

Chapter I–13: *How We Make Our Drums and Guggɔɔs*

Today I am going to talk about how we make our drums, and the people who cut down the trees and make the drums, and what happens to them. And I will join it to talk about how we sew the drums and how we make our drumsticks. And if there is time, I will talk about how we sew our guggɔɔs. And all this, there is a lot of hard work inside it.

There are many differences in drumming, and some of them are coming from the drums themselves. Apart from Dagbamba, there are other people who make this luɔa, but I can say that our Dagbamba drums are the best drums. As the Ashantis are also sewing drums like our type, we will never use the Ashanti drums as our drums unless we can't get our own to buy. The Ashanti drums are not heavy, and it's from the wood. It is a very light white wood, and it doesn't last. The moment you drop an Ashanti drum and it bounces on the ground, it will crack. But our drums will last. Even to sell an Ashanti drum is very difficult in Dagbon here. People don't want it. Even if you get a very good skin for an Ashanti drum, it will not sound well. You will make everything for the drum — the skins, the strings, and everything — and no one will buy it. Even if you sell it, the price will not reach that of a Dagbamba drum. Some of the Ashantis even come here to buy our drums. People even come to Tamale here from Accra and Ada and other towns on the coast to buy our drums. And so our Dagbamba drums are the best. If not that, would somebody travel from Accra to Tamale to buy a drum? And I myself am a witness because I've seen it myself: in the Asantehene's house, they are using our drums and not theirs. The time I was in Kumasi, any time any of the drums in the Asantehene's house was broken, they used to bring it to our house, and we were the ones who sewed the skins to repair their drums. They were using drums from Dagbon.

During the olden days, the Ashantis were not having this type of drum at all. They didn't know how to carve them. They were coming to Dagbon to buy them. It is now that money has become sweet for everybody that they have also learned how to make such drums. They don't even make them themselves; it is some of the Wangara people staying there who make these drums for them. During the olden days, when they didn't have anyone to make these drums for them, they were coming here to buy them. The drums the Ashantis were using were like a dalgu or a Simpa drum, but they used sticks to beat them and not their hands. And they also had something like a big calabash and they put skin over it. Mossi people have drums like that; we call them *binda*. These were the drums the Ashantis were using in the Asantehene's house. During the olden days, if they

wanted any of these lumsi drums or the binda, they were sending people to come here and buy them. They would come and tell the paramount chief of the Dagbamba, the Yaa-Naa, “We want these types of drums.” When they wanted this binda type of drum, they just called it *twene*, which is how they call any drum. As for the dalgu, they were calling it *gyamadudu*, and our luja drum too, they were calling it *donno*.

Any time the Asantehene sent somebody like that, and the Asantehene’s messenger came and told Yaa-Naa, the Yaa-Naa would call Namo-Naa and tell him, “These are the sounding things my friend in Kumasi wants.” The only thing the Asantehene used to send with the messengers was cola, because during that time, to get cola here was very difficult. When the Asantehene sent the cola to Yaa-Naa, Yaa-Naa also called Namo-Naa and gave him some of the cola. And Namo-Naa would call those who make the drums and give them some of the cola and tell them, “These are the things the Yaa-Naa wants from you.” Those people would just hurry and within a short time bring all those drums. And so the Ashantis never came with money. Even one pesewa, the Asantehene never sent anybody with even one pesewa to come for the drums. If the Asantehene were to have sent money to the Yaa-Naa, the Yaa-Naa would not have received it. Namo-Naa would not have collected it. Those making the drums would not have collected it. Only cola: that was how the Ashantis used to get their drums from us.

During the olden days, too, if we ourselves were looking for drums, we used to go to the ones who carve them. If there was somebody who was making these drums nicely, you would go to his house, and in the early morning when he was going to the farm, you would accompany him to the farm and help him on the farm. If you came home, that was the time you would tell him the reason you came to him. The following day, he would take you along to the farm again. And he would get the best tree and cut it down. After he had cut it, if you wanted, you would help him remove the branches from the trunk and help him divide it. If you helped him to divide the tree, it was good, and if you didn’t help him, it didn’t matter. You would carry these pieces to the house or you would leave them there in the farm. It didn’t matter. He would be making the drums while you were in his farm to do his work for him. Sometimes he would make two or three, and after he finished, he would call you and say, “These are your drums.” And you would have to ask, “How much will I give you to buy cola?” And he would tell you, “You have no debt.” And you would say, “May God bless you.” That was all. That was how we got the drums in the olden days. There was no one in Dagbon who would charge you if you asked him to do something for you. No one at all. It

is only now that we have charges for so many things. And so during the olden days, that was also the reason why we were not charging the Asantehene.

And so when the Asantehene sent for drums and Namo-Naa messaged the people who carve them, those people would go and make all the drums and bring them. And Namo-Naa would sit down and then send to tell Yaa-Naa that the drums are made and that it is only left with sewing the skins. Then Yaa-Naa would send a messenger to the chief of the butchers that he wanted such-and-such a number of skins to do something. The chief of the butchers would send the skins to Yaa-Naa, and Yaa-Naa would send them to Namo-Naa. Namo-Naa would sit down and sew all the skins and the strings for the drums before they would carry the drums to the Asantehene's messenger. And the messenger would send the drums to the Asantehene.

If the drums were many, one of the Yaa-Naa's princes would also go along. They would carry these drums on their heads. During the olden days, to walk from here to Kumasi, they used to take forty days. Someone who could walk fast would take thirty days to reach Kumasi. But usually they used to take forty days because of the load they were carrying. If they carried these drums to the Asantehene, and the Asantehene saw the drums and they looked very nice to him, he would say, "Oh, my friend has done good work for me. And I have nothing I can do for him. And for that matter, as we are all friends, we don't pay each other and we don't have debts. And so get cola and give it to him." And so during that time, they were using cola as money. And this cola would be plenty, and they would carry it on their heads to Dagbon here. That was how the Yaa-Naa was giving drums to the Asantehene.

