

# THE XYLOPHONIST AND THE POETRY OF THE XYLOPHONE TEXT WITH EMPHASIS ON THE DAGARA DIRGE

J. P. Kuutiero

Department of English and Modern Languages  
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology,  
Kumasi

## ABSTRACT

*The xylophone is one of the musical instruments used for various occasions by the Dagara [also known as the Dagaaba or Dagarti] and the Sissalas of the Upper West Region of Ghana. Whenever it is played it is normal to hear people who are familiar with its tunes sing or hum the mellifluous tunes that emanate from it. It is possible to see some people wiggling their waists to the rhythm of the tunes. But beyond the production of music are two other important roles that the xylophone text performs - a communication medium and a transmitter of poetic texts. In this study, an attempt has been made to shed light on the xylophone, the xylophonist and the xylophone texts. The nature of the texts has been highlighted with the objective of demonstrating how poetic they are. The study also shows how a text can manifest itself as a voice of conscience while maintaining its aesthetic value.*

*Keywords:- Xylophone, Dirge, Literary Forms, Eulogist.*

## INTRODUCTION

Some African musical implements not only function as instruments for entertainment but often double as communication channels. Among these musical instruments are the drum and the xylophone. With regard to the drum much research has been done on it by reputable scholars such as Kwabena Nketia (1967) and Ruth Finnegan (1970). In their respective works they high-lighted both the communicative and poetic functions of the African drum. The functions of the xylophone also called 'gyil' by the Dagara, on the other hand, are not well known and as it is one of the most important musical instruments in the Upper West Region of Ghana, it is worthwhile these are brought out to light.

In this paper therefore, focus will be placed on the xylophone. As stated already it is a musical instrument which is also operated as a medium of communication and made to express itself in a poetic language. It is the major musical instrument of the Dagara better known as Dagaaba or Dagarti, a Mole-Dagbani linguistic group that inhabits the Upper West Region of Ghana. The 'gyil' is central to various celebrations among the people of this area. It is used to entertain people at festivals and also in their religious worship. It can however be said that it is in the funeral celebrations that the xylophone is most important as a communicative tool, and that is where the best xylophone poets perform. It should be noted that the Sissala who are immediate neighbours of the Dagara, also have the xylophone and use it expressively the same manner as the Dagara do.

An effort will be made in this paper to demonstrate both the communicative and the poetic nature of the xylophone by examining some xylophone texts of two Dagara veteran xylophonists namely Bergyire, and Ambrose Daayeng and texts that are generally owned by the Dagara community as their composers are unknown. The translated versions of the texts are my own. As a Dagara I have participated at the funerals of relatives and friends and others far and near usually as a mourner. I have, as one very much intrigued by xylophone music often asked xylophone performers and dirge singers questions relating to the xylophone. What I present here is considerably based on the interaction I have had with these knowledgeable people in the art to whom I am very grateful for the ideas they have graciously shared with me and also based on my personal observation.

**Fig.1: A xylophonist performing at a funeral.**



### **THE XYLOPHONE (*GYIL*)**

The xylophone is a horizontal structure made of '*liga*' or mahogany wood. It comprises either fourteen or eighteen carved boards of the '*liga*' or mahogany wood of various widths and lengths and hollow gourds of equal number and varied sizes like the boards. The boards are arranged horizontally next to one another beginning with the shortest which may be four centimetres wide and forty centimetres long, to the longest piece of about ten centimetres wide, ninety centimetres long. These flat pieces of wood usually linked up by a hide or a twine are spread over a wooden framework that has the hollow gourds tied to its roof. The gourds are arranged in a way that each hangs directly under a board of corresponding size. That is, the longest board hangs over the largest or biggest gourd and so on in that descending order. The gourds do not touch the ground when the '*gyil*' is in performing position, as that might affect the sonorous sound of the instrument, during play. As the gourds are of different sizes the xylophone is structured such that it slants from the left where the bigger gourds are affixed to the right where the smaller gourds hang. The length of a xylophone is approximately 1.4 metres while its height at its lowest point is about 30.7centimetres and the highest point about 61 centimetres. The boards function as the keys on which notes are struck while the gourds are the resonators. The rapid striking of the keys by a performer with the '*gyilbie*'-- two short rubber-tipped sticks, usually gives rise to the mellifluous melody that emanates from the xylophone (Fig. 1).

