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Decolonizing Our Library System: The Living Librarians (Baansi) of Dagbon, Northern Ghana

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1. INRODUCTION

Linden (1991) narrated how 1,600 years ago the wisdom of many centuries went up in flames when the great Alexandria Library burned down. “Today, with little notice, vast archives of knowledge and expertise are being lost, leaving humanity in danger of losing its past and perhaps endangering its future as well.” Linden (1991) was referring to the knowledge stored in the memories of elders, healers, Traditional birth attendance, farmers, fishermen and hunters throughout the world. These knowledge producers such as elders, healers, midwives, farmers, fishermen and hunters etc. are librarians in their own right (Mchombu, 2004:35).

This has been corroborated by Banjo (1998), in Kah (2012), when he stated that, the traditional intellectuals like elders, clan heads, priests, historians, storytellers and musicians constituted libraries or they were librarians in their own spheres.

Knowledge does not only exist only in books or in brick and motor edifices like modern libraries, for libraries are also defined as “repositories of knowledge’ and the *Baansi’s* of Dagbon also known as living libraries or the indigenous communities are not left out because they have a vast pool of knowledge to be tapped. As living libraries the only difference is that, books in the living libraries are people. Millar et.al. (2012) points out that indigenous knowledge system in our communities do not have libraries with books and computers, but they have their own way to produce, codify, store and retrieve knowledge and information. If the library according to Kah (2012), is not merely a collection of books then it includes other forms of storing information which if not consulted may not provide a holistic picture of the history of a people. This explains why Chisita (2011:7) cited in Kah (2012) suggests that there is need for a return to the concept of “libraries without shelves or “oral librarianship” as a way of decolonising and demystifying library services in Africa. This study

therefore aims at examining the living librarians of Dagbon, *baansi* in the Northern Region of Ghana .

2. METHODS AND OBJECTIVES

This paper describes the *baansi* of Dagbon, who are also termed the *living librarians*. It presents and analyses data collected from community-based interactions. Thematic approach has been used in reporting the findings. Main and Sub themes have been generated from the data collected using various instruments namely, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observations, storytelling, phased assertion, documents' analysis, field notes, historical profiling, and acoustic appreciation. The major thrust of the questions asked during the interviews and focus group discussions are on the overview of *baansi*. The over view encompasses areas such as, the categories of *the baansi* ; the role of the *baansi* and Knowledge acquisition process of the *baansi*. The first part is on the categories of the *baansi* in Dagbon. The data was collected from June 2013 to August 2014. This study is in three parts. The second and the third parts which examine the following: the role of *baansi* in the knowledge acquisition process and the knowledge management of the *baansi* are not the focus of this paper. This paper mainly focused critically on examining the categories of *the baansi*, those who are called the living librarians of Dagbon (*baansi*).

3. DAGBON, NORTHERN GHANA

The traditional state of Dagbon covers an area of about eight thousand kilometers of Northern Region of Ghana. It lies in Ghana's savannah woodland, watered by the White Volta and its tributaries to the west and Oti and its tributaries to the east. Mahama (2004) indicates that it stretches from Kubalem in the south east in Zabzugu District to Zantani in the northwest in Tolon - Kumbugu District, a distance of about 200 miles, with width of 100 miles. Data from the

2010 National Population and Housing Census point out that Dagbon has the total population of 1,258,657 out of 2,479,461 total population of Northern Region. (Zablong and Plockey, 2015)..

Oppong (1971) describes the Dagbon state as the *amalgam of autochthones and an immigrant ruling class*.

