

## *A Drummer's Testament*

### *Introduction part 7*

#### **The Translation**

I am comfortable with this book, heavy as it is. It is a product of the relationships that sustained it. There was a lot of work, but for all of us involved, the work that went into this book was a pleasure because it was a labor and a reflection of love. We felt it every day, with the confidence of people listening to stories in the cool nights, leaning against a nice wall. It was a pleasure to work together to do the research just because we were a group. Our communication was supportive, free of conflict, as if sharing a group mind to which each of us contributed an element of increased consciousness and added meaning. It was a pleasure to receive the blessings of the elders, whose greetings always concluded with a prayer for continued life so that we would meet again. It was a pleasure to enjoy the generosity of the many people in Tamale, some of them not even Dagbamba, who saw our friendship and sympathized with our purpose, who were truly happy to help in any way they were able. There was pleasure in the intellectual challenge of keeping up with the details of the information Alhaji Ibrahim was weaving into his lectures. By the time we saw where we were going, the whole book was already written in our heads. I certainly knew it, and the others too knew it, for nobody wanted to miss even the slightest unfolding of our group vision. Every day, there was pleasure in the little surprises of our talks, pleasure in the increasing complexity of our overview of Dagbamba life. Sometimes when Alhaji Ibrahim had finished talking and left to attend to his other affairs, Ben and Kissmal and I would just be laughing. Ben would take delight in the thought that, "We are now really making this thing *thick*!" Kissmal, ever sensitive to the dynamic of sharing in our work, would be thinking of the future modeled in the form of evening bull sessions among his friends: he would imagine someone reading aloud the passage that we had just heard and how it would provoke and stimulate the conversation. With such thoughts, they were anticipating that the book would be a vehicle for cultural discussions and for the renewal of cultural awareness among Dagbamba who might have limited opportunities to learn about their tradition.

In such a context, we thought we were enjoying ourselves, and we barely noticed that our task as collaborators involved some very time-consuming procedures as the project took on its own life and outgrew our original conception. We were ready from the start because we could build upon the foundation of the

friendship between me and Alhaji Ibrahim since 1971, and on the model of the tentative beginning of our work during 1975. Although Alhaji Ibrahim gave a lot of unfamiliar and detailed information, he spoke clearly and simply, and he gave examples that made it easy for most people to understand him. Within that level of discourse, we felt that we should try to do the translation in a manner to be easily accessible to potential Dagbamba readers who had achieved at minimum a middle-school education. As a middle-school teacher, Ben was familiar with that standard. At the same time, our audience includes the many Dagbamba who are already quite knowledgeable about their heritage and will enjoy reading more about it. We felt it important that *A Drummer's Testament* make sense to a native Dagbani speaker, that is, that he or she can "hear" Alhaji Ibrahim as an elder of Dagbamba culture. Alhaji Ibrahim said, "If our talk goes to a typical Dagbana or somebody who knows Dagbani very well, he will say that, 'As for this talk, they didn't change it or bring another talk inside it. The way I know it, that is the same way it is.' But if you are changing it too much, and it happens to go to somebody who knows Dagbani well, he will say, 'As for this talk, it is not typical Dagbani. Inside Dagbani, that is not the way this talk comes.' Has he not found its fault? And so between these two ways, the one that is the same and the one that only resembles, to me, the first one is better." When we sat down in our meetings with Alhaji Ibrahim, the goal of the actual translation was to balance the English translation, to maintain clarity while retaining many idioms, giving readers an experience of Dagbani rhetoric and cadence. We hoped to allow the intimacy and strength of Alhaji Ibrahim's discourse to contribute to a sense of the Dagbamba ethos and cultural context. We worked from the ground up, so to speak, with intermediate documents and increasingly sophisticated judgment, to steer the translation between a banal and reductive rendering that could trivialize or distort its sensibility, on the one hand, and an excessively literal or unnatural rendering that could obscure its meaning or interfere with its flow.