Xylophone makers are themselves very good xylophonists but of course, it is not every xylophonist that is a xylophone maker. Xylophone making is a skill one acquires through training. The mastery of this skill will usually draw customers to the maker. Any one can own a xylophone if he so desires and can purchase one. A xylophone owner is free to hire out his instrument to anyone or any group of people who may require it for performance at a function at a modest fee. Usually, the fee is paid upon the return of the instrument to its owner after the performance. Such fees are meant for maintaining the quality of the xylophone.



Fig. 2. A lead xylophonist (seated left) and his assistant (seated right) at a funeral performance.

#### THE XYLOPHONIST AND PERFORMANCE

Xylophones are normally played in pairs even though in times of scarcity one is played. During performance the xylophonists normally sit facing each other after positioning their instruments in such a way that the low keys of one xylophone are in line with the high keys of the other. The elder or the more prolific of the two xylophonists is usually the lead performer who strikes a particular tune after both xylophonists have tested their keys and found them to be appropriate to carry the messages they have. While the lead xylophonist plays the text or causes the xylophone to express his thoughts the assistant concerns himself with providing the background melody to the text. The assistant xylophonist who is also the percussionist during play is supported by a gourd-drummer. These three, (see Figure 2. below), must perform in harmony otherwise it becomes impossible for any to play his part well. This is particularly very important during a funeral when the eulogists must sing in concord with the two xylophonists and the drummer. For instance, if the pitch of the xylophone note is either too high or too low the dirge singers may not be able to sing until the appropriate key is struck. If that is not done, a temporary hold up of this mourning process occurs.

That is why among the Dagara, xylophone poets [*gobr*] of high calibre are expected to perform at funerals, and yet to be a xylophone poet [*goba*], many years of apprenticeship may be required in the xylophone training. It is so because the art of communication with the xylophone is a specialized art. The trainee must know all about the xylophone and as is often the case an accomplished xylophonist is also a xylophone maker. The duration of apprenticeship depends on one's aptitude for the 'trade' and like some gifted poets of the written literary tradition, one's first public performance may not be successful but with constant practice the performer overcomes the problems of combining his reflexes and mind to produce intoxicating melodies.

Of course, the young apprentice xylophonist begins learning to master the simplest text and then the more complex ones. As he gets more and more accomplished and confident through playing at non-formal functions such as marriage feasts and moonlight dances he eventually graduates into the higher order of xylophone celebrities. But he cannot become a popular xylophonist through mere carbon copy production. His eminence hinges precisely on his versatility and how grasping his compositions are to the public. It should be noted that apprenticeship to become an excellent xylophonist is open to all interested persons.

#### COMPOSITION

For the xylophone poet to be an effective social communicator, entertainer, commentator and critic he gathers ideas, collates and arranges them coherently. He then strengthens them with the appropriate idioms and other figures of speech that enhance the language and thrust it into the realm of poetry.

The xylophonist like any poet can get possessed by an inspiration or by some powerful emotions resulting in a composition of a song and as Orpingalik, a great Eskimo singer said, “songs are thoughts sung out with breath when people are moved by great forces and ordinary speech no longer suffices.” (Finnegan 1979). So, the xylophonist does not keep a song to himself. He shares it with his community through his surrogate - the xylophone. As soon as he has composed a new song he sits by his xylophone and tries it out until all its rough edges are smoothened. He then waits for the next funeral to occur to launch his new “hit” at the funeral. But he can introduce his new composition anywhere though more often than not the funeral ground is the favourite setting because many people from afar attend funerals and they can better carry the message faster to their various villages and towns.

How does the poet launch his song? He waits eagerly for his chance to play the xylophone since performers play their parts in turns on ‘first come, first served’ basis. When his turn eventually comes he plays it out and sings it out, as was typical of the Late Bergyire, to the hearing of the mourners, eulogists and other performers around him.

The reaction to it is often electric depending on its aesthetic and semantic qualities. The mourners respond to the new song by dancing if the deceased is quite elderly. But if it is a young man or woman, a simulated dance may be performed by women. Meanwhile the new text joins the repertoire of songs that are now communally owned and performed by anyone as best as they can.

