

A NOTE ON  
A DAGOMBA CHIEF'S DRUMMER

by C. Oppong\*

A brief account of a career history collected from a 'Timpana'<sup>1</sup> drummer, the only one resident in a royal terminus chiefdom in Western Dagbon, gives some indication of modes of recruitment and training to specialist professions in Dagbon and the role of musicians in the traditional political system.

Abu Akarema's education was arranged and paid for by a royal chief, to whose line his family was attached by ties of servitude and loyalty, since Abu's grandmother had been the serving maid of the chief's mother. The chief, then head of a small village in Western Dagbon, arranged for a competent drummer to come there from time to time from another village in Eastern Dagbon to teach Abu to play. This teacher had himself learnt to play 'in the south' and was paid for his services. Once he had learnt the rudiments of the art Abu set off to travel from village to village in order to perfect his art by learning from other drummers attached to various royal chiefdoms. On this itinerary he spent five years in the capital, Yendi, to gain experience from the drummers there. At that time the king of Dagbon had four 'Akarema', who regularly played his two sets of 'timpana' drums for him. Then he went on to stay two years gaining musical experience in Savelugu, the main chief's court in Western Dagbon.

Later with his accumulated skill and experience he returned to his patron and sponsor and served him as his drummer, following him to the present village, when the latter was promoted in the political hierarchy. In that village, where he was interviewed, Abu continues to serve his patron's royal successors.

This brief educational and career history shows several features which appear to be typical of the careers of Dagomba musicians in particular and education in general. But first a word about the distribution and use of the drums in question.

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1. The talking drum set is composed of a pair of single headed membranophone played with crooked sticks.

They resemble the Ashanti Atumpan and the Gonja Timpam. They are said to have originally come from Ashanti via the Gonja from whom they were seized after victory in battle. The drums of two places in Western Dagbon in particular are reported to have come from Gonja - those of Kumbungu and Nanton. Their use is said to be restricted to the courts of royal chiefs only, not commoner chiefs, and formerly only eight of the main royal chiefdoms are reported to have been able to own and use them including Yendi, Mion, Savelugu, Karaga, Kpatinga, Nanton, Gushe, Yelzoli, Bimbilla, Kumbungu and Singa. In more recent times their use has spread, but the permission of the king should always be given before they are acquired by any individual chief.

Formerly the major purpose of the drums was to summon the capital and divisional chief's fighting men to war. Now they are most prominent at the entrance to a royal chief's palace on Monday and Friday mornings and on other occasions when he sits in public to receive his subjects and strangers. At such times they both announce arrivals and events to him and those in ear shot or they drum his praise names and ancestry. The drum language is spoken in Twi but it may be both played and understood by people who are unable to speak Twi.

Because of the drums' important functions in wars, both to assemble fighting men and to give warnings of the approaching enemy, drumming of the 'timpana' is closely associated with the military profession, but players are not only recruited from the military ranks. Abu's example and other statements show that the pupil chosen to learn might well formerly be the child of a chief's servant captured in war or other client. Present examples show that players also teach their own sons. Once an Akarema such a musician, whether of slave origin or not, might aspire to gain a military title.

Two of the typical features of Abu's history appear to be this mode of attachment of client musicians' families to royals by bonds of loyal service, stretching over two or more generations and the ties of loyalty engendered by sponsorship of professional training, the relationship often being expressed in genealogical terms. Several case histories demonstrate this pattern of early rearing and training under the surveillance of a chief and patron, an intermediate period of wandering in search of experience and knowledge and then a later return to serve a patron established in his political career.

Spatial and social mobility often appear to be covariables in this society, in which training in specialist skills may involve residence with a tutor, kinsman

or other and intermittent travelling over the whole kingdom in search of knowledge and experience. In such a large centralized kingdom this mobility is one way of ensuring that the skills and knowledge supporting the political hierarchy are the common experience of all their practitioners and do not show wide variation from region to region.



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