunnam, in the folkloric tradition of choreographed performance. This group met every afternoon and was hired frequently for performances around Tamale; whether for visiting students, or for a meeting at a Catholic Guest House, the group was usually performing for a foreign audience. I found this group to be very welcoming and the overall experience as a cultural outsider was fulfilling and challenging. While the form of *tora* I learned in 2006 at the cultural center was exciting and has been useful for my continued work on the genre, the form of *tora* that I learned at Tufts University with Alhaji Abubakari Lunna and David Locke was surprisingly similar to what was being danced in the funeral and recreational settings around Tamale.

Concluding thoughts

The examples discussed above have shown some of the kinds of knowledge that is passed on, expressed, and produced by women in the context of song and dance in Dagbon. More importantly, these accounts have shown the transformative possibility that occurs when women come together in the space that is produced by music and dance. It is natural then, that discussions of important life issues are raised among the members of *KaliTora* when emotions are heightened through music and dance, whether in rehearsal or performance settings. The challenges faced by many women in Tamale both in the domestic and economic realms are numerous: financial instability,

education for children, and extended family obligations are some of the pressures women deal with daily. I would argue that the alliances and advocacy that seems to form through association with *KaliTora* has lasting effects on the everyday lives of the women involved.

In his ethnography of a Dagbamba town and its society, Bierlich discusses the situation of women in Dagbon generally:

Despite her essential role in reproducing the society, the social organization is quick in denying the woman a voice. She lives a 'hidden' existence behind men (the father, the brother, the husband) and her voice is 'muted.' Her agricultural labour is appropriated by her husband and through his mediation entered into the domestic sphere (Bierlich 2007: 16).

He explains further:

Through the gendered division of labour and their contact with the market, women engage their futures as women in a male-oriented society and produce a future based on female agency" (Bierlich 2007: 19).

Here we see the incongruity and contradictions that are part of the lived experience of women in Dagbon. Bierlich describes a hidden existence behind men, and at the same time women who engage publicly in a market economy. Also Bierlich falls into the trap of making unqualified generalizations based on his fieldwork that do not take into account the lived experiences of people like M.Fuseina. Rather than living a hidden existence, she has been active in women's groups and public performances in Tamale, she has achieved a level of financial independence, and lives in her own home rather than in the house of her current husband. When engaging in a kind of "autoethnographic method," (Mackinlay 2010: 97) and focusing on "context-dependent interpretations" (Oyewùmí 1997: xvi) it is almost impossible to make generalizations about women's "hidden' existence" or "muted" voice. Instead one must acknowledge and celebrate "the incongruities, contradictions, antinomies, and hybridity" (Agawu 2003: xviii) that is part of contemporary African society present in the lived experiences of women like M.Fuseina. Participation in the *KaliTora* group may provide some economic relief, but more importantly it creates a space where women can openly voice their concerns and advocate for one another with the same strength and joy that is expressed in their music and dance.

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Interview by author

Wumbei Fuseina, Tamale, Ghana, 5 July 2006.