Enemy Music: Blind Birifor Xylophonists of Northwest Ghana

by

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Dedicated to the Birifor people

CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

All video and audio examples available through the online companion.
http://birifor.org/enemy_music/

4-13	Photo	Sandaar carving a xylophone key in his workshop.
4-14	Photo	El Vuur's sons discussing the conflicts they each face.
4-15	Video	Mwan performing an excerpt of *Darikpon* on two *kogyile* in Donyɛ.
4-16	Photo	Vuur Mwan reflecting upon the texts of his compositions in Donyɛ.
5-1	Photo	Yichiir performing in Bubalanyuro.
5-2	Photo	Chile (far left) and Yichiir (far right) in Bubalanyuro discussing their childhood in the company of their extended family.
5-3	Photo	Yichiir at his farm.
5-4	Photo	Chile performing outside his home in Bubalanyuro.
5-5	Photo	Yichiir performing at the Evangelical Church of Ghana, Bubalanyuro.
5-6	Video	Excerpt of Yichiir performing *Yesu Ya Naa* (Jesus the King) with his congregation at the Evangelical Church of Ghana, Bubalanyuro.
5-7	Photo	Yichiir (right) and Lombɔr (center) perform at the funeral of Kakraba Lobi, where Lombɔr ensured that Yichiir retain his cowries and coins.
5-8	Photo	Lombɔr helping out on Yichiir's farm.
5-9	Photo	Alhansan enjoying my own knowledge of xylophone compositions Bayelyiri.
5-10	Photo	Layir Bayir (orange shirt) and Alhansan (brown shirt) with local boys conversing in Bayelyiri.
5-11	Photo	Alhansan performing his compositions in Bayelyiri.
5-12	Photo	Funeral for a woman in Jorikoyiri, held beneath a large tree in characteristic Birifor fashion.
5-13	Video	Excerpt of a funeral for a woman of Jorikoyiri, featuring Kuyiri Darigain on *kogyil*.
5-14	Photo	Darigain explains his relationship with other blind people, as his nephew listens.
5-15	Photo	Houses in Saru just before the Volta river crossing that connects Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire.
5-16	Photo	SK in Abavana, Accra, rehearsing for a performance with Hewale Sounds.
5-17	Audio	*Kogyil* duet by SK Kakraba and Ba-ere Yotere, Accra.
6-1	Photo	A young ferryman drinks from the black Volta outside of Saru, a breeding

		ground for *Onchocerca volvulus*.
6-2	Video	Students during outdoor exercises at the Methodist School for the Blind, Wa.
6-3	Photo	A group interview with students from the Methodist School for the Blind in Wa.
6-4	Photo	Message written on the wall in John Dari's "Craft Shop of Disabled Apprentices."
6-4	Photo	Detail of shrines from the Vuur household.
6-5	Photo	John Dari displaying both skill and strength dancing with his remaining leg.
6-6	Photo	Detail of the icons of Saanti's xylophone (left) and El Vuur's xylophone (right).
6-7	Video	Excerpt from a Sunday service at the Evangelical Church of Ghana in Bubalanyuro.
6-8	Video	Yichiir performs his composition based off of Luke 18:18-29.
6-9	Video	Yichiir performs his composition based off of Matthew 7:21.
6-10	Video	Yichiir performing *Yesu Ledia Naa* (Jesus is King) after church in Bubalaynuro.
7-1	Video	Yichiir performing his composition *Chenjere* (I See Still) in Bubalanyuro.
7-2	Video	Yichiir performing his composition *Jaanfo* (Learning) in Bubalanyuro.
7-3	Video	Yichiir performing his composition *Den Dem Di* (Small Small Eat) in Bubalanyuro.
7-4	Video	Yichiir performing his composition *Nborfo* (Cheating) in Bubalanyuro.
7-5	Video	Chile performing his composition *Dondomo Lem Ba Turo* (the enemy follows like a dog) in Bubalanyuro.
7-6	Video	Chile performing Donyuor's untitled enemy music composition in Bubalanyuro.
7-7	Video	Alhansan performing his untitled composition about his experience of adversity in Bayelyiri.
7-8	Video	Alhansan performing his untitled composition about accusations of witchcraft in Bayelyiri.
7-9	Video	Excerpt of Saanti performing his composition *Adie Dondomo* (House Enemy) in Vondiel.

7-10	Video	Saanti performing his composition *Yi Barma Kapen* (Let Me Have My Peace) in Vondiel.
7-11	Video	Mwan performing his composition *Dondomo* (The Enemy) in Donyɛ.
8-1	Video	Saanti performing his composition *Namunu Nyuor* Daa. Vondiel.
8-2	Video	Saanti plays the phrase "*Yonyɛ, npuorfo na yan, yan, yan,"* on the *kogyil*, Vondiel.
8-3	Video	Saanti demonstrating the alignment of text and melody in a section of is composition, *Yi Barma Kapen*. Vondiel.
8-4	Video	Excerpt from Saanti's *Yi Barma Kapen*, demonstrating the use of flams, rhythm, and tonal range to effectively surrogate. Vondiel.
8-5	Video	Vuur Mwan performs his composition *Dondomo* while local men from the community sing in Donyɛ.
8-6	Video	Yichiir performing after church in Bubalanyuro, with members of the church singing the text associated with Yichiir's melody.
8-7	Table	Birifor funeral song cycle for a man.
8-8	Table	Birifor funeral song cycle for a woman.
8-9	Video	Excerpt of Chile performing *Daarfo* in Bubalanyuro.
8-10	Video	Excerpt of Chile performing *Pir Kpara* in Bubalanyuro.
8-11	Video	El Vuur performing *Lubile Prai* in Donyɛ
8-12	Video	Yichiir performing *Lubile Prai* in Bubalanyuro.
8-13	Video	Chile performing *Saan Di Bieko* in Bubalanyuro.
8-14	Video	Mwan performing *Saan Di Bieko* on two xylophones.
8-15	Video	Yichiir demonstrating the call that invites his drummer to play, in Bubalanyuro.
8-16	Video	Yichiir performing *Darikpon* in Bubalanyuro.
8-17	Video	Alhansan performing *Darikpon* in Bayelyiri.
8-18	Video	Mwan performing *Darikpon* in Donyɛ.
8-19	Audio	SK performing *Ganda Yina* in Accra.
8-20	Audio	SK performing *Saan Fo Dan Tara Ferai* in Accra.

8-21	Audio	SK performing *Saan Yi Kyena Dakpolo* in Accra.
8-22	Video	Yichiir performing *Chikurobene* in Bubalanyuro.
8-23	Video	Alhansan performing *Chikurobene* in Bayelyiri.
8-24	Audio	SK performing *Benekponble* in Accra.
8-25	Audio	SK performing *Ben Yere Yo* in Accra.
8-26	Video	Saanti performing *Guun* in Vondiel.
9-1	Photo	The busy streets of Accra.
9-2	Photo	Mosque outside of Kakraba Lobi's former house. Mamobi, Accra.
9-3	Photo	SK performing with Hewale Sounds in Accra. (Photo courtesy of SK Kakraba).
9-4	Photo	SK performing with Hewale Sounds in Switzerland (Photo courtesy of SK Kakraba).
9-5	Photo	SK performing with Hewale Sounds at the Holiday Inn, Accra. (Photo courtesy of SK Kakraba).
9-6	Audio	Hewale Sounds' *Kalabule,* from the album *Trema* (2003).
9-7	Audio	Hewale Sounds' *Saabewana,* from the album *Trema* (2003).
9-8	Photo	Tijaan Dorwana's xylophone workshop in Pig Farm, Accra.
9-9	Photo	Continued musicking in the aftermath of Kakraba Lobi's funeral ceremonies. Mamobi, Accra.

Part I

"My Music, I love the music. And I can say, I was born with the music. So, I'm never going to stop music before my life, you see. So, as for the music in myself, I love music, I love music, I love music. Yeah." – Kakraba Lobi

Introduction

A great man has died. *Ganda yina*. Kakraba Lobi, the first Birifor to achieve international acclaim as a performer and proponent of the Birifor funeral and festival xylophone tradition, has departed for the land of the dead (see Figure 1-1). The world will not be the same without him. *Saan fo dan tara ferai*. As he was born, so too he died. *Fo wa yi, fo yo*. Kakraba performed these Birifor funeral xylophone compositions countless times over the course of his career, at funerals honoring cultural leaders and rural farmers alike. Now these melodies permeate his own funeral, performed by virtuosic xylophonists hailing from Ghana, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, the United States, and Japan. The greater part of Kakraba's life was spent sharing Birifor music and culture with the world, adapting a traditional musical form to the shifting contexts of urban life and the international African performing arts circuit. Thus, it was perhaps only fitting that musicians from the world over converged on his family's small settlement in Saru of Northwest Ghana, to return Kakraba to the Earth–from which all life springs in Birifor cosmology–with the musical tradition that he devoted his life to.

In a large field behind the Tijaan (Kakraba's father) family house, under the shade of a metal and canvas tent emblazoned with a red, yellow, and green Rastafarian color scheme that bespoke the regular recreational usage of the tent and massive sound system accompanying it, Kakraba's body was on display, adorned in beautifully stitched northern formal wear. Family, friends, and acquaintances crowded his body to speak and sing to Kakraba, asking him questions through blurry eyes and strained voices. According to 'traditional' Birifor cosmology, the deceased remain in a state of living death until a proper funeral ceremony adequately prepares them for their journey to the land of the dead. While some Birifor downplay their participation in traditional religion (something common for many people across Ghana), everyone at the

funeral spoke emphatically to Kakraba's body knowing that he could hear their pleas and questions. The personal and communal catharsis of vocalizing loss is visceral and undeniable at Birifor funeral ceremonies. However, this grieving is also a direct form of communication with the soul of the deceased, a plea for guidance in an uncertain future.

The throng of colorfully dressed mourners, generously overflowing the shade of the tent with wails and tears, gradually moved away from the deceased as music pulled them to an adjacent tent not more than thirty meters away, around which they danced and conversed for hours to come. When Kakraba's body arrived in Saru a few hours earlier, women were the first to mourn, joining in a sorrowful repeated melody hanging between two tonal centers (roughly F# and D at this particular funeral) punctured by wailing, cries, and questions. Women danced first in an amorphous mass, called to the task by xylophone music that started immediately upon the body's arrival. The dancing, speckled with ellipses, followed the body as it was transported from the courtyard of the family house to a tent in the large field where the bulk of the funeral ceremony would take place. After the introductory solo xylophone section called *Prai*, funeral attendees split into gendered groups away from the main crowd, chanting and clapping with the introduction of drum and a hoe-blade bell during the *Kuor Bine* (funeral dance) in a gradual build-up to the organized group dance that was about the ensue. In alternating order, dancers from each group skipped up to the bottleneck of the crowd and hopped into dance, pounding the ground with their feet while flexing their upper body with the speed and athleticism characteristic of much West African dance (see Figure 1-2). Xylophonists began formal performance in the early afternoon, continuing throughout the night and following day with no more than a few minutes interruption between performers. Each blazed through lengthy compositions on the large, deep, and raspy *kogyil* (funeral xylophone) covering its keys with

sweat and collectively filling the air with music throughout the day, the night, and the next day (see Figure 1-3). Xylophonists from all over Ghana and beyond came to Saru to honor Kakraba Lobi and to facilitate his passing into the ancestral realm, making this funeral one of the most exceptional displays of xylophone music in recent memory. Yet, it was a somber moment in the community because such a crucial and loved member of their society left the land of the living. A contagious and intense feeling of personal loss for a man who achieved so much for his family and people spread across the faces of the funeral, while an uncomfortable realization rose to the surface, slipping out in candid discussions over *cosie* (a local fried and spiced cake).

In 2002, at the closure of my first research trip to Ghana, El Vuur, the great elder xylophonist, who was a friend and musical peer to Kakraba (and was to be my teacher at the request of Kakraba), passed away (see Figure 1-4). With El Vuur and Kakraba Lobi departed, Belendi Saanti of Vondiel was the only remaining great southern Birifor xylophonist from their generation who remains in the land of the living (see Figure 1-5). That changed in 2013 when Saanti's health took an abrupt downturn, and six months later he also left for the land of the dead. In the wake of their deaths, major questions are left adrift, questions about who will take up their roles as primary bearers of Birifor musical culture, who will follow Kakraba's path to the international stage (Aning 1989), and who will provide for the wives and children that they have left behind. At the closure of Kakraba's funeral in August of 2007, at the end of a lifelong commitment to music, the question of who will follow Kakraba rings in the ears of the younger generations of xylophonists, marking both a harrowing loss and new beginnings. For younger xylophonists, the international reputation that Kakraba established for Birifor xylophone music through his recordings, performances, and teaching, is an empowering and daunting legacy, one that they pour their hopes and aspirations into.

However, for one remarkable xylophonist who was the center of attention at Kakraba's funeral, this international acclaim and role as a culture-bearer will never be a possibility. Blind from birth, xylophonist Maal Yichiir is highly regarded as a musician, being a disciple of the great El Vuur, and humbly deflecting a local reputation for remarkable speed, accuracy, and clarity of tone. Yet, despite his talents and ingratiating smile and attitude, Yichiir is regularly confronted with ill will and discrimination because of his visual impairment and the resulting spiritual and social devaluation of his body in Birifor communities. Often seen as having a dangerous spiritual potency that leads to being labeled outcasts and dismissed as "useless," blind, visually impaired, or otherly disabled persons experience a subordinate social and spiritual status in Birifor culture. However, at the funeral of Kakraba Lobi, Maal Yichiir's musical offering to this pioneer of Birifor music stood out for its aesthetic beauty and precise execution, depicted only in part by in the recordings that accompany this book (see Figure 1-6).

Like many other xylophonists, Yichiir's personal compositions revolve around the experience of suffering and hardship at the hands of others, who are framed as "the enemy" (*dondomo*) and engaged, questioned, and challenged through enemy music (*dondomo yiel*). The personal compositions of xylophonists, which over the course of generations slip into the traditional canon, have historically chronicled the mischief, transgressions, and witchcraft of the enemy. *Suoba* (translated by Birifors into English as "witchcraft") as well as plainly malicious gossip are common in the Northwest (Lentz 2009). Birifor xylophone compositions also express the agenda of the performer; an exercise of discursive power in the context of ritual performance. Birifor xylophone compositions cover a range of topics, which I explore in depth in the chapters to come. Of special importance here is the recurring theme of the enemy in compositions of blind and sighted xylophonists, because it shows the different forms of conflict experienced and

resistance waged by each population, and the shared psychological weight of the ever-presence of wrongdoers. Employed as an angle of entry into the psyche of xylophonists, these enemy music compositions unearth the pronounced culture of fear that circulates on the back of witchcraft accusations in Birifor culture. The overall disempowerment of disabled persons in Birifor society is based for blind musicians upon their bodies and their occupation. This makes disability in the Birifor context a compound category of subordination. The enemy of Birifor culture is not universally located in the bodies of the living, and these compositions can be read both literally and metaphorically as challenging social, cultural, and spiritual beliefs about disability in rural Ghana. The nuances of enemy music compositions expands the definition of "the enemy," to include the structures, as well as the agents, of subordination.

The title of this book, *Enemy Music: Blind Birifor Xylophonists of Northwest Ghana*, thus refers to a music compoisiton sub-genre that challenges systems of disempowerment for blind and sighted xylophonists in the Northwest today, invoked here in the mapping of the regional, national, and global terrain of disability. As explored in Chapters 6 and 7, the language of blindness and disability is directly implicated in the disempowerment and dehumanization of people living with various kinds and degrees of physical variance from projected norms. This led scholars to promote a person-first language of disability in place of the preexisting monolithic categories of "the blind" and "the disabled," which entail monological essentialisms. Then a recent reclaiming of the language and categories of disability has shifted the terminology back to ability first. Recognizing the sensitivity of this issue, we must proceed with care, engaging blindness and disability through both the language schemas of daily life and academic discourse.

We begin at the funeral of Kakraba Lobi because nearly all the xylophonists examined

here attended it, with only a few absent because of illness. It was also the first time that I met the blind xylophonists who would expand the scope of this work from a close examination of the processes of historical memory and speech surrogation on the Birifor *kogyil* (funeral xylophone), to a broader yet deeply personal depiction of how music is deployed by blind musicians to contend with and subvert their subordinate social and spiritual status. In this sense, it is a music of liberation and resistance for the African disabled body. The musical responses of blind and sighted xylophonists that engage structures of disempowerment are depicted here as a form of critical agency, extended in ritual context to shed social, spiritual, and cultural essentialisms, through the transformative medium of music. This book examines the lives and music of several blind and sighted southern Birifor xylophonists, bringing their lives, music, and culture into focus, while identifying historical accounts in the Birifor funeral cycle and critically examining the socio-religious structures that subordinate blind xylophonists because of their disability and occupation.

Summary of the Book

Enemy Music engages a unique set of questions that do not neatly fit into one preexisting discourse alone. As a result, I have chosen to piece together a theoretical model that integrates ethnomusicology, anthropology, history, and disability studies to answer two seductively simple questions: Why do blind Birifor xylophonists experience social, cultural, and spiritual subordination? How do they respond to it? The answers developed over the course of this inquiry, distilled down to two basic statements, are first that blind Birifor xylophonists experience a form of compound subordination because disability is manufactured as a negative identity through social, spiritual, historical, and ontological systems, which falsely represent the experience and ability of persons with blindness, effectively dehumanizing the blind body.

Second, they respond by composing songs interwoven into traditional song cycles performed in the ritual context of funerals, which narrate–through the coded process of speech surrogation–the true nature of their experience, ability, and spirituality, thereby transforming cultural histories, conceptions of blindness, and the tradition of Birifor xylophone music through a form of critical agency. In the process of answering these two questions at more length and in greater detail, many other topics will be covered which feed back into the discourses integrated here. For example, my discussion of speech surrogation using the *kogyil* and the historical information in surrogated Birifor song texts is of direct relevance to ethnomusicology and African history, while my discussion of blindness in the region, the negative compound effects of being a blind musician, and the spiritual system of witchcraft and causality that contributes to discrimination against blind people, is of relevance to Africanist anthropology and disability studies. However, the primary goal of this book remains to answer these two questions of why blind musicians are discriminated against in Birifor communities, and how they respond to it in a way that appeals to a general humanistic interest, and not any one discipline alone. This goal is ultimately derived from the expressed most immediate needs of Birifor xylophonists; to be recognized as equal citizens and musicians by everyone.

Four distinct theoretical points are made in the process of answering these questions, points I introduce now and elaborate upon in the ensuing chapters. The first point is that an "ethnography of the individual," in which accounts of cultural practice are developed from the foundation of individual experience, is the most effective way to study the mechanisms of discrimination in rural cultural systems and must be expanded to include new "models of the person" when applied to disabled persons. The second point is that blind musicians experience a form of compound subordination because of their disability and occupation, which are

interpreted through a specific set of mystical beliefs and social prejudices. The position that blind xylophonists occupy spiritually is of great value on the one hand, as xylophone music is necessary for communication with spirits and ancestors. However, on the other hand because of their disability their musical talents are viewed as the necessary result of powerful and thus suspect spiritual forces. Blind Birifors or their families are believed to have somehow invited or earned disability through present or past deeds. Generally conceived as witchcraft (*suoba*), though sometimes expressed simply as social prejudice, these beliefs render persons with blindness as outcasts. Jealousy about their talents as musicians and farmers also makes them targets for witchcraft and witchcraft accusations, contributing to their liminal status and overall misfortune.

The third theoretical point of this book is that Birifor xylophone music enacts a form of historical memory and gnosis (deep knowledge), charged with agency and realized through the process of musical speech surrogation. Andrew Apter (1992, 2005, 2007), Rosalind Shaw (2002), Karin Barber (1989, 2006, 2007), Steven Friedson (1996, 2009) and Carola Lentz (2006, 2009), have shown that ritual practice in West Africa often enacts subtle, coded and subversive, yet contested forms of communication, memory, and consciousness. Recalling the contributions of these theorists and their relevance to the performance of power, history, and cosmology in Birifor funeral xylophone performance, I follow Apter's (2007) concept that such ritual actions are used to inscribe complex multivalent meanings, which enact power and authority along simultaneous channels, engaging preexisting discourses while altering the hegemonic ordering of knowledge production in the postcolonial state. Integrating the ideas of Laura Ahearn (2001) and Alessandro Duranti (2004), Apter framed ritual action as a site for the exercise of critical agency, which remaps the conditions through which it is expressed, and is thus necessarily

transformative (Apter 2007:3, 12). For blind Birifor musicians, the agency exercised in musical compositions by inserting the self into the cultural narratives of society, ability, and the divine, alters the musical, spiritual, and social contexts in which those compositions are performed. This powerful act of communication relies upon an equally complex process of speech surrogation, which I examine through song texts and performances of the Birifor funeral cycle in Chapter 8. Through a strategy of veiling and encoding linguistic meaning in instrumental performance, Birifor xylophonists infiltrate cultural narratives that they are otherwise marginalized from to reinscribe culture and the self. Reviewing the history of theorizing speech surrogation in Africa, I suggest that in the Birifor context the encoding of song texts in instrumental music is an effective strategy of communicative indirection that constitutes one of several locations of historical memory and deep knowledge.

The fourth theoretical point is that musical change, as Gerhard Kubik (1983) suggested, is propelled by individual innovators and influenced by the shifting performance contexts of rural and urban life. To this I add that these locations are crosscut by identity politics that police musical production, filtering but never quelling musical change. Through a comparative study of urban and rural xylophone music and their contrasting performance contexts, I unpack some of the processes of continuity and change in Birifor music, which when assembled with preexisting theories of musical change, reveal that the axes of center and periphery, urban and rural, and famous and forgotten, are overlaid by socio-cultural perceptions of the individual, which marginalize the contributions of musicians with disability.

Accounts of Blindness in Africa

While most of the literature relevant to mapping disability in rural Ghana is not ethnomusicological, ethnomusicologist Simon Ottenberg's biographically oriented *Seeing with*

Music: The Lives of 3 Blind African Musicians (1996) provides an important point of comparison for the personal priorities shared between blind musicians of northern Sierra Leone and Northwest Ghana. In his book, Ottenberg closely follows the lives of three blind *kututeng* (lamellophone) performers, as they skirt the fringes of society. His theoretical approach draws together anthropological theories of personhood and agency, stressing the clash between socio-cultural narratives and actual persons as a location of tension and productive transgression. He writes, "I look at how these three musicians cope with cultural and social structures and their rules, sometimes to adhere to them, sometimes to violate them, and at times to transform them." (1996:11). The transformation of rules, of systems and structures, that is a key agenda for blind Limba *kututeng* players, is likewise a priority for blind Birifor xylophonists, whose compositions contest local stigmas surrounding blindness. The itinerant lifestyles of some of blind Limba musicians, fueled by the necessity of new patronage, contributes for Ottenberg to their liminality, as blind *kututeng* players struggle to make a place for themselves in society. Like Birifor xylophonist Ni-Ana Alhansan they travel, perform, and engage in small-scale trade. However, the mobility of their instrument means that they can migrate over the course of days, weeks, or months. Such itinerant work for blind musicians reflects an isolated lifestyle that departs from tropes of African life as heavily communal. Disability theorist Tobin Siebers has suggested even that the very label of disability individualizes and isolates people from the collective (2008:60). Put in other words, disability is always a pathology of the individual, while ability is an essential trait of all people, making disability a marker of individualism that is rarely desirable. While most of the musicians mentioned here travel to play at funerals but are otherwise sedentary, they are, similar to blind Limba musicians, placed outside of the social collective for their difference, a topic explored in Chapter 6. Another strength of Ottenberg's work is his attention to

musicians' opinions about their own music, a practice that I employ here to understand the intention behind Birifor song texts. There is also a parallel between the split hand compositional technique of the Limba *kututeng* and that of the Birifor *kogyil*, supporting Gerhard Kubik's theory of the interrelation of both instruments' continental development described in Chapter 2. However, the primary insight to be taken from Ottenberg's work is that blind musicians in West Africa find themselves in a precarious social position of liminality, which they use music to engage and contest towards their own socio-cultural empowerment.

Critical Perspectives on Disability

With respect to the theoretical literature on disability, the critical perspectives of social theorists, which underline the latent power dynamics in naturalized socio-cultural structures, have been essential to peeling back the layers of social, cultural, and medical meaning that entrap persons with disabilities in a negative identity. Theorist Tobin Siebers, writing on disability and discrimination, suggests that the "social model" of disability (conceived as a global phenomenon but insulated to the West in his work), is drastically different from the personal experience of disability, seen across a range of issues in Western society historically (2008, 2010). Scholars David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (2006), engaging in the same theorization of disability, suggest that such a social model is one of several *locations* where disability is manufactured. For Snyder and Mitchell, biological and cultural models of disability are combined with a social model to deterministically render the identities of disability. Applying this concept of disability as located in multiple linked domains, I show in Chapter 6 that Western and Birifor models of personhood for the disabled share many of the same social, cultural, and biological essentialisms transmitted through an "ideology of ability" (Siebers 2008:7). However, the devaluation of blindness in Birifor communities also invokes a mystical or spiritual model of disability, which

binds disabled persons in spiritual essentialisms, adding another layer to an already compound subordination.

Concerned with generating a cohesive and coordinated disciplinary identity for disability studies, these authors have also pointed out that assumptions in academic and social discourse in the West about identity, ideology, language, politics, social oppression, and the body, need to be recast in order to accommodate the priorities and experiences of disabled people. Consequently, one aim of this book is to bring these surprisingly new critical prescriptions to bear on ethnomusicology and Africanist anthropology, both of which are already concerned with identity and its illusions, yet house the same volatile ideology of ability. In the Birifor case, the critical agency used by blind musicians in their compositions and lifestyles to challenge assumptions about disability, underlines the importance of music to parsing spirituality and disability in the context of Northwest Ghana. One of the results of the Birifor socio-spiritual model of disability that musicians organize against, is the mapping of social perceptions of disability as biological deviance to disability as spiritual deviance. Just as Africa is pathologized along several fronts, so too is the African disabled body. Here, I argue that this is an enactment of the type of discursive violence outlined by Mitchell and Snyder (2006) in which the locations that the disabled are relegated to, the nature of discourse about them, and their inclusion in a blanket category of disability, are all ultimately forms of sanctioned aggression.

Against pervasive cultural stereotypes of disability, blind Birifor xylophonists create music as an act of resistance, contestation, and catharsis aimed at rendering disability as a lived reality rather than an abstracted social, cultural, or spiritual construct. Through the compositional sub-genre of enemy music (*dondomo yiel*), blind and sighted xylophonists alike deconstruct daily challenges and challengers alike, projecting an identity framed in opposition to

popular beliefs, opinions, and gossip. As a subset of funeral music in general, enemy music utilizes the same communicative devices and stylistic guidelines as funeral music, but is thematically focused around the enemy. The largely proverbial nature of the traditional repertoire is juxtaposed with the deeply personal agendas and experiences of enemy music, which makes public private experiences of misfortune at the hands of the enemy. In Chapter 7, I examine compositions by blind xylophonists Maal Yichiir and Ni-Ana Alhansan, and sighted xylophonists Belendi Saanti and Vuur Mwan for the structures of normalization and pathology that they engage, and for the ways that they represent a Birifor cultural theory of human accountability for misfortune. These compositions are not rituals of rebellion that maintain social order (Gluckman 2004[1963]), but rather attempts to appeal to the conscience of the enemy, who, under a Birifor conception of the person has succumbed to evil and can be swayed back towards virtue. Enemy music is also a ritualized expression of personal and societal conflict aimed at rectifying injustice, and can thus be viewed as a location for powerfully redirecting the course of culture and society. The enemy music of blind xylophonists in particular is expressly composed to reform local perceptions of disability, representing one such deployment of this productive power.

Foucault's popular theoretical emphasis on power, subordination, medicalization, and unequal relationships of production, was just one of several critiques invoked in the re-theorizing of disability in the 1990s. Foucault's notion of subordination as linked to "biopower," is of particular relevance here, be it with some reorganization and alteration. The subordination experienced by persons with disabilities in rural Ghana does not conform to Foucault's and Bourdieu's notion that the manufactured and projected terms of subordination become unconsciously internalized and perpetuated by the subordinated (Bourdieu 1990, 1992; Foucault

1994 [1963], 2006 [1961]). Instead, blind Birifor musicians are keenly aware, as expressed in interviews and compositions, that the reasons for their subordination are more social, cultural, and spiritual than physical. Subordination in this context does, however, exhibit many of the other traits theorized by Foucault, which are echoed in the disability theories of Tobin Siebers (2008, 2010), David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (2006), and many other disability theorists. For Foucault, subordination in the political sense was an introduction and invention of civil society, which created the relations of authority upon which subordination relies. Subordination thus depends upon structured sets of relations, which actively disempower, but do not eliminate the possibility of agency. Theorist Thomas Wartenberg articulated this when he wrote that the,

> Subordinate agent is never absolutely disempowered, but only relatively so... just as the dominant agent's actions are subject to the problematic of maintaining power by maintaining the allegiance of the aligned agents, the subordinate agent is always in the position of being able to challenge the aligned agents' complicity in her disempowerment (1990:173).

This challenge of complicity, I suggest, requires mutual alignment in a "moral community" in order for the dominant agent to be held accountable for benefiting from a negative power gradient. In the Birifor case, it is precisely the encapsulation of wrong-doers in a moral community that makes their accountability possible, since whether motivated by jealousy, recklessness, or the corruption of mystical forces, the enemy remains within the reach of morality. However, this closeness only exacerbates the psychological duress experienced by xylophonists, as the perceived omnipresence of the enemy is further legitimized.

Foucault's related notion of "biopower," frames the very materiality of humanity as policed by the normalization of subjugation (1980:140). Power is both exerted upon a body when it is subjected to norms and standards, and upon the human mind through which the corporeal is experienced. In these norms lie what Judith Butler described as an "exclusionary

matrix," in which conformity and deviation is established and power dynamics assigned, placing the disabled body and person in the precarious position of a sub-humanity (Butler 1993:3; Siebers 2008:56). Structures of normalization thus refuse to, and perhaps cannot in their current form, accommodate the unorthodox nature of disabled bodies. For theorists like Siebers, this signals both the negative power gradient active in ideologies of ability, and the dynamic qualities of disability that push the envelope of what is understood as human capacity. Ideologies of ability place the disabled outside the bounds of ability, and in so doing ironically create a subject position which can reflect back powerful insights about these ideologies (2008:8). This theoretical stance claims disability as a valuable vantage point rather than a liability, which gradually undoes notions of able-bodiedness, and the assumptions that ensue in the cultural inscription of ability. Thus part of the critical project of disability studies, of which this inquiry is a part, is to reveal how ideology locates, separates, and encloses people. From a critical perspective disability contains the potential for critical agency, which as Andrew Apter has suggested is necessarily transformative, remapping the conditions it is expressed through (Apter 2007:3, 12). Here, the musical compositions and performances of blind Birifor xylophonists represent precisely this kind of critical agency, which remakes the self in ritual context and challenging structures of normalization and pathology.

These musical and performative challenges engage the notions of able-bodiedness that fall under Siebers' ideology of ability and ultimately underlie ableism (2008:175). Marginalizing definitions of able-bodiedness are pronounced in rural Birifor farming communities, where strength and fitness often translate into increased agricultural yield, social status, and economic prosperity. Siebers envisions such definitions as violently exclusionary for the "unquestioned inferiority" that they entail, which obscures as natural the policing and

production of ability (2008:6). This same ableism conferred through an ideology of ability, also marks blind musician's xylophone performances as a separate spectacle for their skill at a seemingly visually dependent and highly specialized task.

Along with narratives of ability cast upon disabled bodies, Siebers points out that because disability is associated with physical pain (through notions of physical defect and chronic suffering), people irrationally fear disability and hence distance themselves from the humanity of the disabled (2008:20). With regards to Birifor conceptions of disability as both social and spiritual deviance, the mystical powers that are believed to have caused blindness likewise lead to a non-rational fear of the disabled body as spiritually contaminated. The well intentioned but equally destructive ensuing supposition that disabled persons 'overcome' such monumental setbacks to lead 'normal' lives, reflects a persistent cross-cultural trend of rendering the lives of disabled persons first and foremost through stigma forcefully extrapolated from their biology.

The perspectives from recent and contemporary disability theorists is both relevant and insightful to the study of disability in rural Ghana. However, there are important points of difference between the Western contexts he discusses and Birifor contexts. For example, part of Siebers' critical perspective on disability defines it as a double-bind category that brings no positive benefits of membership or association. While his point that disability is generally a negative category is accurate, there are certainly many 'blind who lead the blind' in Birifor communities, despite the Biblical trope. In addition to John Dari's example as a disabled advocate and organizer of disabled persons mentioned in Chapter 6, blind xylophonists Yichiir, Alhansan, and Darigain all spoke in interviews of the importance of community between blind persons and the knowledge and friendship that circulates in circles of blind musicians.

In contrast to Tobin Siebers, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder articulate disability not

so much as the necessary result of an ideological construct of ability, but rather a culturally constructed location where "disabled people find themselves deposited often against their will." (2006:3). The nuance of this argument is that disability is not an indicator of physical or biological variation, but a label that enforces cultural oppression. Drawing upon the works of Sally French (1994) and Simi Linton (1998), Snyder and Mitchell, like Siebers, posit disability as a site of previously unrecognized agency. However, the specifically cultural location of disability emphasizes that disabled bodies are cast as discordant with specifically local fictions, which are embedded in local knowledge structures. This cultural distinction is essential to understanding that disability operates differently in the context of Birifor culture. Though such a cultural emphasis may seem obvious to some readers, much of the literature on disability is surprisingly centered on Europe and the U.S. at this early stage in disciplinary development. For example, while the *ICIDH-2: International Classification of Functioning and Disability* (W.H.O. 1999) formally added a social dimension to each category of its three-fold schema of impairment, activity, and participation greatly expanding the discourse to disability, cultural and spiritual dimensions remain absent from the current framework of the *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health* (W.H.O. 2011). The cultural model of disability that Mitchell and Snyder articulated expands this social terrain of disability to include the variation of geographically and culturally distinct locations. In the Birifor case, a spiritual model of disability is, as noted, yet another prism though which the disabled body is shaped and branded with a volatile spiritual potency. The key point to take away from the preceding discussion of Snyder, Mitchell, and Siebers, is that the socio-cultural dimensions of disability are more powerful than physical or medical dimensions. The expansion that I integrate here is that in certain cultural contexts the spiritual dimensions of disability are a greater concern to persons

with disabilities than their actual degree of physical impairment. Their bodies are experienced from the inside-out as natural, but are laden with value and dysfunction from the outside-in through social and spiritual essentialisms, which blind Birifor xylophonists chronicle and contest through enemy music.

Chapters

This work is based upon fieldwork and ethnographic data, including audio and video recordings of individual and group interviews, musical performances, daily and ritual practices (farming, festivals, funerals, etc.), and field notes from research trips to Ghana in 2002, 2007, and 2009. In addition to the time I spent in musician communities in Ghana, this book benefits from my continuing correspondence (phone calls, emails, and letters) from 2002 to 2015 with the musicians of this book and their families. Many deaths have occurred over that period, making this work an increasingly rare glimpse at a period in Birifor cultural history.

This book consists of ten chapters divided into four parts. *Chapter 1: Introduction* has so far introduced the subject and method of study, outlining the major themes that the work addresses. In *Chapter 2: Xylophone Music in Africa*, I situate this inquiry in relation to some of the primary tropes of Ghanaian music, continuing through a recollection of the history of the xylophone on the continent and in the Northwest of Ghana as documented through ethnomusicological studies. In this discussion I outline general categories for differentiating xylophone music in Africa, noting where Birifor xylophones, xylophone music, and xylophonists stand relative to each. *Chapter 3: Ethnicity and Ritual Contexts of Musical Performance,* begins by taking stock of what is known to-date about the Birifor with special attention to the works of anthropologists Jack Goody and Carola Lentz, followed by some general remarks on my own research findings about Birifor funerals and xylophone music. In this chapter I introduce the

ritual context of funerals, the importance of mimesis to funerals and festivals, and the social divisions that cross cut them. *Chapter 4: Xylophonists from Vondiel and Donyɛ,* depicts the lives of Belendi Saanti, El Vuur, Vuur Sandaar, and Vuur Mwan through their music and experiences tracing the influence of musical lineage in these two well known families, while articulating a foundational model of Birifor personhood along the way. *Chapter 5: Xylophonists from Bubalanyuro, Bayelyiri, Jorikoyiri, and Saru,* depicts the lives and music of blind xylophonists Maal Yichiir, Maal Chile, Ni-Ana Alhansan, and Kuyiri Darigain, closing with a short biography of my primary research assistant SK Kakraba and his uncle and mentor Kakraba Lobi.

Chapter 6: Blindness and Witchcraft's Causality, provides background information on blindness in Ghana and the integration of traditional religion and witchcraft with Western explanations of blindness through an Aristotelian causality. Blind xylophonists Maal Yichiir, Maal Chile, Kuyiri Darigain, and Ni-Ana Alhansan are the focus of this chapter, as well as other community members like John Dari, the Cross Organization of Persons with Disabilities chairman of the Sawla-Tuna-District. An anthropological account of how and why disability is given a spiritual charge in Birifor contexts is developed in this chapter, setting up the ensuing deconstruction of disability as a social category. *Chapter 7: Enemy Music,* chronicles the recurring theme of the enemy (*dondomo*) sabotaging the happiness and prosperity of xylophonists, as expressed in enemy music compositions. Through these songs and the experiences that surround them the socio-spiritual dynamics of contemporary Birifor communities are portrayed and contested, as the literal and metaphorical enemy is constructed in ritual context. *Chapter 8: Historical Memory and Speech Surrogation in Funeral Music*, is a close examination of the structure and song texts of the Birifor funeral cycle and the process of speech surrogation that is at the heart of the repertoire. In this chapter the musical process of

linking musical and linguistic phrases, the cultural processes of encoding history in song, and the personal process of veiling messages through music, are examined as parts of a larger practice of speech surrogation.

Chapter 9: Urbanization and Musical Change, uses models of musical change and urbanization from previous scholars to understand the processes through which Birifor xylophone music takes on new forms in Ghana and abroad. The focus of this chapter is on the organological changes to the xylophone and the neo-traditional application of the xylophone by SK Kakraba in the group Hewale Sounds. In *Conclusion and Reflections*, I revisit the two initial questions posed at the outset of this book, tallying the theoretical arguments developed to demonstrate the compound nature of discrimination against blind musicians, and the creative strategies full of agency that they deploy. I close by describing where the Birifor musicians of this book are now, how their lives have changed over the course of this book, and finally how I envision developing further research in this region. The readership for this book is intended to include specialists and non-specialists alike, though a familiarity with the academic discourses of anthropology and ethnomusicology is recommended. It is my hope that the humanistic depiction of Birifor xylophonists and their music in this work will be both accessible and of interest to a broad demographic, helping to expand cross-cultural awareness of the structural resistance persons with disabilities experience in rural West Africa.

Chapter 2: Xylophone Music in Africa

The soundscapes of daily life in Ghana, saturated with competing and cross-pollinating musics projected through electronic amplifiers and acoustic instruments, played in tightly packed buses, markets, open fields, and around the corners of concrete and earthen houses reflect the diversity of the lives lived within Ghana's borders. Whether we group people and their experiences according to ethnicity, language, religion, geographic proximity, or shared culture, Ghana's population houses tremendous diversity within a relatively small West African country. With at least forty-seven languages spoken across Ghana's ten administrative regions by ethnic groups that arrived in Ghana through historically staggered conflicts and migrations, the challenge of parsing language and ethnicity has been a historical constant, for both Ghanaians and non-Ghanaians, on the small scale of daily activities and the large scale of national programs and political representation. If "nature abhors a vacuum," then it is certainly pleased with the swarm of interactions and cultural collisions that typify Ghanaian life, sparking and contextualizing the creative expression of its citizens. The interactional dimensions of Ghana *as musical context* are introduced here not as shaping forces, but rather as a pool of resources that individuals wade through and draw from on a regular basis, and which soaks through and connects successive generations of musical practice. The result is a varied terrain of musical practice across which axes of culture and ethnicity are mapped, giving music meaning through deixis.[1]

Overly simplistic generalizations about West African music located in global imaginings or in surface surveys, often lead to the perception of West African music as a fixed category,

[1] For a detailed disussion of deixis, see Bühler, K. 1934. *Sprachtheorie: Die Darstellungs- funktion der Sprache*. Fischer: Jena.

which in turn is thought to correlate with a stable set of musical practices. The truth is that many West African languages (like the often cited Nigerian examples of Tiv, Yoruba, Igbo, Efik, Berom, Hausa, Idoma, and Eggon) frame the very concept of music differently, if at all. The assumption that Ghanaian music conforms to a universal set of guidelines and exhibits specific traits, or even that it can be cross-linguistically defined is not only treacherous, but also glosses many of the productive conflicts that arise when different conceptions of sound as organized expression collide. Thus, as I chronicle major studies of xylophone music across Africa and position Birifor xylophone music in relation to other major xylophone traditions in Ghana in this chapter, it is crucial to bear in mind that the identity of any one genre or tradition is always in flux.

The assumption of cohesion in Ghana is not limited to music alone, since Ghana's socio-political history as the first Sub-Saharan African country to assert independence in 1957, and subsequent position at the forefront of economic development in Africa has maintained a political ideology of cohesion when the reality of Ghanaian life is divided and fractured. Ghana is projected as a peaceful and prosperous country, yet the ongoing chieftaincy disputes across the country, which resulted in the violent murder of the Ya-Na of Dagbon Yakubu Andani II in 2002, the prevalence of violent crime in Ghana's urban centers (Abotchie 2001; Anin 1975; Grant 2009), and the persistent discrimination and racism between regional ethnicities (often rooted in longstanding conflict) tells a different story of Ghanaian life (Lentz 2009). I have chosen these particular examples not to demonize Ghanaian society, but because they reflect my own personal experiences in Accra and the northern regions in 2002, 2007, and 2009, experiences that starkly contrast the popular sentiment that Ghana is a safe and friendly country. With respect to the northern ethnic groups from whom Ghana's major xylophone traditions

emanate, the struggle for status as equal citizens has endured through colonial and post colonial eras, both through the inherited political organization of the north under colonialism (transmuted into indigenous terms of authority and corruption) and through racism in the south. The perceptions of northerners as an uncivilized minority by colonial officers during late nineteenth century surveys of the northern territories are reborn in the twenty-first century under new terms of cultural difference and class stratification in southern urban centers (Hawkins 1996; Lentz 2009).

Stereotypes of Ghanaian music as consisting of large coastal drum ensembles (see Figure 2-1), and the hesitant reception of northerners in southern metropoles are linked because the xylophone music of Northwest Ghana meets resistance on the national music scene, both for its ethnic origins and for its variation from the projected norm of southern Ghanaian percussive traditions, resulting in the under-representation of xylophone traditions in narratives of Ghanaian music. To be fair, there are many factors that contribute to the over-representation of southern Ghanaian music *as* West African music, and so to reduce it to a clash of northern and southern cultures would be incomplete given the global and historical factors at play. The long history of Orientalizing Africa, of Othering the peoples and cultures of an entire continent manifests itself, in part, in global tropes of traditional West African music as primarily rhythmic, ecstatically pounded into drums, and universally accompanied by energetic dance. The savage-civilized dichotomy of the West and the rest endures in perceptions of African music as housing *raw* or *primitive* qualities, which are simultaneously valued for their authenticity and dismissed for their deviation from the restrained musical aesthetics of Western popular and classical canons (Merriam 1982:62). The global trade in African instruments for performance or decorative purposes, which has landed *djembes* of various manufacturing origin and style in stores, homes,

and garages around the world, reinforces the perception of West African music as primarily percussive and reifies the drum as a universal symbol of Africanness (Polak 2000). The drum is rendered as the receptacle of a potent basic human energy, one which African musicians are perceived as depositing through fast and frenetic drumming. This fosters the conception of rhythmic density as synonymous with rhythmic complexity, the reduction of technical mastery to the channeling of a human energy, and the global relegation of percussion to a secondary, accompanitive role, buttressing the fixation of a global imagination on large Ewe, Akan, and Ga drum ensembles. This stereotype of African music is neither new nor surprising. However, it is of interest here because it helps us account for the position of xylophone music in ethnomusicological scholarship as secondary to southern drum ensembles. This is not to ignore the presence of J.C. DjeDje's monolithic works on the one-string fiddles of the Hausa and Dagomba (1978, 2008), the diversity of the complete works of J.H. Kwabena Nketia, the classical orientation Ephriam Amu and George Dor, the numerous contributions to the history of highlife music by John Collins, or the critical purchase of Kofi Agawu's theoretical works, all of which evidence alternative discourses. Rather this discussion is meant to establish the status quo against which all these works orient themselves.

With these dynamics of Ghana as musical context in mind, there are two major musical discourses that Birifor xylophone music fits into: African xylophone music (in its traditional and popular forms) and funeral music. In the ensuing pages of this chapter, I survey major studies of xylophone music on the continent, and pre-existing scholarship on xylophone music in Ghana to establish the coordinates of Birifor music and the Birifor funeral xylophone, the *kogyil* (see Figure 2-2). There are many more foreign and indigenous styles of music that fill Ghana's airwaves which I do not discuss here in the interest of maintaining the focus of this book. This is

not to dismiss their importance, but rather to acknowledge that a serious discussion of how reggaetón or R&B, gospel or classical, or highlife or hiplife music operate in Ghana requires greater depth than I can provide here.

Historical Origins of the Xylophone

The historical distribution of xylophones in Africa is not very well understood due to the tentative and conflicting evidence for its cultural and geographic origins provided by archaeological evidence, travelers' accounts, and oral traditions. The earliest documentation of xylophones and xylophone music dates back to 800 CE in southeast Asia, in records that suggest that variations on the xylophone (a sixteen key wood-harmonicon to be specific) began to appear in in China around 2000 BCE. The temple reliefs of Panataran in Java, currently dated to roughly 1300 CE, depict musicians playing slatted instruments, offering further evidence that early forms of the xylophone were in use in this region (VSL 2010). Most Asian xylophones to date are trough xylophones, which refers to the resonating cavity upon which keys are played, as opposed to xylophones with individual resonators (usually tubes or gourds), both types of which are found across Africa. The early forms of xylophones which are still common in Africa and elsewhere, due in part to the ease of their construction, are leg and pit xylophones, named according to the area upon which keys are placed freely for resonation (see Figure 2-3). In Africa, the xylophone was introduced or invented sometime before 1300 CE, though exactly when and where is unknown. Some theorists have argued that xylophones are indigenous to the continent (Ankermann 1901; Nadel 1931) while others have proposed that they were brought over from Indonesia (Jones 1964; Kirby 1966; Kunst 1942). Historians speculate that Indonesians may have settled in Mozambique around 500 CE, based upon their established seafaring capability and evidence of Indonesian settlements in other large river valleys in Africa

(Grove Music Online 2004). This concept is strongly supported by Chopi xylophone music of Mozambique, which shares many musical traits with Indonesian Gamelans. A.M. Jones has written extensively on this connection, arguing that several common musical characteristics demonstrate this cultural relationship between Africa and Indonesia, including the equiheptatonic tuning of the Chopi *timbila*, its metal keys and the complementary range of each variation of xylophone in the *timbila* ensemble (1964). The large size of Chopi xylophone ensembles is very unique amongst African xylophone traditions, representing another possible connection to Indonesia, along with the highly orchestrated *ngodo* dance dramas that bear a resemblance to Gamelan shadow puppet dramas. The cultural, musical, and linguistic influence of Southeast Asia in Madagascar is unmistakable, and so the extension of that influence onshore is probable. It has also been suggested that Portuguese trade ships may have transported the concept of the xylophone from Indonesia, however, an account from an early Arabic traveler, Ibn Battuta, identifies xylophones in Niger in 1352, predating the arrival of the Portuguese by at least 300 years (Jones 1964:148). When the Portuguese did arrive, they reported that sophisticated xylophones were already in public use. In 1586, Fr. Joao dos Santos noted the presence of the *ambira* xylophone in Ethiopia during his visit, a gourd resonating xylophone with mirlitons (Theal 1901).

Contrasting evidence for the African origins of African xylophones is found in the Manding Epic of Sundiata, which references the earlier presence of a xylophone in the 1200s in the court of Sosso king Sumanguru Kante, who was overthrown by the founder of the Mali Empire, Sundiata Keita. Guinean oral tradition maintains that the Sosso *Bala*, an ancient xylophone currently kept in the town of Niagassola, Guinea, is the very xylophone of Manding legend. Oral traditions from other groups, including the Sara of Chad, and the Dagara, Sisaala

and Birifor of Ghana and Burkina Faso, attribute the invention of the xylophone to divine origins, which supports the ancient origins of the instrument, be it without any sort of hard timeline. Whether we ascribe to an "out of southeast Asia," or a "multiple evolutions" approach, it is important to distinguish between the kernel of inspiration to create a xylophone, and the perseverance to manufacture xylophones and evolve a musical repertoire and style around them. Southeast Asian predecessors at some point have likely influenced xylophone practice in southern and eastern Africa. However, the xylophone has fundamentally been developed in Africa according to an indigenous musical and organological sensibility.

Islam was first introduced to Sudanic West Africa sometime after 1000 CE, bringing Arabic musical instruments, styles, and genres into contact with African cultures. As DjeDje (citing Hrbek 1992) notes, certain cultures such as the Mande assimilated Islam sooner, and thus may have retained more of their preexisting musical traditions due to an initial stance of mutual cultural acceptance (DjeDje 2008:28). According to DjeDje, this may account for the presence of characteristically African instruments like xylophones in certain African groups, and characteristically Arabic instruments like long trumpets and oboes in others like the Hausa, who did not initially widely embrace Islam, despite its current centrality in Hausa culture. The photograph included here (see Figure 2-4), depicts a Hausa man in Cameroon circa 1914 playing a Cameroonian xylophone outside of a settlement. While the Hausa are not generally known for having a xylophone tradition, this photo reminds us that humans are creative and adapt their expression according to available resources. Whether we consider this image a historical aberration, or evidence of greater distribution of xylophones than previously thought, it stands as a reminder that the reality of musical practice is less stable than the language of history and analysis suggest.

