

A NOTE ON DAGOMBA FIDDLERS

by C. Oppong*

The Dagomba fiddlers, 'gondzenema', play the single-stringed, bowed lute.¹ According to one oral account, the first fiddler arrived in Dagbon in the reign of Naa Saa, after migrating from Fada N'Gourma in Upper Volta. They were not formerly organized under a chief resident in Yendi, as they are today. Then in the reign of Naa Yakubu, in the late nineteenth century, the office of Yamba Naa, chief fiddler, was created.

The fragment of genealogy recorded below shows some of the male issue of the first Yamba Naa, as remembered by one of his descendants, living and playing in the capital in 1965. It adds support to the statement fiddlers make about their belonging to one family, and also indicates the way in which related fiddlers are scattered, not only throughout Dagbon, but Southern Ghana too. It also shows the extent to which sons tend to follow their fathers' profession, though some recruits are uterine kin of fiddlers and others are even complete outsiders.

There were only two instances recorded in that genealogy where a son did not learn to play. In the first case (a) the boy became a butcher, in the second he was physically handicapped (b).

Daughters in a fiddler's household are taught to play rattle accompaniments, though this lapses when they marry, only to be resumed should they return home for any reason. The loss of the daughter's skill

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1. This account is based on case histories, genealogies and household censuses collected from fiddlers in three chiefs' villages in Dagbon during 1964 and 1965.

is sometimes replaced in the next generation, when a daughter's son is sent to his mother's brother to learn to play, the son who is in a sense considered to have inherited it. Dreams can be a signal of this, but there are not the strong compulsory sanctions compelling sisters' sons to learn as there are in the drumming profession. If any boy in a fiddler's household does not want to learn to play he can simply learn how to rattle and then run away.

A child can begin to learn to play the fiddle when he is quite small, about five or six years old. The first step is simply to learn to move the bow up and down while sitting next to the father or other teacher, who performs the finger movements with his left hand. Words and music are learnt simultaneously, so that if the player does not sing aloud while he plays he tends to unconsciously mouth the words at the same time. As in the case of drummers, talents differ, so that while one has a good memory for songs and praises, another has a sweet voice and a third is a skilful player.

Some boys born into fiddlers' families are said to be able to play by instinct and this seems to be proved by the fact that one boy may be able to learn to play in a matter of months, while another takes years to become a mediocre performer. For example one boy, Abu was sent to his mother's older brother for training at about twelve years because he was misbehaving at home and had refused to stay with his father. He learnt to play with considerable competence in a mere five months, his performance being considered better than that of many pupils after three years' training. It is thought that it is really only the boy who spends the whole of his childhood and adolescence in a fiddler's household, continually exposed to the music and to practising it, who will become a really first class performer. It is said that connoisseurs of gondze music can tell by ear where a particular player was taught, since the main fiddlers' households have their own particular styles of presenta-

tion and certain teachers are renowned for their skill in performance.

Pupils practice playing at any time when they are free and if a teacher is at hand and hears the boy playing badly he will call him to correct him and demonstrate the correct way. By the age of nine or ten a boy with aptitude may be quite a competent player and may be called by neighbouring musicians to accompany them to play in villages nearby, as well as going to play with his father or other teacher.

There are comparatively few fiddlers in the state and they are found in the divisional capitals and the royal and other terminus chiefdoms at the apex of the traditional, political hierarchy, including Yendi, Savelugu, Karaga, Mion, Nanton, Kumbungu, Zabzugu, Tampion, Diari and Tolon. In Yendi there were in 1965 only two households of fiddlers playing for the king and in 75 villages in Western Dagbon fiddlers were only recorded to be living in three. Since fiddlers' households are rare and widely scattered the typical playing unit is often the householder, together with one or two sons and other pupils who fiddle and one or two young daughters who rattle. Even at great festivals such as Damba in the capital when musicians are playing in public for the king there may not be many fiddlers in evidence. Thus in 1965 in Yendi at the climax of the Damba celebration over fifty drummers gathered to play but only four fiddlers were present accompanied by nine boys and girls playing rattles.

Though few they still figure prominently with their music on important public occasions and travel around a great deal providing entertainment at weddings and namings in private homes, as well as on politically significant occasions. Some travel south for a time, entertaining their countrymen and other people who appreciate their music in the towns.

