

Living Libraries: The Role of the *Baansi* in Preserving the Culture of the Dagbon in Northern Ghana

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Abstract

This study focuses on the role of the living libraries, the *baansi*, of the Dagomba of Ghana in preserving and sustaining the culture and history of the people of Dagbon in the northern region of Ghana. The paper is a qualitative study, and the instruments used for data collection span from 2012 to 2015, which comprises acoustic appreciation, group discussion, observation, phased assertion, storytelling, and filed notes. The study reveals that the living librarians (*baansi*) are the watchdogs/social critics of the society who help to maintain stability and influence people into conforming to the norms and the culture of the society.

Introduction

Indigenous knowledge (IK) is vital information that is sadly diminishing at an alarming rate, Kargbo (2006), and as such, there is an urgent need to preserve it before much of it is completely lost. The consequent losses to indigenous knowledge cause cultural gaps between generations, and deny Africa of its rich and powerful heritage of indigenous knowledge traditions, formed by past generations (Macombu, 2004).

Libraries are among other functions, mandated to serve as rich repositories of historical and cultural collections, many of which may not be available anywhere else in the world. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (2003) urges that all libraries in the world should recognise and preserve their cultural heritage. On January 1, 2016, UN member states agreed to provide access to information indigenous and to preserve indigenous culture and knowledge.

Libraries are repositories of knowledge, and according to Kah (2012), traditional intellectuals like elders, clan heads, priests, historians, storytellers and musicians constitute libraries, or are librarians in their own spheres. This study therefore critically examines the role of one of the traditional intellectual bodies, known as the *baansi*, in their quest to preserve and sustain the culture and history of the people of Dagbon, in the northern region of Ghana, and how public libraries can complement the former's efforts at documenting and preserving the culture.

The *baansi* are made up of different categories of local musicians in Dagbon. These include *lunsi* (drummers), *akarimani* (talking drum players) and *goongenima* (fiddlers), the focus of this study. The *baansi* are knowledge producers or court musicians who engage themselves in the art of praise singing. *Baansi* are not mere entertainers, but also holders of cultural wisdom and history. In fact, they live and relive the history of the people of Dagbon, much has been written about them, but nothing has been written about their role in sustaining the culture of the people. This is the gap this paper intends to fill.

Method and Objectives

This paper is a descriptive of the role of the *baansi* of Dagbon, in cultural preservation. It presents and analyses data collected from community-based interactions. A thematic approach has been used in reporting the findings. Main and sub-themes have been generated from the data collected, using acoustic appreciation, group discussion, observation, phased assertion, storytelling, and filed notes. The questions asked during the interviews and focus group discussions surrounded, "what role do the *baansi* play in preserving the culture of Dagbon?"

The data was collected from June 2012 to August 2015; the population of the study includes the *lunsi*, *akarima* and *goonje* chiefs and their elders of Yendi, and the Dakpema and Buglana palaces in Tamale. In all forty people were interviewed. The study revealed that there were various forms of *baansi*, however the majority was inexistent. However, the most recognized and important ones that run through them are the *lunsi*, the *akarima* and the *goonje*. Our visits to Yendi, the palace of the Yaa-Naa, as well as the Dakpema and Buglana palaces in Tamale confirmed this. We will therefore concern ourselves with these three categories of *baansi*. Hence, the last of three in the study of the living librarians of Dagbon, with the first part of the study titled “*Decolonizing Our Library System: The Living Librarians (Baansi) of Dagbon, Northern Ghana*” focused on the various categories of the *baansi*, which can be found in *Library Philosophy and Practice* (<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac>), the second part presented at the 2nd Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Ghana conference in Accra and centres on *Knowledge Management Practices of the Living Librarians (Baansi) of Dagbon, Northern Ghana*, and the third part focused on the role of *baansi* in preserving the culture of Dagbon.

