

The narrative discourse of a bilingual talking drum: The case of the Dagomba *timpani*¹

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Abstract

This paper analyses the discourse structure of the language of the *timpani* (a single-membrane goblet-shaped drum) of the Dagomba. Using data from video recordings of predawn performances and interviews with the drummers, it shows that the *timpani* performance is an elaborate and structured narrative discourse that blends panegyrics, prayers and exhortations directed at chiefs, citizens, spiritual and historical beings. The use of the *timpani* is a borrowed tradition from the Asante in the 1700s, along with many aspects of Asante cultural communication, including Akan as a dominant language of encoding. During its centuries of adaptation, it has incorporated aspects of the culture of the Dagomba, including the production of speech in Dagbani during lengthy performances, making it a unique bilingual talking drum. The paper shows that this instrumentally encoded bilingual narrative exhibits the discourse properties of oral or written text and can be subjected to the same formal discourse analysis.

Keywords: Surrogate speech, Drum language, Dagomba, Dagbani,
Narrative Discourse

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Introduction

Speech surrogate instruments are typically used to encode short messages such as brief announcements, summons, prayers, appellation, short eulogies and abridged poems and proverbs (Finnegan, 2012). Devoid of the segmental units that characterize vocal speech, these messages are mostly understood by a privileged few trained to decode the prosodic output that is encoded (see Nketia, 1971; Locke & Agbeli, 1981; Mukuna, 1987; Neeley, 1996). In addition to studies on the ethnography of surrogate instruments, there have been studies focusing on the structural aspects of surrogate speech in general, including interpretation/perception (e.g. Arom, 2007; James, 2021); the prosodic and rhythmic encoding (e.g. Lock & Agbeli, 1981; Seifart et al., 2018); phonetics and phonology (e.g., Rialland, 2005; Pfeifle, 2013; Meyer, 2015); pragmatics (Sicoli, 2016); and the general grammar of surrogate language (e.g., Winter, 2014; James, 2021). Studies into the discourse structure of surrogate speech, especially narrative discourse, are rarer.

The goal of this study is to highlight aspects of the narrative discourse produced by the *timpani*, a single-membrane goblet-shaped talking drum of the Dagomba of Ghana. The *timpani* encodes lengthy narrations that are blends of panegyrics, prayers and exhortations to chiefs, citizens, spiritual and historical beings. In addition to being an exception to the generally restricted use of surrogate instruments, the *timpani* is of interest because, unlike many surrogate systems, it is a borrowed tradition from the Asante ethnic group and continues to maintain many of the ethnolinguistic properties of the Asante talking drum and its use since the 17th Century (Hudu, 2021), including the language of encoding, Akan. The incorporation of aspects of Dagomba culture and language in the use of the *timpani* over the centuries presents an interesting case of borrowing and adaptation beyond mere lexical items to modes of cultural communication. The messages and performances are distinct in content and structure from those produced by native

drummers called the *lunsi*, whose drums encode speech solely in Dagbani, the native language of the Dagomba. The discourse value of the talking drum performance is derived from its overall structure, the entities that are captured in the narratives, the order in which they are mentioned and the different target audiences, at distinct stages in the narration.

There have been some studies exploring the discourse properties of surrogate speech. James (2021) shows that the structure of some surrogate systems may be elaborate enough to be subject to a formal discourse analysis. Studies on the *nrwit* of the Alamlak of Papua New Guinea (Coulter, 2007) and the whistled speech of the Chinantec of Mexico (Sicoli, 2016) show that some surrogate systems have unique signals marking the beginning or end of what may be potentially a lengthy discourse (see James, 2021 for more references). The paucity of studies on the discourse of surrogate speech is partly because the use of surrogate instruments to encode lengthy discourses such as narratives is not as common (see notable exceptions Armstrong, 1954 on some Nigerian surrogate systems).

The discourse of the drum conflates exhortations, tributes, eulogies, myths and rituals. They are directed at the chiefs, spiritual beings, ancestors, and ordinary citizens. In addition to transmitting messages with the drum, the *timpani* drummer (known as the *akarima*, who is always male) and the *lunsi* have a shared responsibility of constructing realities and reinforcing the values and cultural ethos of the people, as discussed by Hudu (2023). They do so by interpreting the eulogies of past and present chiefs of the Dagbon Kingdom (the traditional state of the Dagomba) and instructing the subjects to live by the values embedded in these eulogies.