#### **THE XYLOPHONIST AS A SOCIAL COMMENTATOR**

As an entertainer, commentator and critic the xylophone poet comments on all issues of his society and beyond through his surrogate voice at various places he performs- marriage feasts, religious services and dances, and above all at funerals where the top brass in his profession meet to make their comments on society. So in playing the xylophone the xylophonist wishes to communicate his joy, sorrow, anxieties and hopes to his community. He also criticises, admonishes, advises, satirises and encourages society, or its individual members. It does not really matter where he plays but the important thing is that he performs with a communication medium and expresses his mood poetically to people to know so that they might give the necessary response.

#### **XYLOPHONE LANGUAGE**

The overt response the public can immediately make to the poet’s statements is to either sing or dance along with him. This positive response is however based on the knowledge of the language of the xylophone, which has its grammar and syntax related to the spoken words of the poet and his community. That is to say that the xylophone language is grounded on the spoken language. And Dagara being a tonal language on which the xylophone language is based, it is easy to fashion the keys of the instrument to correspond with the possible tonal sounds a Dagara speaker can make. As Finnegan says of the African drums, they “communicate through direct representation of the spoken language, itself simulating the tone and rhythm of speech” (Finnegan 1970) one may add that what she says of the drums is applicable to the xylophone too.

The language of the xylophone at the funeral grounds is poetic. We may add that the poetry of the xylophone language can be found not only at the funeral ground but even in the playing field during moonlight dances. In view of the foregoing, one can call it ‘speaking instrument’ in the same vein as Kropp Dakubu calls the Ga musical instruments ‘speaking instruments’ (Kropp 1991) or the Akan *atumpan* is dubbed ‘talking drum’. In fact, Bergyire a renowned xylophone poet of Nandom whose recorded composition we will be looking at presently had this to say in one of his texts:

*‘Maa benu iere’i . Gylbir nokyoloo Ole nu iere’.* i.e., “It is not I speaking. It is the pointed mouth of *Gylbir*. He is speaking.”

Bergyire in this short piece is ascribing all that he has said, to the xylophone. This appears to contradict what we have said already that the poet speaks through the xylophone. For now we are faced with a situation where the xylophone is now said to be speaking through the poet. This paradoxical situation implies that the poet is possessed by the muse –‘spirit’ of the xylophone at the point in time and is no more responsible for whatever he is saying. He is under the influence of a force greater than himself.

Like the drum of the Akans of Ghana and the Kele of Congo, the xylophone texts announce the death of an individual. The xylophone does not only announce but also gives some general information about the deceased. A text like this from the veteran xylophonist, Ambrose Daayeng informs the listener that a great man has just passed away:

- 1a) *Kakuor gene*  
*kukur’u ga teng*  
*Kukur Zabura*  
*Tammigr Kankaara*  
*Ule nu mwaa vuor.* (Ambrose Daayeng, 1996 --tape recording)
- b) The graceful farmer’s hoe  
 Now lies forlorn on its side  
 The strongman of the hoe  
 The champion of the hoe  
 Has created a void.

Whoever is a “*towone*”, that is to say, whoever understands the xylophone language will interpret this correctly but the “*wong*” or uninitiated ear may only enjoy the melody of the keys completely oblivious of the intermittent groaning and wailing sounds woven into the melody.

A second look at that xylophone piece may be useful in considering its language usage. It is obvious that the name of the deceased is not mentioned but praise names depicting his status in his life time are profusely proffered. “*Kakuor gene*” means the farmer who manipulates gracefully his hoe on the farm. Similarly, *Tammigr kankaara* implies one whom none can equal in the use of the bow. Thus the picture is painted of a very great farmer, warrior and hunter that would be missed by his community.

A nuance that can be read into the text is that the deceased had lived a heroic life and should now be honoured by the living and the dead. The praise names are metaphorical while the ‘hoe’ in the first line is personified and depicted as one lying down on its side inactive and sorrowful. The last line is couched in euphemism as the man is said to have created a void rather than to have died.

The following text may also announce the death of a Dagara woman:

- 2a) *Birpkakpa dugre*  
*Dan kon dug dambil zier*  
*Samonbiin mong sakere*  
*Samonbiin dam*  
*A vuur ka kpele* ( Ambrose Daayeng 1996—tape recording ).
- b) The great matron of sour leaves sauce  
 She who would cook palatable soup even with minimal ingredients  
 The best *saab* cook has failed

Her stirring stick has broken in the process.

The foregoing text also informs the listener that the deceased was a hardworking woman very much alive to her responsibilities. She was a very good cook who was also very economical. She was a caring mother who made sure that her children were well fed. Now that her stirring stick is broken ---that is to say, now that she is dead, only hardships are to be expected by the bereaved family.