Any translation strategy touches upon a number of scholarly and philosophical discussions. The many definitions and connotations of the word "translate" reflect real issues about the ways that meanings can be transformed from one language to another or from one cultural context to another. Indeed, the idea that different languages do not communicate the same information is one of the main contributions of linguistics to the theory of culture.<sup>1</sup> Despite the anthropological ideal to respect the integrity yet also preserve the "otherness" of different cultural world, for centuries whole branches of philosophy and theology have challenged the possibility of interpreting sacred messages, translating sacred texts, and eventually even translating any language accurately. Ultimately, translation issues can only be addressed and encompassed in varying degrees of

depth and sensitivity. One must make decisions on a case-by-case basis with reference to both languages, relying as well on ethnographic knowledge and on the way that meaning can emerge from the broader context.

In deciding to pursue a close translation, we wanted to be consistent with the basic conception for the work, that is, our trust in the descriptive clarity of Alhaji Ibrahim's lectures. We have focused more on idioms and flow than on extensive use of Dagbani words, apart from artifacts and proper nouns. The strategy is initially quite noticeable, but most readers adjust quickly. People who have read preliminary drafts have remembered a surprising number of details and have been able to recall relatively complicated descriptions of customary life. For some topics, I have monitored and paced the introduction of information or specific terms. I occasionally use appositions to define words and clarify idioms. As a drummer, Alhaji Ibrahim built upon his aesthetic tendency to rely on repetition and on gestures such as rhetorical questions as means of establishing clarity and focusing attention. He breaks actions down into component parts, such as "come and stand and see" or "take and go and give," and he digresses into details with what he calls "separating the talks"; such externalization of action is reminiscent of classical poetry.<sup>2</sup> The lectures also manifest a common tendency in West African languages to state a sentence's subject first and then use a definite pronoun with the verb, as a means of placing emphasis. To my mind, these various constructions have an appeal beyond fidelity. Idiomatic expressions or imagery can be thought-provoking or illuminating. One scholar applied the notion to "found poetry" to some of Alhaji Ibrahim's lectures from *African Rhythm and African Sensibility* when he placed them into stanza form.<sup>3</sup> The problems posed by translation are also opportunities. We have strived for a balanced text, one that will be readable and enjoyable, one that will exploit within reason the potential eloquence of translation ambiguities, one that will convey the articulate intelligence of Alhaji Ibrahim, and one that will reflect distinction on the Dagbamba heritage.

Based on our experience and goals, therefore, we developed and refined a particular strategy for Alhaji Ibrahim's lectures. The format of our sessions was based on our use of simultaneous tape-recorded translation in order to make the basic translation conform to Alhaji Ibrahim's phrasing and to preserve the characteristic rhythms of the Dagbani language. In the sessions themselves, Alhaji Ibrahim spoke only Dagbani, but he was also able to follow the translations in most cases. All sessions were tape-recorded with at least two translators present, usually both Kissmal and Ben. One did the active translation while the second and third, if present, kept a record of words and idioms that he felt could or should have alternative translations or merited further attention. I kept track of proper

names, a sensitive area that was often a source of confusion when Alhaji Ibrahim was explaining historical or political relationships, took notes on content to maintain an overview of what he had discussed, and wrote down questions for follow-up as well as points for contextual elaboration or transitional development.

Apart from ethnographic purposes, as I particularly was interested in making sure that the initial translations were very closely done, the normal procedure with which we worked was for Alhaji Ibrahim to talk at most a sentence at a time, then wait for the active translator to finish before continuing. Dagbamba exercise a great deal of care in how they express themselves, and the slow rhythm of our sessions enabled both us and Alhaji Ibrahim to take advantage of the slowness and deliberateness that translation gives to communication. The use of two translators per session was also adopted because the active translator was sometimes so involved in the intricacies of literal rendering that he did not remember what he was saying, in a manner similar to a touch-typist copying a manuscript. The second translator therefore took notes on Dagbani words retained in the translations as well as key Dagbani words in the topic area. They did splendid work. As important as their command of English was the fact that they were already very knowledgeable about Dagbani from the beginning, and they gradually built up their concentration and memory to deal with discussions when information involving names and places was flying fast and thick. It became clear how accomplished Ben and Kissmal became within our adjusted pacing and procedures because outside our work sessions but in similar situations, we saw other translators who were as fluent or even more fluent in English become confused and find it difficult to continue.