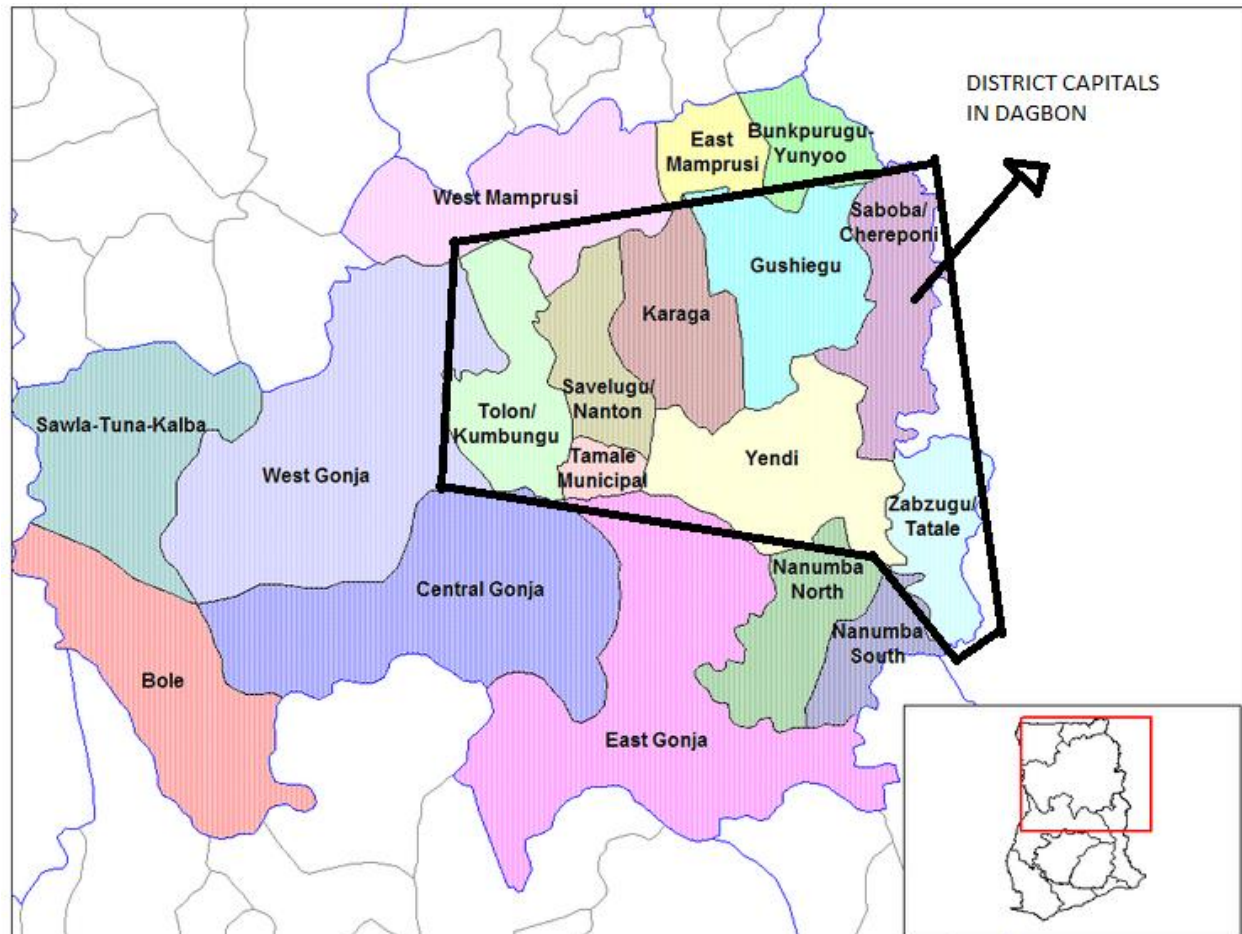


Figure :1 . The people of Dagbon showing its major towns (Source: <https://sites.tufts.edu/dagomba/about-the-dagomba/>)

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. LIVING LIBRARIANS OF DAGBON (*BAANSI*)

Baansi is a generic name given to court musicians of Dagbon (Salifu, 2000). According to Dagbani-English dictionary, *baansi* is a collective name for musicians. It implies that the term *baansi* means court musicians who engage themselves in the art of praise singing. *Baansi* are not mere entertainers but also holders of cultural wisdom and history. In fact, they live and relive the history of the *Dagbamba*. They are therefore knowledge producers.