And even still the Yaa-Naa is getting drums for the Asantehene. But now, Yaa-Naa is paying for them. Any time the Asantehene sends for drums, and Yaa-Naa calls Namo-Naa to tell him, Namo-Naa will tell Yaa-Naa the price, and Yaa-Naa will give Namo-Naa the money to buy the skins and the strings and make the drums. Namo-Naa will make everything and give it to the Yaa-Naa to send to the Asantehene. As for this, I have seen it myself. You know my mother's child, Sumaani. The time my brother Sumaani was in Dagbon here, he was asked by the Yaa-Naa to sew six drums for the Asantehene. At that time, that was his work, just making the drums, and everybody knew that he was a drum-maker. So instead of seeing Namo-Naa and Namo-Naa also seeing him, Yaa-Naa would just send a message straight. That was the time of Naa Mahama Bila. The drums were only six, and the Yaa-Naa sold them to the Asantehene for only three cedis. Two of the drums were new ones, and the rest were old ones.

And apart from the Asantehene, to this day the Ashantis are coming here to buy drums, and only place they come to get these drums is Tamale here. In the

whole Dagbon area, it is only in Tamale here that we sell drums. No one in the other towns or villages is selling drums. If you go round all of Dagbon, you won't see anybody selling drums, unless in Tamale here. If it will happen, it will happen sometime, but not now. And even in Tamale here, it is only my house where anyone is selling drums. I am the one selling the drums. There is no one else selling drums somewhere. That is why the Ashantis come to me to buy drums. And even Ewes and other people from the South come to me for these drums. And the tribes that are here in the North, many of them also come to me. That is why I know more about all this talk.

Inside making a drum, there is a lot of talk. Truly, most Dagbamba don't want to cut down trees and make the drums, and their reason is that according to our custom in Dagbon, if you cut a tree that is wet — a wet, living tree and not a dry one — and make drums and sell them, you will not last on earth. That is why Dagbamba don't want to carve drums. And again, somebody will cut down a tree and get to the house and will not be able to sleep. This also lets Dagbamba not want to do such work. I have seen it personally myself. I know somebody at Tampion who became mad from making these drums. Any time this madness attacks him, he uses a cutlass to be rubbing and going around and all over his head. If you ask him why he is using a cutlass and rubbing his head, he says that there are some things coming and growing out of his head, and that's why he's using the cutlass. That person is still at Tampion. Not long ago he did that and the cutlass cut his head. I think that the sore from the cutlass is still there. I recently sent somebody to Tampion to collect something for me, and the fellow came back and told me that he had met the madman in the house and he had a sore on his head. And many people see this and refuse to do such work.

And it's just because every place has got different types of trees, and here in Dagbon we have some bad trees. These trees are not very big trees; they are small trees. Some of them are just like dwarfs. There is a type of tree in Dagbon too, in the night you will see fire on the tree. And there are some trees that used to walk in the night. These kind of trees, if you are cutting them down, you will get bad things. There are some you will cut down, and within a few minutes you will become sick. They are there, trees like that.

In Dagbon here, if you want to be doing this work, we have some medicine called *karga*. The work of this *karga* is that if you have it in your body and you cut down any dangerous tree or bad tree, the tree will not attack you at any time again. There are people who give this *karga* to those who do this work. The people who have the *karga* medicine are the *kasiyirba*, the people who bathe dead bodies. They also sometimes give this *karga* medicine to protect people who marry widows and also to people who collect other people's wives. And so this

karga medicine has got a lot of talk, but I think we can leave it at that for today, unless we reach some of these other talks.

And what we see is that if you are cutting down these trees to make drums, you will not prosper. The people who are doing this work are always cutting down trees and carving drums and selling them, but they never have money. I am not talking about us who are sewing the skins and selling the complete drums; I'm talking about those who cut down the trees and carve them. We have money more than they because we only sew the drum and hang it, and somebody will come and buy. But they the ones carving the drums, every day they are cutting down trees. We go to give them money before they give us the drums. It's not all of them, but sometimes you give someone money for about twenty drums, and he will promise you that you can come for them in a few weeks. When you go, he will tell you that you have given him money for ten drums and not twenty. And you want the thing, too, and no one else is doing it, and so you have to agree. You gave him money, and still, he hasn't got money. Sometimes we will give them money to carve some drums, and we will wait for about two or three months, and we will not get the drums yet. Every time you send a message to him about the drums, he will tell you he needs money. These people making the drums, with all their cheating, they never have money. And I think that this is another reason why many people don't want to learn how to cut down the trees and carve the drums. The work you will do and not gain, or the work you will do and some sickness will attack you, will someone want it? No one will want it.

In Dagbon here, we have three types of trees that are used for carving the drums. One of them is *taana*, the shea tree. That is the one we used to get shea nuts from to make shea butter. During the olden days, if those who carved the drums wanted to cut down a shea tree, they couldn't just go and cut the tree down. They had to take along fresh milk and pour it on the tree for some days before they come and cut it down. What I heard about it is that they pour down the fresh milk because the sap of the tree is just like fresh milk, and so they pour down the milk before they cut it. That is how I learned it and know it. Another type of tree is one we call *kpalba*, the violet tree. During the olden days, if you wanted to cut down this *kpalba* to make a drum, you had to take three cowries and put them under the tree before you cut it down. By doing that, it meant that you were buying the tree, and if you did that, everything would be easy for you. It's not anyone you were buying the tree from: you were buying it from God. And the last one we use to make the drums is *siyirli*, the cedar mahogany tree. Its wood is very hard. We use it for chewing sticks to clean our teeth. As for that one, if you wanted to cut it down for a drum, you had to slaughter a hen. And again, if you cut *siyirli* down, you didn't have to carve the drums in the house: you had to cut

the tree into pieces and then stay in the bush, carve all the drums and then bring them to the house.

But nowadays they don't do that. They bring it to the house. And they don't do the sacrifices either. What they were doing in the olden days, they are no more doing it. You know, these days everything has changed, and we want to go on following the changes, too. That is why they refuse to give the sacrifices before they cut down the trees. And I think that is the reason why the madness and other bad things are common for them. Somebody might say that it is a lie, that if you cut down such a tree, you will not die or become mad. It is when he cuts it down that he will get to know that it is not a lie. It was our old people who talked, and they said that if you cut down a wet tree and use it to get money, you will not get the money. And as they have said it, it is just plain for everyone to see. And some people hold that talk in their hearts and refuse to do such work.

