

**Searching for Orifa:  
Birifor Funeral Music from Ghana v. 1/v. 2  
Tijan Dorwana and Mike Vercelli  
Liner Notes**

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The Birifor live along the Black Volta River in the remote Northern region of Ghana and extend into Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso. The dense forests surrounding the river have been thinned and cleared to build traditional mud brick homes, leaving vast red-soiled fields to be plowed and sown by hand. The clamor of modernization has not reached this isolated corner of Ghana and on a calm evening anytime of the year, the sound of the Birifor *gyil* can be heard across the savannah.

The Birifor *gyil* is a fourteen-key xylophone constructed from the locally grown rosewood (*Dalbergia Melanoxylon*) or *nirra* in the Birifor language and dry gourd resonators fastened together with goat or antelope hide. A thin fibrous paper or spider cocoons covering small holes in the gourd resonators creates the instrument's characteristic buzzing sound. Tuning the bars takes considerable skill and a small hand ax. Two varieties of instruments exist and are discernable by their tuning: the *kogyil* used exclusively for funerals are tuned to pentatonic scale; and the *bogyil*, used primarily for festivals and recreation is tuned to a tetratonic scale (B-flat, D-flat, E-flat, G-flat). This recording focuses primarily on the *kogyil* and the funeral repertoire of the Birifor.

Birifor funerals are always held outdoors with many family, friends, neighbors, and acquaintances continuously shifting roles: mourning, celebrating the life of the deceased through dancing, eating, drinking, or performing music. A typical Birifor funeral lasts three full days with *gyil* music performed throughout both day and night. The extensive funeral repertoire is gender-specific with particular social conventions determining what music can be performed. The music occurs in cycles, with each *gyil* player performing relevant sections of the funeral repertoire. Upon completion of the cycle, the *gyil* player will walk away from the instrument allowing another musician to perform. This CD examines the major sections from the funeral cycle representing both genders as an example of the breadth and depth of the master *gyil* player's extensive musical knowledge.

The title of this recording refers to the great hunter of Birifor mythology, Orifa. Among Orifa's many great deeds was the bringing of the *gyil* to the Birifor people. While many variations of *gyil* mythology exist, they all stem from the forest and involve the hunter encountering the mythical *kontomble*. The *kontomble* are described as dwarfs, living in specific trees in

the forest and thought to have magical powers, or may even be the descendants of the first humans. One version of the story goes as follows. "It is told that Orifa was deep in the forest, searching for game, when he heard an incredible sound coming from the trees. Upon investigation, he witnessed a ceremony of the *kontomble* utilizing a pair of *gyile*. 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 musical 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."<sup>1</sup>

This recording features two selections disappearing from funeral repertoire, the Na Kpan Bine and Bamba, are only played for the funeral of the master hunter. With the decline of large game in the Birifor forests, there is less opportunity to earn the title "master" hunter within the society. The musical repercussion is that fewer youth hear these funeral songs and won't learn the full extent of the tradition.

**Tijan Dorwana**, originally from the village of Saru in Ghana, is a recognized master musician of the Birifor people. Mr. Dorwana truly represents a lifetime of musical knowledge and his distinct Birifor cultural identity. He has performed in Germany, Luxemburg, France, and the United States, and is also active at ritual and recreational events throughout Ghana. As an educator for over twenty years, Mr. Dorwana has taught Birifor music at the University of Ghana – Legon, and at the Dagara Music Center, located in Medie, Ghana. Through his continued cultural advocacy, Mr. Dorwana has spread his Birifor oral tradition to his students around the globe including the U.S., Candada, Europe, and Japan.

**Dr. Michael B. Vercelli** is the director of the World Music Performance Center at West Virginia University. Michael holds a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Percussion Performance with a minor in Ethnomusicology from the University of Arizona. While well versed in the classical percussion repertoire, Michael's specialty lies in non-Western instruments. He has studied the traditional music of other countries and done fieldwork in Bali, Cuba, Brazil, and primarily, Ghana. Dr. Vercelli is a contributing author to the *World Percussion* chapter in the third edition of Gary Cook's *Teaching Percussion*. He is a participating member in the Society for Ethnomusicology and Percussive Arts Society where he serves on the World Percussion Committee. Michael has given lectures, performances and workshops, across the United States, Mexico, Brazil, China, and Iceland, and is a founding member of the Zumbumba Percussion Trio.

