

Ritual Communication Through Percussion: Identity and Grief Governed by Birifor Gyl Music

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Abstract

Funerals are the most common ceremonies in which the Birifor play their traditional xylophone, known as the *gyl*. In a major city such as Accra, there is at least one funeral every weekend creating a regular opportunity to hear the instrument in performance. For the Birifor, this opportunity is far more than strictly one of performance. During my six months of xylophone study in Ghana, I had many opportunities to witness such events with the guidance of my *gyl* teachers. Close examination of the musical communication aspects of performance at funerals reveals how the Birifor can console their bereaved and educate their community simultaneously.

This presentation applies ideas of musical communication to examine the hidden transcripts within the public performance of the Birifor funeral repertoire and raises questions to the contemporary percussionist regarding the idea of communication through musical performance. The Birifor use the *gyile* (plural) to directly communicate funeral details and the traditional belief system of their culture, as well as encouraging the participants to dance and mourn. In addition, specific melodic elements of the funeral songs which symbolically serve to reinforce the myth, history, and social values of the Birifor will be analyzed.

1 Introduction

Percussionists, whether wrestling with interpretations of contemporary solo and ensemble compositions or executing orchestral excerpts, inherently rely on modes of ritual communication in order to convey meaning behind a performance. Generally, the musician relies on tempo, dynamics, and articulation to represent the written page. Further decisions are based around musical style to properly convey the context of the work, such as differences between Beethoven and Mahler, Varese and Cage, or a *mambo* and a *samba*. What if there is still a deeper level of communication, with the ability to relay specific messages to an audience waiting to be explored by performers and composers? The following episode at a funeral in Ghana explains.

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon, under the

relentless Ghanaian sun, when we arrived at the funeral site. The drive took only one hour by bush taxi to get my three Ghanaian friends, their goat in the trunk, and myself from our village to the dusty Accra district of Mamobi where the "city" funerals are held for the Dagara-Birifor. Prior to our arrival we knew nothing of the deceased, except that they were of Dagara-Birifor descent, but moments after unloading from the taxi, and having not spoken to anyone yet, my xylophone teacher Jerome informs me about the sex and age of the deceased. When I questioned him about this sudden update, he replied that the music of the funeral had told him. This particular instance happened to be a Dagara funeral where the words of the dirges communicate the specifics of the deceased, where as, in the Birifor funeral the traditional xylophone, or *gyl*, does all the speaking. The Birifor use the *gyile* in funeral ceremonies not only to induce a physical response, such as dancing or mourning, but also speaks to the participants in order to relay important information about the deceased, and the traditional stories and beliefs of their culture.

2 Background of the Birifor

The Birifor are found in the Northern and Upper West regions of Ghana and extending into present day Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso. As with most of the people living in this region, the Birifor are agrarians. While the Birifor are closely related to the other ethnic groups in this region, such as the Dagara, Sissila and Wiili, collectively referred to by Jack Goody (1962) as LoDagaa, the fact that they speak mutually unintelligible languages leads me to focus specifically on the Birifor for this research. As my Birifor *gyl* teacher, Tijan, explained, certain elements of the language may relate from one group to another, but when the *gyl* speaks in Birifor, only the Birifor will hear it. Even if some of the rhythms or melodies coincide with those of a song from another area, the meanings behind them will be different as well as the dance that accompanies them. Often when another group performs a Birifor funeral song such as *Ganda Yina*, ("The Breadwinner is Gone") they will simply refer to the piece as "Birifor" and not necessarily understand

the words. In such a case, the Dagara will adapt their own version of a dance to replace that of the Birifor.

