

A Drummer's Testament

Introduction part 8

The Creative

This book stands for many things. On its surface, as I have represented it and named it, it is a testament. It is an act of witness and testimony, and it is an inheritance. I have stressed the basic importance of the idea that the book will be there for future generations of Dagbamba who will not have access to their elders. Does it reach beyond that benefit? What made me believe that I should devote so much of my life to this project? I originally engaged my Dagbamba friends more as a seeker than as an anthropologist. I enjoyed my friendships there, and I enjoyed the challenges of learning to perform their music. Later I was caught up in the challenges of understanding their intellectual style. They shared their own experience of those challenges with me. I was fascinated by how hard they worked to perfect their artistry. I felt intellectual affinities with the amount of disciplined thought that they put into their artistic traditions. I admired how much perseverance and devotion their tradition required of them to achieve expertise within it.

The very existence of an artistic tradition like that of Dagbamba drummers is wonderful. Their artistry gathers musicianship, dance, poetry, proverbs, folklore, and epic history — all into multifaceted performance contexts. There, within those impermanent contexts, through play and enjoyment, something enduring is recreated. Drumming in Dagbon refers to and binds many things beyond itself. The Dagbamba have elevated drumming as a medium to give coherence and integrity to a broad cultural cloth enveloping political structures, historical knowledge, family genealogies, social protocols, intellectual inquiry, community events — and ultimately to a sense of Dagbon itself. From outside or at first glance, the place seems impoverished, but it is rich in its cultural life. It was through intense creative energy and thought that Dagbamba drummers developed such a high art form beyond their apparently limited means. They developed that art for themselves and not to acquire any place on the world stage that might derive from a book. The living body of thought that is their heritage has served its purpose within their own history.

The complexity of the drummers' understanding of themselves has inspired, and required, a complexly conceived ethnography. We can recall the fundamental metaphor of anthropology projecting itself as a mirror in which we see ourselves

and others as reflections of one another. We can recall the intellectual terrain of anthropological knowledge as a Western literary genre that explores both broad and detailed reflections on the diversity and similarity of human experience. The image of transformational affinities with which I began this introduction, from the sound of the drum to the spoken word to the written word, is nonetheless a transformation of song and dance into a dissimilar cultural manifestation. This book no doubt requires a different type of engagement that presents its own challenges. But at least, this book will be there to provide an entrance way for those who can hear its words.

What more does it represent? It is often said that artists are gifted, but it is rather they who give gifts. The sacrifices that artists — or drummers in Dagbon — make for their art speaks of a fundamental generosity. Their gift endows sharing and participation. Certainly, it is true that people anywhere might benefit from having access to the Dagbamba elders, to lean against the wall and enjoy the opportunity just to dwell within their cultural environment. Out of longing to build what Rilke called the temples in their hearing, that experience might in turn engender a realization of human value. In the face of twentieth-century philosophies of meaningless and absurdity, there have been some modern philosophers of art for whom artistic genius, confirmed by the universal sweep of its historical and cultural displays, provides a potential justification for human existence, or perhaps even an ironic theodicy of sorts. I have found consolation in that thought, and I have seen this work to be a gift which affirms that aspiration.

This book therefore stands for Alhaji Ibrahim and for the culture he represents. It stands for the relationship I had with him, and for me as someone who entered Dagbon through drumming to see where it would lead me. It stands for our relationship with Ben and Kissmal, and adding Rev. Wumbee and Mustapha and Alhaji Mumuni, and coming to elder drummers of Dagbon and to the people who helped us as friends and the people who understood the significance of the work. It moves to my family and friends and those people here who understood that the care we all showed each other was somehow connected to the task of representing the culture of the Dagbamba. That culture demanded creativity to bring it into being in our lives.