The paper highlights the structure of the discourse generated by the drum and how the drummer presents messages to different audiences. With a brief formal analysis using Longacre's (1996) *plot* as the notional structure of narrative discourse, the paper shows that the performances of the *timpani*

produce a discourse that can be subjected to the same formal analysis of narrative discourse. The overall goal is to trigger an interest in research on the discourse of surrogate instruments by looking beyond its instrumental mode of transmission.

The rest of this introduction provides relevant background on the Dagomba and their use of the *timpani* talking drum as well as the methods used to obtain data for the study. This is followed by a brief exposition on the theory that will be employed in the paper and then the analysis itself which demonstrates that the performance of the talking drum can be subjected to the same formal analysis as spoken or written narrative speech. The paper ends with concluding remarks.

Relevant historical background

The *Dagbon Kingdom* was founded in the 15th Century (Staniland, 1975; Salifu, 2008 etc.). It is headed by a king known as the *Yaa Naa* who resides in Yendi, the traditional capital of the Kingdom. The natives of the Kingdom, the *Dagomba*, share a common ancestry and culture with the Mamprusi and Nanumba. The Nanumba also speak Dagbani, while Mampruli, the language of the Mamprusi, is so close to Dagbani that many speakers of Dagbani consider the two linguistic forms dialects (see Hudu, 2010; 2018 for further discussion). In addition to linguistic borrowing from English due to colonisation, the language and culture of the Dagomba have been influenced greatly by Hausa, Arabic and Akan. The Hausa and Arabic influence came through trade with the Hausa, which also brought Islam into Dagbon. Similarly, wars and subsequent partnerships between the Dagomba and the Asante led to mutual linguistic and cultural influence (Staniland, 1975). The use of the *timpani* talking drum is one such influence.

Methods

The data were obtained from video recordings of two predawn performances and subsequent interviews with the

drummers. One of the performances was recorded at the King's palace in Yendi, known as the Gbewaa Palace, during the performance of *Akarima* Wumbei Dawuni, the head of all talking drummers in Dagbon. The other was from the palace of the chief of Mion, one of the paramount chiefs in Dagbon, during the performance of *Akarima* Awolu. During the interviews, each drummer watched the recording of his own performance, interpreted what he drummed, and answered further and detailed questions about the work of the *Akarima* covering historical and contemporary issues. Four other talking drummers whose performances were not recorded were also interviewed on the work of the *Akarima* and the use of the *timpani*. They are Akarima Natogma Neindow of the Zohe Palace, Akarima Zakaria Alhassan of the Kuga Palace and retired drummers Wumbei Kwame and Abdulai Yakubu. Information from experts on Akan culture and traditions also enriched the analysis in this paper.

The use of the *timpani* among the Dagomba

The *timpani* drum has maintained many of the ethnographic properties of the Asante talking drum, including the shape, size, and even the name of the drum (*atumpan* in Akan) and the name of the drummer (*akarima* from Akan *ɔkyerema*) (Hudu, 2021). Figure 1 shows a picture of the *timpani* and the drummer while he was drumming.



Figure 1: Akarima Wumbei Dawuni playing the *timpani* at the Gbewaa Palace.

Most importantly, the language of encoding is dominantly Akan, the native language of the Asante that neither the Dagomba drummer nor his patrons understand. Hudu (2023) discusses further similarities in the use of the *timpani* between the Akan and the Dagomba. In both cultures, it is used solely at the chiefs' palaces, as is the case among many ethnicities in Africa, (Finnegan, 2012). In both, it is used only for culturally significant events such as summoning to the palace, announcing the deaths of chiefs and people of royal lineage, but not for births, marriages, and the death of non-royal citizens (see also Finnegan, 2012, citing Nketia, 1963). Notwithstanding these similarities, the use of the *timpani* among the Dagomba has evolved over the centuries. These include its use for predawn performances on Fridays and Mondays to awaken the chief and

notify him of his duties and responsibilities for that day and performances on Thursday and Sunday evenings alerting the chief that the following day is of cultural significance (Hudu, 2021). The predawn and evening performances can take up to 30 minutes.