3 Background of the *Gyil*

While the construction of the *gyil* is simple, fourteen to eighteen wooden keys; corresponding hollow gourd resonators, each with thin fibrous paper or spider cocoons stretched over small holes to create the instruments characteristic buzzing; and a wooden frame, held together with antelope skin; the process to build the instrument is long and considered dangerous. The essential element in the production of a proper *gyil* is the wood for the bars, known as *nirra* or rosewood (*Dalbergia Melanoxylon*). While the strength and durability of the *nirra* wood is valued, especially in the construction of traditional housing, it is also seen as spiritually powerful and is forbidden to cut down. The instrument builder, after taking necessary spiritual precautions, must find the wood in its natural pre-decomposed state and begin preparations for the instrument. Even with the necessary spiritual protection, many *gyil* builders will only make a few instruments in their lifetime, fearing that over-exposure to the wood will prove fatal.

The tuning the instrument takes a refined skill with a hand ax. The tuning for the funeral *gyil*, sometimes referred to as a *kogyil*, is closely related to the western pentatonic scale. While minor variants in tuning are found, the intervallic relationship between pitches remains fairly constant between geographical groups. (Mensah 1982) Since no pitch reference is used in establishing the fundamental pitch, the builder tunes his instruments to the range he likes to hear, thus creating difficulties in using instruments from separate craftsmen. Surprisingly, there seems to be no direct correlation between the pentatonic scale used and the Birifor language. Birifor does utilize some small inflection of the voice, but not the range covered by the scale. This suggests that the rhythmic text spoken on the *gyil* is recognized as speech even when the songs are not sung. As Trevor Wiggins (1999) explains: "Since most West African languages are tonal the words of a song will begin to suggest a melodic outline which is developed often by repetition or phrase extension. A good *gyil* player must be able to repeat on his instrument anything which is said, but *gyile* are pentatonic so he has to make a precise choice on notes, thus establishing the melody more clearly."

While the *gyil* also falls into the genealogy of the contemporary, western xylophone, for the Birifor the *gyil* plays an important role in their history. It symbolizes their musical identity, and also creates a tangible link to their ancestral beliefs. Many variations exist as to the origin of the *gyile*, but they all stem from the forest. The following is a brief summary of multiple accounts.

"It is told, that there was once a great hunter, deep in the forest, searching for game, who heard an incredible sound coming from the trees. Upon investigation, the hunter witnessed a ceremony of the mythical *kontomble* utilizing a

pair of *gyile*. The *kontomble* are described as dwarfs, living in specific trees in the forest and thought to have magical powers, or even be descendants of the first humans. Infatuated by the sound of the music, the great hunter, having magical powers of his own, captured one of the *kontomble*. The hunter then bargained the life of the *kontomble* for the instruction of the *gyil*. The hunter learned the construction of the instrument, the repertoire of the *kontomble*, and brought the knowledge back to his people. To this day, the *kontomble* are still attracted to the sound of the *gyil* but also harbor animosity toward humans." (Vercelli 2006)

4 The Funeral Song Cycle

The funeral begins with a solo *gyil* player announcing the death, through the performance of the funeral song cycle. The funeral music is divided into multiple parts, varying in number according to the sex and age of the deceased and gradually performed in order over the duration of the funeral. Each section of the song cycle has an individual significance to the event and restrictions associated with it. As the performance of the complete funeral repertoire spans three days, for this essay I will discuss only the first two sections of a typical male's funeral, the *Daarfo* and the *Daarkpen*. The analysis of these two bodies of funeral repertoire illustrate both the symbolic and textual modes of communication used by the Birifor.

4.1 *Daarfo*: The Struggle

The first section of a typical man's funeral, known as the *Piri*, is divided into six parts beginning and ending with the *Daarfo*. The *Daarfo*, performed only at a man's funeral is translated as the "struggle." This is the struggle the Birifor face in everyday life, and the struggle the deceased no longer faces. It is a symbolic reminder to the Birifor that everyone, at some point in their life, must face personal challenges and obstacles. Those who confront these challenges are considered strong, and courageous, even if there is nothing extraordinary about what they do. Again, the image of the hunter, as a brave, and courageous individual, is used in association with the *Daarfo*.