The skills of the *baansi* are exhibited in their performance on the drums; the musical sounds and cultural meanings that they produce. Their performances are sources of communication, entertainment, knowledge and training. They form an important source of knowledge and training on the customs and tradition, political economy, history and literature of Dagbon. For instance, the use of praise names to serenade royals serves an importance source of teaching for the people.

The study revealed that there were various forms of court musicians but most of the categories are now extinct. However, the most recognized and important ones that run through them all are the *lunsi*, the *Akarima* and the *goonje*. Our visit to Yendi, the palace of the Yaa-Naa as well as the Dapkema and Buglana Palaces in Tamale confirmed this. We will therefore concern ourselves with these three categories of *baansi*.

4.2. Categories of the Living Librarians- *Baansi*

4.1.1. The Akarima

The *Akarima* is a knowledge producer who uses the drum to communicate with the chief and the community. The message of the *Akarima* is not written but uses sounds as code to disseminate information. According to Primadesi (2012), in its simple term, a code is a rule for converting a piece of information into another - usually shortened or covert - form or representation, not necessarily of the same type. The code could be a sound, proverbs or other sign that has no meaning in itself.

The *Akarima* literally means the one who beats the drum and according to Locke (2002) he plays the *timpana* drum also called the talking drum (see Figure. 2). According to our respondents *the Akarima is the one who plays the timpani drum. They are symbol of authority at the palace; they elevate the status of a chiefs. (Akarima, Interview, 2014) .* This shows that before the coming of the Europeans to Africa, Africans have their system of governance. This fact has been admitted by Kelley (1970) in Emeagwali (2006) that, Africans have been for a long time at the head of civilization and political power, and must be regarded as the real authors of most of the arts and sciences which gave the Westerners at present the advantage over we the Africans.

The *Akarima* is also the chief warrior of the king and kingdom. As such, he belongs to the warrior class known as *Kambonsi or Sapasinnima*. According to Mahama (2004), the word *Kambonsi* means Akan. The term is generally used to refer to people from southern Ghana. Mahama (2004) also points out that the term *Sapasine* is a corrupted version of Akan word *Safohen* meaning the chief warrior. In the Akan political structure, the *safohene* is the leader of the warrior class, the Asafo. Locke (2002) also confirms that the institution of the *kambonsi* is said to have come to the Dagbamba from the Asante, most likely at the time of the forging of diplomatic relations between the two kingdoms around the middle of the 18th century (Wilks, 1975).

The *Akarima* usually goes to the chief's court in the company of the *kambonsi* to pay homage. But when it is a matter relating to musicians in the chief palace, he moves with the *baansi* (Mahama, 2004). By virtue of his roles, the *Akarima* thus occupies a dual position. As chief warrior and leader of the *kambonsi*, he occupies and leads his group or class while at the same time, his specialized role in the royal court places him in another class, that of the *baansi*.

During the community level interactions, an informant explained that the *Akarima* originated from Ashanti. As such, there is an Asante influence evident in the drum language through the instrumentation of the ensemble which includes an iron double-bell called *dawoulei*, the *timpana* large side-by-side drums referred to locally as "talking drums," and the usage of Asante proverbs and praise names played by the various drums and bells of the ensemble (Locke, 2002). According to an informant, it was Naa Zanjina who went to Ashanti and befriended the Ashanti's and the Ashanti's gave him the *timpana* and some people to teach him how to play the drum. That explains why most of the *Akarimah* have Ashanti names like Akwasi, Kofi, Kwame, and Attah.

The *timpana* or the talking drum constitute a pair of drums, each of which is anchored on a pair of stand as shown in fig. 2 and is usually placed at the entrance of the chief's or king's palace. The use of the term talking drums has a special meaning here, hence the language of the drums. The timpani is not just meant to entertain but to speak on issues in the process of which it fulfills its many roles such as communicating and teaching. By extension, the *timpana* are foremost the communication medium of the royal courts.



