

A PRELIMINARY ACCOUNT OF  
THE ROLE AND RECRUITMENT OF DRUMMERS IN DAGBON<sup>(1)</sup>

by C. Oppong \*

The 'lunsi' or drummers form one of the specialized segments of the population of the Dagomba State, which probably appeared at an early date in the history of the kingdom (Tait, 1956). According to one oral tradition the first drummers were descendants of Naa Nyagse, whose son, Bizung, is said to have been the royal ancestor of subsequent drummers. According to another, they are said to have originated at a place called Bizung near Diari, by the site of the old capital of the kingdom, where they are reputed to have begun in the reign of Naa Luro, who is said to have had a bridge built over a river during war time and wanted the deed recorded and so called musicians to come and sing of it. Eventually he chose a drummer called Bezung, whom he entitled Namoo Naa, the first chief and reputed ancestor of all present-day drummers. One titled drummer now alive gave his own ancestry, traced back through six generations of titled drummers through Bezung to his father, Naa Nyagse. Thus individual ancestral charts support the prevalent accounts of origin.

The drummers are led by their own ranked title holders, who are attached to the chiefs' courts throughout the kingdom. The title of the chief drummer in different villages varies, as do the number and names of the minor titles under him. The head of all the drummers in the state is the king's chief drummer, Namoo Naa. In Yendi the duty of drumming for the king is divided between Namoo Naa and his drummers, who play on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, and Sampahi Naa and his followers, who play on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday. Namoo Naa has his own titled officials such

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(1) Data on which this account is based were mainly collected in 1964 and 1965 in both Eastern and Western Dagbon.

as Wulana, Yiwog Naa, and so on, who help him to fulfil his duties for the king. Then each of the king's titled courtiers, including those who were formerly titled eunuchs, has his own titled drummer. Thus there are Kuga Lun Naa, Balo Lun Naa, Kum Lun Naa, Dugu Lun Naa. There is also a separate organization of drummers, who follow the chief riflemen and not the king.

Head drummers in the villages of the various divisions of the state have titles such as Maltshendi, Palo Naa, Lun Naa, Sampahi Naa. Succession to these titled offices may rotate between two or more lines, as in the case of political offices, and uterine as well as agnatic descendants of past holders are eligible.

Analysis of local census data in Western Dagbon shows that drummers are concentrated in the politically significant villages and seldom found in the smaller rural hamlets which do not contain royals.

Table I  
Residential distribution of drummers according to political status of community (a)

No. of villages	Type of Chief	Mean no. Compounds	Mean no. Drummers Compounds	Mean no. Adult Drummers
60	commoner/minor chief's son	13	0	0
12	chief's son/minor prince	45	2	4
2	king's officer*	300	10	24
1	royal (divisional capital)	645	20	56

(a) Data tabulated was obtained from nominal roles at the district offices in Savelugu, Tolon and Kumbungu in 1966.

\* These chiefs are respectively the head of the king's cavalry and archery divisions of the army.

The Drum

The drum played is the closed, double-membraned, hour-glass-shaped drum, which is played in West Africa from Sierra Leone to the Camerouns. The drums are made of a durable wooden frame, 'lun kobli', which is made by specialist carvers. A titled drummer in Tampion and his son are well known for this skill, also a drummer who used to live in Zogu. Some people, including Konkomba, who are not drummers can carve the wooden frame. Some frames appear to be imported from Ashanti. There are four graded sizes of frames from large to small. The size of drum a drummer plays depends partly upon his age and partly upon his seniority. They are called 'lun titali, lun dogu, lun daa, and lun bla'.

The largest drums played by senior titled drummers are usually kept in skin bags and only played for important chiefs. Namoo Naa has one he only plays in the king's presence.<sup>2</sup> The wooden frames cost from a few shillings to one pound in 1965 depending on their size, while the untreated goat skin used for the strings and membranes could then be bought from the butchers for about half a crown. Some drummers appear to be more skilled than others in renewing the membranes and thongs. Some drummers make a considerable part of their income from covering new drum frames and renewing old ones.

