


The Dagomba Praise (Singers, Singing And Naming): Roles And Cultural Significance



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ABSTRACT

This study examined the roles and cultural significance of Dagomba praise singers, praise singing, and praise naming in Northern Ghana. Central to the socio-cultural fabric of Dagomba society, these oral traditions preserve cultural identity, perpetuate historical narratives, and promote communal values. Guided by performance theory, the research investigated the nature of praise singing among the Dagomba people and the role of the praise singer within their cultural context. The study adopted a qualitative approach, utilizing purposive sampling methods to select bards, chiefs, and community members connected to royalty, who are primary targets of praise singing, and field notes, enabling a comprehensive understanding of these traditions. Findings revealed that Dagomba praise singing is deeply rooted in the community's oral heritage, serving as a medium for the praise singer's role as a reservoir of history, honoring achievements, and reinforcing social cohesion. The praise singer emerged as a cultural custodian, mediator, and performer, whose roles extend beyond entertainment to include preserving heritage and adapting traditional practices to contemporary contexts. The interplay between singing, naming, and the roles of praise singers underscored their collective contribution to the enduring relevance of Dagomba traditions. This study highlights the intricate connection between oral traditions and cultural identity and sheds light on their significance in preserving the Dagomba heritage amidst evolving societal dynamics.

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INTRODUCTION

In the heart of Dagomba society in Northern Ghana, the intricate interplay of oral traditions is a cornerstone of their cultural roots. Central to these traditions are the praise singer, praise singing, and praise naming, each of which carries profound socio-cultural significance. The Dagbon area comprises ten administrative districts in the present-day Ghana. These are the Tamale Metropolitan, Yendi, Savelugu, Nanton (formerly Savelugu-Nanton), Sagnarigu (formerly part of the Tamale Metropolitan, Tolon, Kumbungu (formerly Tolon-Kumbungu district), Gushegu, Karaga (formerly Gushegu-Karaga district) and Zabzugu districts. The king of the Dagbon Traditional Kingdom is the Ya-Na, whose court and administrative capital is at Yendi. The seat of the Ya-Na, or king of Dagbon (literally translated as King of Absolute Power), is a collection of cow skins. Thus, the Dagbon or its political system is often called the Yendi Skin.¹

¹ Z. A. Zablong, "The Lunyi (Drummers) of Dagbon: Tradition and Change," *Institute of African Studies. Research Review Supplement*, 21 (2010).

The Dagomba praise singer, commonly referred to as a *lunsi* (drummer), occupies a revered position in society as both a historian and a communicator. Through their eloquent praise singing, these individuals recount royal genealogies, celebrate achievements, and inspire communal pride. Complementing this is the practice of praise naming, which assigns unique appellations to individuals, often reflecting their deeds, character, lineage, victory in war over their opponents or warnings to their enemies. Praise names are more than personal identifiers; they are symbolic capsules of the values, history, and aspirations of the community, ensuring that the legacies of individuals resonate through generations. This tradition is not merely an act of identity creation but also a means of immortalizing individuals within the collective memory of the community. Praise singing, on the other hand, and as a performative art, is deeply woven into the fabric of Dagomba life. It is a medium through which emotions are stirred, virtues are extolled, and identities are affirmed. In its lyrical and rhythmic cadence, praise singing becomes a tool for recognizing leadership, inspiring individuals to aspire to greatness, and reinforcing communal bonds.

This paper, therefore, explores the interconnected roles of Dagomba praise singers, praise singing, and praise naming in shaping the socio-cultural fabric of Dagomba society. It examines the significance of praise singers as cultural intermediaries, the expressive and unifying power of praise singing, and the symbolic value of praise naming in establishing personal and communal identity. This study further seeks to examine the multifaceted roles of Dagomba praise singers while exploring the cultural and social impact of praise singing. The paper investigates the interconnections between praise singing, praise naming, and the roles of praise singers, highlighting their collective contribution to shaping the socio-cultural fabric of Dagomba society. Ultimately, the study aims to illuminate the cultural significance of these traditions in preserving Dagomba heritage, promoting communal values, perpetuating historical narratives, and adapting to modern influences while retaining their relevance in contemporary society. The questions that underline this study are;

1. What is the nature of praise singing among the Dagomba people?
2. What is the role of the praise singer within the cultural set-up of the Dagomba people?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Art of Dagomba Praise Singing

The cultural significance of praise singing among the Dagomba people is very much realised in their cultural practices. Praise singing holds a central role in the expression and preservation of cultural values in Dagbon society. It serves as a means of conveying historical narratives, reinforcing communal identity, and celebrating notable figures within the community. Praise singing, one of the manifestations of verbal art, did not start today. The history of its existence and practice dates back to the 15th century. In the adventure of Sir Francis Drake in June 1579, he encountered some people off the Pacific coast of North America, whose poetry and verbal art did not go unnoticed. As recorded by Francis Fletcher:

The inhabitants of the country revealed themselves by dispatching a man in a canoe to meet us with remarkable urgency. While still relatively close to the shore and far from our ship, he continuously addressed us as he rowed forward. Eventually, upon reaching a reasonable distance, he paused and commenced a formal, lengthy, and elaborate speech in his customary manner. During his delivery, he employed numerous gestures and movements, including waving his hands and turning his head and body in various directions. After concluding his speech, he exhibited great reverence and submission before returning to the shore.²

Hale explains that the modern term "griot" traces its origins to the French word *guriot*, which was first recorded by a missionary monk traveling along the Senegambian coast of West Africa in 1634–35.³ This provides the notion that praise singing existed in Africa in the fifteen century. However, since the thrust of Hale's paper is on the origin of the word 'Griot' itself, not praise singing, this study will not belabor the point except to argue that praise singing ought to have existed in order to have the praise

² Richard Bauman, "The Philology of the Vernacular," *Journal of Folklore Research* 45, no. 1 (2008): 29–36, <https://doi.org/10.2979/jfr.2008.45.1.29>.

³ Thomas A Hale, "From the Griot of Roots to the Roots of Griot: A New Look at the Origins of a Controversial African Term for Bard," 1997, 251.

singer (the griot). Amadou investigated the history and origin of praise singing among the Fulani and Hausas in Bamenda, Cameroon, and states that "... in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Hausas and Fulani migrated from Northern Nigeria to Northern Cameroon, bringing with them a number of praise singers."⁴ The implication here is that praise singing and praise singers existed in Nigeria and in Cameroon through the migration of the Fulani in the 19th century.

The history of Dagbani praise singing dates far back beyond the 19th-20th century to around the 15th century. Oral history, corroborated by research.⁵ Zabloug has it that Dagomba praise singing actually started during the time of *Naa Nyagsi* (1416-1432), the 6th king of the Dagbon kingdom.⁶ Mahama particularly write that the *Lunsi* (praise singers) of Dagbon.

... trace their lineage back to a royal ancestor, Prince Bizung, who was the son of Na Nyagsi. Prince Bizung became an orphan at a young age due to his mother's death, leading to neglect and frequent hunger. In his sorrow, he found solace in striking a broken calabash to draw attention and secure food. Over time, this practice developed into drumming. Bizung later became the Ya-Naa's favorite, as he developed the custom of praising his father through his drumbeats. As an adult, Bizung passed on this skill to his children, teaching them to play the drum as well.⁷

Mahama states that by the time Bizung passed away, the role of praise singers had evolved from a mere activity into a recognized profession and cultural heritage.⁸ Since then, praise singing and praise singers have been preserved within Dagbon culture as knowledge bearers, using songs and drumming to narrate the history of the Dagbon kingdom and the genealogy of its royal families.