Discussion

The *baansi* of Dagbon play a major role in preserving and sustaining the people’s culture and history. We therefore sought to examine their specific roles *as a* knowledge community. The results have been grouped into themes, which are analysed.

History raises people’s curiosity about the past, and enables the young to see the diversity of human experience, and understand more about themselves as individuals and as members of society (Creative Learning and Environment Committee, 2013). History thus is understood as knowledge and practice of people (Fukuyama, 1992).

In African traditional society, the oral tradition has been the main source of the peoples’ histories (Salifu, 2008). Such societies depend extensively on oral traditions, where practitioners use important language to tell or recount the histories of legendary traditional heroes. In Dagbon, the oral tradition places much premium on history. With the *baansi* acting as keepers of Dagbon history, they keep the past of the people of Dagbon in view and in memory. That is to say they are the recorders and articulators of historical and present events. For instance, the primary responsibility of the *baansi* is to preserve the history, which is stored in musical form through drum, poetry, and song. The *baansi* know and understand the relationships between the people who live in their society.

The history of the Dagbon nation has been kept by the *baansi*, who recount it at important ceremonies such as the rituals performed during the installation of chiefs, naming of babies, at funeral ceremonies, and indeed at all social forums. The *baansi* are important in many respects in the entire existences of members of their communities.

Their performances span the entire range of human existence and hence can be considered the 'rite of passage' of the Dagomba people (via the Kingdom of Dagbon, a traditional kingdom founded in the 15th century), from birth to death as well as the observance of rituals and during festivals. This is especially so during Samban *Luja*, an all-night oral poetry decantation session at the chief's palace during major festivals.

Samban *Luja*, as observed, is an occasion where drummers gather in the forecourt of the chief's palace, in the evening of the eve of major festivals in performances that recount the histories of legendary renowned personalities of Dagbon. The histories of such personalities are ultimately those of the Dagbon state. The narratives are often of celebrated Kings, warlords and other legendary figures. By virtue of this role, the *Baansi* assert themselves as the community of knowers, and constitute the living libraries and moving encyclopedias of their time. They are called living libraries because they are the custodians of the wealth of knowledge. As Nowotny (1993) has posited, knowledge production is no longer dependent on formal research structures only. Knowledge is also present in public spaces of individual scientific creativity, professional and lay knowledge, the market and public discourse.

During the community-based interactions of some respondents the following was revealed:

You call them the moving encyclopedias (Referring to researcher). It is proper because of the following: they carry the chieftaincy institution; they have memorized the library transmitted from generation to generation; they memorize knowledge, not only about the chieftaincy institution but all the social life of the people; they are the walking encyclopedia of society, as far back as 100 or 200 years ago; they know you more than you know yourself (a drummer, interview, 12/4/2013).

Another informant also had this to say:

but for them we would have forgotten who we are; but for them society will be tensed and explode; they are tradition bearers and but for them there would be no group identity. (Interview, 12/6/2013)

In a focus group discussion, the group members were of the opinion that:

the *baansi* promote respect for chieftaincy; preserve tradition; prevent adulteration of the people's culture; display or exhibit what the Dagbon people are and what they represent. (*Lunsi/Akarima/Goonje*, Focus group discussion/18/6/2013)

The *Baansi* are thus, recognised for their knowledge of history and of their local communities. This knowledge is expressed through their chants, song, dance, and drumming. Their role as historians is by far their most important function (Mahama, 2004: 37). The *baansi* in updating us on what went on in previous eras also serve as living archives and the collective memory of the public. Salifu (2008:30) records how many drummers have aptly defined their roles in performance, as according to Belcher (1999: 8), Mamadou Kouaté, from Djibril Tamsir's Niane's *Soundiata* stated that:

... we are vessels of speech, we are the repositories which harbor secrets many centuries old. The art of eloquence has no secrets for us; without us the names of kings would vanish into oblivion, we are the memory of mankind; by the spoken word we bring to life the deeds and exploits of kings for younger generations.