And even we drummers have seen. These bad trees I'm talking about, too, sometimes they can cut a tree and make a drum out of it, and the drummer who takes it will die. As he has died, anyone who also takes that same drum will also not last. And so some of these trees in Dagbon here are very dangerous, and because of that, the people who make the drums don't last long. And because of that, too, the people making the drums in Dagbon here are not many. At this time, we only go to three people who are actually carving the drums. They are at Tampion, about twenty miles from this town. It's near to Nanton. Truly, there are people who know how to carve the drums, but apart from those people, I don't know of anybody apart from them actually doing this work in Dagbon today. I myself, and those drummers I know, if we want a drum, we only go to Tampion. I believe there will be other villages, but I don't know which particular villages they are. And so we go there, to Tampion, to buy the drums. It's an old man with his two of his children. They are the only ones. Why is it so? People fear it. Either you will become mad or you will not last long and you will die. And so the ones who do that work are only those people, and they have many troubles. As for us drummers who beat these drums, we are many; in Bimbila and the Nanumba land, we are many; in the Mamprusi land, we are many. But there are only these few people making the drums. And so those who cut the trees to make the drums have more troubles than those of us who drum.

These three trees I have named, they are the trees we use for the drums. If you try to use a *nim* tree or any other tree, it won't do. The drum will break. And among these three trees, the best one and the one which will last for many years is *siyirli*. It is very, very hard. It is only because *siyirli* is not common that they use the other trees. Nowadays, to get a *siyirli* tree around here, you have to go far away into the bush, maybe thirty miles or more, before you will get. But the place

where I was formerly farming, near Galiwe, it was common there. And so siyirli is the best. Any time you see any drummer, if you ask him which tree is good for a drum and will last, he will tell you that siyirli is the best one. And I think that in the olden days, it was this siyirli that they were using all the time. The small drum you are using now, I don't know the age of that drum, but I think in my heart that it will be at least about the same age as my father who is no more in this world, maybe about a hundred years or more. I can just look at it and see that it is very old. My brother who gave it to you, he told me that he didn't know when that drum was made. He also grew up and met it with his father. His father gave it to him, and he gave it to you. If they were to have used a soft tree to make it, it wouldn't have lasted up till now.

And again, another reason why people don't want the work of making drums is that to carve a tree to make a real and complete drum is very hard work. They use four tools to carve a drum. The first tool is an axe they use to cut down the tree and then divide the trunk into pieces. Then they dig a hole in the ground and put a complete section of the trunk into the hole, and then they use an adze to dig in the middle of the trunk to make a deep hole in it. After they have made the hole in it, they remove it and use a cutlass on the outside. Then after using the cutlass, they have another tool we call *korgu*. It's like a big curved knife. They use it to shape and straighten the whole body of the drum, and again, where they have used the adze to make the hole, they use this *korgu* and pull it to scrape inside to make it smooth. They will use it and remove all the roughness in the drum. And there are two types of this knife: there is a smaller one but it has a long handle, and that is what they will use to deepen the inside and make it smoother. After that, they will take the cutlass again and use it cut the mouths and make them smooth. After that, that is all. The drum is satisfied. It's a complete drum. And so it's hard work. In these modern days, every work has changed and become somehow easy, but this work has not changed. I don't think that there is anyone who can use only one day to make a complete drum. Maybe if the drum is a small one, he can do it. But if it is a bigger one, somebody will use about two days just to carve it. And all this hard work in this making of drums, people don't like to be doing such work.

If I am going to sew a drum, when the drum-maker carves the drum, I go and buy it. When I get the drum from the village, if it is a fresh drum that has just been carved, as I have bought it and come home, and I want it to be a drum, as it is, the way they make it is not the way a drum should look. You yourself have been seeing it. I will put water on the whole drum. Then I will use a knife to scrape the outside of the drum until it becomes very smooth and nice. If the inside is not very smooth, I will do the same thing to the inside. Sometimes the people in

the village used to make a drum and the drum will not look fine, but when we use a knife on it, it will become fine. It is just the same as if a person is not fine but he is wearing a very good cloth: at least he will be a bit fine. And so when they make a drum like that and it is rough, we use a knife to make it fine. When the drum is smooth and nice, sometimes the mouth is not finished, and it is we drummers who will make it, and we use a stone to smooth the mouth of the drum. Nowadays if you want, or if you have money, you can go and buy sandpaper and use it. Then the mouth will be smooth.

There are some other drums they make which have some small holes in the body. These holes are from the wood. We also cover these holes. During the olden days, we were using bee's wax. You would put the bee's wax on the hole and get fire to run over it, and the bee's wax would melt and fill the hole. Nowadays we are using glue to cover it. It's not that the wax is no more there, but it's only that in the olden days there was no glue. The glue is better. During the time when we were using the wax, if you put the drum in the sun, the wax would melt again. But now, if you use glue, it will never come off, unless the drum breaks. We mix the glue with wood-dust and use it to fill the holes. Sometimes too you will see that the old drums are dark in color. During those days, after smoothing the drum, they were putting shea butter on the outside and the inside, too. But if you don't put the shea butter, it doesn't matter: the shea butter will not increase the sound. They were putting shea butter because sometimes the sun would make the drum dry and it would crack. We have seen now that if you don't put the shea butter, the drum will not crack, but we don't leave the drums in the sun, either.

As for the skins that we use for the drums, it is the butcher who will slaughter a goat, and we will go and buy the skins. And the skins too have got their extent. It is not all skins we use to sew drums. Truly, we sometimes use a sheep, but the skin is not very nice. The goat skin is better than a sheep skin. If you use a sheep skin to sew a drum, the drum will only be crying *kpam-kpam-kpam*: it won't cry loudly. But as for the goat skin, it cries nicely, and this is why we use the goat skin. But there are some goat skins that are very heavy, too. A goat can be there and it is not big, but its skin can be heavy. And a very big goat can be there, but its skin is not heavy. As for a male goat, even if it is very small, the skin is thick. But if it is a female goat, then however big it is, the skin is not heavy. If the butchers finish slaughtering a goat, and we go and buy the skin, then we bring it to the house.