I have used the musical notation presented by Mitchel Strumph (1970) for the *gyil* utilizing the western G-pentatonic scale to give a general idea of the melodic contour of the phrase. The complete fourteen-note scale of the instrument is illustrated in Figure 1.



Figure 1. *Gyil* tuning range and representation

As the precise tuning varies between individual

instruments, this notation suffices as the representation of the fourteen *gyil* bars and not for actual pitch reproduction. For a detailed, calibrated analysis of the scales used see Larry Godsey appendix in his dissertation: *The use of the Xylophone in the Funeral Ceremony of the Birifor of Northwest Ghana*. (1980)

As the *gyil* player begins the *Daarfo*, the male participants of the funeral may line up to prepare for the reenactment of the hunt. They will often be armed with traditional bow and arrow, or a rifle as they make their way through the funeral ceremony, briefly stopping to pay homage to the deceased and the musician. The movement associated with the hunt is played as the main repetitive pattern in the *Daarfo*. (Figure 2) This pattern is performed slowly, giving the underlying pulse to the participants as they tread cautiously toward their symbolic prey. At the *gyil* player's discretion, this main theme of the *Daarfo* will be repeated until the men have concluded their movements.



Figure 2. Main *Daarfo* motive

Throughout the principal melodic pattern of the *Daarfo*, the *gyil* player must interject symbolic musical representations, recognized and understood by the Birifor, to create a musical poem, similar to the *leitmotifs* of a Wagnerian opera. These symbolic musical gestures include but are not limited to: themes regarding the hunt, the mythical Great Hunter, bird calls, and solemn dirges. (Figures 3-5)



Figure 3. The Hunter's Whistle



Figure 4. The Great Hunter



Figure 5. Bird Call

The virtuoso *gyil* player is seen as someone who can spontaneously weave the symbolic musical expressions into

a cohesive and emotionally moving song. Through these musical gestures, the *gyil* player not only sympathizes with the desperation and struggle of the mourners, but also reinforces the traditional beliefs of the Birifor and assists in the transmission of their myths through oral tradition.

4.2 The *Daarkpen* Repertoire

Through the *Daarfo* repertoire, we have seen how the *gyil* player can communicate through symbolic gestures to the participants of the funeral. In the following section of a man's funeral, the *Daarkpen*, the *gyil* player will directly address the participants through the use of understood phrases spoken on the instrument. It is the *gyil* player's responsibility within the Birifor community to elicit the proper response from the funeral participants, either in the form of ritual wailing by the immediate family, or vigorous dancing in celebration of the departed's life by his friends. The performance of understood phrases allows the *gyil* player to control the mood of the funeral. Just as a contemporary wedding DJ would choose songs appropriate for the bride and groom's first dance, the *gyil* player must select songs appropriate for the specific funeral ceremony. Certain selections may communicate sorrow, others help deal with grief, and some may communicate insults to enforce social norms.

The first example from the *Daarkpen*, called *Kpil Kpala*, is used to communicate not only to the participants, but to the *kotomble* as well. The song reminds the listeners of the origins of the *gyil* and the animosity between the *kotomble* and the Birifor. The *Kpil Kpala* is necessary to keep the *kotomble* from attending at the funeral by insulting their physical appearance. As stated, the *kotomble* are dwarfs but they are also said to have grotesquely large genitalia. During the performance of the *Kpil Kpala*, the *gyil* player will play the words: "Kotomble a way, lam pulo, Kotomble a way, gyil-saa ney" insulting the *kotomble* by saying that their testicles are the size of the largest gourd used as a resonator on the *gyil*, known as the *gyil-saa*. (Vercelli 2006)