Figure 2: *Timpana* (Source: Fieldwork, September, 2013)

During the interactions, it came to light that the set of drums were categorised by sex, male and female according to the tone and role. Further interrogation revealed that in any communication in Dagbon there should be high and low tone. The drum with the low tone is the male drum and that with high tone is the female. Therefore the communication is between male and female. The mixture of the two was said to make the communication produced very interesting. This confirms Haas (2008) assertion that the... "talking drums," are played as a pair with one drum pitched higher than the other.

The talking drums are not portable and thus cannot be readily carried about. (Figure. 2.) . As a result, when they go out with the chief, the *Akarima* use the *dawoulei* to replicate the message of the timpani. The *dawoulei* is A side-by-side iron double bell, called a *gongon* by the Akan in the South. One bell is pitched lower than the other, generally by about a major third. It is played with a tip of a bull's horn, usually about 15 cm. long (Locke, 2007).



Figure 3: *Dawoulei and Lunsi* performing (Source: Hass, 2007)

The *timpani* are generally called the talking drum because it is used to communicate information to people who understand the drum language. The appellations that are drummed are proverbial. This suggests that drum language may be meaningless to those who do not understand it. One must have some background information or be knowledgeable in the drum language in order to decode some of the messages communicated. One must be trained, literate and enlightened in the language and culture of the *baansi* in order to be able to decode their drum message. This has been confirmed by Salifu (2008: 23).

The *Akarima*, as a communicator, is first to send messages to the king. Hence, he is a very important person in the royal court of Dagbon. Contrary to Salifu (2000) that the two most important symbols of royalty are the *goonge* instrument and the *lunsi* drum, the *timpani* was found, during the community interactions, to be the most important. As a chief warrior of the Dagbon State, the *Akarima* is the army chief, a very important role.



Figure 4: *The researcher and Assistant with the Akarima and the Chief Assistant in front of Dakpema Palace (Source: Field Work, August 2013).*

The *Akarima* do not sing. Asked a respondents if the *Akarima* sing when playing the *timpana*, he responded by saying *no, the drum is talking why should I talk again*. This genius technology of communication by the *Akarima* of Dagbon cannot be said to be inferior or primitive as the colonialist made as to believe. According to P'Bitek (1889:19) in Nyamnjoh (2011: 141) the ways of your ancestors may be good and solid, that reach deep into the soil, their custom neither hallow, nor thin, nor easily breakable or blown away by the winds; but this does not deter the epistemology and its disciples from inviting you to despise these ancestral customs and world view, in favour of foreign customs you may not understand or admire.

The *Akarima* only use the sounds/beats of the drums to communicate. During a visit to the Dakpema Palace in Tamale in June 2013, as soon as the *Akarima* saw us he started drumming (Figure 3 above). The following conversation ensued as captured in Figure 4

Box 4: In conversation with the *Akarima*

Researcher: Why are you drumming as soon as you saw us?

Akarima: Announcing your presence to the chief.

Researcher: How will the chief know that we are the people visiting?

The *Akarima* took this opportunity to brief us on how names are important as well as understanding the drum language. He gave an example of one of the Presidential aspirant of the 2012 election when he came to Tamale, He visited the palace as he the *Akarima* drummed, the presidential aspirant understood the language and he explained it to his entourage. The presidential aspirant was so happy that he gave the *Akarima* some money.

The interactions also revealed that specific drum beats have particular meanings. They are addressed to particular offices or personalities. When drummed, they signal that such persons are around or are being addressed. Every royal; king, chiefs, elders and prince and princesses, or any prominent person has a “drum name.” For example, the sound *pam’pam’bi`li,´* which has no independent meaning of its own, but has been used as a sign by the drummers to refer to the King of the Dagbamba, the Yaa Naa, and cannot be drummed for any other person (Salifu, 2008).

Every knowledge producer in the community has a role to play in the community and there is no exception with that of the *Akarima* as knowledge producers. In an interview with the *Akarima* at the *Dapkema* and *Buglana* palaces it revealed that the *Akarima* uses the drum name to praise the people of Dagbon or invite them to the chief’s palace. The *Akarima* also performs the following specific roles in his line of duty:

- The *Akarima* drums at the chief palace on every Monday and Friday morning and as a chief warrior, he is in-charge of the drums;
- Again, he monitors the activities of the chief and attends to the chiefs emergencies;
- He communicates between the chief and the general public;
- He disseminates disaster information and announces festive occasions (Oppong, 1976); Salifu, 2000; Mahama 2004).