Praise Naming

Praise names, also referred to as laudatory titles, are significant cultural phenomena across Africa, functioning as a means to celebrate, honor, and immortalize historical deeds, invoke ancestral spirits, or celebrate personal virtues or achievements, or the lineage of individuals or groups. These names are often used in ceremonial contexts, religious rituals, and oral traditions, acting as verbal affirmations of one's status, role, or ancestral pride. The concept of praise names emanates from the African belief that names are not simply vague terms; they serve as a socio-cultural expression and explanation of oneself as well as carry significant and symbolic meanings.⁹ In South Africa, Praise names, or *Izithakazelo*, are deeply embedded in the cultural practices of the Zulu people. These names, often recited during ceremonies and important gatherings, serve to honor the heroism, nobility, or achievements of an individual or family.¹⁰ The practice of bestowing praise names reinforces cultural continuity, as these names are passed down through generations, ensuring that a family's lineage and accomplishments are remembered. Praise names also serve to commemorate historical figures and maintain oral traditions, linking current generations to their ancestors.¹¹ For example, the Zulu king Shaka is often praised with the name *Shaka kaSenzangakhona*, which is elaborated upon with descriptions such as the "great elephant" or "the one who conquered with his spear."¹² These names hold rich poetic and symbolic meanings, reflecting courage, leadership, and spiritual authority. Reciting these names in traditional praise poems, known as *Izibongo*, plays a vital role in keeping oral histories alive and reinforcing community values.¹³ *Izibongo* encapsulates the moral and ethical ideals of the Zulu people, often offering praise alongside critiques, thus holding significant social and political power.¹⁴

⁴ Jabiru Muhammadou Amadou, "Origin And Evolution Of Praise Singers (Griots) In The Bamenda Grassfields A Historical Investigation," *International Journal of Scientific Engineering and Applied Science (IJSEAS)*, no. 4 (2018), 31.

⁵ I. Mahama, *History and Traditions of Dagbon* (Tamale: GILLBT, 2004).

⁶ Zabloug, "The Lunsi (Drummers) of Dagbon: Tradition and Change."

⁷ Mahama, *History and Traditions of Dagbon*, 17.

⁸ Mahama, *History and Traditions of Dagbon*.

⁹ N Yusuf, A Olatunji, and M Issah, "Yoruba Names as Reflection of People's Cultural Heritage," *Bringing Our Cultures Homes: Festschrift for Bade Ajayi At 70*, no. 186-196 (2014).

¹⁰ Liz Gunner, "Politics and Tradition: Zulu Oral Poetry and the Ambiguities of Representation," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 20, no. 2 (1994): 255-72; T. Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise-Poems*, ed. T. Cope (Clarendon Press, 1968).

¹¹ Russell H. Kaschula, *Orality and Literacy: The Poetics of African Oral Traditions* (National Inquiry Services Centre, 1999).

¹² Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise-Poems*.

¹³ Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Open Book Publishers, 2012).

¹⁴ Gunner, "Politics and Tradition: Zulu Oral Poetry and the Ambiguities of Representation."

In East Africa, praise names also feature prominently among various ethnic groups, such as the Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania. For the Maasai, praise names reflect personal valor, achievements in battle, or social roles within the community.¹⁵ *Moran* (warriors), for example, earn praise names after successful hunts or battles, symbolizing their bravery and strength. These names function as both markers of personal pride and social indicators of status, thereby reinforcing the communal hierarchy.¹⁶ In Ethiopia, the Amharic people employ a similar tradition of praise naming, especially for leaders. These names reflect wisdom, authority, and divine favor, often tied to religious and political leadership.¹⁷ Rulers and elders are bestowed with praise names that are incorporated into hymns and official titles, signifying their right to rule as ordained by divine or ancestral forces. The use of praise names in this context solidifies the spiritual and political legitimacy of Ethiopian leadership.¹⁸

Around West Africa, Nigeria's diverse cultural landscape includes rich praise-naming practices, especially among the Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo peoples. In Yoruba culture, praise names, known as *Oriki*, are verbal tributes that celebrate individuals, families, or even deities. *Oriki* are recited during life events such as weddings and funerals, and are used in daily interactions.¹⁹ Each Yoruba family possesses a set of *Oriki* linked to their lineage, recounting historical achievements and ancestral deeds. Knowing and reciting a person's *Oriki* is believed to invoke ancestral spirits, offering spiritual protection and guidance.²⁰ This practice keeps family histories alive, fostering continuity between past and present.

In Northern Nigeria, the Hausa people integrate praise names into Islamic traditions. Known as "*Lambarai*", these names extol virtues such as leadership and valor. Griots, or traditional storytellers, frequently incorporate "*Lambarai*" into songs to celebrate the achievements of warriors and historical figures.²¹ Praise naming in Hausa society often serves as both a recognition of individual merit and a reinforcement of social structures and hierarchies. Niyi Osundare, a poet deeply rooted in African verbal traditions, explains that:

Names act as gateways to the realm of experience, offering insight into concealed meanings within the complex intersections of time and place. Names narrate stories, either liberating or confining; they can also become self-fulfilling prophecies.²²

Extending this idea, praise names are expressions of visions or ideologies. As Osundare suggests, they hold the power to either uplift or subjugate, particularly when associated with chiefship, where authority and personal ambition often intersect. In the broader framework of chiefship's symbolic practices—such as insignia, architectural designs of palaces, regalia, murals, and sculptures—praise names bestowed upon or chosen by chiefs reveal a clash of ideologies. This resonates with V.N. Volosinov's assertion that signs, whether verbal or non-verbal, are arenas of ideological contestation.²³ These praise names highlight the fact that chiefship is not monolithic; even within a single culture or chieftom, differing ideologies coexist. Oha has succinctly observed that praise names among the Igbo society in Nigeria that praise names are crucial tools in Igbo society for individuals to express and communicate their beliefs, boast about their skills and achievements, and challenge or undermine the perspectives of others.²⁴ Specifically, in relation to chieftaincy, praise-naming functions as a pragmat-semiotic act that interacts with the construction and deconstruction of power. As such, it significantly influences the meanings associated with chieftaincy and the roles of the chief within the postcolonial democratic framework. Oha's statement has essentially captured the nuances of praise names among the Dagomba of the northern region of Ghana. To them, praise names are not only a means of enacting power, but a total embodiment of culture manifested in chieftaincy for the past as well as for the future. Among

¹⁵ Tepilit Ole Saitoti, *The Maasai: A Profile of a Tribe and Its Traditions* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).

¹⁶ Paul Spencer, *The Maasai of Matapato: A Study of Rituals of Rebellion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

¹⁷ Donald N. Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

¹⁸ Marvin L. Bender et al., *Language in Ethiopia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976).

¹⁹ Olatunde O. Olatunji, *Features of Yoruba Oral Poetry* (University Press Limited, 1984); Abimbola Wande, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus* (Oxford University Press Nigeria, 1976).

²⁰ Wande, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*.

²¹ Mustapha Salim, "Hausa Names and Their Islamic Influence," *African Languages and Literature Review* 12, no. 4 (1990): 58–72.

²² Niyi Osundare, *Midlife* (Heinemann Educational Books, 1993), 3.

²³ Valentin Nikolaevich Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (Harvard University Press, 1986).