During the first months of our work, through a structured series of discussions and written exercises I prepared, Ben and Kissmal became progressively more alert to the etymology of idioms and to the differences between translation and interpretation. We wrote connotations and, where possible, etymologies of several thousand Dagbani words. After the first group of lectures was transcribed, they and I listened again to each session, and the transcriptions were retranslated back to Dagbani. The written exercises Ben and Kissmal did consisted mainly of making concordances of the Dagbani words in the transcripts and highlighting literal meanings and normal figurative renderings. The discussions and exercises that constituted this training helped Ben and Kissmal become more alert to the various possibilities in rendering Alhaji Ibrahim's speech. The objective in the lecture sessions, to have the initial translation conform to the Dagbani as literally as possible, had two purposes. First we wanted to have the most basic rendering available for further discussion and decisions relating to translation and interpretation, and second I wanted to have flexibility

when editing the chapters with an eye to the idioms that could or should be retained. We prepared extensive word lists to classify our preliminary translation options and define alternatives. Gradually the translators acquired greater sensitivity regarding ways to reconstitute Dagbani idioms into English, and our own index of Dagbani and potential idiomatic terminology grew in size to several thousand essential words and phrases. These exercises and intermediate documents were very helpful in managing a range of issues from the details of word-choice and phrasing to the overall consistency of the text.

Because of the wide range of Alhaji Ibrahim's knowledge and the depth of his mastery of Dagbani, as the lectures progressed, we had to do further specialized research beyond our sessions with Alhaji Ibrahim. We encountered problems in subject areas of indigenous technology and tools, the names of animals, trees and plants, medicines and diseases. Many of the words in these areas were familiar, but many others were not, even to the translators for whom Dagbani is their native language. In the area of traditional technology, we identified or verified obscure words generally by going to find the items that were mentioned, such as building materials or household implements, different types of hoes and farming implements, different types of water and food storage containers, different types of woven cloth, and so on. The Department of Forestry was helpful in the identification of different types of trees based on a publication prepared during colonial days.<sup>4</sup> Oddly enough, neither the Ministry of Health nor the Ministry of Agriculture had compiled glossaries for local usage, but fortunately there were several Dagbamba officials in these ministries who were knowledgeable enough to identify many local references. Some animals were identified by Dagbamba hunters from pictures in handbooks of West African fauna, and a number of animals were identified in the brief dictionary compiled by Harold Blair, who hunted as a hobby during his colonial service. Ben and Kissmal, both native speakers, were themselves frequently unfamiliar with not only English equivalents but also the actual references of many of the words Alhaji Ibrahim employed. There were as well a number of occasions when they were unfamiliar with the interpretive meaning of the phrases, expressions and idioms of Alhaji Ibrahim's speech. Depending on the way a particular translation problem arose, it was often possible to ask Alhaji Ibrahim to define his terms further or to give examples. Differing pronunciations of names and variations in Dagbani dialects posed particular problems for which there is no easy solution in our text; we have used the terms as Alhaji Ibrahim used them, consistent with western Dagbani and generally with the drumming traditions of Savelugu and Nanton.

As a group, we talked to other learned people, particularly drummers and maalams and local scholars, and as individuals each of us sought out people to discuss different points that came up and then brought back the comments for further discussion among ourselves. From the beginning, I had gone to outside sources for verification and other views, and I always found Alhaji Ibrahim's information to be more reliable. Nonetheless, I often asked him to repeat himself and I pressed him with questions that he answered with patience. Even when it might have seemed as if I were deliberately mistrusting him, when he had a right to be fed up with me, he did his best to satisfy me. That type of exercise might have clarified an occasional misunderstanding on my part, but it did not undermine his points. Indeed, the reliability of his knowledge was amazing to the point of absurdity. For example, in discussing his pilgrimage to Mecca, Alhaji Ibrahim had made what seemed to me an uncharacteristically off-hand comment by describing Yoruba pilgrims defecating on the hill of Arafat to become rich. During a visit to my home, a friend who read the description directed me to relevant passages in works about Yoruba religion by Bascom and Verger referencing stories of Orunmila's and Osumare's feces turning into money.<sup>5</sup> In effect, I guess, we pressed Alhaji Ibrahim mainly to stimulate him, but as he was somebody who talked only about what he knew and who was not afraid to say that he did not know something, he was always a step or three ahead of us, already on top of what he might need to know and always thinking about his memories of what he had learned and the questions he might ask those whom he trusted.