Available evidence shows that the eulogies and other messages encoded by the *timpani* were learned through a prolonged interaction with the Asante. One eulogy that gives credence to this suggestion is attributed to Yaa Naa Mahama II, the father of the reigning King of Dagbon, who reigned from 1938 to 1948. According to the talking drummer who narrated it, it started in Wangara language and ended in Akan. The Akan portion of it, which he verbalised, is shown below. His interpretation, which differs from the closer English translation provided, follows shortly.

<i>Ɔdomankoma bɔ adeɛ</i>	<i>The Creator created the universe</i>
<i>Bɔrebɔre bɔ adeɛ</i>	<i>The Architect created the universe</i>
<i>Bumpuni bɔ adeɛ</i>	<i>The Everlasting created the universe</i>
<i>Nsuo bɔ adeɛ</i>	<i>River created the universe</i>
<i>Nsuo firi he?</i>	<i>Where did River originate from?</i>
<i>Nsuo firi tetetetete</i>	<i>River originated from time immemorial</i>
<i>Efiri Nyame kyeɛ</i>	<i>From the side of God</i>
<i>Efiri ɔdomankoma bɔ adeɛ</i>	<i>From the Creator who created the universe</i>
<i>Efiri tetetetete</i>	<i>From time immemorial</i>

This narrative bears a close resemblance with a special drum form of a common Akan proverb: ‘If a river is big, does it surpass the sea?’ (Finnegan, 2012). Finnegan quotes the English translation of the drummed original Akan version from Nketia (1963, p. 47) as follows:

*The path has crossed the river,
The river has crossed the path,*

*Which is the elder?
We made the path and found the river.
The river is from long ago,
From the Ancient Creator of the Universe.*

While the English translation of the *akarima*'s rendition in Akan only minimally resembles the content in the English translation of the drummed Akan version, the actual interpretation provided by the *akarima*, shown below, provides most of the remaining resemblance:

There was an argument between the path and the water, the path said he was the elder, the water said he was the elder. Then the water said to the path: "You are lying because I have to be at a particular place and as people search for me, they look for you to serve as a means of getting to me".

The fact that most of the eulogies are existing proverbs in Akan is obvious from the historic origins of the use of the *timpani*. However, the borrowing/adoption of such lengthy narrations from Akan suggests a much closer interaction between the ancient Dagomba talking drummer and the Asante. Unlike simple proverbs that can be easily learned, it will take a much longer time and closer interaction between the *akarima* and the Asante *ɔkyerema* for the teaching and learning of such a lengthy narration.

It is important to emphasise that the incorporation of the *timpani* into Dagbon culture was neither due to the lack of comparable surrogate instruments nor intended to displace the use of native surrogate instruments. The *lunsi* existed long before the *timpani* was borrowed, and was used to perform all the functions that the *timpani* performed, in addition to producing dance beats. The *timpani* came to further project chieftaincy by enriching palace life with complementary services of griots. With their addition to Dagbon culture, every chief and person of royal lineage is eulogised by three different griots in three

different languages: Dagbani by the *lunsi*, Akan by the *akarima* and Hausa by the *goonje* (fiddlers) (Hudu, 2021). Despite their different origins and the apparent limitations of the *timpani* and *goonje* as instruments encoding in largely foreign, non-intelligible languages, all three are equally respected as integral part of the ethnolinguistics of the people. Hudu (2023) further observes that the fact that the messages produced by the *timpani* are in a foreign language gives the *Akarima* the sole prerogative to interpret them to his patrons beyond their literal meanings. This makes him potentially more influential than the *lunsi*, whose (Dagbani) eulogies are also verbalised and subject to different interpretations by the native speakers.

Because the typical *akarima* does not speak the language of encoding of the instrument, his use of these instruments is non-generative (see further details in Hudu, 2021). Even though the *Akarima* has the skills to drum a message in any language, the *timpani* does not encode speech beyond what is required to fulfil its traditional functions. However, the *akarima's* burden is lessened by the fact that he does not verbalise what he drums during a performance. He only verbalises when interpreting the drum language to his patrons.