The *baansi* as knowledge producers of Dagbon are very important as far as the history of the Dagbamba is concerned. They act as bridges between the past, present and future generations, so their importance in the survival of the cultural traditions of *Dagbon* cannot be overemphasized. Oral tradition is thus invaluable in its role as a tool for the reconstruction of group history.

Baansi as Communicators

Communication, according to Morrison (2005), means "to share". This implies that communication ought to promote exchange and be in the form of a two-way exchange. There is often the origin/sender and the receiver often described in communication literature as the communicator and communicatee. That makes communication a give and take affair, whereby both or all parties to the process(es) are affected. Indeed for communication to be effective there must be shared meaning between the communicator and the communicatee. That is to say whatever is communicated must be understood between the two. The *baansi* as communicators affect their audience, especially the royalty they celebrate, and people in attendance.

The *baansi* use their musical instruments, or voice to communicate to and with their patrons or audiences. The drum is treated as an extension of the drummer. Whatever they say, sing, or play on their instruments is intended to affect the people in a certain way (Salifu, 2008).

Lasswell (1949: 102) as cited in Salifu (2008) defines the act of communication as one that answers the questions. Effective communication occurs when the receiver appreciates a message and act in a particular way in order to fulfill the sender's communicative intention. For instance, when they perform, *baansi* affect their patrons emotionally. These will induce a verbal assent, a smile, a nod, a sway, dance or mimic, depending on what meaning is communicated and/or appreciated in the communication, and what their mood is at the time of the delivery of the communication. When humans communicate they provide as well as gather information.

Dagbon praise poetry is the preserve of the *baansi*, it's a medium as of communicating history. Interactions revealed that the *baansi* are communicators who communicate through their instruments or drums, song or signs. Indeed, certain messages can only be delivered to the chief via drumming. They use the drum to wake the chief up, and also sing praises to him at dawn, on Mondays and Fridays. This task is called *bieyunaayo*, meaning ... *the day is breaking...wake up*. This allows the chief to prepare to receive the elders, chiefs and visitors who pay him homage in the palace.

According to Zablong (2010) the *baansi* are transmitters of information, in the sense that whenever a dignitary is to pay a visit to a particular town or village, the chief, on receiving the information, passes it on to the *baansi* to pass the message to the entire community. Some respondents asserted that when someone close to the chief died, the *lunsi* or the *akarima* were informed to drum, to send the message to the elders and other chiefs. Every other public announcement is carried out by the *lunsi* while the *akarima* uses his drum to announce visitors and also summon the people in times of conflict or war. Here, there is clear definition of roles among the knowledge community. According to *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2009), the beats and sounds of the drum are used in communication as well as in cultural expression. Salifu (2008: 32) also says that, "the drum is the principal communicative tool used by the *baansi* to drum appellations, send messages and to assist in recounting the exploits of their patrons' forebears." Subrogation communication systems replace the use of speech (Marsh, 2013). That is to say, in Dagbon, one cannot communicate directly with the chief/King. However, one can communicate with the chief using musical instruments as an intermediary, or may do so through an elder. The drum and other musical instruments are therefore the major communication instruments of the people of Dagbon. It is very important to say that during the process of communication, information is internalized and becomes difficult to forget. Thus, it helps sustain and preserve the culture of the people.

Baansi as Consultants/Advisors

A consultant is usually an expert or a professional in a specific field who has in-depth knowledge of the subject matter (Tordoir, 1995). The *baansi* are experts in the history and genealogy of *Dagbon* (Zablong, 2012). As consultants, all the kings, princes and princesses consult the *baansi* for advice. An informant had this to say,

They hold the key to Dagbon knowledge” because they know the history of all the people of Dagbon. In the Dagbon tradition, it is only the *lunsi* as members of the *baansi* who have the license to lay bare any form of message to the chief without risking sanction.

