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# The Ethnography of Surrogate Speech in a Foreign Language: The Case of the Timpani Drum Language among the Dagomba of Ghana

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**ABSTRACT**

This article presents a study of the *timpani* drum beats and the *akarima* drummer among the Dagomba of Ghana, using analysis of audio and video recordings of drumming sessions and interviews with the drummers. Borrowed from the Asantes in the eighteenth century, the *timpani* transmits limited, oft-repeated messages in Akan, a language that neither the drummer nor his Dagomba patrons understand. In spite of this, the *timpani* is an integral part of Dagomba culture and rituals. In addition to transmitting messages with the drum, the *akarima* guards the tradition and cultural heritage, and reinforces Dagomba values and cultural ethos. As a guardian of tradition, the *akarima* resists innovation of the practices associated with the use of the drum. As a constructor of realities, he creates knowledge and values from the praises of chiefs, imparts them to his patrons and actively moulds their lives to conform to these values. The article argues that, far from being a deficiency, the use of the drum to transmit messages in a language not comprehensible to the people contributes significantly to the success of the *akarima*, who functions as imparter of values to his listeners.

**KEYWORDS**

Drum language; surrogate speech; Dagomba; Dagbani; oral literature

**TUMA KOLIVAAI**

Vihigu tuma ŋɔ wuhirila yɛl' shɛŋa ŋan be timpani kumsi ni, nti pahi akarima tuma ni nyɛ shɛli Dagbamba kali puuni. Tuma maa tumbu ni, ti daa yaai Dagbɔŋ akarimanima niŋ shinii puuni (video) saha shɛli bɛ ni daa zuɣiri timpana maa, ka daa lahi ʒini akarimanima tooni n-deei baŋsim zaŋ kpa yɛl' gola ni kali yɛl' shɛŋa ŋan be akarintali puuni. Vihigu maa wuhiya, ni akarintali yila Kambɔnsi sani n-kpe Dagbɔŋ na Naa Gariba zaamani. Dagbɔn timpani pala bɛ ni ŋmɛri shɛli diri alizama gbaai yihi akarimanima yaannim ni zaŋ shɛli wuhi ba. Kambɔnsili zuliya ka timpan' noli yɛra. Di mi nyɛla zuliya shɛli Dagbɔŋ akarima mini o ni salindi shɛba maa ni bɛ wumda. Di mini di tinzuntali maa zaa yoli, timpani nyɛla ti kaya ni taada biŋkumdi kpeeni dama kali yɛlli ku tooi niŋ nayili ka timpani bi kum. Akarima tuma n-nyɛ li ni o gu Dagbɔŋ kaya ni taada ka che bɔriginsim. O mini o baantaba nyɛla ban wuhiri bilichini hala ni nyɛ shɛŋa din yɛn che ka bilichininima gbaai bɛ yaannima ni daa zaŋ hal' suŋ shɛŋa gbibi Dagbɔŋ. Vihigu ŋɔ wuhiya, ni timpani noli tinzuntali maa nyɛla din tiri akarima jilima, dama Dagbamba ban bi wumdi Kambɔnsili ka bɛ ni yɛn paai so ka o wuhi ba bɛ yaannima salima gbunni gbaai yihi akarima.

**KEYWORDS IN DAGBANI**

Biŋkumda yɛltɔɣa; Dagbamba; Dagbanli; nolini baŋsim; Akarima tuma

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Among the Dagomba of Ghana, and in many other parts of Africa, surrogate instruments, which replace the human voice in transmitting speech, are used to send messages to people. The most famous of these instruments is the drum. The sound of the drum, intended and interpreted as speech, is often referred to as drum language, and the drums that send such messages are known as talking drums. Other talking or surrogate instruments include bells, logs, flutes, horns and the fiddle.[1] Ruth Finnegan has argued that the sounds of the talking drum directly represent the words of regular speech (2012). Finnegan considers drum language to be an aspect of oral literature used for specific literary forms such as proverbs, panegyrics, historical poems and dirges. Robert Nicholls has also argued that these instruments do not just produce codes (1993). They are a near-perfect replacement of the human speech organs that produce the actual language of the people.

Other scholars (e.g. Nketia 1971; Locke and Agbeli 1981; Carter 1984; Mukuna 1987; Neeley 1996) view the speech transmitted by surrogate instruments as an abstraction of the meaning communicated in regular vocal speech. They observe that, in any culture that makes use of surrogate instruments, only a privileged few trained members can interpret the language transmitted by the instruments. For this reason, they are hardly ever meant to satisfy the regular, daily communicative needs of the people (see Hudu 2021 for further discussion). It is for similar reasons that all the drummers who took part in this research project are male.

