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Women Drummers: Embracing a tradition and moving forward with change

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to determine whether or not female drummers are becoming a part of the tradition of drumming in Ghana. Much of the focus lies on the pioneer women's group in Ghana, the Aboase Dadziemba Mmensoun Cultural Group. It looks at the role they've played in liberating the women of Ghana and revitalizing a change in the traditional realm of drumming. The research touches on the definition of tradition: how it can embody change and still remain traditional. It looks at the institution of drumming in Ghana and evaluates the ever changing role of women within this institution.
INTRODUCTION

Drumming and dancing are a part of the very soul of Ghanaian culture. One always goes hand in hand with the other, and together they help to create a way of life; giving meaning to the every day ins and outs that take place in this society. Drumming is not only used for recreational purposes, but for ceremonies such as funerals and weddings, festivals such as puberty rites, worship, durbars of chiefs, or states of emergency. It can be said, and often is that drumming and dancing are a traditional part of the Ghanaian lifestyle, and like all traditions, are subject to change. So one can then question the definition of tradition: if something is considered a tradition, how can it also embody change and remain “traditional”? The answer lies in the simple realization that, traditions are dynamic entities and are only able to survive by adapting to the changing times and new environments that grow up around them. Yet changing a tradition is not always an easy process - there must be acceptance of the change among the custodians of the tradition and among the people themselves, those who are a part of the group within which the change is evolving.

It is important to point out that there are three major forms -of drumming: signals, language, and dance. Whereas we can easily find examples throughout history of women being allowed to participate in music making for the sake of entertaining (for the dance), it is only now that they're breaching into the other purposes - the sending of signals and speaking through the drums. Take for instance Asafo drumming - Asafo companies are warrior organizations which were once defined as "consisting of all-bodied men, young or middle aged who are not members of the royal companies but who are united under a leader as a force to initiate or counteract aggression in time of war or during internal disputes." (Nketia 117) This definition no longer holds validity because just this year at the Aboakyere Festival in Winneba, women were participating in the hunting parties. Aboa means "the animal" and kyere means "to catch"; it is a festival during which two Asafo groups compete with each other to be the first to return with a catch (traditionally an antelope), and present it to the chief. Women
are now also drumming and dancing the music of the Asafo companies, making a place for themselves in an institution which used to be exclusively for men.

In the realm of drumming among the Akan groups in Ghana, men have traditionally been the masters and only ones allowed to play the instruments, especially drums such as atumpan, the talking drums which can be used to say something about the chief, or mpebi and nkrawire, two signal drums played in front of the chief. As recounted by J. H. Nketia in his book, "Our Drums and Drummers", "In the olden days in Ghana, it was not the custom for women to drum but nowadays women like to drum." (8) There were many beliefs and myths surrounding the idea of female drummers, making it a taboo for women to even touch the drums, let alone play them. There was the popular belief that because women went through menstruation, they were dirty creatures' and shouldn't touch the drums because they are sacred instruments, "repositories of the spirits . . . and carry with them the associations with ancestor drummers." (Nketia 16) It was also thought that if a woman touched or sat on a drum she wouldn't be able to bear children; she would be left barren and no one would want her. Then there became the common excuse, used more often in modern times, that females just don't have the stamina needed to play the drums for long periods of time.

All of these stories have been proven as the myths they are though, with the growing number of female drummers in Ghana today, among the Akan specifically. Yet being allowed to play does not equal gaining acceptance within the community, it doesn't always signify that change is taking place - that something new is here to stay. So we come to our question: are women drummers becoming part of the tradition of drumming in Ghana, or are they still being allowed to play only at the performance level, not within any deeper cultural context? Has the taboo truly been broken, or are these women merely viewed as deviants of society, or tools through which others can make a profit? There is a growing industry for tourism in Ghana, a business which thrives on the "unique" and "different", so one could extrapolate that female drummers are being used as a type of attraction. Or maybe the increase of women drummers really is reflective of a change in attitude in Ghanaian culture. The purpose of this
research paper was to find the answers to all of these questions; to determine what significance female drummers in Ghana hold now, and will hold in the future. But for the sake of being concise and true to the area within which the fieldwork was done, we will look at female drummers among the Akan specifically.