In Europe the xylophone may have been introduced through the crusades, though textual evidence of the xylophone doesn't appear until the 1500s in the accounts of German theorist Martin Agricola (1529) and then Michael Praetorius (1618, 1620), and in Hans Holbein's *Dance of Death* (1523) (see Figure 2-5). In this image an old man transitions between life and death, aided by the song and dance of skeletons, one of which plays a small portable xylophone. Xylophones in Europe historically were manifested in simple and sophisticated construction, including an early version of the xylophone created by laying keys on the ground without resonators in four transverse rows, and striking them with a brittle mallet or hammer. As Lois Anderson has noted, the East African origins of the term *marimba*, a Bantu word for a free key xylophone such as those found along Africa's eastern coast which is now commonly used worldwide to refer to various types of xylophones, is evidence of the dispersal of the xylophone via the transatlantic slave trade to the Americas (Anderson 1967:49). Modern Western xylophones and marimbas formally differ in tonal range. European xylophones generally have anywhere from two to four octaves with the highest pitch being C8 (4186 Hz), while marimbas have two-and-a-half to four-and-a-half octaves, with the highest pitch being C7 (2093 Hz), making the range of the marimba an octave lower, something that percussionists take into account when reading Western scores.

The Distribution of African Xylophones

Generally speaking, African xylophone traditions extend from Guinea across the continent to Uganda, arching down to northern Mozambique and southern Africa. They are found most abundantly found in West Africa above 15 degrees N latitude but below the Sahara, and Eastern and Southern Africa between 5 and 12 degrees S latitude, though they are also common in Central Africa (Anderson 1967; Jones 1959). In East Africa, xylophones are found

in three main areas: the coastal region of northern Tanzania, Kenya, Zanzibar, and Pemba, the coastal region of southern Tanzania, and southeastern and central Uganda (Anderson 1967:66). Lois Anderson, in her research on the *amandinda* (xylophone) of Uganda, documented the musical organization and performance practice of Ugandan xylophone music, identifying the prominent socio-spiritual position of the instrument as the key contextual factor for interpreting *amandinda* music. This prominent socio-spiritual valuation of the xylophone is likewise found in Birifor culture, as discussed in Chapters 3 and 6. Anderson's research demonstrated that both free and fixed key xylophones are found in East Africa of varying construction and tuning (anywhere from tetra to heptatonic scales), ranging from a few to more than twenty keys (Anderson 1967:66). The wealth of different groups that maintain xylophone traditions in Uganda and Buganda corresponds with a range of social roles for musicians, from casual *amandinda* (twelve-keyed xylophone) performers to royal court musicians who play the *akadinda* (twenty-two keyed xylophone). The *akadinda* itself dates back until at least the 1500s, when Kato Kintu (the legendary Baganda hero) discovered the *akadinda* in Uganda, and selected a local Egyptic clan called the Envulu, to care for and develop the instrument (Kyagambiddwa 1955). This resulted in at least an increase from seventeen to twenty-two keys, if not other additional material alterations to the construction of the *akadinda*.

The south-central region of Central Africa forms what Gerhard Kubik has called the "tonal-harmonic belt," in which xylophones, lamellophones, and other pitched instruments are common (1999). While this area is the primary terrain of xylophone music in Central Africa, in other areas such as southern Cameroon, instruments like the *menjyan* or *m-endzan* (classes of portable gourd xylophones played during royal processions and ceremonies in groups of three or four, each tuned to a different range), were in usage until the beginning of the twentieth century

(see Figure 2-6). The Zande of Central African Republic, likewise have a royal court xylophone, the *manza*, which resembles but has a different arena of usage than the commonplace *longo*, which has variations found across Central Africa. The Zande, unlike the Chopi and Ganda, do not generally play rhythmically interlocking xylophone music, instead favoring a more linear melodic use of the instrument.

In Southern Africa, the Venda of northern Transvaal, the Chopi of northern Mozambique, the Tsonga of southern Mozambique and South Africa, the Lozi and Ila of western Zambia, and the Sena of Malawu and Mozambique all have distinct traditions of xylophone music which have attracted ethnomusicologists interested in both the ritual contexts of their performances, and the distribution of tuning systems in the region. The Lozi *silimba* and Ila *kankobela* xylophones, are both featured in royal ensembles as symbols of the kingship mobilized in royal processions, generally accompanied by three drums. The Sena, a cluster of ethnic groups who emigrated from Mozambique to Malawi at the turn of the nineteenth century, typify the close relationship between African music and language in their xylophone repertoire, which uses the rhythmic phrasing and tonal contour of Sena speech to inform their *valimba* (xylophone) music. The *timbila* xylophone is the primary musical instrument of the elaborately choreographed *migodo* dance dramas of the Chopi people of Southern Mozambique. *Migodo* consist of dance, music, and sung texts carefully woven together into a performance genre, which resemble the dramatic performances of Javanese and Balinese Gamelans.

In West Africa, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Nigeria, and Cameroon house the most prominent xylophone traditions, each with different tonal organization, construction, and performance practices for the instrument. Looking more closely at the West African xylophone traditions that have made appearances in Africanist scholarship,

the primary categories used to distinguish them are the social role of musicians, the use of mirlitons, the socio-spiritual significance of performance, ensemble size and corresponding compositional practices, performance techniques, tuning systems and the relationship of music and language, instrument construction, and the transference of the xylophone and its compositional techniques between traditional and popular musics. In the ensuing discussion, I recall several examples of these traits from musical traditions across Africa, to demonstrate and solidify the historical and cultural context of West African xylophone musics.

The Social Role of Musicians

In Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso, *jelis* (hereditary casted musicians) have long been the socially designated guardians of traditional *balafon* music, a Manding name which combines the words *bala* (xylophone) and *fo* (to play), which they are tasked with preserving. Here, I reiterate Roderick Knight's reminder that while "balafon" refers to xylophones of several different ethnic origins, the anglicized term "balaphone," which appends the suffix "-phone" to refer to the source of the produced sound, is a misnomer (Knight 2003:343). The status of xylophonists as either hereditary musicians, ritual specialists, general performers, or a combination of them, is one of the central differences between xylophone traditions in Africa. Each assigned role encourages a specific subset of the population to create music according to a different set of motivations and incentives. In Guinea, Susu and Malinke hereditary musicians have maintained longstanding *balafon* traditions, earning Guinea its reputation as an epicenter of solo xylophone performance in West Africa. Guinea's Kouyaté lineage claims descent from the legendary musician of Sundiata's court, Bala Fasséké Kouyaté. In these cultures, xylophone performance falls under the domain of a set of lineages, a cultural configuration that brings with it controversial questions of authenticity, kinship, and the casted obligation to maintain the

continuity of tradition.

In cultures such as Birifor, Dagara, Sisaala, Senufo, and others, xylophonists are both ritual specialists in the contexts of funerals and festivals, and general performers during recreational performances. As ritual specialists, xylophonists are governed not by devotion to a ruling class, but rather by a set of cultural and spiritual guidelines concerning the proper performance of ritual. As a result, musicians as ritual specialists are responsible for the maintenance of socio-spiritual order, yet they are not conferred the status of a full time musician, or a central religious figure in the community. Instead, their socio-cultural position is more tenuous, as their ability to correctly perform music and ritual is constantly under scrutiny, and their status as prominent musicians in the community is sometimes cut short by younger xylophonists. In Birifor communities where xylophonists are part-time ritual specialists, younger generations of xylophonists are strongly encouraged to perform at funerals, while older generations of xylophonists often refrain from public performance to give younger musicians the spotlight. The scarcity of royal patronage in modern Africa is something that has fundamentally altered the livelihood of hereditary musicians, placing them in a similar economic predicament to nonhereditary musicians, who have long had to generate their primary income outside of music.

The Social and Spiritual Significance of Xylophone Performance

The social and spiritual significance of xylophone performance, determined individually, collectively, or institutionally, varies greatly both between and within Africa's musical traditions. As noted, xylophone music sometimes plays a political role in the maintenance of kinship and chieftaincy, as in the case of West Africn hereditary musicians. Musicians as ritual specialists, a category that includes but is not limited to hereditary musicians, also often play an important role in ordering and reordering the relationship between the living, the deceased, and the divine in

several West African cultures. The Senufo like the Birifor, Dagaba, Sisaala, Dagara, Akan, Ewe, Ga, and many others, place a heavy cultural emphasis on funeral and festival music, two contexts chronicled through Hugo Zemp's four part video series, "Masters of the Balafon" (2003). Through Zemp's intimate and extended ethnographic depiction of Senufo xylophone music for funerals, festivals, and in the daily contexts of learning, practicing, and leisurely entertainment, the central role that the xylophone plays in daily life and cultural rituals is exposed. Narratives flow from life experience into the xylophone, and are reconfigured and reprojected through ritual. Xylophone music in these ritual contexts is both multivalent and polyvocal, imbued with different appeals, meanings, and values by various members of the community. For the Senufo and Birifor, the xylophone as a musical instrument is a sacred object that requires ritual action to maintain. Previously this meant sacrifices, restrictions on usage, and the approval of spirits for proper performance. However, the circumstances of modernity and outside interest in xylophones have, in both the Senufo and Birifor case, created a new class of instruments which are secular and can be used by non-specialists without restriction. I will explore Birifor funerals and festivals in detail later, for now focusing on the role of xylophone performance as an assertion of personalized agendas across the central cultural axis of the maintenance of tradition.

Like the xylophone music of the Senufo and Birifor, Chopi *migodo* in Mozambique similarly function as an important mode of social commentary in Chopi society, wherein the dance dramas re-circulate elements of Chopi culture and balance the power of local rulers through a socially sanctioned forum for criticism. *Migodo* also serve a similar function in communities of migrant Chopi miners, who construct xylophones from found materials and compose new *migodo* laced with the revelations, friendships and discontents of their migrant lifestyle. The creation of community and unity through xylophone music, in migrant

communities is a theme returned to in the discussion of urbanization in Chapter 9, as the Birifor and other northern Ghanaian ethnic groups have experienced the challenges of migrant labor for several generations.

Ensemble Size and Corresponding Compositional Practices

Senufo mid-sized ensembles and Chopi large ensembles employ different compositional techniques than the solo traditions of *jeli*/*griot* culture and the solo (sometimes duo) traditions of Ghana, Burkina Faso, and Côte d'Ivoire. The Chopi, for example, are well known for their xylophone orchestras, which include several different types of xylophones of contrasting tuning range and compositional function. One of the distinguishing features of several xylophone traditions of Southern, Central and East Africa, is the use of one instrument by multiple performers who play interlocking and sometimes hocketing phrases. This practice opens specific compositional properties unavailable to solo performers, as each player can, at the same time, conform to a pattern or harmonic framework while improvising. One such compositional technique is the creation of an emergent rhythm from repeated phrases that synchronize in and out of phase. The Ganda xylophone traditions studied by Anderson (1967) and Kubik (1998) are the most widely known examples of this technique to date, though the Chopi also heavily rely on rhythmic stratification to accommodate so many players at once. The Senufo have several genres of xylophone music (including funeral music) that feature their large twelve key pentatonic *balafon*. Senufo funeral ensembles generally consist of three *balafons* of complementary pitch and range, three drummers, several dancers, and participants who join in with instrumental and vocal accompaniment. The size of xylophone ensembles, the number of xylophones used, and the manner in which they play together are key features that help us differentiate xylophone traditions. Examples of compositional techniques used on African

xylophones include the use of interlocking phrases, hocketing, call and response, repeated figures in rhythmic unison, and the assignment of lead and accompanitive roles.

Birifor xylophone music in contrast, generally features one xylophonist in the case of funeral music, and two in the case of festival music, both with percussive accompaniment by the *gaŋgaa* double headed cylindrical drum, the *kuur* hoe-blade idiophone, and varying additional percussion (see Figure 2-7). Birifor funeral music, generally featuring only one xylophonist, relies upon the melodic relationship created by at most two notes at once, set to the rhythmic framework of drums and idiophone. The densely interlocking patterns of larger xylophone ensembles are absent in the solo use of the xylophone, which instead features melodic lines that generally rely on exceptional right and left hand independence. Contrasting metric relationships are still implied on the solo xylophone alone, however, the overall musical effect is distinct from the decidedly dense aesthetics of Chopi and Ganda xylophone music. When two Birifor xylophonists play together, as in the case of *bɔgyil* (festival xylophone) music, both play a repeating pattern, that is improvised upon in alternation. While the introduction of a second xylophone does not double the rhythmic subdivision of a piece, as in the case of Ganda music, these improvisations usually imply new temporal relationships within the prototypical six note metric pattern of Birifor music, usually evolving as the repeated phrase is recast through new accents and phrase lengths. The introduction of successive thematic variations based off of one repeated pattern can be heard in Figure 2-8, a *bɔgyil* ensemble performance featuring several members of the Vuur family. Note that these fourteen key *bɔgyile* (festival xylophones) are tetra-tonic, with one key in each octave left unused and without a resonating gourd, acting only as a spatial placeholder.

The Use of Mirlitons

Accounts in Ethiopia and Mozambique of Portuguese missionaries dating back to the 1500s provide the earliest evidence of the use of mirlitons on the resonators of xylophones, linking the current timbral preference for sympathetic resonators in West African music to East African counterparts (see Figure 2-9). This aspect of instrumental construction, of creating a secondary membrane that vibrates in sympathy, is also evidence of the early practical application of the concept of amplification in the construction of African xylophones. While the Mande *balafon* generally omits the use of mirlitons in favor of a cleaner wood timbre (though accompanying instruments often have sympathetic resonators), the Senufo xylophone of Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, and Burkina Faso, like the xylophones of the Dagara, Birifor, Sisaala, and several others across Africa to Ethiopia and down through central Africa, feature the use of mirlitons to create an amplifying, buzzing timbral aesthetic. This buzzing aesthetic has been theorized as one of several African musical practices that have spread, through successive waves of transatlantic feedback, from the West African savanna to the Americas and back again (Kubik 1999). In global popular music, the use of distortion to "dirty up" the otherwise clean sound of electrophones, the use of white noise or ambient sounds to make electronic music less 'perfect,' and the raspy vocal quality of the blues, all reflect the widespread use of this aesthetic, whether or not we accept models of its distribution. Birifor xylophones in particular feature three mirlitons on each resonating gourd. These were traditionally made from the dense spider webs, though now frequently constructed out of a wax paper, which is a more consistently available material for urban xylophone makers.

Xylophone Tuning Systems

The lamellophone, a decidedly more portable and easier to construct instrument than the xylophone, is widely dispersed throughout southern, central, and eastern Africa. Lamellophones

have been linked to the development of xylophones through their shared use of similar scales and pitch ranges. Gerhard Kubik, in an examination of the origins of the lamellophone, suggests that among several peoples in central, eastern, and southern Africa, the root words for lamellophone and xylophone are the same, implying that they understand the two as conceptually similar, and were developed in conjunction (1999:24, 25). The lamellophone is thus not an evolution of the xylophone or vice versa, but rather the two simultaneously emerged in different areas of Africa and were consequently developed through many of the same musical concepts. A.M. Jones suggested earlier that both lamellophones and xylophones originated on the continent in southeastern Africa, where specific heptatonic tunings are shared between both instruments (Jones 1964:34). Hugh Tracey brought this line of thinking to bear on the music of the Chopi of Mozambique, arguing that the Chopi *timbila* has an identical tuning to the *nijari* lamellophone of the Karanga people of Southern Rhodesia, who lived with the Chopi approximately 500 years ago (Tracey 1948:123). This evidence for the cross-pollination of musical concepts between instrumental resources, indicates that the particular construction of the instrument was defined in large part by preexisting musical and design concepts, which determined the scale, size, timbre, use, etc., of the instrument. In southern, central, and eastern Africa, these musical concepts were applied to the development of the lamellophone and xylophone, while in West Africa, the xylophone of the Malian Empire evolved without a lamellophone counterpart. The Birifor *kogyil* does not have a mobile counterpart, however, the role that the Western tuned *kogyil* takes in contemporary ensembles adapts and sometimes replaces the harmonic role of a guitar or electronic keyboard.

Birifor xylophones are generally tetratonic (*bɔgyile*) or pentatonic (*kogyile*) fourteen key instruments, reflecting the five note tuning system that likely spread from West Africa via

Gilroy's (1993) and Kubik's (1998) transatlantic corridor that continues to characterize West African music. The intervallic consistency within and between octaves, and the range of each Birifor xylophone, varies depending on the lineage from which the xylophone maker comes. Certain families are known for a slightly higher or lower range, for greater consistency within octaves, or for a specific tuning taken from a single xylophone, (or a cassette recording of one). There are also strong correlations between the pentatonic tuning systems of neighboring Sisaala and Dagara xylophones, though they tend to have more keys and a lower range as a result of their size. The Sisaala and Dagara boast large xylophones of up to eighteen keys, though more practical, smaller fourteen key xylophones similar to Birifor xylophones are used as well. While traditional xylophones use local tunings, xylophones of Dagara, Sisaala, and Birifor origin are also constructed with Western tempered tunings for use in contemporary ensembles, and to make them more appealing and marketable to a global audience. This is especially common in urban areas, where xylophone workshops flourish or fail depending upon their ability to cater to an international clientele. G and C pentatonic scales are commonly used at Ghana's universities, generally with the addition of a fifteenth key to complete the second octave. With respect to the tuning of traditional xylophones, there is variation in the numerical estimates of Birifor tunings discerned by Mensah (1967) and Godsey (1980), which is further complicated by the different tunings of the xylophones I have heard, played, and recorded. Figure 2-10 juxtaposes G and C pentatonic tunings of urban fifteen key *kogyile*, with the closest Western note values of a *kogyil* made by Tijaan Dorwana, and one made by Vuur Sandaar. Note that Dorwana's tuning is almost exactly one tone in the pentatonic sequence below that of Sandaar. Figure 2-11 supplements this transcription with Larry Godsey's averaged tuning of *kogyile* he encountered during his fieldwork (1980). Much of this variation could be attributed to the difficultly of tuning

instruments with relatively crude tools, such as those common in rural workshops. However, because of the variation between the tuning preferences of different lineages within Birifor society alone, I interpret these tuning differences as the deliberate deployment of a dynamic tonal aesthetic that accommodates intervallic variation within a general pentatonic schema. The same phenomenon of tonal diversity happens throughout Africa and is an important caveat when speaking of the cohesion of tuning systems in a certain geographic area.

Performance Technique and Instrument Construction

The variation in construction and playing technique of xylophones across West Africa reflects the adaptation of the instrument to different performance contexts, musical aesthetics, and to the shifting materials available for construction. The Senufo xylophone tradition, for example, features the use of a wooden hoop (a strap in modern times) to mobilize the hefty xylophone, which performers dance with while playing. The Birifor xylophone, which is similarly cumbersome, also may have been used as a mobile instrument in the past. However, the hoop on Birifor xylophones is now only used for transporting or hanging the instrument, or omitted all together to make the dimensions of the xylophone smaller and more rectangular for ease of packing. At the urban funeral ceremony of Kakraba Lobi, Tijaan Dorwana, Kakraba's biological brother, mobilized a *kogyil* xylophone around his shoulders, playing an abridged piece in tribute to J.H. Kwabena Nketia, who gave a eulogy at the service (see Figure 2-12). This, however, was more of a ceremonial and symbolic action than a reflection of common usage. The larger of the Sisaala and Dagara xylophones likewise are not carried while played, due to their weight and geometry.

Along with the size and frame of the Birifor xylophone, the slope of the keys makes the instrument unsuited for mobile use. This feature, of sloped or flat keyboard construction, is

another trait that differentiates xylophones in West Africa. The gourd resonators that typically hang beneath each key, are sized according to the pitch of the corresponding key, presenting xylophone makers with two options for how to construct a frame around them. The first is to build xylophones such that the keyboard is flat, with negative space left below the gourds. The second is to leave almost no space beneath the gourds, with the keyboard sloped up over the larger, lower pitched gourds. This has important implications for the way that a xylophone is played, as arched keyboards reduce the necessary distance a mallet head travels between keys, but are more difficult to play while moving because of the lateral arm and wrist movement require to strike low notes. Naturally, the range of the instrument has a lot to do with how much arch the keyboard requires, and it is thus not surprising that the West African xylophones with lower tunings tend to have sloped keyboards, while those with higher tunings have flat keyboards. The major organological distinction between fixed and free key xylophones is one that generally separates West African xylophones from their East, Central, and Southern African neighbors, as fixed key xylophones enjoy an almost exclusive popularity in West Africa, while both types of xylophones are found elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa.

Xylophone players in Africa generally use one of two primary types of hand grips, each of which have different advantages. The first has been popularly called the 'matched grip,' wherein the stick rests between the thumb and forefinger, with the remaining fingers closing around the shaft that rests in the palm. This grip, which will be familiar to most people as the global default, is used with wrist rotations ranging from palms down to palms facing each other. The second grip is likewise symmetrical between hands, however, the stick is held between the index and middle finger, and is widespread in African xylophone performance. In addition to being a traditional technique which performers speak of as being "correct" and "comfortable,"

this grip is well suited for lateral movement away from the central axis of the body. While the matched grip in resting position places the heads of the beaters/mallets closer together, the modified second grip places them further apart (see Figure 2-13). The former is useful for striking a key in a consistent spot with both sticks, whereas the latter is advantageous for strident playing, which is common in African xylophone music. One grip is not necessarily better than another, as personal preference and comfort are the ultimate concerns in the choice of grip by a performer, and wrist and arm movement can do much to influence and compensate for various finger configurations. However, I have here pointed to the altered geometry of this African xylophone grip to demonstrate one of the reasons why it is favored, in addition to the large, hard blister that forms on the inside of the index fingers of xylophonists, a visible sign of dedication and expertise.

The Xylophone in West African Popular Music

West African popular music experienced the inclusion of the xylophone from the 1950s onward, staggered in each country according to political, social, and musical factors. In Cameroon, xylophone and percussion ensembles enjoyed a period of tremendous popularity during the 1950s in urban centers like Yaoundé, when bars and nightclubs became a critical space for the assertion of anti-colonial and authentically African identities. Groups such as Richard Band de Zoetele pioneered this new urban popular style, which was received by Europeans in Cameroon as further evidence of the primitive nature of African music. Later in the twentieth century, more directly confrontational genres emerged, such as the genre of war music called *bikutsi,* in which women transgress social norms and patriarchal order with socially and sexually empowered lyrics sung over xylophone and other percussion. Anne-Marie Nzie was one of the most famous popular (as opposed to traditional) *bikutsi* singers, while Messi Me

Nkonda Martin introduced the use of the electric guitar to the genre in his group Los Camaroes, adapting xylophone patterns to guitar.

In Mali, popular music included xylophones from the 1980s onwards, through groups like the Rail Band, the Ambassadors, and Habib Koité's Bamada group, with the help of now senior balafonists like Keletigui Diabaté. In these groups, xylophone phrases and patterns were similarly also adapted to the electric guitar, an instrument with wide popularity across the continent. This transference of musical ideas between instruments is an important factor to consider when mapping the distribution of popular xylophone music, as xylophones may sometimes be supplemented or substituted by other electrophones in popular music. The circulation of musical concepts between lamellophones and xylophones discussed earlier, can be expanded to include the electric guitar and electric keyboards in popular music contexts.

Popular music in Ghana has for decades drawn heavily from traditional music, borrowing compositional techniques and instrumental resources to construct Ghana's most well known styles. The xylophone, however, was not widely found in Ghanaian popular music until the roots revival of the 1970s, when neo-traditional musics gained ground in national consciousness, leaving the door open for performers like Kakraba Lobi and Bernard Womba to apply the instrument in new multi-cultural musical contexts, and adapt traditional compositions to modern orchestrations. The result of such fusions has been the general relegation of the instrument to a melodic and harmonic role in ensembles, which entails greater repetition, simpler compositional structure, frequent block chords in rhythmic unison, and fewer linear phrases. The virtuosic displays of speed, independence, and musicianship of traditional northern xylophone music, is often abandoned in favor of a relaxed, cool style, befitting the roots of much urban popular music in Ghana in palm wine and highlife genres.

Xylophone Music in Ghana

Through the resurgence of traditional and neo-traditional musical idioms during the roots revival of the 1970s, longstanding local musical traditions gained national reputations as cultural symbols of Ghana's diverse ethnic composition. The xylophone music of Northwest Ghana became part of this national tradition of diversity, showing up in urban hotel lounges, on university campuses, radio programs, and street corners. However, throughout that popularity the question of how to navigate the ethnic terrain of Northwest Ghana remained unanswered. Exactly where these elaborate ritual music genres came from, was glossed with generalizations about northern Ghanaians who had migrated to the country from Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire. This ambiguity reflects larger outstanding questions about how to conceptually organize the cluster of ethnic groups that make up the Northwest, given their significant cultural borrowings and similarities, but use of different languages and/or dialects, terms of self-designation, and adherence to different cultural traditions. Several travelers, officers, scholars, and researchers have proposed mappings of ethnic identity, axes of cultural influence, and areas of cultural conflict in the Northwest, which outline what is at stake in these ethnic distinctions for local populations. Jack Goody, through his *LoDagaa* classificatory schema, suggested that cultural practices in the region (including musical systems) display a general continuity in the west and the east respectively, forming a *Lo* to *Dagaa* continuum (Goody 1965). Goody's identification of two major contrasting cultural traditions was accurate and innovative at the time, as was his identification of double-descent kinship systems and mapping of devolution in the region. However, the circulation of cultural influence in the Northwest has taken on new geometries through modernity, and the impressionistic picture that Goody painted has been filled in with greater detail, overwriting the polarization of ethnicity with more subtle accounts of cultural

exchange and influence. In the next chapter, I will explore the question of what ethnicity means in the Northwest.

The Sisaala, Dagara, and Birifor, each have distinct but related traditions of xylophone performance, which vary from settlement to settlement and clan to clan, but share the primary performance contexts of funerals, festivals, and religious ceremonies. Because these groups have for at least the last century been in close proximity, separated by the branches of the Black Volta, there has been considerable mutual influence and overlap between traditions. Most contemporary xylophonists, regardless of which tradition they learned under, can play at least a few iconic pieces from Sisaala, Dagara, and Birifor repertoires. The Dagara and Birifor traditions are more closely related, as both groups live along the western side of the Northwest, while the Sisaala inhabit the eastern side.

Sisaala Xylophone Music

The Sisaala primarily live in the Tumu district of the Upper West Region of Ghana, which is separated from neighboring districts by the Sisili-Kanyanbia River system (Seavoy 1982:3). The Sisaala trace the origins of their xylophone tradition to the neighboring Dagara, supporting what ethnomusicologist Mary Seavoy identified as the easterly expansion of xylophone practice across the region, with the introduction of southerly expansion during modern labor migrations (Seavoy 1982:101). The social organization of the Sisaala consists of an "interlocking network of patriclans," in which authority and responsibility are assigned according to age and social prominence (Seavoy 1982:26). Musicians have varying degrees of status within this social structure based upon their degree of specialization. According to Seavoy, musical performance occurs on three different levels in Sisaala society. Music is performed by the general public, instrumentalists, and funeral specialists, the latter of whose

performances range from casual musicking, to the careful maintenance of socio-spiritual order in ritual performance. The general public engages in the performance of culturally transmitted song and dance forms, as well as wailing during funeral ceremonies. Instrumentalists are a more specialized group who play xylophones and other instruments, including membranophones, aerophones, chordophones and idiophones (Seavoy 1982:71). The skill of an instrumentalist is understood as determined by natural and supernatural ability, as well as interest in the xylophone, and the best xylophonists comprise what Seavoy considers the third class, of funeral specialists. Funeral xylophonists play throughout the extended funeral ceremonies of the Sisaala, and are considered to be a part of the artisan class called *goke*.

Funerals are the largest musical events among the Sisaala, though music is also played at rain ceremonies, ritual sacrifices, puberty rites, and during work and leisure activity (DjeDje 1998:155). The primary xylophone of the Sisaala is called *jengsi* in Sisali (the language of the Sisaala) and is used to play a genre of funeral music referred to as *gokung*. *Jengsi* typically have seventeen keys, though in the past they had an eighteenth bass key that fell into disuse and has since been omitted (Seavoy 1982:101). *Jengsi* can be differentiated from other Voltaic xylophones based upon their greater length, dramatically arched keyboard, and greater number of keys (DjeDje 1998:155). Two *jengsi* are employed in *gokung*, along with a gourd drum called *bentere* and wailing by many members of the community. The *jengsi* is played with two thick sticks wrapped on one end with rubber from local trees to create mallets. The tuning of the *jengsi* is pentatonic and the timbre of the *jengsi* includes a buzzing sound created by mirlitons, very similar to Birifor *kogyile*. *Gokung* music is polyphonic and strophic—incorporating pitched idiophones, membranophones, voices, and a hoe-blade idiophone—and highly polyrhythmic because interlocking *jengsi* parts create polyrhythms and syncopation with solo lines. The

rhythmic phrases of the *jengsi* employ duple and triple groupings in a meter that could be considered 6/8 or 12/8, as with Birifor xylophone music.

Dagara Xylophone Music

As Mary Seavoy's postulation that Dagara culture has heavily influenced Sisaala culture suggests, the Dagara of the Upper West Region have a reputation as the primary bearers of xylophone culture in the region. The Dagara regularly use an eighteen key xylophone similar to the Sisaala *jengsi*, and a smaller fourteen key xylophone closely resembling the Birifor *gyil*, which they use to perform music and dance genres from all three groups. The Dagara like the Birifor and Sisaala use xylophones in various ritual and ceremonial contexts, as well as social and recreational activities. The major festivals of the Dagara are renowned for their "cultured" spectacle, and the maintenance of traditional cultural practices that have been deemphasized by southern and eastern neighbors. The geography of this perception is widely shared amongst Birifors, who speak of "true" Birifor culture as located north and west back towards older Birifor settlements in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire. The Dagara are thus perceived as a kind of cultural anchor in the region with respect to their well attended festivals which feature the dance dramas and musical competitions of old, the regular performance of other genres of regional music, and heightened conformity to traditional cultural practices (see Figure 2-14). Examples of more "traditional" practices include the prevalence of traditional architecture in rural areas, the use of a funeral stand for the body during funerals, greater and more socially accepted emphasis on traditional religion, and linguistic features such as sharply rolled Rs. This reputation is certainly not a rule, and there are many northerners regardless of ethnic origin who live decidedly non-traditional lifestyles. However, concerning traditional culture, the Dagara have an intra-regional reputation for maintaining a cultural identity less diluted than others by the

conditions of modernity in Ghana.

One of the Dagara expressive forms that has become popular across Ghana is *Bewaa*, a ritual and ceremonial music and dance form performed at the transitions between wet and dry seasons, at the end of harvest, and during other social and recreational contexts in the modern era (see Figure 2-15). This performance genre features an ensemble of two xylophonists facing one another with *kuor* (a closed calabash drum with a lizard skin head upon which wax is used to load the head), and worn and struck idiophone accompaniment (see Figure 2-16), around which dancers inscribe space with symbolic movements harkening past practices through contemporary corporeality. Musically *Bewaa* resembles much of the *bɔgyil* (festival xylophone) repertoire of the Birifor, using similar compositional and performance techniques. These techniques include cyclical and repetitive song structure, the assignment of lead and supporting roles, the creation of a timeline by the supporting player striking the lowest key with an inverted mallet, the prominence of supporting percussive parts, and the use of short repeated ostinati as the harmonic backdrop for individual songs. These similarities represent just a few areas of overlap between Dagara and Birifor xylophone traditions, which have increasingly shifted from local traditions to regional genres.

Birifor Xylophone Music

Having outlined the general characteristics of xylophone music on the continent and in the Northwest Ghana, I have already introduced many of the traits that typify Birifor xylophone music. I have noted the primary performance contexts of funerals and festivals, which are accompanied by modern contexts like performance halls, nightclubs, and churches, and the significance of the instrument within local cosmologies that endures alongside secular valuations. I have established the primary roles of xylophonists in Africa as hereditary

musicians, ritual specialists, and/or secular performers, of which the latter two roles apply to Birifor xylophonists. The socio-spiritual position of Birifor musicians is very much malleable, and can be inverted to marginalize xylophonists. The ensemble size and compositional practices of Birifor xylophone traditions differs between the two main Birifor xylophones, the *kogyil* (funeral (*kuor*) xylophone (*gyil*)) and the *bɔgyil* (festival (*buor*) xylophone (*gyil*)). While two *bɔgyile* (plural of *bɔgyil*) are traditionally played together at festivals, only one *kogyil* is played at most Birifor funeral ceremonies. Both types of xylophone are accompanied by the *gaŋgaa* cylindrical drum, the *kuur* hoe blade idiophone, and the *lar*, a small pair of closed stick drums, each of which are substituted according to what is readily available (see Figure 2-17). *Bɔgyil* songs are decidedly more repetitive than *kogyil* songs, with one player performing a cycling melodic ostinato, while the other xylophonist solos by moving through sets of themes and variations. *Kogyil* compositions, however, are more linear and through-composed, featuring extended melodic sections that are not repeated, as well as popular refrains.

Discernment of style in xylophone music is very important to Birifor audiences, as I discovered when asked on several occasions whether or not I could tell a good performance from a bad one. The favored style of Birifor xylophone music can generally be defined by strident left hand movement, creative phrasing, the full development of themes in the prescribed order of the funeral cycle (detailed in Chapter 8), a bouncing rhythmic feel which inspires heightened dancing (shifting between and overlaying duple and triple divisions of the six beat metric pattern), correct and consistent tempo, and finally the comportment of a xylophonist in performance. The pre-existing canon and performance practice of traditional musical forms, which is understood as inherited from the past, defines these aspects style of performance in Birifor xylophone genres. The value of conforming to these stylistic guidelines in both

performance and composition, was explained by senior xylophonist Belendi Saanti, who said,

> If you don't play the olden days style, then people will not listen. But if you play the olden days way, people will listen, because that will touch them, it will remind them of the past on that day. If you also compose similar to the olden days style, then people will really like it. They will always play your compositions widely. (Saanti 2009).

All of the funeral pieces discussed in this book conform to these stylistic guidelines, while differing in their modification of the funeral cycle, reharmonization of pieces, level and degree of solo improvisation, and their knowledge of the traditional repertoire. My approach to depicting this musical style relies predominantly on video and audio examples, which here critically balances textual representation with visual and auditory representation, bringing the music, voices, personalities, and priorities of funeral xylophonists to the forefront of musical analysis.

Music transcription in Western notation is invoked here to offer a sense of musical orientation, and to outline some of the basic relationships of Birifor xylophone music. The musical examples spread throughout this book present Birifor xylophone music in some of its most intricate, advanced, and non-linear forms, as played by master practitioners. The repertoire of Birifor xylophone songs does, however, also consist of more basic shared compositional forms and structures, which are inevitably filled-in with ornamentations according to the skill and whim of performers. In the rest of this chapter, I consider prototypical *kuur*, *lar*, and *gaŋgaa* parts, and three standard *kogyil* compositions in their basic forms as a guide to how Birifor xylophone music can be heard, and also for an idea of how compositions are conjoined in live performance. Each transcription is accompanied by a programmed electronic performance, which I have included as an aid for readers who are unfamiliar with Western notation. The chapter closes with an overview of the construction and story of origin of the *kogyil*.

While the xylophone is played unaccompanied at the beginning of funeral ceremonies,

the second and longer section of performance features percussive accompaniment. The melo-rhythmic relationships between these percussion parts consitutes the primary rhythmic framework within which *kogyil* music is conceived. Figure 2-18 shows basic variations of *kuur* hoe blade idiophone, *lar* closed stick drum, and *gaŋgaa* double-headed cylindrical drum parts. The metric pattern that frames xylophone music is a fast six, which is played on the *kuur* during accompanied portions of xylophone performance. The primary rhythmic device used in Birifor xylophone music is the subdivision of this pattern into duple and triple groupings of various lengths, which are then super-imposed upon, and played against, each other. The *lar* part reinforces the temporal division of the *kuur*, while doubling its subdivision with three note phrases that shift the implied beat. The *lar* part included in Figure 2-18 consists of four one bar variations, which I have compiled here according to the stylistic conventions of percussionist Maal Lombɔr. Note the contrast in the emphasis on the first, third, and fifth beat in measure two, with the emphasis on the second, fourth, and sixth beat in measure three. The *gaŋgaa* part is similarly made up of several variations typical of *gaŋgaa* players I heard perform over the course of my research. The degree of complexity of *gaŋgaa* parts relies heavily upon the skill of a drummer, and different drummers will ornament and accent Birifor music in contrasting ways. *Gaŋgaa* parts consist, on the one hand, of playing time with ornamentation and improvisation, and on the other, of performing calls that displace the implied beat. Calls shift from a triple to duple pulse using phrases based upon the pattern transcribed in measures ten and eleven. Both the *kogyil* and *Gaŋgaa* perform calls to signal shifts in musical and ritual activity, and calls can also be an opportunity for declarative musical statements. That is to say, calls are both structured and flexible; interpreted as much as an opportunity for elaboration and improvisation, as for communication. Like the *kogyil*, there is much subtlety to *gaŋgaa* performance, and talented

players can be identified by their inclusion of ghosted notes, their artistic placement of accents, and their manipulation of tone with the dampening of either of both drum heads of the *gaŋgaa*, all of which can be heard in Figure 1-6.

Ganda Yina is both a popular regional composition, and a favored starting point for students because of its repetitive left hand part and basic use of hemiola. Figure 2-19 is a transcription of SK Kakraba's arrangement of *Ganda Yina* (Figure 8-19), transposed to the tuning of a G pentatonic urban *kogyil* in order to present a visual indication of the harmonic relationships between tones in a way that is familiar to a broad audience, and also to provide a transcription that can be performed for illustrative purposes on Western tuned instruments. The original recording (Figure 8-19) is both more harmonically and rhythmically nuanced, however, this transcription illustrates several basic practices found throughout the Birifor xylophone repertoire. First, the repeating bass figure, voiced at first between both hands and then played only by the left hand, is an example of the alternating duple and triple divisions that characterize Birifor music. This transference of the introductory figure between hands is also a basic technique that allows performers to maintain a repeating ostinato while spreading a solo out over the xylophones full range. Second, the theme and variation from the composition reflects the Birifor musical practice of presenting the same iconic melody through different rhythmic iterations and melodic orchestrations. For example, the restatement of *Ganda Yina's* primary melody at measure sixty-eight of Figure 2-19 is a more minimalistic rendition of the melody than that of measure nineteen. Third, the omission of the fifth degree of the pentatonic scale throughout this composition demonstrates the use of a specific tonal palette for compositions, deviations from which are recognized as incorrect, though solos often abandon such constraints. The solo indicated at measure fifty-seven is generally played as long series of evolving right

hand permutations over the notated repeating bass figure, as can be heard in Figure 8-21. The chords stated in rhythmic unison from measures ninety-four to one hundred, which close the composition, are part of a transitional figure played between *Ganda Yina* and the next composition of this analysis, *Saan Fo Dan Tara Ferai*.

When played after *Ganda Yina*, *Saan Fo Dan Tara Ferai*, loses its first measure, and *Ganda Yina* is similarly not always played with the block chords that SK plays during the pickup measure and measure one of Figure 2-19. *Kogyil* performance demands exceptional right and left hand independence, and *Saan Fo Dan Tara Ferai* is a complex yet accessible example of this. Figure 2-20 is a transcription of an excerpt of *Saan Fo Dan Tara Ferai,* as performed by SK Kakraba (see Figure 8-20), consisting of two contrasting and alternating sections. The first section establishes the tonal base of the song with a strident and rolling bass line in which both hands move constantly between the lower and middle octave of the instrument, creating both melody and counter-melody. The rapid succession of chords during this section, and the use of D in the middle register to outline and emphasize a backbeat, are both compositional techniques used to bring compositions to life and to engage dancers. The second section of this song is built upon repeating arpeggiated triads played linearly in the order AABABBAB, over which the melody is stated and then a brief solo taken. The repetition of arpeggiated chords in this sequence, generally in the middle register, is popular in Birifor xylophone music in part because it allows xylophonists the flexibility to play the upper and lower octaves while keeping the middle ostinato going with alternating hands, as noted in the preceding discussion of *Ganda Yina*.

The third transcription (Figure 2-21) is an excerpt of the initial theme of *Saan Yi Kyena Dakpolo*. More basic in its repeated block chords, this composition demonstrates the simplicity

of some songs, which are essentially basic templates for improvisation. *Saan Yi Kyena Dakpolo*, and other songs that share a relatively open compositional structure and simple refrain, are often popular because these simple refrains have correspondingly memorable lyrics that evolve into local anthems. The alternation between octaves of the block chords of this composition, also reflects the kind of harmonic call and response used in xylophone music, in which new phrases are introduced first in the upper register, and then played immediately after in the lower register, mimicking an exchange between women and men.

These compositions are just three of the hundreds of songs that circulate in the Birifor community of xylophonists. While musicians will claim knowledge of thousands of songs, my more modest estimate places experts in the range of a few hundred full compositions, with less experienced musicians knowing less than one hundred. Musical competency is, of course, not marked by the size of one's repertoire, but rather the ability to perform the compositions one does know true to form. Learning the funeral cycle, which is discussed at length in Chapter 8, is the first task for an aspiring xylophonist, and the composition *Darikpon* is considered to be the first marker of physical mastery of the instrument. Figures 8-16 through 8-18 are examples of performances of *Darikpon*, of which Saanti's would be recognized as the "best" and "most complete" rendition, while Yichiir's particular performance would be critiqued for moving too quickly through the composition, though each would be considered successful renditions. The technical aspects of performance discussed in this chapter are just a few of the tremendously specialized range of tasks that is xylophone performance, and as with all musical traditions, there is an almost intangible quality that separates a true master from adept practitioners. The style displayed by master xylophonists is unmistakable, and I explain what characterizes Saanti's unique style later in Chapter 4. The purpose of this brief characterization of Birifor music

through transcription here has been to provide a starting point for developing a deeper listening comprehension of Birifor xylophone genres. While at first glance Birifor xylophone music may seem repetitive and cryptic because of fast tempos and the limited scale of the *kogyil*, it is my hope that listening to each of the examples in this inquiry online as they are cued in the text will yield an understanding of both the musical complexities and multivalence of Birifor music.

The Construction of the *Kogyil*

The construction of Birifor xylophones is similar to other West African xylophones in that a frame is assembled from wood and bound with animal skin and dried intestine, across which carefully tuned keys are strung, and from which meticulously selected gourds are hung. *Kogyile*, being prized symbols of Birifor culture, are more refined in construction than *bɔgyile*, which while expertly made are generally less sturdy, less ornate, and less carefully crafted. The mallets used to perform on both xylophones are made from a heavy, cylindrically carved stick at one end of which rubber is woven to create the head of the mallet. Mallets in urban areas tend to be of lower quality, often fabricated from chunks of tire rubber instead of woven strands of minimally refined rubber (see Figure 2-22). Birifor xylophones are tuned pentatonically, with substantial variation according to the lineage of xylophone maker, and precision of the workshop. As compared with neighboring Sisaala and Dagara xylophones of the same size, Birifor xylophones are tuned lower, something that Tijaan Dorwana, brother of Kakraba Lobi, has suggested reflects a difference in language (Dorwana 2007). Mirlitons define the timbral aesthetic of Birifor xylophones, as instruments are favored for the right balance of buzz to tone, and considered broken when the mirlitons do not sound.

The process of making xylophones is an arduous task that requires substantial manual labor from start to finish. While in urban workshops such as Tijaan Dorwana's in Pig Farm,

Accra, wood and materials can be purchased, for rural xylophone makers like Vuur Sandaar, all the materials must be gathered through his own labor and refined only by his axe and chisel (supplemented now by a wood plane that I gave him as a gift in 2009). Sandaar explained in an interview, "When I go to the bush to cut the *niira* tree, it is not easy for me. You see the axe I use [a small hand axe], and when I cut, I will sweat plenty. After that, I still have to carry the tree home. At home, I use an axe to divide the tree, and then chisel the pieces to make keys. That part is always difficult." (Sandaar 2009).

Birifor lore shares the common African trend of positing mystical origins of the xylophone and its performance practice. As with the neighboring Sisaala and Dagara traditions, Birifors maintain that a wandering hunter stumbled across supernatural beings in the woods, who he witnessed playing the *gyil*. Called Kontomble by the Birifor, and translated by Jack Goody as "beings of the wild" (Goody 1962:84), these dwarf like sprites were tricked by a hunter (recognized as WɔfaW by some Birifor) into divulging the secrets of the *gyil*, which he then taught to his kinsmen. This set off an imbalance between Kontomble and living Birifor, which xylophonist try to appease through ritual offerings and excellence in performance. In some versions of the story, Kontomble is manifested as an antelope that was being hunted and gives up his secrets in exchange for his life, while in others he is subsequently slaughtered by the hunter (Saanti 2009).

From the foregoing sketch of both xylophone music in Africa and the relationship of Birifor xylophone genres to regional counterparts, the importance of xylophones as instrumental resources and cultural icons is clear. In addition to musicological and organological differences between cultural traditions, African xylophones are employed in a range of different contexts, each of which is filled with various cultural meanings, associations, and roles. Having

established the history of the xylophone in Africa and outlined some of the general aspects of Birifor xylophones, the remaining questions to be answered are to whom the ethnonym "Birifor" actually refers to, how that ethnic identity figures into the differentiation of regional musical and cultural traditions, and exactly which ritual contexts Birifors use xylophones in. These questions, as well as the history of scholarship in the region, are taken up in the ensuing chapter, *Ethnicity and Ritual Contexts of Musical Performance*.

Chapter 3: Ethnicity and Ritual Contexts of Musical Performance

Parsing the ethnic terrain of the Northwest has remained a difficult task since the geometries of large-scale political governance were first applied to the hinterland region, due in part to the historical diversity and decentralization of its peoples. Christened by the arbitrary nature of Africa's national boundaries fabricated through the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, the divisions of nation states and national identities have never uniformly correlated with ethnic identity and cultural practice on the ground. However, in the case of Northwest Ghana, even the very categories of ethnic identification remain poorly understood, fostering a longstanding view of the peoples of the Northwest as historically sharing no central political organization. While the earliest written records of the northwest of Ghana, bearing the prejudices of colonial officers, suggest that there may indeed have been no externally discernible centralized political organization in the region, the reality was likely that complex cultural systems of kinship and clanship, and religious shrines and ritual action that anchored taboos (such as theft, violence, etc.) in physical space, functioned as effective forms of social and political organization. The difficulty of translating this dynamic context of ethnicity to the page, for purposes of research and political policy, has resulted in conflicting uses of ethnonyms and broad generalizations about cultural practice that dilute their meaning. Here, I use the ethnonym "Birifor" primarily because it is what the people I worked with called themselves. However, it also today acts as a functionally stable category for ethnic identification in the area, based in part on a shared sense of cultural origin, reinforced through an overall cultural continuity and sameness in the context of Ghana's tremendous ethnic diversity. Since much of the scant research in the region has been on closely related but distinct ethnic groups, part of the challenge in writing about Birifor culture is to determine how and when generalizations about cultural practices and historical experiences

in Northwestern Ghana broadly speaking, apply to the Birifor in particular. As a means of both locating and contextualizing the Southern Birifor population of this book, I consider the history of the Birifor in relation to larger regional events, trends, and traditions. To achieve this contextualization, we begin here with a general depiction of the history of the region, which applies to several different groups, narrowing down thereafter to the specifics of Birifor culture. Through this chapter, we revisit the regional historical and cultural relationships that situate the Birifor, as a base for understanding the music and musicians of this book.

Being Birifor in the twenty-first century means membership in a group with a long cultural legacy, marked by an ethnonym that people self-identify with, one that is written on billboards and shop signs, and used in casual conversation to differentiate the Birifor from neighboring ethnic groups who share many cultural traits and practices. Organizations and schools bear the name, as do regional government representatives listed with the ethnic identity "Birifor." There is a wealth of variation within this ethnicity, most apparent between two major contemporary populations: the Northern Birifor of Burkina Faso (sometimes referred to as the Maalba Birifor), and the Southern Birifor of Ghana and Cote D'Ivoire. These groups speak different regional languages, different dialects of Birifor, and have distinct cultural practices, but originated from the same population, which has gradually spread south towards the coast over the past century. As with many Gur languages of the Upper Volta, there is a significant shared vocabulary with neighboring languages such as Dagara, but also dialectical and grammatical variation. All dialects of Birifor share a distinction between high and low phonemic tones, which is a primary organizational principle for the contour of xylophone melodies, explored further in Chapter 8.

Amongst southern Birifor communities, migration, be it seasonal labor migration or

permanent out-migration, is commonplace. Motivations for migration include the need for new land as the result of conflict and agricultural necessity, opportunities for migrant workers on southern farms and in southern mines, and the increased stability of Ghana's southern economy. The result has been the bifurcation of the Birifor into northern and southern groups, which are at least internally viewed as respectively more traditional and modern, though the differences may seem slight to cultural outsiders. Southern Birifors speak of the Northern Birifor as the primary bearers of traditional Birifor culture, noting that they have maintained many of the traditional practices and meanings of old which are absent in southern settlements, in contrast with the array of cultural borrowing from neighboring groups of the southern Birifor. This stereotype that circulates within Birifor communities, regardless of the consistency of its characterizations, is telling because it invokes an indigenous sense of authenticity, hints at the cultural significance of historical migrations, complicates the notion of the Birifor and their cultural practices as homogenous, and introduces the categories of identity through which the Birifor differentiate themselves from their neighbors. For the purposes of book, I use the term Birifor to refer to the specific communities of Southern Ghanaian Birifor that I worked with. The Birifor as a whole are distinct from but share many areas of cultural and linguistic overlap with surrounding ethnic groups, including the Dagara, Sisaala, Lobi, Wala, Vagla, Safaliba and Gonja. The categories of differentiating the peoples of contemporary Northwest Ghana, be they linguistic, ethnic, cultural or political are complex and require caution when assembled into depictions of the continuity of ethnicity and tradition.