### THEMATIC CONCERNS

As said already, the poet deals with varieties of themes in his social commentary. One of such themes in a funeral environment is of course the theme of death and the favourite text for most xylophonists is the following which acknowledges the might of death.

- 3a) *Kuu yo tin tin tin*  
*Kuu yo tin tin tin*  
*Kuu yo ni gandaa*  
*Kuu yo tin tin tin.* (Communally owned –tape recording )
- b) Only Death  
Only Death  
Only Death is the greatest  
Only Death.

The truism of this text is better appreciated at a funeral of a great one such as a chief or one held in awe. It impresses upon one the inevitability of death no matter one's social standing.

Death is here personified and further endowed with super human greatness; before him, everyone stands in awe. The repetitive nature of text is significant for the poet seeks to press the point home that no one will escape death and that the bereaved should come to terms with that fact quickly and stop worrying too much.

It is often necessary to find causes for the death of loved ones among the Dagara. It is especially urgent when the death seems to have struck too suddenly or to have occurred in mysterious circumstances. More often than not, the blame is laid at a supposed enemy's doorstep; invariably the alleged practices of the so called enemy generate fear and sow seeds of distrust among people. The collective fear, distrust and suspicion of the known or unknown enemy is reflected in most of the funeral songs like this one by Bergyire in his 1989 tape recording:

- 4a) *Fo nong salom foo luore*  
*Dome ga ni a salom zu.*

**Fo bang a sagame foo luore**

*Dome ga ni a be.  
Foo saa kyen daa nyub  
Dome kyaa zi.  
Foo nye dome a  
A gbee miile to,  
A nuu wogo,  
A pour kpeluu,  
A nuor kyoluu.*

- b) You may wander in the sky,  
The enemy lies there.  
You may flee into the clouds  
But the enemy is there.  
You go for a drink  
But the enemy sits waiting.  
The enemy, you know  
Thin-legged,  
Long-handed,  
Distended-belly,  
Protruding mouth

The enemy is thus shown to be everywhere and much as a person would want to avoid him the person finds him comfortably waiting for him wherever he goes. But the enemy in this context has a double meaning. On the one hand the enemy is the normal human adversary and on the other hand, the enemy is seen as death. The physical description of the enemy portrays an image of death and so a conclusion may be drawn that the human enemy is synonymous with death. The poet uses the image ‘sky’, ‘clouds’ and ‘drink’ to symbolize desperate measures one may want to adopt to avoid the enemy and also points out the futility in all the attempts to escape death. Structurally, parallelism and balancing have been employed in the first six lines while assonance runs through the whole text. This feature is much more obvious in the last four lines.

- 5) *A gbee miile to  
A nuu wogo  
A pour kpeluu  
A nuor kyoluu.* (From Bergyire’s songs -tape recording )

Accepting sound advice is deep in the philosophy of the Dagara and several proverbs attest to it. An example is:

6. *Nikpee dabol’u be mi gang*

Bebe gangne u nuore

Which means, “one may walk over an elder’s walking stick but never his words”.

The consequence of not heeding advice is captured by *Bergyire* in this text.

- 7a) *Bibibewone nyog dopan zoor  
Bibibewone nyog gbaa zoor  
O nie na maal bang a gbaa?*

O nie na maal bang a dopan’i?

( *From Bergyire’s songs—tape recording* ).

- b) A naughty child has caught a viper’s tail  
A naughty child has caught a cobra’s tail  
Does he really know what a cobra is?  
Does he really know what a viper is?

The venomous nature of these reptiles, the viper and the cobra, is well known. A bite from either of them could result in death and for one to hold them at the wrong spot is to put oneself at risk. Simply put, the text

means that whoever will not listen to advice should be prepared to bear the consequences of his action.

The playing of this text at a funeral often suggests the xylophonist is alluding to rejection of advice on the part of the deceased as the cause of his death. But generally, it is an admonishment to all.

A xylophonist could get well remunerated if he played texts that explore the deep emotions of the bereaved and tried to offer soothing words.

Take for example:

8a) *Tiero fo tiere*  
*Nir za be bang baar'e*  
*E nie toor.*  
*Naamwin song fo, wooi! aa !* (From  
Bergyire's songs - tape recording).

b) Deep you are in thoughts  
Yet the ignorant  
Insult you.  
May God help you. Alas! alas!