We also sought help from an expert on Dagbani, Rev. Daniel A. Wumbee, who was working as a principal Dagbana on the translation of the Bible into Dagbani being done by the Assemblies of God New Testament Revision Committee. Rev. Wumbee was also very knowledgeable about Dagbamba culture, and he was able to identify many technical terms and explain many idioms. In comparison to the sophisticated standards that have been established for some Ghanaian languages, Dagbani orthography has been at best unsystematic and at worst haphazard, largely a reflection of personal preferences of linguists who have only done preliminary studies of the language and of changing personnel in government departments like the Bureau of Ghana Languages. I assumed that the Bible would become at least one standard for orthography and transliteration as Dagbani literacy increases. I also contacted Harold Lehmann, who had coordinated the Bible translation during its early phases and who sent me a dictionary draft that updated Harold Blair's edition. I digitized that version and passed the files on, and that dictionary continues to be developed incrementally.<sup>6</sup> Dagbani orthography is still not standardized, but I was satisfied with the years of experience that have enabled the Bible translators to develop a number of

systematized rules to give consistency to many transliteration options, even though the rules continue to evolve. Following the initial transcription of each of our lectures, we prepared word lists based on the observing translator's notes and on the transcription itself, and the translators and I sat with Rev. Wumbee to determine appropriate transliteration of previously unwritten terms and for further review of translation decisions. We sat outside Rev. Wumbee's house at the outskirts of Tamale, in late afternoon, watching lovely sunsets beyond fields and cattle ponds, and Rev. Wumbee would chuckle over the earthiness of some of Alhaji Ibrahim's descriptions. He would shake his head and giggle, "These drummers!" We would promise him to excise the occasional profanities and substitute more delicate metaphoric expressions, and he listened with gentle indulgence when we said we only wanted to know whether this or that word really meant what we thought it meant in the context. I apologize for the passages that might offend some readers.

During the period when we did the initial work, from 1977 through 1978, our individual roles in the sessions both overlapped and diversified. I doubt that any Western scholar would contemplate writing an ethnography by dictating a draft, and this book is not a dictated piece of oral literature. It was the work of a group. Alhaji Ibrahim and I would often consult on the direction of the lectures, and I would also represent to him the need for certain types of contextual elaboration for outsiders who were not as familiar with Dagbon as I was. Occasionally the team would discuss problems about which Alhaji Ibrahim felt he wanted to consult with other drumming elders, and on his own initiative he also learned more from these elders about certain topics he intended to discuss. We also often traveled to meet with our senior consultants or sat with other drummers whose authority Alhaji Ibrahim wanted to consider. Because I took notes during the lectures to help Alhaji Ibrahim and us maintain an overview on the continuity and organization of his talks, my notes as well as the notes of the second translator served to keep a record of weak points that needed further development or clarification and served as well as a reminder of details that seemed inconsistent and required questioning. In the sessions themselves, Ben was the most literal translator with the best control of English vocabulary and generally the best word choice. Kissmal often took over in situations when the amount of complex information in a given topic made the literal translation itself a problem. Later, another good friend joined us, Mustapha Muhammad, then a head translator at the Tamale High Court and fluent in nearly a dozen languages. Mustapha complemented Kissmal's ability to break through occasional impasses in the clarification of the material. In addition to Alhaji Ibrahim and me, therefore, all

four of these Dagbani speakers contributed substantially to the form of the language represented in this book.

When we finished most of the major topics to be included in the book, several complementary phases of further collaboration began. Beginning in 1978 and continuing for several years, I edited the transcripts and prepared draft chapters. In general, the sequence of the chapters in the book follows the sequence of the lectures, that is, moving from the work of drumming into chieftaincy and history and then into economic and household life. There were some chapters that required very little editing from their original presentation. Some topics, however, were elaborated bit by bit as Alhaji Ibrahim felt his way into the lecture format and as he returned to earlier topics on further reflection, sometimes with further information he had obtained from his friends and elders or sometimes with further examples or details. The complexity of the task was compounded by the intricate relationships of the various fields of information. Alhaji Ibrahim referred to my editing as “joining the talks.”