In Ghana, the drum language of the Asantes has received the most attention, in particular in the works of J. H. Kwabena Nketia (1963; 1971). The use of surrogate instruments, especially the talking drum, among the Dagomba has not received as much attention. In the few studies on Dagbani talking drum language, the focus has mostly been on surrogate instruments that also encode music. For this reason, the *lunsi*, whose drums serve both as surrogate and dance instruments, have received the most attention in previous studies (e.g. Asuro 2008). Research on Dagbani (and this is also true for many other languages) has been more focused on the literary aspect of the surrogate instrument and the cultural performances that accompany it. Much less attention has been given to the analysis of the language the drums produce and to deeper ethnographic enquiries into the drum language and the drummer. My own earlier research has contributed to this field (Hudu 2021) and has provided some insights into the use of the drum, the double bell and the fiddle and their production of speech in Akan and Hausa, languages that the Dagomba neither speak nor understand. In that work, I have discussed issues relating to the training in playing these surrogate instruments, the nature of the messages they transmit, how these messages are transmitted, and how the audience is able to interpret them.

This article sets out to provide analyses of the ethnography of the *timpani* talking drum. It looks at the various uses of the *timpani* drum, the position of the talking drummer in Dagbon, the role he (as mentioned above, they are all male) plays in Dagbon society, and how the historic origins of the *timpani* influence these roles. Research on the ethnography of the *timpani* drum language is of interest because, unlike many other instrumental modes of transmitting messages among the Dagomba, the *timpani* is of foreign origin. It preserves virtually every feature that defines the use of the *timpani* among the Akans, including the transmission of messages in Akan. For this reason, the drummer is unable to use the *timpani* to communicate by generating

any speech he wants to make in Akan, except what he has been taught. While the drummers have the skills to drum any statement in any language, they restrict themselves to drumming the same set of phrases on a regular basis. In spite of these apparent limitations, the *timpani* drummer produces messages that are distinct from those produced by other griots, in both content and structure. In terms of content, the *timpani* is used to encode a wide variety of messages, including announcements and panegyrics, and to summon subjects in times of emergencies. Structurally, these messages are much shorter than those generated by other griots, as discussed further below.

The Dagomba (pronounced as *Dagbamba* by natives; singular, *Dagbana*) are an ethnic group in the north of Ghana. Their language is known as Dagbani (Gur, Niger-Congo) and their kingdom is known as *Dagbon*. No language besides Dagbani is spoken by the native speakers in their homeland. Akan, which is spoken in the south of Ghana, belongs to a different language family called Kwa, which is not related to Dagbani. The Dagomba neither speak nor understand Akan when spoken, except those who learn it in native Akan-speaking communities.

The Dagbon state was founded in the fifteenth century (Staniland 1975; Asuro 2008) and covers an area of around 8000 square miles (Asuro 2008). Within the Dagbon state are other ethnic groups, such as the Konkomba, Chokosi, Anufo, Basare, Bimoba, Nafeba and others. The Dagomba share close cultural and linguistic affinity with the Nanumba to the south of Dagbon, who also speak Dagbani, and the Mamprusi to the north of Dagbon, whose language is considered by some as a dialect (for more on Dagbani and dialectal differences, see Hudu 2010; 2013; Hudu and Nindow 2020). The people of all three ethnic groups are descendants of a common ancestor called Gbewaa. *Dagbamba* and *Dagbani* are sometimes used in a broad sense to refer respectively to the people of all three ethnic groups and their linguistic forms.

The two principal towns in Dagbon are Yendi, the traditional capital of Dagbon, and Tamale, the capital city of the administrative Northern Region of Ghana and the largest city in northern Ghana. Politically, the Dagbon state is ruled by a king who bears the title Yaa Naa (king of strength) and who resides in the Gbewaa Palace in Yendi. Under him are 20 paramount chiefs in different parts of the kingdom. The paramount chiefs also have divisional and village chiefs serving under them.

Information on the use of the talking drum was obtained from six living *akarimanima* (plural of *akarima*, drummer of the *timpani* drum) in Yendi and surrounding villages. The first to be interviewed was the head of all *akarimanima* in Dagbon, Wumbei Dawuni of the Gbewaa Palace. He and Wumbei Kwame, who had retired from drumming, were in their seventies. Abdulai Yakubu also retired from drumming and was in his sixties, while Natogma Neindow (the *akarima* of the chief of Zohe, a suburb of Yendi) and Akarima Awolu (the *akarima* of the paramount chief of Mion) were in their fifties. The youngest was Zakaria Alhassan, the *akarima* of the paramount chief of Kuga, who was in his mid-twenties. All but Zakaria had practised drumming for periods ranging from 20 to 50 years.

All six were interviewed for a deeper understanding of the work of the *akarima*, the history of the drum in Dagbon, and the significance of their work to Dagbamba culture, among other subjects. Akarima Wumbei and Akarima Awolu were also recorded while performing at the Gbewaa and Mion palaces. At each palace, a pre-dawn video recording of a performance on Friday and another during the 2021 Damba festival (one of several festivals celebrated by the Dagomba) was obtained. At the Gbewaa

Palace, we arrived shortly after 3.00 am in October 2021. At about 3.30, the *akarima* arrived to set up the drums and begin drumming. He spent about 30 minutes on the performance. At the Mion Palace, which is in Sambu, approximately seven miles west of Yendi, the performance started at 4.00 am and lasted twenty-five minutes. The recorded performances of each *akarima* were later played back to the drummer at separate interviews, to enable interpretation and further insight into the work of the *akarima*. These interview sessions were also recorded for analysis.