METHODOLOGY

Over the past three months, as I’ve watched some of my peers struggling with all the different possible directions their I.S.P.’s could take, I've realized how different my whole experience with choosing a topic has been. I came to Ghana with the desire to study drumming, and in particular, women drummers in this society. During my time here, through all the performances we've seen and experiences we've had, my convictions and passion for following my original intentions only grew stronger. While I watched others experience an overload of ideas, I felt the path to my project becoming clearer with every step. Each time we watched a performance, in all the different areas of Ghana which we traveled to, I felt a stirring in my soul, a pull that told me drumming really has become a part of my life in the last three years, and what better a place to study it in-depth than a country in Africa. Drumming touches something deep inside of me, and here was my chance to combine it with one of my other great passions -women's studies.

Things especially started falling into place after I began hearing about the women's drumming group located in Cape Coast. Talk about our I.S.P.’s had been going on since week one of the program because they constitute such a large part of our time here, and should be planned for well in advance. So all along I paid special attention to the groups of people we worked with and saw perform drumming and dancing, and the places where they were located, to start building my list of contacts. I took notice that each time I asked about the
existence of any women's drumming groups in Ghana I was being referred to a group located in Cape Coast.

My preliminary fieldwork began with making some key contacts who were directly involved with the women's group, the Aboase Dadziemba Mmensoun Cultural Group. The first day of the week we were in Cape Coast as a group, we saw Aboase perform for us, along with other groups from the Agoro Project, with which they are affiliated. So I met Mr. Selete Nyomi, the director of Agoro, who in turn gave me the name of Mrs. Mensah, the director of the Aboase group. During that week I also familiarized myself with the Town Hall, the location for their practices, and met some of the women I was soon to be working with.

Throughout all the stages of planning for my I.S.P. I knew it was important for me to take lessons and better my own drumming skills as well as study female drummers in this culture. In light of the fact we have to give an oral presentation in addition to our research paper, I decided I'd like to give a performance to show, rather than just tell, about what I had learned and experienced for a month. So in setting up some of my initial plans with Mrs. Mensah, we discussed the different possibilities of whom I could train with, how many people in total my core group would consist of (because I had to take into consideration getting them to Accra for my final performance), how many days and for how long each day I would want to practice, and we talked about key people I should interview for information for my paper.

After setting up a homestay for myself and confirming that these were the people I'd be working with for my I.S.P., I returned to Cape Coast in April to "go into the field." Right away I set up the practical part of my project, establishing a daily schedule of lessons with my instructor, Charlotte Amonoo. During the first day's lesson, Charlotte and I decided that I would be learning the Fante's Adzewinga dance, which is played with the hands on the apentemma drum. After the first week and a half, I also began incorporating learning the dance into afternoon lessons and a few of the different songs which are sung with Adzewinga. In the evenings I joined the Aboase group for their
practices, where eventually we came to end the sessions with Adzewa so I would also be acclimating to group dynamics of performance, not just "Natalie Charlotte" dynamics.

In between lessons I conducted interviews, observed what was going on at Town Hall outside of my private lessons, participated in performances with Aboase (upon their invitation and insistence!), and visited sites that held historical importance to the part of my research which became most like a case study of my sisters' group. I was using both participant and non-participant observations for gathering data and formulating opinions.

I felt that the participant observation in particular was very important to my research because of the performance aspect and because in some sense I am a part of the very sub-culture I was investigating: I too am a female drummer, although I am not Ghanaian. By participating in some of the observations I was making, I feel it gave me a clearer perspective and truer analysis of the very questions I was asking, because I was doing for a month of my life, what these women do for a living. So not only was I figuring out if women drummers in Ghana feel if they're being accepted, I was experiencing my own degree of acceptance as a woman in the realm of drumming, or lack there of.

Coming at it from another direction, however, I feel my non-participant observations played equally key roles because of the simple fact that I am not a Ghanaian woman. I can therefore never make a pure judgment based on my personal experience about being accepted into the tradition of drumming in this society regardless of my gender, because as an outsider, I'll be treated differently no matter what. Non-participant observations also allowed for me to step back and make my own assessments of what was going on without any outside opinions influencing me.

Both types of observations helped me in formulating the types of questions I wanted to ask for my interviews. I was seeing how the women were interacting with each other, with the drums, and with the community around them. I knew that to get the truest opinion about the questions I wanted answered I had to engage not only the women and those that direct them, but custodians of the
very tradition they were influencing and changing, people of the local community, people from all different generations, and anyone with a voice and the free will to oppose or support what women drummers stand for.