Ethnicity and the Colonial Encounter in the Northwest

The history of the Northwest of Ghana did not begin with the arrival of colonial officers. However, due to the historically oral nature of cultural traditions in the region, there is only

restricted knowledge of what the Northwest was like before the colonial encounter. Amongst the first written records of the peoples of the northwest of Ghana comes from G.E. Ferguson, a Fanti officer in the Gold Coast Colonial service who reported on the ethnic groups of the middle Volta basin in 1894 as acephalous, uncivilized, and disorganized. Later in 1905, this impression was echoed by Captain Moutray-Read, who added to this that their social organization rarely extended beyond the family unit. Like much of the West African hinterland, the northwest of Ghana was hit by Sofa and Zaberma slave raiders in the late 1800s, who indiscriminately targeted all ethnicities in the region, in what was the aftermath of raids from Dagbon and Wa (Ahrin 1974:100; Hawkins 1996:205; Holden 165:73-74; Hebert *et al*. 1975:49-53; Lentz 2006:25; Person 1975:1706; Wilks 1989:125-126). How much of the disorganization related in these early accounts was the product of previous conflict is thus unknown, however, the goal of sending colonial officers to the Northwest was clear. British commissioners wanted to assess the political organization of the Northwest to manipulate it and exploit the local population, and as a solution to the perceived lack of political unity they installed sergeant-major chiefs to enact and enforce the extension of colonial power. This system of rule was imposed upon what was seen as disorganized masses, when the reality was likely closer to what colonial officer St John Eyre-Smith characterized as a system of elders, coordinated through territorial priests who maintained Earth shrines (*tengaan*), and consequently cosmic and social order. Each family unit was autonomous, but governed by the same taboos and penalties of transgression mandated by Earth shrines, and policed and enforced by priests and ritual specialists. This created a moral community, across which several lines of social difference connected, forming a kind of "moral ethnicity" (Lonsdale 1992). The household (*yir*) itself was the most basic social division of this community, which was linked to surrounding settlements through complex systems of patriclans

and matriclans (Lentz 2006:16). However, perhaps because of the nuance of these mechanisms of social organization, they were overlooked or ignored by colonial officers and missionaries, as the hierarchies of chieftaincy and Christianity were imposed on the region.

British rule was established in northwestern Ghana in 1898, and in 1903 and 1905, British officers escorted by Hausa troops made periodic trips to the Lawra district to strategically appoint chiefs, in the beginning of what would become the colonial policy of regional rule by sergeant major-chiefs formally established in 1907. These chiefs helped solidify the negative power gradient between officers and the indigenous population, subsequently allowing chiefs to build their own systems of exploitation for labor and land upon it. Colonial systems of chieftaincy were superimposed over preexisting configurations of authority and group membership based on clanship, kinship, and religion. The geographic boundaries of earth shrine parishes, market networks, and clanship ties were overlaid by "native states" (later renamed "traditional areas") with colonially appointed paramount, divisional, and subdivisional chiefs (Lentz 1993). As Carola Lentz suggests, these chiefs had a vested interest in establishing a cohesive cultural identity which they could use to legitimize their chiefdoms, and thus likely contributed to the reification of stable ethnic categories that were previously absent from regional life (1994:460). Additionally, the prevalence of labor migrations for northwesterners in the colonial and postcolonial eras introduced new motivations for solidarity between northwesterners in migrant communities across Ghana, acting as another site for the invention of ethnicity. The introduction of Christianity by a group of missionaries known as the White Fathers, or the Society of Missionaries of Africa, further coalesced ethnicity in the region through their translation of the Bible into select languages, fostering notions of shared ethnicity based on language.

By 1928 British authorities had recognized that the doctrine of direct rule in the northwest of Ghana was failing, commissioning Captain R. S. Rattray to conduct a survey of the region to assess the possibility of greater native autonomy. The product was Rattray's broad ethnographic survey, *Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland* (1932). That year, after the power of colonially appointed chiefs had gradually led to more public corruption and violent exploitation, direct rule in the Northwest came to an end. The power of colonially appointed chiefs, however, did not, continuing at least until Ghana's independence in 1957, transmuted thereafter into government positions and access to greater resources and education (Hawkins 1996:206). The indirect rule which ensued, justified through institutions like the Native Authority courts, extended from 1933 until 1957, with the appointment of many of the same sergeant-major chiefs of direct rule to positions of power and authority during indirect rule in what were asserted as indigenous institutions of social and political organization. The result was that the fictions of colonially installed chiefs were legitimated as part of a newly indigenously authored government, while pre-colonial realities were further buried and obscured.

The shift from direct to indirect rule also coincided with an increase in conversions to Christianity in the region beginning in 1932, though as a whole the peoples of the Northwest have embraced Christianity and/or Islam slower than their southern neighbors. The reason for the success of Christianity during this period was due in part to the ease of interfacing Christian conceptions of a single God with indigenous spiritual views, which posited the Earth as the supreme spiritual entity. The post-independence missionary doctrine of inculturation of the 1960s, in which Christian missionaries deferred religious authority to indigenous clergy, represented a major step towards a state of religious independence, in what had been a gradual process of rendering Christian ideals through local systems of meaning. This fostered the

performance of traditionally funerary expressive forms in the context of Christian services, including xylophone music and other ritual practices (Hawkins 1996:217-218). However, this ongoing translation of Christian beliefs into indigenous terms also opened the possibility for gross exploitation of indigenous belief systems, as occurred in the mass conversion of Dagara communities in 1932, wherein drought was manipulated to bolster Christian conversions (Hawkins 1996:219). Access to medicine was also another means through which missionaries drew the interest and dedication of local communities, capitalizing on the close connection between the material and spiritual in many Northwestern cosmologies. However, despite these means of garnering interest in Christianity, the complex process of weaving Christian ideologies into preexisting religious frameworks ultimately relied and relies upon the agency and ingenuity of individuals, making the overall process of religious change one of syncretism, not conversion.

Islam and Christianity firmly took root in the northwest of Ghana after their introduction into the region in the 1800s, however, they are strongest in urbanized areas, and the religious and musical practices of the Birifor remain largely indigenously oriented. Even in urban areas, many of the Birifors that I met and worked with, including SK Kakraba and Ba-ere Yotere, do not ascribe to Christianity or Islam, instead engaging and observing traditional rituals and taboos. The traditional belief system of the Birifor could be described as animistic, based upon a spiritual orientation toward the Earth and ancestors, wherein the enactment of ritual maintains continuity between spiritual and earthly domains. The significance of the Earth in Birifor cosmology is primary; seen as the source of all nourishment and prosperity for the Birifor, the earth is believed to be the fundamental point of contact with spirits.

The importance of this colonial and missionary history to contemporary Birifor society lies in the terms of tradition, ethnicity, and power which were manufactured through the colonial

encounter as a means of parsing if not controlling the population. As fictions became naturalized power was extended through them with increasing legitimization. In postcolonial society, the vestiges of these manufactured traditions remain, both in the form of political organization, and ethnic cohesion. The lines between 'traditional' and 'modern' are of course problematic and tenuous, filtered through the perpetual now of production. However, as this historical perspective on Northwest Ghana demonstrates, the distinctions between traditional and modern, pre- and postcolonial, and authentic and syncretic are complicated by the manipulation and alteration of the 'traditional' for purposes of social delineation and political control. Communities assimilate traditional identities and practices out of political necessity, and ethnonyms are adopted and applied for purposes other than their timeless authenticity.

From the historical sources available, it can be deduced that for the acephalous peoples of the region colonialism meant, amongst other things, the codification of cultural traditions and linguistic proximity into ethnic categories, and the imposition of newly fabricated systems of rule. The first ethnonyms in the Northwest that were printed onto paper thus hijacked real aspects of cultural identity and reconfigured them according to the needs of mass governance (Iliffe 1979; Ranger 1983; Vail 1989). While some scholars have suggested that this is tantamount to the invention of ethnicity in the Northwest (Hawkins 1996), it seems more likely that preexisting social and political structures remained intact, either functioning in parallel, or fused into a new dialectically constructed system of social organization. In the context of the post-colony, major ethnic designations retain their political significance, while kinship and clanship systems continue to thrive without wide institutional recognition, constituting a major intra- and inter-ethnic form of mediation, communication, and organization.

Early Anthropological Accounts

Louis Tauxsier (1912), Allan Cardinall (1920), Robert Rattray (1932), and Meyer Fortes (1936) were amongst the first trained anthropologists to conduct ethnographic research along the Upper Black Volta, followed later by Sir Jack Ranke Goody (1956, 1962, 1972). While each of these early accounts of Northwest Ghana provides valuable historical and anthropological insights, the work of Goody represents the most substantial anthropological contribution to the study of the hinterland region, and has special relevance to this book because of Goody's detailed writings on LoDagaa funeral practices, and the remarkable ethnographic detail of his writings. Goody has also been influential in directing the discourse of culture and history in the Northwest through his modeling of "double-descent" kinship systems, his introduction of the "LoDagaa" schematization of ethnicity, and the identification of numerous shared practices and beliefs within that cultural spectrum. LoDagaa refers to the continuum of ethnic groups with overlapping cultural and linguistic practices that extend from west (the *lo* side) to east (the *dagaa* side). The Birifor fall on the *lo* end of the spectrum, sharing more cultural similarity with the Lobi, LoPiel, LoSaala, LoWiili, and DagaaWiili, which is consistent with the historical spread of the Birifor along the northwestern border of Ghana. Goody introduced this schematization of cultural practice and identity in the 1950s for several reasons. First, many of the ethnonyms used to describe populations in the Northwest, such as Lobi, Dagarti, and Sisaala were colonial misnomers with a distasteful history and general inaccuracy, which made the Northwest all the more cryptic to outsiders. Second, at the turn of the century populations in the Northwest did not consistently self-identify with any ethnonyms, using them only loosely to refer to neighboring groups. Third, Goody observed considerable cultural continuity within the populations of the Northwest, making the introduction of a new general term to refer to this relationship, without reenacting the misapplication of ethnonyms, appropriate. Goody thus recognized the complexity

of the cultural and ethnic make-up of the Northwest and sought to introduce a new terminology that identified accurately the landscape of ethnicity and culture in the region.

However, people in the Northwest today use ethnonyms such as Dagaba, Dagara, Sisaala, Birifor, Lomiiwo, Lowiili, etc., to refer to themselves and others, regardless of the origins of the terms, but *never* use LoDagaa. Because LoDagaa is an anthropological construct, and because there are specific ethnonyms in usage today across the Northwest, I choose along with theorists like Carola Lentz to not use Goody's terminology, except when referring to a larger cultural complex in the region. While what it meant to be Birifor in the pre-colonial era may never be known, I am concerned here with what it means to be Birifor today. Simply put, there is no *being* LoDagaa in contemporary Ghana. Some scholars such as Sean Hawkins (1996) have argued that because of the political history behind the ethnonyms in use in the region, it is best to use the term LoDagaa, as it sheds the legacies and stereotypes of colonialism. However, as cannot be ignored, the history of anthropology in the region including the enterprise of Goody is bound up in the colonial encounter, and many contemporary African scholars have voiced strong critiques against the definition of African populations through foreign terms. Thus, while the definitive categories of ethnicity in the Northwest have yet to be inscribed for time everlasting, failing to describe the people of the Northwest through the terms that they self-identify with is ultimately to compromise the agency that they exercise through their use. For this reason, I favor the term "Birifor" throughout this book, rather than "Lobi," "Dagara," or "LoDagaa" because it is what the people represented here identify as. It is important, however, to retain the insight of Goody's work that these populations share many of the same traditions and practices, and that lineage, clanship, and shrine ties, form a complex web of influence and exchange between them.

Kakraba Lobi is one of many examples of the creative use and navigation of ethnonyms

by Birifors. He adopted the alias Kakraba Lobi in place of his birth name Tijaan Siinyiri for the cultural authenticity that it garnered. As a musician, it is not uncommon to adopt a widely recognizable stage name. However, his choice of the ethnonym "Lobi" is telling. The term Lobi today refers to groups living just west of Ghana in Cote D'Ivoire and Burkina Faso, but generally not to groups living in Ghana, though in the colonial era it was used to refer loosely to many peoples across this region of the hinterland. In both usages, it is associated with a long-standing cultural tradition of xylophone performance, with which Kakraba sought to align himself. The misuse of the term during the colonial era was known to Kakraba, who was himself a cultural historian of the region through his own personal experiences and efforts as a primary bearer of northwestern culture to the world. Yet he adopted this name precisely because of the associations it gained in the aftermath of colonialism, which he channeled towards his own personal and professional success. Thus, while the impact of colonialism on ethnicity in the Northwest has been substantial, northwesterners have recognized this influence and chosen to strategically push back, deploying colonial terms towards in accordance with local agendas.

This positioning of Birifors in relation to other contemporary ethnic groups in the region is done with the recognition that these cultural configurations and the ethnonyms used within them do not represent untouched, age-old realities. Instead they are categories that map sets of relationships developed through a complex regional history, told differently from the vantage point of persons, clans, and ethnic groups. From these varying perspectives, tropes of cultural difference are playfully manipulated, and re-appropriated. On the street in *pito* (millet beer) bars, and in homes in urban centers and rural towns alike, joking conversations break out over stereotyped cultural practices, covering topics such as dog treatment and consumption, lack of bride wealth, appetites for indulgence, ascription to certain religions or religious cults, and ways

of speaking or linguistic traits, to name a few. This joking tone reflects the remarkable atmosphere of cultural acceptance that I experienced in the Birifor communities I worked in, bred by the ethnic diversity of Accra and the Northwest. The widely known content of these cultural stereotypes, which can be specific down to the minutia of ritual practice, suggests that these differences remain an important marker of identity between ethnic groups of in northwest Ghana. In the context of leisurely conversation, such humor dismantles traditional identities and boundaries, placing cultural categories and practices out in the open for critique without placing criticism on one person alone.

Life in Birifor Country

The northwest of Ghana, through which the Black Volta extends in a network of rivers, is the heart of xylophone music in Ghana. The Birifor currently inhabit a roughly 2,000 km^2 rectangular area that extends down the Black Volta from Burkina Faso into Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, an area which has gradually expanded southwards over the past several decades. The Southern Birifor of the Sawla-Tuna-Kalba district migrated to Ghana in the early 1900s, negotiating with the Gonja Paramount to settle on the banks of the river separating Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, placing them in close proximity to the Wala, Vagla, Gonja, and Safaliba peoples, who still jointly inhabit several towns and villages in the Sawla-Tuna-Kalba and Bole Districts. This geographic area is typical West African savanna grassland fed by the Black Volta, a river network that creates the area's major geographical boundaries. The land of the region changes dramatically between the dry and wet season, with the former lasting from November to March and the latter from April to October. In the wet season tall grasses and fully foliaged trees thrive, making the landscape a deep green and providing shelter from the winds that blow across the parched lands in the dry season, when a mixture of natural environmental changes and slash and

burn agriculture make the land brown, dusty, and desolate. The Birifor burn select areas of surrounding vegetation to draw out animals to be slaughtered for food, as well as to rejuvenate soil for future agriculture, benefiting their two primary local subsistence practices of hunting and farming. Regional paved and dirt roads alike deteriorate during the wet season, impeding travel as rivers swell and seep into nearby woodlands. The dry season often reveals the damage left by the rains, damage that can take years to repair due to the lack of resources and national interest. The dry season is decidedly the best season for travel and research in Birifor communities, as many ritual observances and festivals occur during the dry season, as well as during the transitional periods between seasons.

Most Birifor farmers cultivate a selection of crops on their plots, predominantly guinea-corn, maize, millet, groundnuts, yams, gourds, tomatoes, cassava, and rice, while short-horned cattle, sheep, goats, dogs, chickens, and guinea-fowl are kept as livestock. Additional food sources include fish and turtles from nearby water sources, and wild leaves and fruit from baobab and shea trees. Popular local dishes include the staple food *tized*, which is warm slabs of fermented millet, over which various sauces or stews are poured over, and meat is added as available. The locally brewed and tremendously popular millet beer is ubiquitous in the region, fermented in black earthenware (sometimes plastic water bottles) and consumed in dried half calabash bowls. As a result of heavy agriculturalism, and the felling of trees for construction and artisanal use, there is a distinct absence of trees near most settlements and large spacing between compounds. Houses are generally constructed from felled trees, mud and sediment, occasionally supplemented with concrete walls and corrugated metal roofs. Traditional roofs are flat with drain systems that line low-lying walls on the roof, which keeps the crops that are processed and dried upon rooftops from blowing or rolling away.

The social organization of the Birifor consists of an interlocking network of clans and lineages in which authority and responsibility are assigned according to age and social prominence, similar to neighboring ethnic groups (Goody 1956:9; Seavoy 1982:26). While patriclan and matriclan membership extends back and forth across the LoDagaa spectrum developed by Goody, these clans are often hidden, revealed only in the context of certain rituals, such as *Dyoro* initiations. Major patriclans include *Maalba (*after which the Maalba-Birifor of Burkina Faso are named*), Pondaal (Pornaal), Paalba, Yonbalador, Sonobo, Cholbo, Lenkaal, Bilfaal, Kankandor, Weretuolbo, Muleedor (Muleeyirideme), Wielbe, Kujuol, Nanbirebe, Daankuyirideme, Kulbiel, Gunguol, Bachiel, Taanbile, Badaal,* and *Viewayirideme*. Note in that in the naming of each patriclan, *"dor"* and *"yirideme"* are sometimes used interchangeably as suffixes to connote shared membership in a household. Matriclans amongst the Birifor are split into four major sects, *Da*, *Somo*, *Hien*, and *Kambere,* lacking the localized subdivisions of patriclans, but retaining a wide and potent sphere of influence. A crucial, though often overlooked, aspect of Goody's theorization of clanship in the Northwest was his articulation of the paired joking relationships between the major matriclans and patriclans of the region. These pairings based on clan membership govern ceremonial roles in ritual activities, in which groups reciprocally offer "cathartic services" for one another (Goody 1962:69). For Goody, these joking relationships represented an important apparatus of sociopolitical cohesion, as the reciprocal exchange of ritual expertise fosters positive relationships between clans as a whole. As a response to the perceived absence of political organization in the Northwest, he pointed to these bonds maintained through ritual as one of several exchanges that fluidly ensured group solidarity. Musical Birifor rituals are indeed a platform for a range of different clan based exchanges, expressions, and actions, notably the inheritance of property. Funerals mark a major

transition in property, as clans claim ownership over moveable and immovable property along clan lines. Xylophonist Belendi Saanti expressed some of the tensions surrounding inheritance and clanship during formal and informal interviews. He said,

> When you have a family, you often live next to someone else. The neighboring property, sometimes if there is no one there to claim it for a long time, you can inherit it. But then some one in your family comes and crosses your way and says, "No. It is not yet your time to inherit. It is my time to inherit these properties." So then there is fighting and fighting, and the case goes to the chief's house to be resolved. The senior is saying to the junior, "It is not your turn yet, you are a small boy, you cannot inherit. It is me, the senior, who must inherit that. Our relative has passed away, but you are not thinking about how we should bury the person, how we should care about them, instead you are thinking about inheritance. why? That is what I am asking." (Saanti 2009:GHR20C30).

In this case the tensions of inheritance arise out of a locally vacated property. However, there are cases where upon the death of a father, a house can be repossessed through clanship claims.

Most Birifor are raised jointly by socially recognized fathers and mothers, and a larger network of uncles and aunts. Some Birifor use the same terms to describe their sibling and cousin, mother and aunt, and father and uncle respectively, considering more fine-grained distinctions to be impersonal, even though the Birifor language accommodates more specific mappings of kinship. The result is that when you query some Birifors about their familial ties, they may say that someone is their father, when in reality that person is their uncle. Sons and daughters generally inherit the occupation of their parents, both in urban and rural settings. Concerning the differences in xylophone music between patriclans, each is known for favoring xylophones of slightly different tuning. The Pondaal xylophones of Donyɛ for example, are one pitch higher in the pentatonic sequence that the Paalba xylophones of Saru. These tonal differences are believed by xylophonists to correspond with dialectical differences between major settlements of each patriclan. The alignment of musical and clan divisions will become

more evident through the consideration of xylophonists from contrasting patriclans in Chapter 8.

Ritual Contexts of Musical Performance

Having outlined the historical backdrop of cultural trends, foreign influence, and various research efforts in the Northwest of Ghana, I move now to the actual ritual contexts of musical performance, facilitating the subsequent examination of the practices and narratives that circulate within them. Music plays a central role in all major life-cycle events in Birifor communities, and is generally understood as negotiating relationships with the otherworldly through honoring, invoking, and appeasing ancestors in the context of funerals, festivals, and religious rites. Major festivals for the Birifor and surrounding ethnic groups include *Bori* religious festivals and puberty rites (*Kontombore* and *Bagrepla*), Earthshrine festivals (*Tengaan Daa*), and harvest and hunting festivals (*Bomaal Daa, Kobine,* and *Kakube*). The *Kakube* (guinea maize and rocks) festival in Nandom attracts attendees from all across the Upper-West Region, as does the *Kobine* festival in Lawra. Recognized widely as a spectacle of Northwestern culture, the *Kobine* harvest festival features performances and competitions between youth music and dance troupes from all over the region. At the 2009 *Kobine* Festival in Lawra, mimetic reenactments of great hunts, and a frenetic *Bewaa* dance competition (which Lawra secondary school won) were just two of several highlighted events over the course of the multi-day celebration. To say that music, dance, and drama are the focal point of these festivals would be an understatement, as xylophonists from the entire region flock to them wielding xylophones of varying size, construction, and tuning. Along with seasonal festivals, many Birifor adults also strive to return to Burkina Faso to reconnect with their roots every seven years. Both the Birifor and LoMiwo set out on this northern pilgrimage for a kind of cultural and spiritual rejuvenation, which occurs at major Earth shrines in Burkina Faso. Those who have made this journey, earn the right to add

the suffix *"tey"* to their name, as did Damolnuor Ledantey, father of a talented xylophonist Ledantey Kpiinsun, who performed at several of the funerals I attended.

Funeral ceremonies play a crucial role in the Birifor cosmological orientation towards the Earth, facilitating the passing of the deceased into the spirit realm while fostering social and psychological cohesion in the aftermath of the loss (Mendonsa 1975, 1982). Xylophone music in the context of funerals is the primary medium of communication with spirit ancestors, making music a key point of purchase for understanding Birifor cosmology. Birifor funerals feature numerous performers over the several days and nights that they usually span. At a typical funeral, women's singing is heard first, following the body of the deceased through the funeral ceremony, pausing only for brief intervals until the body is interred into the ground. Women speak closely to the body, touching the deceased and gesturing in visible grief. Women's mourning is both public and communal, as their lament constantly collects new voices generating an emotional tidal wave that brings everyone to tears. While this mourning is of course deeply personal, as a strategy for communal recognition of loss women's vocal laments succeed at transmitting the gravity of the occasion to all within earshot. At Birifor funerals, these women's songs represent the primary vocal music performed, unlike ethnic groups to the northeast who have funeral chants (*long*) that are sung over xylophone music.

During a funeral in the village of Bonchɛ (which translates as "try the cut and see" referring to testing the richness of soil for farming), I witnessed 45 xylophonists perform over the 72 hour funeral for Sondewr Larko. Deeper into the Birifor heartland, the town of Bonchɛ is in an area that is not wanting for xylophonists because of the strength of musical culture in the area, as remarked by xylophonist Vuur Sandaar (2009). There were almost no breaks longer than five minutes throughout this funeral for Sondewr Larko, who was a well-respected man for his civic

mindedness and economic success. Each performer played for about forty minutes, which Maal Yichiir later explained was customary at Birifor funerals. He said, "At most funerals there are many xylophonists, so it will be difficult for me to play one hour. But if I can do so, then it means that it is forced, because there are no xylophonists. But if there are others, you cannot play like that according to custom." (Yichiir 2009:GHR4C36). At this particular funeral, the brothers of the deceased (prosperous businessmen living in southern Ghana), arrived late at the close of the second day of the funeral, rousing a new wave of cries, exclamations of grief and sadness, and musical performances. A train of sympathizers led them across the field towards Larko's house, to the large tree around which his compound housed the funeral service. As a devoted Muslim, Sondewr Larko had already been buried, according to Islamic mortuary practices, adding to the remorse of the brothers since they missed the opportunity to speak with him one last time.

Many Birifors speak openly to the deceased before interment, communicating with a soul that is perceived as not leaving the body until the proper completion of the funeral ceremony. This perception of the presence of the deceased throughout the funeral process is critical to understanding the songs sung and played at funerals, which praise their deeds in life and express the suffering that will ensue in their absence. As a chant for a Dagara child's funeral documented by Goody shows, these emotional expressions can even take on an aggressive tone towards the deceased, who may be perceived as passing too soon, or not doing enough to ensure the prosperity of the family their absence (1962:100).

On the night of October 18th, 2009 a young boy in Saru passed away after battling a fever for several days. Just two hours after sunrise, the child had been buried and mourners had gone their separate ways. The funeral lasted a total of only three hours. There was no xylophone

music, no dancing, no drinking, and celebrating. Instead women's laments stood on their own filling the air with a hollow sadness and strained, questioning voices watered by tears. Children were called home from school for the day, and farms laid unworked throughout the day in observation of loss to the family and community. The funerals of children generally do not receive the same ceremony as the funerals of adults. A child who has not been weaned is not considered to have become a part of the community and is consequently not given a musical funeral ceremony. Likewise young children often receive an abbreviated ceremony with far fewer attendees, because they have not yet achieved adulthood. While these explanations may reflect a formal belief system that organizes grieving, or a cultural concept of the person that the child has not grown into, I believe that in the case of the death of an infant or child, sadness and grief are severe enough to warrant a different kind of mourning. The diffusion of parenting in Birifor settlements amongst all adults also means that the loss of a child is distinctly recognized as a loss to the whole community, and not just friends and close family. Xylophonist SK Kakraba remarked that the death of a child brings great sadness because the child did not have the opportunity to reach adulthood and know life as the living adult community has (Kakraba 2009).

Aside from the primary performance contexts of funerals and festivals, xylophone music is heard as part of the daily soundscape of Birifor settlements that have xylophones, which are a prized and expensive commodity. Musical performance is the focus of Birifor men's artistic expression and technical mastery in such communities. A xylophone in a compound generally means that all the men there have developed their own unique interpretation of the local repertoire, though many will never develop their talents to the degree necessary for ritual performance. There is consequently a strong expression of individuality asserted through

xylophone performance, with each performer retelling the funeral repertoire through their own particular level of proficiency, and their own personal and artistic agenda. The xylophone has also become a viable means for economic prosperity and a resulting heightened social mobility, as international performers like Kakraba Lobi have demonstrated. The repertoire of Birifor xylophone music itself consists of a series of songs that have various degrees of overlap with the larger network of "LoDagaa" compositions, many of which fuse instrumental performance with underlying song texts. Birifor song texts reveal much about Birifor life, from the expression of a unique worldview to the interpretation of local and national sociopolitical changes, and from historical accounts of regional life to the individual artistry, identity, and cultural positionality of musicians.

The roles of men and women in mourning at funerals are distinctly different, as are the funeral ceremonies and song cycles for men and women. These differences reflect the gendered division of labor in Birifor society, be it physical, social, or spiritual. As Goody observed of the LoDagaa, the gendered division of funerary roles and funeral ceremonies reflects and enacts a "sharp division of labor between the two sexes. As a man is given his bow and quiver, so on a woman's lap will be placed her personal blanket…and in her hands an unscraped calabash bowl." (Goody 1962:83). This symbolic invocation of domestic roles through totems placed upon the dead–containers for cooking, calabashes for eating and drinking, baskets, pots for brewing pito, firewood gathered from the forest, or buckets used for fetching water–reinforces the gendered ordering of family and society. As mimetic action, these practices re-inscribe the gendered division of labor with the social and spiritual force of ritual (Goody 1962:84; Hogan 2007, 2009). It also reinforces an ideology of ability wherein social value is symbolically linked to specific tasks, of which the blind are perceived as being incapable of, marginalizing them

from the mimetic re-inscription of society.

Perspectives from Jack Goody

Jack Goody's major works on the West African hinterland, *The Social Organization of the Lowiili* (1956), *Death, Property, and the Ancestors: A Study of the Mortuary Customs of the LoDagaa of West Africa* (1962), and *The Myth of Bagre* (1972), contain exacting ethnographic depictions of cultural practice, social organization, and a myth of origin which became the primary anthropological representation of the peoples of the Northwest for decades to come. Goody's most influential contribution to the larger world of anthropology was his theorization of the kinship systems of the LoDagaa as being "double-descent," in which different types of property, cultural duties, and clanship ties are distributed along matrilineal *and* patrilineal lines. Among the Birifor, inheritance of moveable and immovable property is likewise split along matrilineal and patrilineal lines, though the Southern Birifor place more emphasis on matrilineal inheritance. The roughly five decades that separate Goody's theorization from the contemporary Northwest have also brought noticeable changes to the kinship configurations that he observed. Through the migration of Birifor to southern plantations and urban centers for labor and greater job opportunities, the traditional configuration of kinship systems has expanded to accommodate new social bonds. In Mamobi, Accra, where many Birifor live along with a flourishing Hausa population, traditional clan and lineage ties are still invoked, yet new relationships with other groups are forged, generally around common occupations or the relative closeness of cultural origin.

In addition to his assessments of kinship, ritual practices, religious systems, linguistic and ethnic distributions, and modes of property inheritance and exchange across the West African hinterland region, Goody's broader anthropological and historical corpus introduces important

theoretical concepts that can productively be applied to Birifor culture and society. Drawing upon experiences with the LoDagaa and his comparative research, Goody argued that intensive forms of agricultural development in LoDagaa communities create the potential for the accumulation of surplus, which influences social structure and drives social change. Scholar of African religion John Mbiti similarly noted that such new economic conditions introduce the concept of time as a commodity, which along with surplus alters the fabric of social and spiritual life (Mbiti 1969:215). For the Birifor, this impact of the changing conditions of agriculturalism occurred both on rural farmsteads, and on industrial farms in southern Ghana, altering the economic basis of Birifor society. Labor migrations, both to urban centers and peripheral farms, have been ongoing in Birifor communities at least since the 1930s. The influence of this agricultural development is wide-ranging, and many Birifor express powerfully conflicting views about their dependence on both small and large-scale agriculture. The maintenance of the household (*yir*) and community (*teng*) is a central theme in Birifor culture, and anxieties about the downfall of a household and farmstead are revealed in conversations and songs about abandoned and dilapidated (*dakpolo*) houses, created by the death or out-migration of the senior males of the household for greater economic prospects. At the same time, as a recent study by human geographer Kees van der Geest (2010) suggests, rural communities have an overall positive outlook on seasonal migration, viewing it as an essential source of economic security for households. With respect to long-term migration, most of the 204 rural households Kees van der Geest interviewed in Northern Ghana noted the prosperity that could be attained through long-term migration, though the cost of returning home empty handed was recognized as high and the exportation of the community's most talented and/or motivated men disadvantageous to the household and community. This conflicted perspective reflects the historically shaping force

that migratory labor has been in Birifor communities, as well as local attempts to grapple with the new social and economic dimensions it introduced.

Agricultural development also continues to have an impact on musical change in rural and urban Birifor communities. Amongst a population where farming has been the primary source of livelihood for generations, it is not surprising that changes in agricultural life are closely reflected in music. The success or failure of a harvest naturally determines the date and amount of time and money available for festivals and musicking, while also setting the correspondingly celebratory or lamentful tone of the harvest festival. However, what is less readily apparent is the careful cultural unpacking of modern West African agricultural realities, expressed in songs critical of the embrace of contemporary agricultural economies. These songs invoke themes of the suffering of the household because of migration, the dangers of using modern agricultural technologies, and the seductive double-edged nature of success. Labor migrations have also brought Birifor musicians and musical instruments into a variety of new contexts, which has been a prime mover of musical change in Birifor communities over the last several decades.

Another theory that can be grafted from Goody's works and applied to contemporary Birifor contexts is one of psychological and epistemological change created by new technologies of communication in which new concepts, attitudes, and even ways of thinking are generated and adopted as the result of the new possibilities technologies bring. For Goody, this meant that the development of certain specialized knowledges relied upon the existence of technologies such as writing, telephones, radio, television, cassettes, etc. Historically, Birifor society used oral and aural communication to consolidate and transmit knowledge, as is common in West African cultures. Goody and Watt (1968) characterize this transmission of knowledge in oral cultures as

a "long chain of interlocking conversations," in their discussion of the verbal and nonverbal nature of direct semantic ratification in oral traditions (1968:29). Grounded in personal, face-to-face events, oral knowledge is thus immediately experienced and deeply socialized, making the embodied nature of communication in this context both one of its core characteristics and greatest strengths. With the introduction of new technologies, such as writing, Goody suggests that new ways of knowing and communicating emerge in oral cultures, which subsequently dramatically alter the nature of shared cultural knowledge. Today, technologies of communication like televisions, cell phones, and cassette recorders are commonplace in Ghana, modernizing Birifor life with the same consumerism and fetishism as the rest of the world, while also opening profound new ways to circulate and inscribe knowledge. This has made Ghanaians decidedly more technologically literate than the still pervasive global stereotypes of Africans as provincial and technologically illiterate suggest. However, the difference between oral and written ways of ordering the world remains a point of tension for Birifors (as it did for Mudimbe (1988)) because of the elements of embodied communication attenuated from new representational technologies. As historians of their own culture, the Birifor musicians I worked with expressed concerns about their messages being lost on younger, distanced, and perhaps disinterested generations who no longer consistently understand the surrogated texts of their music. The presence of these new technologies is thus believed to be gradually diminishing interest in traditional oral knowledges in Birifor society, an impact that is felt heavily in both urban and rural contexts. Yet, while these technologies may estrange some Birifors from their traditional cultural systems of knowledge, they also mark them as modern Ghanaian if not global citizens, bearing substantial cultural status. The ability to read and write, if not type and operate a computer, remains an important professional and generational dividing line, and the impact that

this will have on the continuity of traditional knowledge in Birifor communities remains uncertain.

Musically, the introduction of tape recorders has influenced Birifor musicians in many ways, and tape recorders are still found at nearly every Birifor funeral ceremony. Cassette tape recorders have been used to record tunings of xylophones for future tonal reference since their introduction to the region, and are now used by Birifor to record repertoire, interviews, performances, speeches, and more. Audio and video recorders of all types can thus be understood as opening new channels of reflexive inter- and intra-musical development. The introduction of these technologies has signaled new means of musical interaction and exchange, of texts, tapes, pictures, and videos between musicians, xylophone makers, researchers (foreign and native) and audiences, propelling Birifor xylophone music towards greater dialogue and precision.

Recent Scholarly Perspectives

Following Goody's landmark studies, a handful of anthropologists and ethnomusicologists have conducted research amongst the cultures of the Northwest that fall under Goody's LoDagaa continuum, including Larry Godsey (1980), Mary Seavoy (1982), Eugene Mendonsa (1982), Sean Hawkins (1996), and Carola Lentz (1993, 1994, 2006). As knowledge and awareness of the peoples and their priorities of the Northwest have gained traction in national consciousness, comparative analysis is slowly becoming possible, despite significant differences in cultural practice between settlements, and amorphous lines between regional languages and dialects. While Lentz (2006) and Hawkins (1996) have written extensively on the topics of history, ethnicity and religion amongst the Dagara, Seavoy's (1982) dissertation on Sisaala xylophone music and Godsey's (1980) dissertation on Birifor Funerals

helped facilitate the differentiation of Birifor, Sisaala, and Dagara musical traditions. Mendonsa's (1982) ethnographic depiction of Sisaala divination practices, and their manipulation by senior generations for social control, likewise helped illuminate aspects of regional cosmologies which facilitates the contextualization of Birifor spiritual world views within the larger matrix of regional religious practice.

These works provide essential points of cultural reference for research on Birifor culture and music, though the work of Larry Godsey (1980) remains the primary ethnomusicological source of reference for explicitly Birifor musical culture. Larry Godsey's dissertation *The Use of the Xylophone in the Funeral Ceremony of the Birifor of Northwest Ghana* (1980) expands upon Goody's *Death, Property, and the Ancestors* (1962) by providing an intimate and detailed account of a Birifor funeral, and attending to primarily organological questions about the *kogyil* in the process. Following a funeral process from the moment of death through the formal ceremony and subsequent seasonal ritual observations, Godsey helped establish the tremendous significance of funeral music amongst the Birifor to an ethnomusicological audience. The decades that separate this book and Godsey's fieldwork, allows us to identify changes in the funeral process over time, and assess the influence of modernity and global technologies on Birifor xylophone music, which have changed the accessibility, duration, iconography, and character of funerals.

Part II

"I don't leave what my father taught me. I haven't left the olden days behind. What they did then is what I do now." – Belendi Saanti

Chapter 4: Xylophonists from Vondiel and Donyɛ

In the dew of early morning on Southern Birifor farmsteads, when birds and livestock reclaim the soundscape from the night's creatures with calls and cries, Birifor farmers rise to greet the new day early, heading away from their dwellings into forests and across fields to their respective plots. Each day when they awake they do so through a particular body and consciousness born of a life of experiences that is uniquely their own. In short they are their own person regardless of the ensuing degree of social interaction and affiliation the day brings. To construct this account of xylophone music and disability in Birifor communities at large, I examine the biographical details of Birifor xylophonists to establish a series of relationships between self and society, which anchor the theorization of music and culture at the heart of this book. That is to say, the compositions, stories, and experiences of xylophonists are invoked here as the foundation from which I construct an analysis of Birifor musical culture and the experience of disability by Birifor musicians. The selves of this book, all of whom have lived as rural farmers, are the elder generation of great Southern Birifor xylophonists (El Vuur, Kakraba Lobi, and Belendi Saanti) and several younger but professional Birifor xylophonists. From the contemporary xylophonists in the Northwest today, I have selected Maal Yichiir, Maal Chile, Ni-Ana Alhansan, and Kuyiri Darigain for their musicianship and unique perspective as blind musicians, Vuur Sandaar and Vuur Mwan as the sons of El Vuur who have continued the family tradition of excellence in xylophone performance and construction, and finally SK Kakraba as the relative and protégé of Kakraba Lobi, who has developed his own musical career in the urban context of Accra. We will meet many other Birifors in the process of telling their stories, especially their gregrarious kin who invariably interjected during interviews, conversations, and performances, despite their valiant and laudable attempts at self-restraint.

To refine the expansive life histories of each of these individuals down to a succinct and telling representation of Birifor musicianship, I focus on the aspects of their lives that engage the collective consciousness of Birifor musical culture, using the friendship between these individuals to triangulate common experiences, perspectives, and themes. As a community of musicians, the xylophonists of this book are linked through their shared occupation and cultural membership, and through personal ties created during public and private interactions surrounding xylophone performance. From their lives, we can begin to formulate a model of Birifor personhood that critically contextualizes their actions, expressions, and opinions in ways that reveal a distinctly Birifor perspective on regional life. This is especially important for the discussion in Chapter 7 of disability as a distortion of personhood extending into spiritual domains and encased in a larger ideological construction of ability. The production of self for disabled persons around the world, is often crosscut by a disempowering social narrative of inability, and the blind musicians of this book are no exception. The current anthropological orientation towards personhood, which this book is in stride with, has been mapped by many previous theorists and deployed as a solution to impersonal and inaccurate theorizations of society or culture at large (Barber 2007; Fortes 1987 [posthumous publication]; Hollan 1998; Jackson and Karp 1990; Levy 1973; Linger 1992; Rice 1994; Stock 1996, 2001; Turino 1993, 2000). By rooting higher order generalizations in the bodies and experiences of individual actors, and by recognizing the tremendous idiosyncratic variation between people, the richness and complexity of the self gains traction in the abstractions of social, cultural, and musical systems, and the discourses constructed around them. This is important both for blind and sighted xylophonists because of their shared belief that who they are, and the importance of what they do, is grossly misunderstood. The premise of this person-centered methodology is thus that

people are different enough to require a fine-grained depiction of consciousness, experience, and biography, before the patterns and configurations of society and culture can be accurately perceived. In addition to textualizing their experiences and perspectives, and transmitting their music, I have included photographic portraits of these xylophonists throughout this chapter specifically for the character and personality that they convey. Alongside visual representations of musical and cultural contexts, events, actions and instruments, these personal images offer a glimpse into the aspects of personhood that extend beyond the page. These xylophonists are grouped in this and the next chapter by location and common household, collapsing the spatial divisions I traversed by motorbike into narrative transitions between the landscapes of the Northwest.

In ethnomusicology, understanding culture first and foremost through the individual has been theorized by Timothy Rice (1994), Thomas Turino (1993, 2000), and Jonathan Stock (1996, 2001) along with several other scholars. These ethnomusicologists have identified the difficulty of drawing a line between individual and collective culture or practice, an issue that persists in contemporary scholarship. For Rice, part of the solution was to integrate historical, social, and phenomenological modes of inquiry in ethnomusicology, locating the individual within historical and cultural moments through interpretation grounded in both observed events and interior mental states. The innovation in Rice's method was the application of a phenomenological approach, which articulates the intentionality of musicians through careful attention to their personal conceptions and perceptions. Asking questions about how musicians hear their music, what meanings they assign to it, and how they understand their contemporary reality, elicits a representation of music from the inside-out, which continues to have relevance to ethnomusicology as Friedson's (2009) application of Heidegger to Brekete/Gorovudu music in

Ghana demonstrates. For Turino (1993, 2000) the musician as individual is the very impetus of cultural change, as well as a member of the collective, a view that led Turino to depict the raw creativity of musicians in sharp contrast to state apparatuses, teasing out their interactions and exchanges. Stock (2001) writing explicitly on the subject of "an ethnomusicology of the individual," suggests along this vein that culture is shaped by individuals and, in turn, shapes individuals, with prominent musicians at a crucial point in the process of cultural circulation and articulation. Building upon these perspectives I employ a person-centered approach that renders the self relative to social, cultural, and historical systems, against which the self engages in a competition of discursive production, determining and being determined in the cycles of culture. Understanding this relationship as reciprocal is key to negotiating the balance of power between self and culture, yet in the case of blind Birifor musicians we must go a few steps further. For Birifors with blindness this reciprocal relationship is mapped along a negative gradient, wherein "culture" defines and subordinates them in ways that they cannot themselves undo, despite their resourceful contestations that are in turn marginalized from dominant cultural narratives. In this book I develop a model of how this relationship of unequal production and determinism exists between culture and the disabled self, as well as how persons with disability respond to it.

Traveling in the Northwest

Reflecting upon my own time in Ghana's swath of the West African hinterland, the invariable starting point was the small town of Tuna (see Figure 4-1), the most convenient and central location from which to conduct my research, offering both electricity and fuel. Tuna lies towards the northern border of Ghana's Northern Region, just before the Upper-West Region begins. Tuna is bisected by the Bole-Wa road (so named because it connects the popular market town with the regional capital), from which dirt roads extend perpendicularly in either direction

(roughly east and west) into rural territory (see Figure 4-2). Some 17 hours bus ride from Accra with a stop in Kumasi, Tuna is a second tier road-stop town, overshadowed by the town of Sawla that lies 27km to the south and absorbs the majority of business created by the paved government artery. Tuna survives in large part because of the patronage of its markets by residents from local towns and villages like Daniwuur, Gbongbonduori, Danivaar, Nakwabi, Blema, Mona, and Doumeh, which lie between Tuna and Sawla. Tuna itself is a combination of Wala, Birifor and Vagla inhabitants, and houses both a central church and mosque. While the town has a police station and formal chief, a town council of women and men make most of the civic growth and maintenance of the town possible. One of the more active members of this council has been Nicholas Bayelle–"Nico," as he is fondly known–who remains anchored in Tuna despite his success as an entrepreneur and businessman abroad. A Birifor native to Donyɛ (home of the Vuur lineage), Nico migrated along with several other families from his generation to Tuna in 1979 with the intent of improving the quality of life for those living in what remains a town with no industry, and of facilitating the spread of electricity out from the main road towards rural settlements such as Donyɛ. This agenda has fallen between the cracks of national development projects in the transitions of national governance, and Nico saught to change that. While power lines were erected in 1996, it was not until 2008 that they were actually connected to the regional grid and wired into houses and businesses. The circumstances of daily life in Tuna thus changed dramatically between my 2007 and 2009 research periods, with the presence of electricity fundamentally altering the economy though not past the threshold of what would be considered prosperous by national standards.

Through Tuna's town counsel, Nico and his peers organized the drilling of bore holes for water access, the framing and roofing of school houses, and the continual clearing and

maintenance of local roads to adjacent towns, a task which requires herculean efforts when seasonal rains destroy roads. Nico describes Tuna in 1979 as "a place of extreme poverty, because of the lack of industry, which Sawla has taken over because of the major roads that branch in Sawla." (Bayelle 2009). Nico is more optimistic about present day Tuna, noting that an industrial slaughterhouse (by rural standards) is being built in the town, which promises new jobs and business despite the potential of polluting their local water sources. Schools also flourish in Tuna, though the town's low performance on national educational tests has roused the concern of local parents and educators. No xylophonists of renown live in Tuna, and so my path branched out from Tuna across dirt roads and sinuous single-track paths connecting a constellation of villages.

Belendi Saanti of Vondiel

Setting out from Tuna for Vondiel, the home of the great xylophonist of the southern Birifor, Belendi Saanti, there are two routes, each with seasonal advantages and disadvantages. The majority of the trip is along narrow dirt and sand paths through forests, fields, and farms, colored by the dramatic palette change of wet and dry seasons. The northern route–which proved more treacherous–sets out north on the Bole-Wa road, departing west from the government road at Gindabour. From then on, only a sliver of a road leads over sun-baked ditches, up rocky inclines, and across rivers. The southern and preferential route (except in the middle of the rainy season) abandons pavement immediately in favor of the heavily eroded Kalba-Tuna road, whose shoulders drop off dramatically into deep mud pits and waterways, which would gladly devour a motorbike as tax for the overflowing lorries that grind down the road with deep geometric treads. The towns of Naanfaa, Naharjyiri (a Dagara settlement), Nahari (a Gonja settlement), Gonsi, Kantamɛ, Kporbayiri and Konfugsi (lit. "you cannot

frighten me.") line the 20 km of road from Tuna towards Vondiel. Konfugsi is one of many towns that have a distinct geographic division according to the split ethnic make-up of the town. Wala in the east and Birifor in the west (recently named Bakaayiri by Birifor residents), the town is more segregated than others, like Sawla, Tuna, or Kalba in which the geometries of habitation do not neatly align with ethnicity. From Konfugsi to Vondiel is 14 km down a banking sand and dirt path through farm plots and low lying forest, until the verdant farms of Vondiel and heat of the sun finally yield to the masterful masonry of Belendi Saanti's house (see Figure 4-3).

Sometimes quiet with the only the sound of the wind through tall seemingly endless maize fields, or across the dried seasonal dustbowl of hard earth and dormant brush, Saanti's house in Vondiel is at other times the locale of industrious craftsmanship and musical activity that fills the air with all sorts of sounds, humanly organized and disorganized. One recurring sound from Saanti's house during my visits was the pounding, slopping sound of shea butter (*kaa*) being mixed and refined by the women of the household, and later sold at local markets. Like the dry millet breaking Ruth Stone (1988) observed as a seasonal musical activity, the preparation of shea butter uses a rhythmic pulse to coordinate the actions of workers (see Figure 4-4).

The layout of Vondiel is similar to the rest of the villages of this book, with plots of farmland delineated naturally according to geographic features, and placed close to sources of water. Houses are usually placed close to a tall set of trees near flat clearable land, close enough to neighbors to be social, but far enough away to be private. Outside of each structure (of which there are generally several) typical features include raised log benches, shrine huts, and storage silos built conjoined to the corners of houses. The graves of men often receive central placement just outside of the house in the courtyard, where kids use the smooth raised concrete surface for

games and naps. At Saanti's house, the graves of his father Kanor Belendi who passed away in 1987, and his brother Kanor Sommul who died during my first research trip in 2002, are circled by foot traffic throughout the day by family and friends moving between the different work areas of the property. Most of my conversations with Saanti (except those regarding money which were held privately) happened in the idyllic shade of two large mango trees, beneath which Saanti broke from or supplemented his daily routine of farming to play xylophone and talk about his life (see Figure 4-5). Always attracting an audience, our mornings and afternoons were well attended, which was to the satisfaction of Saanti as a grandfather and purveyor of cultural heritage. Saanti's range of talents have earned him a reputation as a local renaissance man, and in my presence alone people sought him out for advice on masonry, bike and tool repair, hunting, farming, music, ritual activities, and just to get some of his apparently choice tobacco or snuff. Each day, after transitioning from the patient toil of farming to xylophone performance with a spicy mixture of bagged gin and chewing tobacco, Saanti played and discussed his own and favorite compositions, elaborating upon his personal experiences and larger cultural trends according to my questions, and those of the other men present.

The main conflicts that preoccupy Saanti, as expressed in songs and interviews beneath the mango trees, are the loss of traditional cultural values, knowledge, and music in the community through disinterested youth, and the ever-presence of "the enemy" (*dondomo)* who regularly interferes in personal and professional affairs. Other themes that surfaced over the course of our conversations were the unwanted negative attention that being a xylophonist draws, and the double-edged sword of ritual protection against witchcraft, which is so powerful that it can backfire and disrupt a household. I will revisit his compositions and statements which convey these concerns in the coming chapters, for now noting his vested interest in the

maintenance of order and prosperity in his household and the Birifor community, and his use of xylophone music as a form of public and ritual communication.

As a representative of traditional culture and a member of the *Pondaal* patriclan, which is known for its excellence in xylophone performance, Saanti firmly believes in the value of the traditionally rural lifestyle that many Birifor men have left for southern fortune. In his songs of admonition to the youth about the value of the traditional Birifor lifestyle, Saanti says, "Because of patience, we stay here to farm. Because we know how down south is, we stay here to farm." (Saanti 2009). For Saanti, the dedication to traditional practice is not just a matter of enthusiasm or interest. Playing xylophone, maintaining shrines, obeying local taboos, and farming the Earth (which has spiritual significance as mentioned earlier) are for Saanti jointly governed by religious and pragmatic sensibilities, filtered through a seriousness and ingenuity evolved over decades of practice and experience. Saanti said,

> I don't leave what my father taught me. I haven't left the olden days behind. What they did then is what I do now. To advise my children how to keep our way, I usually tell them, "Look, this is how things are. This is how my father showed me. This is how he played. This is how I play. So, follow in our footsteps, and don't go a different way. If you follow this path, it will lead you to become a great xylophone player." (Saanti 2009).