These roles make them important people in the society. It also shows that before the colonization of African societies, Africans had and still have ways to manage their affairs. That is they have a system of governance, communication, rules and regulation used for the betterment of the African society. That is to say before the colonial contact and encounter with their territories

now dominated by colonizers such as the Europeans, the indigenous people had their own ways of learning and perceptions of their world and the things in and around them.

Our visit to the palaces and interactions with some of the *Akarima* revealed that apart from the Ya-Naa's palace, where there are two state drummers, where each drummer has a set of drums, every other chief may engage the service of only one state drummer. Some palaces do not have *Akarima*. A state drummer may have an assistant but the assistant should never have his own sets of drums. This is how an informant stated it: *Some chiefs do not have the status of Akarima for that matter they cannot use Akarima*. This confirms what was said earlier by the respondents that the *Akarima* elevate the status of the chief. One can deduce that Africans have their structure of authority which it used to rule its own people before the introduction of the western system of governments. (Kelley, 1970 in Emeagwali, 2006).

Dagbamba society is divided into identifiable social classes. These classes are: *Nabihi* (Persons of the royal blood); *Kpamba* (the Nobility); *Worizohanima* (the Equestrian Order); *Namogola* (the elders who were formerly eunuchs), *Afranima* (the Muslim), *Kambonsi* or *Sapashinnima* (the warrior class), *Baansi* (the eulogists and drummers) *Wonzamanima* (the barbers); *Tindaamba* (the fetish priests); *Tarimba* or *Dagbandabba* (the commoners); *Nakohenima* (the butchers) and *Machelnima* (the blacksmiths). The *Nabihi-Kpamba* and *worizohanima* have the power to appoint sub-chiefs and title holders. The office of the *Akarima* as we were told is not hereditary as in the case of other classes of *baansi* (Mahama, 2004). The study revealed that any commoner of Dagbon can become an *Akarima* if only he is interested and trained. Mahama (2004) also confirmed that usually people of the *kambonsi* class or common people become *Akarima*. However most of the *Akarima* we interviewed testified that their fathers were *Akarima*. One of the informants said *Akarimah* is an inherited profession. Basically what it means is that

you can become *Akarima* only when you belong to the *Akarima* family, Chernoff (2001) attests to this fact by stating that only a child born into this profession can practice the vocation.

4.1.2. The *Goonje*

The *goonje* are also another group of knowledge producers from the *baansi* class of Dagbon, who uses the violin also known as *goonje* in Hausa to communicate his message to the audience. According to Mahama (2004) only members of the *goonje* family may practice the profession. However, Chernoff (2001), stipulates that anyone one who has interest in the profession can practice it. Contrary to Chernoff (2001) assertion, all those we interviewed attest to the fact that they come from the *goonje* family.

The *goonje* as we were informed during an interaction with some community members are made up of the ensemble of men, women and children. Our observation during the 2014 Damba festival also revealed that the men play the *goonje* and some of the men, the children and the women support with the shaking of the gourd known as *Zaabia* as in Figure 5. This is also corroborated by Mahama (2004).

Ensemble of goonje and Zaabia players performing during Damba Festival



Fig. 5 Source : (Field Work, April, 2014)

The *goonje* was said to have originated from the Muslim Arabs of North Africa. However, the art spread to the West Africa as a result of the Trans-Saharan Trade. In the case of the Dagbon *goonje*, as we learned through this study, its ancestry was traced to Burkina Faso and through the Mamprusi, an ethnic group to the north of Dagbon, as a result of intermarriage. As a result of their origin, *goonje* songs are often in Hausa or a mixture of Hausa and Dagbani. One can infer from this that there were social movements and interactions among people of Africa before the artificial boundaries were created as a result of the Europeans scramble for Africa for their

personal gain. According to Senah, Adusei and Akor (2001) one of the objectives of the Europeans to Africa was to win territories.