The image of culture represented in this book recalls the ancient Chinese image of culture represented as “The Creative,” the first of the sixty-four hexagrams of the *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*. The *I Ching* is an oracle with which people in a civilization of great order, rationality and wisdom understood themselves in times of crisis and decision; it was studied as fruitful ground for philosophies of conduct by schools of thought as ostensibly unrelated as those of Confucius and Lao-tse.¹ Not the least of my reasons for including the following

discussion of the *I Ching* is that it will no doubt seem to many readers to be surprising and out of place. Conventional attitudes would contrast and not compare a great classical civilization like that of ancient China to a poor and underdeveloped society in the African hinterlands. Wealth can have wildly varying significance when comparing societies; however, the classical character of Dagbamba society in some ways makes it culturally more comparable to ancient China than to the West. In contrast to a Western focus on innovation in artistic expression, for example, the Dagbamba artistic heritage more closely resembles the Chinese approach to art broadly characterized as “the need for inspired spontaneity” along with a “reliance on acquired vocabularies,” resulting in “a combination of traditionalism and respect for the uniqueness of every performance.”²

I believe that there is something to be learned with regard to a person like Alhaji Ibrahim from the nature of the *I Ching* and the moralistic commentaries of the ancient Chinese scholars. The language of the *I Ching* itself is vague, a quality it shares with other systems of divination and thought, a quality from which perhaps derives some measure of its continuing adaptability.³ The way one engages it affects the kind of sense it makes. Therefore, its level of discourse may serve here as a provocative type of discourse to complement the discourse of literate Westerners and the discourse of an indigenous non-literate intellectual like Alhaji Ibrahim. In such a juxtaposition, Alhaji Ibrahim’s discourse is much more accessible, probably, than most Western scholarship, and certainly more accessible than the *I Ching*. Still, it can be intriguing to spend a bit of time with the type of discourse in the *I Ching*.

I was introduced to the *I Ching* by my dear friend and fellow drummer Eric Rucker, a devotee of the Yoruba *orisha*, a *babalorisha* of Yemoja, and a student of Ifa divination. Eric had the broad sympathy to connect himself with Alhaji Ibrahim without even meeting him. Eric learned to beat the *gunḡon* from me, and he played it admirably. We drummed together nicely on many occasions over many years of friendship. I have mentioned him above as a significant person to this book who helped me keep the spirit of my relationship to Dagbon alive while I did the writing work in the United States. I shared and discussed early drafts with him, and he influenced me as a model of positive receptiveness who attempted to internalize Dagbamba cultural values on a personal level in his time and place. During the time when he was helping me proofread the galleys of *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*, he involved me with the *I Ching* as a framework for supportive meditation.

I had just moved back to the States. I was separated from Alhaji Ibrahim and my friends in Ghana. I had received the first of the fellowships and grants

that would later continue to provide a significant amount of support for the project, and I was in transition to a more isolated phase of the work. I was somewhat concerned about the amount of work that was involved. Alhaji Ibrahim and I had together faced many problems in doing the work, and I knew that I would have to struggle to bring the project to fruition and that part of my struggle would be getting encouragement to do the work, especially in the States. Eric brought out the *I Ching* as a way of offering that encouragement. We asked how I should understand the work and come to terms with it in order to do it, and what I should be thinking about my role in the work.

In that initial reading, the response we received was the first hexagram in the *I Ching*, titled The Creative, in a form that changed to the hexagram known as The Receptive, one of the more than four thousand possibilities of an *I Ching* reading. Starting from the first time Eric showed me the use of the *I Ching* and throughout the next few months, I played with the *I Ching* while I thought about the trajectory of my studies of drumming and my relationship to Alhaji Ibrahim. During that time, I so frequently saw this hexagram of The Creative that it might be considered a symbol of this book. After it appeared the first time, when I had rather casually watched Eric consult the oracle with broad questions about the work, the oracle later on continued to reply to my questions with the same hexagram. I therefore thought more deeply about it so that it might become another guide for me in finding pathways to following through the work.

It was still later that I began thinking about the actual parallels between the commentaries on the imagery of the hexagram and the cultural understanding Alhaji Ibrahim represented. I cannot say that the *I Ching* influenced me to do anything differently, though its message was indeed encouraging when I faced problems, and perhaps I found added patience as a result. Oddly enough, none of the friends and colleagues whom I asked about my reflecting on the *I Ching* within this introduction questioned the appropriateness of discussing a book of divination seriously, and none were uncomfortable with the uncanny aspect of the fact that I kept getting a particular hexagram. What was difficult for some of them was the *I Ching's* moralistic language, which some thought potentially alienating, as well as the challenging quality of its ideas.