These messages woven through Saanti's songs, have been only partially heeded his sons, several of whom have migrated to Sefi (Western Region) to work on cocoa farms, but still play *kogyil* at a professional level. When I asked Saanti about his days as a youth and his relationship with the xylophone over the years, he smiled gently and explained that it was love at first sight. Growing up in Vondiel, in the same house that he is now the head of, Saanti showed an immediate interest in playing his father's xylophone, and committed the performances of other xylophonists to memory. He said, "When I was growing up, the xylophone was inside me. I grew up with the xylophone, and I listened to many people's performances. I loved them and I

would add their skills to mine, to create my style. My father was a xylophonists, so I learnt a lot from him too." (Saanti 2009). Like many other young performers, Saanti developed his skills in the acoustic confines of his father's compound, until asked one day by his father, who had noticed his son's exceptional skill, to perform publicly at a funeral (see Figure 4-6). For Saanti popularity came immediately after his first public performance, which he remembers as some time during "Acheampong's time" (Ignatius Kutu Acheampong, former Military Head of State of Ghana, 1972-1978) (Saanti 2009). Saanti began composing when he was very young, using the height of his twelve-year-old grandson from the village to illustrate his age at that time. As a young and popular composer, older xylophonists advised Saanti to remain humble, and take the time necessary to learn the full traditional repertoire. Saanti recalls this admonition, quoting his elders as saying, "You have seen that your music is popular, but you must back up. Do not get ahead of yourself, you must continue to learn." (Saanti 2009).

In many ways, however, Saanti was already thrust ahead of his age and experience into the vulnerable position of ritual and musical specialist, becoming a common target for jealous ridicule and witchcraft. The tensions of these roles are expressed in songs Saanti composed as a youth, which question audience members about their animosity towards him at funerals, proclaiming that he performs by request to assist the bereaved in mourning (2009). Some of the complications of being both a musical performer and ritual specialist are evident through these songs, which critique both the process of mourning and the Birifor cultural system of inheritance. They express a distaste for inappropriately timed conversations of inheritance during funerals, which often end in someone trumping the current caretaker's right to their property through clanship claims, backed by the authority of a local chief. Saanti challenges inheritors in one of his compositions by asking, "What have you done to deserve that inheritance? Is it like farming

and you earned it? A human being has passed on, and you are thinking about properties." (Saanti 2009). Saanti is especially critical of these discussions, because the social perception of the lust for property they express ensnares him as funeral performer, and because it compromises the genuine tone of serious mourning at funerals. The accusations of mixed motives during a funeral usually invoke the wife or daughters of the deceased as the items of Saanti's interest and intent, which he also finds insulting considering the significance of death (Saanti 2009). Saanti explained his typical role at funerals by stressing his ability to engage his audience and evoke powerful emotions in them. He said,

> When I play at a funeral, let's say it is your friend or relative who has died. I will play the xylophone to call you to come and listen, then the playing alone will touch you. It will compel you to do all sorts of things, like crying, dancing, wailing, dashing, giving gifts. I am helping the family to remember the deceased, and soothe them. It will prod them with difficult questions, which will make them think hard about life ahead. (Saanti 2009).

Saanti's role as a musician and ritual specialist entails the exercise of a communicative power, which in turn makes him the target for jealousy and rivalry. Some of the ill will that Saanti has incurred over the years is understandable considering his propensity for promiscuity as a youth. In his compositions, Saanti recalls being young and inspiring women to dance and subsequently romance, at funerals. If romance at a funeral sounds odd or inappropriate, remember that funerals are large social events, which can span several days and nights, with periods of intense mourning and periods of cathartic celebration. These romances eventually led Saanti into trouble when he "eloped" another man's wife, and was called to their chief to answer for his actions, at which point he was fined goods in reparation. Naturally such behavior invites negative attention and so we cannot ignore that some of the enemies xylophonists attract are all but invited. Saanti recognizes the recklessness of his youth, believing that when his brother's wife was later "eloped," it was in part invited by his actions.

As a performer, Saanti has developed an immediately identifiable style that is at once busy and energetic, yet subtle and nuanced, heightening the expressive qualities of the *kogyil*. Musically, his style is characterized by balanced phrases of light triplets with carefully chosen accents, executed through a combination of single and double strokes. Saanti's use of double strokes and his frequent and varied dampening of keys to control and not just stop their resonance, are not common amongst Birifor xylophonists. When I asked Saanti how he developed these techniques, he laughed and said, "It is my hand style. When I play it, other xylophonists are jealous. They say I know more than them." (Saanti 2009). Saanti's preference for accents that fall on off beat triplets, links his style to many African and African American musical counterparts, immediately invoking in my own mind the rhythmic style of jazz drummer Elvin Jones. To cross over into the context of African American music, Jones' orchestration of accents around the drumset (notably between the hands and feet) over a fast triplet pulse, remains both an iconic aspect of John Coltrane's seminal works, and a marker of Jones' unmistakable style. Kakraba Lobi and El Vuur, both contemporaries and friends of Saanti, do not display this rhythmic sensibility, or use these particular nuances of technique. Instead, their styles are more aligned with a straight duple pulse, and have accents placed with less dynamical range. Saanti remarked one day that because of his own musical prowess composing, El Vuur would defer to him as the superior musician, which is perhaps true since the two were close friends and Vuur had a very warm and humble personality. Comparing their styles based upon the accompanying recordings in Chapter 8, there is significant stylistic variation between musicians, which hints at the diversity of style in Birifor xylophone genres.

El Vuur, Vuur Sandaar, and Vuur Mwan of Donyɛ

El Vuur, the great xylophonist who passed away in the closing days of 2002, is

remembered fondly in Birifor communities as a great practitioner of xylophone music, and an unforgettable personality. Described by his sons Vuur Sandaar and Vuur Mwan as being a strong man of medium stature with a fair complexion and a contagious smile, El Vuur was recognized widely as an expert performer but not a prolific composer. Sandaar said,

> My father was always smiling. When a stranger would come, he would just look at you and smile. He would welcome you very well. When he would go to a funeral, because people liked him so much, they would surround him and chat with him. So, sometimes when he went to a funeral, he wouldn't want to sit near where the mourners are, because he knew how popular he was. Wherever he went, people would come, and he would smile and talk with them peacefully. He was very polite and friendly with other people. (Sandaar 2009).

During his lifetime, Vuur performed at numerous funerals and festivals all over Ghana, and into Burkina Faso and Côte D'Ivoire, receiving many visits from other xylophonists seeking his tutelage. Xylophonists like Maal Chile, Maal Yichiir, and Ni-Ana Alhansan learned a great deal from El Vuur, both with respect to performance practice, and coping with the responsibilities of being a xylophonist. Of the few compositions that Vuur authored, his *Lubile Prai* is still performed widely and unanimously associated with his own characteristic style of playing (see Figure 4-7).

El Vuur, a member of the *Pondaal* patriclan was a native of Donyɛ (see Figure 4-8), which lies to the northwest of Vondiel, deeper into the heartland of Birifor territory. Donyɛ is located outside of the junction town of Wechiau, which is home to the national hippopotamus reserve. Passing through the towns of Kolmasa, Grungu, and Yuornur, each with fewer and fewer distinguishable landmarks, the route to Donyɛ is a challenging ride, which has taken its toll on many travelers. On one ride to Donyɛ, I slid out the back wheel of my motorbike and dumped it in a puddle of mud, breaking the motorbike's battery free in the process. On another occasion, while traveling the route from Donyɛ to Tuna, a torrential downpour that turned the

skies to a dark and rich blue claimed the life of the gifted guinea fowl dangling from my bag, and left me bed ridden with a fever for several days. During one of my stays in Donyɛ, the same road catapulted Vuur Sandaar from his Sukido "moto," onto the hard rocky ground, cutting his leg and dislodging a tooth. Earlier in 2007, a taxi driver whom I had persuaded to take me from the urban capital of the Upper-West, Wa, to Donyɛ, discovered hours into the ride that the roads were more treacherous than expected, leaving me to walk the last several miles on foot. Such scenarios are commonplace during motorized transportation in the West African hinterland, and the road to Donyɛ proved to be my own personalized introduction.

A now familiar locale, the Vuur settlement in Donyɛ seemingly radiates outwards from the smooth sun-dyed concrete of El Vuur's grave, a central point from which the houses of brothers, sons and nephews extend outward across the landscape (see Figure 4-9). The Vuur settlement is a pristine network of farm plots, a convenient fifteen minutes walk from the town square, which hosts two markets during the week. Local school houses share the centrality of the market location, with solar cells that stand proudly on their roof tops signaling the towns inclusion in foreign development projects. During my visits, the solar cells in the town center, which are not available for public use, provided enough power to charge a cell phone or power a television for a few hours, while the small roughly ten-inch square solar cell owned by the Vuur family, has been defunct since 2008.

With only a few recorded songs of Vuur's available, made on low fidelity portable cassette players (see Figures 4-7, 4-10), and his family and friend's stories and memories of him as a persona and performer to go on, my impression of Vuur is shallower than that of the rest of the xylophonists included in this book. However, Vuur's legacy clearly endures in his sons, whose musicianship, craftsmanship, and personality reflect family traits passed down for

generations, pointing to the strong inter-generational transmission of musical traits. Vuur Sandaar and Vuur Mwan are the two sons of El Vuur's nine boys and four girls, who have continued the family tradition of excellence in both xylophone performance and construction, taking over the family homestead in Vuur's old age. Both brothers perform widely in the Northwest, at funerals up and down the Birifor belt. My own experience with the Vuur family goes back to 2002, when I was instructed by Kakraba Lobi to study with El Vuur, who passed away shortly thereafter. Meeting Vuur Mwan and Vuur Sandaar later in 2007 at the funeral of Kakraba Lobi, I witnessed and recorded their performances, deciding to trace them back to their home in Donyɛ, where I established a friendship over several weeks in Donyɛ in 2007, which continues to this day (see Figure 4-11).

Vuur Sandaar, remembering his father El Vuur, often regrets that he is not still alive to offer him guidance in life. In an interview he explained, "I never finished learning everything from my father before he passed away. The things that he taught me, the skills that I learned from him, were incomplete when he passed away. So I say to myself, 'If my father was alive, I would know more.'" (Sandaar 2009). This humble sentiment reveals Sandaar's modesty, omitting the fact that he learned to build and play xylophones (and *gaŋgaa*), farm, and raise fowls and goats from his father (see Figures 4-12, 4-13). The family occupations of agricultural, musical, and artisanal toil have been passed down since at least Sandaar's great grandfather, Gylbaa Niyn. Like most other Birifor families, Sandaar's migrated down from Burkina Faso, starting with Niyn El's decision to raise his son El Vuur away from his home village of Tenpaar in the less populated southern town of Donyɛ, where larger plots of land were available. When I asked Sandaar why his grandfather left the border region of Burkina Faso and Ghana, he replied, "He migrated from Burkina to Ghana because of food problems. Because our ancestors left

Ghana to go to Burkina and had plenty of children there, the land is congested. There is no land to farm. We have children to feed. So our family has come down to Ghana to get land, and stay and farm." (Sandaar 2009). This family history supports the theory that migration motivated by agricultural and economic necessity has been recurring in Birifor communities historically. Many of the songs that today are interpreted through the north/south geometry of economic prosperity in Ghana, have in the past referred to more localized spatial relationships, across which fortunes and misfortunes were mapped.

Neither Mwan nor Sandaar had the opportunity to go to school as youths, both displaying considerable agricultural skill, musical ingenuity, and interest in their father's artisanal carpentry at a young age, which established their value to the homestead. Two of their brothers, however, have attained formal degrees, with their youngest brother Barnabas teaching in Goyiri, outside of Wa for several years. In 2014 Barnabas died suddenly, leaving the Vuur family without their beloved ambassador to the developed English speaking parts of Ghana. Sandaar's level of education became evident through his questions for me in our leisurely conversations, which dwelled on basic aspects of physics and chemistry, which he sought to apply to farming. One of the more picturesque moments was when he asked me about the consistency of clouds, given my recent flight through them. Expecting to field more typical questions about national and global culture, I plodded through a careful explanation of the states of matter, using the familiar images of an "ice block" from a refrigerator, and the steam from a boiling pot as points of reference. Sandaar picked up the tripartite schema immediately, moving quickly through several other questions, which finally landed on whether my electrical skills were sufficient to fix his radio. The educational history of Sandaar and Mwan is significant because, as will become clear, none of the blind xylophonists included in this book were given the opportunity to go to school as

children. The crucial difference is that Sandaar and Mwan were committed to farming and raising animals because of their skill as laborers, while Yichiir, Chile, and Alhansan were not sent to school because it was considered to be a waste of money. As Yichiir and Chile explain, their father did not even teach them the basic life-sustaining skill of how to farm, having to rely instead on their own resourcefulness and the assistance of their devoted siblings. While Sandaar and Mwan keenly grasp the value of education, sending all of their children to primary school, they also recognized from an early age the value of their father's professions. Both grew up knowing that their father was a famous xylophonist and xylophone maker because people treated him with respect and came to the house regularly to hear him play, and were as a result constantly aspiring to master their fathers skills (Sandaar 2009). Embodying the lessons of Saanti, Mwan and Sandaar focus on traditional customs and ways of life, noting that life in the rest of Ghana is more difficult than people realize.

The constants of small scale agriculture and musical activity remain firmly intact in the Vuur family today, while two of Sandaar's brothers have migrated to Nyamincho in the Western Region to "pluck" cocoa, and another two have been claimed by disease. The centrality of xylophone music to both the livelihood and daily soundscape of the settlement is characteristic of many families in the *Pondaal* patriclan, to which both of Sandaar's parents claimed membership. With respect to matriclan membership, Sandaar and Mwan inherit that of their father Vuur, which was *Daa*, while their mother was *Hien*. The importance of these clanship ties is multifold, but with respect to xylophone performance, clan membership defines the specific rituals and degree of seriousness taken towards the xylophone and the traditional repertoire, rituals detailed in Chapter 6. The xylophone as a channel for creative personal expression and ritual action, flourishes in patriclans such as *Pondaal* and *Paalba*, but not in others despite the cohabitation of

settlements. Reasons for the relative familial isolation of musical practice include the accessibility of xylophones (expensive instruments with specific maintenance requirements), and the importance of constant exposure to xylophone music from a young age since much of the repertoire and technique is transmitted through listening and observation. Exceptions naturally exist, especially with the presence of many multi-instrumentalists in Ghana, such as Aaron Bebe Sakura.

Clan membership is not without its responsibilities and constraints, as like the other men in the Birifor double-descent system of inheritance Sandaar and his brother Mwan do not inherit their fathers possessions, except in the case where a son has already displayed mastery of a father's occupations and is using the property productively (see Figure 4-14). During a period of mourning socially recognized as vulnerable, fellow members of their patriclan came to the household to remove Vuur's possessions when he passed away in December of 2002. We can trace this experience from Saanti's songs that ridicule materialistic and self-interested discussions at funerals, into Sandaar and Mwan's experience of hardship following their father's death. Over the course of my conversations with Sandaar and Mwan, I came to realize the bifurcation of time for them between before and after Vuur's death, as they would temporally and emotional locate events on either side of his death. This experience of falling between the cracks of inheritance was also shared by Sandaar's uncle, who was forced to abandon the family house when his father's clansmen repossessed his property. Sandaar recalled the story saying, "The father's people came and took all the animals, everything. They took all his properties, and left him. He was farming, but no money was coming, and he could not take care of the children [his younger siblings]. He knew that children are dying when they get sick and there is no money, so he decided to leave for down south." (Sandaar 2009).

The hardships that Sandaar and Mwan face, which they elaborate upon in compositions and interviews, are for the most part typical of rural farmers of the region. Sandaar said, "The primary challenges I face are food shortages. If the year's harvest is small, it becomes difficult for me. Also when building xylophones and raising animals, if I face problems with these things, then they will bring me down. Money is the problem." (2009). He continued by listing the various needs of his children, including uniforms, sandals, school supplies, and money for medical visits. The history of high infant mortality rates in the region has made all parents extremely cautious with their children, and clinic and hospital visits remain prohibitively expensive. Sandaar's interest in his children and the local youth is not limited to financial or health concerns alone, as he plays an active role as a father and teacher, evident through his daily approach to parenting and the steps he has taken to make the xylophone accessible to children of all ages. While a pit xylophone is generally found close to, or within a family compound, Sandaar observed that they deteriorate and fall out of tune rapidly on account of being immovable and exposed to the elements. As a solution, he constructed a small, flat, rectangular movable wood frame with overlapping corners (lap joints) upon which xylophone keys are placed, which is ideal for his children who by the time they can sit upright show interest in the xylophone. He said, "I made that for the children who cannot play the large xylophone. The children who are very small still have interest. You see them sometimes taking the beaters. I made that for them, but those who are tall enough can play the big xylophone." (Sandaar 2009). The wood frame raises the keys slightly off the ground, so that they can vibrate freely, though there is no significant resonation. Sandaar adds that this design is advantageous because the younger children can play inside when it rains, and can move the xylophone so that other children's activities will not disturb them.

The process of musical transmission in Donyɛ, from generation to generation, and laterally within peer groups, happens largely through observation and repetition. This is not to say that analytical discussions and breakdowns of patterns and phrases do not occur as well, but rather that the general trend is towards listening and the internalization of music. Sandaar explained how children learn when he said,

> The one that watches is the one who will pick things up from their father. When we are playing xylophone, some children will come and sit by us, and listen to what we play. Then eventually they will pick up the beaters and start doing something. That means that the child has interest in the xylophone. (Sandaar 2009).

I asked Sandaar what happens if some of his kids are not interested the xylophone, and he said, "The children, when I as their father am doing something, if they like it they will come and sit by me and watch. Then they will copy from me. But if I am doing something and the child does not come sit down to watch, I cannot force their interest." (2009). It turns out that Sandaar hasn't had to force their interest, since his children showed remarkable persistence in trying to be a part of whatever musical activity was going on in the house, despite my attempts to isolate the sound of the xylophone for recording purposes. Typically, during a performance session at the house with Mwan and/or Sandaar, children from ages five to ten years old would sit nearby and tap the constant bell pattern of Birifor music, or play *gaŋgaa* parts on the back of metal bowls.

Sandaar and his forebears, like the other xylophonists of this inquiry, have also faced adversity because of the widespread presence of "enemies" created by jealousy and the occasional social infraction. This recurring theme is, in the case of the Vuur family, projected as a plight of their lineage as a whole. One of Sandaar's brothers recalled several situations in which their family had to show great self-restraint in order not to be drawn into fights at funerals and public gatherings, invoking a song from the Birifor tradition about restraint on the battlefield leading to long life. Vuur Mwan, the brother of Sandaar, conveys the shared nature of these

enemies in his compositions, which simultaneously appeal to enemies to disperse, and his family to unite against them (Mwan 2009). As a young player in his mid-twenties, Vuur Mwan displays a surprising musical maturity that shows through his compositions and dexterity with traditional pieces, unique talents that he believes has made him a target for jealousy and witchcraft. Characterizing the intent of his enemies, Mwan said, "When I sit down to play xylophone, because I play it well some people are jealous. They are trying to find a way to kill me, to find a way to strike me down, so that I cannot play anymore. If they don't see me on this earth anymore, they will be happy, because I will not be competition anymore." (Mwan 2009). In addition to sharing enemies, Mwan and Sandaar share many of the same rhythmic phrasings and harmonic cadences of their father's musical style. However, Mwan's playing is heightened by a fluency of movement and clarity of tone that has earned him apprentices and students despite his young age. His energetic and precise style is reminiscent of Vuur, but with a mellower approach that reflects current musical sensibilities (see Figure 4-15). Mwan's approach to composition is centered around the xylophone as an instrument, with song texts, drum and percussion parts, and dance movements evolving out of phrases developed first on the xylophone alone. However, once a song text is applied, Mwan is very conscientious about making that meaning public, taking time after a performance to explain a song or tease out its melody (see Figure 4-16). When I asked him about this verbal transmission, he simply said, "When I play, I teach." (Mwan 2009). The themes of the songs Mwan composes and teaches, depart from the racy relationship dramas of his grandfather Niyn's songs, focusing on the more virtuous concerns of his family and household's prosperity.

I asked Sandaar and Mwan about their experiences with Maal Yichiir and Maal Chile as blind xylophonists, knowing that the Maal brothers had studied under El Vuur, and that Sandaar

had just constructed a new frame for the Maal family xylophone. Sandaar smiled immediately and said, "We have never seen Yichiir in a bad mood. He was so kind to our father. We have known him since we were young. He is a cool and quiet person. Chile too. As xylophone players, they are marvelous. Alhansan and the rest are also very good at xylophone." (Sandaar 2009). The positive relationship between the Vuur and Maal families extends not only between xylophonists, but also between men and women from the two households. Sandaar added that many people, however, do not appreciate the music or presence of the Maal brothers, overlooking their talents and kindness and judging them based upon their blindness. He explained that his own respect for people with blindness comes from his father, whose universal kindness had a long lasting impact upon him. Sandaar said, "They came to our father to learn xylophone, and he respected them and took them as students. So as we grew up, we also respected Yichiir and company. But some people are always insulting the blind. There are people who respect them, and people who do not. We give them a lot of respect." (Sandaar 2009).

Chapter 5: Xylophonists from Bubalanyuro, Bayelyiri, Jorikoyiri, and Saru

The village of Bubalanyuro lies east from Donyɛ, nestled in a forested area on the far side of the Bole-Wa road back past Tuna (see Figure 5-1). The literal meaning of Bubalanyuro ("What do they drink?") hints at some of the challenges its inhabitants have faced since the village was founded, a name reflecting the substantial distance between the settlement and the closest year-round water source. The town originally bore the name of its now forgotten founder, replaced by the name Bubalanyuro and the joking and playful answer "…*pito*." (millet beer). The trip from Tuna to Bubalanyuro is 20 km, split equally between the paved Bole-Wa road that runs until Yipala, and the ensuing streams and ditches which create an obstacle course that anyone visiting the village must overcome. The chief of Bubalanyuro lives under the largest baobab tree on the road to Bubalanyuro, which stretches out high above the surrounding trees creating an unmistakable landmark. Lauyun Nkala, a lean and ingratiating man, keeps track of village events and offers mediation as necessary. He lives in the shadow, however, of former chief Alhadji (one who has made the Hajj to Mecca) Ankaara, who is widely remembered for the prosperity he brought to the village, as reflected in Yichiir's praise composition *Ankaara*. (Yichiir 2009). A predominantly Birifor settlement, Bubalanyuro consists of several family farmsteads, two small church houses (the Evangelical Church of Ghana and the Roman Catholic Church of Ghana), and a schoolhouse, all without electricity or a mechanized water supply. These features make Bubalanyuro an unlikely choice of residence for the Maal family. However, when Sagba Maal, father of Yichiir and Chile, passed away in 1992, the family was forced to relocate from their previous home in Suomu to their uncle Sagba Wanaa's house in Bubalanyuro because of clanship claims. Village life in Bubalanyuro revolves around the agricultural cycle, with younger generations increasingly drawn or siphoned out for school and

the economic opportunities of market towns and urban centers. The road to Bubalanyuro has fallen into disrepair in recent years, though monthly sessions of communal labor slowly fill in the sections carried away by seasonal rains.

Maal Yichiir and Maal Chile of Bubalanyuro

From the onset of Maal Chile's and Maal Yichiir's blindness, which occurred when they were infants before they could remember what it is to "see," both brothers were treated differently than their sighted siblings, ten of fourteen of which are still living (Yichiir 2009). Traditionally, a mother and father, as well as their brothers and sisters, jointly partake in the raising of young boys and girls on Birifor farming settlements. However, Yichiir and Chile were not taught by their father or mother, but by their siblings, and "on their own." (see Figure 5-2). Yichiir described this experience as "difficult, because we always had to feel the ground before we could know what to do." (Yichiir 2009). Gesturing towards the ground, Yichiir commented both upon early experiences of learning, and the dangers that farmers face in daily agriculture. Scorpions and other biting or stinging insects are drawn to the rich cones of soil in which yams are planted, while snakes, which are taboo for many Birifor clans, slither along the surface of farm plots. Most young boys grow up helping out with the various tasks of small scale agricultural life, gradually absorbing the lessons of the seasons. However, Yichiir and Chile did not begin farming until their twenties under the tutelage of their brothers. When Yichiir and Chile did learn to farm, it brought them both happiness and increased status in the household, as they were able to tangibly contribute to the well being of the family. On days when Yichiir and his dog led me out to his farm of roughly three hundred yam mounds, we walked to the changing sounds of his machete as it bounced off of the top of grass and knocked against trees (see Figure 5-3). The long and confusing path which Yichiir navigated perfectly, was marked for him by

changing plants and trees, some of which were arranged in rows to designate the boundaries of farm plots.

Yichiir and Chile began playing xylophone at a young age, influenced musically by their father and other xylophonists who performed local funerals. Yichiir described learning to play the xylophone as a gradual process, when he said, "In our tradition, learning meanings listening, and then playing." (Yichiir 2009). With the instruction of El Vuur mentioned in Chapter 4, the Maal brother's became popular as performers shortly after being coaxed by their brothers into performing publically at a funeral. Yichiir describes the reaction of many people as surprised when they witness him playing, which he adds is often accompanied by unwanted remarks. Both Yichiir and Chile expressed great thanks that they had grown up in a family where the xylophone was readily available, describing it as a source of great fulfillment for them as blind people (see Figure 5-4).

When their numerous siblings were sent off to local schools, Yichiir and Chile were passed over in favor of their sighted brothers and sisters. There are several ways to interpret the choice of Sagba Maal, the father of Yichiir and Chile, to send his daughters to school, and not his blind sons. It can be read aggressively as the symbolic demasculinization of blind boys and men by placing sighted girls and women ahead of them in a society that otherwise privileges men. It can be read as an exercise of agency by Birifor girls and their mothers against the currents of the traditionally patriarchal organization of Birifor society. It can also simply be viewed as a reflection of the value of boys and men, regardless of their visual capabilities, to the daily endeavor of farming, which constitutes the primary source of food and income for the family compound and community. It also could have been that their sisters were simply more gifted and promising academically, which is possible since in my experience their sisters are

exceptionally intelligent and talented. Whatever the angle of interpretation one takes, clearly Yichiir and Chile were unhappy with this choice. Yichiir said, "Yes, we wanted to go, but our parents didn't give us that chance. Now that we have seen the importance of school, we would like to go, but our childhood has past." (Yichiir 2009).

Later in life, Yichiir saved enough money to send himself to school, attending the Methodist School for the Blind in Wa, just a few hours north of Bubalanyuro. From 1995 through 1998, Yichiir learned about various tools and assistive technologies for the blind, handcrafts like weaving, basket making, and chair building, as well as Christian teachings and the Evangelical Church of Ghana. Chile, however, did not attend school, and instead remained at home cultivating both the land and his musical skills. The impact on Yichiir of his education is unmistakable in the stacks of yellowed Braille sheets and books in his room that stand at shoulder level, and the acquired crafts of weaving and chair building that provide Yichiir supplemental income. The circumstances of education for the blind in the Northwest of Ghana are explored at further length in Chapter 6, depicted through my experiences with current and prospective students at the Methodist School for the Blind in Wa. However, the point here is that in a society where literacy and education are socio-cultural markers of modernity and tools of economic mobility, the value of education to persons with blindness or other disabilities, who are often already socio-spiritually marginalized, is enormous. The personal, social, and economic value of education for the blind is unmistakable, however, learning also occurs outside the walls of schoolhouses and educational institutions.

Christian churches in Ghana are another crucial domain of both learning and belonging for Yichiir and Chile, who were drawn to Evangelical and Roman Catholic services respectively because of the immediate acceptance they received in church through the Christian ideology of

redemption (see Figure 5-5). Viewing all humans as necessarily colored by sin, the readings, sermons, and songs of their rural churches focus on the constant and shared quest for redemption and perfection that all Christian Birifors share. As both brothers explained, in addition to enjoying the communal aspect of worship, they prefer the teachings of Christianity to traditional religion because they do not stigmatize them for their blindness (Chile 2007; Yichiir 2007). Chapter 6 explores in detail the disjunctures between religion and witchcraft for disabled persons, outlining the causality of traditional beliefs that systematically subordinate the blind Birifors of this book. With respect to their life histories, however, the Christian church and its teachings have been a source of both social acceptance and community for Yichiir and Chile, in addition to the alternate spiritual path it provides for them. As a non-Christian myself, who nevertheless resembles the Christian missionaries that have been operating in the region for decades, I was keen to separate my agenda and beliefs from those of missionaries, and thus did not press Yichiir or Chile about the degree to which they internalized Christian ethics or the belief in a Supreme God. Instead, my questions lingered on the value that they placed on traditional religion and Christianity, the values placed on them through both systems, and the musical dimensions of their religious practice. To this day, Chile attends the Roman Catholic Church in Bubalanyuro, but does not perform xylophone in church services. Yichiir, however, does perform during almost every church service at the Evangelical Church of Ghana in Bubalanyuro, along with several percussionists and a choir of churchgoers, something that he has been doing for roughly twenty years (see Figure 5-6). In Chapter 6, I consider the songs that Yichiir has composed and performs at church for their spiritual, personal, and compositional significance. Cast within the contours of Yichiir's daily life, Sunday is a joyous occasion for him not just because of its holiness, but because of his popularity at church and the excitement

and relative newness of playing in church. Yichiir said, "The church music comes from the Bible, and the traditional music is something that is from the olden days. I grew up with traditional music. This is new to me." (Yichiir 2009).

Yichiir's compositions, range from interpretations of passages from the Bible, (which pertain to his spiritual goals), to public praises or admonitions, to songs of critical protest of the treatment of disabled persons, the latter of which unanimously invoke the malice and mischief of powerful and ever-present enemies. Yichiir is also well versed in the traditional canon of funeral xylophone music, and thus knows much of the extensive collection of pieces passed on from generation to generation, which constitute the Birifor *kogyil* repertoire. Vuur Sandaar commented on Yichiir's music by saying,

> Yichiir definitely has his own style. When we hear him, we can recognize him. The reason is that everybody has their own way of interpreting each piece. Let's say you are playing Prai. There is a place where everyone will put their own melody, where they will style it. When you hear that, you will know who is playing. (Sandaar 2009).

The particular nuances and features of Yichiir's style will become more evident in the musical examples of his compositions in the ensuing chapters, suffice it to say that Yichiir's life and music are the mainstay of this analysis of musicianship and experience amongst blind musicians, because of the breadth and range of his musical and life experiences.

When Yichiir and Chile travel to a funeral together, they will decide ahead of time which one of them will perform, believing that it is best to have only one musical representative of the family. While at some funerals multiple members of a family are called to play (and indeed oblige the request), it is traditional for the older sibling to defer to younger brothers so that, "they too may have their time." (Yichiir 2009). Vuur Sandaar and Vuur Mwan share this same relationship, however, their father Vuur, just like Saanti and Kakraba Lobi, continued to perform while their brothers played funerals and festivals, occupying a separate status as musical masters

and valuable repositories of cultural knowledge. This tradition of "passing the torch" to one's junior siblings, is believed by many to be part of the set of guidelines for performance passed on by the *Kontomble* spirits who introduced the xylophone to the Birifor. According to explanations by each of the xylophonists of this inquiry, that transition occurs around the age of fifteen. However, each of the grown men that I interviewed somehow represented an exception to that rule.

Echoing the sentiments of Vuur Mwan, Yichiir speaks in his compositions about the complications and hardships of inheriting the ritual responsibility of performing at funerals. As a blind musician, Yichiir feels that he is often cheated at funerals, as he expresses in his song *Nborfo* (Cheating). Describing the composition, he said,

> It is about when we go to funerals, and people cheat us out of money. When we play, people throw plenty of cowries, but afterwards when we collect them and go to exchange them for Cedis, they cheat us. It is not easy to travel to funerals and play. If I get money at a funeral, and the man exchanging money sits back and does nothing, and then takes the lion's share, then how can I continue to play?
>
> At times, you can give them 100 Cowries, and only receive 20 Pesowas in return. If that is the case, then we will stop playing xylophone, because I cannot play and someone will take everything afterwards. In our tradition, the father is the one who buys you a xylophone to play. Then, the money that you collect at the funeral through performing, the cowries that you get, they are for your father. You play to help pay for the xylophone. After you have paid for the xylophone, you can keep whatever you earn. Now, when we play at funerals, people take money from us, so we are not making a profit. What is the use then? If you have a cowry, throw it. If you have Cedis, throw them. But do not throw cowries, and then later go back and collect them again. (Yichiir 2009).

This situation is further complicated by that fact that the earnings from a funeral *kogyil* performance are split between the *gaŋgaa* player, the *kuur* player, the *kogyil* player, and the *kogyil* owner, the latter of whom takes the largest portion. From this interview excerpt, we can take away an impression of the tension that veils and perhaps fuels performance. Misfortune is naturally always unwanted, however, rivalry and self-righteousness can breed productive musical

competition.

For each of the blind musicians of this inquiry, public performance would not be possible without the support and advocacy of close friends and family. For the Maal brothers, it was the assistance of their brother Lombɔr that made their musical lifestyle possible (see Figure 5-7). In the Maal family, Chile's younger brother Lombɔr, showed the most promise in the family as a young xylophonist, but chose to stop playing so that his blind brothers could stand out as the family's xylophonists. I first met Lombɔr at Kakraba Lobi's funeral in 2007, where he played an accompanitive ostinato on the highest note of Yichiir's xylophone with two sticks, since no *lar* was available. An enthusiastic and boisterous man, I got to know Maal Lombɔr over the ensuing years, finding out that he acted as the senior male of the household, and was instrumental to Yichiir and Chile's well being. Lombɔr not only provided transportation via motorbike for the brothers to attend funerals, he also helped them in innumerous ways around the house and on the farm (see Figure 5-8). More than the rest of the family, Lombɔr was an adherent of traditional religious beliefs and practices, emphasizing the power of local totems over the community. For Lombɔr, a balanced lifestyle and the appeasement of local spirits ensured harmony not only with the land, but with their fathers of old. He felt strongly that the misfortunes his own father faced, including the early death of four of his children, could be avoided by future generations through adherence to and maintenance of traditional religion. In 2009, Lombɔr was steadily complaining of health problems, including numbness and tingling in his right arm, which was diagnosed at a nearby clinic simply as high blood pressure. A little over a year later, Lombɔr passed away, leaving the Maal household without his bellowing voice and proudly positive outlook on life. Speaking about Lombɔr's orientation towards traditional culture, Yichiir said, "It is not all the olden days things that we have left. There are many that we keep. We are happy with the new

and the old." (Yichiir 2009).

Ni-Ana Alhansan of Bayelyiri

The village of Bayelyiri, the home and birthplace of blind xylophonist Ni-Ana Alhansan, lies west of Tuna, roughly 20 minutes motorbike ride off the Tuna-Kalba road down a single-track dirt path. Like the other villages depicted so far, the houses of Bayelyiri cling to large trees around which most domestic activities occur. Beneath the large arching mango tree outside Alhansan's house in Bayelyiri, I spoke with Alhansan about the comings and goings of the day, working through recordings and discussions of his pieces over the course of several sessions (see Figure 5-9). As sometimes happens, elders seize such opportunities to pour libation, honoring both ancestors and present company, and consuming a bottle of akpeteshie (local gin) in the process. The texts of these libations are naturally adapted to the circumstance in which they are performed, as is evidenced in the libation offered by Alhansan's father before one of our recording sessions. He said, "My ancestors, we thank you for bringing Yonyɛ all the way from America to come visit and help us. We ask for your help to guide Yonyɛ with his work, so that he may succeed and help us here. We ask you to protect him, and that whatever he lays his hands on become a success. Also guard him to wherever he goes and back home peacefully." (Ni-Ana 2009). My own reputation for traveling from one xylophonists house to another had preceded me, just as Alhansan's reputation in the area as always being on the move and engaging in his small-scale trade, had preceded him.

Alhansan belongs to the *Yonbalado* patriclan, which accounts for his exposure to the xylophone and its repertoire at a young age. Like Yichiir and Chile, Alhansan did not learn to play xylophone primarily from his father, instead learning from his close friend and companion, Layir Bayir (see Figure 5-10). When I asked about his childhood experiences and onset of

blindness, Alhansan said, "I grew up blind. That is what I remember. My parents told me that I got measles as a child, and that is why I am blind." (Alhansan 2009). Alhansan's father Ni-Ana corroborated this, saying that before the sickness, Alhansan could see the same as his brothers and sisters. Alhansan never attended school, sharing Yichiir and Chile's plight of being passed over when funding for education was allocated by their father. Unlike Yichiir and Chile, Alhansan does not farm in any capacity, though he does travel and sell small items such as batteries and matches (Alhansan 2009).

Like Yichiir and Chile, Alhansan sought out the tutelage of the recognized elder xylophonists of the region, studying briefly with both Belendi Saanti and El Vuur (see Figure 5-11). Alhansan stressed that he had developed much of his skill on his own, and that his creation of original compositions sets him apart from other xylophonists, but also explained what it was like to study with these masters. He said,

> Ok, I know xylophone. I know how to play. But sometimes, when you are working on a song and come to a place you cannot pass, you will go to someone who knows the song better. When you go to them, they will open up your mind. So I got to a point where I wanted to learn something, and I went to Vondiel and met him [Saanti], and he cleared it for me. (Alhansan 2009).

Within the framework of African knowledge as enacted in aural and oral ways of knowing, Alhansan's statement is a reminder that learning and mastery are driven by agency, both in the immediate context of public performance, and in the larger patterns of life decisions and sustained action.

The style that Ni-Ana Alhansan has developed has a distinct similarity to El Vuur's through its narrower range of dynamics, its use of straight time that generally pushes the beat, and his particular ornamentation of traditional compositions and song cycles. I asked Alhansan about the similarity of their styles, to which he responded, "I can describe him (El Vuur) as

somebody who is the *best* xylophonist. Because he is the best xylophonist, we would all meet at the funeral grounds and play, and he would teach us how to play some of the key areas." (Alhansan 2009). The songs that Alhansan filters through his style remix many of the rhythms and phrases of the preexisting repertoire, conforming to the stylistic guidelines that signal that a composition has a surrogated text, as articulated earlier by Saanti. Traveling with the frequency that he does, Alhansan maintains close friendships with the other xylophonists of this book. In response to the list of xylophonists I asked him about, he said, "I have met many. I have met Darigain. In fact, every funeral it seems we meet. I have met Yichiir and Chile, and even all their drummers." (Alhansan 2009). The friendship between blind musicians in particular, is of special importance because of their shared experiences, even when those experiences are negative.

In his compositions, Alhansan reveals the discrimination he faces as a blind member of the community and as a musician. He decried this when he said, "Whenever I go to funerals, people will insult me and say, 'What can a blind man do?'" (Alhansan 2009). This type of prejudice, born from a range of stereotypes that dis-able the blind, narrowly aims witchcraft accusations, gossip, and general ill-will at Alhansan. Elaborating upon these witchcraft accusations, Alhansan said, "They say that I have exchanged my eyes for the xylophone. I know that what they are saying is not true. I know that I have not exchanged my eyes for playing xylophone. So when they say that, it hurts me, but I have nothing to say." (Alhansan 2009). Alhansan's petty trade similarly comes under fire, leading him to perceive his enemies as an ever-present threat when he is traveling. Alhansan's compositions about these experiences of discrimination are analyzed in detail in Chapter 7, along with many other songs about enemies garnered by the status of a blind musician in Birifor society.

Kuyiri Darigain of Jorikoyiri

Traveling to Jorikoyiri to spend time with blind xylophonist Kuyiri Darigain, the childhood friend of Yichiir and Chile, I set out from Tuna to Sawla along the government paved road, departing shortly thereafter down a long dirt and sand path through Degzie, Guruyiri, and Nakpala, arriving finally at Jorikoyiri (see Figure 5-12). On one of my visits, a large funeral for an elder woman was already underway, and as a result of women's funerals being less common during my visits, this particular opportunity allowed me to observe, record, and participate in a Birifor funeral ceremony for a woman (see Figure 5-13). This particular funeral ceremony provides a key example of the mimetic inscription of the gendered division of labor, as women's daily chores and activities were acted out with symbolic subtlety. The pieces Darigain performed there, *Pokobo, Chikuorbene, Kbpala ,* and *Guun* will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 8.

Unlike the other blind xylophonists introduced here, Kuyiri Darigain became blind as a teenager. Rather than attending school, Darigain chose to migrate south for industrial agricultural work out of economic necessity, following in the footsteps of many young Birifor men before him. The name Dari in Birifor culture has special significance, referring to a child who has been born after an earlier sibling passed away, which is understood by many Birifor as the same soul entering the world again through a second body. *Sidari* is also the Birifor word for spider, a creature that is evoked symbolically in Birifor culture as a repository of wisdom. Darigain shared one of his possibly less wise decisions as a youth to take a job near a polluted tributary, which likely played a factor in the subsequent onset of his blindness. Darigain personally attributes his blindness to being attacked by a dog after a hunt, an experience which damaged the muscles in his calf and left him with a substantial infection.

As a child, Darigain was taught xylophone by his father, through the same process of musical transmission typical of sighted Birifor xylophonists. For Darigain, the deterioration of his vision did not affect his xylophone performance. He said, "It is not the eyes that play xylophone. It is the hands that play." (Darigain 2009). Other tasks did, however, prove challenging. Darigain also said, echoing Yichiir's observation of the necessity of feeling the ground for blind farmers, that,

> As for other activities, everything else is difficult. Xylophone is easy. Farming is difficult because you use sight to select. You have to see the guinea corn, the maize, the grass. When one is blind, one must feel. As a farmer you must be fast, and this slows one down. So to be honest, I find farming very difficult. I can do it, but I find it difficult. (Darigain 2009).

The most severe effect of the physical transformation Darigain underwent was undoubtedly the way he has subsequently been received in larger society, a topic which kept resurfacing in our discussions. Darigain explained,

> When I became blind, people saw me as a different person. They treated me differently… They saw me as a disabled, someone with nothing. Vulnerable. So they try to avoid me. They don't avoid me because they fear me, they avoid me because they think I cannot perform activities as they do. (Darigain 2009).

Darigain's experience supports the modeling of disability's disempowerment as stemming from a shared ideology of ability, which marginalizes peoples who cannot display such ability. While as a larger phenomenon this ideology curtails the perceived competency of persons with disabilities in many domains, for rural Birifors it conjures up a correlation between the ability to farm, and the ability to support oneself and one's family, which disabled persons are marginalized from.

Eventually, after years of practicing xylophone inside, people began to ask Darigain to come out and play publically at funerals and festivals, helping to establish his status as a regional performer. Unlike Yichiir and Alhansan, Darigain never took interest in Christianity, and sees

church music as fundamentally different from traditional xylophone music, primarily because of its differing tonal basis (Darigain 2009). Darigain attributes his relentlessly positive attitude towards life and his community to his supportive family and the strong personal relationships he maintains with other blind persons. During interviews, Darigain was eager to articulate the importance of relationships between blind persons, which he suggested are often overlooked. He explained that when he meets another blind person, he, "Will be happy because this [blindness] is a natural phenomenon. It is something that has happened by nature. So you should feel comfortable when you meet your fellow blind person. You will share ideas, and enjoy it." (Darigain 2009). This articulation of blindness as natural is a tacit response to the stigmatization of blindness as the unnatural result of witchcraft. For Darigain, the experience of once having sight, and the status experienced as a sighted person, is a nostalgic topic of conversation between persons with late onset blindness (see Figure 5-14). He said,

> If I meet my fellow blind man, we will sit down and be remembering what we were doing [before we became blind]. Suppose I was a great farmer, I became blind, and then happen to meet my fellow blind man. We will sit down definitely, and we will talk. I will try to remember what I was doing, and the other man will say, this is what I was also doing. Then we will be chatting and remembering what we did, and it will make us happy. (Darigain 2009).

Yichiir, Chile, and Alhansan, who cannot remember sight as a sense, do not share this nostalgia. However, Darigain's statement can also be read as simply referring to the area of shared experience created by the physical affliction and its social reception. This camaraderie contrasts Darigain's experiences outside of his circle of family and friends, which he describes as markedly more distant and impersonal after the deterioration of his eyesight. I asked Darigain what he would tell Ghanaians who have this orientation towards disability, to which he replied,

> The blind are also human beings in the system. I want to tell all Ghanaians that, we, the blind, are vulnerable. Now that we are vulnerable, we would like people to know this and help us. If you become blind and you cannot see, you will want people to lean

> against, so that they can also show you senses or directives about what to do, to also fit in the system. So for me now, my father is dead, and I don't have anybody taking care of me.
>
> I want all Ghanaians to know that there are vulnerable groups in the system, and that we need support so that we may live. I used to farm, and now I cannot. Now that I am not farming, I am sitting in the house. When yam season comes, everyone is getting yam to eat, and I am sitting here. I find it difficult. If someone does not come and give me yam, how will I eat? What will I get? I have no one supporting me. So I want to tell all Ghanaians that the blind need support. If someone is blind, it is nothing. They must accept that they are disabled, and then live. So they need support. (Darigain 2009).

While his response speaks for itself, the recurring theme of frictions reintegrating into society, and the desire to shed the negative stigma surrounding blindness, links his experience and perspective with those of Yichiir, Chile, and Alhansan. Interestingly, Darigain's statements challenges both blind and sighted persons to accept blindness as a natural human condition, and to by increasing support for the blind, which he articulates as both personal and financial support.

SK Kakraba (Dongmwine Biirdooh) of Saru

The 58 kilometer journey from Tuna to Saru, winds across a daunting landscape through a series of towns and villages before giving way to the familiar fields, faces, houses, and river of SK Kakraba's (born Dongmwine Biirdooh) hometown of Saru (see Figure 5-15). Naanfaa, Naharjyiri (a Dagara settlement), Nahari (a Gonja settlement), Gonsi, Kantame, Konfugsi, Kporju Kunta, Bunchire Kunta, and finally Saru's nearest market, Kalba, stand between Saru and the closest paved road. I was first introduced to SK Kakraba by ethnomusicologist Gavin Webb in 2002 at the University of Ghana, Legon campus, a far cry from the rural farmstead SK grew up on. I studied with SK immediately after meeting him for the first time, and we have become close friends through our subsequent years of communication and research together. SK acted as translator for much of the research included here, applying both his fluency in musical

terminology in English, Twi, and Birifor, and his insider's perspective as a professional xylophonist towards the descriptive accuracy and success of this book. Through the funeral for Kakraba Lobi that took place in Saru in 2007, and my subsequent visits in 2009, I became very familiar with Saru, its people, and the pace of life along the banks of the Black Volta.

At a young age, SK was chosen by his father to migrate south to Accra after finishing secondary school. Unlike many other Birifor boys and men who migrate to work on farms and in industrial jobs, SK and his brothers and cousins were selected based upon their skill playing and building xylophones. SK in particular was chosen because of his musical talents and his fluency in English. Now in his mid-thirties, SK as a youth performed at funerals and festivals in the North, enjoying the life of a young xylophonist in demand. Today, he rarely plays in traditional ritual contexts because of his fear of jealous listeners using witchcraft to destroy his success in Accra (S. Kakraba 2007). This concern is shared by many other musicians who have gained notoriety in urban areas like Accra, who fear that a malicious curse inflicted on a visit home could threaten their career in the city. While the performance of xylophone in ritual contexts brings with it spiritual vulnerability, the secular contexts in which SK has for many years performed are seen as safer, because "witches" and people with spiritual power are generally believed to stay in the hinterland, though this is not a hard and fast rule. Performing in Hewale Sounds, a neo-traditional group explored further in Chapter 9, SK has adapted the *kogyil* to the fusion of ethnic styles that is Ghanaian urban music (see Figure 5-16). Unlike the popular music of Ghana's airwaves, groups like Hewale Sounds emphasize an acoustic orchestration, fusing a conversance with Western classical and jazz music (they are fond of covering Dave Brubeck's "Take Five"), with a range of musical approaches from Ghana's various traditional musics. SK was originally recruited for Hewale Sounds by Prof. J.H. Kwabena Nketia, who put

together and helped secure funding for the group. This relationship eventually led SK to take over Kakraba Lobi's duties teaching xylophone performance at the University of Ghana, Legon. Subsequent budget cuts, however, removed his position and eventually academic funding for the group entirely.

SK Kakraba's name, which he chose over his more traditional birth name Dongmwine Biirdooh, reflects his general propensity towards the assimilation of modern concepts into traditional domains. His choice of patronyms was practically and politically adroit, as "Kakraba" makes tangible his relationship with his iconic uncle, while the reversal of Birifor traditional naming order makes it much easier to fulfill the bureaucratic obligations of city life. Stylistically, SK continues in Kakraba Lobi's trend of adapting the *kogyil* to Western compositions musical roles, using the instrument in a more simplified chordal role. For both musicians this has also resulted in less rhythmic density in their renditions of traditional compositions in favor a lyrical minimalism. Xylophone music is of course generally busy and percussive. However, when outlining the styles of the xylophonists of this inquiry, SK Kakraba and Kakraba Lobi's emphasize clear and minimally ornamented melodies. This stylistic approach can be heard in SK's duet with his cousin, Ba-ere (Bernard) Yotere (who was also taught by Kakraba Lobi), in which the two jointly weave the composition's melody through interlocking phrases and alternating ornamentations, solos, and refrains (see Figure 5-17). While *kogyil* duets are not common in traditional contexts (instead the *bɔgyil* is played in pairs), in secular and urban contexts it is typical for two xylophonists to play *kogyil* together, alternating leading and supporting roles. SK does not compose in the traditional cannon, focusing instead on spreading Kakraba Lobi's compositions, that have trans-African themes.

In the years that I have known SK, the primary challenges that he has faced are

developing his career across international borders, and recouping payment from the bandleaders of the groups he performs in. No longer part of the circuit of funeral performers in the North, and still struggling to support himself as a secular musician, SK has for many years supplemented his musical income by doing odd jobs, and teaching the occasional university student some basic compositions from the funeral repertoire. With his skill and the favor of Kakraba, SK is expected by his family and peers to flourish musically, and have money to show for it. Urban life is of course expensive, and even international performance tours do not always leave musicians with disposable income. These tensions, and the techniques of adapting the *kogyil* to urban musical settings and styles, are the primary issues explored with reference to SK's life and music in Chapter 9.