To fully understand the issues discussed here, it is important to look into the position of the *timpani* in Dagbon culture, including its origin and history. The *timpani* is not the only instrument that the Dagomba use to transmit speech. Jacqueline Cogdell DjeDje (2008) identified as many as 26 musical instruments used by the Dagomba, including membranophones, chordophones, aerophones and idiophones. Of these, nearly a dozen instruments are used to transmit speech, although only a handful of these are prominently used as such. These are the *luŋa* (plural, *lunsi*) (a double-membrane hourglass-shaped pressure drum), the *gungoŋ* (a cylindrical drum the size of a Western snare drum), the *goonje* (plural, *goonjenima*) (a one-stringed fiddle), the *timpani* (plural, *timpana*) (a single-membrane goblet-shaped drum), the *dawule* (double bell) and the *kikaa* (a wooden flute with a gourd at the end). As discussed extensively in DjeDje (2008) and in some detail in Hudu (2021), some of these instruments are of foreign origin and are unique for encoding surrogate speech in languages that are not native to the Dagomba. Notable among these is the *goonje*, used by the people of the *Goonje* clan, who are of Hausa origin. They use the instrument to produce fiddle music accompaniment to songs in Hausa. The *timpana* and *dawule* are used by the *Kambonsi* clan (a wing of the Dagbon army) to encode speech in Akan. Of these, the *timpani* and *dawule* are unique in that they are used solely as surrogate instruments. The fiddle and other surrogate instruments are also musical instruments.

Dagbon histories, both oral and written (e.g. Staniland 1975), are unanimous in their view that the *Kambonsi* clan in Dagbon and their eccentric cultural practices are of Akan origin, and that these practices were adopted into Dagbon during the reign of Naa Gariba in the 1700s. The name *Kambonsi* (singular, *Kamboŋa*) is the same as the Dagbani word for an Akan person. Their chiefs, like Akan chiefs, sit on stools, not skins. They use Akan personal names and wear cloths, not smocks. Even their dance moves resemble those of the Akans very closely. On the *timpani* and *dawule* surrogate instruments, Hudu (2021) notes that their names, shape, use and language of encoding all bear close resemblance to Akan language and culture. The names *timpani* and *dawule* are *atumpan* and *dawuro* respectively in Akan. One of the talking drummers interviewed referred to the *timpani* with the alternative name *kambon luŋa* (Akan drum). Even the name of the person who drums or bells them in Dagbani is called *akarima*, from the Akan *ɔkyerɛma*, "master drummer". The speech transmitted by the *timpani* and bell is Akan, although none of the six talking drummers interviewed for this study spoke Akan or knew any living *akarima* who could speak Akan.

The *akarimanima* are conscious of the fact that they are not articulate in Akan, and what they say may not match spoken Akan. Akarima Awolu calls the language of the *timpani Dagban Kambosili* ("Dagbani-ised Akan") and the language spoken by the Asantes *Kambon Maŋli* ("proper Akan"). He says that they sometimes differ, but most of the time they converge. However, the divergence is due to the general lack of

competence of the *akarima* in Akan and the fact that the messages were passed down over the past three centuries, principally through the drummed mode complemented by a verbalisation of these drummed messages from one non-Akan-speaking *akarima* to another. Otherwise, there is no doubt that the messages were truly from native Akans, not Dagbani statements translated into Akan.

It must be emphasised that the adoption and integration of the work of *akarima* into Dagbon culture was driven by the desire to enrich the culture of the Dagomba with a complementary surrogate system. It was not driven by the need to acquire something that was lacking in their own culture. This is because virtually everything that can be done by the *akarima* and his *timpana* can also be done by the *lunsi*, who existed long before the *akarima*. I discuss further details below, on different griots in Dagbon. In addition to providing dance beats, verbalising what they drum and recounting history in lengthy detail in Dagbani (actions that are not part of the work of the *akarima*), the *lunsi* also use their drums to send announcements, mobilise people and perform any other duty that the *akarima* performs with the *timpani*. With the emergence of the *akarima* and his *timpani*, some of the functions, especially sending announcements and summons to people in distant places, may have been ceded to the *akarima*, whose instruments could produce sounds that travel farther. Thus, while the *lunsi* can perform these functions – and occasionally still do – some of them have come to be identified as the primary functions of the *akarima*.

The *akarimanima* share cultural and linguistic spaces with the *lunsi* and the *goonjenima* as three separate griot clans in Dagbon.[2] *Luŋa* and its plural form refer both to the double-membrane hourglass-shaped pressure drum and to the person who plays it. Similarly, *goonje* refers both to the fiddle and the fiddler. The *lunsi* are the traditional custodians of the history of the Dagbon kingdom. Of the three, only they perform and recount history and eulogies in Dagbani. The *akarima*, on the other hand, is the only griot who talks solely using the drum. While the *lunsi* also use their drums as surrogate instruments, they are as prominent for singing and chanting the praises of their patrons as they are for the sound of their drums. The *akarima* never verbalises what he drums.[3]