An additional procedure, and one which further distinguishes the collaborative nature of this project, involved reading the drafted chapters back to Alhaji Ibrahim to confirm their integrity with his intention and understanding. This aspect of manuscript preparation for some time went hand-in-hand with the lecture format of the original sessions, beginning in 1979 and continuing into the 1980s. As individual chapters were prepared, Ben, Kissmal and I, occasionally assisted by Mustapha, would read the drafts back to Alhaji Ibrahim to check for accuracy and to review the text, in effect giving him a chance to revise or expand the text, a process he called “repairing the talks.” He answered questions, made corrections, rounded out descriptions, and added a number of transitional and summary passages. Substantive questions and commentary during sessions were also tape-recorded and transcribed with the same procedures as the original lectures. Also, as chapter drafts became available, Ben and Kissmal reviewed their translations by going over the drafts to see whether the English translation would retain fidelity if it were to be retranslated back to Dagbani. Phrases or words that sounded out-of-context or unnatural in terms of spoken Dagbani were noted, and Ben and Kissmal were generally able to recall much of the original terminology to determine whether their original translations were accurate or needed revision. They prepared written comments with specific references to alternatives in the drafted translations. Finally, the chapters were edited again to incorporate Alhaji Ibrahim’s revisions, and the re-edited chapters were further revised for continuity in the presentation of information.

Though straightforward in conception, these procedures were very painstaking to carry out. The format we adopted has been subject to similar

physical and collaborative constraints as the analysis, evaluation, and reverification of other types of data. There are a number of time-consuming tasks involved in preserving the character of oral historical materials while making them comprehensible to people from another society, yet the importance of doing each component of the research thoroughly is clear to me when individual tasks are viewed against the broader context of the scale of the project and the overall quality of the work. As usual, Alhaji Ibrahim had an appropriate proverb for our efforts: “The one who holds a rope knows its joining places, but the one who wove the thread knows how long it is.” The work continued incrementally over a number of years. This book may have a few mistakes here and there from innocent confusion, but I hope that nothing significant will be misrepresented. Over a period of several years, our small group continued to work together, and the intentions and thoughts and meetings and conversations and consultations that came to dominate our relationship have become this book. The interdependence and communication facility we developed through our years of experience working on this project was difficult to achieve, and we all tried our best.

My daily routine in Tamale was always busy. During the last half of the 1970s, apart from when we would travel in Dagbon to witness events or to meet with our consulting elders, six mornings a week from eight o’clock until noon, I studied drumming with teachers selected by Alhaji Ibrahim, except on Sundays when I would beat drums with the drummers at wedding houses. I also accompanied them to play at funerals or occasionally at festivals. After class, I ate lunch, generally pounded yams and soup at a roadside restaurant. At that time, Ghana’s economy had collapsed. There were shortages of everything, and after lunch, I would go around trying to find things for myself, my friends and my elders. I had befriended most of the town’s store managers, and I would go to greet them to see if one thing or another was coming in. If not that, I would try to find a way to fill my storage pot with water, which was scarce, or I would pass the market, or I would visit elder drummers or other friends in town, or I would service my equipment or deal with whatever. Alhaji Ibrahim and my associates would meet me back at my place after he prayed the three o’clock prayers, and he would talk from three-thirty until about five-thirty. Then Kissmal and I would go to see Rev. Wumbee to work through the day’s wordlists, until six or six-thirty. I would pick up some kenkey or fried yams on the way home, bathe and eat, then visit Alhaji Ibrahim to discuss the way the talks were moving or any other concern. After that I would hang out and relax for an hour or two. When we moved into the cross-checking exercises in the 1980’s, I stopped my drumming lessons, and the team met mornings and afternoons, six days a week.