Since the drum frames last a long time they are frequently inherited and passed from father to son or senior to younger brother. They are also passed on from one child in the house to another as the original owner outgrows a small drum and needs a larger size. Thus each

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2. The wooden frame of that drum is covered in a lion skin and it has a lion's tail hanging from it. He has a second drum which he uses for everyday purposes. Similarly the chief drummers of other chiefs, who have reached their political terminal and the divisional chiefs, have special drums covered in skin, which are kept in skin bags and only used in special performances for their royal patrons.

instrument belongs to a particular player, but it may be passed on to someone else when he outgrows it or be inherited by a kinsman.

Drummers

People in Dagbon generally recognise three different kinds of good drummers: historians who know the historical facts well, 'they know chiefship', - such drummers voices are not necessarily sweet and they are generally appreciated most by the old men; then those who have sweet voices and may or may not know the history very well - these are generally most appreciated by the young men; thirdly there are the drummers with the flexible wrists who can play well.

The king's chief drummer, Namoo Naa, is recognized as brilliant in all three spheres, others can be named in different chiefdoms who are well noted for one or other virtue.

Great jealousy and competition are said to be rife among the well known drummers at a time such as the end of the fasting period when drummers perform historical narratives at all the great chiefs' palaces. In a royal village each drummer's house in turn provides a singer for the occasion. If the head of the house knows there is no good singer available in his own household, he may get one from elsewhere and the chief also plays a part in securing a good singer for such public performance at his palace, since his own prestige is partly reflected in the quality of the performance provided. The drummers are however not free agents and cannot play anywhere at will. A junior drummer may slip away from his own village to play and sing elsewhere at a performance where he knows by so doing he will earn more in chiefs' favours than in his own village, where the more senior drummers will earn the most; or, a drummer whose own chief is for some reason not at home may accept invitations from other chiefs to perform for them. But generally the drummer is restricted by the

fact that he must follow his own 'gate', subject to the organization of the senior drummers in his section and to his chiefly patron.

At a time such as the end of the fasting period connoisseurs of the drummer's art and the historical tradition will wait until they hear who the singers are to be in their neighbouring villages before selecting which performance to attend.

### The Drummer's Role

In the past and still today it is the drummers of Dagbon who, "For want of archives, record the customs, traditions and governmental principles of kings" (Niane, p. vii) as well as singing royals' and others' praises and enlivening state and household celebrations with their songs and music.

Moreover not only do the drummers record the royal history and genealogies and teach them to princes, but in case of doubt of facts in political disputes they are called upon to say what is the case - to validate a particular claim to office. A modern instance of this kind, which occurred at the highest political level, was the occasion of the dispute concerning the right of the late Ya Na Abudulai III, to succeed to the Paramountcy because of his physical deformities. The Namoo Naa, the first authority on Dagomba history, was called to tell if any other kings had suffered deformities and been allowed to rule. His answer was given at an emergency meeting of the Dagomba State Council in 1958. At first he refused to narrate such instances, pleading the risk to his own life for revealing such information. Eventually when the required sacrifices had been made, including a white cow, white ram, white goat, white cock, two white doves, masa cakes and milk, he gave a list of six or more kings who suffered from various defects including insanity, blindness and other deformities and were still suffered to rule. Thus Abudulai's claim to office could not be rejected on those grounds.

Recruitment

The task of learning the massive body of oral literature which the drummers remember is an arduous and painstaking one, requiring long hours of patient application and practice on the part of the teacher as well as the pupil.

The literature is kept fairly esoteric by the strongly sanctioned taboos against reciting long passages of history in public except on specific ritual occasions and at the same time sanctioned rules and restrictions, limiting and ensuring the continuity of recruitment of players, maintain the tradition unbroken through time.

The role of drummer, 'lunga' in Dagbon, may be classified as a 'recruitment role' (Nadel, 1956) in that the boy whose father is a drummer is compelled to assume the role, at least in a nominal sense, while drummers' daughters, since they are not eligible to assume the role themselves, must give at least one of their offspring to replace them in the next generation. On the other hand strong sanctions also operate to prevent those unrelated to drummers from playing. Thus a drummer's sons stay at home to be taught by their father or are taught to play by a brother or father's brother. It is traditionally considered unthinkable for a drummer's son to stay in his father's house and not learn to play. Should he object strongly to learning his father's profession, however, then he may go to live elsewhere, escape by running away and no evil should be befall him so long as he always keeps his drum and plays it symbolically on Mondays and Fridays. But if a son learns when small and later goes away without taking his drums then it is said that misfortune and even death will pursue him.