Truly, as everything is now expensive, nowadays the skins have also become expensive, and even sometimes you will find it difficult to get a skin. The other day I went to Lamashegu to the butchers' place to buy a skin, and they told

me that some Hausa people had come and put down money for the skins. If you go there, you will just see the money lying down, and it is thousands of cedis, and that is the money the Hausas have put down. And we don't know why they have put down such money or what they are doing with the skins. I think maybe they are using them for some of the things we also do with them. But if not something that happens like that, then you will just go to buy the skins, and they are there.

If the butcher slaughters, and you go and buy about four or five skins and come, you put the skins on the ground. If the skins have stayed for some days and they are dry, you sprinkle water on the skins. Then you go and sit down. It will not be long, and as they were dry, they will become soft. At that time, you will get a pot and put water in it, and you will put the skins inside, and you will get a stone and put on top of them so that they will stay under the water. And you will go and be roaming your roaming. Getting to two or three o'clock, the skins will be very soft.

At that time, you will get a flat piece of wood and put a skin on the wood, and you will take the type of curved knife we call *korgu*. You take a skin and squeeze the water out from it, and you put the skin on the wood. There are some small pieces of meat on the skin from when they were first removing the skin from the goat, and you will use the knife to scrape the skin and remove the small bits of meat. If you finish, then you put it back inside the water again.

At that time you will get a calabash and be entering houses and collecting ashes. When you finish collecting ashes, you will get something we call *yoyli*: it is a type of melon, but it is not something we eat. You will cut it and remove the seeds which are inside. How this *yoyli* is, it does as if it eats: where its strength goes, it makes everything look weak. You will take a skin from the water and spread it, and take the seeds and spread them all around the skin, and you will use your hand to be pressing on the skin. And then you will take ashes and spread them on top, sprinkle a little water on it, and put it back inside the pot with the water. You will pour the remaining ashes inside and use your hand to stir the pot, and then you put the stone back inside on it, and cover it. If I am preparing a skin, after I take the *yoyli* and the ashes to spread on it, I will leave it down in the pot again until the next day. When day breaks and I come, I will take it and remove all the hair, and all the hair will be easy to remove. Then I wash the skin. If I don't wash it, it will be smelling too much. When I finish washing it, I will take the knife and remove the dirt again. And any place that is still smelling, I will remove all the dirt and bits of meat again. If you come and see it, you will not know that it was something that was smelling. And at that time, the skin is ready for sewing.

If I myself am going to sew a drum, I will start and make the ring that will go around the mouth. There is a type of mat they weave in the South. It is made with flat reeds, and I buy the mat and come and sit down and remove the reeds and put them down. When I finish, one mat will give about one hundred or two hundred reeds. I take each reed and split it so that it is flat, and I use the knife again and pull the reed against my foot, and I scrape away the dirt and make the reed smooth. And then I trim it so that each reed will be only about as wide as half of a fingernail. At that time, there is something else again: there is a type of dry raffia grass which we call *kpari*: they sell it in the market, and it is also from the South. I will get some of this grass. Truly, in the olden days, when we weren't getting these things from the South, we had them in Dagbon here, and they are still there. There is a town called Zantana, near the river. These things are all there. Even at Daboya, they are there. It is just because our roads are now short ones: that is why we go to the market and buy these things from the South, because the lorries are always going to the South to be bringing things to the market.

When I have all these things, I sit down and take a reed and measure it around the mouth of the drum to be like a ring. We call it *lun' kuyra*, that it is the seat of the drum, that is, where the head is seated on the drum. I will leave a small allowance for the grass, and I will take the grass and be wrapping it around the reeds. If you don't watch carefully and leave an allowance when you first measure it, then when you finish tying it with the grass, it won't go onto the drum. If I reach the end of a reed, I will add another and continue wrapping it and tying it, and I will be tying the reeds with grass to make a ring until it comes to the size the drum needs. When I finish tying one mouth, I will tie the other mouth. When I finish doing it, the reeds will be in the shape of a ring that will just fit over the mouth of the drum. It shouldn't be too tight; it should be just a bit loose.

Then I take a skin and measure it on one ring, and if it is good, I take a knife and cut around so that the skin is a bit larger than the ring. Then I pull the skin over the ring, and I use an awl to make holes on the edge of skin, and I take some string and sew it and pull it so that the skin will catch the ring well and hold it. Then I get what we call *lundi' sherga*: that is the string I will use in sewing the skin onto the ring. What we use in sewing the mouth is the same thing as the skin: when a drumskin is broken, you take it and cut it into a long strip, and you put it in water and roll it to make a string. You make it very thin, but it is very strong. This is what you take to sew the skin all around the outside edge of the ring. How I do it, I take the awl and pierce the skin and go through the outside reeds on the ring, and when I pierce the hole like that, I will sew the string through. Then I pierce the same place and put the string back through, and when I pull it, I put the awl there so that the string leaves a loop. Then I sew the next one, and this is what

I will be doing until I have sewn all around the ring. When I finish sewing, I take a knife that is a bit bent at the end, and scrape all inside the skin and remove the dirt. If there is any water in the skin, when I use the knife like that, the water will also come out. And then I will put it down, and I will do the same thing to the other ring.

And what remains is only to lace the drumheads onto the drum, and we have some leather strings that we lace through the loops that are on the inside part of the rings where we have sewn the skin. As for the strings that we use in lacing the drums, we call them *lundihi*. We use the skins of many different animals to make them. The cow that is just in the house, when it brings forth and the child is about a year, if they slaughter the calf, we can use the skin to make the strings. In the bush too, there are many animals we use. They are all types of bush antelopes. There is *gbeyu*, the waterbuck: it is very big and has big horns. There is the *walga*, the oribi. There is *kparbua*, the common duiker: it is like a small deer. There is *bambua*, the red-flanked duiker. I have told you about it: it drinks a lot of water, and it lies down and watches water; its way is that if someone is coming to drink, it will say, “I will not lie down and see water, and you will come and drink it before me,” and it will run and go and drink. There is *sanƙpaliŋ*, the bushbuck: it has white stripes. There is *kɔyu*, the roan antelope: it is very big, but not as big as a horse, and it has got big horns. The *kɔyu* skin is very hard. All of them, we use their skins to make strings, and there are others, too. If you get the skin of the roan antelope or the bushbuck, you will take water and sprinkle it, and when it is soft, you take it and put it on a board, take a knife and scrape the hair. If it is the skin of a duiker or an oribi, you will put it in a pot and do the same thing you do for a goat skin. This is how it is.

