

A Drummer's Testament

Introduction part 6

The Ethnographic Seed

Among these drummers is a man named Ibrahim. He has made the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, the Hajj, so he is an Alhaji: Alhaji Ibrahim. His father's name was Abdulai, so he is Ibrahim Abdulai. He is a drummer, so he is Ibrahim *Luna*, Ibrahim the drummer. He is a leader of this group of drummers, and he is often addressed by the people in his area as *Mba Luna*, My Father Drummer. He is a straightforward and unassuming person, and on the surface there seems to be nothing special about him, until you see him through the eyes of others, for he commands a great deal of respect among his peers within his society. I first met him in 1971, when I came to Tamale to learn how to drum. I was after the music, pure and simple, but there was more to drumming than I thought. But then again, in a place where people in their fifties are still called "young," and I was entering my mid-twenties, I was still very young. I only knew enough to go there, and I was lucky that when I asked for drummers to teach me, someone took me to Alhaji Ibrahim. He is the medium for our access to the depth of the culture that stands hidden behind the otherwise unremarkable face of Tamale. If we were all really there together, we could go to sit with him in cool of the evenings. Under the stars, he would talk to us about things we know and things we don't know. But we are not there, and as it is, Alhaji Ibrahim and I wrote this book, and the book itself has its own story which I will tell first.

Dagbamba drummers share a number of role models with Western scholars: they have a disciplined approach to learning, a concern for sources of information, and an awareness of their responsibility to educate; they are self-conscious of their relative erudition within their society, and they are inclined to the temperance of intellectual life. Given my own intellectual background, we understood one another, and I enjoyed relating to someone like Alhaji Ibrahim. During the early days of our relationship, however, what I appreciated most was the seriousness with which Alhaji Ibrahim regarded the drumming he was teaching me. And he could really play wonderfully. Whenever I sat with him and followed his drumming on any particular dance, the rhythms came together clearly, and the movement of the dance beat was easy to understand. I suffered occasional frustration with the sheer size of the drumming repertoire and the disciplined complexity of drumming techniques, one small and embraceable face of the

magnitude of the task of trying to come to terms with culture. In parallel fashion, I was also receptive to the advice he gave me about how I should understand the work of learning drumming, but I was less than comfortable, perhaps, with the way he seemed able to see right through me. The man was very heavy and at the same time very funny. He would cite proverbs that would crack everyone up and put somebody gently to shame, or he would look at something for a few minutes and then just give it a name that everyone would use to call it from then on. He held me at arm's length and applied standards to me as if our cultural differences were only a problem of communication and of little account in matters of judgment. I knew, of course, that it was I who had come to him and that I should adjust to his expectations and moral authority, but his maturity and easy-going self-confidence made me feel shallow, and I was ambivalent about his ability to cut through complex situations in the confrontation of traditions to find a common thread that linked us as human beings.

This odd discomfort pointed to a need for trust and a problem of commitment. I was appreciative of the way he helped solve all the problems of my work, but I was aware that our relationship projected the beginning of a time of growth for me, and I was conscious that my youthful lack of experience augured inescapable difficulties and dependency. I was at the time secure enough in my own learnedness not to be overly worried about abandoning an illusion of control in terms of research discipline, for we shared an affection for learning. But learning drumming in Dagbon was more than memory and technique. I sensed broader issues concerning my receptivity and worthiness as a potential vessel and vehicle of a tradition that was much bigger than me as a single person, or indeed, whether my aspirations included it. Elderly drummers had responded to my enthusiasm and started calling me *Lunzeyu*, “red-skinned drummer,” after a person who was one of the early great drummers in Dagbon centuries ago, saying that I was “born in the same skin” as *Lunzeyu* and that my appetite for drumming showed that I had “inherited” him. Later at home I mentioned this point in an off-hand conversation with an acquaintance who was a spiritualist and macrobiotic dietitian. He said, “There is nothing surprising if a Great Will needs several lifetimes to complete its work,” and advised me that if I returned to Ghana, I should enhance my concentration by eating local food but avoiding too much pepper and by keeping my gaze downward whenever I walked about. I laughed.