The major functions of the *timpani* in Dagbon do not differ from those of talking drums in other parts of Africa. Talking drums are a form of oral literature (Finnegan 2012); through them, drummers encode meaning using a limited variety of acoustic signals. Their signals are largely an abstraction of the meaning encoded in vocal speech. The speech they produce is largely understood by a few, culturally rooted members of the society (for further discussion of this, see Nketia 1971; Locke and Agbeli 1981; Mukuna 1987; Neeley 1996). As discussed in Hudu (2021), the fact that, for the Dagomba, the language encoded is not the language they speak presents a further level of abstraction than that produced by talking drums of other cultures. When compared with the Akan talking drum, the similarities are even more striking, as may be expected from the historical links between them. Finnegan (2012) notes that becoming a talking drummer is hereditary among the Akan people (as well as the Yorùbá). That is the case for the Dagomba, too. People do not learn the skills and art in their adult life; rather, they learn them in childhood from an elder close relative, as a unique clan activity. Among both ethnic groups, the *akarima* is attached to the chief's court. Citing Nketia's research from 1963, Finnegan (2012, 471) notes that, among the Akans, "births, ordinary deaths, and marriages are not normally publicised on drums". This is the case among the Dagomba as well. Other

common uses of the drum include making announcements, especially during emergencies and wars. Among many African cultures, proverbs and words of wisdom characterise the eulogies of people who patronise their services, and the messages are meant to have a positive impact on the lives of the people by calling them towards virtue, and to emulate the best examples of their ancestors (Bokor 2014).

However, the *timpani* may be unique as a surrogate instrument dedicated to the service of royalty, not only in Dagbon but among many cultures.[4] One comparable ethnolinguistic system in terms of limitation of use, as reported by Paul Neeley (1996), is the *Ewondo* drumming of the Mekomba in Cameroon, where the surrogate speech consists of a single genre, produced by an individual, the catechist, at a predetermined time solely for calling Christians to church services. The *timpani* is also unique in Dagbon for being the only surrogate instrument that is not performed in an ensemble. As noted by most of the *akarimanima*, the maximum number of *timpana* that can be drummed at one venue is two, and that can only occur at the Gbewaa Palace. No other chief in the entire kingdom has the power to authorise the use of two *timpana* at his palace. Even when two *timpana* are drummed at the Gbewaa Palace, they have the effect of one, as they do not necessarily communicate with each other or produce complementary beats. Rather, one starts drumming a message, then the other picks up from where he left off and completes it.

The linguistic encoding of the *timpani* also differs from many surrogate systems in being restricted to oft-repeated messages, although the *akarimanima* acquire the skills to drum any message that is presented to them in any language. The *timpani* is never used for communicating private or confidential messages; Nketia (1971) makes the same observation about its use among the Asantes. The drummers do not have any interest in using the *timpani* to engage in conversations, not even among themselves. While this may account for the general paucity of *akarimanima* in Dagbon, it does not threaten the vitality of the *timpani* talking drumming in Dagbon, due to its strong links to the customs and traditions of the people. The use of the *timpani* is an integral part of the life of the chiefs' courts, which are the nerve centres of culture and tradition in Dagbon. For this reason, the *akarima*'s performance is part of any occasion that requires the gathering of people at the palace.

There are ten different distinctive occasions that call for the *timpani*'s use. Some of these are weekly or annual, including *Biɛɣunaayo*, performed pre-dawn on Mondays and Fridays to awaken the chief. The *Biɛɣunaayo* performance on these two culturally significant days is preceded by the *Zaawuni Timpani* (dusk performance), performed in the evening of Sunday and Thursday to notify the chief that the following day is Monday or Friday and remind him of the day that is coming and the responsibilities before him. After waking up the chief with *Biɛɣunaayo*, the *akarima* returns to the palace in the forenoon on both days for the third in the series of weekly performances. This is part of the performance of the rituals of the day, known in Dagbani as *Sambani Malibu* (the rites of the forecourt). In fact, according to Awolu, the whole of Friday and Monday are days of traditional significance. Thus, the *akarima* is at liberty to use the *timpani* at any time on both days as long as it is before dusk. The *akarima* also performs during annual festivals, including the Damba, Buɣum and Kpini festivals, as well as at celebrations marking the two Islamic Eid festivals: the *Eid ul-Fitr* and *Eid ul-Adha*.

The remaining six occasions that call for the *akarima*'s performance could happen on any day. They include the installation ceremonies of chiefs, the burial and funeral rites of people of royal lineage and the announcement of special events such as the death of people of royal lineage. Because of the role of the *akarima* as a source of information about these events, the *akarima* is always among the first to receive news of the deaths and identities of new chiefs before the formal ceremonies take place. The other roles include the summoning of sub-chiefs and royals to the palace in times of emergencies, accompanying the chiefs on their journeys, and mobilising the warriors of the kingdom during wars. According to Akarima Abdulai, historically, the *akarima*'s role during wars went beyond mobilising people. Being a part of the warrior clan in Dagbon, he was required to be part of the war contingent; he had to whip up a sense of patriotism for the chief and warriors by reminding them of the exploits of their forebears and how they made names for themselves and brought glory to the kingdom. The warriors were reminded that they could not let their ancestors down by doing anything short of following in their footsteps. With the rarity of wars in contemporary times, this role has become non-existent.