As for the skin of a bush animal, if you use it like that, it will keep long, even for some years, and it won't break. If it is a goat skin you are going to use, as for that, you will buy the one they have already tanned and finished: it is red. As we don't always get the bush animals, we use the goat skins, too. Sometimes we get the skins of the duiker, and sometimes too we get the skins of the calves. But as for the strings from the goat skins, they are not strong and they don't keep long: when you take goat skin and make the strings, getting to a year, when the harmattan wind blows, they weaken and become dry, and they will be breaking. This is why we don't like the goat-skin strings, and if you are watching, you will see that most drummers try and get the white strings.

If you want to make the strings, when you have removed the hair and the skin is clean, you will let it dry. Then you take a knife or a razor blade, and you will start and be cutting it into a thin strip: you will be going around the skin and cutting it, and it will be very long. When you finish, you will put it inside water.

At that time, you will see that it will cool itself. When it becomes soft, you remove it, and you take one end and tie it to something. Then you hold the other end and stretch it so that it is straight, and you will use your hand and be rolling it against your leg. You will be rolling it until you finish doing all of it, and you will tie it. When it is dry, then you cut the ends. If it is the skin of a bush animal, then you take a stone or a broken piece of pot; if I am making the string, I get, say, a piece of cement stone and I make a hole inside it. I tie the string to something, and I put it through the hole in the stone, and I will be pulling it. At that time, the dirt and roughness will all go out from the string. If you are cleaning the string with a broken pot, it is the same thing: you will put the string against it and be pulling the string, and you will be pulling and pulling until the dirt and the roughness will go out, and you will see that the string is white. This is what you will do before you will use the string in lacing a drum, and then you will take it and be lacing the drum. If it is a goat skin you are using to make the drumstrings, you will cut it and make it the same way, but you won't use the stone to clean it, and as for the goat skin, it is red.

If I am making a drum, as for the mouth of the drum, if I haven't already smoothed the mouth, then before I put the drumhead on it, I will get a stone and smooth all around each mouth of the drum. When it is smooth, I will put the drumheads on each mouth, and I will take a string and lace it through all the loops. After I finish lacing the drum, then I will take a strip of leather and tie it to the neck of the drum, and I will pull it around the strings of the drum and tighten it a bit. At that time the skin will sit well on the mouth of the drum, and by the next day, when the skin is fully dry, the drum is a drum, and you can beat it. And any time we beat a drum and finish, we tie it like that to make the skin sit well. And that is how we make the drums.

And there is some watching inside making drums, because every drum is different. Any tree or drum has got the type of skin which will fit it so that the drum will sound well. Those of us who sew the drums, any time they bring drums to us, if we know the drums, we know the type of skins we have to use on them. A drum that doesn't want a heavy skin, you have to take a female goat skin to sew it. There are some drums that want a heavy skin, and you will use the male goat skin. And inside our watching, too, there are some drums, if you use a white goat skin on it, the drum will not sound, but if you use a black goat skin for it, it will sound. The drum I am using now, if I use a black skin or a brown skin for it, it will never sound well. It is only a white one that will make it sound. It is from the tree. That is what the tree wants. Every tree has the type of animal it wants. And so it all comes from the particular drum, how it was carved and the type of wood. But you cannot just look at a drum and say that the drum needs a light skin: you will use a

light skin, and if it doesn't sound well, then you will change to a heavy skin. As we make the drums and they are sounding nice, we know the drums and we know the sort of skins the drums want. The old drum you're using, I used a white skin for it, and it is sounding well. When that drum was with me, it was not sounding as now when you are beating it. By that time, I didn't know where the fault was from. And now if I want to sew another skin for that drum, I will know to use a white skin. And so any time I use a particular type of skin for a drum and it is not sounding well, then I have to change the type of skin for it. As we sew the drums, we get to know how the sounds are. If your watching shows you that this drum is good and that drum is not good, when you are going to sew the second drum, you will search for the type of skin you used in sewing the first one. If you don't get that type of skin, it's going to worry you.

And all this is from watching. If you are at something today, tomorrow, and the next day, you will know what is in it. We drummers sew drums and get to know how they sound and how good or bad they are. Apart from the skins, the sound of the drum comes from the length between the two mouths, and the way it was carved, the curved part of the bowl from the mouth to the neck. The neck too, that is the breathing channel of the drum: if it is not wide enough, then the sound will be inside the drum and it won't come out. And so when the drums are brought, through your own watching you will know that the first time this hole was like this and it was sounding like this. But it is the head you will be beating before the sound will come to the center, so to my watching, the head is more important than the center. And again, there are some drums that are not good. If you have a drum, and you try different types of skins, and the drum is not sounding, then by all means, the fault is coming from inside the drum. Sometimes you can scrape the inside and make it smooth, and it will sound better. If you see the difference like that, you will do whatever you can do to make it very smooth. But if you do that to the drum, and it still doesn't sound well, that means that the drum is not good. Not all the trees they cut to make drums are good. That is how it is.

How the skins are, too, some of them are thick and some of them are thin. The skins that are light and thin are usually sounding better than the thick ones. As for the thick ones, they are strong and hard, and you have to beat them hard, too. But the light skins can easily break at any time. If it is the rainy season or the dry season, there are also differences. Sometimes you will get a light skin and sew it and put it on the drum, and you will see that the drum is very heavy. During the rainy season, if you get a light skin and put it on the drum, it's heavy. But if the harmattan winds are blowing in the dry season, all the skins are light. None of them is ever thick. During harmattan season, we will be breaking our drums all

the time, and only guṅḡoṅ will be left. And even if you sew a drum here and take it to Kumasi to beat, the sound you beat at Kumasi will not be the same as the sound you were beating in Tamale here. Here we have got a lot of sun, and we also have a lot of hotness. Kumasi is different, and the air is not dry: the air will spread on the skin and make it soft. Sometimes during the rainy season, we will put our drums in the sun for a little bit before beating them; otherwise they will be too heavy. But in the harmattan season, it will all be the same: whether you use a light skin or a thick one, it will break. There is dry wind blowing, and the skin dries too much.