Difficult as it is for drummers' sons to escape becoming drummers, when they grow up, it is still more difficult for a daughter's son to escape learning, for he must replace his mother. The particular child who

is to represent his mother and siblings with his maternal kin, is chosen by divination and then 'adopted' by his mother's brother or maternal grandfather. Even on the day that a drummer's daughter is married her husband is told that one day one of their offspring will be claimed for this purpose. It is usually after a daughter has given birth to one or two children that one is taken at the age of four or five. Should a drummer's daughter only bear female children then she must send a daughter, who will later be given in marriage to a drummer, or to another man on the understanding that one of her sons will be given to learn to play. Thus it is a strongly sanctioned rule that any drummer's daughter, wherever she is, must send a child back to her natal family, otherwise illness and death will befall her children, in the form of insanity or leprosy. After several such calamities occur the individual realizes through divination and dreams that he must fulfil his obligations. As several cases show the inherited obligation may pass to the second and third generation of descendants of a drummer's daughter. Once a man realizes that he should learn he might even be well over thirty.

One interesting case demonstrates plainly that it is actual descent from drummer ancestry which is the basis of the supernatural sanctions and not social paternity, for even an illegitimate son of a drummer may be pursued by misfortune and illness if he never learns to play.

#### Case I    An illegitimate drummer

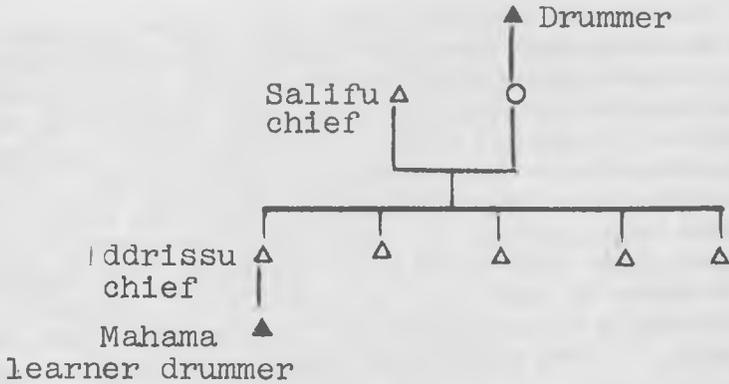
A case was recorded of a teacher whose wives would not stay with him and whose hand became swollen at certain times of the year. Sometimes he appeared mad and sang drummers' songs although he had never been trained. His mother, who did not come from a drummer's family was married to a chief and since her husband had many wives she



well past childhood and neither his senior brothers nor his father were drummers. The talent had been inherited from his father's mother's father. So to prevent further attacks of illness Ibrahim went to stay with a classificatory senior brother (related to Tani) a titled drummer, and has since learnt to play the drum. He now has his own household near that of his former teacher and his own son is learning to play.

Case III Mahama, the mature pupil.

A chief, Salifu, had as one of his wives a drummer's daughter. Their eldest son Idrissu also became a chief and his younger brothers identified themselves with their chiefly parentage and elder brother. None of them followed the profession of their mother's relatives. Idrissu's son Mahama however discovered as a result of divination, after a long series of illnesses and misfortunes, that he should go and learn to play as his father's mother's father had done. For after his father's death Mahama had begun to suffer from a series of illnesses and five wives in succession had left him, and their children died. He went from place to place trying to find medicines that would cure his fits of epilepsy and attacks of nightmares. Once his drummer's ancestry had been divined as the cause, he joined a distantly related drummer's compound and began to learn to drum, though he was well over thirty and the rest of the pupils in the house were small boys. He was interviewed eight months after beginning to learn to play and then appeared to have regained his health and peace of mind.



These three cases illustrate the sanctions at work in the recruitment of uterine descendants of drummers to a profession which is of vital importance to the continuity of the traditional political system in that it preserves its 'charter' and ideology. They also indicate why there is a tendency to professional in-marriage among drummers, since members of other groups are fully aware of the misfortunes which may occur should an outsider marry into the group and refuse to allow his offspring to join the profession when chosen.