²⁴ Obododimma Oha, "Praise Names and Power de/Constructions in Contemporary Igbo Chiefship," *Cultura, Lenguaje y Representación: Revista de Estudios Culturales de La Universitat Jaume I*, 2009, 101.

the Dagomba, there certainly exists a difference between praise names and personal names, because while praise names can be seen as verbal texts meant to eulogise the characters and the achievements of chiefs and kings in their various courts and palaces with the aim of receiving their patronages, personal names are additional names taken by or given to individuals either in backing up the traditional titles they have taken or in testifying to their competence in various vocations such as hunting, herbal healing, artistic productions. Fabulous and Mbagwu approach the concepts of "praise" and "names" from a unique perspective, asserting that while "praise" refers to "the expression of approval for one's achievements or qualities," a "name" serves as a gateway to understanding experiences and a guide to uncovering hidden meanings shaped by time and place.²⁵ Praise is described as a pragmatic and semiotic act that conveys obligations and highlights abilities and accomplishments. A name, on the other hand, is a reference that can denote anything, with the unnamed being equivalent to the unnoticed.²⁶ Oha further emphasizes that "praise-naming is a cognate pragmatic and semiotic act through which obligations and expressions of abilities and achievements are communicated."²⁷ More than just an identifier, a praise name operates as a social text that reflects relationships, power dynamics, and the reshaping of goals. UbahaKwe specifically highlight that Igbo praise names contain meaningful structures tied to philosophical and cognitive experiences.²⁸

The Praise Singer

Since the performer of verbal art cannot be isolated from the performance, and the singer cannot be isolated from the singing process, interest in the performer of verbal art (the praise singer) has also risen in the studies of oral literature. Oral narratives had earlier been considered from the point of view of cultural relevance, and from the functionalist and psychological perspectives as a collective unconsciousness of the group of people. For this reason, the performer of the text, his artistry and creativity, had often been neglected, and by that, the "total obscurity that attended the entire oral literature of Africa" had also been neglected.²⁹ Ganyi and Inyabri have bemoaned the long neglect of the performer in/and performance in the discourse of African Oral literature when he (the performer/oral artist) is the central element within the scheme of things of oral literature. They argue that;

The significance of performance and the performer in oral literature is best understood when one recognizes that oral literature exists primarily in the mind of the performer, who recounts stories to the same or different audiences on varying occasions. Without the act of performance and the dynamic interaction with the audience, oral literature cannot exist, as the performance context and its associated influences are integral. The performer's creativity, skill, adaptability, and insight are crucial tools that enhance our understanding of the meaning and impact of oral narratives. Performances become a form of artistic expression, where the performer strives to achieve aesthetic appeal and functional significance, serving as a representative of their society's values to the wider world. Thus, the performer, the performance context with its vivid imagery, and the expressive elements of oral delivery are essential components of oral literature, enabling the artist to reflect and reinterpret both individual and collective experiences.³⁰

Historically, and paying attention to the maker of the text_ the praise singer, Lord, Rothenberg, Sherwood, and, more recently, Muleka have all emphasised the relevance of the performer or the praise singer, the fact of which had earlier received little or no attention.³¹ Muleka emphasises the role of the praise singer or the oral artist when she observes that "performance only comes into existence when

²⁵ Ifeoma Loveth Fabulous and Ugochi R Mbagwu, "The Igbo Praise Names And Songs: A Brief Survey," *Nigerian Journal of Arts and Humanities (NJAH)* 1, no. 1 (2022), 36.

²⁶ John Algeo and Katie Algeo, "Onomastics as an Interdisciplinary Study," *Names* 48, no. 3-4 (2000): 265.

²⁷ Oha, "Praise Names and Power de/Constructions in Contemporary Igbo Chiefship," 103.

²⁸ Emefie Ikenga Metuh UbahaKwe, *Igbo Names: Their Structure and Their Meanings* (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1981).

²⁹ Friday M. Ganyi and Inyabri E. Inyabri, "The Aesthetics of Violence in Nigerian Literature," in *The Postcolonial and the Global*, ed. A. O. Adebayo (African Heritage Press, 2013), 45-60.

³⁰ Ganyi and Inyabri E. Inyabri, "The Aesthetics of Violence in Nigerian Literature."

³¹ Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960); Jerome Rothenberg, "Jerome Rothenberg and Dennis Tedlock: On Ethnopoetics, Two Early Definitions," *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1993; Kevin Sherwood, "Ethnopoetics." *Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry*, ed. Burl Kimmelman (Facts on File, 2005); Joseph Muleka, "Orality and the Performance of Gendered Roles in African Societies," *Journal of Black Studies* 45, no. 7 (2014): 695-717.

performed, but a performance does not begin until the performer comes onto the scene.”³² Most certainly, Muleka has hit the nail right on the head_ there cannot be performance, or even an audience, without the performer. Furthermore, Sherwood also draws attention to the text, but equally highlights the maker of the text, the performer, when he observes that:

Ethnopoetics scholarship focuses on the analysis, translation, or transcription of texts derived from living traditional poets, singers, or storytellers. It may also involve revisiting previously collected texts and retranslating them to highlight their aesthetic qualities and culturally significant aspects. Some of the most impactful works in Ethnopoetics have emerged from collaborations between academically trained scholars and traditional artists.³³

Attention is hereby drawn to the ‘living traditional poets, praise singers and storytellers as the makers of the oral text. Still on the relevance of the text maker, Lord, in his book, *The Singer of Tales*, observes that:

The oral poet embodies both tradition and individual creativity. Unlike a writer, the oral poet does not intentionally deviate from traditional phrases and narrative elements. Instead, the immediacy required during live performance compels the poet to rely on these established traditions.³⁴

Lord, in these words, equates the praise singer with ‘tradition’, and designates both with the same status in the scheme of things of folk art. In effect, the praise singer is as important as the culture or tradition itself. The praise singer is not only said to be the tradition, but he is the ‘author-God’, creating things on his own_ ‘he is the individual creator.’ Ethnopoetics performances, according to Lord, should be recorded for purposes of analysing their literariness, but that should be done with oral artists in focus. He proceeds to provide the essence of recording text versions of narrative performances when he writes that “...oral poetry represents a unique and distinct process where oral learning, composition, and transmission intertwine, appearing as interconnected aspects of a single cohesive process.”³⁵ No one will be able to describe the role of any praise singer in any society better than the praise singer himself. Belcher quotes the Malian and Kouaté, to have saying, talking about what the praise singers do:

We are the keepers of speech and the guardians of ancient secrets preserved for centuries. The art of eloquence holds no mysteries for us; without our efforts, the names of kings would fade into obscurity. We serve as the collective memory of humanity, reviving the deeds and accomplishments of rulers through spoken words, ensuring they are passed down to future generations.³⁶

Similarly, Salifu Asuro and Ibrahim James quote a Dagomba praise singer domiciled at Yendi, Issah Zøhi, to have said at an evening of epic poetry performance that,

We recount events that have already taken place because we cannot know what has not yet occurred. Our father instructed me to reveal what the world seeks to conceal. He advised that if something happens once, I should proclaim it ten times, and that poses no issue. However, I must never claim that something has happened if it has not.³⁷

Undoubtedly, the two scenarios above have_ Belcher and Salifu and M-minibo have summarized the socio-cultural significance of any praise singer, and have equally, therefore, paved the way to discuss the role of the Dagomba praise singer specifically.³⁸ In fact, Hale holds the view that for the key roles praise singers perform in society, simply calling them “praise-singer” becomes a “far too limited description.” He goes further to indicate that praise singers actually contribute to their own societies in so many other ways as:

They serve as historians, genealogists, advisors, spokespersons, diplomats, interpreters, musicians, composers, poets, educators, motivators, town criers, journalists, and organizers or

³² Muleka, “Orality and the Performance of Gendered Roles in African Societies,” 88.