When Alhaji Ibrahim and I worked together the first time, in 1971, I had taken a year-and-a-half leave away from a graduate program at The Hartford Seminary Foundation, where I had a fellowship to resume studying in 1972. Alhaji Ibrahim and I corresponded, and I told him I would be coming as soon as I

finished my course of study, and where I could be reached in the meantime. I wrote *African Rhythm and African Sensibility* as a master's thesis, but the faculty determined that I could use it as a dissertation if I would complete the necessary course work and exams. I took some extra time to prepare *African Rhythm and African Sensibility* for publication, and it was not until late 1974 that I was able to return to Ghana. Charles Keil, who was an external member of my doctoral committee, had advised me to plan several projects. During my first stay in Ghana, I had studied music in a number of contexts, and I was considering a collection of life histories of musicians. I was also thinking of using a single cultural setting to look more deeply into the themes of *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*. I was also thinking about using the social and musical environment of an urban nightclub as a nexus for examining the intermingling of urban groups, and particularly for looking at the lifestyles and mentality of the generation of post-colonial youth who were my friends in Accra.

On my return to Ghana, I had intended to travel to Tamale directly, but things kept going wrong in Accra. I struggled for several months to find accommodations in that overcrowded town; then my camera broke; then my tape recorder broke; then I got sick; then I got sidetracked into other projects. I was busy in the Ewe traditional area as well as the Ewe areas of Accra. I roamed the urban scene and worked with contemporary musicians. I continued to spend time developing my friendships in Accra and Lome with an eye toward finding a way to describe the lives of marginal young men and women who were cut off from traditional supports and were making their own way in the towns. Those friendships would later be the effective root of *Hustling Is Not Stealing* and *Exchange Is Not Robbery*,¹ but I had not yet resolved my approach and I was unclear about any eventual productivity, although we all had a lot of fun. I had a letter from Alhaji Ibrahim that some Dagbamba in Accra had informed him of my arrival in Ghana, and I wrote back that yes, I was in the country and I was coming. But my situation, with its multiple interests and projects and problems and reasons and excuses, was what one of my Accra friends liked to summarize in Pidgin as “and den and den den,” meaning “and then and then and then.” I was too hassled to go north, perhaps reluctant because I felt unready for the patience of disciplined work with Alhaji Ibrahim, and I thought I had to prepare myself for the changes my relationship with Alhaji Ibrahim was going to put me through.

I finally became fed up with my procrastination and left my other work hanging, and I arrived in Tamale in mid-1975 and found everything easy. There were no accommodations at the time of my arrival, and a friend of Alhaji Ibrahim, Alhaji Iddi Yakubu, who lived two houses away, gave me a room in his house.

We resumed my training where we had left off, but this time Alhaji Ibrahim said he wanted to add some drumming that was sanctioned only for certain serious cultural events, and he wanted to explain to me the history and drumming language behind those dance beats. He said it would be good for me to learn them if I was going to call myself a drummer. I was obliged to make what were for me some expensive sacrifices of animals, and I did so because of him and despite my feeling that there were plenty of other dances with good beats that I might learn with equal enthusiasm. There were stirrings among some of the younger drummers about teaching a foreigner these secrets, but Alhaji Ibrahim refused to mind their complaints. Nonetheless, the pressure of tradition was real, and when he talked to me about these heavy dances, he seemed to shrink and become visibly older. He was encouraged by elder drummers in the area whose opinions were strongly supportive and who joined him in furthering our efforts to advance my learning. That period of conflict in the situation represented a crisis of commitment for Alhaji Ibrahim as well as for me, and as much as I had to change in order to work with him, his life also changed.

It was also in 1975 that Alhaji Ibrahim and I started working with the two associates who were to be with us as part of a team for the duration of the evolving project, Kissmal Ibrahim Hussein and Benjamin D. Sunkari. They played key roles in the translation and preparation of this text. Because of the importance of the information Alhaji Ibrahim planned to give me about the sanctioned dances, we decided to tape record our discussions in the form of lectures (*yełtoya*: “talks”), and we needed reliable translators for several reasons. Alhaji Ibrahim was fluent in Asante Twi and spoke English to an extent, and at the time, from my days hanging out in Accra, I was pretty good at Twi, so we generally conversed in English or in Twi. While I was studying Dagbani, I could follow him to an extent, but even had I studied it for years, the material was too important and Alhaji Ibrahim’s command of language too sophisticated for a casual approach. There are even many Dagbamba chiefs who have elders sitting by them to help them understand the “deep Dagbani,” the enriched archaic and poetic forms drummers sometimes employ in their songs and historical oratory. In my later correspondence with Harold Blair, who had edited the first Dagbani dictionary, he wrote me that even when he was fluent enough to dream in Dagbani, he had difficulty understanding the Dagbani in the drum history, which he compared to Chaucerian English. Although many ethnographers become expert in a local language, and some circumstances demand it, there is in practice a distinction between mastery and use,² and most fieldworkers achieve varying degrees of proficiency mainly for purposes of adaptation and rapport, and if possible they try