Interviewing was vitally important for me because women drummers are only recently coming out and making a place for themselves in this culture, so there isn't much in the lines of written or film documentation. Almost all of the data I collected came from formal and informal interviews, conducted over a three week period. Considering that the group I chose to focus on has played a major role in the movement for women drummers in this nation, and may be in fact looked on as the pioneer group for the cause, I think it also makes my research just that much stronger to have collected the data first-hand from the very people involved. Interviewing also allowed for me to cross-check my information with the very people who were expressing their opinions, not just reading opinions that may have been written decades ago and no longer obtain, only serving the purpose of illustrating growth that's taken place.

I recorded my data either by cassette or hand-writing the information. I also photographed some of my outings and practices with the Aboase group, which unfortunately won't be contained within these pages because I prefer to wait and do all the developing of my film from Ghana, myself with the lab facilities I'm used to working in at home! If I were to do this project again, or something similar to it, I think I would have looked into having some of my rehearsals videotaped because I have no idea what my dancing techniques look like.

I also feel that were I to do this project over, I would have done more preliminary research into the performance itself. I didn't realize upon my decision to study Adzewa that traditionally only one drum is played for the dancers. I was able to learn the rhythm very quickly, but in the stages of putting the polishing touches on my performance - keeping time with the bell, knowing where to end and switch the beat for the dancers, and learning to ignore the singing and the dancing and focus on my drumming (because everyone follows my lead since I'm the only drum), I realized you really have to know your stuff to play for this dance. Even as I'm writing I feel butterflies in my stomach thinking about the
performance; you can't really cover up for your mistakes when yours is the only drum producing music and the whole show rides on you! I feel good that I've taken on this challenge for myself, but probably wouldn't duplicate this decision if I could do it differently.

As far as analyzing all the data I've collected, I can say it's been an ongoing process and probably will remain so long after I've handed in this project. When one begins to question the changing dynamics of a tradition, they are questioning an entire institution, and this is not something which can be completely thought out within a few weeks of research and fieldwork and the production of a small scale paper. But the evaluations and opinions I've formed have come from the consensus of others' opinions on the matter and the experiences I've had and observations I've made in the field.

The Story Behind the Women
The history behind the Aboase Dadziemba Mmensoun Cultural Group, begins in 1984 at the Philip Quaque Girls' Middle School. The founder and current director of the group, Mrs. Leticia Araba Mensah, was the head teacher of the school at that time. Her assistant in forming and coordinating the group in 1984 was Mrs. Araba Cole, who was at that time the school's home-science teacher. The idea for starting a movement to train girls how to drum and blow the horns (mmensoun) sprouted within Mrs. Mensah after she saw a woman blowing the horn during the Fetu Afeyie Festival in Cape Coast, September 1984. She set her idea in motion when Nana Kwamena Kum, a cultural instructor, visited the girls' school that fall. Mrs. Mensah discussed what she'd seen at the festival with Nana, and he agreed to her proposal of him coming to the school and teaching the girls to drum and blow the mmensoun.

Within only a few months time, the girls were ready to make their first public appearance. In November of 1984 the group came out at a Cultural Festival Competition between basic primary and middle schools in the Cape Coast municipality. The competition was held at Cape Coast Castle and the girls' group consisted of eight horn blowers, five drummers, and one timekeeper (dawuronta). The performance they gave had been choreographed by Nana, Mrs. Mensah, and Mrs. Cole.

"It was the first time bringing the horn blowers out; at that time it was still a taboo. They did really well, but the judges didn't place us. We were so annoyed! They didn't appreciate it because they hadn't seen girls play before." (Mensah, 14 April 1997)

Soon after this the girls performed again at a cultural enrichment program held at C.O.S. Park in Cape Coast. The program had been launched in all the regional capitals because the government was trying to eliminate the use of bells in the school at this time and introduce drumming to transmit messages. Their was the only group to play at the program's luncheon so, "it was a big honor." (Cole, 14 April 1997) Mr. Blege, the Deputy Secretary of Education at the time, was present and saw the group perform. He was impressed with their skills and promised to visit the Philip Quaque School.
Following through with his promise, Mr. Blege went the following day and was greeted at the school's gate by the mmensoun players who led him inside, playing all the way. Once again he was greatly impressed, and extended an invitation for the girls to perform at the next independence day celebration on the sixth of March. So, in 1985 the group played for the first time at national level.