From 1979 I was mainly in the United States, where I did most of the editing, returning to Ghana on six more lengthy trips to follow through with the cross-checking and touching upon some additional topics. These trips took place through the 1980s and into 1991, stretching the period of fieldwork to more than twenty years. Putting it all together on paper was another big job, this time for me. I had helpful encouragement from family and friends here, and I was easily able to manage with the support I had from institutions, from my family, and from music. I was the happiest guy I knew. Every day I would jump out of bed and get into the work. I relied on the same attitudes we had used throughout and brought them into my life. I recalled our working relationships, reminiscing on the small details here and there that come to stand for the tenderness of remembered friendships. I thought deeply about Alhaji Ibrahim, and I asked myself if his spirit was coming through. I corresponded with Alhaji Ibrahim, Ben, and Kissmal, keeping in touch and pursuing outstanding questions. I continued my drumming and my music, looking at my inspiration as I played and eliciting positive feelings of generosity and sharing with my fellow players and dancers and audiences. I befriended musicians and drummers. I built a shrine and hung amulets in my house. I taught interested people how to play Dagbamba drums, and we played at parties and community events. I drummed for African-American dance groups. I wore Dagbamba smocks. I looked at photographs I had taken and showed them to friends, listened to recordings of African music and Dagbamba music and shared the recordings with friends. I covered my wall with a survey map of Dagbon, and I hung African art everywhere I found a place. I built drums and repaired drums. I had a wonderful friend, a drummer named Eric Rucker who truly understood the essence of African drumming without ever having been in Africa, and who wrote to Alhaji Ibrahim with the name Suliman. Over several years, he and I gave presentations to thousands of school children about African music and cherished the sight of enraptured kindergarteners flipping out over the drums. I talked about the contents of the chapters with friends and colleagues, and I noted the way their questions anticipated the movement of Alhaji Ibrahim's presentation. I gave chapters to people, solicited their comments, and tested their recall. I tried to bring Dagbamba proverbs into my conversations. I immersed myself in the details of the work, still drawing insights from the substance of our efforts.

When we listened to Alhaji Ibrahim's lectures and worked with them, in our group or on our own, we looked for our starting point in our relationships with each other. That reality was a foundation of a structure of involvement that thrust us with a feeling of fascination into something vastly larger than us. My friend Eric once told me that among the Yoruba of Nigeria and Benin, one idea of Obatala, the great god of the heavens and of culture, is the image of the god of the

white cloth, a cloth so wide that its ends cannot be tied together. And like the extent of wisdom, or like the task of seeking wisdom, the image conveys an idea of culture as so vast that its comprehension is beyond any one person, and its points of entry are as varied as the relationships that one person can stand and wish for. When I had originally thought that this work would reach the depths of a single culture, I was deceiving myself. Even this heavy book does not gather all; it only reaches its extent. The book is long because of the elders' knowledge and authorship: in a work of cultural preservation, why remove what the elders thought significant to say? Knowing what I also know, there are many things that are not included in every chapter. Each of the many chapters could be a dissertation or a book itself, a path to reach into Dagbon, that tiny part of a postage stamp on a globe, where a single human being is lost in the expanse of culture's dimensions. We never see the whole of culture. Alhaji Ibrahim himself was exploring Dagbamba culture all the time he talked this book. That is how culture moves: Alhaji Ibrahim measured and shared a small part of it; then he moved on; then he shared a part of it and led us on again. Thus, over a period of years, he guided us through an act of complex witnessing, giving us in this testament not merely the testimony of his life as a purveyor of cultural meaning: Alhaji Ibrahim's testimony gives witness as well that traditional life is maintained through each human being's continuing engagement with ethical judgment.

The Dagbamba we meet through Alhaji Ibrahim are incredibly conscious of who they are and where they stand, and they welcome the way their culture threatens their sense of self. Their past is part of the present, constantly reviewed and revised and acted out in cultural events. For the drummers of Dagbon, as for anyone who is concerned with the nature of human life, there is a continual need to reassess the relevance of fundamental questions about the general meaning of culture — what it is, how it works, and why it is important. To Dagbamba, though ever conscious of the past, the Dagbamba heritage is handed down not a fixed body of tradition but as a living body of thought.<sup>7</sup> The past is one part of it, but they explore it in the present by starting from the experience of alienation in the face of choice and then by separating the alternatives with a regard for tradition. The truth of Kissmal's description of his father's character and his sense of tradition lies in the image of Alhaji Ibrahim as trained by great people in the past to be a profoundly moral man, one whose moral vision extends beyond interpersonal relations to include broad perspectives on institutions of leadership, family, work, community life and religion, one who relies on creativity and imagination to handle human issues of cross-generational relations, of stages of the life cycle, destiny, and death. He measures everything and always returns to his concerns of why we Dagbamba try to relate to one another as we do, what