And again, the strings that we use to put the two heads on the drums, the lundih: in the harmattan season, I never make them too close. Even if you ask me to do it close, I will leave some wider space between the strings. If I sew it close and you press it too much, the whole skin will break. It will just separate. Even the strings themselves, during the harmattan season, they become hard. You cannot press the drum easily, and if you press too much, the strings will break. And so, the sewing of drums in the harmattan season is different from the sewing of drums in the rainy season. During the harmattan, if you are usually beating a drum, you have to hang it: you can't put it on the ground. If you put it down in the night and the coldness of the ground comes to enter the skins, the skin will expand as if it is wet, and if you beat it, you won't enjoy the sound again. Even I think that you yourself have witnessed this. People have been telling me that in some parts of America it is very cold, and if you take a drum to that place and beat it, you will see that the sound will change. I don't know your town, but I believe that the way your drum is sounding here, if you take it to your town, the sound will change to another sound. That is how it is.

And so there are many differences in the drums we beat. The drums they are making today are even different from the drums they made formerly. If I want to go and buy the drums from the village, to buy a single drum has got one price and to buy many of them has got a different price. And again, the price is depending on the drum. The drums from the olden days are better than the modern ones. During those days, they had enough time to sit down and make it well, but those making drums now don't have the time. The medium-sized drum you bought, when my brother Sumaani was in this town about twenty years ago, that was the time this drum was carved. If you go to the place where he got this drum to look for a drum like it, you won't get. Nowadays they wouldn't take their time to make a drum as good as that one. As they don't take their time to make it well, any way they make it, you will still buy it because there is no one else making it. That is why we buy it; if not that, I know that the olden days drums sound better than these modern drums. Any time we group to beat, if you come to look at all

the drums we are using at that place, you will not find any new drum with us. We are all using old ones because the old ones sound well. As for the modern ones, only some of them sound well, not all. And the reason is that you have to take your time to make a drum that will sound well. The part inside the neck of the drum has to be wide or the sound will not get through. Sometimes when the drum has just been carved and it is still wet, the neck will be wide, but when the drum dries, the neck will close a bit. And so if you want, you should take an old drum and compare it to a new drum. You will see that there is a difference. The inside of the old drum is smooth and wide, but the inside of the new one will not be like that.

When a drum is wet and you sew it, sometimes it will sound, but when the wood dries, it will shrink and will not sound well again. And there are some drums that only sound when they are dry. A drum that sounds when it's wet but not when it dries, as for such a drum, it means the tree from which it was made is a weak tree. But when a tree that has matured is made into a drum, such a drum will not shrink again. When you cut a mature tree and look at it, you will see a red part inside that shows that the tree is matured. But when you cut a tree and you see that the inside is white, it means the tree is not matured. And so the red part is the matured part and can be used for making a drum. When you sew it, it has nothing again: whether it's dry or not, it doesn't care. But as for a wet tree, when something is not strong and it is drying, it is going to become weaker again. And it is going to shrink more. You'll see the hole looking as if it's bent, and when it's like that, it won't do the work you want it to do. And this is what happens when you make a drum. When you hear a drum sounding well, it's from the making of the drum. If you don't make it well, whatever happens, it won't sound. But if you make it well, even if you sew it badly, it will sound. That is how drums are.

And so not all of the new drums sound well. As for some of the new drums, if they don't close up too much, it will come to a time when the drum will sound nice. If you hang the drum and just use it occasionally, it will never sound. But if you are using it all the time, it will become used to the beating. As for that, it is from the skin. Even an old drum, if you put new skins on it and beat it, it will not sound. But if you beat it all the time, the sound will change. The skin will become soft. The small drum I have now, you have been seeing me beating it since you first came here. But now I have sewn it with new skins, and sometimes you may have been seeing me begging to borrow somebody's drum to beat because I don't enjoy my drum when I'm beating it. I don't enjoy the sound. If I were to be beating it all the time, it would be better. And really, if someone else is beating it somewhere, I hear it sounding well. And so if the skin is hard, you the one beating the drum cannot hear whether the sound is nice or not. If you are

beating it, another person will rather enjoy the sound more than you the one beating it. The sound will go to that fellow and he will enjoy it, but as you are holding it and beating it, you will not get the sound nicely. You won't enjoy it because the skin is thick and hard. If I had used a thin skin for sewing it, it would have been sounding very well, but the time I was sewing it I couldn't get a thin skin, and so I don't enjoy it. And it also comes from how you are beating it. Someone who is standing somewhere is not beating; he is just sitting down quietly. But you have to beat it hard so that the sound will come, and you'll find it difficult to listen and hear it. Someone will come and tell you that the sound of your drum is very nice, not knowing that you yourself don't enjoy it. And all this is inside our drumming.

And apart from that, the drums we have, we use a stick to beat them, and we call it *lundoli*, "drumstick," and there is also some work in making it. As for the *lundoli*, we go to the bush and cut it. As the drumstick is curved, it isn't that you will go to look for a curved tree: you will cut a straight stick and carve it before you bend it. And the drumstick also has the trees that are good for it. The best tree we use is called *puhiga*, the tamarind tree. There is another tree called *dazuli*, a gardenia, and it is also good for the drumstick. Another good one is *kuliḡbinli*. And the fourth one we use for the drumstick is the one that the white man brought it and planted: the *nim* tree. The tree they use to make a big drumstick is the same tree they use to make a small drumstick. And so the drumsticks are bigger than one another, but they can be from the same tree. This is how it is.

If you go to the bush and cut the tree, and you want to make the drumstick, the work has got its type of axe we call *lehu*: the wood is short, but its iron mouth is very sharp. You put the small tree trunk or branch in front of you, and you get a small stool and sit down. You start by first making the head which is going to be hitting the drum. You cut it and carve it to be round. Then you put the head on the ground and use the axe on the trunk to peel it. When you are peeling it, you hold the end and start in the middle and peel it down so that the axe will come to stand at the place where you carved the round head. Where the stick comes to join the rounded part, we call it the neck of the drumstick. The day you are going to make it like that, you won't make only one: you will make six, and if you have enough time, you will make about eight or ten. But it won't be all of them that you can bend on that day.