Theoretical framework: The *plot* as the notional structure of narrative discourse

The formal analysis of the discourse structure presented below makes use of the *plot* as the notional structure of narrative discourse, as proposed by Longacre (1996). Longacre's use of the plot is inspired by the concept of *plot structure* used in the analysis of rhetorical structure. He argues that the typical narrative text has a perceptible *climax*, a feature that is inherent in the rhetorician's anatomy of *plot structure*, which spells out a schematic notional structure of climactic narrative. Climactic narrative discourses are built on a unique *schema*; just as other discourse types also have unique schemata.

A climactic narrative discourse begins with a *title*, followed by *aperture* and *stage*. It ends with *finis*, preceded by *closure*. Between these are various *episodes*, consisting of *prebreak episodes* (optional), *peak episode* and *postpeak episode*. The notional structure correlates with a surface structure. However, the correspondence between them is not necessarily one-to-one. For instance, the *title* and the *aperture*, which is typically formulaic (e.g. *once upon a time...*) are primarily features of surface structure and have no correspondents in the notional structure. The *finis* is also formulaic (e.g., *That's all*, or *We're through*) and appears only at the surface level.

At the notional level, the story begins at *stage* with exposition, where the story is laid out with information such as time, place, local colour, and participants. Within surface structure, we see episodes expressed as expository or narrative paragraphs/discourse, also known as *slots*. Longacre describes the *prebrake* episodes as inciting moments ('get something going') and developing conflict ('keep the heat on') where the situation intensifies or deteriorates. At the surface level, it is a paragraph or discourse articulated by means of successive time horizons, back reference in paragraph conjunctions etc. The *peak episode* is the climax, where everything comes to a head, with possible contradictions, knots and tangles that may lead to confrontations in the narrative. It is also the denouement, where a certain event could lead to a resolution of the conflict. The *postpeak episode* mirrors the *prepeak episodes* at the surface level and corresponds to the final suspense at the notional level where the plot keeps untangling. The plot wraps at *closure* and brings the story to an end. At the surface level, this may surface as expository, narrative or hortatory paragraph or discourse.

The plot is considered for the analysis of the structure of lengthy performance of the *akarima* because the main part of the performance, which also takes the most time, consists of a chronicle of the eulogies of past and present chiefs in Dagbon, making it largely narrative. Within the discourse, there is an

aperture and *stage* at the beginning and a *closure* and a *finis* at the end. Between them are several peaks, each dedicated to the memory of a living or late chief. The *akarima* dedicates some time to drumming the eulogy of each chief, closes off and moves to another.

Analysis: Elements of the narrative discourse of the timpani performance

From the analysis of the video recordings of the performances and interviews of the drummers, these pre-dawn performances consist of four segments: signalling the spirits, paying tribute to historical beings, eulogizing chiefs, and closing off. An important issue pointed out in the analysis below is that, some elements of the plot in the *akarima*'s narrative are innovated, as they are lacking in the Asante's use of the drum. Thus, the position of the drum as a discourse-encoding narrative instrument with elements of the plot is a blend of elements from both languages and cultures.

The aperture: Signalling the spirits

This part of the performance is clearly one of the innovations forming part of the adaptations of the *timpani* use into Dagbon culture. It has both spiritual and linguistic/discourse significance. It represents the *aperture* in the entire narration (Longacre, 1996). It opens the performance, just as *once upon a time* does in a narrative storytelling. The performance does not start without it, and it is as devoid of elaboration and internal structure as *once upon a time* is formulaic. While it is targeted at only the spiritual beings, it is required to open the performance for the messages meant for physical beings.

The *Akarima* begins the performance by sending signals to two categories of spiritual beings. One is the spirits of the ancestors, the other is the spirits of nocturnal beings roaming the earth at the time he starts the performance. He invokes the spirit of the ancestors by rubbing the drum with his bare hands

while engaged in silent invocations. The essence is to provide the support and protection needed to carry out the performance.

The spirits of nocturnal beings are next to be signalled, with a few seconds of finger taps. The Mion *akarima* tapped each of the two drums several times for exactly 8 seconds to send a message to hunters and witches who may be unaware that daylight was approaching and that it was time for them to begin returning home. In his own words:

Our hunters and witches begin operation after everyone goes to bed. They may be unaware that it is about 4:00am and may still be going deeper into the wilderness. When I hit the male drum a few times with my finger, wait for a few seconds and do same on the female drum, any nocturnal being far away will get the message that it is the beginning of daybreak. Thus, they will begin their journeys back home.