In the *I Ching*, each hexagram represents an image. The image is in turn associated with a judgment and with related attributes, tendencies, virtues, processes of nature, and so on. The *I Ching's* rhetoric is difficult at first glance, not unlike the rhetoric of Dagbamba drummers, seemingly simple while continually addressing certain realities through vague proverbs that require thought. I feel, therefore, that the *I Ching* fits the purposes of this introduction with regard to the text that follows, because when one uses the *I Ching*, relating to

the given text requires one to look beneath the surface of a situation, yet the language is not superficial because it is the vehicle for meditation and understanding. If from our own modern mentality, we elevate what we might feel to be the enormous contrast between classical China and northern Ghana, this reflection on the *I Ching* may seem all the more remarkable, as remarkable as the repetition of the oracle to my queries about my relationship to Alhaji Ibrahim and the work we were doing. In this context the *I Ching* may open doors for readers by demonstrating the affinity of the understanding with which people in these two very different civilizations have approached the idea of culture, for there are many parallels between the way Alhaji Ibrahim approaches life and what has been described as the Confucian sense of deliberate tradition.⁴

In an *I Ching* consultation, casting coins or sticks generates six lines. Each of the lines is represented as either straight or broken, and each particular order of lines is viewed as forming a hexagram. During centuries of use, the elemental pairing of straight and broken in turn has come to represent the complementary and contrasting qualities at the heart of much Chinese philosophy: *yin* and *yang*, light and dark, firm and yielding, masculine and feminine, waxing and waning, above and below, strong and weak, positive and negative, and so on. The combination of possibilities yields sixty-four six-line arrangements, or hexagrams, each one an image based on its internal groupings of lines and on its accompanying ideas that reflect the essence of a situation and what is under or behind it. In the book of the *I Ching*, each hexagram is accompanied by text that interprets it as an “image,” as a “judgment,” and through commentaries. The hexagrams are therefore something like symbolic abstractions of a structured variety of human conditions that are to be interpreted thoughtfully with reference to the questions one might ask about one’s circumstances and an appropriate course of action. The character of the six individual lines in a hexagram is sophisticated in their generation through various divination techniques so that a particular line can be considered as static, indicating an abiding concern or problem, or as changing, indicating direction and potential through the transformation of the hexagram’s “changing” lines into their opposites to form a second hexagram.

The hexagram of The Creative that I repeatedly met and have come to understand as a representation of the idea of culture is composed of six straight, strong, positive lines. This configuration is interpreted with highly elevated language in multiple ways in the *I Ching*, as the “image” of double heaven in its perfection, as spirit in contrast to nature or the senses. The Creative is an image of “the essence of power and energy” conceived of as constantly repeated motion based in time. The Creative thus inherently conveys a notion of enduring

influence, “the power of time and the power of persisting in time,” in terms of “its action on the universe and of its action on the world of men.” In tune with African spirituality, The Creative represents the rule of the head, the guidance of the intellect in creative origins. The Creative achieves cultural continuity through “furthering” and “persevering in” “the work of conservation” as “a continuous actualization and differentiation of form.” The Creative is thus conceived of as restless and associated with movement. In this regard, the *I Ching* acknowledges the ongoing effort and rigorous commitment that are necessary for cultural traditions to persist and survive.

When we were working on this book, Alhaji Ibrahim was an older man, yet rather than doing the work with, as he said, “what his heart wanted,” he was continually getting up and going to different towns just to ask questions so that he would not make a mistake. This restless and searching honesty is one example of his relationship to The Creative. Within the purview of the *I Ching*, The Creative is something that moves through him, and he was always exemplifying it. That is how culture moves, too, through people like him. He lived that way because it was his way of having integrity in his life, and the hexagram refers to what is involved in living like that. The hexagram, with its positive image of movement and transformation, also speaks of a foundation of “peace and security,” of a sense of propriety and ethics, of power and success, “of curbing evil and furthering good,” of “awakening and developing the higher nature of humanity.”