As described in more detail in Hudu (2021), a summons to the palace involves eulogising the individuals being summoned, followed by the Akan phrase *bra ntem*, which means "come in haste". Similarly, announcements of deaths are made by drumming the eulogy of the deceased, followed by the Akan phrase *damirfa due*, "rest in peace". If the deceased has no *akarima* eulogy, the eulogy of his or her youngest ancestor is drummed to signal to listeners that death has occurred in the house of that individual. The messages are more varied during festivals, as they encounter guests of different backgrounds and stature. The *akarima* does not just drum the eulogies of individual royals who arrive at the palace to participate in the festival. These eulogies also serve the purpose of announcing their arrival. Thus, people who are not even at the festival grounds are able to tell who has arrived. In contemporary times, as was observed during the 2021 Damba festival, the work of the *akarima* is complemented by another person who verbally announces in Dagbani the identities of the royals arriving. This is done to ensure that those who do not understand the drum language are not left out of the proceedings.

One of the most important duties of the *akarima* is to announce the movement of the chief. This includes the chief's entrance into towns and villages during his travels; this is announced with the use of the double bell. It also includes the chief's emergence from, and return into, the palace. Before entering a village, the *akarima* bells to announce *ɔhene o ba*, "the chief is coming". When he enters the village, he bells *ɔhene ŋuna m-bala*, "chief, that is him", a phrase that starts with the Akan word *ɔhene*, "chief", and then switches into Dagbani. After that, he bells the praises of the chief of that village before they pass the village. Sometimes the chief stops and interacts with the chief of the village before he passes. Akarima Awolu's explanation of his role in directing the movement of the chief during a festival is quoted below:[5]

> Before setting my eyes on him, I drum to express doubt, *ɔhene yɛnkɔ dan*, "the dependable chief". Is the chief sitting or coming out, I do not know. When I set eyes on him, I say, *ɔhene re ba, ɔhene, ŋuni m-bala*, "the chief is coming, the chief, that is him"; *Asaasefo wo ba*, "the owner of the land is coming"; *deɛ okum nnipa gyae nnipa, brɛbrɛ*, "the one with the power to take a soul and spare a soul, [walk] slowly, slowly". At this point, everyone can confirm that the chief is out.

To walk the chief back into the palace, the *akarima* drums *ɔhene sɔre brɛbrɛ*, "chief, wake up [and walk] slowly"; *deɛ okum nnipa gyae nnipa, brɛbrɛ*, "the one with the power to take a soul and spare a soul, [walk] slowly, slowly"; *asaase tokuro, sɔre brɛbrɛ*, "the hole of the earth [the one whose absence creates a vacuum/hole], wake up [and walk] slowly, slowly". These phrases are drummed repeatedly. Between the chief's exit and return, the *akarima* drums to remind the chief about how his ancestors succeeded in getting to the throne. The grandparents are eulogised one after another and the chief is told to emulate them.

During the evening and pre-dawn performances, the *akarima* catalogues the eulogies of late and present kings of Dagbon and ends with the incumbent chief that he serves. He also includes tributes to some historical beings who played or continue to play various roles in promoting the work of the *akarima*, including God Almighty, the Yaa Naa who established the tradition in Dagbon, and the chief who established the *akarima*'s ancestor as an *akarima*. Most of these tributes are proverbs and wise sayings encoding values meant to guide people's behaviour. During the *Biɛɣunaayo*, the *akarima* drums *adiɛ akyi*, "it is daybreak", after completing the eulogy of each chief before moving on to the next. From the interviews with the *akarimanima*, more than 40 of these eulogies of present and past chiefs of Dagbon were obtained. All but four were in Akan. In the sample eulogies of kings provided below, only the fourth is in Dagbani.

*Sɛ wo tiri yɛ a, na ɛfiri Nyame* (Naa Andani II Jirilɔŋ, 1876–99)

When your head is good, it is from God.

*Nsuo bɛtɔ a, mframa na ɛdi kan* (Naa Alhassan Tipariga, 1899–1917)

Before it rains, it is the wind that comes.

Ntontom bɔ dam awia a, ɔrennya obiara nka (Naa Mahama Bila, 1948–52)

When mosquitoes become wild during the day, they won't find anyone to bite.

*Saŋgarili bi kpɛri gu' chɔgifu* (Naa Abdulai III ŋmarigɔŋ, 1954–67)

A kola nut worm does not infest a bad cola nut.

*ɛtire kɛseɛ na ɛsoa adeɛ* (Naa Yakubu Andani, 1974–2002)

It is a big head that carries a load.

*Ka anokware, anokware na ɛyɛ* (Naa Abukari II, 2019–)

Speak the truth, the truth is good.

On most occasions when the *akarima* performs at the palace, he coordinates his performance with the fiddlers and the *lunsi*. The *akarima*'s duties at the palace and those of the *lunsi* and *goonje* are required to complement each other. Being part of the same palace and rendering similar services to royalty, the only way they can succeed is to fashion an orderly interaction. On the death of a chief or the enskinment of a new chief, the first to announce it is the *lunsi*. The *akarima* is required to wait for the *lunsi* to announce it through their drum before he can do the same. After him, the fiddlers take over. The *akarima*'s announcement is unique because the message of the *timpani* travels further than that of the *lunsi* and fiddlers.