When asked how finger taps can produce a sound that travels far, his response was that the message is carried to them spiritually. The *akarima* waits for a while after these finger taps to receive signals, spiritually, that he can proceed in peace.

The stage: Paying tributes to historical beings

The second part of the performance is paying tribute to historical figures for their roles in sustaining the work of the *akarima*. This stage is cast in the mould of tributes to historical beings; however, it also includes myths and admonitions to the living. These tributes constitute a *stage* in the narrative. It is the moment when the narrative begins. It precedes the climax, when the chiefs and ordinary citizens are exhorted with the eulogies of past and present chiefs. These historical beings are God, the chief who ordained the *akarima*'s ancestor, the crocodile, the vulture, the pussy cat, Boaro (a historical figure in the court of the King of Asante) and Naa Gariba, the Yaa Naa who established the *akarima* tradition in Dagbon.

Of these, it is the tributes to God, the ordaining chief, Boaro and Naa Gariba which can be understood in the ordinary sense of a tribute. The mention of the non-humans (the crocodile, vulture and pussy cat) is part of Dagomba mythology. Experts on the Akan talking drum indicate that they are not part of the performance of Asante talking drummers and have no traces in Asante history. Even the tribute to Boaro, said to be a historical figure in the Asante King's palace appears alien to present day Asantes. The *akarima* is required to drum the tributes in the order presented below, without reversals.

God Almighty

The *akarima*'s performance begins by recognizing that it is by the power and will of God that he is able to do his work. He recognises God as having absolute control over everything on the surface of the earth. The Mion *akarima* interpreted the initial strokes of the *timpani* with the stick that constitute tribute to God as follows:

What? What? What happened? Whatever happens is by the will and power of God Almighty. To him belongs the power and dominion. Everything begins, proceeds, and ends by his will and power.

By not saying it in Akan, as they do for the eulogies of the chiefs, it implies that this tribute is drummed in Dagbani. Even though tributes to God feature prominently in Akan drum language, the actual message in the tribute and when it is drummed during the performance may be unique.

The chief who ordained the akarima's ancestor

Every *akarima* inherits the tradition from an ancestor, mostly his father. He sends tributes to the chief who ordained his ancestor as *akarima* as a mark of gratitude. But for this chief, he would not have had the chance to inherit and practice the tradition.

The crocodile

The exact nature of the link between the *akarima* and the crocodile is fuzzy. When asked why the crocodile deserves tribute, one of the drummers responded that the crocodile is among the first to play the *timpani*. The tribute to the crocodile had three interpretations from different drummers, as follows:

- a. *The crocodile cannot harm a person except in water.*
- b. *However weak the crocodile is, he is an akarima in the river’.*
- c. *ɔdenkyem nkom nipa. ‘He is an akarima, but he is in the water’.*

The vulture

All the drummers believe that the vulture is believed to be among the first to play the drum. One of the drummers explained that the *akarima*'s life at the palace is akin to the life of a vulture. He is like a scavenger living off handouts from the chief and visitors to the place. The tribute to the vulture is thus a tribute to the *akarima*, celebrating him for dedicating his service to royalty and living a life of deprivation like that of the vulture.

The pussy cat

The tribute to the pussy cat is drummed in Dagbani, with the interpretation: ‘The pussy cat is holding a *danta* (a type of gun), he does so because of the mouse’. This is an allegory of the traditional position and role of the chief as the ultimate power and authority, with the responsibility for deterring the activities of evil doers. The cat represents the chief, the mouse being the evil doer who dares not commit evil because of the imminent retribution from the cat. Thus, strictly speaking, this is a tribute to all chiefs in Dagbon and a reminder to them about their role in the society.