to safeguard the accurate transmission of information by relying on indigenous translators. As a drummer and a master of words and a lover of language, Alhaji Ibrahim had a strong sense of the importance of language to the substance of tradition. Later, when this book began to take shape and we all became more sensitive to the nature of the task, Alhaji Ibrahim used to stump the translators by using obscure or archaic words and then tease them that they didn't know Dagbani. Translating was difficult enough for native Dagbani speakers who had been speaking English for fifteen or twenty years. Even if I had known Dagbani more thoroughly, I would have used the same multilayered system, described below, for handling the type of material we were eliciting.

During those early days when Alhaji Ibrahim was talking about matters considered especially serious, therefore, it was important to find specialized assistants, people who had grown up speaking Dagbani and who had had years of English schooling and practice as well. On the other hand, in a part of Africa where many people are multi-lingual, most people do not use translators as such, but they do rely on messengers and intermediaries. Good translators in that context are judged on their ability to convey and reformulate information to suit the situation. If you are annoyed at someone and send a messenger to give a complaint, a good messenger will "repair" your words and try to find the best way to resolve the problem. Social researchers both struggle against and rely upon this orientation, for a translator's intervention can occasionally lead to clearer understanding and better results. Alhaji Ibrahim and I had some frustrating sessions with experienced translators, who reduced long speeches to a few summary sentences or used phrasing that was inaccurate even to my limited Dagbani ears. We decided to look for people who were close to us personally, who were interested in Dagbamba culture, and who would be adaptable to our ideas about how we wanted to talk to each other in serious discourse.

Our two associates recruited themselves. Kissmal Ibrahim Hussein was still in secondary school at that time, having attended Arabic school during his tender years. A trusted son of Alhaji Ibrahim, he came to be very influential in the way we communicated as a team. He was already there as a constant companion who enjoyed going around with me on my visits to greet various elderly people, and a more loyal and sensitive friend would be hard to find. Kissmal had actually become involved before I even knew him: when I was first in Dagbon, he was a kid; he had frequently tagged along anonymously behind me, and he had written a journal of his observations of my movements, doing reverse anthropology so to speak. His memory was remarkably accurate, and he was able to give detailed accounts of conversations and recall taped sessions nearly word for word. An able

translator, he also became a reliable coordinator of the many different activities and exercises that this project eventually required. Ben Sunkari was the younger brother of my best friend during my 1971 work, Mohammed Mohadien James. Mohammed and I had shared many a pleasant conversation when we used to walk together to witness and record the wealth of musical life in Tamale and its suburbs, but when I returned to Ghana in 1974, Mohammed had moved to Accra and was trading. I was close to his family, and I used to greet his mother regularly. By 1975, Ben was living at home, having completed his “A” level examinations and a specialist training course, and he had begun a teaching career. Extremely intelligent, totally fluent in English, poetically sensitive to Dagbani, Ben brought himself forward because of his interest in his Dagbamba heritage, and he immediately demonstrated a probing delicacy in rendering Alhaji Ibrahim’s Dagbani. We worked together for several months while I learned more about drumming, until my money ran out and I went home to make some more.

When I returned to Dagbon at the beginning of 1977, I asked Alhaji Ibrahim to talk more about drumming and his life as a drummer, and he agreed. I gathered Kissmal and Ben for a discussion of their role in the project, and I started by asking them why we should be interested in Alhaji Ibrahim’s story and what kind of person they thought he was. Kissmal noted three points. First, he said, his father does not like quarreling. Second, he is very sure of himself, and he does not mind what people say about him. Third, he treats everyone the same, that he treats his own children the same as anyone else’s children. Kissmal summarized his description of his father by saying that “He always knows what is good and how to do things in a correct way, and he knows what is bad, too. And it is because he knows that he was trained by some very great people in the past.” When I asked Kissmal whom he meant by “great people in the past,” Ben interjected, “He’s talking about something like tradition.”