During festivals, the installation of chiefs and any other event that requires the chief's emergence from the palace, the fiddlers, who are the closest to the chief, are always the first to get information about the emergence of the chief from the palace. Once they receive the information, they fiddle a song known as *Kaakaasannu*, which signals the chief's exit from the palace. The *akarima* then picks up his drumming sticks and relays the information to the *lunsi*, who always sit at a distance from the entrance to the palace. According to Akarima Awolu, in some cases, the *akarima* first has to praise the *lunsi* as a way of beseeching them to take the information and relay it. They are then alerted to play *Gingaani*, the unique *lunsi* beat that signals the emergence of the chief from the palace. When the *lunsi* start drumming, there will be three different performers celebrating the emergence of the chief. They will then usher him to his seat, all praising the chief and extolling his name and virtues in three different languages: Hausa, Akan and Dagbani. These eulogies typically include those of the chief's notable or immediate ancestors, each as distinct as the differences between the languages in which they are expressed.

At the Damba festival and other festive occasions where dancing takes place at the palace, there is a remarkable coordination between all three, especially between the *lunsi* and the *akarima*. At such events, the *lunsi* and *goonje* are more prominent and dominant over the *akarima*, given that their performance provides drumming and music for people to dance to. However, in order not to be totally left out of the proceedings, the *akarima* may pick up and drum the praise name of any past royal whose dance beat is being played by the *lunsi* and *goonje*. This adds to the excitement of the dancers. Not only are they dancing to the distinctive beat of their ancestor, they are also listening to his praises from the *akarima*. Such a dancer will typically move towards the *akarima* and reward him with money, as they do the *lunsi*. The *akarima* will do this for each dance tune that the *lunsi* and *goonje* beat. For this reason, the *akarima* possess an impressive knowledge of the *lunsi* and *goonje* eulogies, dance beats and tunes of present and past royals. In fact, for every chief or royal he can praise with the *timpana* drum, he also knows his or her *lunsi* dance beat and eulogies, as well as appropriate *goonje* dance tune and eulogies.

Sometimes, drumming the eulogy of a progenitor does not require the drumming of his dance tune by the *lunsi*. The sight of his direct descendant on the dance floor is enough to trigger the drumming of his name by the *akarima*. During the Damba festival, in addition to other dance beats that are drummed, there is the distinctive Damba dance beat, which is not linked to any specific past chief. However, the *akarima* still finds a way to introduce distinctive strokes of the *timpani* into the mix, with the goal of adding to the beauty of the sounds to which people are dancing.

Similarly, the chief's return to the palace is marked by an interaction between the griots. According to Awolu, the *akarima* has the exclusive right of all the griots to call an end to an event and ask the chief to return to the palace, sometimes to the chagrin of the *lunsi* and *goonje* who may be enjoying the show and earning from donations from the dancers at the event. He would typically do this if he thinks the chief has been out for too long, or if nightfall is setting in. He does so by drumming *ɔhene sɔre*, *O kum nipa ja nipa, sɔre* ("chief, wake up"). Once the elders of the chief hear this beat, they understand that it is time to end the drumming and dancing and to prepare the chief for a return to the palace. The *lunsi* and *goonje* have no choice but to yield and

provide the appropriate drumming and songs to get the chief back into the palace. The *lunsi* will get the chief to the door of the main hall of the palace. After that, the *goonje* take over inside the hall and take him deeper into the palace, bringing an end to the event. For the *akarima*, whether the chief is exiting, on the dance floor or returning to the palace, there is not much variety in what he drums. He instils pride and greatness in the chief by drumming the praises of his ancestors and associating him with their great exploits.

Coordination also exists between the griots during the *Biɛɣunaayo* performance at the Yaa Naa's palace. As already noted, the first to arrive and awaken the chief is the *akarima*. The *lunsi* are the next to come. During our visit to the palace, the *lunsi* had arrived even before the *akarima* completed his performance. When the *akarima* finished performing, they waited further for the Islamic dawn prayer, in which the Yaa Naa, his wives and other residents of the palace took part. As soon as the prayers were completed, they began drumming for about an hour, by which time there was daylight. The last to arrive were the *goonjenima*, who sat inside the palace to conduct their performance. Their performance marks the end of the *Biɛɣunaayo* performances. Later in the day, when it is time to perform the rituals of the day, the *akarima* and *lunsi* return, along with the trumpeters. The *lunsi*, together with the *goonjenima*, usher the chief out of the palace to sit in state and meet other chiefs who are part of the rituals. The *akarima* maintains his position to drum the praises of the chiefs and provide their identities as they arrive. The trumpeter echoes whatever the *akarima* drums, being "the son" of the *akarima*.