Historical Boaro

The Boaro is a warrior chieftaincy title in Dagbon. Like all other warrior titles, it was borrowed from the Asante. The historical Boaro who receives tribute during *akarima's* performance is believed to be a high ranking official at the palace of the King of Asante, the equivalent of the chief of staff in the seat of government of a modern state. However, interviews with Asante scholars well versed in present day Asante traditional governance structure show that *Boaro* does not exist as the title of a duty bearer in present day palace of the Asantehene. According to all the drummers interviewed, the tribute to the Boaro is based on a historical incident that took place centuries ago in the court of the Asantehene. One of them narrated it and provided the rationale for the tribute as follows:

‘I praise Boaro. That was the Boaro of the Asante. This Boaro resembled the Asantehene closely. When the Asantehene cannot be out, he comes out to represent him. On one occasion, when the Boaro emerged, the *Akarima* mistook him for the Asantehene, due to their resemblance. So, he drummed saying the ‘*Asantehene a ba*’ ‘the Asantehene has emerged’. He continued drumming his appellations. Then Boaro sat down. Afterwards, the Asantehene emerged, then ordered the arrest of the *Akarima* for praising the Boaro with appellations reserved for him. He ordered for him to be beheaded as a punishment. Then Boaro came to his rescue, pleading that the *Akarima's* action was inadvertent, he only mistook him for the King. He pleaded for the *Akarima's* life to be spared and offered himself for the death penalty, since he was the cause of the mistaken identity. Thus, Boaro was beheaded. For this reason, anytime we start playing the drum, whether at dawn, in the morning or evening, we owe it a duty to praise Boaro. We pray for him to rest in peace for laying down his life to save the *Akarima*’.

Naa Gariba

The tribute to Naa Gariba should ordinarily be classified under the next stage of the performance, tribute to the kings, given that Naa Gariba was a King of Dagbon between 1700-1720, (Salifu, 2008). However, he is treated differently and given a special mention because he established the use of the *timpani* as a tradition in Dagbon. He is the first Yaa Naa to be given an *akarima* eulogy and the tribute to him is considered a sacred duty and must be played before tributes to other kings. By contrast, other late kings can be omitted during these performances especially due to time constraints.

The peak episodes: Eulogies of chiefs

The plot in the *akarima*'s performance reaches its climax when past and present chiefs of Dagbon are eulogised one after another. Unlike the *aperture* and *stage*, the amount of time it takes to narrate all the peak episodes depends on several factors, including the amount of time available for the performance. In the predawn recordings for this study, a total of thirty-nine eulogies of past and present chiefs were captured, including twenty at the Gbewaa Palace and nineteen at the Mion Palace, with the eulogies of many chiefs featuring in both. At the Gbewaa Palace, the chiefs eulogised included twelve who ruled Dagbon as kings, from Naa Yakuba Nantoo, the 27th King who ascended the throne (1824-1849), to the reigning King Naa Bukari II. It also included eight deceased paramount and divisional chiefs. At the Mion Palace, the eulogies started with Naa Abdulai, the 28th Yaa Naa to rule Dagbon (1849-1876). Each chief gets a slot constituting a peak episode. The eulogy of each chief is repeated at least three times.

The message of the eulogies

Most of the eulogies are statements of wisdom, typically proverbs, that express the values or principles guiding the life of the chief. In them, the citizens gain wisdom and direction on how

to live their lives. The lessons in them emerge from the didactic interpretations of the drummers. Others are statements extolling the virtues or accomplishments of the people eulogised. They are in Akan, with very few in Dagbani and other languages. Below is a sample. The last is the only one in Dagbani.

(Yaa Naa Abdulai II, 1920-1938)

Abosomakotere nante brebrebre, ɔbeduru aburokyire

(Though) the chameleon walks slowly, it will reach abroad.

Yaa Naa Abukari II, reigning Yaa Naa

Ka anokware, anokware na eye

Speak the truth, the truth is good

Naa Abdulai Mahama (Chief of Mion, 2019-2022)

Se aboa bi beka wo a na, efiri wo ntoma mu

When an insect bites you, know that it comes from your own clothes.

Zohe Naa Salifu (late Chief of Zohe, Yendi)

Tarim borila alaha, alaha mii n kuro

The ordinary man desires things cheap, but that desire (for cheap things) is his undoing.