Kakraba Lobi (Tijaan Siinyiri) of Saru

Born Tijaan Siinyiri, Kakraba Lobi, the xylophonist of international repute introduced at the outset of this book, was raised in Saru as the son of rural farmers. In addition to working fields and processing crops, Kakraba was as a youth a skilled fisherman, shepherd, and trader. As a young man of many talents, Kakraba was not content to remain a rural farmer as his parents had hoped, and decided to migrate to the cocoa belt of southern Ghana in search of greater economic opportunity. Employed only briefly as a farmer in Kokoti village near Offinso town, Kakraba soon left farming altogether and learned Kente weaving from a friend. When this proved to be an unstable source of income, Kakraba left Kokoti in 1955 for Kumasi, the second largest city in Ghana. A series of mishaps in Kumasi left Kakraba broke and unemployed, motivating him to travel to the capital city of Accra in search of an uncle, who lent Kakraba a *kogyil*. Kakraba began playing xylophone on the streets of Accra, creating a unique blend of adapted Ga, Twi, and Birifor songs, while still performing the traditional Birifor xylophone

repertoire. Kakraba flourished as a musician in Accra, gaining recognition as a unique bearer of Ghana's diverse national heritage.

In 1957, Kakraba was invited by A. A. Mensah to perform for the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation for the first time. By 1961, Prof. J. H. Kwabena Nketia had invited Kakraba to teach xylophone performance at the Institute of African Studies (IAS) at the University of Ghana, Legon, where Kakraba would be appointed for the next two decades. In 1963, Kakraba Lobi took his first international performance tour to Rome and Jerusalem. Kakraba would go on to tour over 25 countries, performing and teaching at numerous institutions and venues including UCLA and Wesleyan University, with the help of longtime friend, student, and collaborator Valerie Naranjo. Over the course of the 34 years that Kakraba was active as a xylophonist, Kakraba made several commercial recordings, including *Ghana: The World of Kakraba Lobi* (1995), *Song of Legaa* (2000), and *Song of Niira* (2004). On Friday, July 20th, 2007, Kakraba Lobi died of pneumonia at Ridge Hospital in Accra, Ghana. Falling ill only three days earlier Kakraba's death came as a shock to his family, community, and colleagues, so much so that SK was the only one at his bedside when he passed away.

Part III

"Disability is not inability and disability is no handicap to development. The disabled seem unable because of societal attitude and the environment they find themselves in. The disabled need friendship and opportunities, not sympathy." – John Dari

Chapter 6: Blindness and Witchcraft's Causality

The lives, locations, experiences, and concerns of the Southern Birifor xylophonists explored in Chapters 4 and 5, demonstrate that both blind and sighted xylophonists experience adversity because of their occupation as both musicians and ritual specialists. However, four of these xylophonists also experience an additional form of socio-spiritual displacement because of the negative perception of their visual impairment through both a spiritual system of value, and an ideology of ability. The purpose of this chapter is to examine how blindness, religion, and witchcraft operate in the Northwest, building upon the discussion in Chapter 1 of how blindness is projected as a form of social and spiritual deviance in Birifor contexts, which are employed in the ideological construction of disability. Part of this examination involves a review of the medical history of blindness in Ghana, as well as a glimpse at the few educational institutions that do exist for the blind in Ghana. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the northern regions of Ghana have a long history of epidemics of blindness, which informs regional consciousness of the condition in surprising ways. One might expect that this history would lead to an increased acceptance of blindness as one of many physical impairments, however, it instead reinforces a cultural narrative of blind persons as "useless." (Yichiir 2009). Religion and witchcraft, which I interpret here as separate systems jointly supported by individual spirituality, likewise have a long history in the region which is surveyed here only in brief. The focus of the discussion instead is how systems of causality from religion and witchcraft have the potential to shape, either positively or negatively, the perception of disability. In so doing, they act as a primary current against which blind Birifor musicians struggle to reclaim the socio-spiritual production of self. A key feature of Birifor religion is the ever-presence of mystical dangers in daily activities, which require ritual purification and the observation of taboos to avoid, and provides an

alternative and additional system of causality. This alternate causality also unfortunately facilitates and shields a culture of fear in which juju (*til*) and witchcraft (*suoba*) accusations are common, a culture of fear directed against minority groups, including disabled persons.

To develop a framework for understanding the discrimination that blind musicians experience in Northwest Ghana, I review early anthropological works on witchcraft to identify key issues for the discussion from a broad range of African cultures, proceeding through contemporary works on witchcraft in Africa. In recent scholarship, there are several articulations of the relationship between music and witchcraft, wherein music displays witchcraft beliefs, critiques those beliefs, ensures spiritual protection, and finally acts as a key medium for contesting witchcraft accusations (Adinkra 2008). Peter Geschiere's (1997) concept of witchcraft as a process for parsing and projecting modernity, augmented by Todd Sanders' (2003) notion that tradition is maintained as much as modernity is asserted in witchcraft, opens an understanding of how witchcraft competes with modern medicine and an Aristotelian causality to determine the cause and value of blindness. These recent works tend to locate the intersection of religion and modernity in markets and public transactional spaces, where modern commodities are imbued with a spiritual potency that requires the intervention of ritual specialists (Geschiere 1997; Piot 1999; Meyer 1999; 2002; Shaw 2001, 2002). I suggest that in the Birifor case the disabled body, already laden with misconceptions, is further objectified and disabled through a spiritual essentialism rooted in witchcraft beliefs, which casts the disabled body outside of both tradition and modernity. This initial discussion provides a point of reference and sense of scale for the ensuing articulation of *witchcraft's causality*, which I suggest renders blind people as objects of spiritual transgression more than as human actors.

Blindness in the Northwest

Ghana is no stranger to blindness, with the Upper East Region once carrying the unfortunate title of the "country of the blind" (Wilson 1961). With a high incidence of both congenital and disease borne blindness, including the world's second most infectious cause of blindness, *onchocerciasis*, blindness and visual impairment have likely been a medical constant since the area was first inhabited (see Figure 6-1). The northern regions of Ghana, as a result of their extensive river networks, have been sites of major epidemics of onchocerciasis. Known widely by the more accessible name "river blindness," these epidemics of parasitic infection were chronicled by the efforts of John Wilson (1953, 1961), who acted in coordination with the British Empire Society for the Blind. Fifty years later, blindness, visual impairment, and eye disease are still disturbingly common in the northern regions. Many residents remain resistant to the cause attributed to, and treatment for various forms of visual impairment by Western medicine, finding alternative interpretations in traditional religion, Christianity, Islam, and mysticism. Earlier, I surveyed the causes that both traditional world-views and Western medicine attribute to blindness in the context of Ghana, while articulating the social, cultural, and spiritual matrices through which bodily variation is crystallized into a deterministic identity riddled with stigma (Goffman 1963). This outside-in perspective on disability that circulates in Birifor communities sharply contrasts the lived realities of an inside-out perspective, a schism that fuels blind xylophonists' contestations of the hegemony of disability.

As Gregory Barz's medical ethnomusicological work on HIV/AIDS music in Uganda (2006) demonstrates, and the research of ethnomusicologists Abimbola Cole in Botswana (2005) and Kathleen Noss van Buren in Kenya (2010) supports, music is frequently deployed as a strategic form of healing, as a response to the labels and misconceptions of sickness and healing, and as a location for the negotiation of healing strategies (2006:36). Together with historically

shifting attitudes towards illness in Uganda, music as transactional communication was effectively used by women with HIV/AIDS to challenge the social stigmas attached to HIV/AIDS, enacting a meta-linguistic power that fuses the performative dimensions of music, dance, and drama. The music of Birifor xylophonists is similarly used as a space of contestation and catharsis, wherein blindness is transmuted from a social category to a lived reality. This is in part because blindness as a medical condition has yet to reach the same level of socio-cultural awareness as HIV/AIDS in Ghana. As in the context of Uganda, Birifor models of witchcraft, sickness, causality, and medicine are culturally defined and socially determined phenomena, which buttress social categories of Otherness and disempowerment. This type of ideologically entrenched power gradient is unfortunately found around the world, both with respect to blindness and disability. For example, in Tibet, those born blind are often considered cursed through a specific interpretation of Tibetan Buddhism's linkages between karma and the cycle of rebirth. Unlike Hinduism which views reincarnation as an uncontrolled and ongoing process, Tibetan Buddhism houses the potential for a form of past-action determinism, which is socially manipulated to subordinate blind persons. While formal Buddhism emphasizes the complexities of reincarnation and specifically warns against such essentialisms, the social reality of Tibetan Buddhism manipulates spiritual purity to marginalize blind people. This example is one amongst many, and to broaden our perspective on blindness as socially and culturally constructed, I provide a general survey of the issues persons with blindness encounter in the region and how these interface with global trends, while conveying the unique needs of blind Birifor musicians and their advocates, as expressed in interviews and discussions. The socio-spiritual conception of blindness is drastically different from the individual experience of blindness, and located in those differences reside areas of personal, social, and spiritual production that disadvantage blind

people in Northwest Ghana.

In 1981, the American group J. Geils Band released the song "River Blindness" on their album *Freeze Frame* (1981). While not necessarily their best song, the lyrics "black flies rise as the water flows," offer both evidence of the international awareness of river blindness epidemics that have plagued Sub-Saharan Africa and South America, and of the widely known causes of river blindness. This is important here because so many Birifor in the Northwest either do not fully understand the biological reasons for the onset of blindness, or refuse to recognize them as the primary cause of blindness, instead viewing the physical ailment as the direct result of the use of witchcraft or juju, which blind persons or their ancestors invited. There are unfortunately also many other common medical reasons for blindness, and not all of the xylophonists here are blind because of the parasitic degradation of their optic nerve. Additional causes for blindness in West Africa include cataract, glaucoma, smallpox, syphilis, leprosy, measles, and tuberculosis, as well as physical trauma. The parasitic cause of river blindness, however, should be more widely known given the severity of the epidemic that peaked in the 1950s in Nakong, Northeastern Region of Ghana (Wilson 1961). The prevalence of such river blindness epidemics in northern Ghana means that northerners have a relatively high degree of exposure to blind persons, and that traditional systems of belief have had a long time to develop their own explanations for visual impairment, which as noted compete and co-exist with Western medical explanations. In contemporary practice, mystical explanations of blindness often invoke circumstances of modernity, including Western medicine and medical clinics. However, they are governed by an overall notion of cause and effect that is fundamentally different than the Aristotelian causality of the West.

The discovery of the cause of river blindness was made possible by the work of Irish

surgeon Dr. John O'Neill, whose treatment of a prevalent dermatitis called "craw-craw" in Ghana in 1874, led him to identify *Onchocerca volvulus*, a parasitic nematode (one of three major types of parasitic worm), as the cause of the skin disease (1875). Then in 1917, Rudolfo Robles Valverde of Guatemala published research findings that identified Onchocerca volvulus as the cause of the blindness that his patients suffered, also associating it with skin disease and other effects of the parasite (Robles Valverde 1917). River blindness is sometimes called Robles' Disease because of the importance of his contribution. Later in West Africa, the research of Donald Breadalbane Blacklock in Sierra Leone in 1923 identified the black fly of genus *Simulium damnosum* as the primary agent of transmission of river blindness in West Africa (Blacklock 1926).

In Ghana, this black fly known as the buffalo gnat, breeds near fast flowing, well-oxygenated rivers, such as those that extend out from the Volta across northern Ghana (Medicine for Africa 2010). *Onchocerca volvulus* spreads particularly virulently because of the unique life cycle of the parasitic worm, which uses separate hosts for each stage of development. *Onchocerca volvulus* is ingested by blood-feeding insects, inside which it develops into infective larvae, which are then transmitted into a vertebrate host when the insect feeds. In the vertebrate host the adult parasite is formed, which then multiplies and spreads within the host. Other common diseases caused by similar parasites in Ghana include elephantiasis and schistosomiasis, which together with onchocerciasis can be treated through anthelmintic drugs (like Ivermectin, a primary treatment for onchocerciasis), which attack parasites, eggs and/or larvae. Annual doses of these medicines are sometimes needed to ensure a parasite is eliminated entirely.

The writings of John Wilson chronicle the outbreak of river blindness in the Northeast Region of Ghana during the 1950s in particular, revealing a startlingly neglected and vulnerable

rural population (Wilson 1961). Blind himself, Wilson and his wife Jean treated Ghanaians in the Upper Volta for *ocular onchocerciasis*. As of 1950, Wilson estimated the disease had blinded one in ten people in certain upper Voltaic communities. A subsequent regional survey in the same year indicated that six hundred thousand out of one million Ghanaians in the northern area of Ghana contracted some degree of river blindness, with thirty thousand completely blind as a result (Wilson 1961). Wilson's book *Ghana's Handicapped Citizens* (1961) details his involvement with these blind communities, introducing the primary issues and concerns of blind persons in Ghana. Amongst these is the necessity of specialized equipment for education and everyday life, which is mostly foreign made and must be imported. Imported products are expensive and difficult to come by in rural areas, representing one of the greatest roadblocks to education for blind persons in Ghana. Students that I interviewed in 2009 at the Methodist School for the Blind in Wa, echoed Wilson's sentiment by stating their school's current need for Braille sheets, Braille embossers for computers, and Braille typewriters. Refreshable Braille displays, such as those in use in Europe and the U.S., are rare in Ghana due to insufficient funding for such specialized devices. Standardized Braille itself, which accommodates the full range of characters used in African languages, was not introduced until the 1950s through efforts by UNESCO and SOAS. Wilson also noted that care for the blind, in addition to education at that time, was so limited that clinics across sub-Saharan were plagued by prohibitively long lines for treatment (1953:147).

In his 1953 report to the British Empire Society for the Blind (formed in 1950), Wilson explained that blind persons across Africa rarely find a place "within the framework of native society." (1953:141). Instead, they remain isolated and disorganized, without a clear outlet for their productive energy and efforts. Consequently part of Wilson's goal in his research and relief

work was to start clinics and organizations for the blind, with the hope that they would flourish under indigenous management. Wilson, speaking about the practicalities of achieving this goal, said,

> There are of course many problems: the reluctance of parents to send blind children away for training, the rival attractions of begging, and the need to organize an after-care system. With a knowledgeable local committee directing this operation these problems should not be so formidable as they seem. When a blind man goes back to his village able to grow his own food, to support his own family and to make goods which sell in local markets, he will become part of the tradition of that village, and his example will be the surest foundation on which the scheme from these modest beginnings can grow into a diversified system of education and welfare. (Wilson 1953:146).

Considering that Yichiir, who can farm, make chairs for sale at local markets, has a formal education, and has a specific occupation within society, is still the target of discrimination and jealous ridicule decades later, northern Ghana is still in some ways in the "modest beginnings" of the construction of systems of support and ideologies of acceptance for blind Africans. Wilson, noting the rare occasions where he had encountered collectivization amongst blind populations, citied the blind beggars of Kano, Northern Nigeria. This guild of at that time eight hundred blind individuals, had both a designated area for habitation in the city, and a clearly stated role and purpose in life. As the *Sarakin Makafi* (Hausa for "King of the Blind") explained, blind persons play an important role in society as beggars designated by the Koran, and serve a crucial function as recipients of alms and purveyors of blessings in a cycle designed by Allah (1953:141). This sense of self and place in a spiritual order leads to a valuation of blindness as normal, ideologically challenging the negativistic projection of blindness as dysfunction. Wilson recalled the *Sarakin Makafi's* agreement to have his picture taken on the condition that, as his translator explained, "So long as you don't use it to restore his sight. Allah has made him blind; it is not for men to interfere." (Wilson 1953:141). While in the case of this guild of blind Hausas in Kano blind persons invoked religion towards their own best interest,

Wilson also noted several incidences in which religion and traditional belief systems severely hindered the efforts of Western aid for blind Africans. Wilson's take on blindness in Africa was balanced and ahead of his time, and he was careful not to undermine local religious views, despite the numerous cases of subordination and neglect he witnessed. However, other members of the society were more vocal about the frictions they witnessed between religion and medical treatment. In the discussion session following his address, the remarks of an unnamed member about his own experiences in Nigeria were recorded as follows:

> He had seen Muslim children with flies round their eyes and when he had asked the mothers why they did not brush them away they said it would be impious to do so because Allah sent them, and with regard to the pagans it was a great difficulty to get them to attend the clinics because the local medicine man, not the witch doctor, told them that if they went to the white man's dispensary they would be killed and made into chops. (1953:147).

From this statement, the frustrations of international efforts at medical aid, and the hesitancy of local populations to accept aid when it conflicts with preexisting beliefs, are both clear. However, this also represents a more basic trend in the conception of blindness in West Africa, in which blindness is cast through a religious worldview, which determines the social and spiritual value of blind persons. This persistent spiritual stigma along with cultural standards of physical ability articulated in 1953, has a disturbing resonance with the experiences of blind Birifor xylophonists I witnessed and recorded in 2002, 2007, and 2009, more than fifty years later, and in the conversations we've had been 2002 and 2015.

Education for the Blind in Ghana

In same way that blind Ghanaians face challenges integrating into a society that persistently marginalizes them, they also encounter difficulty navigating the national educational system in Ghana. Most schools in Ghana are not properly equipped to teach blind students, and so many schools simply will not accept them. Schools specifically for the blind in Ghana are not

common, and those that do exist usually require a student to move to another region of the country. A visually impaired child in the Northwest can attend the Wa Methodist School for the blind for kindergarten through junior high school, but must travel to Wenchi in the Brong-Ahafo Region, Swedru in the Central Region, or the Mfantsipim School in the Cape Coast, to attend secondary school. As an adult seeking education, there is a vocational school in Tamale in the Upper-East Region called the Nyohini Rehabilitation Center and School for Adults, as well as programs through the University of Ghana's various campuses. Access to funding for education is equally limited for blind students, who as we heard in Yichiir, Chile, and Alhansan's accounts, are seen as a poor investment. In a mild attempt to compensate for this lack of financial support, two percent of the Sawla-Tuna-Kalba District Assembly's "Common Fund" is used to sponsor children with disabilities to attend school. Despite the small size of this amount, John Dari, the Chairman of the Cross Organization of Persons with Disabilities, Sawla-Tuna-Kalba District, remains optimistic about the prospects of securing more funding. John Dari's optimism is supported by John Choprɛ's success as a blind student, who in 2009 became the first blind student from the Sawla-Tuna-Kalba district to receive a university education and degree, in his case in the humanities and French at the University of Ghana, Cape Coast.

One day in mid-September of 2009, I escorted a young blind orphan named Dari from Yindabo (near Sawla), to the Wa Methodist School for the Blind, with the hope of leveraging admittance for him. Sitting on a bench awaiting the headmaster Sampson Akurugu, we spoke of simple things, listening to the hustle and bustle of students socializing down concrete corridors and playing ball outside (see Figure 6-2). During our wait, I learned that the terms of his acceptance would be largely determined by whether or not he was medically deemed fully blind, but remained otherwise in good health. While the reluctance of the Wa school to admit children

of poor health is an understandable pragmatic necessity given the volume of prospective students they receive and paucity of state funding, it is none-the-less yet another limiting factor for educating rural blind West Africans, many of whom also suffer other ailments related or unrelated to their blindness. In the case of the young boy Dari, the headmaster did end up admitting him some weeks after our meeting, the majority of which was spent talking about the budgetary setbacks the school was facing. My interviews with students from the school highlighted the headmaster's success at creating a productive and supportive learning and social environment for students, despite the aforementioned lack of funding and resources (see Figure 6-3). The Wa Methodist School for the Blind did, in 2010, secure funding from the Force Foundation, an NGO based in the Netherlands, for a new computer center of modern assistive technologies, though the funds to run and maintain the facility remain unsecured for the years ahead.

While increased education generally correlates with greater integration in society for blind persons, John Dari also reflected on some of the non-trivial complications of education for the disabled. Dari related a story about a young deaf boy from Sawla, who returned from a semester of school in Wa to a mother who could no longer understand his signing because of its complexity. As a result, she prevented him from returning to school, fearing that he may become further distanced from his family. Trying to express his disappointment to his mother, the child gathered stones and slowly moved them from one pile to another, leaving only one behind (Dari 2009). Metaphorical or literal, the story echoes the needs expressed by Wilson for greater outreach to the parents and family members of disabled students. Likewise school systems that integrate sighted and blind students often subject blind students to teasing and ridicule. A song sung by Birifor children at school teases blind children for being unable to perform basic tasks.

Chanted to the familiar rhythmic cadence of the *kogyil* and *gaŋgaa* in the traditional composition *Benekponble*, the words *"jככn ba don bul kan,"* ("the blind cannot make a ball of dawa dawa") criticize blind children for not being able to prepare a staple food, and carry the subtext that they are useless as a result. Thus, the theme of blind persons as helpless or useless, expressed by xylophonists as part of a larger ideology of ability, is in some ways reinforced in contexts of institutionalization, even when these contexts are otherwise sources of great fulfillment for blind persons.

While I have presented these challenges as specific to students and educators of blind and disabled students, many sighted students face similar problems during their education in Ghana due to a lack of funding. A frequent topic of conversation amongst adults and young adults in the Sawla-Tuna-Kalba district in 2009, was the low marks local students received on regional tests, which threatened the already faltering funding for the district and region. While the community seemed to lay the blame on teachers, who were seen as not doing enough to prepare students, the teachers I interviewed pointed to a lack of resources and normal conditions of education (Soribe-ain 2009). They pointed to the state of most of the schoolhouses, whose floors and walls are often cracked, and which lack any sort of plumbing or accessibility to water. Indeed, part of the daily life of students in Tuna involves long trips to nearby rivers to collect water. This same sentiment is heard across Ghana, whose peripheries have outgrown the educational facilities erected decades ago, if at all. A basic request shared by towns like Dyganso in the Ashanti Region, where I lived for two weeks in 2002, is for corrugated metal roofs for schoolhouses, which perform better in the rain and outlast traditional thatched roofs. With the help of several other foreigners, I secured funds for a new roof for Dyganso's elementary level schoolhouse in 2002, however, many other communities go without such

external intervention and support.

From this sketch of education for blind persons in Northwest Ghana, it is evident that like many other countries, overall funding for education is limited, all the more so for specialized schools like those for disabled persons. As a result, access to education is restricted for blind students, many of whom like the xylophonists of this book, are not sent to school by their families. However, this is not to say that these difficult circumstances have left the blind helpless, as the blind xylophonists of this inquiry all gained mastery of the xylophone independent of formal education, and many disabled people have been instrumental to the project of empowering fellow disabled persons irrespective of their level of formal education. Likewise, the activism of disabled persons like John Dari radically challenge the stubborn association of disability with inability. A message (see Figure 6-4), painted in bright colors across John Dari's "Craft Shop of Disabled Apprentices," conveys this clearly, calling for opportunities not sympathy for disabled persons. It reads,

> MESSAGE: Disability can be anybody's lot at anytime! Disability is not inability and disability is no handicap to development. The disabled seem unable because of societal attitude and the environment they find themselves in. The disabled need friendship and opportunities, not sympathy. Help the disabled actualize their aspirations and have some self-fulfillment in life. BE A BROTHER'S KEEPER. (2009).

This progressive statement reflects the sophistication of the thinking of disabled persons in the Northwest, which locates the disabled as one of many contemporary groups that need equal rights and opportunities, not sympathy and liminality. Written in English and invoking the Christian language of being a "brother's keeper," the message also reflects the influence of Christian missionaries in the region, who have been at the forefront of advocacy for blind and disabled persons in Northwest Ghana. John Dari described the message as inspirational for the boys that he accepts to work at the shop, who work together to fabricate and sell baskets and

small goods. Dari was also quick to point out the message scratched in chalk beneath the shop title, which reads, "Mr. Credit is dead. No credit." (Dari 2009).

Aspects of Traditional Birifor Religion

Today, African religion encompasses nearly all world religions. In contemporary African communities, Christianity and Islam, while historical imports, are rendered through a distinctly African worldview that is anything but stagnant. Assessing the status of religion in the Birifor communities I spent time in, I found that many people seamlessly mixed Christianity or Islam with traditional beliefs and ritual observations. This is perhaps remarkable given the substantial difference between many traditional African religions and those introduced through conquest. With the doctrines of Christianity and Islam well established in scholarship of all kinds, the focus here is on the aspects of traditional Birifor religion that xylophonists are directly involved in, and those that invoke their disability. Yichiir's interpretations of passages from the Bible, considered at the end of this chapter along with the church services he attends, demonstrate the ways in which Christianity offers a preferential worldview to traditional religion for some but not all blind Birifors.

Birifor traditional religion (*pourfo* lit. "to worship") is characterized by a fundamental orientation towards the Earth, and towards ancestors. The Earth, perceived as the source and final destination of all life, is the focus of most religious observations, notably the maintenance of major and minor Earth shrines through festivals, sacrifices, and other ritual practices. Shrines vary in size, but are generally small inconspicuous objects, such as a collection of pots or small idols. They play an important role in the social organization of the Birifor and related ethnicities because of the geographic radius of their power. Shrines imbue space with sacred protection, but also with sacred rules, which require sacrifice and ritual rectification when violated (Goody

1956:91). This sacred relationship between the Earth and the Birifor has continued since the beginning of time, and is perpetuated by the continued ritual maintenance of shrines, performance of ritual ceremonies, and observance of taboos. While local priests enact the responsibilities of the living to the Earth shrine, the spirit known as *Tingaan* in return ensures the well-being of the community. *Saan*, a lesser spirit, is likewise honored with small shrines around the house, in return for the protection of the family household. *Saan* shrines usually take the form of bird heads and other totems at the entranceway to a compound, or pots containing ritually prepared substances placed near the grain silos of a compound (see Figure 6-5). *Kontomble* is likewise offered small rituals and sacrifices in return for spiritual protection during xylophone performances. Birifor traditional religion is thus animistic in the sense that it posits the existence and influence of souls, though the location of those souls beyond life is not restricted to physical objects.

The notion of the soul is of central importance in Birifor cosmology, as it is the locus of being that endures through the journey from the worldly to the spirit realm. Jack Goody has suggested that the Birifor symbolically bifurcate the soul in ritual ceremonies, which implies the presence of a "multiple soul" in Birifor cosmologies. In other words, a Birifor soul is not inherently good or bad, but is instead composed of both virtue and vice (Goody 1962:370). The soul is something that the individual constantly maintains control over, balancing its conflicting appetites over the course of a terrestrial lifetime. On the occasion of death, however, the balance is disrupted and requires ritual intervention to rectify. This somewhat volatile notion of the soul helps to account for the importance of diviners (known as *sie nyere*), to the protection of the community against malicious ghosts who manipulate community members or ever-present mystical forces towards their own mischievous ends. The key insight here is that the soul is, like

the mystical power hijacked in witchcraft, not inherently good or evil, but can be manipulated towards contrasting ends.

Xylophone music and musicians, like diviners, play an important role in mediating between domains of the living and dead, enabling the proper passage of the soul from this world to the realm of spirits. Death for the Birifor represents *the* major metamorphosis of the soul, which is fundamentally altered through its transition into spirit form. Viewed from an anthropocentric perspective, death and subsequent existence as a spirit means the destructive depersonalization of the soul, and the removal of the individual from the community, both of which are mourned as great losses amongst the living. Of African religions in general, philosopher John Mbiti wrote, "Death stands between the world of human beings and the world of spirits, between the visible and invisible." (Mbiti 1969:145). The notion of two worlds mapped across the same space, one visible and one invisible, is critical to understanding how deceased Birifors undergo a long journey, cross a perilous river, and reach the land of the dead, but still exist in close enough proximity to interfere with daily life and xylophone performance. It is also important because according to Birifor ritual specialists and musicians, the xylophone communicates across this divide, making the audience of xylophone performances greater than just the visible bodies of the living. Spirits are understood not as people, but as things; a kind of diffused vestige of the self.

Ethnomusicologist Judith Becker in her book *Deep Listeners: Music Emotion and Trancing* (2004), theorized culture as, "a supra-individual biological phenomenon, a trans-generational history of ongoing social structural couplings that become embodied in the individual and transmitted into the future through actions." (2004:130). This articulation of culture as a phenomenon dispersed between the bodies of the living, yet trans-generationally

transmitted emphasizes a perception of culture as always operating, in a sense, in parallel. Becker suggests that we view culture as housed in the bodies of the living, but not contained to any one body alone, constantly transmitted, re-imagined, and refined. In the case of Birifor communities, culture is distributed in parallel across the community of the living, and the community of spirit ancestors who play a crucial role in passing on cultural and spiritual practice, similar to the distribution of community articulated by anthropologist Judy Rosenthal in her work with Togolese Ewes (1998). This distribution is solidified through ritual contact with spirits, and through public displays that are enacted to honor spirits. Thus, we may think of culture as embodied in the human sense, but also as embodied by spirits, who as noted inhabit a type of parallel plane rooted in the same physical space as the living. The investment of the living in the well being of spirits as explained by Saanti, is ensured by the destiny of all humans to one day become spirits (Saanti 2009). Mbiti articulated this general characteristic of African religions when he wrote, "Spirits are the destiny of men, and beyond them is God." (Mbiti 1969:78).

Whether an import of Islam and Christianity, or a pre-existing religious conception re-codified in Western terms, most Birifors who are religious (and all those of this book), believe in a Supreme God (*Nagnmin)*, who created the Earth, but is removed from the daily activities of humans. Saanti characterized both the role of God and the role of spirits and ritual specialists, when he said, "God created me, and gave me these talents. But because he is over there, he cannot come down and do all sorts of things for me. But he made people who have powers. *Gabaas* and all those things that you can pass through. So I should go there and perform those rituals and apply the talent that they give." (Saanti 2009). The ritual powers and ritual ceremonies to which Saanti refers, are of particular interest to xylophonists because they deal

with the here and now of daily life, rather than the grand scale of God's activities. From Saanti's comments, we can also understand how and why a Supreme God and spirits coexist and play complimentary functions in a singular, cohesive, Birifor cosmology. God may have set the world in motion, but God is not policing the circulation of mystical powers. This integration of indigenous and world religions functions similarly to the overlaying of a rational causality with a mystical causality discussed later in this chapter, attesting to the highly adaptable quality of belief in African contexts.

The Spiritual Maintenance of Xylophones and Xylophonists

Funerals and festivals are important occasions for communication with spirits along channels that are accepted as part of traditional Birifor religious practice. The xylophone as a sacred instrument inherited from spirits and featured in Birifor ritual contexts, retains a spiritual charge that necessitates ritual maintenance of both the instrument and performer, as well as the observation of certain taboos. As Saanti explained, "If you tamper with the totems of a xylophone, you will just die. If you intend to harm or kill the player with spiritual powers, then you will die first." (Saanti 2009). The specific rituals that xylophonists perform and undergo, outside of the public events of funerals and festivals, are carefully concealed to preserve their power, though any skilled xylophonist is eligible to undergo them. These rituals are conducted by initiated members of xylophone patriclans, such as the *Pondaal* or *Paalba*, who are usually themselves great xylophonists. The physical markers of these beliefs take the form of small totems (icons invoking ancestors) affixed to the xylophone, and spare calabashes or other items hanging below the keyboard (see Figure 6-6). Senior performers like Saanti have had to rely upon such totems for protection many times over the years he has played at funerals. As he explained, "If I am playing, and anyone tries anything, I will reach into this small calabash, and

take something and suck it. I will leave and be done for the day, and everything will be ok. But the other person will suffer." (Saanti 2009). These ritual preparations of the xylophone and xylophonist are not aggressive, but do carry a heavy penalty for transgression. So much so, I discovered, that many xylophonists were concerned about even touching the totems (usually a filled horn) of other xylophonists, houses, or shrines, for fear that their protective mystical power might accidentally be negatively channeled into them.

During one of our afternoons in Vondiel, Saanti explained the intricacies of the *Pondaal* rituals he performs for a xylophonist to give them protection against witchcraft, and heightened skill as a player. The overall process is divided into four discrete rituals, each serving a different function in the advancement of a xylophonist. *Gaaba* is the first ritual, in which *pito*, a fowl, and other herbs specific to each ceremony are submitted by the xylophonist to the ritual specialist, who prepares them into a liquid that is applied to the xylophonist (Saanti 2009). This ritual occurs, like the rest of the rituals, at the house of the elder specialist, where the younger xylophonist is bathed and treated. Some of the liquid from the ritual is retained in a pot, which is later delivered to the xylophonist's house to be used periodically as a wash that imbues the performer's hands with superior skill. Saanti explained, "You will wash your hand with it and it will open your hand. From the rituals that you perform, all the ingredients will be there in the vessel." (Saanti 2009). The first step in this sequence of rituals thus gives the performer greater dexterity and fluidity with their stroke.

The second ritual, *Bumbir*, opens the xylophonists mind and protects them through a similar ritual to *Gaaba*, which takes place at the elder's house. Saanti described *Bumbir* by saying, "*Bumbir* is for protection, and it also makes your xylophone hot. So nobody can do bad things to you. You have some protective medicine that you can take." (Saanti 2009). *Nangoba*,

the third ritual in the sequence, is performed specifically to "polish the hands" of the xylophonist; to add speed and accuracy to their playing. *Solma,* the fourth of these rituals, completes the sequence and generally takes place at a secret location, which is often the house of an especially well-known ritual specialist in the region. This secret location was previously Vuur's house in Donyɛ while he was living, though after his death in 2002 another specialist has taken over the *Solma* ritual. *Solma* is a more serious and substantial ritual in that it involves slaughtering a cow (a significantly larger undertaking than the usual fowl), and the inclusion of cow blood in the mixture applied to the xylophonist. *Solma*, by completing the ritual sequence, ensures the protection and skill of the xylophonist, and also confers them heightened status amongst xylophonists for having completed the ritual sequence.

Not all xylophonists go through these rituals, and those that do are generally deeply entrenched in Birifor traditional systems of belief. Saanti, Vuur, Kakraba, Mwan, and Sandaar all completed them at a young age as talented youths from *Pondaal* and *Paalba* families. Yichiir and SK, however, on account of their Christianity and urban lifestyle respectively, have not undergone these rituals, and are wary of dealing with such mystical powers. This trepidation is understandable because of the double-edged sword that protections against juju and witchcraft can become. Saanti, reciting the text from one of his compositions, said, "Juju has made me useless. Juju has caused me a problem. I have gone to get juju for protection, but when I go home, it causes a different problem in the house. There are always more rituals to perform, here and there, and it is causing problems. It is spoiling my work. The juju has destroyed me." (Saanti 2009). Given these dangers, and the time and resources devoted to the rituals, the fact that they are still performed with a frequency of a few times a year in Vondiel, means that the spiritual protection and musical skill they offer are enough to balance out the equation, and make

them appealing to successive generations.

Witchcraft's Causality

Gaaba, Bumbir, Nangoba, and *Solma* all manipulate mystical forces to defend against the abuse and misuse of those same mystical forces. The primary difference is that ritual specialists channel such forces towards protective and musical ends, while witches and sorcerers use them for evil. To understand, in plain terms, how this perception of witchcraft influences the lives of Birifor xylophonists, I examine here Birifor causal explanations of events where the mischief and interference of witches or sorcerers were considered to be at play. All of the xylophonists represented here believe that witches and sorcerers leave their bodies at night to conduct evil, and that evil spirits prompt community members to do things against their will. That some witches don't know they are witches, adds to the perception that conducting or contracting witchcraft can run in one's family, or spread through an illness, disease, or genetic predisposition. The language of witchcraft amongst Southern Birifors is poly-lingual, in part because of the prevalence of witchcraft, sorcery, and other occult economies in West Africa (Colson 2000:341), and the spread of English words through development, radio, and television. Spoken in English and Birifor, witchcraft (*suoba*), and juju (*til*), both refer to the manipulation of mystical forces, but for contrasting purposes. *Suoba* generally refers to the use of mystical powers towards destructive ends, specifically by evil spirits or individuals possessed by them. *Til* refers to the benevolent but equally powerful and volatile manipulation of mystical forces towards protective ends. This distinction is important, because musicians will speak of their protective *til*, but never of engaging in *suoba*. Having outlined the protective rituals that use *til* above, I turn now to *suoba* (witchcraft) as it impacts the xylophonists of this book, with attention to the ramifications of witchcraft systems on African blind persons.

Discourses of witchcraft on the ground and the causality active within them are separate, though related in obvious and important ways, from the anthropological discourse on witchcraft. The history of such writings on witchcraft goes back to E. E. Evans-Pritchard's seminal work on Azande witchcraft (Evans-Pritchard 1937), which established the social emphasis of witchcraft studies that was later taken up by scholars associated with the Manchester school of anthropology (Marwick 1965; Middleton 1960; Turner 1957). In the mid 1990s, anthropologists dramatically revised their perspective on witchcraft in the African context, newly emphasizing it as a modern phenomenon that acts more like a prism than a set of stagnant beliefs. This was largely a reaction to the criticism that the discourse of witchcraft in anthropology exoticized Africans and relegated them to a spiritual backwater. The depictions of witchcraft since then have emphasized the creative ways that African beliefs in witchcraft engage postcolonial realities, and are in turn shaped by them (Adinkra 2008; Bastian 1993; Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Geschiere 1997; Meyer 1992, 1999, and 2002; Parish 2000; Shaw 2002). Through this lens, witchcraft is seen as a source of cultural agency and a critical part of the experience of the West African present, regardless of the associations and labels used in the description of contemporary practice.

Several of these studies cast witchcraft beliefs as both a locus of African gnosis, and as a kind of critical mechanism of indigenous cultural and spiritual production. These two roles are of particular interest to this inquiry, because the former indicates the deeply entrenched (though dynamic) nature of those beliefs, while the later pertains to how blind xylophonists are cast through the causal system of witchcraft. My own emphasis on witchcraft as a causal system reflects the fact that witchcraft operates across religious and spatial boundaries, appealed to by Birifors to explain the ordinary and the extraordinary. Since the goal of this book is to

understand the plight and music of blind xylophonists, the focus here is on the intersection of witchcraft with disability, rather than on the intersections of witchcraft with indigenous and world religions. This particular angle permits a harsh critique of the causality of witchcraft as a form of structural violence against disabled persons, without undermining the authentic beliefs of the individuals of this book, and the Birifor people as a whole. The realness or tangibility of witchcraft and witches, or the spiritual value of ritual protections and observations, is not challenged here. Regardless of their relation to actual events, the discourse of witchcraft retains a dramatic effect upon the socio-cultural status of blind xylophonists. That being said, all of the xylophonists of this book testified to the presence of witches who engage in witchcraft (*suoba*) at night, when their soul (*sie*) leaves their body (*yangaan)* to roam freely. These witches are described as having a voracious appetite for the flesh (physical and spiritual) of the living. SK went so far as to describe the gruesome process wherein a witch grows another mouth at night to consume flesh, while Maal Abraham, Yichiir and Chile's brother, added that witches can turn into the unlikely form of a cow that is too nimble to be shot.

John Mbiti, writing on African religion said of African societies that, "People must find and give immediate causes of death. By far the commonest cause is believed to be magic, sorcery, and witchcraft. This is found in every African society, though with varying degrees of emphasis; and someone is often blamed for using this method to cause the death of another." (Mbiti 1969:151). Recognizing that this is today an overstatement (since undoubtedly there are some African societies where witchcraft is absent), it nonetheless underlines the functional role that witchcraft plays in explaining misfortune, especially death and disease. In Birifor communities there are many different perceptions of what blindness is, what its causes are, and how to receive the blind. Common sense notions of blindness in the region still posit its origins

in witchcraft, the intervention of spirits, or pseudo-scientific explanations. Again, the point here is not to establish the 'real' cause for the blindness of Birifor xylophonists, but rather to survey the system from which the negative projections of their physicality originate. There is a distinct conservation of energy in such witchcraft beliefs, in which all actions and events are understood as meaningful and not accidental, rendering even the most severe or seemingly random misfortune as the result of an imbalance in the system. As an example, a lorry crash that claimed the lives of several young men at the end of my research trip in 2002 was interpreted as linked to a series of traceable events and transgressions.

The causality under scrutiny here is not located in witchcraft beliefs alone, as the cultural conceptions of time, cause, and effect of traditional Birifor culture differ in important ways from those of Western traditions. Goody (1972:210) followed by Mendonsa (1982:85) noted that among the LoDagaa, Sisaala, and Tallensi, there are,

> Three levels of causation, the immediate, the efficient, and the final. The immediate is the technique used to kill the deceased; disease, snakebites, or other "natural" causes as well as forms of mystical or aggression. The efficient is to be found among the members of the community itself, the person behind the act of killing. The final cause is the ancestor, the Earth shrine, or a medicine shrine. (Goody 1972:210).

Mapping Birifor causality as dispersed between immediate, efficient, and final levels of causation accommodates three very different angles of interpretation within one cohesive system. The immediate cause, rooted in the physical world, includes observable action and witchcraft, which operate according to contrasting logics. The efficient cause represents the responsibility of the living, both those directly and indirectly involved in the event, to maintain balance and spiritual order in the community, which in the case of death or witchcraft they have neglected. The final cause is a recourse to the larger system of beliefs of the individual, which in the case of the xylophonists of this book is either traditional religion or Christianity. The sophistication of

this tripartite causality is found in its simultaneous invocation of existential, mystical, social, and spiritual domains to explain life as it unfolds. Viewed as a strategy of the psyche, witchcraft beliefs also diffuse individual responsibility for hardship, scapegoating witches, witchcraft, and the malicious intent of others in the interpretation of misfortune.

The immediate level of causation is of most interest here because it contains seemingly contradictory logical systems. When a young man passed away in Donyɛ in 2007, the explanation of his death, given by Sandaar, was both that he had succumb to disease, and that a witch had transformed into a cow, ambushed the man at night while he walked alone along a path, entered his body, and stopped his heart (Sandaar 2007). Likewise, blind Birifors are sometimes thought to be blind because of something different in their physiology, however, that physiology is different precisely because of witchcraft or a curse. Witchcraft is thus not exactly contrary to an Aristotelian causality, and there are clearly notions of cause and effect operating within witchcraft. Aristotle laid the foundations for rational and scientific thought by attributing all motion and change to four primary causes: The material cause, the formal cause, the efficient cause, and the final cause. However, these causes were of a different type than invoked by Goody, and apply more to ontology than causality, forming an ultimately teleological view of the world that contrasts the cyclic causality of witchcraft. What is shared between both causal systems, is the appeal of rational, and scientized if not scientific interpretations of the world. Witchcraft runs along side rational interpretation, dipping into the same pool of events to recast and reconfigure them, operating something like dream states wherein normal events, actions, and reactions are overlaid with new sets of rules that follow an alternative logic. The dualism present in witchcraft's immediate causality is both a dynamic aspect of Birifor spiritual views, and a backdoor through which the humanity of blind persons is evacuated. No matter the rigor of a

local scientific account of the process of visual degeneration, or the cultural salience of Western medical interpretations of blindness, witchcraft beliefs still stigmatize blindness and disability as the causal result of mystical powers. Whether a blessing or a curse, the persistent belief that mystical forces are the cause of blindness marks the blind body as an object of mystical intrigue, rather than as a volitional self. The reason why witchcraft's causality and not religion is the focus of this critique (and a fundamental *location* disability), is that blindness is always predetermined as the natural and necessary result of an imbalance of mystical energy, which blind persons or their families, not a divine presence, have invited. That otherwise secular Birifors believe in witchcraft, also attests to the fact that it functions as a separate system from religion. The danger in such a naturalized and normalized system is that, in the case of Birifor communities, it underlies and thus compromises rational assessments of the world, without refuting them altogether. Witchcraft thus corrupts the logic of an Aristotelian causality by positing an immediate cause in a parallel mystical domain.

The causality operative in the worldviews of the Birifor communities of this inquiry, in addition to influencing the reception of blind persons, places music in a socially and spiritually functional role. Xylophone music not only brings people together to remember the deceased, it ensures the passage of the soul from the body to the land of the dead. Without a proper funeral ceremony, the deceased would remain in a state of limbo, neither living nor dead. Likewise harvest festivals not only celebrate a year of plenty, but also ensure the success of the next harvest by communicating with spirits. The causality of Birifor spiritual systems is similar in this regard to Amazonian Suya seasonal songs, which make the very seasons possible. Ethnomusicologist Anthony Seeger wrote of the Suya that their, "Seasonal songs did not simply follow the vagaries of rainfall and drought, but rather established the changing season. When the

new season's song had begun, it really was that season--whether or not the rains suddenly stopped or began to fall once again." (Seeger 1987:70). This power of music to organize the social, the natural, and the spiritual, thus becomes a critical force maintaining the balance of life and the world. In both the case of the Suya and the Birifor, cultural notions of cause and effect must also be considered for the cohesion that they create in the face of seemingly random events, such as drought or famine. Likewise, it is important to consider the motivations behind preserving systems of mystical power in the context of the potential hegemony of modernity, where tradition is framed as a yoke of the past. Such tensions between tradition and modernity was evident in one of Saanti's adult sons surprise that I would devote such resources to studying their music. He said,

> At first, there was plenty of spiritual power amongst our people. Sometimes someone would have great spiritual power, but nowadays they are throwing it away, because they have been deceived to go to church. Now, we see that you have come from far away [to research our music], so this makes us reconsider throwing this away. In the old days, we would use juju to make xylophones. A xylophone maker would have to undergo certain rituals before they make a xylophone, to imbue it with power. So that it will last forever. (2009).

In a similar conflict of tradition and modernity, Todd Sanders (2003) suggested that in the case of the Ihanazu of Tanzania, witchcraft can represent the reassertion of a 'timeless' tradition against the otherwise rapidly shifting trends of modernity and globalism, and thus serve as a critical component of indigenous identity.

Valuations of Christianity

In response to the negative narratives and enduring stigma of witchcraft, the persistent efforts of Ghanaian and foreign missionaries, and/or personal religious choice, many Birifors have integrated a Christian God, Christian ideology, and regular church services into their lives. For the blind xylophonists of this book, the embrace of Christianity is directly linked to their

spiritual exclusion from traditional systems through the stigma of witchcraft, and their social marginalization through ideologies of ability. The performative and communal quality of Christian religious services and rituals in Birifor areas certainly also draws attendees, apart from the Christian doctrine that is invoked. Indeed some church services are distinctly Birifor for their inclusion of various practices and aspects of traditional religion, such as the use of the *kogyil*. A large part of the appeal of Christianity for blind xylophonists, however, lies precisely in the stereotypical placement of Christianity in opposition to indigenous systems such as witchcraft, since their blindness is laden with such powerful stigma through those systems. In contrast, the original sin of Christianity places all humans at a spiritual if not moral deficit, while positing the equality of all humanity, and laying out a course of action that can lead to salvation and heaven. Christian and Islamic ideology have both been wielded historically to create inequality and conflict, especially in the context of sub-Saharan Africa. However, for Yichiir and Chile, Christianity in the context of the rural Northwest offers social and religious narratives that place them upon a newly equal footing as community members and as human beings. Thus, this discussion engages not the institutions of religion, but rather personal religious priorities and how they relate to the larger discussion of music and disability in Birifor contexts.

As noted in Chapter 5, Yichiir is the only musician of this inquiry who plays xylophone at church and composes songs based off of texts from the Bible. His preference for a Christian world-view is demonstrated through the passages that he has chosen to surrogate in his compositions, which emphasize both equality and charity. Yichiir performs regularly in the church ensemble at the Evangelical Church of Ghana in Bubalanyuro, which consists of *kogyil*, two field drums, bass drum, tambourine, a pair of tall cylindrical stick drums, and an entire congregation of singers. Figure 6-7 is an excerpt from a performance during a Sunday service at

the Evangelical Church of Ghana in Bubalanyuro, which displays the orchestration of this ensemble, and the way the xylophone is used in it. The musical format of church services, as opposed to funerals, is decidedly segmented since songs only last a few minutes and are interspersed with readings and testimonies. Yichiir expressed this difference by saying, "For the funeral, I play until my time is up. But for church, we play and then stop for us to talk about things, and then we start to play again." (Yichiir 2009). He admits that funeral music requires more skill and stamina than church music, but is quick to add that he loves church and gospel music in general.

Yichiir also composes his own religious solo compositions based upon passages from the Bible, which he performs without accompaniment. In Figure 6-8, Yichiir performs and sings his composition based off of a translation of Luke 18:18-29. This particular passage has special relevance to Yichiir because it establishes God as the only perfect being, and because it instructs believers to give their worldly possessions to the poor and focus on the treasure that waits in heaven (Yichiir 2007, 2009). In this particular example, which is primarily in Birifor with only a few borrowings from Twi, the continuity of the surrogated text is ensured both through repetition and the established vocal melody of the text, which the xylophone replicates with heightened percussive intonation. Interestingly, Yichiir didn't choose to include Luke 18:35-42, in which Jesus comes across a poor blind man, who Jesus rewarded with sight out of compassion. Instead, Yichiir's interests lie in the entrance to heaven granted through a humble and Godly life on earth. In Figure 6-9, Yichiir performs his composition based off of Matthew 7:21, which similarly lays out the necessity of virtuous action and not simply prayer to gaining entrance to the kingdom of heaven (2009). Finally in Figure 6-10, Yichiir performs the xylophone part he has created for a pre-existing song sung by the congregation in Birifor, *Yesu Ledia Were Naya* ("Jesus is king").

In these examples, Yichiir's musicality is heard through both his instrumental and vocal performance, something that is generally not heard in ensemble performances because of the sonic dominance of drums and idiophones.

The preceding examples of Yichiir's church performances are not meant to venerate Christianity in opposition to traditional practice, but rather to show Yichiir's alternative musical and spiritual outlets, which entail new ways of receiving blind persons in Birifor communities. Musically, these examples demonstrate the process of speech surrogation discussed later in Chapter 8, while also reflecting the Christian themes that resonate with Yichiir and the congregation. There is of course much more to say about Christianity in the Northwest and musicking at the Evangelical Church of Ghana in Bubalanyuro, which as seen from these examples has a full congregation of singers, an ensemble of drums and percussion, and an extensive repertoire of religious songs that span Birifor, Twi, and occasionally English. However, the importance of these examples to this discussion is that they demonstrate the religious narrative with which Yichiir associates and has chosen over the traditional narratives of witchcraft, and his use of the xylophone and creation of xylophone compositions in an alternate religious and spiritual context.