At the time, though, even with further reflection and planning, none of us anticipated the scope of the project we were undertaking. I thought that through intensive interviews and discussions with Alhaji Ibrahim, we could focus on a personalized understanding of the meaning of music to someone whose life was involved with the observance of customs and who in some respects could represent the vocation of an African musician. I was thinking about trying something like an introspective life history as a way to join the many bits and pieces of “data” that are aspects of drumming beyond rhythmic creativity, to demonstrate how important African musicians are in their societies, how rich and fulfilling an experience their music gives them, so that musicians here would read it and weep for themselves. A focus on one person, I believed, would well convey

the depth of African music in a single society and thus expand the general themes about African music I had discussed in the dissertation that was to become *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*.³ *African Rhythm and African Sensibility* was a book about African music considered in its broadest and most general terms. Through working further with Alhaji Ibrahim, I wanted to show where drumming goes from the place that book ended, to enter African music at one particular point and go deeply into music's inspiration and effect. But the idea that we could do a comprehensive ethnography of the Dagbamba tradition in Alhaji Ibrahim's words had not yet become clear. I am still somewhat amazed at some people's capacity for knowledge, and I was very aware of Alhaji Ibrahim's intelligence and articulateness, but to me, it was not his encyclopedic knowledge that characterized his intelligence. Like Kissmal and Ben, I was interested in Alhaji Ibrahim's inner strength and broad vision, in the way he could see through people and the way he could cut through the complexities of any situation to reveal its essence. In Dagbon, when something is happening among the people, a drummer knows "what is inside it" and "what is under it." Alhaji Ibrahim's self-assurance reflected an image of a traditional intellect that is concerned with the meaning of culture, grounded in moral judgment and the practice of art.

We had asked Alhaji Ibrahim to talk about himself as a drummer, how he felt about his life within his culture, and the way he had lived since childhood. From the very day we started, he went far beyond what we asked and far beyond what we expected. At first, we tried to dissuade him from discussing details of what we thought were extraneous matters, like chieftaincy genealogies and customs, but he continually surprised us. During our early sessions, we were often confused as to why he was talking about one thing or another, and we tried to ask him to talk more about himself and his feelings about his life in Dagbon. He continually maintained that he could not talk about himself as a drummer without talking about chieftaincy, and the way Dagbamba lived in the past, and why they have come to live as they do. As the cassette tapes would spin and I would think about how laborious transcribing interviews is, it was often an effort not to interrupt him. But I did not want to interrupt him, because sometimes just as I was about to speak, he would say something very interesting or beautiful or gripping. Sometimes, too, he would talk about matters that raised an intriguing and ambivalent moral tension in me: my acknowledgment of his superior wisdom and my identification and respect for him as a friend and mentor were often out of joint with his perspective on certain customs I did not understand. Kissmal, Ben and I let him go and did our best to follow him. In our evening meetings we would sit around and scratch our heads, and it was only later that we would realize why he

had said certain things. After a dozen sessions, as Alhaji Ibrahim talked about himself by objectifying “the talks of drumming,” it was obvious that he had taken over and was following a different plan from ours, a continuing series of talks that had the structure of an ethnography and also was consistent with his interest in training me and bringing me up as a drummer. It was also obvious that his descriptions had more intimacy and impact than mine could have, and that they would be complete in their own terms.

Actually, the idea of doing an ethnography of Dagbon in Alhaji Ibrahim’s words was very attractive just because it was possible. Alhaji Ibrahim was capable of lecturing me on all the topics essential for a systematic description of the Dagbamba cultural heritage. There was thus an implicit critique of ethnographic models in the way the work would elevate an indigenous intellectual as the authoritative voice of cultural representation. Also, executing that strategy set up a number of interesting methodological challenges that I will discuss in the next section of this introduction. Indeed, the project addressed a number of ethnographic issues that could generate broader interest beyond Dagbon. The work also had credibility because scholars had already documented the learnedness of musicians in the savanna regions of West Africa, though mostly in the Mande cultural area, and the Dagbamba example extended that scholarship. The conception therefore resonated with anthropologists and other social scientists, whose positive reviews enabled the project to begin receiving institutional support from 1979. Thus did a number of circumstances come together.