According to Zablong (2012), in Dagbon, drum elders form part of the inner circle of royal advisors. The YaaNaa, the King of Dagbon, is expected to consult this inner cycle of drum elders on matters of utmost significance, such as matters relating to the next successor of the King, the regent. This means that the *baansi* are special advisors to the chief. They are the only ones who could reprimand the Yaa Naa when he is going wrong. According to Locke (1990), they exercise sensible judgment. The chief seeks advice from the *baansi*, especially the *lunsi*, because they know the history and genealogy of every Dagban.

They not only serve as advisors to chiefs, but these knowledgeable *baansi* also counsel the general society. Among the populace their appreciation of the drum message serves as important source of advice on their traditions. The message serves as the source of reference in their discussions and tracing of their traditions and culture. Visitors to the community are painstakingly guided to appreciate the people and their values and history when they attend the performances of the *baansi*. As an elder of the chief’s or king’s court, the master drummer is also a member and elder in the society and thus also offers advice to his people. In times of doubt and conflict this elder is consulted to explain issues and to help place things in the right perspective.

Baansi as Social Critics

Societies have evolved ways of regulating their members and instituting measures for implementing and enforcing controls. Such measures are called social control. “Social control” according to Deflem, (2007) refers generally to societal and political mechanisms or processes that regulate individual and group behavior, leading to conformity and compliance to the rules of a given society, state, or social group. Schaefer (2010) also states that the term “social control” refers to the techniques and strategies for preventing deviant human behavior in any society.

Social control occurs at all levels of society. Human beings have to observe certain group norms including folkways, values, rules and regulations, to satisfy their wants, needs and desires without any problems. These rules act as means of social control. Thus the society needs some intrinsic as well as extrinsic controls (that are inner as well as external), Social control is a necessity.

Social control is mainly done through socialization where society comes to understand and identify with a social system and its values and norms, thereby securing a stake in upholding those values and norms (Crossman, 2014). While the *baansi* as a social institution serve a role, they also have established themselves particularly as social critics. It is their job to identify people with errant behavior, and employ their tools of talk, music and proverbs to remind such persons of what constitutes proper behavior, or remind them of the consequences of breaking the societal code. This, they do by referring to the experiences of some other persons in the past who behaved in similar ways, and ended badly. This in a way makes ‘the *baansi* social critics as well. “Social criticism” is a term used to refer to the areas that deal with the exposure of faults in various aspects of society. It analyzes social structures which are seen as flawed, and aims at practical solutions by applying some specific measures to reform. According to Mondal (n.d) people must respect social norms for society to survive. Social critics therefore help to maintain the stability in the society and force persons to obey social decisions. The *baansi* are the repository of this code. For instance, the women members of *lunsi*, often the praise singers and composers, *lum-pagiba*, are noted for spontaneously composing songs, either to praise somebody or to rebuke a social miscreant. By so doing, they serve as social control in the society. Social control is a general method of regulating the behavior of individuals in society through accepted social norms. According to Cohen-Khani (2008) the cliché that, ‘examining the past allows us to navigate the present and predict the future’, pertains to the role of drummers in Dagbon, who serve as advisors to chiefs and the general populace. According to Nyumba, (2006) Indigenous Knowledge again provides the basis for local-level decision-making about many fundamental aspects of day-to-day life and adaptation to environmental or social change.

In addition, the study we realized that the *baansi* are the “conscience of the society.” They put the people right when they go or are going wrong. According to the respondents, they do this better than the journalist because they do not take sides. It is their calling to remain impartial on such matters and “tell it as it is.” Locke (1990:21) points out that, *the baansi* are the chief’s favorites. Such knowledgeable men are under their chief’s command, and the chiefs are in the position to receive their intimacies and advice.