The structure of the narration

The entire narration of the episodes begins with the eulogy of a late King of the Kingdom, even if the *akarima* is not performing at the King's palace. Since all chiefs in Dagbon are of royal lineage, every chief is directly related to one King in lineage. Second, the *akarima* respects the chronology of ascension to the throne. No chief will be eulogised before another that preceded him on the same throne. Such a reversal would be contemptuous of the one who came first. Third, there is a greater concentration on the ancestors of the chief of the palace where the *akarima* is performing, even if they are not past chiefs of the same palace where the *akarima* serves. The

essence of this is to remind the reigning chief and his subjects of the exploits of their direct ancestors and urge them to emulate them in virtue. Fourth, where the chief being praised is no more alive, the *akarima* adds the Akan phrase *O ko chire chire chire* (he has gone very far) before concluding his eulogy and picking the next chief. Fifth, the *akarima* shows an indication of the relationship between two chiefs by drumming their eulogies in succession, as he transitions from one chief to another. To do that, he drums the eulogy of the ancestor, followed immediately by the praises of the descendant, even if they did not occupy the same throne or if their reign was interrupted by another chief. Finally, if the *Akarima* is doing a pre-dawn performance, he closes off the eulogies of each chief with the Akan phrase *adie akyi* 'it is daybreak'.

The phrase *adie akyi* is the defining beat of the predawn performance. It reminds the chief that it is time to wake up and continue the tradition of his forbears whose eulogies are being chronicled. It is as if the chief will not succeed in his royal duties if he does not receive this reminder. This drumbeat is so crucial to the *akarima's* work that it comes to symbolise his role at the palace. When a new chief seeks the service of an *akarima*, he says that he is looking for someone who will awaken him at dawn. The awakening is in two senses. One is the literal awakening with the sound of the *timpani*. The other is metaphorical. The chief is being asked to stay alert in performing his duties and responsibilities over his subjects. He must be mindful of the exploits of his ancestors into whose shoes he has stepped and be ready to emulate them. If he is overtaken by slumber, he will fail.

Besides these common general structural features, the *akarima* of a sub-chief focuses on past chiefs of the palace he serves. He also informs his patrons that a particular chief went on to become a bigger chief, especially if he became a King (Yaa Naa). For this reason, after drumming the praise of any chief of Mion who graduated to the position of Yaa Naa, the *akarima* of

the Mion Palace would drum *sankara bumba* “he became a Yaa Naa” (*Sankara* being an appellation for Yendi).

Ending the performance

There are two drumbeats that signal the end of the performance. The first constitutes the *closure*, the second constitutes the *finis*.

Closure: Prayer for peace

The drumbeat that constitutes the closure is the phrase *mntinaasi mntinaasi mntinaasi* (sit well, sit well, sit well). In Akan, *mntinaasi* is an imperative construction for more than one person to sit. In the Dagomba *akarima* drum language, it is a prayer for the chief to rule in peace. To show that this prayer is directed at the ruling chief, the prayer is preceded by his appellations, even if he had drummed that earlier in the performance.

Finis

The second of the final drumbeats signalling the end of the performance is the phrase *adie akyi* ‘it is daybreak’, followed by the ideophone *korekorekorekore* ‘clearly’. This constitutes the *finis*.

Final remarks: The evolution of the *Akarima* tradition in Dagbon

The Dagomba *timpani* evolved from a mere talking drum of foreign origin into a partly nativised ethnolinguistic discourse-generating instrument forming part of what defines life in the chiefs’ palaces. In spite of being non-generative, the predawn performance with its messages to different audiences has properties of linguistic structure at the discourse level and a unique narrative structure. This is in addition to its position as oral literature with several literary devices (not discussed here) that contribute to its aesthetic value. The linguistic component

of the tradition appears to have experienced minimal change, as the language of encoding of the eulogies of the chiefs remains dominantly Akan. However, elements of the discourse, overall discourse structure, and ritualistic aspects of the performance have undergone a significant evolution over the centuries. The signals and tributes to spiritual and historical beings, including non-humans are the clearest mark of the evolution and integration of the tradition over the centuries into Dagbon culture and traditions.

Remarkably, the ritualistic aspects have contributed significantly to the position of the *timpani* in Dagbon as a discourse-producing instrument with such elaborateness that defies its foreign origin. With the widespread use of surrogate instruments in different parts of the world, especially in Africa, it is likely that other surrogate systems have comparable discourse value. When scholars look beyond the modality of surrogate instruments and focus on the discourse they encode, the analyses they provide may enrich our understanding of discourse processes in general.

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