

FURTHER NOTES ON GHANA'S XYLOPHONE
TRADITIONS

In a previous note in this journal¹ I drew attention to evidences of musicality and musicianship among the Lobi and the Dagaba, two of the ethnic groups carrying xylophone traditions in Ghana. In the succeeding paragraphs I offer a description - not a solution - of a problem that would confront anyone who might make a study of these traditions.

In northwest Ghana, the area to which xylophone making and playing belong in Ghana and its immediate neighbourhood, the following ethnic groups must be counted among those who carry and sustain this tradition: Lobi, Wangara, Dagaba, and Sisala. The problem to be solved reveals itself in a number of questions: (1) Are these ethnic groups related in some way? (2) Can anyone of these be rightly regarded as the radiating centre for the xylophone traditions? (3) Which of them is likely to be the one? (4) Did this group originate the instrument? (5) If it is not an autochthonous group, did its first immigrant ancestors possess the instrument?

If answers to these questions could be found important lessons would be provided for those concerned with the origins of the African xylophone as well as for those concerned with the histories and cultures of the peoples of Ghana and its neighbourhood. The solution of the problem of origin concerning the xylophone in Ghana would require data from many different sources: from internal evidence as well as evidence external to repertoires, and from a comparative study of oral traditions and constructional and performing techniques. This data is not altogether available yet, and it must be given time to grow.

1. "Musicality and Musicianship North West Ghana" Research Review Vol.2 No.1 Michaelmas Term 1965 pp.42-45.
2. (a) Rev. A.M. Jones. "Indonesia and Africa: The xylophone as a Culture-Indicator" in African Music vol.2 No.3 (Roodepoort; 1960) pp.36-47.
(b) M.D.W. Jeffreys. "Negro Influences on Indonesia" in African Music vol.2 No.4; 1961 pp.10-16.

In the meantime relevant data that have become available can be put together and the gaps and the possibilities they hold can be indicated. One point to be borne in mind is the mixture and the constant influx of peoples in northwest Ghana. A district commissioner writes in the 1921 census Report of Ghana (page 132) "there is often no clear distinction between tribes. For instance Lobis, Dagartis (i.e. Dagaba), Isalas, and Grunshis are very mixed up, and the inhabitants of many compounds might with propriety be counted under either head or as a combination of both". Rattray also throws a hint on the fluidity of societies in this area. Writing in the early 1930's about the Lobi, he said, "Their real habitat is across this river (the Black Volta), in the Ivory Coast, whence members of the tribe are migrating to British Territory (Ghana) in ever increasing numbers."¹

Conducive conditions for the inflow of musical traditions and the borrowing and adaptation of musical ideas are thus in existence in northwest Ghana. These conditions are reflected in the variety of xylophones and xylophone tunings.² The Sisala have the largest xylophones, with seventeen keys held over a frame rising to about 2½ feet from the ground at its highest end and to about one foot at the lowest end. The side of its highest end is often covered with basket work made with leather straps woven over wooden spokes. The instrument has the same tuning as the 17 keyed instrument of the Dagaba, a slightly smaller instrument used in pairs. According to Sazu Ninkara, a famous Lo-Birifu xylophone maker, the Dagaba xylophone may have as many as 20 keys, but 17 is the more usual number. Like the Sisala instrument the Dagaba xylophone is sometimes, but not usually given a basket-work shield.

The Lobi also make a xylophone tuned in the same way as the Sisala and the Dagaba instruments. But theirs is a much smaller instrument and has 14 keys. They call it the gyilgu when in general use and Kogyil when used at funeral (kuol).

1. Rattray, Capt. R.S. The Tribes of the Ashanti Hunterland Vol. II (Oxford: Clarendon Press; 1932) p.425.

2. See the tunings and the scale intervallic structures on the next page.

The Lobi possess two other xylophone types. The Losala, i.e. those Lobi domiciled in the Lawra area, use a large 14-keyed xylophone called Gyilmɔ which they tune differently and always use in pairs. These are larger instruments than the gyilgu, but not as large as the Dagaba type. The gyilmɔ is used at funerals, at spirit possession (Baybene) dances and at preharvest (soer) dances, - dances whose songs mostly use twelve of the fourteen keys. The Lobrifor xylophone, called Bogyil, also has 14 keys two of which are regarded as bad keys and are never used. It is always used in a pair, at spirit possession and other social dances.

These xylophone types and tunings cannot, unfortunately be used as identification marks. The Lobrifu, users of the Bogyil - the 14-keyed instrument with two "bad" ones also use the kogyil or Gyilgu (the 14-good-keyed xylophone). The Wangara, speaking a language completely unintelligible to the Lobi, also use these two instruments. The Dagaba and the Sisala, two other groups speaking different languages, can also communicate musically on their two xylophone types. But the Dagaba and the Lobrifor who speak mutually intelligible dialects cannot always communicate in music. When the Brifor plays his Bogyil, the Dagawo (singular of Dagaba) cannot enjoy it, because the tuning - i.e. the scale - is different. On the other hand the Miiwo-Lobi around Gawo - the Lobi capital in Upper Volta, and the Miiwo-Lobi in northern Ivory Coast who speak a different language from the Lobrifor of Ghana, share with them the same xylophone tunings, musical repertoires and dances.

Thus what is suggested in the music is refuted in the linguistic situation. Musical traditions suggest, for instance, that the Sisala and the Dagaba must be ethnically related; their linguistic disunity suggests that we have no sufficient evidence in the music to draw such a conclusion. The difficulty is a real one; for one cannot dismiss either the conflicting musical evidence or the linguistic evidence and conclude that two groups with identical forms of one or the other must be ethnically related. The evidence before us does not suggest that the inertia of linguistic forms is more critical than that of musical forms or vice versa. In other words, we have not the means in the

LOBI XYLOPHONE TUNINGS

(The Kogyil Tuning is used also by the Dagaba and the Sisala)

KEYS NUMBERED FROM THE LOWEST NOTE	KOGYIL OR GYILGU		BOGYIL		GYILMO	
	CPS	CENTS	CPS	CENTS	CPS	CENTS
1	106	214	110	367	82	308
2	120	316	136	447	98	119
3	144	241	150	213	105	343
4	166	220	198	304	128	228
5	188	208	236 ^x	-	146	222
6	212	243	236	369	166	323
7	244	263	292	92	200	101
8	284	270	308	418	212	406
9	332	215	392	-	268	195
10	376	208	392 ^x	292	300	154
11	424	299	464	374	328	326
12	504	231	576	116	396	151
13	576	246	616	364	432	321
14	664		760		520	

^x Gyilsaona i.e. Bad tone.

available data to judge whether music or language is the more permanent heritage. There are adjacent neighbours in our examples which have retained divergent musical traditions against a common linguistic background, as there are also adjacent neighbours which have retained distinctive languages against a common background of musical traditions.

We are thus unable yet to resolve the first point in our five-point problem. The difficulties here are not necessarily insoluble. There are yet wide unexplored fields which might offer clues. But the present difficulties are valuable pointers to the danger of proclaiming links and ascribing origins too soon in comparative studies of this kind.

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