In the hexagram, too, creative energies are blessed with good encounters, and no obstacle like time or distance is too great to overcome. When I thought of my relationship to Alhaji Ibrahim as a drummer and cultural historian, I understood the oracle to be saying that our relationship was as though destined. I have described bringing our work to fruition as a struggle, but once I became involved with Alhaji Ibrahim and saw where our relationship was going, it was as if I really had no choice but to follow through. As the commentaries suggested, I experienced that destiny as constraining me to come from love, clarity, perseverance, from whatever was the best in me. When Eric and I first cast the coins, all six of the lines of The Creative changed to give the second hexagram, its complement, The Receptive, the natural response to The Creative, an image of devotion and perseverance.

Within this reflection on The Creative, Alhaji Ibrahim is a source of the culture of these people, the Dagbamba, a master of the creative force within them. According to the *I Ching*, The Creative directs a human being to seek happiness through perseverance in what is right and what will stand through time. Alhaji Ibrahim, through his relationship to The Creative in Dagbamba culture, can also serve as a symbol or example of an important concept in the *I Ching*, the idea and

image of “the Great Man.” The image of the Great Man gives metaphoric reference to the oracle’s underlying ideas of responsibility, propriety, and harmony. As the image pertains to this hexagram, the Great Man links the attributes of the image of heaven with cardinal virtues, achieving peace and security in many ways: through humaneness, through creating order, through creating union by linking love to mores and justice, exemplifying the perseverance of wisdom and thus ensuring the continuity and duration of The Creative. The *I Ching* compares the success of creative activity to “rain” and “the gift of water,” which cause “the germination” and development of life, suggesting that all aspects of the cultural portrait which flows from Alhaji Ibrahim’s mouth might have substance and give sustenance. Alhaji Ibrahim maintains, and one of his proverbial name affirms, that there is no end to drumming and wisdom. As an extension of that cultural movement, this book is offered as a testament with a prayer for enduring influence in the sharing of love. The hexagram of The Creative requires a willingness to suffer to continue this path. The creation of this book required a willingness from both Alhaji Ibrahim and me to alter and change ourselves until we attained a relationship that comprehended the cultural affinities we shared. When he started the work, Alhaji Ibrahim tried to make himself strong in every way. He prayed and prayed, seeking to extend our friendship to his family and my family, and he sought the company and advice of his elders, his brothers Mumuni and Sheni, and his dear friend, the Maalam Alhaji Shahadu Issa, Limam of Lamashegu. In his life and in this work, Alhaji Ibrahim was always “consciously casting out the inferior and degrading in himself,” “limiting the field of his activity” to further himself and follow his path, and by that means he achieved a profound integrity.

As the work progressed, I encountered The Creative again and again, with changing lines: into The Caldron, the vessel of sacrifice in the temple of the ancestors; into The Gentle, representing the gradual penetration of wind; and in the final stages of the work into the last hexagram, Before Completion, with its hopeful messages of fruitfulness through carefulness and of order through differentiation. But on several occasions, particularly while I was working with the text itself, as its readers shall, The Creative came with a changing line in the fifth position, becoming The Treasure, or Possession in Great Measure. All of these hexagrams in some way directed me to my role and my position with reference to the words Alhaji Ibrahim has given us. I often reflected on the thought that even with all the experience and intelligence and wisdom Alhaji Ibrahim had, he was still adding to it, and yet he was able to talk at length about all this knowledge without once opening a book. He was talking entirely out of his memory, which was like a big pot or vessel filled up to the top with water, still

becoming fuller as he grew in his eldership. I was there to receive it, and he just poured it all into me. This thought relates well to the various images of The Cauldron, The Receptive, and The Treasure, but I would here like to comment on the particular hexagram of The Treasure, for he often advised me, “Don’t let what you are holding in your hands to fall on the ground.”

Within the movement of the lines in an *I Ching* consultation, upward from first through sixth, The Creative is at one point described as an image of growth representing stages of an ascent on six dragons. In Western symbolism, dragons are associated with greed and a host of other negative traits, but in Chinese symbolism, dragons typically represent water, fertility and the energy of the thunder and lightning that augur the procreativity of the earth.⁵ In the movement from The Creative to The Treasure, the ascent stops in the “favored” position of the changing fifth line: the ruler of the hexagram is described as a human ruler in touch with humanity, not at the sixth stage in which “a man climbs so high that he loses touch with the rest of mankind, and becomes isolated.” In the fifth line of The Creative, the image of a flying dragon in the heavens reflects the achievement of the Great Man. The implication is that Alhaji Ibrahim’s lectures had risen to the realm of the past chiefs and drummers, those who had reached high levels of spiritual effect. The *I Ching* speaks of the permeating “visibility” of this achievement, whose “influence spreads” and is seen “throughout the world” like the sun. Everybody can see this man’s greatness. The positive influence of the Great Man is there whether one understands or not. The *I Ching* even says that “everyone who sees him may count himself blessed.” In the blessings are help: models of ways to live with people, ways of seeking what is worthy in relationships. In his commentary on this aspect of The Creative, Confucius wrote of concord, that “things that have affinity in their inmost natures seek one another.”