³³ Sherwood, “*Ethnopoetics*.” *Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry*.

³⁴ Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 4.

³⁵ Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 5.

³⁶ Stephen Belcher, *Epic Traditions of Africa* (Indiana University Press, 1999), 8.

³⁷ Abdulai Salifu Asuro and Ibrahim James Gurindow M-minibo, “Convergence and Divergence Strategies in Greetings and Leave Taking: A View from the Dagba. Kingdom in Ghana,” *International Journal of Linguistics* 6, no. 4 (2014): 224.

³⁸ Belcher, *Epic Traditions of Africa*, 8; Asuro and M-minibo, “Convergence and Divergence Strategies in Greetings and Leave Taking: A View from the Dagba. Kingdom in Ghana,” 165.

participants in various ceremonies such as naming rites, initiations, weddings, and the installation of chiefs, among others.³⁹

The fact that praise singers can be historians is clearly demonstrated by Groenewald. The pair analyzed *Hananwa*, praise songs in the Northern Province of South Africa, and concluded that the praise song “gives a comprehensive account of the 1894 siege of Blouberg.”⁴⁰ They contend that the song narrates the exact historical information, as it happened and as any historian would have given their account. They further observe that the praise song:

Illustrates the historical expertise of the oral poet. The chronological progression of the war events recounted in the poem is coherent and aligns with other orally transmitted accounts. By integrating the various cross-references among the proxemic markers, the audience can piece together a vivid depiction of the events of 1894.⁴¹

It has been noticed that all that praise singers of any kind do constitutes a form of oral composition which deals with invocation, adoration or condemnation of the objects of praise. Generally speaking, however, the role of praise poetry, through the praise poet, has been succinctly summarized by Groenewald. He observes that:

The purpose of praise poetry is largely shaped by the context and circumstances of its performance. Clan poetry at weddings and praises used in divination are primarily mediatory, aiming to establish a connection with ancestors. On the other hand, poetry that exalts chiefs, kings, or political figures can serve as a traditional form of propaganda or offer sharp critiques. Fundamentally, praise poetry seeks to highlight the individuality of a person, distinguishing them from others and reinforcing their dignified character and status. Regardless of the setting, audiences find it highly engaging, making the roles of entertainment and education—especially in familiarizing listeners with the genre's conventions—significant and not to be overlooked.⁴²

The Nexus Between Singing, Naming, and Cultural Roles

The connection between singing, naming, and cultural roles in Dagomba society is intricate and profound. Naming ceremonies are more than the bestowal of identity; they are a cultural performance where the lumsi play a pivotal role. In Dagomba culture, naming ceremonies mark the child's formal introduction into the community. Praise singing at these events connects the newborn to their lineage and honors their ancestors. Through their songs, lumsi recount the family's achievements, ensuring the child's identity is firmly rooted in their heritage.⁴³ For example, if a child is named after a revered ancestor or a community hero, the praise singer's song might recount the deeds of that ancestor, inspiring family and community to uphold their legacy. This establishes a continuum between past, present, and future. Praise singing during naming ceremonies reinforces the child's place within the social hierarchy. The Lumsi emphasize the child's potential contributions to the community, linking them to the virtues of courage, wisdom, and generosity. The lyrical content of the lumsi's songs during naming ceremonies educates the audience on the significance of names, lineage, and cultural values. According to Finnegan, oral traditions like praise singing serve as informal educational systems, passing down knowledge and values to the next generation.⁴⁴

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Performance Theory

The idea of performance as the “doing” of folklore gained prominence in the early 1970s. In the introduction to *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore*,⁴⁵ a collection of essays credited with shaping the framework for the performance approach to folklore, performance is emphasized as an “organizing

³⁹ Hale, “From the Griot of Roots to the Roots of Griot: A New Look at the Origins of a Controversial African Term for Bard,” 251.

⁴⁰ H C Groenewald, “I Control the Idioms: Creativity in Ndebele Praise Poetry,” *Oral Tradition* 16, no. 1 (2001): 29–57.

⁴¹ Groenewald, “I Control the Idioms: Creativity in Ndebele Praise Poetry,” 33.

⁴² Groenewald, “I Control the Idioms: Creativity in Ndebele Praise Poetry.”

⁴³ Samuel Gyasi Obeng, *African Anthroponymy: An Ethnopraxmatic and Morphophonological Study of Personal Names in Akan and Some African Societies*, vol. 8 (Lincom Europa, 2001), 33.

⁴⁴ Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa*.

⁴⁵ Américo Paredes and Richard Bauman, *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1972).

principle.”⁴⁶ The scholars contributing to this shift (notably Dan Ben-Amos, Roger D. Abrahams, Richard Bauman, Dell Hymes, Dennis Tedlock) were advocating for a fundamental rethinking of the field, with performance—seen as a form of situated communicative practice—serving as the central focus.

Jakobson describes performance as a form of expression in oral art, heavily reliant on poetic language, with the “body” serving as the medium that shapes and defines communication.⁴⁷ Bauman defines performance as a “mode of verbal communication” where the performer takes responsibility for their interaction with the audience, demonstrating their communicative competence.⁴⁸ Bauman's concept of competence refers to the knowledge and skill to communicate in a socially and culturally acceptable manner, ensuring that the performer does not offend the audience. Scheub provides perhaps the most relevant interpretation of performance, particularly for this study on Dagomba praise singing. He sees performance as an “underlying process of balancing, loosening, bending, twisting, reconfiguring, and transforming the eruptive and disruptive energy and mood” surrounding the focused attention of the audience.⁴⁹

Unlike written narratives, narrative performances occur in real time and space, shared between the performer and the audience, fostering interaction, dialogue, and the exchange of experiences “here and now.” This reflects culture in its immediate emergence.⁵⁰ Kapferer and Olajubu identify three key elements that shape the performance of an oral poem.⁵¹ Olajubu refers to these elements as “the situation, the audience, and the text,” while Kapferer frames them as “text, action, and experience.”⁵²

Regardless of perspective, both approaches underscore the idea that performance creates a unity between text and action, ultimately resulting in the experience or repertoire of the praise singer. Geertz suggests that actions stemming from experiences can be represented in various forms, such as tales, parties, ceramics, rites, dramas, images, memories, ethnographies, and allegorical machines.⁵³ For Kapferer, the performance of praise singing involves three interconnected components, albeit framed differently.⁵⁴

First, there should be the text, which is a collection of the appellations the griots chants out, or “pours out” as it were, on the individual to whom the praise is directed. Second, there should be action. The griot, on some special occasion, must be seen in action—hands pointing to the one being praised, voice on loud, with or without the drum in his armpit, head tilted towards one direction, with one hand slapped on one side of the cheeks, moving to and fro. The Dagomba praise singer does not only churn out words during the performance, he accompanies it with volume, pitch, tempo, intensity, repetition, emphasis, length, dynamics, silence, timbre, onomatopoeia, and so on, to convey his message to his audience. Then the experience is the sum total of the repertoire of history that the bard has in his reservoir of knowledge. Each gate, king, sub-chief, clan, town, and royal lineage has its praise songs exclusive to them alone, and the griot has to master all that. All these constitute performance in Dagbani praise singing.