This study also revealed that the *goonje* is the latest to join the *baansi* class and are very popular. According to Mahama (2004), the *goonje* became members of the royal court of musicians in the late 19th century during the reign of Na Yakubu I.

The *goonje* instrument is made from half of a gourd calabash covered with animal skin. The strings on the bow are made of hair from horse tail (Figure. 6). This is held horizontally and hung over the shoulder with a scarf.

Goonje and Zaabia (*Half gourd with string attached and Zaabia a full gourd filled with pebbles*).



Figure 6 (Source: Fieldwork, September 2013)

The role of the *goonje* complements that of *lunsi*. They sing as well as praise the chief and his ancestors. The *goonje* do not sing historical songs for the chief although their songs have historical citations. Their main role is to sing praise songs. An observation by the researchers revealed that they also join the procession of the chief. This role as we observed is perfectly coordinated by members of the three *baansi* groups under discussion. This shows that there is order in the performance of the entire *baansi* class under study. The order in their performances cannot be said to happen in just a spur of the moment but rather something that has been mastered over the years. And this can be qualified as science in itself. Higgins (n.d) explains that science is knowledge acquired by study, mastery, trained skill.

The *goonje* also perform during social functions such as weddings, funerals, naming ceremonies, festivals and in market places and this supported by Mahama (2004) and Chernoff (2001).

The Lunsi

The term *lunsi* (plural) and *lunga* (singular) means the art or the knowledge of beating the drum (Locke 1990). The *lunsi* are drummers with royal prestige. They are part of a royal lineage in Dagbon; to be called *lunsi* means one of your parents either father or mother must come from that lineage (Oppong, 1972; Locke, 1990; and Mahamah, 2004). This was attested by most of our informants. All those we interviewed confirmed that either their mother or father comes from the *lunsi* lineage. It therefore means that membership is solely by blood relation. According to Locke (1990) this is caste society. Caste society according to Web dictionary is a form of social stratification characterized by endogamy, hereditary transmission of a style of life which often

includes an occupation, ritual status in a hierarchy, and customary social interaction and exclusion based on cultural notions of purity and pollution. And this is usually determined by birth and according to my informants they are all descendants of Bizung. This is also confirmed by Oppong, (1972); Locke, (1990); Mahama, (2004) and Zablong (2010).

The *lunsi* retinue is made of women and men. However, in Dagbon tradition while the men drum the women also sing praises. Although such women are called *lung paaga*, literally meaning drum woman, they do not really drum (Zablong, 2010). This has some semblance in English language where the drum major commands the drum corps while the drum majorette only leads(marches with) the drum corps in a march. An interview with the respondents and observation at various functions during the performance of the *lunsi* confirmed that indeed the women are praise singers but they do not drum. The question is, why women do the women don't drum? According to Zablong (2010) in *Dagbon* it is forbidden for a woman to drum.

The *Lunsi* of Dagbon, as we were told during the data collection process, trace their genealogy to a royal ancestor, Prince Bizung. Prince Bizung was the son of Na Nyagsi. The Ya-Na who established the physical boundary of Dagbon (Mahama, 2004). Prince Bizung became an orphan at a tender age as a result of the death of his mother. He was neglected and often times left hungry. In his misery, he found comfort in beating a broken calabash to attract attention and to get food to eat. This latter evolved to drum. Bizung eventually became Ya-Naa's favorite as he developed the habit of praising his father using his drum beat. On becoming an adult Bizung taught his children to also play the drum. According to Mahama (2004) by the time Bizung died, the work of *lunsi* has not only become a profession but a cultural heritage. By this rendition, the *lunsi* art originated from the royal parlance and as such has close affinity to the Dagbon royals. No doubt that the *lunsi* are popular in the royal courts. Over time the *lunsi* thus developed

around the royalty. (Mahama, 2004; Zablong, 2010). Zablong (2010) posits that the royals call the *lunsi N-yeba*, meaning my grandfather. This is in respect of the royal ancestral founder, Prince Bizung.