happened and we did this, how something comes and how we experience it. His knowledge of his culture is based on his connection to people, and he never gets too far away from the culture. It would be impossible for any outsider to develop the networks in which Alhaji Ibrahim participates, but even among Dagbamba, he is a drummer whose role within his culture is to know about people and to bring the higher forces into the world: the picture of Dagbon we might have had from another would probably have been less great.

This book is therefore a tribute to drumming and to this particular person and why he is there. It is a testament to him and the many dead people and many living people who are speaking through him. Alhaji Ibrahim's older brother Alhaji Mumuni, who occasionally sat with us and listened to early chapter drafts, said that it was as if someone had put a tape-recorder in front of his own grandfather with whom he had sat as a child. This book's making was based on the relationships we nurtured, but its point of unity is the personality and mentality of Alhaji Ibrahim. There may probably be other drummers in Dagbon who could have done this work. There are drummers who are his equal or perhaps who are more than him in terms of their powers of description or their knowledge of custom. There are many drummers who share his love of logic and his rhetoric of questioning, examples, proverbs. But many of them are aged and would have lacked the strength and patience to be as thorough as he, and others who know the Dagbamba tradition might have lacked Alhaji Ibrahim's worldliness and his ability to see himself through me. And actually, I never met anyone who had Alhaji Ibrahim's ability to sustain a discourse on a given topic, to talk about something completely with the kind of organized clarity that graces his communication. The extent of his engagement with culture both exercised and enhanced his moral authority, and people who knew him, whether his elders or his followers, liked and respected him because he held closely to tradition. He is fit to epitomize and represent them. I believe that Alhaji Ibrahim's commitment and love toward his tradition shine through every page of this book.

Alhaji Ibrahim is a man and a drummer. He is a Dagbana and a Ghanaian. He is a householder and a father. He is a Muslim, and many of his friends are maalam. And again, as we can only meet the past in the present, as steeped in the sense of tradition as this book is, this book is really about Dagbon in the twentieth century. These aspects of the relativity of Alhaji Ibrahim's perspective reflect the relativity of culture and the relativity of all knowledge. Therefore the relativity of Alhaji Ibrahim's knowledge is also part of who he is as a respectable person who can represent his culture and bring it to bear on life. As Kissmal said, Alhaji Ibrahim is great because of the way he treats people and also because he knows that the Dagbamba tradition is great. His broad vision leads to intimacy because

he strives to find an appropriate perspective to view a situation in terms of responsibility and leadership, of one who is responsible, for oneself and others. He shows chieftaincy succession through the eyes of a prince, the market through the eyes of the market chief, funerals through the eyes of the funeral elder, madness through the eyes of the family of the sick person, children through the eyes of the parents. When he talked, he looked at the people who trained him and guided him, and he continued to seek guidance from those he respected, to bring all of them into his experience. He talked to us the same way they talked to him, so that their experience could move through him to guide us who had asked him. Conscious of that responsibility too, he tried further to epitomize them in himself for us. He was so careful.

For most readers, in general, I expect that the way Alhaji Ibrahim's wisdom touches fundamental rhythms and tones of human life will be the most striking aspect of his discourse. This book is about Dagbon, but those who live in cultures near to the Dagbamba, although on occasion they may have to get beyond Alhaji Ibrahim's pride in being a Dagbana, will find many similarities — in attitudes, in proverbs, in approaches to life's situations — through which they can see themselves and what they share with Dagbamba. Most Dagbamba will appreciate the opportunity to learn more about their culture from someone who knows it much better than they, and they will read this book with excitement. Nonetheless, I expect some people, particularly Dagbamba, to take issue with parts of this book. If it provokes arguments, then those arguments may be taken as an indication that Dagbamba culture is still vital, still a force in the lives of people. There will no doubt be those who will argue with or even be infuriated by Alhaji Ibrahim's account of the Dagbamba chieftaincy crisis. There will be those who will be angered by his perspective on the national government and its political, economic and judicial arms. As a representative of the traditional system of authority in Dagbon, it is to be expected that Alhaji Ibrahim would be hostile to the elites of the bureaucratic systems of authority in the modern state of Ghana. Like many of his fellow citizens at the time, too, he was disgusted with the deteriorating conditions in Ghana under the corrupt regime of General I. K. Acheampong. In addition, parts of his discussions of whatever topic — women, children, householding, punishment, religion — all touch perspectives that may be sensitive or embarrassing to various readers.