Olajubu has observed, regarding praise singing, that in the process of Yoruba oral poetry (praise singing).⁵⁵ The oral artist enhances their verbal expression with dramatic actions, gestures, vocal variations, facial expressions, strategic pauses, rhythmic elements, and sensitivity to the audience's reactions. These elements are essential to the composition process. The non-verbal actions, along with the artist's costume and the mood present during the performance, contribute to the overall meaning of the oral poem. As a result, performing a Yoruba oral poem goes beyond being simply a verbal art form.

⁴⁶ Richard Bauman, “Introduction,” in *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore*, ed. Américo Paredes and Richard Bauman (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1972), v.

⁴⁷ Roman Jakobson, “Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics,” *Style in Language* 350, no. 377 (1960): 570–79.

⁴⁸ Richard Bauman, “Verbal Art as Performance 1,” *American Anthropologist* 77, no. 2 (1975): 290–311.

⁴⁹ Harold Scheub, *African Oral Narratives, Proverbs, Riddles, Poetry, and Song* (G. K. Hall, 1977).

⁵⁰ Bauman, “Verbal Art as Performance 1,” 1975.

⁵¹ Bruce Kapferer, “Performance and the Structuring of Meaning and Experience,” *The Anthropology of Experience*, 1986, 188–203. Oludare Olajubu, “Yoruba Oral Poetry: Composition and Performance,” *Oral Poetry in Nigeria*, 1981, 71–85.

⁵² Olajubu, “Yoruba Oral Poetry: Composition and Performance.”

⁵³ Clifford. Geertz, *A Interpretação Das Culturas* (LTC, 2008).

⁵⁴ Kapferer, “Performance and the Structuring of Meaning and Experience.”

⁵⁵ Olajubu, “Yoruba Oral Poetry: Composition and Performance,” 82.

Performance should be understood within the context of communication and cultural practice, as each performance and ethnographic piece is tied to a specific cultural setting, with its meaning only being fully comprehended in that context. Lévi-Strauss suggests that the ability to communicate through symbols and language is fundamental to performance. According to him, performances have their own codes, enabling knowledge to be produced and reflected upon through culture, while engaging participants in a "multi-sensory" experience.⁵⁶ In relation to theories of performance, Sullivan argues that the art of praise-singing is grounded in three common elements:

- 1) a "recognized procedure" that structures the performance,
- 2) a collective representation, and
- 3) a shared "consciousness" that distinguishes performance from everyday actions.⁵⁷

Zumthor, however, emphasizes the content and transmission (receptive habits) of performance. He proposes that for any verbal art (such as praise singing), there are four key aspects: i. The performer, ii. The performance takes place within both a cultural and situational context, iii. Performance is intentional conduct assumed by the performer, publicly and functionally, as a responsibility, and it can be repeated without being monotonous, which Schechner refers to as "restored behavior"),⁵⁸ iv. Performance has the ability to alter knowledge.⁵⁹ One dimension that Zumthor adds is that the ultimate result of the execution of a verbal art (praise singing) is that there should be acquisition of knowledge (what I call cultural knowledge).⁶⁰ The participants will listen to praise singing for entertainment, but as they derive pleasure, they also get to know where such and such a king, royal gate and lineage emanated.

Perhaps, one would argue that, by far, Bauman's classic definition is the most all-embracing. He views performance as a form of verbal communication that involves the performer taking responsibility for their interaction with the audience by demonstrating their communicative competence.⁶¹ This competence is rooted in the performer's knowledge and ability to speak in a socially acceptable manner. From the audience's perspective, the performer's expressive actions are assessed based on their effectiveness. The greater the performer's skill, the more intense the experience, as the audience enjoys the intrinsic qualities of the performance. Bauman concludes that performance is a unique form of interaction where the performer takes responsibility for demonstrating their communicative competence.⁶² In this context, performance as communication should be distinguished from other speech acts due to its expressive or "poetic" function, as noted by Jakobson.⁶³ Hartman further views performance as a "contextualized human experience," where performative acts can be identified by various characteristics such as a display (showing the performers), the responsibility to demonstrate competence, evaluation of participants, emphasizing experience, and keying (signals that focus and direct the interpretation of the event).⁶⁴ From this perspective, Langdon suggests that performance is a universal activity, which raises concerns regarding its translation and preservation.⁶⁵

⁵⁶ C. Lévi-Strauss, "Antropologia Estrutural [Structural Anthropology] (C. S. Katz & E. Pires, Trans.)," *Tempo Brasileiro*. (Brazil: Rio de Janeiro, 1967).

⁵⁷ Lawrence E Sullivan, "Sound and Senses: Toward a Hermeneutics of Performance," *History of Religions* 26, no. 1 (1986): 5.

⁵⁸ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (Routledge, 2003).

⁵⁹ Paul Zumthor, *Performance, Recepção, Leitura* (Ubu Editora LTDA-ME, 2018).

⁶⁰ Zumthor, *Performance, Recepção, Leitura*.

⁶¹ Bauman, "Verbal Art as Performance 1," 1975.

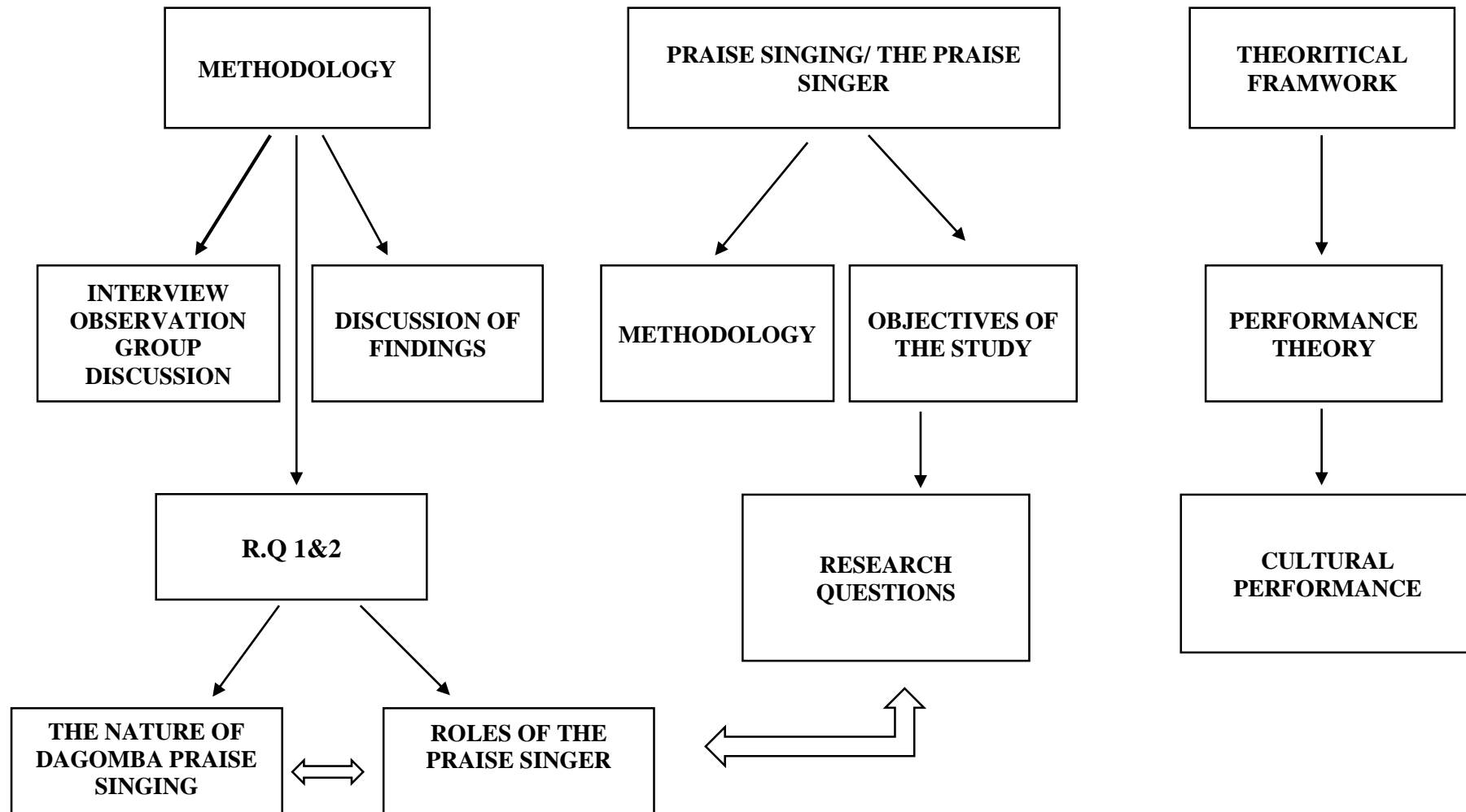
⁶² Richard Bauman, "Verbal Art as Performance 1," *American Anthropologist* 77, no. 2 (1975): 290–311.