I had always been impressed with the memory and verbal fluency required for non-literate erudition, and some aspects of my research on African music revolved around engaging the intellectual modes that are conveyed in nonverbal arts. Alhaji Ibrahim was both a great musician and a master of words. One of my mentors, the historian Ivor Wilks, once described Alhaji Ibrahim as a polymath. In our sessions, as Alhaji Ibrahim took fuller measure of his capabilities in that format, he expanded his lectures and showed his vision of the scope and depth that he wanted to achieve. Early on, perhaps sooner than I, he saw the full extent of the talks. Alhaji Ibrahim’s profile as a male traditionalist fits more closely to deeply entrenched expectations about cultural knowledge. His discourse is disciplined, full of proverbs, genealogical information, ceremonial references, and historical allusions. He continually amazed us with his ability to sit down and just talk for an hour or so, giving a structured presentation, without notes, on a topic he had perhaps thought through the night before, reclining in a chair outside his door.

In a comparable way, during 1977 and 1979 I also was doing intensive interviewing with an anonymous young woman who was one of my acquaintances among the young people I was moving with in towns like Accra and Lome, an endeavor that later resulted in *Hustling Is Not Stealing* and *Exchange Is Not Robbery*. She was not learned like Alhaji Ibrahim, but she was a genius at storytelling, a verbal artist who also used our extended interviews to challenge herself. The sustained focus of our interviews were for her an opportunity for a more ambitious and concentrated period of in-dwelling and remembrance. I believe that it has simply been her status as a non-literate marginal woman that prevented some readers, both male and female, from acknowledging her brilliance, her broad vision, and her capability to use her storytelling to produce a systematic ethnographic critique of the complex social world she and her associates occupied. I certainly had much less fellowship support for my work with her than for my work with Alhaji Ibrahim. At the time of this research, and generally up to now, Alhaji Ibrahim's profile as a male traditionalist fits more closely into deeply entrenched expectations about cultural knowledge.

In reality, though, Alhaji Ibrahim Mba Luṇa was indeed a great master. Extremely articulate and knowledgeable, he had witnessed the significant transformations of Dagbamba society during the twentieth century. He and his contemporaries grew up and reached their maturity under both British colonialism and Ghanaian nationhood, but they were raised by the last generation to grow up before colonialism reached Dagbon. He grew up in Dagbamba villages and lived in the major cities of Ghana, and he balanced a great respect for the Dagbamba tradition with a sensitive worldliness. Once it became clear that Alhaji Ibrahim was capable of a comprehensive overview of Dagbon, we committed ourselves to it without question. The book would employ his superior discourse, follow the way he made his points, and respect his perspectives on what was important for future generations of Dagbamba to know about themselves. Moreover, the elaboration of that format could dictate our procedures and build upon the situation in which we worked. When Alhaji Ibrahim spoke this book, he was talking to me and to Ben and Kissmal as an audience. My relationship with Alhaji Ibrahim as an ethnographer was consistent with my identification with him as his child, through my drumming apprenticeship, and consistent as well with my identity as a Dagbana drummer in the spiritual line of *Lunzeyu*. We shared that relationship, and we shared a love of learning, and we built on that experience. In me he was as well talking to a stranger who had come to Dagbon with an open heart. In Ben and Kissmal, Alhaji Ibrahim was looking at young Dagbamba and also looking at future generations who might someday be on the streets of Tamale.

He wanted all of us to feel that we might know and respect the Dagbamba at this point in their history, as he did. He wanted us to know that we could understand what is happening in the situations we witnessed and in which we might want to become involved. His expressed wish was that through us as a group, distant strangers he would never meet would know that the Dagbamba are a great people, and that future generations of Dagbamba would know themselves, and that they all would know the greatness of Dagbamba and could know the way to live in Dagbon and live with the Dagbamba.