When you want to bend them, you boil water, and you put all the sticks in the boiling water. You will let the water stand on the fire, and the water will be boiling with the sticks. At that time you will gather some ropes that cannot break easily so that you will tie the necks of the sticks when you bend them. When you see that the water has boiled the sticks well, you will remove one of the sticks, and

as soon as you remove it from the water, you tie the neck with the rope, and then you put it down and step on it and bend it. When you see that it is bending easily, you will also see some smoke or vapor coming out from the stick. When you bend it to the position you want, you will tie the rope to the end of the stick where you are going to hold it, and you put it down. That is how you will be bending and tying all of them until you finish.

After you have tied them, you will leave them down until the next day. If you want the drumstick in a hurry, you can untie it, but to leave it is better. If you tie it and leave it till day breaks, when you loosen the rope, the drumstick will not straighten itself again. If you loosen it that very day you made it, it can spoil. The time you untie the rope, that is when you are going to repair the end you will hold when beating, because it was only the neck and the head you made. The place where you tied the rope and behind it, that part is remaining. And so when it is daybreak and you untie the rope, the drumstick will not straighten again, and you will take the small axe and peel the skin on the end. You will carve away the wood to fit your hand, and you will cut away the part that is extending out. If you finish it like that, some people leave it like that and sell it. If you want, you will take a knife and smooth all of it and make it look nice. That day too, if you want, you will make a hole below the neck or you will cut a small circle, and you will tie a leather string from the neck to that place.

And so how we make the drumstick, if the hot water doesn't enter it, the time you use force to bend it, the stick will break. When we want to cut a tree like puhiga to make a drumstick, we have two ways: if you climb the tree and cut the branch, it is different from if you cut the small tree that is just growing from the ground. The one that is growing on the ground is better than the one on top of the tree because when you want to bend it, it will not break. But if the sticks are from the top part of the tree, no matter how you boil them, half of them will break. They break because the tree is an old tree, and it has got many branches, and the branches have got branches. But the one that is growing and standing straight, it doesn't break, and that is what we go to cut if we see it. As for that one, it will reach, say, from where I am sitting here to across the room, and you can take it to make about four or six drumsticks. But if the tree is grown, and you can only get the branches that are on the top of the tree, you will cut short ones and make only one stick from each. And so the tree that is just on the ground makes a better drumstick than the branch that is on the top of the tree. Even if it is dry and you get it and put it in the boiling water, you can bend it.

The best tree for making the drumstick is the puhiga. The one that follows puhiga is the kuliñbinli. As for that one, even if you don't put it in water, you can bend it. If its stick is big and you bend it and tie it for about a week, you can use

it, but it is only that it is very light. That is why we don't like it so much, because it is not heavy. And there is also dazuli: as for the dazuli, it can make many drumsticks, but if you see it, you will say that you cannot use it to make a drumstick. It is surprising because the dazuli is a tree that has many bends in it. But if you come and you want to break it, it will be very difficult for you to break. When you make the drumstick with this dazuli, to bend it is not hard, and when it dries, it is a very strong stick, and it is very heavy. This is how the dazuli is. And the nim tree too, we use it to make the drumsticks. As for that, if the drumsticks are a hundred and you put them in the water, some will break, and those remaining will crack. Those that crack, you will sew some leather around the neck, and you will tie the neck. Even if it doesn't crack when you bend it, getting to the next day, you will see that the head will split. And so the nim tree, we don't usually take it to make a drumstick. That is how the nim tree is. The only reason why we sometimes use it is because it is very difficult to get the puhiga. Sometimes you will go far into the bush to search for it, and you won't get it. But this nim tree is just in the house. The dazuli and the kuliḡbinli too are just near, but as for them, their work is not as nice as the puhiga.

And what is remaining again? The guḡḡḡ is there, and it also has its work. As a guḡḡḡ is big, they have to cut a large tree to make it, and they will use the trunk of the tree to carve the guḡḡḡ. And if a guḡḡḡ skin breaks or if we get a new guḡḡḡ, we drummers are the ones who sew it.

When you are going to sew a skin for a guḡḡḡ, you will take the guḡḡḡ and put it down. There is a type of local rope well call *gabga*; they sell it in the market. You will go to the market and buy them, and one guḡḡḡ eats four ropes. You will come to the house and put them down, and you will go and buy the skins. As for the guḡḡḡ skin, you will use a skin that is thick, and so you will go and buy the skin of a male goat, As the male goat's skin is thick, when you use it to sew a guḡḡḡ, it will cry well. On the part of bush animals, you can use saḡkpaḡiḡ or gbeyu. These are the two best skins. You can use the bambua skin, too. As the skin should be thick, it should not be too thick, and so something like a kḡyu skin, we don't use it. And a guḡḡḡ eats two skins, because one mouth is one skin, and the other mouth is one skin.

When you are going to sew the guḡḡḡ, you will get a friend to help you, and he will sit opposite you with the guḡḡḡ between the two of you. You will let the guḡḡḡ sit with one mouth on the ground, and then you take a skin and cover the mouth that is up, and the part of the skin that has the hair will be on the outside. Then you take two of the ropes and join them, and you use the rope and tie it around the skin that is hanging over the mouth of the guḡḡḡ. You will tie it tightly and force it and pull the skin so that the skin will be tight over the mouth.

And then you turn the *ḡuḡḡḡ* and put the other skin and tie it as you tied the first one. At that time, you will stand the *ḡuḡḡḡ* on its side so that the two mouths will be facing you and your friend.

And you will get the large *ḡuḡḡḡ* strings to sew it. We call them *ḡbandaa*. As for the strings for the *ḡuḡḡḡ*, all the bush animals I called, you can use their skins to make *ḡuḡḡḡ* strings. But the strings we use to sew a *ḡuḡḡḡ* are large and thick, and they are not as long as the ones that we use to sew the drums. If you have the strings of a large antelope or a cow, it is good.