⁶³ Roman Jakobson, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," in *On Translation* (New York: Harvard University Press, 1975), 232–39.

⁶⁴ Luciana Hartmann, "Performance and Experience in Oral Narratives on the Border Areas between Argentina, Brazil e Uruguay," *Horizontes Antropológicos* 2, no. SE (2006): 0.

⁶⁵ Ester Jean Langdon, "A Fixação Da Narrativa: Do Mito Para a Poética de Literatura Oral," *Horizontes Antropológicos* 5, no. 12 (1999): 13–36.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Research Question One

What is the nature of praise singing among the Dagomba People?

The Nature of Dagbani Praise Singing

Dagomba praise singing involves a process of learning through imitation and absorption by attentive listening, where the young bard, the student, undergoes tutelage from his master, the experienced praise singer. There is processing and storing of information in the memory by the young bard. A verbatim reproduction of the “stored” information in the nature of the praise names occurs during performance, and this is with little or no modification. In the Dagomba praise singing, the praise singers make a difference between the “core” information and the embellishments. The embellishments being the manner of presenting the core information, the going around something before finally hitting at it, the pitch and intonation of the voice, the in-depth knowledge of, for instance, the number of children a king once had and their royal praise names, or even the number of praise names a king himself had, because depending on the amount of information a master has, the young bard will have same information unless he (the young bard) goes to look for more from another master later after graduation. All these embellishments will differ from one praise singer to another, albeit the core information, being the praise names, is the same. Praise singing among the Dagomba is performed at various social, religious, and communal events, including royal ceremonies, religious festivals, weddings, and funerals. These events are seen as opportunities for the Dagomba people to honor their ancestors and celebrate the achievements of notable community members. For instance, during funerals, praise singers recount the life of the deceased and the virtues of their lineage. At weddings, they may sing praises for the bride’s and groom’s families, thus reinforcing family bonds.⁶⁶ Each performance is carefully timed, often aligning with significant stages in life or moments of communal reflection, which emphasizes the role of praise singing in preserving and transmitting cultural values.

Praise singing among the Dagomba can be categorized into several types, each specific to a different context. Yakubu identifies royal praise songs, which are specifically performed in the presence of chiefs and other dignitaries.⁶⁷ These songs are often performed at palace events and highlight the lineage and accomplishments of the chief. Another type is *Kuli kumsibu* (announcing the deceased funeral), which is performed at funerals, particularly for prominent members of the community. This type of praise singing is more somber, aiming to honor the deceased and provide a sense of closure for the family. Additionally, there are celebratory praise songs performed at weddings and other joyful events, where singers laud the accomplishments and virtues of the families involved.⁶⁸ Each type of praise singing reflects the Dagomba’s rich oral tradition, with lyrics carefully chosen to suit the occasion. The content often reflects historical narratives and socio-cultural values, with each performance tailored to resonate with the occasion’s unique significance.⁶⁹

Becoming a praise singer requires an extensive period of initiation and training. This journey begins with living alongside a master for an extended duration to learn the art of singing and mastering the traditional musical instruments associated with praise singing. The relationship is akin to that of a master and servant, where the trainee is expected to demonstrate unwavering loyalty, obedience, and respect toward the master. These values must be upheld even after completing the training. Upon graduation, the trainee attains the status of a master praise singer themselves.⁷⁰

However, in-depth interviews with the bards and young singers revealed that the nature of Dagbani praise singing is completely different from the general view of praise singing. Lord, for instance, argues that:

It can be accurately stated that the singer adopts the compositional techniques of their master or masters rather than memorizing specific songs. There is no structured curriculum or deliberate

⁶⁶ M. Issahaku, “Praise Names and Their Relevance in Dagomba Culture,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 22, no. 4 (2010): 215–30.

⁶⁷ S. Yakubu, “Ethno-Poetics of Dagomba Praise Songs,” *Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2008, Pp. 45–63. 18, no. 1 (2008): 45–63.

⁶⁸ Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa*.

⁶⁹ Obeng, *African Anthroponymy: An Ethnopragmatic and Morphophonological Study of Personal Names in Akan and Some African Societies*.

⁷⁰ Salim Amaduo, “Ethno-Poetics of Dagomba Praise Songs,” *Journal of African Studies* 18, no. 1 (2018): 45–63.

effort to learn particular formulas or sets of formulas. Instead, the process involves imitation, assimilation through attentive listening, and extensive individual practice.⁷¹

In so many ways, the Dagomba praise singing, except for the last line of being *a process of imitation and assimilation through listening*, differs considerably from the view of Lord.⁷² The Dagbani praise singing had a definite program of study starting from *Dakoli nye bia ba* (the child is the son of the bachelor), to *Naa Nyagsi* (a recount of how the first king of *Dagbon* fought and conquered the *Tindana* priest who inhabited the land before he arrived), to *N yaanima* (a recount of the bards grandfathers who bequeathed the singing to him), to *Ziblim ni o nyeli Andani* (Ziblim, a king, and his younger brother Andani, another king), and to *Nam*, which is the last program.

The graduation point in the Dagomba praise singing is when the young bard completes his lessons on *Nam*, which consists of a recount of all the over forty past kings of *Dagbon*, and not just; also about how they ascended the skin, what they did and what happened in the reign, and finally about the number of children they had. According to one of the bards who was interviewed, the stage or program before the *Nam* is *Ziblim ni o nyeli Andani* (Ziblim and his brother Andani). When this stage is mastered very well, the young bard can perform all public praise singing except the dust to dawn court praise singing, which takes place at the chief palace twice every year.