With a changing fifth line, the image of culture in The Creative changes to the image of the hexagram representing The Treasure, or Possession in Great Measure, where the fifth line refers to one whose “truth is accessible, yet dignified.” The *I Ching*’s comment that “The situation is very favorable” reflects the blessing of the encounter with Alhaji Ibrahim and also reflects my role in our work. The image of The Treasure is the sun in heaven, illuminating the earth, and the judgment indicates the unification of “strength and clarity, . . . a time of strength within, clarity and culture without.” The weak line in the favored position holds the strong lines “by virtue of unselfish modesty.” “Shyness is a human being,” say the Dagbamba. Through my shyness and respect, I represented the water that flowed into Alhaji Ibrahim’s coolness, as the hexagram suggests, enabling his “power to express itself in a graceful and controlled way,” a bonding of shared ideas about the energy of learning and creativity.

The Creative, like culture, is beyond any one person. Almost in prescient affinity with the modern philosophers who discern a possible redemptive value in artistic achievement, the ancient commentaries on the efficacy of The Creative intriguingly maintain also that the hexagram, by positing beginnings, “furthers the world with beauty.” The commentaries therefore note that writing, words, and thoughts about The Creative are incomplete expressions. In the world of Father Drummer, a musician, what cannot be explained becomes a proverb, and a proverb becomes a name that defines a person, and a name becomes a dance that defines a community. The commentaries further explain that the greatness of The Creative lies in the fact that nothing much can be said about it and the means by which it works, but note that “individual lines open up and unfold the thought, so that the character of the whole is explained through its different sides.” In the continuously increasing scope of Alhaji Ibrahim’s lectures, similarly, portions of the cloth of culture are unfolded layer by layer, examining each pattern or custom in detail without reference to a dominant creative force, apart from an underlying conception of God. The intricate scale of the work reflects again on the vast scale of The Creative and recalls the imagery of perseverance and confidence in the persistence through time of creative influence. Alhaji Ibrahim had consulted people he trusted and decided to do the work, and once we started, in a way it was impossible not to go on. I have no doubt that because of the greatness of his intellect and knowledge and the greatness of his heart, he had glimpses of all of it, even from the beginning. He knew that he was hearing the words of those who had talked to him, the great people who trained him, and he knew that what was inside him and passing through him was moving because of a blending of identities between him and me. He was my best friend and my father, and I was his best friend and his child. I became, to the extent I learned, a Dagbamba drummer, Lunzɛyɔ, and Alhaji Ibrahim talked a book about a great culture to the extent he knew it. Through our identification and love, that culture revealed its scope in life, becoming both my testament and his. One of us knew and one of us asked, and through the controlling force of the first and inclusive attribute of The Creative, the sublime generative power of “ideas that have yet to become real,” the individual forms flowed to their appropriate places. It took us many years, and we reached our extent.

Notes:

1. *The I Ching, or Book of Changes*, 3rd. rev. edition, trans. by Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Barnes (Princeton: Bollingen Series, Princeton University Press, 1967), quoted passages from pp. 3-15, 59-63, 369-97, 456-60.
2. E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton: Bollingen Series, Princeton University Press, 1956), pp. 148-49.
3. Kidder Smith, Jr., "The Difficulty of the Yijing," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 15 (1993): 1-15; Kidder Smith, Jr., *et al.*, *Sung Dynasty Uses of the I Ching* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), especially chapter 5.
4. Huston Smith, *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions*, Second Edition (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), pp. 154-95.
5. Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, translated by Rosemary Sheed (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, World Publishing, 1967): 207-09.