A function of this mechanism of recruitment, in this case compulsory 'adoption' upon the composition and development of drummers' households, is such that in five drummers' compounds there were found to be three times as many relatives related through daughters and sisters as through brothers and sons.

Marriage Patterns

The greater tendency among drummers to professional endogamy than amongst any other section of the population has been noted in the literature (Tait, *ibid*) and data which support this observation has been collected. (See Table II). Rigorous analysis of marriage choice patterns cannot of course be attempted until a socio-economic

framework of the whole society has been established. It is difficult to discover to what degree in-group marriages merely reflect the composition of the local population and to what extent they represent social pressures to endogamy. There is enough data collected from nominal role files however from over seventy communities in Western Dagbon to show that drummers comprise probably under 2% of the population, so that when we see below that of 83 marriages contracted by drummers and their daughters 17% where within the professional group it indicates that there is a degree of preference for endogamous marriages: Not only are these professional endo-

Table II

Analysis of drummers' marriages according to estate or professional affiliation of spouse. (a)

Marriage	Total	Ruling estate	Mus- lim	Commo- ner	Rifle- man	Drum- mer	Fidd- ler	Craft smas
Drummers	43	21	4	4	6	7	0	1
Drummers' daughters	40	13	3	3	1	7	4	9
TOTAL	83	34	7	7	7	14	4	10
Percentage	100	41%	8%	8%	8%	17%	5%	13%

gamous marriages but some of them are also kinship marriages, as drummers are noted for their approval of family marriage (taking a 'Dogiri paga' - family wife), the preferred form being cross-cousin marriage, which may have the result of binding adopted sisters' children more closely into the adopter's family.

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(a) Marriage data tabulated was collected from four royal villages.

Moreover many drummers' marriages, contracted with spouses outside their own professional group, are with chiefs' daughters and of the drummers' daughters many marry men of the ruling estate. Even allowing for the fact that spurious claims to chiefly parentage for spouses may have been made by informants and that not all titled parents were in fact chiefs or royals, the fact that over 40% of the 83 marriages recorded were with members of the ruling estate or their titled followers shows a definite tendency for chiefs to choose drummers as sons-in-law or to marry their daughters, and in fact analysis of 85 marriages contracted by men of the ruling estate showed that a quarter had married drummers' daughters, which is significant indeed when it is remembered that they probably constitute less than 2% of the female population, while 14% of 93 princesses' marriages were with drummers.

These marriage figures need to be considered within the context of typical drummer-prince, patron-client relationships. The relationship between a chief and his drummers is not purely a contractual one in which the latter sing history and provide entertainment purely for financial gain, though payments are made, but it is a personal and often life-long association of patron and client, in which there is considerable loyalty on both sides. Case histories show that a drummer may attach himself to a prince at an early age and follow him in his political career and then settle with him to serve him and his successors. The link between the two may be changed into one of kinship and affinity by the transfer of wives in either direction. Thus whereas other people are reputed not to like giving daughters to drummers because all their children will learn to drum and not to like marrying drummers' daughters, because then some of the children will have to go to their mother's brother to learn to drum on pain of death, in the case of chiefs the sanctions are said to be more often relaxed and anyway such marriages ensure a further supply of recruits for the drumming profession, who will already have bonds of allegiance with their princely relatives and be ready to serve them. So as

well as referring to each other as husband and wife, as is characteristic of these patron-client relationships of unequal social status, the drummer may also be able to refer to his patron as his mother's brother or senior father whether real or classificatory.

### Conclusion

In Dagbon then the drummers, 'lunsi', are the court historians and musicians, chroniclers of the past and recorders of the present. They play an important part in all rituals involving chiefship, including installations, annual festivals and funeral ceremonies and other rites of passage.

The unbroken historical narrative and royal genealogy which they remember and recite is the charter of the political structure of the kingdom and the story of the origins of the people and as such is vital to the continuity of the traditional social system.

The continuity of the tradition is protected by the supernatural sanctions ensuring the supply of recruits to learn the skill and their links with chiefly patrons are enhanced by ties of kinship and affinity.

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