While wishing him God's blessing the poet goes on to remind him of his present fate as a bereaved;

9a) *Nirnang be ter ba e*  
*Nirnang be ter yeb e.*  
(From Bergyire's songs—tape recording).

b) The desolate has no friend  
The desolate has no a brother.

and concludes it with:

10a) *Nirnang be I bontiera fo tier'e*  
*Tiero na kub'a*

b) Loneliness is not a thing to worry about  
Worry will only kill you.

A text like that stimulates much more wailing and groaning and an avalanche of tears among the bereaved and others in similar circumstances. The ironies in the text make it particularly interesting. The bereaved normally should deserve sympathy from all but here we find the bereaved being insulted instead of being consoled. It is a typical example of what happens at Dagara funerals. While some eulogists sing praises of the deceased and try to soothe the pain of the bereaved others cast insinuations that border on insult or outright castigation. It is also interesting that the poet should worry about the bereaved and yet advise him not to worry about poverty and loneliness.

To diffuse intense emotions typical of funeral situations, xylophone texts unrelated to death punctuate the ones directly related to themes of death. The following hints at the problems of a barren woman.

11a) *Zan tar to*  
*O bie to*  
*Kyen ler to*

To o yong we. (Communally owned -

tape recording ).

b) *Zan tar pounds*

Her child pounds

Kyen lher pounds

*Pounds alone*



'Zan tar' and 'Kyen Lher' are ideophones ascribed to two women-pounders. 'Zan tar' is the woman has a child to help her pound millet. In pounding, she makes the heavy sound 'zan' with her pestle and the daughter replies with 'tar' but the barren woman *Kyen Lher* pounding her little millet only makes light noise with her pounding *Kyen Lher*.

Simple though this text may seem, it tells of the loneliness of the woman in a state of barrenness. The poet as usual is not specific but uses ideophonic words as metaphoric names for the subjects of his comment. The alliterative use of the /t/ and the assonance /a/, /e/ and /o/ provide a rhythmic cadence to the text as may be observed.

Deviant behaviour of people is often a subject of comment during funeral celebration among the Dagara.

12a) *Na mil mil niru*  
*Zore lane nibe*

Wone yeke mile be bere  
*Gyagyū mila no. (Ambrose Daayeng, 1996 -  
tape recording ).*

b) It is a traitor who  
Mingles among people  
Hears them and embroils them in disputes  
He is the swift moving tarantula

The activities of a tale-bearer in the society are condemned in harsh terms for the Dagara believe that such activities can destroy a people. So in the text a tale-bearer is a traitor whose speed at entangling people in conflicts is likened to the fast moving tarantula that bites as it moves.

Xylophone poets by nature of their calling are moralists and they endeavour to make their voices heard on moral issues. In doing this they invoke the name of God to let people turn away from wrong doing. The following text warns society of God's justifiable punishment as a reward for society's waywardness.

## CONCLUSION

An attempt has been made in the paper to examine the Dagara xylophonist and his poetic texts in relation to dirges. The xylophonist worthy of the traditional title 'goba' is a poet and an artist as has been demonstrated in this paper. Usually, he undergoes a period of apprenticeship for several years and often emerges as a skilful poet and a craftsman at the end of his training. The length of time he takes to learn the art depends on his ability to learn fast. As a poet, he is an entertainer, a social commentator, a critic and a moralist. The xylophonist successfully plays all those roles using the xylophone as a medium on which he plays out poetic texts that he has composed or learnt from other xylophone poets. These poetic texts played on the xylophone usually come across to the uninitiated merely as soft liquid melodies. But to the initiated ear the melodies come across not only as soothing but also critical and humorous pieces of information. The employment of rhetorical devices such as metaphors, idioms, proverbs and parallelisms in a xylophone text heightens its language and thus thrusts the particular xylophone text into the realm of poetry.

## REFERENCES

- Bergyire. (1989). Xylophone texts on tape.  
Daayeng, A. (1996). Xylophone text on tape.  
Finnegan, R. (1970). 'Oral Literature in Africa' Oxford Press, Clarendon.  
Finnegan, R. (1979). Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context, University Press, Cambridge.  
Kropp, D.M.C. (1991). 'One Voice' African Studies Centre, Leiden, The Netherlands.  
Nketia, J.H.K., (1967). "Akan Poetry" in Introduction to African Literature Longman Group Ltd, London.