Chapter 7: Enemy Music (*Dondomo Yiel*)

Many Birifor xylophonists have composed songs that chronicle misfortune and attribute it to the enemy (*dondomo*). Because of the prevalence of this theme in the compositions of xylophonists historically, and because many of these songs label themselves "*dondomo yiel*," I consider the compositions included in this chapter as a compositional sub-genre within funeral music as a whole. The compositions of the traditional Birifor funeral cycle, which also sometimes invoke *dondomo* but are not authored by musicians of this book, are explored at length in the ensuing chapter as part of a larger discussion of historical memory and speech surrogation in Birifor funeral music. Starting here with songs composed or popularly performed by Yichiir, Chile, and Alhansan, I identify their resistance to the dominant ideology of ability that circulates in Birifor social, cultural, and spiritual domains, moving thereafter to an exploration of the themes of sighted xylophonists' enemy music. In all these compositions, there is compelling evidence for both the bifurcated soul and moral community posited by Goody (1962), which I invoke here as they mediate the relationship between person and hardship, recast in song as between self and enemy.

Maal Yichiir's compositions about his experiences as a Birifor musician with blindness unanimously invoke the enemy (*dondomo*), recollecting and deconstructing popular misconceptions of blindness. While Yichiir has composed many songs about a range of different topics, four particular compositions on blindness, which I recorded in 2007 and again in 2009, provide the clearest example of the adversity he has experienced, and his radical revision of Birifor conceptions of disability. *Chenjere* (I See Still), *Jaanfo* (Learning), *Den Dem Di* (Small Small Eat), and *Nborfo* (Cheating), each engage and breakdown Birifor ideologies of ability by projecting new narratives of the competence and virtue of blind persons within the spiritual

discourse of funeral ceremonies. These songs also engage general challenges that xylophonists face as ritual specialists (introduced in Chapters 2, 4, and 5), as Yichiir claims membership in and commitment to the Birifor community of musical ritual specialists. *Chenjere* (see Figure 7-1), contains the following text, which is generally surrogated, though sometimes sung or spoken for the sake of clarity:

> ***Chenjere*** (I See Still)
>
> I am playing.
> I am playing to tell people,
> Even though they make fun of the blind,
> We can still play.
>
> People say,
> "The blind can't do anything." [The title of a Birifor children's song].
> People are always saying the blind use witchcraft to play the xylophone.
> But we are proving to you it is not witchcraft.
> It is our own talent, which God gave us.
>
> Everybody plays,
> But when we play, people say it is witchcraft.
> We can play past them.
> They always talk unnecessarily.
> (Yichiir 2007, 2009).

This composition provides a clear depiction of the areas of conflict for blind Birifor xylophonists introduced at the outset of this chapter. Teasing, childhood narratives of inability, witchcraft accusations, and malicious gossip are all invoked, which the skill of blind musicians as performers, legitimated with reference to a supreme God, is asserted against. The conflict between social projection and personal experience for blind xylophonists cuts across all these categories, lending credence to the interpretation of both spiritual and cultural models of disability as restrictive in Birifor contexts. Musically, this composition is characterized by the refrain, "*Wa le wa,*" (I am playing), to which three descending parallel chords in the pentatonic sequence of the *kogyil* are assigned.

The second composition, *Jaanfo* (see Figure 7-2), dwells more persistently on witchcraft accusations and refutes them by stressing the importance of learning to self-improvement. Interestingly, in the end of the song the existence of a Supreme God is invoked as trumping the mystical forces of witchcraft. The text of the composition, as relayed by Yichiir, is as follows:

Jaanfo (Learning)

Everything is about learning.
If you want to play xylophone,
You must go and learn.
Witchcraft cannot get you there.

Everything is about learning.
Those who accuse us of witchcraft are mistaken.
Everything is learning.

I have been taught by Dorpunu [Yichiir's uncle] and Vuur.
I have learned.
Why do you say I am a witch?

It is Vuur who taught me how to play,
But Vuur can still see.
It is Dorpunu who taught me how to play,
But he can still see.
So why do enemies say that they will go blind?

Enemies are jealous because we play better than others.
They say we exchanged our eyes for the xylophone.

If you know that I exchanged my eyes for the xylophone,
Why don't you also do the same and play like us?
If you think that is the reason, you should also do so.

Xylophone playing is God gifted.
It is not about witchcraft.
If you use your witchcraft,
You cannot do it,
Because it is God's gift.

When we play the xylophone,
People are always saying xylophone players are useless.
But we are the ones who keep people at the funeral,
Otherwise they would go away.

It is because of the players that the funeral is still on,
Otherwise everyone would go home.

The xylophone is not about chieftaincy.
It is just for funeral celebrations,
So don't fight over it.

We only play at funerals.
People will sit down and say that we are rich,
But there is nothing to be gained from it.
We are sacrificing ourselves for the sake of the funeral.
(Yichiir 2007, 2009).

That people attribute the skill of blind xylophonists to mystical powers reflects both a mundane jealousy, and a cultural ideology of ability in which only a mystical cause can explain the 'musical feats' of blind xylophonists. Yichiir's dismissal of this spiritual interpretation, in favor of a more pragmatic model of practice and learning, reflects the frustrations of a talented and dedicated musician whose music has been hijacked by narratives of witchcraft his whole life. That blind Birifors can be understood as physically incapable to the extent that a specialized skill such as musicianship can only be explained by mystical origins, is the result both of the formal ableism of Birifor culture, and the spiritual role of Birifor xylophonists as ritual specialists. The discrimination that blind Birifor musicians face, as described in this composition, draws mystical associations from the act of ritual musical performance to legitimate negativistic interpretations of disability. Since sighted musicians are also sometimes accused of witchcraft associated with performance, and because Birifors with disabilities who are not musicians are still labeled as spiritual pariahs, I interpret musicianship and blindness as woven together in Birifor communities into a compound form of subordination, which is policed by spiritual narratives. This is important to bear in mind because the adversity blind Birifor xylophonists face is often spread across interpretations of their musicianship and disability together, diminishing the degree to which either can be cast in isolation.

The third composition, *Den Dem Di* (see Figure 7-3), focuses on economic and occupational realities for blind persons in Birifor communities, expressing the various necessities of rural living in opposition to the ridicule of the enemy. Yichiir composed this song in response to a snakebite that he received while farming, which left him bedridden for several days. The large rubber boots worn by farmers to protect against such bites are expensive, and at the time Yichiir did not own any, though after the experience his brother Lombɔr saved money to buy him some. The song text, explained in detail by Yichiir, is as follows:

Den Dem Di (Small Small Eat)

As a blind man, I have nothing.
But still the enemy is jealous.
The enemy says,
"Yichiir is always boasting,
But he is not good at xylophone.
That is why he farms."

How big do I farm that you turn to a snake and come bite me?
You, my enemy, you don't provide me food to eat,
But you don't want me to farm.
What will I do?

If I can't farm, I can't eat, and my family will not get food to eat.
You don't care for me, and you don't want me to farm.
Why shouldn't I?

As a blind man, I also try my best.
I work hard to get food.
It is small small that I am doing to make it in life.
So the enemy should not be jealous.

Everyone is working hard to make it in life.
When I do the same, you come and destroy my work.

I have a large family.
They need to eat.
If I don't farm, what will I have to feed them?
You sit down there while I work.
Do not disturb me.

The enemy says,
"You play xylophone, and now you want to farm as well. Why?"
I say, you sit down there and don't work hard,
Because as for me I am going forward.
I am not going backward.
So you sit down there and go backwards.
I will go forwards.

Enemy, if I need something, do you buy it for me?
If I need cloth, you can't buy it for me.
If I need pants, you can't buy them for me.

I've seen my father sitting there,
From morning until evening.
He is also blind.
He could not get me anything.
As I have seen that,
How can I not work hard to feed my family?

Everyone has seen my father.
They never cared for him.
They saw him with their naked eyes.
If you do not want me to farm,
How do you expect me to feed my family?
I am working hard.
Enemy! Go away from me.

Listen xylophonists!
I have composed this enemy music.
Everybody, and you young boys, dance to this enemy music!
You must dance, do not fold your hands, come and dance!

I am insulting the enemy.
If you hear this and want to fight, then you are the enemy.
But if you are not the one, you have to be quiet.
If you come to bother me, then you are the one I am talking about.

You!
Witch!
No matter how big you are,
All human beings pass through death,
And so you shall also.

Before people outside can know things about you,
Good or bad, it must always come from someone in your home.
They will sell you out. If not, no one would ever hear the secrets of your home.

(Yichiir 2007, 2009).

The song begins by stating the reality that, as a blind person living in a community already struck by poverty, Yichiir has nothing. Despite this, the enemy constantly provokes and undermines his productive efforts and achievements. The enemy in this case turned into a snake and bit him, hindering his agricultural productivity. The use of witchcraft by the enemy is, for Yichiir, predominantly motivated by jealousy, which he tries to dismantle by relaying his struggles, and arguing for his recognition as an ordinary hardworking member of the community. As opposed to *Jaanfo*'s focus on musicianship as a learned skill, *Den Dem Di* challenges popular opinions about blind persons' farming, claiming the necessity of agricultural toil as the primary subsistence practice for everyone in the community.

Yichiir's invocation of his father Sagba Maal's blindness (which was late onset blindness), links Yichiir's own experience with those of his family and community, helping to historicize disability through tangible experiences, rather than through spiritual abstractions of witchcraft. As a cathartic venting of the psychological stress of economic hardship, such compositions encapsulate a complex of motivations. The enemy of these songs is at once a legitimate source of evil, either as a human actor or as witchcraft, and a receptacle if not scapegoat for the burdens and stresses of life. For blind musicians in particular, the enemy can likewise be interpreted both as referring to actual persons and events, and to the local opinions and views that create and police a cultural ideology of ability. The call for funeral attendees to "dance to this enemy music," articulates both enemy music as a sub-genre, and represents one of the reasons why this composition remains a popular request for Yichiir at funerals (Yichiir 2007, 2009). Yichiir explained that the youth at funerals unanimously come and dance in response to this call, which signals a heightened intensity of performance by musicians and dancers. The

closing statements directed at the enemy in this song display the varying degrees of transgression that enemy music chronicles, and the differing tones they take with the enemy. The insults thrown at the enemy are also accompanied by more subtle statements of the responsibility of the household to prevent the spread of malicious gossip.

Yichiir's fourth enemy music composition, *Nborfo* (cheating) (see Figure 7-4) is, like *Jaaŋfo*, about the complications of musicianship for xylophonists in Birifor communities. Written in response to being cheated out of earnings at funerals, Yichiir explained before playing this song that his brother Lombɔr does his best to track the money that is "dashed" when he plays, but that it is difficult during the heat of a performance. This song differs from the preceding three in that it addresses not the enemy as diffuse or abstract, but cowry exchangers, ridiculing them for cheating xylophonists in general, while explaining the economic challenges and spiritual dangers that xylophonists face at funerals. The song text proceeds as follows:

Nborfo (Cheating)

Whenever we play,
The man who exchanges the cowries cheats us.

Do you know how much the keys cost,
How much the gourds cost,
How much the spider webs cost?
Do you know how much the skins cost,
Or the whole xylophone?

Whenever we play,
People who are not xylophone players,
Come and want to take all the money.
Ask Sandaar, who makes xylophones,
How much the spider webs cost, the gourds,
The keys, and the whole xylophone.

You don't know how to play xylophone.
You don't know how to play bell.
You don't know how to play drum.
But you are making the rules for xylophonists,

Taking the lion's share.
Are you a xylophonist?

If I don't play what will you exchange?
I will leave and we will see if you can still make exchanges.

If I don't play, will you do any exchanges?
If I don't play, you have nothing to exchange.
I am the one who plays and earns cowries for you to exchange,
And despite that, you are insulting me.
If I don't play, how will you exchange cowries?

You are not a xylophonist.
You are not a member.
You don't play anything,
And you are always maintaining ill will towards us.
So if we dislike you,
Then it is you who caused it.

Is it because we are the people you can take advantage of?
Because there are those who bury the corpse,
And collect the cowries thrown there,
But you don't do these things to them.
Is it only the xylophonists whose money you take?

I composed this music for all xylophonists,
To help our whole community.
If you buy a xylophone for someone,
And they travel to a funeral to play,
And come home empty handed, is it right?
It is not I alone; it is all of us that are affected.

We play at a funeral.
The dust is everywhere, and there is witchcraft.
If you play better than someone else,
They can throw something and kill you.
They can try to strike you down with witchcraft.
All these things we endure,
And then we go home empty handed.
But still there is jealousy.

The xylophone players,
We are the people who have a loose guard for people to cheat us.
If we come together and unite,
They will not be able to cheat us anymore.

Stop these bad habits.
You are not xylophone players, so stop.
People who are pushing them to do these things, must also stop.

Akpeteshie sellers, and *goro* nut sellers also get cowries,
So why not take money from them?
Can't those people help also?
(Yichiir 2007, 2009).

Tallying the expenses incurred as a performer, *Nborfo* challenges those who make money off of musical performance, but are not musicians themselves. Bitterness breathes through the lines of this composition, in which Yichiir asks why other workers at funerals are not the target of Cowry exchangers' exploitations. This composition relates to the previous discussion of disability as spiritual deviance through its vision of a community of musicians of which blind performers are a part, and because of the exposure to witchcraft it acknowledges for all xylophonists. Against the exclusions of disability, Yichiir renders himself through this song within a cohesive community of musicians (which I experienced in real life as just that), assuming a role of leadership by publically calling for just dues for xylophonists. Highlighting the exposure to witchcraft that xylophonists brave to perform at funerals, Yichiir also establishes the mystical dangers involved in the profession in general, which when combined with Yichiir's account in *Jaanfo* of his skills being relegated to witchcraft, provides a compelling perspective on the double-bind of spirituality for blind xylophonists in Birifor communities.

In these four compositions, Yichiir's struggles as a Birifor living with blindness are located primarily in public resistance to his two main occupations of farming and xylophone performance. Despite his personal experience of hard-earned success, his achievements are widely attributed spiritual origins because they contradict popular notions of what blind persons are capable of. The culture of fear evident in the recurring theme of witchcraft in xylophone music is wielded to further distance blind musicians from their already mixed status as ritual

specialists. This plight is shared by other blind Birifor xylophonists, including Ni-Ana Alhansan, Maal Chile, and Maal Yichiir's father Sagba Maal during his later years, each of whom I consider next for the additional issues they add to the counter-narrative of blindness and ability established in enemy music.

Enemy Music performed by Maal Chile

As noted in Chapter 5, Yichiir's older brother Chile never took to composing his own compositions, instead focusing on mastering those from his contemporaries and the pre-existing repertoire. In order to engage his opinions and perspective as a blind xylophonist, I asked him to perform songs that related to his own personal experiences, be they part of the traditional cannon, or more recent pieces by his contemporaries. The piece that he performed which has the most relevance to this discussion was composed by his father after he had become blind, and is entitled *Dondomo Lem Ba Turo* (The Enemy Follows Like a Dog) (see Figure 7-5). Like the previous compositions by Yichiir, this piece is generally performed during the *Darikpon* section of the funeral cycle, which will be explained at more length in the next chapter. The text of Sagba Maal's enemy composition, as related and performed by Chile in 2009, is as follows:

> ***Dondomo Lem Ba Turo*** (The Enemy Follows Like a Dog).
>
> Woman alone cannot do everything.
> Man alone cannot do everything.
> Wherever you go, the enemy follows.
> If you go to market, the enemy is following.
> If you go to farm, the enemy is following.
> Everywhere the enemy is following.
>
> Everywhere I go, the enemy is already there.
> The enemy is always at work to destroy.
> Wherever I run to, the enemy is already there.
> Everywhere I go, the enemy has passed before me.
>
> The enemy is always creating confusion
> Between the wife and the husband.

The enemy is always everywhere.
Even in the house, there will be an enemy.
The enemy is always at work.

The enemy has destroyed everything,
And now he is standing by and laughing.
The enemy says,
“I heard you have not gotten anything from the farm this year.
Is it true?”

The house enemy does not want you to prosper in life.
They want you to suffer.
The enemy says,
“They say in your house there are graves all over.”
The enemy is like a dog following you.
The enemy has turned himself into a dog.

I can cry today.
I can cry tomorrow.
But no one has sympathy for me,
Because the enemy has caused confusion.

Whatever you have, there will be any enemy.
Anything I do, the enemy is still unhappy.
I do not have a zinc roof.
Only trees and mud.
The enemy is still unhappy.

After the harvest, the enemy and I will sit down and eat my food.
But still, the enemy is not happy with me.
They don’t want to see me again.
I am not eating from your bowl,
Why are you my enemy?

The way the enemy talks is sweet,
But don’t be fooled.
He is the one, the destroyer.

Some enemies are planted at the house like a tree.
Now you [the enemy] have destroyed the house.
You have destroyed my life.
Come, lets make one.

The enemy will come and make one with you,
But in the night they will turn into a witch and destroy you.
The enemy has turned into a dog.

(Chile 2009).

This song of the persistence and omnipresence of the enemy, offers important insight into the psychology of Birifor witchcraft beliefs, and the psychological weight of the enemy as the source of conflict between self and society. The transformation of the enemy into a dog in the literal sense, as well as their display of traits stereotypically associated with dogs is, as divulged by the title, the central theme of the piece. The notion of shapeshifting is of critical interest here, because witches are believed to be able to alter their bodies from projected norms into strange and disturbing forms. That the variation of the disabled body, perceived as abnormal in the physical and medical sense, is cast as the result of witchcraft in Birifor communities is not surprising, given the pervasive belief that the only other humans that deviate from biological norms are witches. This linkage is just part of the Birifor spiritual model of disability that twists and contorts the disabled self, but it is of special importance because it helps map how the causality of witchcraft is used to explain disability and reinforce its mystical origins.

Maal's opening statement about the balance between gendered domains of labor in the song is used as a quick transition into the omnipresence of the enemy, who equally disrupts the traditionally gendered spaces of the market and farm, and causes frictions in marriage. In the phrase, "they say in your house there are graves all over," there is a historical indicator of Sagba Maal's personal experience as the head of a household with a high mortality rate. There are indeed many graves in Suomo, which trace sinuous circles around the small earthen compounds. Chile, relating this misfortune, said, "He had many children that passed away. We are his youngest. Those who are our seniors, they all died." (2009). Maal Abraham, the younger and more gregarious brother, continued saying, "Maal had one wife and all the children died, so he left that community and moved to another. He felt that the enemy was in the home and killed his

family, which made him compose this song." (Abraham 2009). Interestingly, Maal in this composition suggests that the enemy is directly involved in the lack of sympathy for the blind, which can be read as saying that the enemy has a hand in the ideological cementing of witchcraft to disability. The notion of the enemy as a kind of receptacle for grief and misfortune applies here, however, not at the compromise of the genuine belief that all misfortune is to some degree caused by human transgressions. Talking to Chile about the relevance of his father's composition to his current life, he was quick to note that Bubalanyuro had brought better fortune for the Maal family than his father experienced in Suomu. However, the constant invocation of witchcraft surrounding blindness was, as he explained, still part of his and Yichiir's daily life.

Chile also described another composition by a musician of old named Webaar, who composed a song about the deterioration of his eyesight. Chile explained the context of the composition as follows:

> One day, his eyes were causing him pain. Every time he would lie on his bed, he would think, "where are these pains coming from? Have they come to make me blind?" Webaar, like Donyuor, was an *old* time musician. He was very skilled. At first he was not blind, only having pain and fearing it. Later he became blind.
>
> The enemy went to ask him, "how were your eyes yesterday?" He responded, "they are still the same. There have been no changes." When the enemy left and when out in the town, he said, "I hope that this pain blinds him." He prayed that Webaar be blinded.
>
> The wife of Webaar asked him to open his eyes so that she could see them, because she heard that there was something in his eyes. When he opened them, there was nothing, so it was a lie. The wife asked the husband, "open your eyes, let me see. Is it true that those things are there?"
>
> Webaar then asks his own people, "What have I done to you on this earth that you want me dead? Then *Pondaal* doesn't want a great man to survive. *Pondaal* doesn't like a great person. Hatred cannot kill, only God can kill. If you hate me, you cannot kill me. Only God can kill me." (Chile 2009).

In this composition, a history of blindness in the region and the attribution of its mystical origins are both contested and consolidated. While the dates of Webaar's lifespan is unknown, it

is likely that he lived during a period of widespread river blindness such as identified by John Wilson (1953), which this composition is likely a response to. The attribution of the enemy to the *Pondaal* patriclan as a whole, and the invocation of God's powers, similarly reflects the historical consistency of the culture of suspicion, competition, and mystical forces in Birifor culture.

Donyuor, the other musician of old to which Chile referred, composed enemy music that is still widely performed at funerals. Chile explained that he performs Donyuor's composition (see Figure 7-6) because it applies to the problems that he experiences as a blind person. The song text as follows:

Untitled #1

I had a great son.
He helped me in many ways,
And now he has passed away.

The home, the farm, are spoiled.
If my son were here, he could help me,
But he is no more.

My son is the best farmer.
When he farms for me, people are jealous.
They say that it is not he who farms, but *Kontomo*.

Enemies say, "Donyuor! It is because of the hoe you use that your farm is prosperous."
The enemy wants to destroy my hoe so that I can no longer farm.

What is the cause that the enemy wants to strike you down like this?
You are doing your own work as a great farmer.
Why?

Donyuor is very handsome, and had three wives.
All have passed away, and the enemy is laughing.
Why?
This thing can happen to anybody,
So why should you laugh at him?

My three wives passed away,

I am a bachelor.
When I harvest Guinea corn, millet, and all that,
People will leave their cattle near the crop to destroy it,
Because they don't like me.

The enemy has called me to the chief's house,
To answer questions about eloping someone's wife.
People say be well prepared,
When going to the chiefs house,
Because when you get there,
You will not be able to run back home.
You have enemies,
So you should be well prepared,
Before you go to the chief's house.

If I go to the chief's house,
They will kill me,
So I must be well prepared.

As my wives have passed away,
It is thinking about it that causes problems.
I need to buy clothes,
But I am unhappy because of thinking,
And cannot work to buy them.
There are many things in my head that are causing problems.

As a bachelor, I have nothing.
When I cook food,
People are still coming to beg for food.
But I do not have a wife to cook for me.
Then when I cook, you still come to beg.

There is a *tuor* tree in my house that produces a lot of fruit.
When I pluck the fruit, that is what I am living on.
People want to come and take all the fruit,
And when I refuse, they say that I am a greedy man.
(Chile 2009).

Donyuor's invocation of the same themes as the rest of the xylophonists considered here reflects the continuity of experience and of understanding misfortune as linked to the enemy in Birifor cultural historically. The theme of a member of the family, be it a spouse, father, mother, son, or daughter, bringing great prosperity to a household in life and misfortune in death,

is found throughout the *kogyil* repertoire, and is evoked in the compositions *Saan Yi Kyena Dakpolo* and *Saan Fo Dan Tara Ferai* discussed in the next chapter. Jealousy, witchcraft accusations, and political complications are invoked in this song as perpetually tainting prosperity, articulated here with reference to the psychological burden of misfortune and the Birifor culture suspicion and jealousy.

Enemy Music by Ni-Ana Alhansan

Ni-Ana Alhansan's compositions offer an even more intimate depiction of the emotional impact of socio-spiritual discrimination combined with the practical dependencies created through blindness. The following excerpt from one of our discussions demonstrates Alhansan's personal experience of the ideology of ability, which I had by the time of this interview seen through the experiences of Yichiir, Chile, and Darigain. On an afternoon in 2009, as we waited for Alhansan's father to return from farming to pour libation so that Alhansan could perform for another day's recording session, Alhansan and I discussed his life.

> Brian: So, sometimes I have heard people in Ghana say the blind cannot do this, or the blind cannot do that. Have you encountered this before?
>
> Alhansan: As for this, I have. So much so that people will say, "What can Alhansan do?"
>
> B: Can you remember a specific instance of someone saying that?
>
> A: Whenever I go to funerals, people will insult me and say, "What can a blind man do?"
>
> B: Do people ever say that you can only play the xylophone because of witchcraft?
>
> A: They say that I have exchanged my eyes for the xylophone.
>
> B: How does that make you feel?
>
> A: It pains me. But what can I do? I know that what they are saying is not true. I know that I have not exchanged my eyes for playing xylophone. So when they say that, it hurts me, but I have nothing to say.
>
> B: When you go around trading do you also encounter these attitudes?

> A: It is only because of misery that I am doing this small trade. When I sit down, people will also say, "What can a blind man do?" Because of that, they will not support me. When I am up traveling, I can support myself small, and people will talk less. (Alhansan 2009).

Alhansan's personal occupational solution to the conditions of blindness is similar to the Limba *kututeng* players described by Simon Ottenberg in northern Sierra Leone (1996), as constant travel between villages in both cases ensures a cycling clientele. It also challenges notions of blind persons as immobile through evidencing travel over long distances on seasonally fluctuating paths by blind musicians on a regular basis. Unlike the other xylophonists of this book, Alhansan leaves his compositions untitled, and so I have retained that practice here. The themes of these untitled compositions match those of Yichiir's pieces, making public his experience as a blind person living his life against the powerful currents of Birifor narratives of ability. Here, I will consider two of Alhansan's compositions that illustrate this perspective, the first of which (see Figure 7-7) proceeds as follows:

Untitled #2

I, Alhansan, am a blind man.
I do not see.
I don't have anything on this earth.

When I sit down,
Other people feed me.
I have nothing.

I feel that I am of no use on this earth.
But wherever people are sitting,
They are gossiping about me.

They are conspiring against me.
When people are talking about me,
And Layir is there,
He will not agree.

He will say, "What has Alhansan done?"

> So, I see Layir to be a god,
> A protective god against those people.
>
> I composed this song for people who sit and talk about me.
> It is a song that conveys my misery to the people.
>
> I am a miserable blind man,
> And whenever you are sitting together,
> You are gossiping about me.
> The only thing I have in this world is xylophone.
> (Alhansan 2009).

The downtrodden sentiment of Alhansan expressed in this composition reflects the psychological impact of his dependence, and his deep appreciation for his life long advocate and friend, Layir Bayir. The absence of aggression or the naming of the enemy in this song reflects the more passive stance taken by Alhansan in response to local attitudes about his blindness. This is not to say that Alhansan accepts the social and spiritual deficiencies cast upon him, but rather that his humble personal style comes across in his compositions. Alhansan's protest comes more in the form of an appeal to people's humanity, rather than an outward attack on the enemy.

The message of the second of Alhansan's compositions considered here (see Figure 7-8) is popular precisely because it frames his discrimination through the general themes of suspicion and competition, which resonate with local communities. Alhansan prefaced this next song by saying,

> If I play this song, you will see people who have already experienced the same thing as me become very happy. They will stop what they are doing and listen. Both men and women have experienced what I have in life. When I play that, you will see so many people happy and trying to listen to the way I express my sorrow. You will see everyone at the funeral trying to come closer to listen to the song. You know, in society there is suspicion and competition. People do not want others to progress. So when you have experienced this and hear this xylophone [music], both men and women will want to come closer and listen. (Alhansan 2009).

The song text of this popular composition is as follows:

Untitled #3

As I am sitting here,
I am a blind man.
No matter what good I am doing,
People do not appreciate it.
Some people will even take you out,
To mountains, to rivers,
And say this man,
Either he should perish,
Or never progress in life.

So I Alhansan,
I also sit down and say,
"Ah. But why do I, a blind man,
Also have people going to places like Nako to curse me?"
[Nako has a mountain that is considered a spiritual destination].
I play this xylophone to express my misery about my suffering,
And yet people are not hearing it.

Why should you take me to God?
What do I possess that you need to take me to such an extent?
Is it the xylophone that I know?
Or is it the petty, petty trade I am doing?
Or what?
I am expressing my sorrow to society.
(Alhansan 2009).

Alhansan's reference to Nako is significant because it reflects the Birifor belief that physical places retain distinct mystical energies, something that is also evident in the maintenance of local Earth shrines as mentioned in Chapter 3. Referencing names and places from a local cultural consciousness also makes songs like this popular, a practice that in my experience senior xylophonists exploit more than junior ones. The popularity of this song, however, does not overshadow the gravity of its themes, and the psychological strain that is expressed as accessory to already daily conditions of misery and suffering. The personal experience that breathes through these compositions is of finding a place in life as a blind person, both as a xylophonist and a trader, but never escaping the ill will of enemies within the greater

Birifor community, nor the personal feeling of deficiency created by dependency. Such feelings of dependence are focused for blind Birifors because of the circumstances and structures of Birifor life. All people depend upon others to some degree, but that dependence is naturalized in a way that need arising from blindness is not. In both Alhansan's compositions, the influence of Christian language and religion is unmistakable, alongside concepts from traditional religion and witchcraft. As religion and witchcraft in Birifor contexts was the topic of the previous chapter, the point here is just to note the co-existence of a supreme God, lesser gods, witchcraft, and narratives of an afterlife, all of which mix Christian and Birifor religious language. The unanimous rejection of witchcraft in these compositions shows that spiritual conflict for Alhansan lies not between Christianity and traditional religion, but between the genuine production of self and witchcraft.

Revisiting the relevance of these enemy music compositions by blind xylophonists to a Birifor ideology of ability and its inclusion of a spiritual model of disability, Yichiir, Maal, and Alhansan each articulate the locations of disability within Birifor culture through their songs. They locate a Birifor social model of disability in the construction of exclusionary practices, which marginalize them at markets, schools, funerals, and in the public sphere, while inviting jealousy and malice upon their homes. Their songs point to a biological model of disability in Birifor culture in the widespread belief that disabled persons are infirm and incapable, which range from beliefs about their agricultural and economic capability, to the perception of their performances as miraculous or marvelous for their transgression of projected norms, to fear of the contagious mystical powers of disabled bodies. A Birifor cultural model of disability is identified in the contexts of funeral ceremonies, witchcraft systems, and malicious gossip, which reinforce the displacement of disabled persons from cultural narratives as natural. The spiritual

model of disability depicted in these compositions renders disability as the necessary result of spiritual forces outside of the individual, and beyond their control. Birifor social and biological models of disability are remapped and conjoined with a Birifor spiritual model of disability, which translates and legitimates them through a spiritual narrative of causality that stigmatizes disabled persons. In these compositions, the resistance to witchcraft and witchcraft accusations, and the counter-narrative of a supreme God as the only true judge of virtue, constitute resistance to the spiritual model of disability that blind xylophonists are confronted with. These models together contribute to the general ideology of ability that circulates in Birifor communities, but do not represent the full extent of that ideology. A Birifor ideology of ability cannot be uniform, because as shown here some Birifors critically challenge and contest this ideology. However, to the degree that it is shared, circulated, and structured, these compositions demonstrate that it draws from these separate areas in the production of disability, forming the relations that make subordination possible for blind Birifor xylophonists. This representation of disability in Birifor contexts through songs about disability by blind xylophonists creates a depiction of disability from the inside-out, revealing where the challenges of disability truly lie from the perspective of disabled Birifors.

Enemy Music by Belendi Saanti

The Birifor projection of a constant enemy presence is boldly engaged in enemy music compositions. So far, I have considered the compositions of blind xylophonists as they culturally locate disability as spiritual deviance. Now, I turn to compositions by Belendi Saanti and Vuur Mwan, as well as some of their personal experiences of local conflict, to show how the enemy is constructed by sighted xylophonists, and how these constructions evidence a moral community that encompasses enemies, placing them within a sphere of potential influence. As noted in the

preceding chapter, certain aspects of Birifor traditional beliefs, such as a bifurcated and thus vulnerable soul, facilitate the conception of the enemy—read both as an actual actor, and as a psychologically constructed receptacle of misfortune—as being tamable through ritual and discursive interaction. That enemy music, independent of disability, engages social, cultural, and spiritual conflict helps to explain both the general psychology that supports the concept of the enemy, and the tensions that accompany the role of musical ritual specialist for xylophonists, adding weight to the prior discussion of witchcraft's causality. Enemy music that does not take up themes of disability is also relevant to locating enemy music about disability, because it reinforces the general presence of a culture of suspicion and fear in Birifor society, which has a compound influence on blind xylophonists through their joint membership as persons with blindness and xylophonists.

In the afternoons Saanti and I spent in Vondiel beneath the large mango trees just past his father's grave, we discussed and recorded many compositions, including pieces that explicitly engage the enemy. As Saanti explained, he, his father, and his family have gained and maintained enemies over the years because of jealousy surrounding his lineage's skill and prosperity. He said, "My father was a great farmer. He gained enemies because of this. He was the leading farmer in the community, producing the most harvest, and his enemies didn't like that. So they were always terrorizing him." (Saanti 2009). However, the source of misfortune for Saanti's father, uncles, and brothers did not always come from outside his lineage, as Saanti's composition *Adie Dondomo* (House Enemy) reflects (see Figure 7-9). Saanti explained the background of this composition by saying,

> My father's brother told me to compose this song. He had enemies who would go and gossip about him, and so he had this message. "It is always your home people who will bring you outside, who will reveal your secrets outside for people to hear. If not, people wouldn't know about them." *Adie Dondomo*. Because the enemy is in the house. (Saanti

2009).

With respect to the inclusion of the enemy within a moral community, it is easy to see how kin cast as house enemies are still within the reach of morality, and that song represents the ideal medium for indirectly critiquing the actions of the house enemy. However, as the song text below shows, the house enemy does not exclude the presence of an external enemy, but rather places partial blame for misfortune and malicious gossip on family members who have transgressed social or spiritual norms, and aided the enemy outside. This same theme is present in the compositions already introduced, but refined here according to Saanti's particular family history. The song text of *Adie Dondomo* is as follows:

Adie Dondomo (House Enemy)

I play because it is God's gift.
But enemies are saying that I should stop playing.
Because my success pains them they say, "Stop! You shouldn't do!"

When the enemies are wide-awake,
They become jealous.
When they become jealous,
They will find a way of spoiling things.

All the things that the enemy does:
Going to the juju man to make me useless,
Stopping me from succeeding in life;
I am still aware.
If the enemy goes and does things against me in other places,
I still know about it.

There are always funerals in our house.
Many people have passed away.
What is the cause?
It is my grandfather.

He passed away on bad terms,
So there will always be a problem in the house.
The people do not know the cause of the house problems.
The problems are buried in the ground.
They don't know what is the cause.

When there is a problem,
You go to perform rituals to discover the cause of your misfortune.
But when you return home,
The problem is still there.
So who is the cause?
It is the grandfather.
(Saanti 2009).

As noted in Chapter 6, Saanti's invocation of God reflects a belief in a Supreme God as creator who is not concerned with daily events. This notion of God likely reflects a pre-Christian belief in a supreme God, since Saanti's lineage has practiced traditional religion for as long as Saanti is aware. However, because of the spread of Christian language through development projects, it is difficult to imagine even the most traditionally oriented community as isolated. The theme of enemies created by jealousy conspiring against the composer and engaging in witchcraft, is here accompanied by the invocation of a juju man's powers making Saanti useless, and halting his progress in life. Juju men generally play a protective role in society, manipulating juju to protect against witchcraft. The manipulation of the juju man and his powers towards destructive ends by the enemy, is itself a perversion of the spiritual order of Birifor cosmological systems. The notion that the enemy, through the manipulation of spiritual forces, causes uselessness and economic and social failure, makes possible the interpretation of individuals who fall outside of cultural narratives of ability as struck by witchcraft. The language of ability that Saanti uses to describe the destruction created by enemies, thus reflects a Birifor ideology of ability that is primed to stigmatize disabled persons.

The frustrations of trying to navigate the spiritual forces that fill Birifor life, but never truly overcoming a spiritual deficit are expressed in the end of this composition. This reflects the reciprocal nature of action in a Birifor worldview, wherein the cause of misfortune is always partially attributed to human action. In this composition, the ill will that preceded his

grandfather's death is framed as the underlying reason for the ongoing problems of the household, which not even ritual intervention has been able to undo. In other compositions, Saanti implies that he and his brothers' previous promiscuity invited the adultery of his half-brother's wife, and describes selfishness within the community as inevitably inviting selfishness. The causal relationship peering through these compositions is one of reciprocity, though that hasn't stopped the local valorization of Saanti's exploits. The troublesome aspect of this belief, which on the outside resembles the golden rule, is that it posits the existence of a spiritual staying power; a stigmatizing resonance that has plagued Saanti's household. While in Saanti's case this stigma is diffused across his lineage, for blind Birifors that stigma is focused upon their very body, which is cast as a contortion of functionality and normalcy by spiritual forces.

Another of Saanti's compositions entitled *Yi Barma Kapen* (see Figure 7-10), addresses the gossip that circulates in Birifor communities, the complications of arranged marriages (which used to occur regularly in Birifor society), and the spitefulness of the enemy throughout. The song text of *Yi Barma Kapen* is as follows:

Yi Barma Kapen (Let Me Have Peace)

When a woman travels to Saanti's house,
She will pass people on the road who say,
"That house there is a hunger house, there is no food there.
If you go there, hunger will kill you. So don't go there."
But think about it.
You are being deceived, don't listen to it.

Enemies do not want the son of Belendi to survive,
Because he knows how to play xylophone,
How to farm, how to do everything.
They are jealous. They want Saanti out of the way.

I'm the only son my father has chosen as a xylophone player,
And everything else I do, I do for a living.
But still you want to kill me,
You want me out of the way.

Why?

As youths, our fathers arranged marriages for us,
And told us, "treat women well!"
People have been called back from down south,
To marry a woman and take her there.
I composed this song to say that wives are like gold (*selma*).

My father made me marry many wives,
And it became a large burden for me.
Enemies still say that I am enjoying life,
But the truth is that I have many wives and it has become a burden.

I slept with you, my wife.
But then you went out.
We slept in the same bed,
And you went out and told people that I am not a man.
Why?

When I go to the market, and see a beautiful woman,
I think, "If I bring this woman to my house to be my wife, I will be very happy."
But even If I succeed,
I may find that I have brought an enemy into the house.

Enemies always want to strike me down.
Because for people like me,
Others will sit down and criticize.
Allow me to rest.
Allow me to have peace.

It has become too much.
It is God that gave me this talent.
So if you hate me, please allow me to have peace.
I don't eat from your bowl,
Or come to your house to beg,
So allow me to have my peace.

In this modern world,
When you witness or hear something,
You don't have to repeat it.
When you gossip,
It will come back to you.
So when you see these things,
Just watch them and pass.
It is dangerous to say the things that you see these days.
(Saanti 2009).

In addition to being one of Saanti's more musically remarkable pieces on account its lively rhythmic flow, which emphasizes light eigth note triplets within the 6/8 pulse, this composition reflects several important issues in Birifor society, which the enemy regularly disrupts. Saanti's description of his interactions with women, of the false rumors spread by the enemy, the burdens of polygamy, and his demasculinazation through gossip, all offer important cultural commentaries about the values and narratives passed from generation to generation. Saanti's codification of these issues in song is intended largely for the audience of his children, as well as to dissuade the enemy from malevolent acts. The inclusion of one's spouse in the category of the enemy, narrows down the theme of the house enemy introduced in *Adie Dondomo*, to refer specifically to the circumstances of polygamy and the inevitability of marital conflict. The mapping of the enemy onto a wide range of issues shows both the flexibility of the concept of the enemy, and the perceived ever-presence of the enemy's harmful intent. Finally, Saanti's appeal in this piece to the enemy to let him have peace, and his invocation of the reciprocity of malicious gossip, demonstrate the inclusion of the enemy in the moral community of Birifor culture.

Enemy Music by Vuur Mwan

The remaining enemy music composition considered in this chapter was written by Vuur Mwan in response to a similar situation of familial distress, though in this case in the aftermath of his father El Vuur's death. Like the other xylophonists of this book, Mwan composes enemy music in response to the ill will of community members. He explained,

> The reason why I play and compose songs about enemies, and the reason that others do, is that in our community there are jealous people, people who do not want others to survive, even when someone does something good in life, like playing xylophone. (Mwan 2009).

The jealousy and gossip that circulate in Birifor communities, which I have previously described as malicious, are articulated here as leading even to death, demonstrating the seriousness of these issues in Birifor culture. The song text of Mwan's simply titled *Dondomo* (see Figure 7-11), is as follows:

Dondomo (The Enemy)

The enemy has seen that Vuur has begat strong men and women,
And has a prosperous household.
They are jealous and want to strike us down.

Enemies have overtaken us already.
When we sleep, we still worry about our enemies' doings.

Because of all that we achieve,
The enemy is unhappy.
They pray for us to perish.
They try to kill us.
They want problems in our family.

The enemy spoils all that we do on this earth.
They have become a worry for us.
Even when we enter a room to drink water, we are worried.
When we go to farm, we are worried.
Anywhere we go, the enemy is there.

My family!
We must find a way of solving all these problems.

Father! [Referring to Sandaar as a senior brother].
Now that our father is gone,
You must sit down and plan things.
Do not allow the enemy to take over.
Sit down and think about these problems.

Enemies are everywhere.
There is no place that they are not.
Everywhere, they are there.
So plan well before you go out and about.
Everywhere enemies are gossiping, because Vuur's sons play well.

Always thinking of the enemy, our father grew lame.
When our father speaks, the enemy is already not listening.

> It is only our father and God who can tell us what to do.
> Enemy! You cannot tamper with us.
>
> What have I done to you?
> I am just a poor man.
> El as a poor man begat me.
> What have I done to you?
> Niyn gave birth to me.
> So enemies, go away.
> (Mwan 2009).

In Mwan's composition the enemy is portrayed as a constant psychological burden for his whole family, which they carry even into daily activities like farming, drinking, and sleeping. The ill will of the enemy is conveyed here as thinly veiling murderous intent, towards both Mwan and his family. Against a stated omnipresence of the enemy, Mwan calls upon Sandaar to solve the problems they face in their father's absence. Attributing their father's failing health to thinking about the enemy, rather than the enemy's actions, adds a layer of sophistication to the perception of the enemy in Birifor contexts. Mwan, through this composition, suggests that the psychological burden of the enemy is as damaging as their actual mischief and violence. Adding this to the depictions discussed so far, the enemy is portrayed here as influencing one's mental health through their psychological facilitation of a Birifor culture of suspicion. This is not to say that there are not tangible acts of violence in which enemies are involved, but instead that Birifors like Mwan are aware of the total impact of the enemy, including what individual people carry away from moments of conflict and experiences of adversity.

Mwan's brothers interjected on one occaison after this song was performed that there were several recent occasions when fights had almost broken out, when their characteristically cool Birifor demeanor almost gave way to violent conflict. He said,

> We are always careful, but fights still happen. The last time was when I was riding a moto to a funeral. A man was walking and when he heard the moto, he didn't want to step aside. I managed to just get past him, and he said, "Why? Have I done anything bad

> to you? Why do you ride like that?" I parked the moto and came back, but when I saw him, I realized I didn't want to fight, because I realized that he had friends watching. They were praying that I would fight him, so that they could retaliate on me. There were many standing at the back. So I decided to leave. There is an old song about a fight. There is a brave man, when he goes out to gatherings and there are fights, the brave man doesn't go in to fight, he stands at the back and watches, so this was in my mind. (2009).

The subtext of this song and Mwan's brother's comments is that restraint and wisdom are favored over valorous sacrifice, especially in light of the omnipresence of the enemy. It also reflects just a hint of the underlying territorialism that sometimes bubbles to the surface in regional travel. Conflicts between patriclans, ethnic groups, and families of musicians often manifest themselves in little more than joking and teasing. However, sometimes they escalate into physical violence and sustained ill will.

With respect to disability, the imagery of Mwan's father growing lame because of the psychological weight of the enemy also reinforces, again, the point that in Birifor society, biological variation and change are interpreted as the result of the enemy's malicious influence. Disability in the context of contemporary Birifor culture and society is widely attributed negative mystical origins, a belief that hijacks already hegemonic perceptions of disabled bodies within a Birifor ideology of ability to spiritually entrap disabled persons. Through the sub-genre of enemy music explored in this chapter with reference to local musicians, blind xylophonists contest the social, cultural, biological, and spiritual construction of disability, while engaging the shared concerns of the local community of xylophonists. Sighted xylophonists similarly use the genre to rebuke the actions of the enemy, to air their personal grief, and to project norms of culturally and morally acceptable behavior. They demonstrate that the enemy is a complex entity in Birifor culture; the enemy creates suspicion, fuels fear, and violently inhibits personal progression, yet is rendered within the bounds and reach of the moral community. I interpret this as part of a cultural theory of human accountability for misfortune in Birifor culture, which

normalizes disability as spiritual deviance caused by the enemy, and creates relationships of legitimacy with existing social and biological interpretations of disability. It also shows that while the enemy is depicted within the moral community, persons with disabilities are often marginalized from that community.

The questions of what tangible influence the enemy music compositions of blind Birifor xylophonists have on society, of what impact they have on audiences, and of how their messages are retained are difficult to answer for a few reasons. Measuring the influence of these contestations is complicated, since on the one hand they are well attended, intently listened to, and thoroughly contemplated. On the other hand, positive social change for disabled persons is slow. Over the span of ten years of involvement with Birifor communities, I have only seen mild improvements, while frequently encountering community members who were dumbfounded by my choice of musicians to conduct research with, and openly denigrated blind persons. Correspondingly, the impact that these songs have on audiences is mixed, since as chronicled throughout these compositions, backbiting and jealous competition occur during funeral performances themselves. Still blind xylophonists continue to attract large audiences at funerals. The community retention of the messages of enemy music was in my experience very high, since there was a strong lateral familiarity with individual compositions throughout the community. In leisurely conversations around town, people could sing numerous song texts in fragments, usually emphasizing a particular phrase that they found amusing, or that resonated with them. Additionally, the incidence of conflict that is perpetuated by, or occurs as a result of compositions is further evidence that people are truly listening. However, the retention of these songs is no guarantee that their warnings are heeded or their lessons learned.

Combined with the discussions in the previous chapter of witchcraft's causality as

binding disability in spiritual essentialisms, this invocation of social, cultural, biological, and spiritual models of disability fills out the ideological terrain of disability that blind Birifor musicians navigate by underling the linked domains in which disability is produced. The compound categories of subordination laid upon blind xylophonists can be thus understood as the confluence of these models, just at the compound effects of race, gender, and class subordinate women of minority groups in the U.S., whose bodies are cast through the negative space of their deviation from the majority (Alcoff 2006; Beale 1995; Caldwell 1991; Crenshaw 1989, 1995; Davis 1981). The subordination of blind musicians is in short complex, requiring the addition of this spiritual model of disability along with the cultural, social, and biological models already theorized. The focus on the texts of Birifor xylophone compositions throughout this discussion is continued in the next chapter through a broader discussion of the Birifor funeral repertoire. The theme and language of *dondomo* resurfaces in several of the traditional compositions considered next, along with new prescriptions and inscriptions of culture. The emphasis I have placed here on enemy music as a vital expressive outlet for contemporary musicians ultimately reflects its deep importance and value to the musicians of this book. Vuur Sandaar highlighted the basic motivation behind the performance of enemy music by saying, "There are songs without enemies, both from the olden days and now. We play enemy music now because when you play xylophone so many people are jealous." (Sandaar 2009).

Chapter 8: Historical Memory and Speech Surrogation in Funeral Music

Demonstrating the interrelatedness of music and language in African cultures has a long history that has perpetuated exoticisms of both African music and language, and genuinely accurate assessments of African cultural ingenuity, creative strategies of communication, and the value of communicative indirection. From early colonial accounts of the drum languages of African tribes, to the scientized assessment of whether African drum systems constitute languages or merely codes, to nuanced contemporary analyses of the shared tri-tonality of Yoruba language and Bata drumming, the use of musical instruments by Africans for communicative ends has endured independent of Africanist scholarship's metamorphoses. Because of these power dynamics involved in the personal and cultural production of Africans, I approach the relationship between music and language in the Birifor context not as evidence of some hidden gem of traditional African linguistic or musical practice, but as the location of a discursive strategy used by blind and sighted musicians to navigate the terrain of cultural and historical production through a form of agency exercised in ritual practice. I propose that xylophone performance and its texts represent a form of historical memory, wherein events from the recent and distant past are encoded in song and distilled through the process of speech surrogation down to melodic phrases that closely match the contours of spoken language, and can thus be understood by a listener who is adequately primed. Historical song texts of Birifor music are constantly re-imagined, refreshed, and reshaped through this practice of speech surrogation; a culturally generative process that fuels linguistic, musical, and historical invention. To the dialectic of history, I add the process of musical speech surrogation as an area of discursive production, employed creatively by blind xylophonists to contest their subordination through its ability to veil and disguise, while communicating with, and thus collectively

engaging the diffuse audiences of the living, the dead, and spirits. Both the superficial correlation between musical phrases and words, and the deeper value of communicative indirection, are assessed here as aspects of musical speech surrogation, the texts of which provide historical insight into Birifor cultural worlds.

Complementing the life histories presented in Chapters 4 and 5, this chapter features a sifting of song texts for historical information about cultural trends and identities, social practices and taboos, and the socioeconomic impact of national issues like migratory labor, in local communities. Viewing history as a decentralized process of change, constantly contested and reconstructed, these personal accounts of local events, encapsulated in songs that are shared, re-performed, and passed on, represent a critical part of oral and aural history encoded through speech surrogation and cultural metaphor towards powerful discursive ends. Chapter 7 differentiated between song texts that are largely proverbial, and song texts that are more personal in nature, using the first instead of the third person, both of which are present in the Birifor funeral repertiore. Kwesi Yankah (1989), writing on the nature of proverbs in Africa, locates the narrator in proverbs as a neutral third party, mediating events to the listener who must then extrapolate cultural values and moral lessons. This use of proverbs as a "communicative strategy of indirection" is found in some older Birifor compositions, which contain stories, riddles, and cultural narratives, situating speech surrogation in general as a process of encoding that similarly veils, protects, and empowers (Yankah 1989:326). The organization of this chapter proceeds from a review of the concept of speech surrogation as it applies in the context of Birifor xylophone music, to an assessment of several song texts from the Birifor funeral cycle, and finally to a discussion of historical memory in music. From an initially non-discursive way of knowing (musical performance), I follow the path of contemporary scholars in excavating

cultural histories from the surrogated texts. The chapter concludes with a consideration of these anthropological perspectives on historical memory as they apply to the song texts depicted here.