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<sup>1</sup>Michael B. Vercelli. "Performance Practice of the Dagara-Birifor Gyl Tradition through the Analysis of the Bewaa and Daakpen Repertoire". (D.M.A. diss., University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, 2006.),19.

## Personnel:

### Volume 1

Track 1: Tijan Dorwana – solo gyil; Michael Vercelli – werran.

Tracks 2-5: Tijan Dorwana – solo gyil; Michael Vercelli – ganga; Ryan Frost – kurr; Mark Benincosa – lar.

Track 6: Tijan Dorwana – lead bogyil; Michael Vercelli – support bogyil; Ryan Frost – ganga; Mark Benincosa – kurr.

### Volume 2

Track 1-2: Tijan Dorwana – solo gyil; Michael Vercelli – ganga; Ryan Frost – kurr; Mark Benincosa – lar.

Track 3: Tijan Dorwana – solo gyil, ganga; Michael Vercelli – kurr.

Track 4: Tijan Dorwana – solo gyil; Michael Vercelli – ganga; Ryan Frost – kurr; Mark Benincosa – lar.

Track 5: Tijan Dorwana – lead vocals, lead kuor, jingles; Michael Vercelli – support vocals, support kuor, jingles; Ryan Frost – support vocals, support kuor, jingles; Heather Bergseth – support vocals, support kuor, jingles; Mark Benincosa – support vocals, jingles.

Track 6: Tijan Dorwana – solo gyil; Michael Vercelli – gun-gong; Mark Benincosa – lar; Heather Bergseth – kuor.

Recorded May 7 & 9, 2012 in Bloch Hall, West Virginia University  
Recorded, mixed, and mastered by Mark Benincosa

Photos and design by Catherine Lovell

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## **Searching For Orifa Volume 1**

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### **1. Piri**

The *Piri* is a series of unaccompanied gyl pieces that carries messages of condolence to the family of the deceased.

The *Daarfo* is the first piece played at a man's funeral. In the Birifor tradition, men are regarded born as fighters in life. *Daarfo* is for warriors. When an elderly person dies, the other elders perform the *Daarfo* to demonstrate hunts, wars, and trials the man had experienced in his lifetime. They blow the horn, or *werran*, to signify that they have killed the enemy.

*San de bie ko* translates as "what has the mother done to upset the ancestors and take the child away".

*Piri kpon* is the most important piece in the *Piri*. It carries the most sympathetic songs. For example "The old woman/man has gone out of the house and built a new one outside" referring to the new grave outside the family home or "tomorrow what is going to happen to me?" meaning that the living relatives are left alone.

*Wa deil n yon* says that the deceased has "gone and left me. If I die next who will celebrate my funeral?" Everyone is bound to die and if you don't have relatives you won't have a proper funeral.

### **2. Daarkpen – Gon Prri**

*Daarkpen* is performed only at men's funerals and is comprised of thousands of individual songs. The title "*Gon Prri*" designates these particular songs as the oldest in the *Daarkpen* repertoire. *Daarkpen* also carries a number of sympathetic songs: *Ganda Yina* "the breadwinner is gone", "death should have let this man live another year", "he has been taken away so fast" and "If the elderly people had known they would not have allowed this incident (death) to happen." The *Daarkpen* also signals the beginning of the dancing.

### **3. Chi Kobine**

Translates as "grain farmers' song" and is performed at both men's and women's funerals. In the Birifor tradition, both men and women participate in farming responsibilities. Grains are the main food crop of the Birifor and a staple of their diet. Songs include "the great farmer was awake at early dawn but was caught by an elephant (death)". The *Chi Kobine* carries messages of praises for what the farmer did in his life and what could have been accomplished if he were allowed to live.