Lord may have arrived at that wrong conclusion because of the lack of diversity and universality in his work. Lord relied solely on Yugoslavian epics, yet his conclusions appear all-embracing of every oral performance, and perhaps in every culture. Perhaps, an analysis of one or two unwritten traditions of different cultures beyond Yugoslavia may have given a broader and different conclusion. Goody, in his *The Power of Written Tradition*, as well as Bauman, have expressed a similar concern.⁷³ Goody, in particular, criticizes both Lord and Parry for drawing conclusions on what should have been purely oral culture using Yugoslavian epics and Homer's work, respectively, which were purely written, not oral. He argues:

Both Homeric epics and Yugoslav epics, like many other epics, originate from early literate societies, even though they are delivered orally. The oral performances within literate societies are undeniably shaped, to varying extents, by the influence of writing and should not be equated with the creations of entirely oral cultures.⁷⁴

Bauman, writing generally about verbal art performance, of which praise singing is a subcategory, opines that "there can be no universal checklist of keys to performance," indicating that 'performance' across cultures will differ from each other.⁷⁵ There may be some similarities, but generally the form and nature of one verbal art cannot, should not, be used as a yardstick for all. He, therefore, suggests that "the specific inventories of communicative means that may serve as keys to performance in a given community are to be discovered ethnographically, not assumed a priori."⁷⁶

Again, the general notion that young bards are 'not very clear about the details of how he learned his art', and that his only motivation is when he is "interested in the old songs, had a passion for them, listened to singers, and then, 'work, work, work' and little by little he learned to sing', has been found to be contrary to the Dagbani praise singing.⁷⁷

This study found that bards in the *Dagomba* tradition are part of a royal lineage. No one outside that lineage can be called a praise singer. According to Oppong, Locke, and Mahama, becoming a praise singer requires having at least one parent—either the father or the mother—descended from a lineage of praise singers.⁷⁸ This was corroborated by most of the respondents interviewed, all of whom confirmed that either their mother or father belonged to the praise singers' lineage. Consequently, membership in

⁷¹ Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 24.

⁷² Lord, *The Singer of Tales*.

⁷³ Richard Bauman, "Disciplinaryity, Reflexivity, and Power in Verbal Art as Performance: A Response," *Journal of American Folklore* 115, no. 455 (2002): 92–98.

⁷⁴ Jack Goody, *The European Family: An Historico-Anthropological Essay* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 26.

⁷⁵ Richard Bauman, "Performance," in *A Companion to Folklore* (Wiley, 2012), 94–118, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118379936.ch5>.

⁷⁶ Bauman, "Performance," 101.

⁷⁷ Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 24.

⁷⁸ C. Oppong, *Growing up in Dagbon* (Accra: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1973); David Locke, *Drum Damba: Talking Drum Lessons* (White Cliffs Media, 1990); Mahama, *History and Traditions of Dagbon*.

this group is strictly hereditary. Locke describes this structure as a caste society, which the Web Dictionary defines as a form of social stratification characterized by hereditary transmission of lifestyle, occupation, ritual status, and social interactions, often marked by rules of endogamy and distinctions of purity and pollution.⁷⁹ This caste status is determined by birth, and according to the informants, all praise singers trace their ancestry to Bizung, regarded as the forebear of all praise singers in Dagbon. This claim is also supported by Opong, Locke, Mahama, and Zabloug.⁸⁰

The group of praise singers includes both men and women. However, in Dagbon tradition, while men play drums, women focus on singing praises. Interviews with respondents and observations at various events confirmed that women actively participate as praise singers but do not drum. When asked why women are not allowed to drum in the Dagbon kingdom, the bards explained that "in Dagbon, it is forbidden for a woman to drum."



Figure 2: A Chief Praise Singer and his Students

Source: <http://alma.matrix.msu.edu/the-language-of-african-music-dagbanli>

Research Question Two

What is the role of the praise singer within the cultural set-up of the Dagomba People?

Reservoir of Dagbon Oral History

One of the roles of the praise singer among the Dagomba people is that they are the source through which the people connect past cultural knowledge to the present. The human knowledge of the present and of himself is greatly influenced by history. Okihiro quotes Marc Bloch as having argued that 'even if history were indifferent to political man/woman and were unable to promote social change, it would be justified by its necessity for the full development of human beings.'⁸¹ History, therefore, is a great tool for human development.

In the Dagomba royalty and tradition, cultural and genealogical knowledge is of great essence to the would-be kings or the chiefs and kings who are already on the skin. In fact, one of the criteria for selecting who qualifies to be enskinned is the person's closeness to the royalty-his lineage. People have been trained and endowed with such a history of the royalty of Dagbon. They are the praise singers. Chiefs and kings would rely on them for such information. A king would listen with pride and dignity when his story, what this study will coin as 'his-tory (history) is being told to him. The praise singers are known for their knowledge of Dagbon history, and this is expressed in their music and drums. All the people interviewed corroborated this assertion. The bards boasted that when it comes to the history of Dagbon,

⁷⁹ Locke, *Drum Damba: Talking Drum Lessons*.

⁸⁰ Opong, *Growing up in Dagbon*; Locke, *Drum Damba: Talking Drum Lessons*; Zabloug, "The Lunsi (Drummers) of Dagbon: Tradition and Change." Mahama, *History and Traditions of Dagbon*.

⁸¹ Gary Y Okihiro, "Oral History and the Writing of Ethnic History: A Reconnaissance into Method and Theory," *The Oral History Review* 9, no. 1 (1981): 29.

they are more knowledgeable than other classes of historians. Of this wealth of knowledge the praise singers have, the study found that some of them serve as respected advisors to chiefs, kings and regents.

This study will, however, make a distinction that the knowledge of the praise singers goes as far as royalty and the kingship (what would be termed as *Nam* in Dagbani) are concerned. The repertoire of their knowledge of the history of Dagbon should be differentiated from the knowledge of an academic historian, whose knowledge may include all aspects of the culture. There were times when the participants were asked some questions, and they admitted that the questions were not within the repertoire of their praise singing, and directed the researchers to contact the octogenarians who lived around that time. For instance, in the following interview. Mba Yiwagnaa confirmed this assertion. In conversation with an elderly praise singer(written as PS) in Nyankpala.⁸²

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

PS: Announcing your presence to the chief, and telling what royal lineage you come from

Researcher: How do you know my lineage upon seeing me?

PS: Sometimes we just need to know which town or village you come from

Researcher: Do you know everything about each town and village?

PS: Everything about Nam and royalty in a town or village, but not everything that is not related to Nam....for such things, you have to consult the elders of the town.

Chernoff also attests to this fact, that the praise singers are really knowledgeable in the knowledge they produce, and that the theory that Africans do not produce knowledge is thus flawed.⁸³ Metinhouse argues, contrary to the findings, that “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.”⁸⁴ For Metinhouse, Africans are bereft of history and cultural knowledge, which only Europeans have. In a sharp contrast to Metinhouse’s view, this study, corroborated by Hyun, posits that Africans and for that matter, the drummers of Dagbon, also produce vast knowledge that enables communities and societies to develop and advance themselves in whatever environment they find themselves.⁸⁵

Praise singers, known as *lunsi* among the Dagomba people, hold a pivotal role as the chief communicators at royal courts. Among all the drummers in Dagbon, they are regarded as the most significant due to their unique position and responsibilities. This elevated status stems not only from their musical talent but also from their deep understanding of Dagbon's history, customs, and social structure. *Lunsi* serves as the primary channel for conveying important messages and ensuring that the oral traditions of the community remain vibrant and accessible.

At the chief’s palace, the praise singers fulfill a critical role as intermediaries between the chief and the public. As noted by Yiwagnaa in a transcribed interview, one of their key responsibilities is to announce the presence of visitors to the chief. This announcement is not merely a formality but a nuanced introduction that conveys the visitor’s royal lineage, social standing, and purpose for visiting. This tradition underscores the *lunsi*’s role in maintaining the hierarchical structure of the Dagomba community, where lineage and social connections are central to individual identity and societal organisation.

Beyond their palace duties, praise singers extend their communication functions to social gatherings such as *durbars*, funerals, and festivals. These events provide a platform for the *lunsi* to act as social mediators and facilitators of interaction. By playing the drum and singing praises, they publicly acknowledge and celebrate the presence of attendees, effectively ‘introducing’ individuals to the gathering. This introduction serves to situate people within the larger social context, emphasizing their roles, achievements, or connections to the community. In this way, praise singers enhance the collective sense of belonging and reinforce social cohesion.