Their main task is to sing the praises of chiefs and their ancestors, especially on Monday and

Friday mornings when courtiers greet their chiefs. Reciprocal ties of gifts and favours, given in return for loyal service, may result in a musician and his sons being attached to a chief and following him from one skin to the next, as the chief climbs the ladder of political office, till the fiddler and his sons remains at the chief's terminus to serve successive occupants of the skin. These relationships of patron and client are expressed by the actors in kinship terms, such as junior and senior brother, father and child. At the same time the fiddler is referred to by his patron as his wife and he in turn calls the latter husband, indicating the complementary inequality of their relationship.

The case of Sumane gondze provides an example of such a situation. Sumane served a divisional chief, Bukari, as court fiddler and then, when Bukari's son Iddrissu succeeded to a terminal skin, he asked Sumane to follow him. When Sumane died one of his sons, Seidu, who had been farming for several years, returned to assume his father's role as fiddler for Iddrissu, for at that time he was the only fiddler in the village. After Iddrissu's death Seidu served the next four occupants of that same skin. In the time span illustrated below Sumane and his son served six chiefs in succession.

SUMANE GONDZE

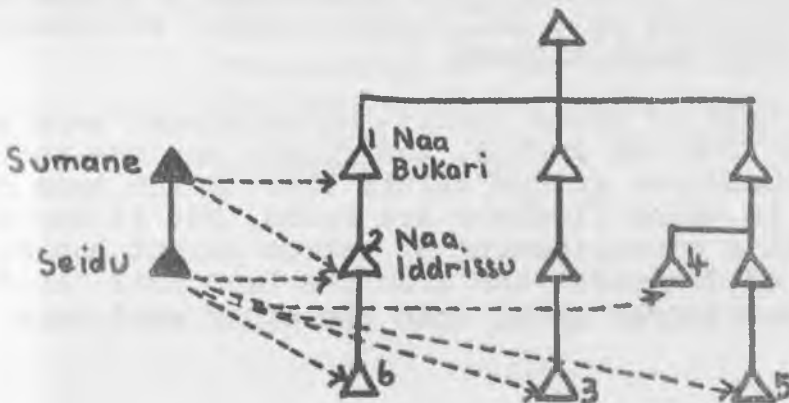


Table I

Fiddlers' Marriages

Fiddlers	Occupational Group of Spouse					
	Rulers	Muslims	Warriors	Drummers	Fiddlers	Other*
F 19	5	9	0	0	0	5
M 13	4	1	1	4	0	3
Total 32	9	10	1	4	0	8

* Includes farmers and craftsmen.

Above is a classification, by occupational affiliations, of the marriage partners of thirty two men and women of fiddler parentage. It calls into question Tait's statement that the fiddlers exhibit the signs of group endogamy which drummers show (1956). No in-group marriage was recorded at all. Fiddlers say that they always marry spouses from other groups because they are one family. Moreover there are not the sanctions operating, which as has been described elsewhere, predispose drummers to marry members of the same professional group. They neither encounter the same objections from outsiders regarding the fact of compulsory adoption of daughters' children, nor do they have the same internal pressure to incorporate such children, by making in-group family marriages. (Oppong, 1969) According to the figures in the present sample their own group is the only one from which they do not take spouses. Further data will support or disprove this. At least the data tally with actors' statements about what they think happens.

Over half of these thirty-two marriages were made with spouses from two groups, the rulers and the mallams. Admittedly these two groups mainly live in the type of communities in which fiddlers are found, but it may also indicate both a strengthening of patron client bonds, as in the case of drummers, and also the fact that the fiddlers are a more muslimized group than the other musicians.

Conclusions

These fragments of data, including family history and marriage choice patterns, are useful in that they indicate interesting areas for further investigation in the area of the kinship system and organization of specialist occupational groups among the Dagomba. For instance it would be interesting to compare this fragment of a genealogy with similar ones collected from fiddlers in all the main chiefdoms of the state, to see to what extent they may be correlated with one another to form a genealogy including most of the Dagomba fiddlers. Tait wrote that the gondzenema have distinct localized kin groups (1956). They are certainly located in specific communities in the kingdom, but whether these should be termed kin groups or merely households linked to each other by a widely ramifying net-work of kinship ties remains to be explored.

Bibliography

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