The *lunsi*, as knowledge producers, use speech, song, and drumming to tell the story of the kingdom, Dagbon as well as the genealogy of the royal families. The *lunsi* are cultural commentators and historians, they also act as tradition bearers in keeping of the oral histories of the Dagbon people (Salifu, 2008). That is the *lunsi* are known for their knowledge of the Dagbon history and this is expressed in their music and drum. All the people we interviewed corroborated this assertion. They, the *lunsi* boast that when it comes to the history of Dagbon they are more knowledgeable than the other classes of the *baansi*. Chernoff (2001) also attests to this fact. This implies that the *lunsi* are really knowledgeable in the knowledge they produced. And the theory that Africans do not produce knowledge is thus flawed. As Metinhouse (1997: 43) puts it “In the name of written documents and absolute power conferred on it by Europeans, Africans or at any rate Black Africans were excluded from history”.

The *lunsi* are considered the most important of all the drummers in Dagbon. They therefore constitute the major source of communication at the chief palace. This might be due to the wealth of knowledge they produce and manage. Knowledge production is not the monopoly of the global North or West. Africans and for that matter the drummers of Dagbon also produce vast knowledge that enable communities and societies to develop and advance themselves in whatever environment they find themselves (Hyun, 2006).

Furthermore, a major aspect of the *lunsi* is their praise work. They use praise song and praise names to celebrate people and their achievements. Indeed it is in the place of the *Lunsi* to bestow

praise names on public figures. Due to their repertoire of knowledge they are quick to determine and place person categorically according to their position in society. They spend time learning about their culture and people to depths than most ordinary people. This view has been noted by Salifu (2008 : 56) as...

When one says *luŋa ni salim ma* it sets off the meanings, “a drummer will eulogize me”, “a drummer will sing for me”, “a drummer will tell my story for me”. This “story” is the story of my life; one that started with my forebears and becomes a never ending story, because I will live it and pass the torch on to my progeny.

At social functions such as durbars, funerals and festivals drummers play a third party function, by publicizing whoever is present. They ‘introduce’ each person to others in much the same way as a third-party mutually known to two strangers needs to introduce them to each other.

The *lunsi* are the most popular and represent about ninety percent of the *baansi* class. We observed during our investigations that in a big gathering, you may have eighty percent (80%) of *lunsi*; ten percent (10%) of *goonje* and the rest put together will be ten percent (10%). This confirms Mahama’s (2004) and that much earlier by Kinney (1970:).

The *lunsi* drum is carved out of hard wood in the form of an hourglass with holes at each end. Animal skin membranes are then used to cover the holes at both ends as shown in figure 9.



Figure 7 *Lunsi* (Source: Fieldwork, September, 2013)

CONCLUSION

Taken together, the *akarima*, *goonje* and *lunsi*, are part and perhaps the most active and vibrant group of Dagbon cultural knowledge, history and musical art. Hence they form the community of knowledge producers and managers. In our subsequent paper we will take a close look at their roles as a collective of knowledge producers. Noteworthy of this selection of *baansi* is that while the *akarima*'s title is different from the instrument played, *timpani*, in the case of the *lunsi* and *goonje* the performer and instrument bear the same name. Also, while the *akarima*'s act is individualized, the *goonje* and *lunsi* perform in a group. In addition, the *akarima*'s act is essentially instrumental while the *goonje* and *lunsi* combine instrument and voice.

The *baansi* as living librarians has the history of Dagbon in their memory. Salifu (2008:30) records how many drummers have aptly defined their roles in performance, as reported by Belcher (1999: 8) who quotes the griot Mamadou Kouaté, from Djibril Tamsir's *Niane's Soundiata*,

... we are vessels of speech, we are the repositories which harbor secrets many centuries old. The art of eloquence has no secrets for us; without us the names of kings would vanish into oblivion, we are the memory of mankind; by the spoken word we bring to life the deeds and exploits of kings for younger generations.

There is no doubt that they are classified as librarians.

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