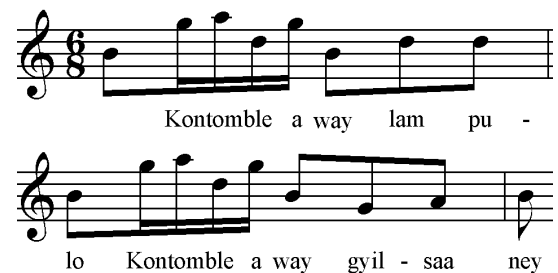


Figure 6. *Kpil Kpala* insulting the *kotomble*

Later in the ceremony, the *gyil* player may choose a more sympathetic song to encourage the participants to mourn the deceased. The family of the deceased is required

to mourn at the time of the funeral and without proper encouragement from the xylophone player the ceremony will not have its desired effect. Songs such as *Namwine Gon Doya* are played during the *Daarkpen* to achieve the emotional response of the participants. *Namwine Gon Doya* translates to “God Knows the Sufferers” and is established not on the lead *gyil* but on the supporting xylophone. The second *gyil* player will repeat the phrase *Namwine Gon Doya* while the lead *gyil* player embellishes and improvises melodic ideas associated with the song.



Figure 7. *Namwine Gon Doya*

5 Modes of Musical Communication

After investigating the traditional texts and melodic representations of the Birifor funeral repertoire, how can the contemporary percussionist achieve this level of communication with an audience without the benefit of a specialized tonal language? Rather than the Wagnerian approach of assigning iconic meaning to individual rhythms or melodies the percussionist must experiment with elements of emotive and stylistic modes of communication.

Ethnomusicologist John Blacking (1995) defined four types of musical communication. The first form, when rhythm is perceived as “an exciting stimulus,” results in a purely physical reaction such as marching, dancing or nervous energy. Interestingly, this is the only form of musical communication which does not rely on a cultural context. At the Birifor funeral, other ethnic groups may not understand the meanings of the funeral repertoire, but the driving rhythm of the *Daarkpen* is enough to encourage them to dance. An energetic rhythm is enough to communicate to an audience on a physical level.

Blacking’s second form seems to be written specifically for the Birifor xylophone. “If as a result of cultural experience, a musical pattern has come to be regarded as a sign of a social situation or is accompanied by words that specifically recall a social situation, its performance may announce social situations, recall certain feelings and even reinforce social values.” Through Blacking’s definition, we can relate both the symbolic and textual meanings associated within the *gyil* melodies. The Birifor funeral songs can symbolically recall the myth and history of the *gyil*, as illustrated in the *Daarfo*, as well as enforce social values, such as the need to mourn at a funeral expressed through the text of the *Daarkpen*.

Blacking’s third and fourth modes of musical communication deals with the communicative properties of program and absolute music. A stated program will only be effective on an culturally educated audience. Without assigned meanings “timbres, patterns of melody or harmony, or groups of instruments do not have absolute meaning in themselves,” but with symbolic musical assignments the performer may be able to approximate a musical narrative similar to the Birifor. In the case of absolute music, the performer must rely on personal musicianship and creativity in order to “express ideas about aspects of society and convey to [the] audiences various degrees of consciousness of experience.” The musician will be able to communicate with audiences more successfully upon the accumulation of performance experience. By effectively employing multiple modes of musical communication through preparation and performance, the contemporary percussionist, similar to the Birifor *gyil* player, can intensify the musical connection to the audience.

6 Conclusion

The regularity of hearing the *gyil* in ritual performance strengthens the connection between the musicians and funeral participants. By utilizing multiple modes of communication, we can see how the Birifor use these performance opportunities to console their bereaved and educate their community simultaneously. Through oral tradition, or rather, aural tradition, the Birifor use the *gyil* as their primary method of passing along the cultural myth and history of their people.

The contemporary percussionist often experiments with multiple modes of communication to a listening audience. The classical percussionist may pose questions relating to mallet choice and articulation, clarity of melodic line, and score interpretation, but as the Birifor illustrate, it is also our responsibility to communicate powerful expressions of sorrow, heritage and joy. While comprehensive knowledge of the cultural context surrounding both the composer and the composition should be a prerequisite to performance, it should also be our task as performers to educate audiences and broaden our collective percussive culture.

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