Birifor Musical Speech Surrogation

The role of music as communication in the Northwest of Ghana was identified by several early anthropologists, including Henri Labouret (1923) and Jack Goody (1962). Labouret noted that amongst many of the groups of the Northwest, who don't have traditions of large drum ensembles like their southern neighbors, whistling is used as a system of abridgment (1923:154). Goody wrote of the announcement of death in LoDagaa communities, that, "Those living at a distance can tell whether it is a man or woman (or child) who had died. There are words for these tunes, but, as usual with LoDagaa xylophone music, they are rarely sung." (Goody 1962:80). As Goody articulated, vital information is communicated through LoDagaa xylophone music, which has a corresponding text that is rarely sung but widely known to an extent that from a distance the sex and general age of the deceased can understood without any drum or idiophone accompaniment. Robert Rattray, while not commenting on surrogation in his northern expeditions, posited the use of sympathetic resonators in southern Asante drum ensembles as a means for enabling the differentiation between consonants and vowels in surrogated Asante texts (1923:252).

Speech surrogation in the broader context of African music has been theorized by Robert Armstrong, Thomas Sebeok, and Donna Sebeok in their edited volume *Speech Surrogates: Drum and Whistle Systems* (1976), which expands the phenomenon that George Herzog (1945) experienced as "drum-signaling," into a broader and more dynamic practice of speech surrogation. Building off of their general framework for identifying, analyzing, and evaluating speech surrogation, I assess here how musical speech surrogation functions in the Birifor context

of funeral xylophone music. I conclude that through speech surrogation, music as a system of culturally meaningful symbols gains additional generative discursive dimensions, mapped across the overt and covert communications of surrogated texts in musical performance. As a strategy of communicative indirection, speech surrogation is also of great value for its veiling of meaning, both to individuals and their agendas, and for the maintenance of cultural gnosis.

There are many techniques through which meaning is packaged and parceled in music, which range from the purely musical evocation of abstract meanings, to forms of signaling and coding, to complex systems of abridgment and surrogation. The process through which the signs of language are rendered as signs in music, such that they can meaningfully interpreted, similarly varies depending upon musical, cultural, and situational context. Part of the purpose of this discussion is to articulate how Birifor xylophone music qualifies as surrogation, not signaling or coding, because of the range of connections it creates between music and language, and the flexibility of the medium to surrogate different languages and communicate novel and improvised information. The practice of using xylophones to "speak" is found in other African contexts such as Ganda xylophone music, which Gerhard Kubik characterized as relying upon a performer's ability to display "an impressive vocabulary, in which onomatopoeic syllables, or syllables which constitute words, as well as metaphorical comparisons are used for didactic purposes." (1994:54). From the range of qualities of musical speech surrogation in global practice, I focus here strictly on those that apply to the Birifor context.

On the syllabic level, the pitch contour of a surrogated message is matched in Birifor xylophone music by individual notes from the pentatonic sequence. The alignment of the Birifor language with *kogyil* phrases can be heard clearly in Saanti's outstanding performance in Figure 8-1, in which he vocalizes the text of his composition *Namunu Nyuor Daa* (The Poor Man

Drinks *Pito*), which is examined later in this chapter. The subtle rhythmic nuances heard in this recording, such as the control of a key's resonance, or notes struck quickly in succession help establish the instrument's sonic resemblance to syllabic units. Thus the sound of each key strike becomes a sign (or part of a sign) when assembled according to the conventions of Birifor speech surrogation. Cultural conventions of surrogation facilitate the reading of what imperfectly resembles a syllabic unit, as the intended unit. Linking syllabic units in phrases is a general practice that helps disambiguate meaning in speech surrogation, which Birifor musicians rely upon heavily. Likewise, just as in regular language use, situational and contextual factors and clues help distinguish between words that sound the same. Thus, a speech surrogate does not need to exactly replicate the sound of speech in order to consistently convey the meaning of spoken language. Instead, surrogation effectively approximates language by relying upon many of the same strategies used to parse spoken language. A common sense analog in spoken language can be found in the accurate recognition of a mumbled phrase, which is only partially resembles the intended phrase. By filling in the missing pieces according to prior experience and learning, a listener is able to extrapolate the intended meaning despite the broken continuity of a message. In musical speech surrogation these gaps in representation are filled-in by the listener, as when the end of a word is implied based on the sounding of the first syllable. It is important to note here that there is a difference between fitting words to music, as most every international popular song does, and speech surrogation. When humming the melody of a popular song, it is possible to identify that song based upon its melody, and then apply its widely known text. However, the difference in speech surrogation is that it relies upon an established vocabulary consisting of musical and linguistic conventions, which can then be manipulated to generate *new* meanings. The way that this functions in Birifor xylophone music is not through the codification

of a certain phrase as having a fixed meaning, but rather through a combination of musical practices which frame each note as potentially discursively meaningful in context.

Birifor speech surrogation, viewed as a lexical representation, involves three distinct processes–direct transmission, contraction, and enphrasing–which make the reading of musical sound as discursive meaning possible. Direct transmission involves the close mapping of sound phoneme to musical sound, and is the primary process through which language is encoded in Birifor music. In Figure 8-2, Saanti plays the phrase "*Yonyɛ, npuorfo na yan, yan, yan,"* (Yonyɛ, [my Birifor name, lit. "Travel and see,"] I thank you more, more, more), to signal to me that, after a full day of farming, and then a long recording session of extracting surrogated texts, he was tired. This particular basic example demonstrates the matching of each syllable to a note spaced according to the rhythmic framework of Birifor speech, and picked out from a flow of other musical notes. The prevalence of segmental phonemic tones in Birifor, heard in this example, is one element of the Birifor language that lends itself to surrogation through the process of direct transmission. In Figure 8-3, Saanti dissects part of his composition *Yi Barma Kapen* (Let Me Have Peace) to demonstrate the alignment of syllable to note, and the mapping of linguistic intonation across melodic and harmonic relationships. The repetition of *kapen* (peace) in this example, demonstrates the importance of harmonic relationships to surrogation instead of set pitches, as the same phrase can be restated from any tonal center. In Figure 8-4, a longer excerpt of *Yi Barma Kapen* can be heard, which demonstrates the use of both percussive flams (barely off-set strokes) and tonal range to accommodate double consonants and open vowels respectively.

Contraction, in contrast to direct transmission, is the abbreviation of lexical units into shortened forms, as when single tones represent multisyllabic words. Birifor xylophone music,

on account of being a rhythmically dense genre, tends to have at least one tone, and sometimes more per syllable. However, contraction is occasionally used for longer words, especially when they fall at the end of a phrase, as heard in Figure 7-9. The third process, enphrasing, involves couching a syllabic unit in a larger phrase in order to clarify its meaning. This is similar to error correction in computer science, wherein bits are nested in chunks of code that can reveal the intended binary state of a bit if an error occurs in the transmission of the bit. This practice is common in Birifor speech surrogation, which uses proverbial phrases and figures of speech to convey and disambiguate complex or new meanings. Figure 8-5, in which Vuur Mwan performs his composition *Dondomo* while his kin sing the surrogated text, demonstrates that a few priming words are key to comprehending the entirety of a surrogated text. The communication through the xylophone that I am applying the label of speech surrogation to, functions more like a language than a code because the vocabulary of communication expands and contracts according to usage, and is dynamic enough to accommodate different languages. That being said, the speech surrogation enacted by xylophonists is considerably better (more nuanced) in their native languages than the many trade languages they learn, reflecting the fact that the act of surrogation requires linguistic competence on either side of the act of communication. These three processes of direct transmission, contraction, and enphrasing, represent three different ways in which language is encoded in music in a process commonly known as surrogation, all of which occur in the context of Birifor xylophone music.

The foregoing assessment of speech surrogation invokes non-native terms to understand the communicative act of xylophone performance in ritual genres. However, xylophonists are also keenly aware of the value and processes of speech surrogation, which they describe in more personal terms. I asked the xylophonists of this book about how speech surrogation operates in

practice, and whether their messages are lost on audiences. Yichiir, like Mwan, noted that at funerals his audiences don't always pick up on the meaning he intends, saying, "When I play, some know, and some don't know. Some I have to explain the meaning to." (Yichiir 2009). The one exception to this, however, is the musical context of the church. In Yichiir's experience and my own, Birifor church members immediately understand what Yichiir is saying with the xylophone. This due to several factors, including the participatory nature of many Ghanaian church services, the basis of his compositions in fixed texts from the Bible, and the weekly repetition of his songs at services. I put Yichiir's statement that his congregation understands all of his music to the test just after a Sunday service in 2009, when I asked him play several different compositions to see how quickly the congregation picked up their texts (see Figure 8-6). The result was that certain members knew songs immediately and joined in singing, while others gradually filled out the choir once the text was already being sung. Because this was a provoked response, it is difficult to tell how much being shy played a part in the slowness of some of the congregation to join. However, it was clear that not only did the pastor and others immediately recognize the song, but that the vocal melody was perfectly aligned with the instrumental melody for songs in Birifor. The songs that the congregation sings in English are contrastingly very simple and repetitive, due in part to the limitations of the congregations competency in English. Yichiir's rendition in English of "My God is Good," demonstrates this simplicity, as well as the more basic approach to surrogation taken with non-native languages, which utilizes more abbreviation due to Yichiir's unfamiliarity with the intonation of English (Yichiir 2009). I asked Yichiir about the difficulty of surrogating English since the xylophone is a Birifor instrument, to which he responded, "When I hear someone play anything, I can transpose it to the xylophone. But if I've never heard it before, I cannot do it." (Yichiir 2009). I

then inquired as to whether the same applied for creating xylophone parts for pre-existing Christian songs, and he said, "Ok, If I know the music, then it is easy for me. If I don't know it, then it is difficult." (Yichiir 2009). Both of these comments pertain to the encoding that occurs during surrogation, and the necessity of a thorough familiarity with that which is to be encoded. While his statements may seem to reveal the obvious, they importantly frame speech surrogation as an interpretive act. Speech surrogation differs from coding in that it is not enough to simply hear the message for it to be communicated. Like translating between world languages, words are not a sufficient basis for translation. Instead, phrases are the primary currency of translation, since in the case of music the way that a phrase is represented and structured in surrogation differs from how it is spoken or sung.

Belendi Saanti, as a master xylophonist with an exhaustive knowledge of traditional songs texts, described several situations where he was not clear about the meaning of another xylophonist's composition, even though he remembered the melody vividly. He said, "I will go ask them afterwards, 'This particular piece you played, what does it mean to you?' Once they have explained it, I have memorized it. Then I apply it to my playing." (2009). I read this statement in a few ways, both as limiting the scope of surrogation, and as revealing something about its generative grammar and vocabulary. For a senior performer steeped in Birifor musical culture to be unclear about the meaning of a song, implies that the act of surrogation requires a certain competency and fluency with the particular tonal and rhythmic conventions of communication through the *kogyil*. It also implies that only certain phrases have established meaning in the sense of being fixed. The phrases that do have established meaning, gain them through either a conversation outside of the moment of musicking, or through singing by a xylophonist during a performance. Through these two processes, the grammar and vocabulary of

surrogation expands and contracts according to the memories of xylophonists and audiences. The proximity of speech sound and musical sound is thus not singularly sufficient to convey meaning. There is a crucially embodied aspect of speech surrogation, one that requires specific listening competency and memory. Saanti's comments reestablish the imperfect nature of surrogation as communication, in which errors are possible both in transmission and reception.

In the figures referenced so far, there is a close homophonic relationship between xylophone melodies and the tonal contour of Birifor, both in sung and spoken forms. Maal Yichiir's use of verses from Birifor, Twi, and English translations of the Bible for his new 'gospel' compositions, demonstrates that the xylophone is sometimes used as a poly-lingual speech surrogate. The general practice of composing entire melodies based off of a separate text suggests that while certain cues must be in place to understand a melody as a set of meaningful utterances, the practice of speech surrogation relies upon strategies of extrapolation from language usage to link tonal phonology to syllabic and phrasic units.

Veiling and Gnosis in Speech Surrogation

When formulating the abstract concept of surrogation and mapping the subtleties of its alignment of tonal and rhythmic contours from music and language, it is easy to de-emphasize the agendas communicated across and within the medium. Birifor musicians not only intentionally use the instrument for surrogation, they effectively extend their agency through it, indicating at least part of why the instrument and its musical genres are so important to Birifor musicians. This hints at the deeply personal qualities of speech surrogation in Birifor contexts. The question of why speech surrogation as a particular ritual language practice is used instead of a more direct form of communication, can be understood through Andrew Apter's conception of deep knowledge in ritual context as fluid and not fixed, circulating in a discursive space that

allows the negotiation of conflicting meanings (Apter 2007:xi). Apter's particular theorization of gnosis in African cultures was in part a response to critiques of Marcel Griaule's works, critiques that argued that the category of secret knowledge Griaule posited was yet another channel through which the colonial and postcolonial imagination distorts African realities. For blind Birifor xylophonists, speech surrogation in ritual contexts enables statements that would otherwise be silenced or ignored, statements that dangerously challenge the socio-spiritual status quo, as evidenced in my previous discussion of enemy music. Speech surrogation as coded language thus creates a space for the reconfiguration of power dynamics as much as it conveys concrete meanings. The view of blind persons as cursed, and global tropes of the blind sage are equally implicated in the yoke of falsely constructed identity applied to persons with blindness, which blind xylophonists deconstruct within the bounds of ritual performance through speech surrogation.

The concrete cultural meanings of the surrogated texts of the Birifor funeral cycle are performed at every Birifor funeral (with the exception of those of young children), yet are only discernible to the culturally and linguistically primed ear of the attentive audience that packs tightly around a performer. These texts gain legitimacy and recognition through performance in ritual context, yet require active attention to decipher, as we have just noted. As such, they represent a form of gnosis in Birifor culture because of the secrecy of the location where they circulate potent cultural meanings. The more personal agendas of enemy music, and other compositions not from the standard funeral cycle, use this established discursive power to project xylophonists own experiences into this arena of deep knowledge, hoping to tip the balance of popular opinion and cultural memory in their own favor. The key point is that what at any moment constitutes actual deep knowledge changes according to the memory and participation

of the community.

The deep knowledge of funeral music is only one of several types of communication at Birifor funerals, which entail many other actions and events that have symbolic significance. Examples include the gathering of firewood by women to indicate the dutiful completion of a lifetime of domestic tasks by the deceased, the treatment of the body before interment, communal grieving and wailing, and many other ritual practices. Goody described the relationship between funeral ceremonies and social and cultural production in LoDagaa communities when he wrote, "Here again the values of society, to use a much-abused phrase, are enshrined in funeral customs; the system of status evaluation emerges in its concrete reality, the procedures themselves offering positive sanction on the desired goals." (Goody 1962:80). The goals, aspirations, and prosperity of the community are central themes of the Birifor funeral cycle, invoked to both express and to assess culture.

To consider a parallel example from South America, singing occupies a similar space of cultural production in Suya society. Anthony Seeger (1987) characterized singing in Suya contexts as,

> ...An essential part of social production and reproduction. It re-establishes the clarity of spatial domains, temporal durations, and certain forms of human relationships. Singing enabled individuals to create aspects of self, it established and sustained feelings of euphoria characteristic of ceremonies, and it related the present to the powerful and transformative past. The Suya would sing because through song they could both re-establish the good and beautiful in the world and also relate themselves to it. (Seeger 1987:128).

While the singing of Birifor musical culture has largely been surrogated into instrumental music, both groups share the use of music as the kind of powerful personal and cultural expression articulated by Seeger. Birifor festivals similarly mark the transition between wet and dry seasons, while the proper performance of funeral ceremonies ensures that a community will

not fall into ruin. The human relationships inscribed and critiqued through musical practice in the Suya case, are exemplified in the Birifor case by Yichiir's and Alhansan's compositions that contest their subordination as blind xylophonists. Seeger's relation of the present to a powerful and transformative past is found in the Birifor context of the funeral cycle, wherein the deceased are aligned with cultural projections of success and virtue, and the events surrounding their death are framed in relation to actual and proverbial events. Since Birifor xylophone performance in ritual context plays a critical role as the terrain across which culture, society, and self are negotiated, I argue here that xylophone music and its surrogated texts are in fact forms of deep knowledge, in which meaning is perpetually written and overwritten.

The Birifor Funeral Cycle

The structured sequence of xylophone compositions (*sokpa*) of Birifor funerals, repeated by several xylophonists over the course the multi-day funerals of rural Birifor communities, is the primary template through which all funeral music is played. Through intricate musical segues, or short pauses between pieces, the standard structure of the Birifor funeral cycle is infused with various additional compositions and interludes according to the whim and skill of a performer. The funeral cycle formally differs for men and women, each with different songs that address gendered personal and cultural issues. In this analysis, I have chosen to reference actual recordings rather than create transcriptions of each composition, since these recordings provide the appropriate level of representation for this consideration of meaning in surrogated texts by allowing the reader to hear the relationship between Birifor music and language, and see nuances of person and performance. The prototypical song cycle, which can be embellished or curtailed according to amount of performance time available, is represented in Figure 8-7 and Figure 8-8.

The layout of the funeral procession varies for men and women, as well as for individuals

with different occupations. The dramatic and choreographed reenactment of a hunt performed for the funeral of a great hunter, is absent from the funeral of a farmer, who may be alternately honored by the performance of *bɔgyil* festival repertoire. At the funeral of Charles Balturu, a successful farmer who passed away in Saru during one of my research, his ceremony featured harvest festival music as a symbolic evocation of years of plentiful harvest. *Bokpala*, a piece for *bɔgyile* and percussion typically performed at festivals, was in this case performed at his funeral because of its symbolic importance to his life-long occupation of farming.

The two primary movements of a funeral performance are the opening *Prai*, a solo xylophone section that mixes surrogation and purely musical interludes, and the *Kuor Bene*, or funeral dance. As indicated by the title, this section encompasses the entire accompanied portion of a xylophone performance, and all the dancing that occurs at a funeral. As each of the thematic sections indicated in Figure 8-7 and 8-8 are expanded to include additional compositions, I consider both primary and secondary compositions here to show how a typical sequence of the funeral cycle may be performed, though there is tremendous potential for variation and alteration in the cycle.

Prai

Articulating the importance and meaning of the *Prai* section during one of our afternoons in Bubalanyuro, Yichiir said, "*Prai* has a meaning. When someone has passed away, the people will hear the melody and realize that someone has died. Often there are rumors of death, but people will not start mourning until they hear the *Prai*." (Yichiir 2009). The opening composition of *Prai*, *Daarfo* (struggle), is an iconic musical introduction (see Figure 8-9) that invokes the perpetual struggle of life that the deceased, but not the living, have been released from. As Yichiir noted, it also importantly announces the gender of the deceased (Yichiir 2009).

During funeral ceremonies for hunters, the repeated two-chord phrase of *Daarfo* is used to invoke the stealth of the hunters, and is extended to match the choreography of the brief dance drama. The dance drama of this section performed is only by a few select performers, and is distinct from the communal dance of the *Kuor Bene*, which occurs regardless of the deceased's occupation, and is far more regular and rhythmic.

Pir Kpara, the second composition of *Prai* (see Figure 8-10) is an instrumental interlude without a surrogated text, which xylophonists describe as a time to warm up and get used to the intonation of a xylophone, if not playing on their own (Chile 2009). This section of instrumental interlude often includes the performance of additional short compositions, which vary depending on the performer. While El Vuur was known more for being a great performer than a great composer, his particular rendition of *Prai* entitled *Lubile Prai* (Bird *Prai*), was inspired by local bird calls from village life in Donyɛ. The composition has a fittingly strident melodic quality that mimics the polyphony of bird calls heard in early morning and early evening farm life. *Lubile Prai* (see Figure 8-11, 8-12) is one of several compositions popularly used as a substitute or addition to the latter sections of *Prai*. Sandaar explained the popular story of how his father Vuur composed this song when he said,

> My father heard the birds' songs. Every time he went to farm, he heard them singing. As he was working, he remembered their songs in his head. One day when he came home, he said, "Hmm. Today, I must try to play the birds' songs on the xylophone." And he did, and his playing sounded the way birds sing. When he played that song, people surrounded him. They really loved it. (Sandaar 2009).

The particular birdcall that *Lubile Prai* captures comes from the bird known locally as *Memer buala*. These birds are commonly found along river banks, standing out from the brown soil with bright red feathers and a hooked beak, which they employ adeptly in constructing nests from mud and sticks.

The third composition of *Prai*, *Saan Di Bieko* (See Figure 8-13, 8-14) depicts a cultural proverb in which a mother violates the taboos of *Saan* (the spiritual guardian of the household and lineage), and as a result brings illness upon her household, in particular to her son. The details of the spiritual transgression are less emphasized in local interpretations of the piece than the overall message of the suffering a lineage can endure because of one member's actions. Saanti spoke of this piece as having special significance for him, because his own father passed away on bad terms with local spirits, requiring Saanti and his brothers to perform various rituals over the course of several years to try to rectify the situation. As seen in Chapter 7 through Saanti's sentiments expressed in *Adie Dondomo*, this spiritual deficit has yet to be overcome (Saanti 2009). The song text of *Saan Di Bieko*, as performed and explained by Chile, is as follows:

Saan Di Bieko

Confusion has come and destroyed the house.
It has killed the children.
The house is quiet.
There is nothing to be said.

People are crying for help,
But there is no one who can help you.
One person cannot make a funeral.
There must be many.

Look at suffering.
Look at suffering.
Anytime there was a problem,
My son was there to help.
But now he is gone.
(Chile 2009).

The final composition of *Prai* is a reiteration of the opening theme of *Daarfo*, accompanied by newly surrogated text, which includes calls to percussionists and dancers, and signals the closure of the *Prai* section. The text is as follows:

Prai

Someone has died and has been buried.
It is finished.
They are at their own house.
There is nowhere else to go.

Death kills the great, not the weak.
Death usually comes to the great.

Every time, the funeral is at your house.
People are saying, "Oh! What is happening?
Every time, the funeral is at your house."

When will he come back again?
We have buried him.
But when will he come back?

[This section signals the drummer to sit down and prepare to play.]

Is it the same problem that is killing everyone in your house?
Your problems have no end.

Come and see my suffering!
[This signals the throwing of cowry shells.]
(Chile 2009).

As Yichiir demonstrates in Figure 8-15, the names of drummers are surrogated during their final invitation to play, which occurs after the Prai is complete and the drummer is seated. Immediately after the call, the theme of *Daarfo* is played again just for an instant, before giving way to the rapid fixed opening of *Darikpon*, a transition that ignites drumming, dancing, and general excitement.

Kuor Bene

Darikpon is the first section of the *Kuor Bene*, and performing *Darikpon* with speed and accuracy is a fundamental marker of skill for Birifor xylophonists. In general, the dance pieces of the funeral cycle have less densely packed textual meaning than the pieces played in other sections, since the percussive accompaniment often all but drowns out the xylophone. These

pieces still use surrogation, but on account of the focus on dancing and drumming there is more room for and emphasis on purely musical improvisation. Figures 8-16, 8-17, and 8-18, each feature renditions of *Darikpon* by Yichiir, Saanti, and Mwan respectively. As an iconic piece, *Darikpon* is played with a cohesive tonal and rhythmic consistency, as heard across these examples. The range of compositions that can be stitched together in this section after *Darikpon* is vast, and varies based on clan and community. Sometimes these compositions are the equivalent of a section of a song, while at other times they are an entire multipart composition. The remaining standard compositions in the *Darikpon* section discussed here, are thus regularly conjoined with various local songs. *Darikpon* is generally only played at the funerals of males, but there are of course exceptions to such rules. Interjecting in one of our sessions, Saanti said,

> I also want to let you know, that sometimes you will go to the funeral of a woman, and you will hear *Darikpon* being played. The reason is that sometimes when an elderly woman dies, they can play *Darikpon*. It is not the first music to be played, but when the funeral is underway and well attended, somebody may decide to play *Darikpon*. For young women's funerals, they will not play this. (Saanti 2009).

In my experience of the performance of a funeral for a woman in Jorikoyiri, the composition was both used to establish a performer's skill, and to motivate an extra section of intense music and dance in response to a lull in the long funeral ceremony.

Ganda Yina (see Figure 8-19) is one of several compositions that can be played after *Darikpon*, and this section of the funeral cycle is one of the most musically generative in terms of new repertoire. The order that I present these compositions in here, reflects the order that they were generally played, though often pieces or sections of pieces would be rearranged or substituted, reflecting the structural flexibility of this section, as well as the occasional mistakes made by performers. The text proceeds as follows:

Ganda Yina (A Great Man Has Gone Out)

This great mean has gone out,
What is the cause?
Is it not death who has taken him?

The great man of the family,
Is no longer in the house.
Death should have waited,
For another year to come.

How will I sleep?
What has taken this great man?
It is death.

A great man has passed away.
People can abuse his family.
If he were still here,
People would respect the family.
(Chile 2009).

The composition *Ganda Yina* firmly establishes the value of a male to his family and community, asking why death couldn't have waited longer before taking the pillar of the household away. The next song, *Saan Fo Dan Tara Ferai* (see Figure 8-20) recalls the sweetness of life created by a father's guidance and support, and the bitter taste of life left in his absence. The song depicts the optimism of the days when the father was alive as now tainted by the confusion that has descended upon the household. The song text is as follows:

Saan Fo Dan Tara Ferai

Father has passed away,
Now the children are suffering.
They have no father.
When your father was alive,
You were carefree and boastful.
Now, if you do those things,
Your enemies will not be afraid.

The bad child, when the father gave him advice, did not take it.
Now that things are difficult,
He runs back to the father for advice,
But it is too late.
(Chile 2009).

I asked Sandaar about the relevance of this song to him, in light of Vuur's death in 2002. He said,

> This sort of thing has been happening to us. People talk a lot about us. People say that when Vuur was alive, we were boasting. Now Vuur has passed away, so they are seeing how else they can harm us. Every time they insult us. A white man came to visit Vuur, but never returned. People say that we are fools because we could not get him to take Vuur to the U.S. (Sandaar 2009).

Saan Yi Kyena Dakpolo (see Figure 8-21), is typically conjoined to *Saan Fo Dan Tara Ferai*, and evokes the imagery of an empty house (*dakpolo*) which has fallen into disrepair. It will eventually collapse and the house's fields become dry and barren. Such a house usually lies neglected because all of the males in line to inherit the house have passed away. In modern times, the song has acquired new meaning, as the definition of a *dakpolo* has expanded to include households that have suffered because men have left, either through labor migration or disinterest in the property or family. The relevance of *Saan Yi Kyena Dakpolo* remains very real for Sandaar and Mwan, who recalled a great-uncle's house that was abandoned when the children were not able to feed and support themselves on their own. Thus, when *Saan Yi Kyena Dakpolo* is performed at funerals today, the traditional message of the erosion of the homestead is applied to new circumstances in the reformation and reconfiguration of historical memory. Many other songs are usually inserted into the *Darikpon* section, however, since they vary substantially based upon the performer's choice, I address them later as separate from the standard song cycle.

Chikuorbene (see Figure 8-22, 8-23) is played upon the death of a farmer. Through its recognition of the dedication and achievements of the deceased, despite the hardships of agricultural life, it motivates the donation of cowries, corn, yams, and other goods to the bereaved. During the course of Birifor funerals, the family of the deceased receive gifts in

addition to the love and condolences of the community, which are determined according to gender, occupation, and personality. Livestock, fowl, weapons, and tools are tied to trees, while cowries, coins, and gifts are amassed at the body. *Chikuorbene* glorifies the occupation of farming by flattering all farmers present, effectively eliciting donations for the bereaved. Each stanza of the following song text is understood as a call to throw cowries and give gifts. Yichiir noted that this communication is crucial to the funeral process because if this meaning is forgotten, it will be at the expense of the bereaved (Yichiir 2009). The text of *Chikuorbene* is as follows:

Chikuorbene

If you marry a good wife, she will last.
But if you marry a bad wife,
She will always give you trouble,
And it will eventually lead her to death.

Anything you do on this earth,
There will always be enemies of your efforts.
As a good farmer, you would see him in the first light of morning at the farm.

Enemies are destroyers.
You can farm hard and help feed them,
But they will still destroy what you have worked for.
I am calling you [farmers, for donations],
But I am not hearing anything from you.

If you only eat meat, your house will be destroyed.
If you eat *dangbere* (pumpkin-leaf stew),
Your house will last for a long time.
If you say you will not eat *dangbere*,
Then your house will not last long.

Extra time [in the fields] makes you a good farmer.
What is wrong with your hand?
Why are you using it to steal and not using it to farm?
You can work and make money, so do not steal."
(Yichiir 2009).

During the *Chikuorbene* section of the funeral cycle, several other pieces can be played

which relate specifically to the life or death of the deceased. *Gbele Doyɛ* is one such piece, and reiterates the theme of the role of the father as the keystone of the household, seen earlier in *Ganda Yina*, *Saan Fo Dan Tara Ferai*, and *Saan Yi Kyena Dakpolo*. Sandaar explained *Gbele Doyɛ*, by saying, "It equates losing one's parents to being orphaned, and talks about the suffering that follows. When the father was alive, he provided you food to eat, and met all your needs. But now that your father is absent, you become orphans. This applies to us." (Sandaar 2009).

Benekponble (see Figure 8-24), which immediately follows Chikuorbene, is played to "reactivate the dancers," and does not have a surrogated text (Yichiir 2009). As SK explained, "*Benekponble* is a music that is for children's dancing. If they want to shake their bodies." (Kakraba 2002). *Ben Yere Yo* (see Figure 8-25), which can be inserted into this section of the funeral cycle, is a cultural proverb that teases and ridicules blind persons for getting drunk despite their disability. This song represents yet another way in which ideologies of ability are spread and consolidated in Birifor culture. SK explained the origins of this song before performing it, saying,

> It is a story about the blind man, that he went and bushed [got drunk]. He or she went and bushed, taking too much *pito* from the calabash. When she or he was bushed, there was no one to pull him or her home, and it was difficult for one to lead them home. So one time there, people are singing, "*Jɔɔn ben yere yo tinyu kol bada, jɔɔ ne jɔɔn, ben yere ye tinyu kol ba dina*." It means, he can't see, but he is taking a calabash of *pito*, which will make him bushed. So who will pull you home? (Kakraba 2002).

Because of the negative depictions of blindness in this piece, blind xylophonists understandably choose not to play it. Saanti and Mwan, on account of their lifelong friendship with Yichiir and Chile, also generally refrain from performing this song.

Guun (see Figure 8-26), which follows *Benekponble*, is the final section of a xylophonist's performance, and can take several different forms. The type of Guun played at a

given funeral depends largely upon how long ago and how quickly the deceased passed, and when a xylophonist arrives at a funeral to perform. The three main types of *Guun* included here correspond to different timeframes, each with a unique character of mourning. However, as Saanti and Yichiir pointed out, there are many more *Guun* compositions in circulation (Saanti 2009; Yichiir 2009). Saanti explained that, "Those three are from the days of our forefathers. They are understood by everyone. As for the others, I don't know, because they are peoples' compositions. All the rest are other peoples' compositions." (Saanti 2009). *Guun Sanbuor, Guun Momɔrgbɛ*, and *Guun Gaanba*, are the three primary Guun compositions that occupy this traditional status. The first, *Guun Sanbuor*, is played, "When a person dies suddenly...We play it when someone just passes away quickly. It doesn't matter how many xylophone players there are. One thousand, two thousand, they will play the same type of *Guun* throughout." (Saanti 2009). The second composition, *Guun Momɔrgbɛ*, is played, "When someone dies and you are not around. You saw that he or she was sick, and you traveled to another place, and upon your return, you find that the funeral for them is almost finished. If you are a xylophone player, they will have you play just to make a small offering for them." (Saanti 2009). The third, *Guun Gaanba*, which is also played when someone passes away suddenly, frames the loss of the deceased as especially painful because there was no time to say goodbye. A fourth type of *Guun* mentioned by Saanti, was what he described as the shortest performance a xylophonist can give at a funeral. He said, "There is another type of *Guun*. When I travel to play a funeral, and see that an old person is sick, and then return for their funeral later, I will play this song. It describes how they died. It is the cheapest piece I can play. They see me as a great xylophone player and ask me to play something short." (Saanti 2009). *Guun* finishes with a climatic build up that then abruptly halts with a final chord, after which the crowd temporally reshuffles in cheers and

excitement, gradually reforming into a tight circle around the next xylophonist in line.

Local Compositions Included in the Funeral Cycle

The exact format of the funeral cycle, and the compositions that are rendered within it, constantly shifts over time, as new compositions come to the forefront of cultural consciousness, and others fade into extinction. In this sense, the historical memory contained within compositions is likewise constantly shifting. The following compositions were regularly performed at the funerals I attended, however, only time will tell to what degree they achieve the iconic status of the compositions discussed so far in this chapter. They also display the practice of speech surrogation, and I attend here to their themes to round out an understanding of the cultural issues developed in surrogated texts. The process of composing these songs, varies from musician to musician, but is generally driven by exposure to previous pieces, sounds and melodies from daily life, and spiritual or divine inspiration. Belendi Saanti said of composing xylophone music that,

> Xylophone always comes from the mind. So, there are certain things that occur to you over time. You sleep, and then one day, the ideas come. With those ideas, you can give meaning to the songs. It is like a spirit that comes to my mind. Something that inspires me. It is problems that make me compose music. Problems. What God gave me, this xylophone here, I lie down and think, and ideas come to me. What brings those ideas? It is Supreme God (*Nagnman*). (Saanti 2009).

Saanti's explanation of why and how he composes, and the role of inspiration and God in that process, reflects the spiritual significance of xylophone music. The mystical stories of the xylophone's origins, the ritual context of funerals in which it is played, the creation of compositions in reaction to the enemy, and the presence of God as an underlying source of inspiration, all reinforce the reality of powerful mystical forces circulating in Birifor society and culture.

The themes developed in the next compositions, include the persistent double-edged

sword of migratory labor in Birifor culture, alcoholism and disrespectful conduct, and jealousy within communities of xylophonists and xylophone makers. Belendi Saanti's composition (see Figure 8-1) *Namunu Nyour Daa* (The Poor Man Drinks *Pito*), combines several of these themes as they apply to his role and experience as a father. Saanti explained the motivations behind the song by saying that, "All these things happened with my children, and that is why I wrote this song, to advise my children who have traveled south to work hard there, and make money. It is a song of advice to my children." (Saanti 2009). The song text of is as follows:

Namunu Nyour Daa (The Poorman Drinks *Pito*)

Where the rich go,
The poor always follow.

Pataar [*Akpeteshie*] drunkards are fighting and killing each other.
Why? I am not part of your drinking company,
Why do you want to fight me?

After taking the drinks and fighting,
The drunkard had not paid for his drinks.
The owner of the bar came to ask him for his money,
And the drunkard said,
"No, I've not taken any *pataar* from you,
So why are you asking me for money?"

The owner said,
"Have you forgotten that you have just now taken *pataar* from me?
You have taken it, you didn't pay, and then you are fighting."

The drunkard left, eventually became sober,
And returned to the bar owner.
He said, "I'm sorry, I was out of my senses before,
And didn't remember taking *pataar* from you.
Now that I am better,
Won't you give me one more shot?"

The young people,
When they grow,
They want to go down south to farm.
They leave to farm, and there is no one left to help their father's farm.

But when they come home,
They want to eat plenty of food.
The women will cook for them,
And they will still want more.

Were you here to farm?
You know how small the farming is here,
And yet you are eating like that.
When you cook, only give me small,
Because I was not there to help you farm.

If you were here to farm,
You would have no problem with food.
But you are not here.
You went down south,
Now you have returned.
Who should farm for you to come and eat their food?

You have come back from the south,
But you have not been here to farm.
You should go back there,
Think long and hard,
And then come back here.

You are complaining that you didn't get money down south,
But you have been there for many years,
Without earning money.
Go there and reflect on the situation.

Because of patience,
We are staying here to farm,
Because we know how down south is.
Because of patience, we stay home to farm.

You chose to go down there and farm,
And when you have a monetary problem,
You still run back to your poor farmer father here.

You ask him for help,
But how will he help you?
Do you think your father here can help you?
You who come from down south?
You are asking for money for this and that,
But can it work that way?
(Saanti 2009).

The consumption of alcohol in Birifor communities is regular, excepting personal or religious reasons, though alcoholism is not especially pronounced by national standards. Millet beer is ubiquitous and inexpensive. Farmers and manual laborers will often drink a calabash of *pito* sometime in the morning hours. Important occasions unanimously involve the pouring of, and partaking in libation with locally distilled gin. Drunkenness at funerals is commonplace, and both Saanti and Yichiir have composed songs that warn against alcoholism. In *Namunu Nyuor Daa*, the consumption of alcohol by a poor drunkard seems to be primarily invoked as a metaphor or subtext for the second message of the piece, which critiques his children's indulgence at home despite not bringing anything to the table from down south.

The theme of labor migration in this song demonstrates the evocation and inscription of historical memory in musical context, as the past is consolidated through iteration and used to mold the future. The risk involved in migratory labor, which is also acknowledged for its potential rewards, is critiqued here for the burden it has already imposed upon the community, before a migrant laborer's return. It has depleted the local community of workers and family members. Saanti explained the conflicted feelings about labor migration for parents, saying,

> Many children have gone south to farm, so we cannot say to our children, "don't go." Many others are there, so we cannot say no. Young men and women travel south to do farming and all sorts of things, to make money and come back to help their fathers here, so you cannot say your son shouldn't go. He will also come back and help you. If, as a father, you say no and your child disobeys, there will be tension. So, it is best to let your children go and see for themselves how it is. (Saanti 2009).

These economic and cultural tensions, expressed in musically surrogated texts, continue to inform contemporary consciousness about migratory labor, while reifying the past as polarized between northern and southern economies. Saanti's own experiences with migrant labor ultimately left him in favor of traditional agricultural practices. He said, "The youth in our villages go down south to farm. Because of the cocoa yam, the youth have run down south. But

it is not working well for them. Instead, them should come home and farm here. Make food." (Saanti 2009).

Migratory labor is not the only economic concern in Birifor communities, as noted in the discussion of enemy music compositions in Chapter 7. Along with the tensions between small and large scale agricultural practices of the north and south respectively, there are interior agricultural narratives of the dangers of industrial practices, which are framed as immodest given the poverty of the community. Yichiir chronicles, through his composition *Satnyono* (rain-bringer), one case in which the gamble of economic development failed. He explained *Satnyono's* meaning as follows:

> There was a man in this community who, at farming time, took one of his many cows and sold it for money. He took that money and paid a tractor to plough his entire farm. He thought that he would harvest plenty of corn and millet this way. But that year, the rain refused to come, so everything bounced back. He couldn't achieve his aim. So now we sing, "Oh, you have suffered so much that you can sell a cow and plough your whole farm, and then the rain never comes."
>
> In the Birifor community and tradition, when there is no rain that particular year, we have someone who can make the rain come. And so this powerful man who has been making the rain come, was unable to make the rain come that year. This was a big problem for everyone, because if this man cannot bring the rain this year, then there will be no crop to harvest. The name of the man is *Satnyono* [rain (*saa*) bringer (*nyono*)]. He is the owner of the rain. He uses traditional powers to bring the rain. (Yichiir 2009).

Indicating the importance of local religious figures to agricultural life, this statement by Yichiir also reflects the ongoing sense of competition in the local community, and the conception of all events as bound in a human-centered cycle of causality. The man's misfortune is understood as invited by his greedy ambition, since if he had saved his money and continued non-mechanized agricultural practices, he would have lost less during the year's drought.

The theme of theft, competition, and violence within the community of xylophone families, detailed in Yichiir's composition *Nborfo* (see Figure 7-4), is also found in a

composition by his great grandfather, which lays out norms of behavior at funerals, arguing for a lost recognition of the gravity of funeral ceremonies. The text of Dorpunu Sagba's untitled composition is as follows:

Untitled #4

Xylophonists are suffering.
We will play, and then they will come,
Take all the money, and leave us.

Xylophone makers, they are doing well in life,
Because they get more money than us.
And when they make money,
They can go and buy a cow.
But those who play xylophone,
People will say they get money and use it for drinking.
They will describe xylophonists as useless people.

At funerals, often times xylophonists are fighting, bickering,
Because they all want to play.
One says, "I want to play,"
And another says, "no, it is my time I want to play."
There are always quarrels over performing.

As you people are always fighting over the xylophone playing,
I want to ask you, the person who died, is he a tree?
Is he not a human being?
Is he an animal or a tree?
Why are you fighting over playing?
People are always hanging their cowry bags to be the next one to play.
(Chile 2009).

Performed in the very context that it critiques, this song functions in part to enforce the norms that it laments the loss of. The actions of xylophonists, xylophone makers, and cowry exchangers are all brought to attention, and framed as inappropriate if not immoral in the context of the ritual ceremony that facilitates the transfer of the community member to the community of ancestors.

Historical Memory in Birifor Compositions

The texts of the standard and non-standard funeral compositions included in this book enact a form of historical memory that is dynamically constituted and contextualized in performance. Because of the expanding nature of Birifor experience through regional and national development (as well as influxes of global culture), these pieces and their performance can be seen as both a historical archive of cultural epochs, and an evolving form of expression that is adapted according to the idiosyncrasies of new performers. In this sense, the production of history in the memories of the community is an act charged with agency. Xylophonists as ritual specialists are thus both purveyors and negotiators of history, community, and culture. Articulating the role of xylophonists, Saanti said,

> When I go to a funeral, I play very hard and seriously. I am explaining the history from the olden days on the xylophone. I am bringing this out for people to sympathize, and when they sympathize they bring money and dash it. They can bring guinea corn, millet, fowls, and other gifts. (Saanti 2009).

Reiterating the function of xylophonists to emote and inspire an audience, Saanti frames the role of the xylophone as bringing Birifor history to bear on the moment, creating meaningful connections between funeral attendees and their cultural past. Reading the performance of these actions as symbolic, xylphonists direct the course of culture, signaling the transition between stages of personal and cultural grieving. Thus the xylophone compositions and life histories of each musician of this book, when considered in concert, provide an intimate narrative of life in Birifor communities for xylophonists over the past few generations, inheriting aspects of previous generational narratives tracing back to the foundations of Birifor culture.

Historical memory in the context of West Africa has been popularly theorized by Jean and John Comaroff (1992; see also Baum 1999; Barber 2006, 2007; McCall 1964; Rosenthal 1998; Shaw 2002), who asserted the existence of historical memory in non-discursive cultural practices, and outlined several modalities of recollection that serve to re-inscribe historical

memory. These modalities function as the mechanisms, institutions, and practices that reshape and reconfigure historical memory in West Africa over the shifting terrain of modernity. As the Comaroffs note, history is constantly recast according to local socio-cultural agendas, framing such modalities of recollection as forms of collective agency that allow West Africans to articulate their position in the contemporary and historical flows of culture, despite the restrictions of hegemonic or colonialist discourses. The modality of recollection that I have focused on here is the performance of *kogyil* compositions, in which potent texts are circulated in the re-inscription of self, culture and history. I have included texts from a range of compositions, and explained how and where their themes find purchase in the lives of contemporary musicians. In so doing, I have sought to privilege the experience of musicians in the creation of historical narrative, while expanding the locations of historical and cultural production to include speech surrogation.

Anthropologist Rosalind Shaw similarly located dialogues of historical memory and contemporary cultural practices in the ritual practices of the Temne people of Sierra Leone, outlining a related theory of the production of history (2002). According to Shaw, Temne dialogues of culture and history circulate in the space of ritual actions and observances, reconfiguring the past and present according to the evolving concerns of the local within a global expanse that extends across space and time (Shaw 2002:19). Such dialogues constantly reshape Temne divination practices, witchcraft beliefs, religious imagery, and the interface between the human and spirit world, attesting both to the dynamic modernization of "traditional" practice, and the complex social mechanisms of historical memory in Temne communities. The musical dialogue of *kogyil* music depicted here, similarly contextualizes witchcraft beliefs, mediates the relationship of the living and dead, and directs narratives of self and society.

Anthropologist Karin Barber, in a comparison of Dinka ox songs, Ila self-praises, and Yoruba songs (2007), outlined ways in which personhood is established through the texts of these three praise genres, each of which engage contrasting social configurations. Barber suggests that we view texts as "modes of making persons," rather than as "transcripts of individual consciousness." (Barber 2007:134). In texts, Barber suggests, the clearest affirmation of the categories of personhood that have preoccupied anthropologists for the past few decades--agency, authority, individuality, and self-determination--are found. Song texts are interpreted here for their life outside of the performer, and beyond the moment of utterance or invocation; for their power to create and delineate socially and culturally. They are extensions of the person that drop anchor within a local consciousness. Taking up Barber's attention to how texts generate sets of relations influence people and perception, I have argued that *kogyil* compositions both contest and create narratives of self and culture in the critical space of funeral ceremonies.

The enemy music compositions of the previous chapter, like those considered in this chapter, represent musical templates, which when performed and re-performed take on new associations and meanings. Shaped according to personal and cultural agendas, they powerfully engage the divine, retell history, and assert a new agenda in that history. They challenge witchcraft accusations, casting insults, and communicating along subversive channels. What has made this potent projection of self, community, and history through song so compelling for blind musicians, is that they otherwise have little social mobility, yet because of their musicianship, gain access to powerful mechanisms of cultural production. Their voice becomes part of Birifor cultural history through the lifespan of their compositions, through their inscription of meaning in ritual and physical space, and through the memory of audiences.

As noted by ethnomusicologist Jonathan Stock, the reinterpretation and re-performance of music casts it within new social and historical moments, imbuing music with new meaning and referents (1993:162). Since the Birifor compositions of this book are played over and over by xylophonists, their reiteration in new historical moments is guaranteed, while compositions of old continue to retain relevance to contemporary life. For Stock, this new creation of meaning included the application of a new political ideology to Chinese music in the context of contemporary performance. For the musicians of this book, the reinterpretation of compositions and their selective re-performance challenges mechanisms of social and spiritual objectification, marking music as a site of contestation, as much as the reification of tradition. Stock also articulated the importance of focusing, "not only on the histories of those whom they study but also in the ways in which 'history' (or 'tradition') is manipulated by present-day individuals and the manner in which musical sound itself invokes real or imagined historical pasts." (1993:4-5). This orientation towards the processes of history is echoed by ethnomusicologist Raúl Romero, who envisioned individual memory as short compared to the long-term preservation of experience through song and ritual action (2001). In the Birifor context, traditional compositions are manipulated to refashion the past and present with a creative license that blurs the lines between what is real and imagined. The repetition and reinterpretation of *kogyil* compositions thus becomes a form of historical consciousness; a shared conception of the past, which is circulated between the living and the dead (as outlined in Chapter 6). As a final caveat for the preceding discussion, the expression of that consciousness naturally only projects one "truth" against many others in the context of performance, acting as a reminder that, as scholars Michael Jackson (1989) and John McCall (1995) have noted, "Unlike academic discourse, which tends towards a reduction of experience to non-contradictory, essentialized and universalized truths,

lived experience encompasses–indeed, even demands–multiple truths." (McCall 1995:266). The polyvocality of the depiction of speech surrogation and historical memory in this book, has been intended to outline the multiple truths that fill Birifor musical texts. These texts demonstrate perspectival and experiential variation, as well as revealing narratives of simultaneous systems of causality. To understand how song texts allow a kind of critical agency that shapes the telling of history, I have here referenced the narratives, discursive devices, and ideologies that Birifor musicians coexist and compete with, while examining the Birifor funeral cycle in greater depth.

Part IV

"You could not step twice into the same river; for other waters are ever flowing on to you." – Heraclitus

Chapter 9: Urbanization and Musical Change

Many theorists have already depicted the processes of urbanization and globalization as they apply to music and musical change, framing them as the creative synthesis of contrasting cultural forces, overwriting previous models of monolithic capitalist influence and center-periphery domination (Appadurai 1996; Erlmann 1993; Nettl 1978; Taylor 1997; Turino 2000). The perspective that I graft from this ongoing discussion and employ in the Birifor context is that communities split by migrations and migratory work provide a vital channel for transmitting musical influence from the urban to the rural, the rural to the urban, and areas of migratory work in between. As depicted by Saanti's composition *Namunu Nyuor Daa*, labor based migrations have brought several generations of Birifor men to the southern regions of Ghana, representing the artery of influence that brings rural and urban musical culture into contact. These influences take many different forms; new cheaper materials for constructing instruments, tape recorders that permit greater standardization in tuning, new scales for performing with western instruments, new contexts of performance, and new compositions evaluating those contexts. This chapter proceeds by examining recent theories of musical and cultural change in ethnomusicology, identifying and solidifying their points of contact with preexisting discourses of globalization and urbanization, and then applying them to urban Birifor xylophone music. The goal here is first to understand how ethnomusicological theories of change, both musical and cultural, have been formulated through an evolving understanding of globalization, and second to link these models to musical change in urban Birifor communities, contributing to nomothetic projects in ethnomusicology (Rice 2002).

Globalization's axes of influence are, as articulated by Appadurai (1996), multidirectional and complex, and migratory communities in Ghana (popularly referred to in Twi

as *zongos*) generally have tremendous ethnic diversity, which facilitates a kind of lateral influence between groups. As Suzel Reily demonstrated in *Voices of the Magi: Enchanted Journeys in Southeast Brazil* (2002), music can act as a major source of common ground and understanding for otherwise relatively dissimilar groups, something that is common in Accra. The prevalence of cross-cultural performance groups in Accra offers just a hint of this, and here I frame the group Hewale Sounds–in which SK Kakraba adapts the *kogyil* to new neo-traditional compositions–as an example of how ethnically based musical traditions come into contact and are fused into new musical (and commercially viable) entities, while friendship and community ties are created across ethnic boundaries through common membership in the group. This discussion of urbanization compliments Carola Lentz's (2006) extensive research in Nandom, which shows how migrant workers were a major force behind the spread of Western aesthetics in Northwest Ghana. Lentz argued that in material, cultural, and linguistic spheres, national influence circulated through these migrant workers, who acted as experiential sponges by working in ethnically diverse communities, and through heightened exposure to global and national trends. The circulation of music and culture through a migratory population can been seen through musicians like Kakraba Lobi, who migrated south and then traveled around the world teaching and performing, integrating new influences back into traditional culture, altering the canon of Birifor music. The impact of this breadth of experience and exposure can be heard in Kakraba's songs *Africa Unite* (2004) and *Mandela* (2007), which engage themes of pan-African political organization and extol the virtue of African leaders respectively. These themes strike a strong contrast with the relatively culturally circumscribed themes of the funeral pieces considered so far, which reflect the circumstances of both urban and rural life. Through the introduction of new themes and contexts of musical performance, and through changes to the

construction and tuning of the xylophone, global and national influences are rendered in urban Birifor xylophone music, offering a glimpse of the rich context of musical and cultural change that is Accra.