#### **4. Bin Kpen**

The *Bin Kpen* is a puberty dance only performed for members of the Birifor society who have gone through the traditional puberty ritual. While meant for dancing, members of the community would drive away young children so that they do not participate in the dance. Due to the inherent power of the *Bin Kpen*, it cannot be performed if the deceased died from a snakebite, boils, measles, or anthrax for fear of spreading the death to the community.

#### **5. Na Kpan Bine**

The *Na Kpan Bine* is regarded as a very powerful piece and only performed at the funeral of a hunter. Every *Na Kpan* (hunter) is regarded as very brave. Often during a hunt an animal can turn on the hunter and attack. At the funeral, all the trophies of the deceased hunter will be displayed. Other hunters attending the funeral come with their weapons to demonstrate their skills. A designated fowl will be the focus of a ritualistic hunt performed for the funeral participants. The hunter regarded as the most powerful will end the hunt by finally killing the sacrificial bird.

#### **6. Kpi Kpala**

The two *bogyille* used are typically played at Bori festivals but they are also traditionally played three times at the funeral before the burial of the corpse. The Bori festival is a time of sacrifice to the traditional gods for their good harvests. Many songs in the *Kpi Kpala* are similar to those of the *Daarkpen* and the *Po Kuobo* but the unique tuning of the *bogyille* keeps the music festive. The *kpi kpala* is thought to "cool down" the funeral and serve as a relief from the intense mourning of the deceased's family.

## **Searching for Orifa Volume 2**

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### **1. Daarkpen Bili**

The *Daarkpen Bili*, meaning "little *Daarkpen*," demonstrates the "new style" of performing *Daarkpen*. Because of *Daarkpen*'s popularity, many gyl players have composed new songs for the repertoire. These will often be based on similar themes as the old or "original" *Daarkpen* songs, but also reflect modernity and the xylophonists virtuosity on the instrument.

### **2. Po Kuobo**

*Po Kuobo* is for the Birifor women. It carries similar messages as the *Daarkpen*, but is accompanied by different rhythms. Songs include "this women should have lived longer to care for her children". At a women's funeral the *Po Kuobo* would also signal the beginning of the dancing.

### **3. Bin Kpon Bili**

The *Bin Kpon Bili* or "little *Bin Kpon*" is similar to the *Bin Kpon* puberty dance, but originates from the Lobis of Burkina Faso. It is regarded as "small or little" because the Birifor do not believe it contains enough emotion to be considered "big". It is commonly heard in Lobi funerals, but while Birifor dancers enjoy its unique rhythm, great Birifor musicians don't often perform it.

### **4. Guun**

The *Guun* is played at the end of the xylophonist's performance. Funeral participants will run from the funeral cite and dance waiting for the funeral to emotionally cool down. After the *Guun*, the music will stop until another xylophonist decides to perform.

### **5. Juju Music**

Juju Music is the only selection not taken from the Birifor funeral and the only piece not using the gyl. Juju music is an important selection from the Bori festival used to mark the transition for Birifor youth into adult hood. This selection would typically be performed near the end of the festival when the newly initiated youth parade through town. As they go house-to-house, members of the community contribute small donations to help ease the transition from child to adulthood. These contributions often put a financial burden on many community households and therefore regulate the festival to every seven years. The *kuor* drums heard on this track are made from large calabash gourds. Once the calabash is dried, a large hole is cut in the top and the inside is removed. A thick goatskin is stretched across the opening and fastened around the gourd with rope.

## 6. Bamba

The *Bamba* is usually played together with the *Na Kpan Bine* for only those considered to be the bravest of warriors. To be considered as the bravest of warriors, one would have to kill an elephant or a "black animal" (human) in battle. The music of the *Bamba* is considered so emotionally charged that is rarely played today. In olden times, a performance of the *Bamba* would inspire hunters to kill anything, including humans, in retaliation for the death of such a great hunter. This performance uses the *gun-gong* drum borrowed from the Dagomba people to lighten the emotional content of the music.