The *akarima*'s role in Dagbon goes far beyond performances at the palace. He and the other griots are guardians of the tradition, especially the aspects pertaining to royalty, and they engage in constructing realities. Some aspects of his performance resemble a liturgy. They are enactments (Abrahams 1977), and, as part of these enactments, he is bound by cultural dictates to perform certain roles. He is required to stick to what was bequeathed to him by his ancestors. He is averse to innovation. In fact, he does not think that he has the right or power to innovate. This is because his ancestors are watching and will neither consent to change nor forgive him for setting aside details of what was bequeathed to him. The *akarima* thinks more about his obligation to hand over the tradition to the next generation in a state that is as close as possible to how it was delivered to him. He sees himself as a gatekeeper of this tradition and stresses the need to protect every aspect of his work from being "contaminated" by modern influences. Akarima Awolu spoke about innovating instincts among younger people learning the tradition, and about the painstaking work he often undertakes to insist on maintaining the tradition in its pristine form when he interacts with them. As I asked questions to establish the boundaries of what was permissible, he would often remark that he received similar questions from younger *akarima*, and he would often take his time to explain things to me with the same level of detail and powers of persuasion as he would to the young people.

The *akarima* is also engaged in the construction or reinforcement of values, realities and cultural ethos. He takes part in defining who the ideal Dagomba personality is; how life ought to be lived and how it ought not to be lived; the difference between what is good, pure and wholesome and what is bad, rotten and filthy. He interprets what he drums didactically to the chief he serves, his other patrons of royal lineage, and the ordinary citizens interested in knowing or learning about their beloved chiefs and the history of their kingdom. As Hudu (2021) notes, the *akarima* explains these

eulogies to his patrons when he realises that they do not understand them. He knows this when the patrons fail to respond to eulogies directed at them (their understanding is signalled by offering him money in appreciation). Others will voluntarily approach him to seek an understanding of what he drums. For this reason, the *akarima* is not interested merely in the literal interpretation of the eulogies. He is interested in the values that are expressed in these eulogies, in the reinforcement of existing values, and in shaping the behaviour of people towards the good of society.

With regards to the chiefs, his goal is to get them to appreciate what their forebears, who occupied the same positions before them, represented. He educates the chief to understand how the chief's ancestor came by the eulogy, and how it has had an impact on his personality and reign. The *akarima* also sometimes chooses a eulogy for the chief, or helps him in choosing a eulogy for himself. A clear example of this is the choice of a eulogy for the reigning Yaa Naa, Abukari II. In November 2020, when I first interviewed Akarima Wumbei, he told me that the Yaa Naa had no eulogy of his own and was being eulogised with his father's. That was close to two years into his reign. A year later, when I interviewed him again, the king had acquired his own eulogy. Narrating how it happened, Akarima Wumbei said that the king called him to demand that he got him his personal eulogy. Having thought it over already, he presented and interpreted it to him, and the king accepted it.

The focus on constructing or reinforcing values and a cultural ethos, along with the lack of facility in the Akan language, explain why the *akarimanima* sometimes present slightly different, though not necessarily contradictory, interpretations of some of the eulogies of the chiefs. There are instances when the *akarima* would use his knowledge of history or information from mythology to compensate for his deficiency in Akan. This means that his interpretation would differ from that of the *akarima* who understands the proverb. An example is the reference to the crocodile in *akarima* performance, which, in Akan goes: *Sɛ ɔdɛnkyɛm bɛnkum nnipa a, na ɛfiri nsuo* – "For a crocodile to kill a person, it has to be caused by the water [in which it is hiding]." Akarima Wumbei could not verbalise the proverb in Akan, but interpreted it as: "The crocodile cannot harm a person except in water." Akarima Abdulai Yakubu verbalised it as *ɔdɛnkyɛm nkom nipa*, and interpreted it as: "He is an *akarima*, but he is in the water." Akarima Awolu too could not verbalise it in Akan, and interpreted it thus: "However weak the crocodile is, he is an *akarima* in the river." What all the talking drummers believe is that the crocodile is an *akarima* and that he is believed to have played the talking drum.

In a few cases, the interpretations would deviate slightly from the actual literal meaning of the proverb, as rendered in Akan. An example is the eulogy of Naa Yakubu (a late chief of Mion and the son of Naa Aburu Shatankuɣili), which says *Asɛmpa firi dwa so* – "good news comes from the market". Akarima Awolu's interpretation in Dagbani was: "When the market is in session and you are not honest, you cannot make transactions." He then went further to add the following: "When you go into the market, you must be ready to play by the rules. You can't buy without paying and expect to have your way."

In most cases, the *akarima* would first proceed to offer a simple, accurate interpretation of the eulogy. Afterwards, he would provide further interpretation with details not found in the proverb, as well as real-life lessons that could be derived from these eulogies. For instance, the eulogy of the reigning chief of Zohe is *Nsuo mmuro nkyine, nkɔ sere*, meaning "it is raining on the salt, and the [solidified] oil is laughing [in mockery of the salt for getting dissolved in the water]". Natogma Neindow added the following, after accurately

interpreting the eulogy: "A while later, the sun shone, and the [solidified] oil found itself in the same predicament and melted. When your colleague is suffering from a predicament under a certain condition, do not mock him or feel superior. The condition can change, and you will suffer the same predicament."

Another example of this is Akarima Abdulai's interpretation of the eulogy of Naa Andani II Jirilɔŋ (1876–99), which says *Sɛ wo tiri yɛ a, na ɛfiri Nyame*, meaning "if your head is good, it is from God". Akarima Abdulai offered a good interpretation: "The lucky person comes from God." But beyond this, he went on to help the listener appreciate what it meant, by offering the following varying interpretations:

> It is God who makes kings, not handsomeness nor riches. Or my good fortune is from God, I came with it from God. Or when your head is good, it is so because you brought it as such from God Almighty. Or a lucky person comes from God.