The morning after the independence celebration, the girls met Joyce Aryee, the Minister of Education, who gave each member of the group exercise books, white Converse sneakers, blue socks, an encouragement to continue what they were doing. "Even President Rawlings was impressed with the performance they had given." (Mensah, 14 April 1997) Every year afterward, the group went to participate in the March sixth celebration.

"Left and right there were invitations for the girls to play: funerals, weddings, inaugurations . . . We were getting invitations from all corners of the country." (Cole, 14 April 1997) Eventually

became a mixture of young girls and women who were playing in the group. The women were helping to train the girls, and this process of mixing the girls from different classes still continues. But the original group from 1984 have all graduated and pioneered a separate project together - the Aboase Dadziemba Mmensoun Cultural Group, founded in 1995.

In 1987, Mrs. Mensah left the middle school, and the next year Mrs. Cole followed her lead. So during the 1987-88 school year, the program nearly collapsed because the new head teacher, Mrs. Alberta Wilson, wasn't interested in the group. The girls were saved however, when Mr. Abaka, the Regional Manager of Anglican schools, reprimanded her for letting the program slide. Mrs. Wilson immediately reactivated the group, and invitations to perform continued to come. Eventually Mrs. Wilson retired and was followed by Mr. Matthew Moses Hooper and then Mr. Twumasi Ankrah, who is the current cultural instructor teaching the girls in the school now.

Twumasi Ankrah became the girls' cultural instructor in 1995, with the aid of Mrs. Mensah. The size of the group is presently 22 students, all different ages
and from different classes. The reason for doing it this way versus class-by-class, is to always maintain students who are already at performance level, in the group. Everyone in the group has the ability to drum, blow the horns, sing, dance, etc.

When asked if he feels that because he is a male instructor training a young women's group, does he take away from the stigma of female drummers proving their musical competence, he answered no. "The girls are students in an environment where they have to learn and it's an opportunity to have the group, so I haven't taken away from the stigma of women drummers. In fact some of them are asking now how to get into a school where they can become cultural instructors, and I feel they are very serious. It will actually be better to have women instructors leading women's groups because in Ghanaian culture there's easier dynamics between boys/boys and girls/girls." (Ankrah, 17 April 1997)

Although Mrs. Mensah has retired from the Philip Quaque Girls' Middle School, she is currently the Municipal Education Cultural Coordinator of the Cape Coast region and the head coordinator of the Aboase Dadziemba Mmensoun Group. Her responsibilities have shifted from training the young girls to trying to recruit them as they finish school, to join the Aboase group as the older women either marry or move away. The meaning behind the group's name is actually very beautiful and illustrates the bond between Mrs. Mensah and the women: "Aboase" is someone who started something, "Dadziemba" means Dadzie's children (Dadzie being Mrs. Mensah's maiden name), and Mmensoun stands for blowing of the horns.

The Aboase group, became affiliated with the Agoro Project within the same year they were founded, 1995. Before their affiliation, the women struggled with always needing to find drums and space to practice, and Agoro was having trouble putting together an exclusive "women's group". Agoro was founded on 9 October 1993, with Mr. Selete Nyomi as the director. Agoro means "to play" and the purpose of the project was to try and embody a fusion of music, dance, and drama - all aspects of performance. Thus this name was chosen so there wouldn't be a one sided definition. Mr. Nyomi was always trying to add new
groups to the center to maintain variety and make their project uniquely different. Before joining with the Aboase group, he had tried to start a women's group within Agoro, but it was hard to find enough women with the incentive and means to show up for practice every day, and he felt a woman should be directing a women's group to keep it in perspective.

Selete started to hear of the Aboase group when time and again he was being directed to the Philip Quaque girls whenever he needed horn blowers for a performance. He heard that originally the Center for National Culture wanted to absorb the pioneer women's group, but Mrs. Mensah eventually sought his help because she felt it would be in her groups' best interest to work with Agoro, where they'd be provided with an instructor who would help them to continue upgrading their skills. Selete jumped on the idea of the enjoyment because here was his chance to incorporate an already formed women's group, with a woman director at their head.

Presently, many of the Aboase women, along with some members from other Agoro groups, are participating in a workshop at the Town Hall entitled, "Training of Cultural Instructors'. The purpose of the course is to train two categories of cultural instructors: one joining Ghana Education Service, as cultural instructors who will assist in the training of children in the art of drumming and dancing, and the other group will be involved in the training of foreign students as and when necessary. So, already the women are taking steps toward bettering their own skills and moving forward with their pioneer roles.