To an ethnographer in this age of mutuality and dialogue, there are important questions that must be asked: what is going to stand for the relationships that were formed and developed in the field? what motives were behind those relationships, and will the work that results reflect those motives? Many anthropologists these days therefore talk about ethnographic work as a kind of translation that will bridge the different cultural worlds of ethnographer and subject, with the idea that the differences between people, the things that alienate them from each other, should not be reduced or simplified but should be represented in a way that preserves their distinctiveness while rendering them comprehensible as alternatives of the human potential. Translation is a good metaphor for the ethnographic task. It is a complex art that strives for balance and perspective to address the subtle ambiguities that make culture and character unique, yet it holds open the possibility of communication and understanding. Somehow we try to live with this possibility, although in moments of doubt we may say that we can never know another person, not even a brother or sister, parent or child. Somehow, despite all the philosophy about a human being's isolation, culture and character are passed from generation to generation and from friend to friend.

In the dictionary, the word "translate" has many meanings — to move, to convey, to relay, to transfer, to transform, even to exalt — from language to language, from place to place, from person to person, from culture to culture, from era to era, even from earth to heaven. Anthropologists have thought of all of these meanings, of course, because they have experienced deep and strange relationships in their research, and there is usually quite a distance between the different places they work. Anthropologists lead a difficult life, castaways adrift on a raft of intangibles in an often uncomprehending world, knowing the pain of distance and separation. Yet they are fortunate: washed by fragile feelings on distant shores, their calling evokes the mildness of the species, and they dwell within communication that the world had thought unachievable, to understand what was thought incomprehensible. Therefore, the anxieties they have do not turn on

isolation or selfishness but on devotion and responsibility, asking, as translators must, “Have I been faithful to that which I cared about and brought to another place?” Their translations convey and transform that intention, and they do not so much recreate the reality of the people and places they encountered as they make a new reality to reflect on their presence there.

An ethnography thus informed is a movement of culture. There are other ways in which this book is a translation, but the first steps of its movement started before the words, in our feelings for each other, to make this book stand for our relationship. It has its objectivity as a characterization of that real relationship, who we were and who we had to be to do this book. Our intentions were bound to that psychic movement of affection and fidelity which had weathered the conflict of commitment and trust. To follow it was to follow a process of identification, as between parent and child, friend and friend, working from and through our differences by projecting and internalizing each other’s needs. There is no process more basic to human emotion than that. As such, my habitation in Dagbon was no more than that simple process whereby a child grows to take the character of a parent by identification, and a parent holds and informs the child. And thus do I find that not a day passes when I fail to think or use something that Alhaji Ibrahim taught me. To talk about identification in this context is another way of talking about mediating the translation through ethnographic knowledge, to assert the authority of empathy and concern over anxiety and doubt in human relations.

Yet as simple and basic as it is, identification proceeds through a complex working through of the recognition of differences: it is not the result of a willful wish or an intuitive sympathy or a spontaneous feeling but of a special type of matured deliberation. To those with whom we would become as one, our approach begins with the perception of separation and difference, the ambivalent recognition of what we are not, and only through the gradual refinement of our self-consciousness do we arrive at a comprehension of another that we could describe as internalization. Thus in childhood, through the stages of growth, and finally in mourning, do we acquire the character of those we feared, do we understand the motives of those we followed and come to act as they did, do we become like them and speak of devotion and love, do we say, “This is my family, my father, my brother, my mother, my sister.” Alhaji Ibrahim advised me that a child with sense will take every older person to be his father. As time passed, I came to call Alhaji Ibrahim “father,” and he called me his child, and I came to call his brothers and his elders “father” as well. And they too turned toward me and extended our ties, praying for my father and mother and family at home. And my father and mother in America also reciprocated with their help through me, and we

sent Ibrahim Father Drummer on the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. They told me as well to give Alhaji Ibrahim the same love and respect I gave to them. I did so, but even then I still did not see the full wisdom of this advice or know the full strength of my relationship to Alhaji Ibrahim, though a time would come when I would.

Notes:

1. John M. Chernoff, *Hustling Is Not Stealing: Stories of an African Bar Girl* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) and *Exchange Is Not Robbery: More Stories of an African Bar Girl* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
2. James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority," *Representations* 2 (spring 1983): 132-43.
3. John Miller Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