And you will also get a large awl. The time you put and pulled the skin on the mouth of the *ḡuḡḡḡ*, there was some part remaining, and you will take that part and turn it and roll it back over the rope. If you turn the skin like that and wrap it around the rope, you will use the awl to pierce a hole in the skin at the point where you have turned it over the rope, and that is where you will sew it. The way you pierce the hole, you go through the skin and under the rope, and you come out through the skin again, so that it will pinch the rope and hold it. And so how you pinch it, you roll the skin over the rope, and then you pinch. Then you pierce it under the rope and push the string through. As you have done that, you sew it through the holes you made in the skin, and when you sew it and pull it, the string will pull against the rope, and that will let the skin pull tight around the rope. And that is what we call *ḡbankuyra* or *ḡuḡḡḡ kuyra*, the seat of the *ḡuḡḡḡ*. How the skin is rolled tightly around the rope, the rope and the skin together, that is the way the skin is seated on the mouth of the *ḡuḡḡḡ*. And so it is the same as the *lun' kuyra*, the ring of reeds that fits over the mouth of the drum.

There is something else again you will get: you will cut some small pieces of skin we call *ḡbanchirga*. You will pierce a hole in every small piece. These small pieces of skin are what you are going to use when you want to sew the places where you have pierced the skin. When you do that, these pieces will close the hole and protect the part where you have pierced it, and any time you pull the strings, the skin will not tear. And so the time you are sewing, you will put the strings through these pieces before you thread them through the holes: if you make a hole, you will take one of the small pieces of skin and put the string through it before you pull the string through.

When you sew the string at the mouth of the *ḡuḡḡḡ* where you are sitting, then you will give the string to your friend, and he will pinch and sew it under the other rope. Then he will pull it through and put one of the *ḡbanchirga* to protect that place. At that time, your friend will make another hole just a short way around the outside of the *ḡuḡḡḡ*, put another of the small pieces of skin, and thread the string through again. You will see that the string is lying along the outside of the rope, on the side of the mouth, and it is pulling against the rope and

holding the skin tightly over the mouth of the *gunḡon*. When he passes the string back the other way to you, then you will sew through on the other side, and you will also pull the string through. You will also move a short way around the outside of the *gunḡon*, make another hole again, put the *gbanchirga*, and sew the string back to your friend. When you do that, your friend will pull the string through to the other side. The two of you will be making the same holes and pushing the string through, and taking the small pieces of skin and putting the string through them.

You will be doing that and going all around the *gunḡon* until you come to join the place where you started, and then you will continue by going in the other direction so that the string will catch all around the outside of the rope that is holding the skin over the mouth. When you come the second time to the place where you started, then the *gunḡon* is sewn all around both mouths, and you will tie the string. At that time, you will take a knife and cut away the skin that is folded back over the rope and is remaining over the edge of the mouth. The part that you cut away like that, you can use it to make the small pieces, the *gbanchirga*, any time you are going to sew a *gunḡon*. At that time you get a short piece of *gunḡon* string. You take the awl again and make a hole at the edge of each mouth of the *gunḡon*, under the rope, and you put a string through and tie it. This is what you are going to use to tie a piece of cloth so that you can hang the *gunḡon* from your shoulder when you beat it or carry it.

And then you take the *gunḡon* and dry it. We drummers don't dry it in the sun, because if you dry it in the sun, when it's night and you're going to beat it, it will be loose. But if you dry it in the shade, when it's dry, it's dry. And getting to daybreak, when it's dry, you get a knife or a razor blade and remove all the hair that was on the skin that you used to cover the mouth. When you finish shaving it, you get a small string again to tie across the top part of the mouth. That is what will buzz when you beat the *gunḡon*, and we call it *chahirga*. This string is the same string we use to sew a drum, and we make it from a drumskin that was broken. You take an awl to make small holes on the outside edge of each mouth of the *gunḡon*, and you put the string through and tie it to the thick strings you used to lace the *gunḡon*.

And then you get some strips of leather again, and you take one and wrap it around two of the heavy lacing strings that are on the side of the *gunḡon*. These leather strips, we call them *gbandarigara*, because they will catch and pull the *gbandaa*, the strings. That is what pulls the strings. The time you are going to beat the *gunḡon*, you will be pulling these strings, and the *gunḡon* will become very tight. And so the time you sewed the *gunḡon*, you made the holes to lace it so that they will be two-two and going around the *gunḡon*. If not that, then you will

have a string remaining on the outside, and you won't be able to pull it. How the size of the *gunḡoṅ* is, maybe you will have sewn eight or ten or twelve places to go around it. If the *gunḡoṅ* is big, if you don't make it with more laces, then if you pull it, it won't sound. And if you have sewn it well and finished, at that time, the *gunḡoṅ* will become a *gunḡoṅ*. And this is how we sew a *gunḡoṅ*.

If you bring a *gunḡoṅ* out and you want to beat it, you have to tighten it. You use either the drumstick, or even you can use your palm, to hit the edges of the *gunḡoṅ*. And then you will pull the *gbandarigara*, the leather strips that you put on every two strings, to pull the strings together so that the skins will hold tightly. And if you are beating a *gunḡoṅ* and you see that it is becoming loose, then you have to put it down, start pulling the *gbandarigara* one by one, turning the *gunḡoṅ* and going around all of the strings. Then you will see that the mouth will be strong again. There are some *gunḡoṅ* beaters, when it comes like that, they don't even put the *gunḡoṅ* on the ground: the *gunḡoṅ* will still be hanging, then he just hold the leather strips and pull, and he will use the drum stick to hit the edge of the mouth; you will see that the mouth will become tight, but it isn't everybody who does that.

And when a *gunḡoṅ* becomes old, or when you beat it for some months, you will see that when you pull the leather strips to tighten it, the sound doesn't come again. The strings have stretched, and they cannot pull the mouth tight, and the mouth too has become loose. At that time, two people have to sit down again. The way you sat down to sew it the first time, that is how you will sit: one mouth of the *gunḡoṅ* will face one person, and the other mouth will face his friend. You will remove the leather strips, the *gbandarigara*, and then you will pull the strings again. You are not making holes and sewing it, but you are only going around all the *gunḡoṅ* and pulling the strings. That is what we call *gunḡoṅ voora*, pulling the *gunḡoṅ*. And when you pull it like that, you will see that the strength will come back again. And you will put the leather strips back onto the strings, and you will be pulling them before you beat. That is the way we do it.

And so in Dagbon here, our drums have got a lot of talks, and this is one of them. And on the part of how we make our drums and how we sew them, this is what I know about it. And tomorrow I will tell you how a drum is beaten and sounded.