⁸² Interview was recorded and transcribed.

⁸³ John M Chernoff, “The Rhythmic Medium in African Music,” *New Literary History* 22, no. 4 (1991): 1093–1102.

⁸⁴ G P Metinhouse, “Methodological Issues in the Study of ‘traditional Techniques’ and Know-How,” *Endogenous Knowledge: Research Trails*, 1997, 43.

⁸⁵ Eunsook Hyun, “Transdisciplinary Higher Education Curriculum: A Complicated Cultural Artifact,” *Research in Higher Education Journal* 11 (2011): 1.

The wealth of knowledge that praise singers possess is a fundamental reason for their central role in communication at the chief's palace and beyond. They are custodians of historical narratives, genealogies, and cultural values, which they seamlessly incorporate into their performances. This reservoir of knowledge enables them to craft messages that resonate with both the chief and the community, ensuring that their communication is both meaningful and impactful. Moreover, their ability to recall and narrate the royal lineage of individuals visiting the palace further highlights their expertise in preserving and managing the oral history of Dagbon.

At social events, this knowledge extends to publicizing notable figures present at the function. By celebrating the accomplishments and heritage of attendees, praise singers elevate the significance of the occasion while fostering a sense of pride and respect within the community. Their role as third-party communicators mirrors the function of an intermediary who bridges gaps between strangers, fostering understanding and connection through shared cultural narratives.

In essence, the role of praise singers as communicators transcends mere performance. They are cultural diplomats, mediators, and educators whose contributions sustain the intricate social fabric of the Dagomba people. Their presence at the royal courts and social events not only enriches these occasions but also serves as a living testament to the enduring power of oral traditions in preserving identity and fostering community ties.



*Figure 3: Praise Singers at Social Events_ Funerals (at Tolon) and Naming Ceremonies(Nyankpala)
Source: Field study*

Celebrating People and Their Achievements

As their name suggests, praise singers are dedicated to celebrating individuals and their accomplishments through the medium of praise songs and praise names. This practice is not merely a form of entertainment but a profound cultural expression rooted in the Dagomba oral tradition. Praise singers, or *lunsi*, are entrusted with the task of immortalizing achievements and recognizing contributions in a way that reinforces social values and identity. Their role goes beyond singing; it is a symbolic act of acknowledgment that connects individuals to their history and community.

A central aspect of their work is the bestowal of praise names on public figures, a practice deeply embedded in Dagbon's cultural ethos. As the researchers observe, praise singers draw from their extensive repertoire of cultural and historical knowledge to craft and assign these names. These names are not arbitrary; they are carefully chosen to reflect the individual's personality, lineage, or notable deeds. Through this, praise singers place individuals categorically within the social hierarchy, affirming their status and role in society.

The depth of understanding required for this role cannot be overstated. Praise singers immerse themselves in the study of Dagbon culture, history, and genealogy to a level that surpasses the ordinary

knowledge of most community members. This mastery enables them to tell "the story" of an individual's life, weaving it into the larger tapestry of Dagbon's collective heritage. As Salifu aptly observes, when one says *luɔa ni salim ma*, it evokes layers of meaning: "A drummer will eulogize me," "A drummer will sing for me," or "A drummer will tell my story." This "story" begins with one's ancestors, is carried forward by the individual, and is passed down to future generations.⁸⁶ In this way, the *lunsi* ensure that the achievements and values of the individual transcend time, becoming an enduring legacy.⁸⁷

Praise singers are also the most visible and celebrated among the class of Dagomba drummers, representing approximately ninety percent of this artistic tradition. Their popularity is tied to their ability to connect deeply with the community through their art. During field observations, it was noted that praise singing is a prominent feature at social gatherings such as funerals, weddings, the enskinment ceremonies of chiefs, and even market days. These events serve as public stages where the praise singers demonstrate their craft, creating a sense of communal pride and continuity. At funerals, especially those of titleholders, the role of praise singers is particularly poignant. They do not merely sing; they narrate the life and legacy of the deceased, celebrating their contributions to society while connecting the living to their ancestral lineage. This practice underscores the cultural significance of praise singing as a tool for preserving and transmitting the values and history of the Dagomba people.

Moreover, at weddings and enskinment ceremonies, praise singers elevate the celebratory atmosphere by highlighting the virtues and accomplishments of the individuals involved. Their art transforms these occasions into moments of collective recognition and joy, where personal achievements are celebrated as a shared triumph of the community. Even at marketplaces, the praise singers' performances serve to reinforce social bonds, reminding people of their interconnectedness through shared stories and heritage.

Discussion Summary

Dagomba praise singers, often referred to as griots, are far more than mere entertainers. They are cultural custodians, historians, genealogists, and communicators whose knowledge preserves the history and traditions of the Dagomba people. Their singing serves as a medium for recounting genealogies, celebrating achievements, and reinforcing the values and norms of society. Naming, as a related practice, is deeply tied to identity and heritage, with praise singers playing a crucial role in bestowing names that encapsulate lineage, achievements, and personal attributes. The roles of praise singers extend to various social and political spheres, including their function as advisors, diplomats, and tradition bearers during ceremonies such as naming rites, royal installations, and festivals. These activities highlight their influence in preserving continuity and transmitting cultural knowledge across generations. Furthermore, through their songs and names, praise singers provide a powerful commentary on the community's social structure, values, and historical trajectory. In essence, the role of praise singers in celebrating individuals and their achievements is both dynamic and multifaceted. Through their songs and praise names, they honor the individual, connect the past to the present, and inspire future generations to uphold the values of the Dagomba people. Their work is a powerful reminder of the importance of storytelling and recognition in sustaining cultural identity and fostering a sense of belonging.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Documentation and Archiving

Stakeholders, including cultural institutions, researchers, and local authorities, should prioritize the systematic documentation and archiving of Dagomba praise singing and naming practices through audio, video, and written records. This will help preserve the oral heritage for future generations.

Curriculum Integration

The Ministry of Education and curriculum developers should incorporate local oral traditions, including praise singing and naming, into the teaching of literature, history, and civic education in schools across the region. This would help students connect more deeply with their heritage.

⁸⁶ Abdulai Salifu, "Names That Prick: Royal Praise Names in Dagbon, Northern Ghana" (Indiana University, 2008).

⁸⁷ Salifu, "Names That Prick: Royal Praise Names in Dagbon, Northern Ghana," 56.

Community Governance and Conflict Resolution

Given their respective social status and roles as moral voices, praise singers should be intentionally engaged in community governance, especially in promoting peace, resolving conflicts, and conveying community values in public spaces.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the roles and cultural significance of Dagomba praise singers, their singing, and the practice of naming, highlighting their indispensable place in the socio-cultural fabric of Dagbon. It has been argued that praise singing and naming are not merely artistic expressions but vital elements of Dagomba heritage that shape historical narratives, sustain cultural identity, and reinforce social cohesion. The study emphasizes that the roles of Dagomba praise singers, singing, and naming practices are intertwined, reflecting a profound cultural significance. Praise singing is not only a medium of celebration but also a mechanism for immortalizing individual and collective identities while naming serves as a bridge connecting people to their ancestry and cultural legacy. Together, these practices underscore the dynamic interplay between art, history, and cultural identity in Dagbon, making the praise singers vital to the preservation and evolution of Dagomba heritage.

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