Women Drummers: Liberating
Women in Ghana
The significance of the role played by the Aboase Dadziemba Mmensoun Group can't be ignored, but does their history answer the question of whether or not female drummers are being accepted into the Akan traditions of drumming beyond the purpose of the -dance? The answer is no, but they have certainly led us in the right direction to finding it. As stated in the introduction, a change in tradition requires the permission of the custodians of the tradition and acceptance among the group of people who will be affected by the change. So, we move to the opinion of a custodian of traditional drumming, the Obaatan chief of Cape Coast and surrounding villages, as a source for cross checking the women's opinions that they are indeed being accepted.

Nana Egyare Kotompo II, the head of the royal stool family (obaatan meaning "mother" of the family), feels that although formerly women weren't allowed to blow the mmensoun or play the drums for ceremonies or sending signals, that time has passed. Nana expressed that all the chiefs he knows have accepted women drummers and recognize that more women should be trained to drum. He says that today the chiefs are engaging the female musicians, not necessarily always vice-versa. He gave the example of the funeral ceremony for the Paramount Chief who died last August, which will be held from 7 July - 12 July: the Aboase group has been invited to play at the funeral.

"Imagine Yaa Asantewa, a woman who went to war and defeated so many people. If people accept this piece of history and look to her as a great woman, why shouldn't women drummers be accepted? It's a natural gift." (Kotompo, 25 April 1997)

The fact that women could go to a funeral right now and be acknowledged for playing the drums represents something much deeper than just providing music for the ceremony, it signifies the revitalization of change and dynamism in the culture. Drumming and dancing are a part of the way of life in Ghana; what was once the normal way of doing things is no longer so. Not everyone is going to accept this at once, but acknowledgment is the first step in the movement
toward change. Traditions are dynamic entities, evolving and moving forward over time, or dying out as they refuse to change with the world around them.

Just as other women of the world have burned bras, marched in protest, and claimed their rights to voting and abortion, African women are voicing their liberation through their drumming. "Women are defined by their roles. When they step out of their social roles, they immediately attract attention." (Mrs. Esi Sutherland-Addy, 2 April 1997) Outsiders need to recognize that they cannot measure another culture's liberation by their own because two completely different ways of living are being dealt with. Allowing women to drum marks a great change in how they are viewed in the Akan traditional society and in Ghana as a whole; they are stepping out of the roles which once defined them, and are now creating their own definitions of themselves.

"What's fundamental in Ghana is different from what's fundamental in the US, or India, etc. Aboase has played a female musicians. We have two faces at the center: one to preserve I tradition and one to move forward and be creative within the tradition, being responsive to the changes around us. You can't box us." (Nyomi, 25 April 1997)

**CONCLUSION:**

Traditional Growth
It is in my opinion, which has taken its shape over the past three weeks, that women are indeed joining the ranks of traditional drumming in Ghana. It has been shown to me that the people of the Akan culture, as well as custodians of the tradition, are accepting the change which is taking place. Women are playing for more than just entertainment, these women are now taking command of such drums as the atumpan and fontomfrom. I believe that female drummers are here to stay, they are not a passing fad and the significance of the role they are playing runs much deeper than a tourist attraction or the entertainment level.

In fact, it was pointed out to me by Mr. Selete Nyomi that tourism often lends to staticism in a culture, rather than a tool for promoting dynamism. He said he's experienced numerous times, foreigners who come to Ghana and express their feeling that people here should never change the way they do certain things because "people will love to see that, don't ever change it". By viewing the industry in this manner, one can argue then that tourism would be a retarding factor in women's liberation through drumming, not a tool for growth backed by a corrupt notion of profit.

The fact that already more than one generation of women is involved with drumming and blowing the horns, is a good sign that tradition is continuing to change. It shows that the interest is there and the forward motion of change is more powerful than any disapproval or disagreement with it. "The taboo has been broken. My girls are having children;-so you see, they were just myths told to try and keep women in 'their place'." (Mensah, 14 April 1997) Once again women have grown tired of the selfishness of men and are taking steps to ensure that future generations of females will continue to move ahead, creating their own definitions instead of falling into the places set out for them. My sisters are moving with their souls, and no one can take that away from them.

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