Urbanization and Global Influence

Theories of urbanization, westernization, and modernization are key critical perspectives evoked in theories of musical and cultural change in ethnomusicology, each of which help map the broader framework of globalization. Bruno Nettl's edited volume *Eight Urban Musical Cultures* (1978) represented the first major collection of urban ethnomusicology, bringing together a range of studies on the development of musical practice as linked to the changing social conditions of musical performance in urban areas. In the collection, David Coplan's social history of Highlife in Accra (1978), Daniel Neumann's intimate depiction of *gharanas* in Delhi (1978), and Nettl's own chapter on the changes in Persian classical music in Teheran (1978), each identify significant musical changes resulting from the circumstances of urbanization. Musical change is depicted throughout as heavily influenced by the increasing social organization of musicians in cities, the closer proximity of musicians and musical styles within urban spatial relationships, and the impact of both westernization and modernization. For Nettl in particular, the difference between these two latter concepts is that westernization is the acculturative change that results from direct or indirect western influence, while modernization is the influence that a global historical moment brings. This distinction separates the larger and historically universal process of modernization from the historically and politically specific process of westernization.

In Nettl's collection, the tension between musicians and the socio-cultural systems that support them recurs as a theme throughout. Musical change is framed as a result of musicians

asserting their music, style, and selves against powerful socio-cultural currents. As a result, the amount of resistance experienced by musicians in urban settings is of interest to accounts of musical change, since it provides an important motivation for musical creation. Another theme relating to musical change developed in writings on urbanization is the negotiation of authenticity and tradition, as explored in ethnomusicologist Nathan Hesselink's "Samul Nori as Traditional: Preservation and Innovation in a South Korean Contemporary Percussion Genre" (2004). In this article, Hesselink examines traditional and modern Korean percussive traditions, outlining the ways that innovation within tradition is encouraged, but innovation beyond stylistic confines is discouraged. The policing of tradition is important to consider when questioning how Birifor xylophone music operates in Accra, since anything that deviates from ritual performance genres is not considered traditional. Hesselink also relates the changing contexts of performance of *samul nori* groups from folk contexts to concert halls, a transition through which formerly danceable space is replaced by fixed seating. Urban Birifor performances likewise generally replace the large open fields of rural performances with venues and concert halls that restrict dance space and introduce new enclosed acoustic contexts. Urban performances are as a result decidedly less participatory and more observational. Urban life, full of cultural and musical juxtapositions, is thus a breeding ground for musical change, as 'little traditions' find niches to compete with and critique 'great traditions.'

Theorizing Globalization

Since the 1980s discourses in ethnomusicology have frequently invoked notions of globalization to understand the transnational circulation of music and musical influence, especially in relation to the commoditization of music, the influence of urbanization on music, and the nature of musical economies, all of which contribute to musical change. Theories of

globalization originated in the political economy of sociologists Immanuel Wallerstein and Andre Gunder Frank, who were amongst the first to stress historicity in the global influence of the West on local cultures, economies, and politics. Globalization itself, in all its political, economic, cultural, institutional and technological manifestations, was at this stage envisioned as a homogenizing force that created what Marshall McLuhan termed the *global village* (1962). More recent theorists (Arjun Appadurai 2004 [1994]; Jocelyne Guilbault 1993; Stuart Hall 2004; Timothy Taylor 1997) have critically re-envisioned globalization as a series of decentralized relationships that facilitate multiple simultaneous flows of meaning and media, all fraught with contestation, competition, and negotiation. This differs from earlier theorizations of globalization in that the positions of transmission and reception are no longer located along an inherently unequal power gradient. The very development of theories of globalization, like its subject, are now understood as emanating from several co-existing centers of thought, articulated through accounts that identify the range of influences and activities that constitute globalization.

Sociologists Jan Aart Scholte, Diana Crane, George Ritzer, Douglas Goodman, and Stuart Hall, as well as anthropologists Arjun Appadurai and Charles Piot, have each contributed important insights to the discussion of globalization, all sharing a common focus on the spatial reorganization of subject positions and information flows through globalization as facilitating a deeply dynamic network of exchanges across previously unsurpassable boundaries. One of the key implications of their approaches to globalization is a departure from concepts of Americanization and Western domination, toward an examination of the disorderly networks of globalization in areas previously envisioned as peripheral. Anthropologist Charles Piot has articulated this notion with ethnographic detail through his work *Remotely Global: Village Modernity in West Africa* (1999), in which Piot looks to Kabre culture of northern Togo to

understand how modernity is equally negotiated at the cultural periphery and the center. Amongst the Kabre of northern Togo, global icons, words, symbols, and meanings are used to bolster the circulation of modern and traditional commodities in local markets. Commodity exchange in markets is of course not an exclusively modern phenomenon, but it is within traditional market systems that the symbols of modernity are appropriated and given new meaning (1999:71). In the Kabre worldview reinforced in market transactions, the spiritual potency of previously everyday objects is dramatically altered, reshaping the meaning and value of globalized commodities, styles, and ideas in a way that challenges the perception of globalization as a predetermined process of center-periphery domination.

Such alternate experiences of globalization beg the question of what exactly globalization is in a general sense, given the variability of its experience. Jan Aart Scholte identifies several common definitions of globalization, each of which map the flows of global influence differently. As Scholte explains, globalization is generally viewed as internationalization, liberalization, universalization, westernization, modernization, or deterritorialization (Scholte 2000:15-17). For Scholte, internationalization simply acknowledges the presence of global networks of trade and exchange, while liberalization views these networks as containing tremendous potential for growth and the dissolution of inequality. Universalization is the state achieved by globalization wherein people worldwide have access to a common set of commodities or resources. Theories of westernization and modernization argue that global networks circulate dynamics of power, which are generally viewed as either benevolent or malevolent. Lastly deterritorialization posits the radical potential of globalization to alter the ways in which we understand space, territory, and difference. The discourse on deterritorialization has origins in the work of scholars like Anthony Giddens, who suggested that,

"The intensification of worldwide social relations…link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa." (Giddens 1990:64). This last definition of globalization as deterritorialization is of most interest to our inquiry here, since it marks the processes of globalization as catalysts for change on many interrelated levels of cultural activity. It also critically recasts the spatial relations between socio-cultural groups, altering the nature of international exchanges in a strikingly different way than prior center-periphery modeling. Arjun Appadurai's cultural flows model in particular, outlined these new spatial relationships by introducing the concept of five transnational flows--ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, finanscapes, and ideoscapes--each of which effect different spheres of cultural activity, globalizing them in distinctive but related ways (1996). These different flows crosscut borders established by industries and nation-states, crucially deterritorializing global cultural networks, and adding new unidirectional relationships to the assessment of musical change. In Appadurai's often cited theoretical orientation, which stresses the dramatic impact technology has on knowledge and culture, there is a clear analog to Goody's notion that technologies of communication and development enable new areas of knowledge production. For Goody, technology fundamentally altered economic activity and the circulation of knowledge in rural communities, while for Appadurai it is the directionality of this influence that alters the global terrain of cultural production.

One of the central questions at the heart of theories of globalization, is to what degree it represents a homogenizing or heterogenizing force. With respect to musical change, this becomes an inquiry about how globalization leads to the extinction or mutation of local or indigenous practice, while also providing new materials, and influences for musical invention. Stuart Hall's (2004) writings on the subject assert that hegemony works in subtle and seductive

ways, permeating all aspects of global relationships in ways that do not surrender to simple binary analyses of cost and benefit. While this hegemony would seem to suggest a trend towards sameness, the cultural flows model proposed by Appadurai emphasizes the heterogenizing influence of globalization, pointing to the hybrid forms that have emerged through *glocalization*, a term popularized by Ronald Robertson (1995). It also importantly acknowledges the multidirectional trajectory of influence across what are ultimately decentralized networks. Reception theory, building upon these concepts, assigns substantial agency to the recipients of globalized representations, arguing that differences such as nationality and ethnicity heavily influence meanings assigned to mass media representations (Crane 2002). Interestingly, Appadurai seems to contest this element of reception theory through positing the fetishism of the consumer, or in other words, consumer agency is an illusion projected by the media, when in reality consumers are at best choosers (1996).

Applying these models of influence to Birifor music, they accurately articulate the layered nature of interpretations, revisions, and assertions of cultural meaning and identity that fill Birifor music. Cell phones, radios, televisions, popular musics, foreign goods, and advertising campaigns all represent different channels of global influence. While these are present in rural areas, they find greater concentration and cultural salience in cities. The degree to which Birifor xylophonists engage popular culture, likewise varies between urban and rural contexts. While the rural xylophonists of this book relied upon radios and weekly markets for national news and media, urban xylophonists step out of their front doors onto streets bustling with the flows of modern West African and global culture. While the necessity of consumption draws rural and urban Birifor alike into national and global markets, the integration of goods, styles, sounds, and ideas into their music fundamentally relies upon active cognition and

reception, placing individual and communal agency at the forefront of globalization in Birifor communities.

A Philosophical Perspective

While the aforementioned theories of globalization emphasize the inequalities of global relationships, other scholars have viewed all and any communication (including global influence) as critical to the growth of human knowledge, wherein the potential for the utopian state of global equality lies. Philosopher Jürgen Habermas' theory of the importance of communicative action in all of its forms, and the "inherent telos" in communication that necessarily leads towards "reaching understanding" in prolific sense, is one model that renders meaningful each and every act of communication along the progressive flows of history (1967, 1988). Habermas' theory of communicative action (1981) includes both the micro-structures of individual communications, and the macro-structures of communication and dissemination of knowledge throughout human history, expanding, in this case, the discussion of globalization in relation to the larger destiny of humanity. For Habermas, communication itself is the fundamental universal upon which all socio-cultural and personal development rests. With respect to the evaluation of globalization in the context of Ghana, I invoke Habermas here to show that there is an inherent trend towards mutual understanding and growth created by all forms of communication and interaction, including globalization. On a practical level, this means that globalization, while negatively impacting some forms of music and musical communities, will eventually create a state of heightened awareness of music and musical cultures on a global scale through the myriad of new interactions that it makes possible. While globalization is certainly a force loaded with unequal power relationships that must be reckoned with, its processes are also an important part of the larger trajectory of humanity towards utopian states of knowledge and

being. The corrupting forces of transnational music industries are more than familiar to ethnomusicologists, supplanting local musics, musicians, and instruments with powerful flows of globally commoditized musical cultures. However, Habermas' vision suggests that a collective awareness will eventually be reached by all participants in global networks of cultural exchange that will level out relationships of power, despite the economic disparity and conflict that has so far been a historical constant.

Change as Knowledge

The notion of change, of alteration or variation if not progression over time, is amongst the most fundamental ways in which humans know and learn about the world, one that dominated Aristotle's philosophical works. On an epistemological level, the observation and awareness of change makes all sorts of distinctions, conclusions, and deductions in daily life possible. From basic reasoning to complex scientific observations about the natural world, comparing entities from distinct time periods yields telling information about reality, no matter how it is philosophically construed. Cultural conceptions of time similarly universally accommodate change, even when change is perceived as cyclical or spiral, as in the case of some African religions, or when it is perceived as spatial but not temporal, as in the case of several groups in New Guinea's highlands (Hassig 2001:3; Mbiti 1999 [1969]). Even sound itself is modeled as change in pressure transmitted through a solid, liquid, or gas. While there are seemingly infinitesimal levels on which we can address this fundamental movement of reality, the point here is that change is a baseline through which music and tradition are understood.

The very foundations of ethnomusicology reside in questions of cultural and musical variation and change, from Bela Bartok's attempt to statistically triangulate regional musical repertoires and performance practice in Eastern Europe (1976 [1931]), to the massive

comparative project of Alan Lomax's cantometrics (2000 [1968]), to Gerhard Kubik's assertion of the prolific importance of individual musicians in musical change (1999), the centrality of variation and change to ethnomusicology is clear.

Yet, historically this emphasis on change has been so central to evolutionist models of culture in anthropology that some theoretical streams have diverged from or even dismissed comparative approaches to cultural activity, embracing a perspective focused on individual cultural units with minimal lateral reference to other cultures. In ethnomusicology the 1950s witnessed a distancing of ethnomusicological projects from those of comparative musicology, in part due to a new appreciation of the cultural aspects of musical practice, and the value of understanding musical traditions through indigenous concepts and frameworks. While the reasons for the shift away from the normative projects of comparative musicology make sense historically, contemporary ethnomusicologists face new problems interfacing disparate ethnographic studies and theoretical perspectives into a cohesive pool of shared knowledge in the discipline, a project that comparative studies will inevitably aid. With respect to the study of musical change, the approach I take here is that the combined insights from both descriptive and prescriptive accounts yield both a historical chronicle of the theorization of musical change, and a heightened awareness of the range influences that propell musical change.

Musical change, especially in regards to the modernization of tradition, is often sparked by transnational influences conveyed across global networks, as noted in the foregoing discussion. Exactly how musical change is inspired through globalization has been explored by many ethnomusicologists through case studies, ethnographies, and theoretical writings (Austerlitz 1997; Guilbault 1993; Neuenfeldt 1997; Polak 2000; Turino 2000; Velez 2000; Waxer 2002). Timothy Taylor's work *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets* (1997)

examines a set of ethnomusicological case studies as they help establish the newly global nature of music, with special attention to the new resultant cultural figurations. Taylor discusses the appropriation and resistance that artists enact from the so-called cultural center *and* periphery, complicating our understanding of the power dynamics behind global music networks in a similar way to Piot (1999) and Appadurai (1996). He also discusses the feminist music projects made possible through globalization, and the potential for cross-cultural collaborations facilitated by globalization. Attending to the myriad of issues surrounding identity, Taylor articulates some of the confusion created by the "new ethnicities" that arise from the deconstruction of regional barriers, while also discussing the subtle manipulations of identity and authenticity by musicians. In urban Birifor communities, this new ethnicity draws from surrounding languages, cultures, and ideas to create a new sense of being 'northern' that transgresses former boundaries of ethnic designation, which were already malleable as outlined in Chapter 3.

Tim Taylor's overall contribution to understanding music in globalization comes in the form of a deconstruction of uniform notions of cultural identity, supported by concrete examples of the hybridization of music, culture, and ethnicity. In both urban and rural contexts, Birifors construct personal and musical identities amidst an influx of national and international influence. The Ghanaian Band Hewale Sounds, as a multi-ethnic and musically diverse neo-traditional group, is an iconic example of this hybridization, while the linkages created between northern ethnic groups in Mamobi, Accra, is evidence of the fluidity of culture and ethnicity.

Acknowledging that globalization, urbanization, westernization, modernization, and deterritorialization represent newly salient influences on music, there are still many other factors at play in musical development, variation, and change. Seeking to understand the variables at play in musical change cross culturally, ethnomusicologists have proposed contrasting models of

musical change that outline the various generative resources for musical creation. Surveying these different conceptions of musical change below, I propose that while it is possible to map general theoretical aspects of musical change, actual musical change occurs as the result of many non-generalizable contextual factors. Still, there is much to be gained from the comparison of musical change in different traditions, as it boils down the cross-cultural components of musical change, revealing the complex interplay of internal agency and external influence.

Models of Musical Change in Ethnomusicology

Melville Herskovits and (1941) Richard Waterman (1951), two foundational scholars in the discipline of ethnomusicology, approached the issues of cultural and musical change through the concept of syncretism, which they applied to the interactions of African and European musical forms. According to their conception of change, cultural or musical traditions are more likely to fuse together when there are preexisting similarities between them. Thus in the case of African and European musics, their mutual use of diatonic scales and polyphony facilitated their synthesis into new forms in the U.S., which still retained their own respective identities. This early mapping of the forces behind musical change represented an important shift in the theorization of African music and European music, emphasizing their sameness against the historical trend of subordinating African music. It also helped to explain the immensely productive influence African music has on all of its off-continent fusions. Interested in African American music, Herskovits and Waterman proposed that while African and European traditions had a profound impact upon each other because of their sameness, other musical traditions like those of Native Americans, did not "syncretize" with European music because of their minimal shared musical traits.

In the early 1980s, Bruno Nettl, in his model of musical change, suggested that there are

four primary types of change that occur in musical traditions, each of which are determined by the relative degree of conservatism built into a given musical tradition. The first is the entire substitution of one system or tradition for another, wherein a previously popular style of music is overtaken by a distinctly new one. Reasons for this include changing cultural contexts that make new incoming influences more appealing, accessible, or practical. This represents perhaps the most drastic impact of cultural circumstances on music, and does not apply to the Birifor genres discussed here. James Porter, among others, has pointed out that this kind of change is rare, and should not be the focus of studies of musical change. He contends that, "It is mistaken moreover, in my view, to talk about systemic change as if it were the only important kind of change. Changes of whole "systems" and radical innovations are, after all, comparatively rare, especially in traditional societies." (1988:82). The second type of musical change is what Nettl describes as the radical alteration of a preexisting musical system, as is the case when a new technology or instrumental resource is introduced, when a drastic socio-political change occurs, or when an individual musician emerges with an entirely new musical vision. As an example, the transatlantic slave trade created radical alterations across the Diaspora, as Africans were forced to channel their pre-existing musical practices into new languages, new instruments, and new conditions of servitude. For Birifor professional musicians, the absence of traditional sources of patronage for urban music necessitates the use of the xylophone in other performance contexts and musical styles. Rather than radically altering the system, however, this seems to be expanding it in conjunction with the geographic extension of Birifor communities.

The third type of musical change is what Nettl termed gradual, or incremental change. This is something akin to the kind of constant development that many musical traditions experience through exposure to the vast array of musical styles that circulate in our

contemporary world. Socio-political factors, such as those that led Zairian rumba through a dramatic popularity and then decline under Mobutu's brutal regime in Zaire (Democratic Republic of the Congo) (White 2008), can perpetuate such change, or even simpler developments such as the expansion of repertoire or style by individual groups or musicians who fuse related styles, practices, and instrumental resources. This third category is distinct from Nettl's fourth, in which variation within a given tradition occurs, but still maintains the tradition's stylistic conventions, prescriptions, and integrity (1983:178). This fourth category of change includes new compositions by ensuing generations of musicians who seek to compose within the generally accepted guidelines of a tradition, and applies to the Birifor funeral xylophone repertoire. Alan Lomax's (1968) argument that song traditions tend to be conservatively oriented towards the maintenance of style, supports this fourth conception of musical change, as Lomax argued for the general continuity of stylistic development. Yet for others like Gerard Béhague (1983), this last category of change indicates the inherent potential for change in all musical traditions, challenging the very notion of static musical traditions. Béhague suggests that the relative permissibility of variation within a musical system marks its internal potential for change and development (1983). Thus, while certain traditions may have a greater propensity for growth and change than others, the mere repetition of music, mapped across new bodies and new instruments, represents change.

Another influential model of musical change in ethnomusicology which relates to this mapping of music across bodies, as well as the location of musical meaning, comes from the writings of John Blacking in the 1970s, whose general focus on the human elements of music making and the importance of local meaning to the perception of music, contextualized music and musical practice in individually and socially experienced human realities. This type of

thinking represented a new synthesis of anthropological and ethnomusicological theory at the time by looking to contemporary persons to understand music and musical practice, more than to historical recordings or compositions. Blacking wrote, "...*All* music is folk music, in the sense that music cannot be transmitted or have meaning without associations between people," asserting that meaning, transmission, and most importantly people are central to any discussion of music (1973:x). This attention to embodied cognition is a departure from the examination of music (or other aspects of culture) on the level of shared social realties alone. People consciously invoke and reinvent social, musical, and cultural meanings, making the presence of all meaning the result of contemporary human actors. For Blacking, musical change does not follow laws anymore than emotions do, and is similarly inappropriately cast through narratives of structure and progress. Musical change from this perspective is subjective, artistically realized, and personally and culturally contextualized.

While Blacking argues that musical change is inherently radical and unpredictable, subsequent theorists such as Gerhard Kubik stress the internal and external stimuli that intermix with personal agendas and priorities to propel musical change. Kubik (1983) suggests that the availability of new materials, new technology, new ideological frameworks, and the ever-expanding terrain of commercialism, provide individuals and music cultures with new raw materials to create music, falling in line with the thinking of Appadurai (1996), Goody (2006), and Taylor (1997). With regard to internal change, Kubik emphasizes the importance of individuals, their life histories and experiences, and small and large-scale changes in musical cultures, making his theoretical stance compatible with Blacking's, yet distinct because of Kubik's emphasis on the importance of material and social influences on musical change. This theoretical orientation is evident in Kubik's use of archaeological research to support his theory

of the distribution of iron bells, and subsequently timelines, across Western and Central Africa. In this book, I have presented Birifor *kogyil* traditions through this person first approach, which I use in the ensuing discussion of the *kogyil* in Accra as the primary linkage between academic narrative and actual experience.

So far, we have traced models of musical change through Nettl's writings on urbanization, westernization, and modernization, Hesselink's unpacking of the relationship between authenticity and the maintenance of tradition, Taylor's complication of globalization, Herskovits' and Waterman's assessment of cultural propensities for syncretism between similar traditions, Nettl's models of the various degrees and types of musical change, and finally Blacking's and Kubik's valuation of the role of individuals in musical change, and material influences on musical change respectively. These theories demonstrate the historical progression of theorizing musical change in ethnomusicology as complex and non-linear. Individual scholars have developed contrasting approaches to musical change that do not follow a clear disciplinary trajectory, as ideas developed by one theorist do not always suit subsequent works, nor do they necessarily stick in disciplinary discourse. Those that I apply in the ensuing discussion of Birifor music in Accra are invoked for their explicatory power, which changes along with the music depicted.

The Musical Context of Accra

Accra, as the economic, political, and musical capital of Ghana, is a premier context for musical innovation and change in the country, due in part to the range of national ethnically based musical genres that interact and mix within the bustling capital (see Figure 9-1). Dance club DJs remix international acoustic and electronic music (like dub, reggae, and reggae-ton) with Ghanaian songs, rhythms, orchestrations, and languages, while festivals, concert halls,

schools, and bars feature acoustic traditional, classical, and neo-traditional musics. The musical compilation *Ghana Club Bangerz Volume 2* (2009), offers a glimpse of the "mashups" that happen in electronic genres, while acoustic genres show a similar hybridity in what is a rich environment of musical cross-pollination. For most Birifor xylophonists living in Accra, each day brings a constant barrage of music from the radios and massive sound systems that blare out of shops, and the various ethnically based musical ensembles that are the centerpiece of religious and ceremonial activity. The Mamobi-Nima area of Accra, as a culturally diverse area of immigrant groups, is home to most Birifor musicians living in the city, maintaining a reputation in Ghana for being both an area of poverty and violence, and an area of strong cultural identity. This reputation is in part earned by the local gang "The Nima Boys," (a name no doubt inspired by the "Area Boys" gangs of Lagos, Nigeria) of which several Birifors I know are a part. The influence of this and other gangs has created an image of Mamobi/Nima as unsafe, which has some statistical truth to it.

Mamobi/Nima is also home to a large Hausa population, and Mosques fill the air at least five times a day with calls to prayer (see Figure 9-2), acting as a constant reminder of the mixed ethnic and religious make-up of the neighborhood. Home to northern immigrants from both the east and west of Ghana, Mamobi/Nima conceals several "spots" that serve northern drinks and food, and are a popular social destination for Birifor men. It is in these informal contexts that the frictions between ethnic groups living in such close contact are vocalized and eased in joking and teasing relationships. Musically, this proximity translates into an increased awareness of the numerous cultural traditions that constitute Ghanaian music as a whole, which facilitates lateral musical influence and hints at the rich intellectual musical climate of Ghana, wherein musicians of one tradition are almost always conversant in several others. For xylophonists living in

Mamobi/Nima, however, most of the paid opportunities for musical performance are spread across the city, while the clientele that buys their xylophones from urban workshops is likewise diffuse, pulling xylophonists out into the city.

Patronage for urban xylophonists is fundamentally different than that of rural xylophonists. While rural funeral ceremonies entail the ritual payment of xylophonists and percussionists, urban performances of xylophone music as secular entertainment rely upon payment from event organizers, band leaders, bar and club owners, and occasionally educational institutions and private students. In these economic relationships, the surrogated appeals for fairness in reparation of songs like *Nborfo* have little influence. Instead, urban xylophonists engage in the fickle economy of musicianship in Accra, where gigs are regular, but the 'dollas' earned rarely make it past bandleaders' pockets. SK Kakraba's source of income over the past nine years reflects this, and has shifted between institutional support, concert performance, foreign students, and odd jobs for his extended family. SK's cousin Ba-ere Yotere, another talented xylophonist from Saru who migrated south to Accra, conversely relies upon a standard salary as a security guard, a position he has held for over seven years, rather than earnings as a musician, even though he has also performed internationally with Kakraba Lobi. As outlined in the discussion of urbanization and globalization above, urban contexts bring with them new factors for music and musical performance, and these economic relationships represent just one of several aspects of urban Birifor xylophone music that distinguish it from its rural counterparts.

Hewale Sounds

The Ghanaian musical group Hewale Sounds, led by *antenteben* (end blown flute) virtuoso Dela Botri, and featuring SK Kakraba on *kogyil*, combines African, African-American, and global Afro-Diasporic musical influences into a new characteristically Ghanaian sound.

Hewale Sounds consists of master musicians from several Ghanaian musical traditions, representing a literal manifestation of the musical and ethnic diversity of Accra (see Figure 9-3 and 9-4). Each of the musicians in Hewale Sounds brings his own individual performance background to bear on what is a traditionally based but heavily adapted musical style, fusing musical influences from all over the world. While their album entitled *Trema* (2003) demonstrates a jazz influenced approach to neo-traditional Ghanaian music, their following release entitled *Dela Botri and Bakuye* (2004), features hiplife MCs rapping over slightly simplified, but still trademark Hewale Sounds orchestrations. The performance of hiplife with live instrumental and traditionally rooted accompaniment by Hewale Sounds can be read as a strong musical statement about the stylistic importance African instruments and live performance to African music. Seeking to both further popularize neo-traditional music and to reform the hiplife movement, Hewale Sounds laid out a new musical synthesis through their integration of traditional music with a Ghanaian hiplife vocal style, which fuses lyrics in English, Ga, Twi, Ewe, and French.

With respect to their usual performance of neo-traditional music without hiplife stylings, Hewale Sounds borrows the orchestrational approach of the classic and controversial Pan-African Orchestra album *Opus I* (1995), creating harmonies between vocals, *antenteben* (flute), and *kogyil*, as well as melorhythmic interplay between the *gome* (bass tension frame drum), *kpanlogo* (conical tapered single-headed drum), and *agogo* (double iron bell), replicating a style that is complex yet utilizes simplified traditional compositional forms (see Figure 9-5). Nana Danso Abiam's Pan-African Orchestra was both innovative and controversial for its combination of Ghana's diverse instrumental resources and compositional genres, many of which as seen here have sacred and ritualistic functions. Hewale Sounds, while successfully navigating the flows of

global musical culture to create albums that are more smoothly received, is hardly the first group to jump into the pool of Afro-Diasporic culture and emerge with a successful music and style. African musicians such as Fela Kuti, Thomas Mapfumo, Salif Keita, Ali Farka Touré, and many others similarly found inspiration in African American traditions like jazz, blues, R&B, and rock, integrating them into new musical styles that flourish in global markets. Ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino, in his work on cosmopolitanism and cultural capital in Zimbabwe, explains that what is African music, and what is American music, does not always correspond with the ethnicity of its performers or innovators (2000). Thomas Mapfumo, the originator of Zimbabwean chimurenga music, was exposed to North American jazz and rock before he delved into traditional Shona music. Turino explains that it was a local demand for Shona music that led Mapfumo to incorporate Shona music into his Afro-rock style, revealing the potential disjuncture between ethnic and cultural/musical identity. In the case of Hewale Sounds, each musician grew up steeped in traditional Ghanaian music, while also exposed to national and international popular genres through Ghanaian popular media, and then later the urban nightlife of Accra. When they perform together, however, the cultural meanings of each instrument and song style are stripped in favor of the global model of music as secular entertainment.

In the instrumentation and orchestration of Hewale Sounds, the *kogyil* (generally a C or G pentatonic xylophone with a fifteenth key to fill out the upper octave) acts as the harmonic backbone of the group, filling the chordal role of a guitar or keyboard established in popular music genres. The use of Western rather than traditionally tuned xylophones, was an introduction of both Nana Danso Abiam and Kakraba Lobi, who sought to employ the instrument within the tonality of international popular genres. A, C, and G pentatonic xylophones are now ubiquitous in urban xylophone maker's shops, and tourists, schools, and

southern musicians request this modified tuning, though they are almost entirely absent from rural workshops. Two songs from Hewale Sounds' album *Trema* (2003) exemplify the use of the fifteen key urban xylophone in neo-traditional contexts. The first, *Kalabule* (see Figure 9-6), a modern composition translated as "smuggling," uses a repeating xylophone figure as the rhythmic and harmonic center of the piece, which is clearly stated as the primary theme, and then reduced to block chords behind soloists and omitted entirely in the drum solo that ends the song. The opening and closing figure and fermata, reflect the modern compositional techniques used by the group, while Dela's solo departs from the pentatonic framework to invoke heptatonic scalar divisions. The second song, *Saabewana* (see Figure 9-7), places the xylophone in a more central role as the primary bearer of melody, which flutes match and harmonize with, reflecting the origins of the song as a Dagara rain song. The more complex xylophone part of this piece contains both a repeating left hand pattern, and a melody stated in unison by *kogyil* and *antenteben*. There is a xylophone solo during the closing forty seconds of the piece, however, this is used primarily to repeat the main theme of the piece in reprise. Both of these pieces reflect typical songs of the larger neo-traditional repertoire and genre which several younger bands emulate in Accra, wherein repetitive and relatively simple xylophone parts are used as a melodic and/or harmonic basis of compositions, contrasting traditional genres of funeral xylophone music, in which lengthy compositions are executed through a virtuosic speed and rhythmic density. There are of course other applications of the xylophone in Ghanaian music. However, Hewale Sounds provides a clear example of the differing use of the xylophone in new musical genres that are still acoustic and decidedly Ghanaian, but integrates global musical concepts and compositional practices.

Musical Change in Birifor Xylophone Music

To conclude this discussion of musical change in Birifor xylophone music, the general processes it invokes, and the personal agendas and perspectives it reflects, we can recall the primary changes in rural and urban xylophone music, that we have encountered in this book. In the rural musical practice of Birifor xylophonists, the very iteration and re-performance of compositions gives them new meaning, while improvisation and ornamentation constantly shift the aural face of xylophone music. The built-in variation of the traditional funeral cycle, wherein new compositions are interspersed within canonical songs, constantly adds new meanings and melodies to the funeral genre. Meanwhile, the increased prevalence of tape recorders and recording technologies in Ghana facilitates greater musical dialogues, and allows for the proliferation of specific tunings of the xylophone, which as noted vary by patriclan. New rural performance contexts, such as churches, place the *kogyil* both within new musical and religious systems, and within a different musical ensemble of percussionists and vocalists.

In urban musical practice, the xylophone is employed in a range of new contexts. These include educational institutions like the University of Ghana, Legon, performance halls and venues like the National Theatre of Ghana or the Alliance Française d'Accra, urban funerals such as the urban observance of Kakraba Lobi's death, and finally the street, which is the location from which Kakraba Lobi spring-boarded his career to the international stage. Traditional performance in concert halls and on the international stage bring new dimensions of cultural authorship, which lead musicians to present traditional pieces in abbreviated form and segmental fashion. This tends to include more singing, and a spoken narrative that weaves together education and entertainment. The practice of teaching Birifor culture during musical performance by Kakraba Lobi and others lends credence to the ethnomusicological project taken up here of culturally situating musical sound. These new contexts of musical performance often

also feature non-native performers, playing xylophone, *gaŋgaa*, and singing. In the context of neo-traditional performance groups like Hewale Sounds, the xylophone is no longer used as the lead melodic and rhythmic voice, instead playing a chordal role. This musical application is thus devoid of surrogated texts, lacks the solos and intense dance sections of traditional repertoire, uses western tunings, and generally features xylophone parts consisting of just one or two repeated phrases, as heard in Hewale Sounds' *Saabewana* and *Kalabule* (2003), and the Pan-African Orchestra's rendition of the Bawa song *Yaa Yaa Kole* (1995).

The construction of the xylophone in urban contexts, as seen in urban workshops such Tijaan Dorwana's, alters the xylophone in substantial ways, bringing it closer to its European counterparts. Tijaan Dorwana's sons Eric and Isaac are the brawn behind the family xylophone workshop in Pig Farm, Accra, a maze of houses, roads, businesses, and gutters. Churning out xylophones at a much faster pace than traditional workshops, Dorwana and sons attribute their speed to the new materials they use, including a new lighter wood (both in hue and weight) than the traditional *niira* (rosewood), which is fully dried in just one day over a fire, rather than taking six months to one year to dry fully. This new wood, however, performs poorly with seasonal temperature change, being more brittle and losing resonance through warping over the years. In this workshop (see Figure 9-8), *kogyile* are constructed with electric planes and sanders, giving them a more pronounced geometric quality, but less timbral variation than the hand carved xylophones of northern workshops like Vuur Sandaar's. These urban xylophones are built without the traditional carrying hoop, and often use synthetic materials such as rope instead of gut, and wax paper instead of spider membranes. Due to popular demand, the tunings are usually A, C, or G pentatonic, though urban xylophone makers also make traditionally tuned xylophones as well. Yet another instrumental variation is found in the construction of xylophone

mallets (see Figure 2-18), which are often machine cut, and use tire rubber rather than natural rubber. Kakraba Lobi also popularized a shorter stick by about an inch and a half, which is lighter and easier to manipulate than the full size mallets that require considerable strength and dexterity to weild.

From these examples musical change in the form of national and global influence is reworked by both rural and urban Birifor xylophonists towards the maintenance and cultural codification of a Birifor musical identity, and towards the development of the *kogyil* within new musical genres, wherein it takes on new meanings and new tonal qualities. Over the course of this chapter, I have outlined just a few of the concrete changes that occur in traditional and neo-traditional genres, suggesting that all the musical activity represented in this book inevitably contributes to musical change inline with the theories of previous ethnomusicologists (Béhague 1983; Blacking 1978; Kubik 1981, 1999). Labor migrations in northern communities are critical to the growth of urban and rural musics, acting as Carola Lentz (2006) suggested as primary conduit for cultural influence. The tensions of migratory labor outlined in the previous chapter, here translate into yet another channel through which Ghana's wealth of cultural and musical traditions circulate. In the context of Accra Birifor xylophone music is, like the numerous other traditional musics of Ghana, couched in a rich musical environment that embraces hybridization as a cultural and musical strategy, supporting both the reification of the traditional into narratives of cultural identity, and the development of new musical genres and figurations (see Figure 9-9).

Conclusion and Reflections

The two primary questions that have driven this book and the four theoretical areas I have invoked in the presentation of Birifor *kogyil* repertoires have been chosen according to the lives and musical expression of contemporary Birifor musicians. Their priorities and perspectives have been the mainstay of this study, which has sought to interface their personal experience with studies from ethnomusicology, anthropology, history, and disability studies. The first question posed at the outset of this book, of why blind xylophonists experience subordination along multiple interrelated fronts in Birifor communities, has been answered with reference to the historical prevalence of blindness and blindness epidemics in the Northwest, systems of witchcraft and spiritual stigma, local ideologies of ability, jealousy and gossip, the ever-presence of the enemy, the fledgling state of institutional support for persons with disabilities in the Northwest, and finally the compound effect of blind xylophonists' status as both spiritual outcasts and ritual specialists. The responses of blind xylophonists to these persistent frictions and fictions, naturally expand far beyond the personal narratives and compositions included here. However, xylophone music as a speech surrogate, as shown here, acts as a critical platform for the exercise of social, cultural, and spiritual agency in the ritual contexts of rural Birifor life, representing a key medium for engaging systems of oppression.

The four theoretical points developed in this book have each helped map the processes at play in these two questions, bringing the elusive power dynamics of rural communities to the forefront of the study of Birifor musical culture. The first point that social, cultural, musical and ideological systems must be understood through the individual and not the abstracted collective, helped establish the difference between the personally experienced and socially attributed personhood of blind and sighted xylophonists. The second point that the subordination

experienced by blind xylophonists is compound, consisting on the one hand of witchcraft accusations, jealousy, and gossip because of their role as ritual specialists. On the other hand it consists of a spiritual and social ideology of ability circulating in Birifor communities, emphasized the policing of bodies and activities that occurs for persons with disabilities. This excavated not only the ableism of musical practice, but also the socio-cultural and spiritual locations of disability that confront blind xylophonists on a daily basis. The third point that Birifor xylophone music is the site of a carefully constructed historical memory, cultural consciousness, and gnosis through its surrogated texts performed in ritual context, drew attention to the deeper meanings that circulate in funeral xylophone music, which are not at first apparent. Both contemporary and traditional song texts convey historical themes and events, recall shared existential challenges, and establish archetypal cultural relationships, while xylophone performance as symbolic action in ritual contexts evokes corporeal meanings through mimesis and ceremony. The fourth and final point was that the 'rural' and the 'urban' are both sites of constant musical change propelled by individual innovators, who actively engage their cultural and musical contexts. This highlighted the role that individuals from this study have played in musical change in Ghanaian xylophone genres, and who has been marginalized from that change. My articulation of constant variation and change within traditional Birifor xylophone genres, framed the use of the *kogyil* in urban neo-traditional and popular music genres as the result of a generative musical approach that lies at the heart of Birifor musicianship, rather than as the result of the invisible hand of modernization. As noted, there are identity politics that police whose music is codified within preexisting genres, and only time will tell whether or not the compositions of the blind xylophonists of this study are retained in Birifor culture at large. However, the creativity and ingenuity that blind and sighted xylophonists channel into

xylophone composition and performance fuels constant change within traditional genres, and expands into new musical contexts, attesting to both the musical and discursive value of the xylophone. The goal throughout this study has not been to create cultural or musical fact, but rather to voice individual perspectives on the contemporary circulations of musical culture, which are fundamentally in motion.

Path Travelled

Chapter 1: Introduction, took on the widespread stereotype in the Birifor communities I worked in that blind or disabled persons are useless or unable. The common saying, "*Bo le jɔɔn ni toun maal*?" (What can a blind man do?), represents just one manifestation of the underlying ideology of ability of global culture that is reinforced in Birifor contexts through the transference of biological and social narratives of disability into spiritual terms. This form of structural violence enacted against disabled persons was articulated with reference to recent disability theorists, and also the early critical discourses of power and subordination they were inspired by. The thesis stated was that disability in the Northwest functions fundamentally differently than in other contexts, because the already heavy emphasis on physical ability as the marker of social value in rural farming communities is compounded by witchcraft beliefs that stigmatize the disabled body as the product of negative mystical forces. I argued that a spiritual model of disability must be included with the social model developed by Siebers (2008, 2010), and the cultural model developed by Snyder and Mitchell (2006), to accurately describe the construction of disability in rural West Africa.

In *Chapter 2: Xylophone music in Africa*, I contextualized the Birifor *kogyil* in relation to the history of the xylophone in Africa as depicted through ethnomusicological scholarship and commercial recordings, and also in relation to some general qualities of Ghana as musical

context. Through this history the importance of the deep and raspy tone of the large pentatonic *kogyil* used by xylophonists in the ritual context of Birifor funerals makes sense in relation to the construction, use, and socio-spiritual significance of xylophones in other African musical traditions. The use of the *kogyil* in particular as a medium of inscribing culture and negotiating spiritual relationships through ritual, was traced through previous research efforts in the region, each of which posited various structurings of Birifor culture. The arched keyboard of the *kogyil*, its use in small ensembles, and the soloistic and expository nature of performance, were all mentioned to group the Birifor tradition with regional counterparts, of which Sisaala and Dagara traditions have the strongest areas of overlap. I also suggested that xylophonists as active musical agents react to the national reality of cultural diversity by reapplying the instrumental resource of the *kogyil* in new musical genres, while also altering the xylophone according to modern tonalities and economies.

In *Chapter 3: Ethnicity and Ritual Contexts of Musical Performance*, I recounted the known history of Ghanaian Birifors, beginning with colonial and missionary encounters, and proceeding through contemporary written histories by scholars such as Carola Lentz (2006). Through the works of early anthropologists and travelers I explored the power dynamics and political events that led to the construction of ethnicity in the Northwest of Ghana, outlining the systems of political control that ethnicity has been used to legitimate, and locating the Birifor musicians of this study in relation to the regional populations and historical themes. I suggested that the colonial and postcolonial history of the Northwest makes the codification of tradition and ethnic identity there extremely complex, as this history introduced new relationships and identities that were then integrated into, and laid-over, pre-existing forms of socio-political organization. I recalled the systems of clanship, taboos anchored in shrines, and the mediation of

local religious specialists that the seemingly disorganized peoples of the pre-colonial Northwest used to maintain a fluid system of political organization, which endures in contemporary culture alongside regional and national governance. I also pointed to the creative use of ethnic and cultural labels by musicians like Kakraba Lobi, who took the name 'Lobi' in part for its broad association with the great xylophone cultures of the hinterland region. This chapter also introduced the primary social, cultural, and economic realities of contemporary southern Birifor communities, outlining the double-descent kinship system that Goody famously identified, while mapping some musical characteristics across patriclans. The primary contexts of xylophone performance--of funerals for the *kogyil*, and festivals for the *bɔgyil*--were depicted as part of an overall process of grieving and ordering the seasons respectively, both of which place the xylophone in a central cultural and spiritual role. The overall Birifor identity to which this study applies was thus carefully contextualized in relation to the fluidity of culture and ethnicity in the region and the available research on Birifor communities.

Chapters 4 and 5 depicted the musical life histories of the blind and sighted xylophonists of this study through a person-centered representation anchored in my own fieldwork experiences. The rural geography of the Northwest was introduced through this chapter, which the priorities and problems of each xylophonist were mapped across. While the concerns of blind xylophonists are distinct from those of sighted xylophonists because of the way disability functions in Birifor communities, both chapters outlined shared areas of overlap that apply to all xylophonists as ritual specialists. These included the negative occupational hazards of susceptibility to jealousy, witchcraft, theft, violence, gossip, and generally improper behavior at funerals, but also the positive artistic and musical concerns of maintaining tradition and correctly completing ritual obligations, as well as long lasting friendships that bind the small community.

The personal accounts of xylophonists from two distinct generations helped articulate the systems of Birifor culture posited in previous research through contemporary musicians who view kinship, spirituality, culture, and society through their own unique experiences. The importance and extent of friendship between xylophonists and the impact that this has on the reception of blind xylophonists by sighted xylophonists, was emphasized as an important and often overlooked aspect of social and ideological resistance. Through the human relationships of this chapter, the performance practice and repertoire of Birifor xylophone music circulates and is passed down through generations, as seen through the musical lineages of El Vuur, Kakraba Lobi, and Belendi Saanti, embodied in Maal Yichiir, Maal Chile, Ni-Ana Alhansan, Vuur Mwan, Vuur Sandaar, Kuyiri Darigain, and SK Kakraba.

Chapter 6: Blindness and Witchcraft's Causality, chronicled the history of blindness in the Northwest, providing a review of the medical documentation of disease borne ocular degeneration, a leading cause of blindness in the region, as well as systems of support for persons with blindness. Access to education for persons with blindness in the region was discussed in brief, which cast light both on the relative scarcity of educational institutions for the blind and the tremendous role Christians and missionaries have played in funding the schools that do exist. Traditional Birifor religion, with its emphasis on the Earth as the source of all life and the ever-presence of spirits, was differentiated from witchcraft based upon the presence of witchcraft beliefs in secular and Christian society and the alternate causality that governs witchcraft. Traditional religious practice, as noted, places the funeral xylophone within a delicate cosmic relationship, which requires the observance of certain taboos and rituals in order to maintain spiritual order. While all of the xylophonists of this study reported being targets of witchcraft, I characterized the Birifor system of witchcraft as particularly damaging to blind

persons because of the strongly negative spiritual stigma it applies to disability.

Unpacking the system of causality operative in witchcraft beliefs, and in Birifor communities in general, I suggested that witchcraft's causal explanations of blindness socially and spiritually entrap blind persons. In addition to the direct assessment of blindness as a result of witchcraft, the interpretation of physical variation or transformation, and generally unexplainable events as manifestations of negative spiritual forces, labels the blind body as spiritually tainted, even if only by association. Birifor systems of witchcraft thrive not in opposition to other religious or rational systems, but rather in parallel, making the re-reading of disability as a construct in Birifor communities extremely difficult since rational, experiential, and medical explanations of blindness are subsumed within the mystical forces that circulate in Birifor communities. The two Christian compositions by Yichiir discussed in this chapter, demonstrated the relevance of a Christian ethic to his personal life and socio-cultural position of subordination. The origins of witchcraft beliefs in traditional society and the negative interpretation of disability through witchcraft has led blind xylophonists like Maal Yichiir to embrace Christian ideologies, which for him level the spiritual playing field.

The compositional genre known as *dondomo yiel* was explored in depth in *Chapter 7: Enemy Music*, with reference to several compositions by blind and sighted xylophonists, for the contestation and documentation of culture that they provide. In these compositions the mistreatment of disabled persons in Birifor communities becomes clear through personal narratives of discrimination, while the hardships faced by xylophonists are depicted as the result of jealousy and violent intent of the enemy as a backlash against their musical prowess. Several other aspects of Birifor culture were invoked through the texts of enemy music compositions, including witchcraft and shapeshifting, the power of God over witchcraft, the circumstances of

rural poverty, cheating in business dealings, the importance of education, the ritual appeasement of ancestors, tensions between the sexes, and finally the broad category of physical transgression and psychological duress that is the enemy. Considered primarily for the meanings encoded in their surrogated texts, these songs represent critical perspectives on, and contestations of, Birifor cultural systems from the inside out. They anchor the abstract theorization of disability and musicianship in Birifor culture, through carefully composed and publicly performed enemy music.

Chapter 8: Historical Memory and Speech Surrogation in Funeral Music, identified both these processes in the Birifor *kogyil* funeral cycle, whose compositions use speech surrogation as a communicative strategy of indirection and veiling to inject the retelling of history and culture with personal experiences and agendas. Navigating the historical representations of African's using drums to "speak," this chapter presented speech surrogation both as a literal process of encoding syllables and phrases into musical sound, and as a cultural strategy of communication that constitutes a location of Birifor deep knowledge. The Birifor funeral cycle of xylophone compositions was related in this chapter for the surrogated texts it features, and for the historical and cultural information encapsulated and conveyed in its songs. Referencing scholarly perspectives on historical memory, I suggested that such a lasting cultural consciousness consists of multiple truths that representationally compete for legitimacy, making musical speech surrogation a vital medium for framing history according to the experience of subordinated populations. Finally, I suggested that the historical narratives in Birifor funeral music of labor migrations, local conflict, tradition, and modernization are all invoked in the constant re-creation of self in society, bringing the discussion again back to the lives and experiences of Birifor xylophonists.

Chapter 9: Urbanization and Musical Change, traced Birifor xylophonists and the *kogyil* from the context of the rural north down to the coastal urban center of Accra, outlining the processes of musical change active in and between both contexts. Reviewing models of urbanization and musical change from the disciplines, I argued that the urban context of Accra brings with it different cultural and musical configurations, which are actively integrated into new and old genres of musical performance by individual musicians. In rural communities, the improvisatory nature of xylophone music, the variability of the funeral cycle, and the constant creation of new compositions (sometimes in new contexts like the church) all contribute to rural musical change within the Northwest. Acknowledging the influx of West African and global culture in Accra and the dynamic neighborhoods that Birifor xylophonists gravitate towards, I took a person-first approach to the impact of urbanization on musical change, arguing that the transference of the *kogyil* as an instrument to neo-traditional ensembles ultimately relied upon the ingenuity, creativity, and persistence of individual musicians from various ethnic backgrounds, who pooled cultural influences to generate a new sound. Likewise, the adaptation of the traditional funeral repertoire to the international stage relied upon individual musicians like Kakraba Lobi, whose approach to musicking emphasized the cultural context of Birifor xylophone music. I closed this chapter with a brief consideration of the organological changes introduced to the *kogyil* by urban xylophone makers, which represent just a hint of the constant cultural synthesis and hybridization of musical practice and musical instruments in Accra.

The Birifor xylophonists of this study play *kogyil* everyday, whether to work out a few ideas in a spare moment, or to perform publicly in front of eager crowds. The data amassed for this research study is thus still only a glimpse of the continuous development of Birifor xylophone music, and the expanse of musical traditions that spill over the national boundaries of

Ghana's section of the West African hinterland. Further research in the region will therefore benefit from the coordination of a greater number of studies and research efforts, and also the empowerment of local musicians and scholars to conduct their own studies. In closing, I return to the perspective of Yichiir as he described the ways that my research has already influenced the relationships and lives it describes. Simply by conducting this study and writing this book I have already improved the social status of blind musicians through my interest and investment as a foreign scholar, be it in a small way. This improvement is evident in the changing attitudes towards blind musicians amongst many sighted xylophonists, whom I gradually convinced through my initial interest and subsequent friendship with Maal Yichiir, Maal Chile, Ni-Ana Alhansan, and Kuyiri Darigain that blind xylophonists are also great purveyors of musical and cultural tradition and should be treated as equals. Yichiir described the impact of my research from 2007 to his life in 2009 by saying,

> Now that you have come to do these things, you have made them realize. It means that they will not trouble us as xylophonists again. Now that you have come, you are bringing us out for people to see... Amongst our people, the xylophone is a sacred thing, but some people don't take it seriously. You have seen that we are blind. You have seen us play at funerals. You have seen how everything is going, and you are trying to help us. You must work very hard to help, to bring us out. To make it so that people know us more, because we are hiding here. You have done so much, all these things you are doing, you are helping us. People will come more." (Yichiir 2009).

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