Alhaji Ibrahim is reporting Dagbamba culture as he knows it from his experience and from the training he received from the elders of drumming. My decision has been to ensure, to the best of my ability, the accuracy of the testament as he gave it to me and as he told me to present it. That is the work of ethnography: in its documentation, in its descriptions of what happens, as much as

if not more than in any given theoretical or ideological thrust, it has the capacity to stimulate the further development of culture by raising the moral tensions by which culture enters and moves through history. Culture is always threatening, and ethnography's tendency to engage the problematic meaning of culture is the mark of its genre. But ethnography is only a minor type of literature, with some of the potential strengths of literature but more surely with the acknowledged limitations of literature. As Alhaji Ibrahim has lived with and managed the confrontations of values and traditions, he has always believed that patience and respect could find deeper meeting points beneath the conflicts. Although his testament portrays the meaning of culture in terms of the individual, he has always known that culture is more than any individual and its wholeness is a matter of faith. This ethnography is therefore offered with a prayer for broader understanding and patience on the part of those who are most closely concerned with the fate of Dagbon, that they may not be disturbed by the parts that challenge them to the extent that they lose faith in the whole.

## Notes

1. W.V.O. Quine, *Word and Object* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1960); Quine, *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961); Rodney Needham, *Belief, Language, and Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973); Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969).
2. Erich Auerbach, "Odysseus' Scar" in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard Trask (Garden, City, NY: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1957), pp. 1-20.
3. Charles Suhor, "Drumming, Language, and Poetry — Finding Relationships," *Percussive Notes* (April 1992); also Suhor, "Across Cultures, Across Genres — African Drum Talk and Found Poetry," paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music, Chicago, October 1991.
4. Available sources at the time were F.R. Irvine, *Woody Plants of Ghana with Special Reference to Their Uses* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961); and A.H. Booth, *Small Mammals of West Africa* (London: Longman, 1970); and *Agricultural Extension Handbook 1977* (Tamale: Ghanaian-German Agricultural Development Project Northern and Upper Regions, German Agency for Technical Cooperation [GTZ], 1977); a recent compilation for further identification is Roger Blench, *Dagomba Plant Names* (preliminary circulation draft, 2006): <http://www.ethnopharmacologia.org/prelude/pdf/biblio-hb-43-blench.pdf>.
5. William Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), pp. 240-247; Pierre Verger, *Notes Sur le Culte des Orisa et Vodun: à Bahia, la Baie de Tous les Saints, au Brésil, et à l'ancienne Côte des Esclaves en Afrique*, *Memoires de L'Institut Français d'Afrique Noir*, no. 51 (Dakar: l'Institut Français d'Afrique Noir, 1957; Amsterdam: Swets & Zeitlinger N.V., 1970), p. 233. The friend was Eric Rucker, mentioned throughout this introduction.
6. Roger Blench, et. al., *Dagbani-English Dictionary* (circulation draft, 2004): [http://www.rogerblench.info/Language/Niger-Congo/Gur/Dagbani dictionary CD.pdf](http://www.rogerblench.info/Language/Niger-Congo/Gur/Dagbani%20dictionary%20CD.pdf); see also H. A. Blair, ed., *Dagomba (Dagbane) Dictionary and Grammar* (Accra, Gold Coast [Ghana]: Government Printer, 1941). The work was updated by Tony Naden, *Dagbani Dictionary* (2014): [http://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/ae2814\\_96c112f4dbdc4167bd0bc4bdea3826e4.pdf](http://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/ae2814_96c112f4dbdc4167bd0bc4bdea3826e4.pdf).
7. Ivor Wilks, private communication.