The differences between the explanations of the different *akarimanima* were mainly in the further detailed interpretations of these eulogies. However, to the average Dagomba with no understanding of Akan, it is impossible to determine which part of the *akarima*'s explanation constitutes a simple interpretation and which is a further elaboration.

Perhaps the most fantastic case of interpretation and elaboration beyond literal meaning was presented by Akarima Awolu on the eulogy of Naa Abukari II, the reigning Yaa Naa. In our interaction with Akarima Wumbei, he simply presented the eulogy in Akan and its interpretation thus: *ka anokore, anokore ye* – "speak the truth, the truth is good". During our interaction with Akarima Awolu, we got to the same eulogy, and Akarima Awolu interpreted it as follows, after saying it in Akan:

> It is imperative to speak the truth, but it may also be good to tell a lie. Let the truth be your guide in everything you do in life. However, where it is useful to lace the truth with some harmless lies that will solve a problem, do so.

Upon further enquiry, he admitted that it was Akarima Wumbei who taught him both the eulogy in Akan and its interpretation in Dagbani. Given that the details he added about the need to lace the truth with lies are neither part of the eulogy in Akan nor included during our interaction with Wumbei, it is unlikely that Wumbei included them when he interacted with Awolu. It is more likely that Awolu himself added them after deliberating on what he thought the value of the eulogy was. He probably thought that the added details were necessary to warn citizens against going to extremes in telling the truth, simply because it is the eulogy of their king, in situations where the truth might cause harm to them or to society.

As an *akarima*, he has licence to do this. He is required to take an active part in defining what the standards are for the position that the chief occupies and for people who are royalty. It is impressed upon the chiefs not to fall below these standards. He strives to ensure that royals and ordinary citizens appreciate the values by which their revered chiefs lived. To achieve this, the *akarima* gets busy in making sense of what these eulogies mean and how they may have contributed to the greatness of their bearers, to their success as chiefs, and to the glory of the kingdom. His success in playing this role comes from patrons' lack of understanding of Akan and their total dependence on what the *akarima* says for their understanding of these eulogies.

I conclude this article with two related reflections. One is on the role of meaning in communication. Meaning encoding is at the heart of every communicative event, with very few

exceptions, such as religious liturgies. The fact that the Dagomba have held on strongly to the *timpani* and the Akan language encoding, in the presence of alternatives that transmit speech in Dagbani, indicates that the ritualistic component of their use is of greater importance to them than the linguistic and communicative needs. Among the Dagomba, the cultural symbolisms that the *timpani* and *akarima* typify compensate for the linguistic deficiencies of both. The need to maintain the activities of the *akarima* as part of the heritage of the people is of greater consideration than the need for ease of understanding of the instrumentally transmitted speech. For the Dagomba, contemporary communicative needs are secondary to preserving the desires and dictates of their late kings, who are believed to be alive in the spiritual realm, who continue to maintain a share in the custody of the kingdom and who can exact retribution against anyone who defies their orders.

The second, related reflection concerns the evolution of the role of the *akarima* over the centuries. The role of the *akarima* as a didactive instructor in the values and cultural ethos was non-existent in the past compared with today. The *timpani* and *goonje* were borrowed by Dagbon at a time when the *lunsi* were already established as the custodians of history (as they continue to be) and would have been engaged in education on the culture and traditions of the kingdom. In spite of this, the *akarima*'s role in shaping behaviour has grown to a level where it is potentially more impactful than that of the *lunsi*. Citizens can choose to interpret the *lunsi*'s eulogies as they see fit without consulting the *lunsi* because the eulogies are in Dagbani. By contrast, the *akarima* is like the proverbial one-eyed man in the land of the blind, whom the citizens must follow to "see" the realities of the values that characterise the lives of their revered forebears.

## Notes

1. For a detailed discussion of aspects of the grammar of the speech produced by surrogate instruments, see the edited collection by Winter and McPherson (2022).
2. See DjeDje (2008) for an extensive study of the *goonje* in Dagbon, and Hudu (2021) for analysis of the surrogate language produced by the *goonje* and *akarima*. Asuro (2018) and Chernoff et al. (2023) include extensive narrations on the *lunsi* and drumming within the wider culture of Dagbon.
3. To avoid ambiguity, the use of "talking drums" and "talking drummers" will henceforth be avoided. The Dagbani words *timpani*, *akarima*, *luŋa* and their respective plural forms are used.
4. According to Akarima Awolu, during light-hearted arguments between the *akarima* and the *lunsi* or *goongenima* over who is a greater griot, they are teased as being a bunch of motionless silent griots who are incapable of talking or doing anything creative, allowing only the drum to do the talking. In response, they express their pride in their dedication to royalty. They serve only people of royalty, unlike the *lunsi* and *goonjenima*, who go about in the streets and marketplaces eulogising any commoner they meet.
5. All lengthy narrations from the *akarimanima* are translations of what they said in Dagbani.

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