Baansi as Teachers and Educators

The role of a teacher in society is valuable. It has far-reaching effect on the people, and no other person can have an impact more profound than a teacher (Raina, 2007 cited by Amoah, 2012). Many educationists have described the teacher in different ways. Some describe him as a dispenser of knowledge, while others see him as a leader, counsel or coach, facilitator and a role model. Whatever description one would want to use, the underlying issue still remains that the teacher plays a lead role in determining the future of students and society. According to the White Paper on Education and Learning (n.d), education and training will increasingly become the main vehicles for self-awareness, belonging, advancement and self-fulfillment. Education and training, whether acquired in the formal education system, on the job or in a more informal way, is the key for everyone to controlling their future and their personal development. A good teacher is the one who has a wealth of knowledge from which his pupils can tap from. He is an encyclopedia, a library from which others may make references. Indeed, this is who the *baansi* of Dagbon are.

Before the twentieth century, children in Dagbon had the bulk of their education via “informal” means; observing the ways of adults, through stories, proverbs, riddles and mentorship/apprenticeship of older family members. The *baansi* as keepers of the oral tradition served as both the instructors of etiquette and practitioners of the performative arts (Salifu, 2010). Thus the *Baansi* are “educators”.

Further discussion with the respondents showed that they, the *baansi*, are responsible for teaching the young the details of the profession. In this context, the *baansi* become master tradesmen responsible for training their apprentices in their art and performance. They train the young in not just the performance but also the methods and ways of recording their histories, and communicating that history and culture as well as values and principles of their trade to the populace. It is their duty to educate the public with nothing but the truth. Here, their role is one of moral education or ethical training.

Baansi as Entertainers

Entertainment builds community and forges identities (Flattum, 2011). These oral traditions have been sources of invaluable education as well as entertainment in our traditional rural societies, and they hold the essence of our unique culture and traditions (Dorji, 2010). The role of the storyteller is that of a central source of entertainment, knowledge, and evocation of a communal togetherness, sometimes referred to as *Ubuntu* (humanity/brotherhood). These communal sittings are reflective of a type of patriotism to the communities in which African people exist, a sense of the community being greater than any one individual (Zakiya, 2008).

This statement is relevant to the *baansi* in Dagbon, who as storytellers, are central to the knowledge production and dissemination process. Through their stories, the *baansi* entertain and teach, what has come to be known as “edutainment”. Edutainment according to Nemec and Trana (n.d) is a distinctive form of entertainment that enables the participants to be educated (e.g. get new information from various fields of our life), or even brought up (their postures, values and behavioral patterns could be influenced).

The *baansi* are the primary musicians of Dagbon. They provide music at various social functions such as: naming ceremonies, weddings, and other social functions. The tune of the praise names that are sung or beaten on the drum are the basis of the social dances that are performed at community gatherings. Salifu 2008 says they provide “infodutainment”.

During performances, the *baansi* entertained with their music, chants and dance, wearing big smocks and pants/togas. The music serves as the magnet that attracts people to the events. Ngulube (2003) is of the view that using socialization processes like dance, music, storytelling and the development of technologies to manage and communicate IK may preserve IK without taking it away from the people.

The Weakness of Baansi

According to Zablong (2012), in recent times, some of the *baansi* have compromised their stance due to economic and political pressures. In the past the chief took care of the *baansi*. But the trend has changed, so they have to feed, clothe and provide shelter for themselves. Again the chieftaincy institution in Dagbon has two gates; Andani and Abudu gates. Some of the *baansi* have associated themselves to a faction and they are only loyal to that faction to the detriment of the whole chieftaincy institution. This assertion was confirmed by some of the respondents.

Furthermore, *baansi* try to impress their audience with praise names that are unknown to the latter, or direct drum messages to them that the target audience cannot decode. They actually miscommunicate. In so long as the epithet has been directed to the particular audience, it is the duty of the audience to appreciate their performance even if the message is unclear. Hence, sometimes receivers ‘pay’ the *baansi* even when it is clear to all that they have misapplied the praise epithets. This shows that the knowledge and not the performance of the *lunsi* is limited. Yet, because it is the duty of a recipient of praise to reward the artist, one has to honor that. It is dishonor to not acknowledge the drummers’ efforts (Salifu, 2008).

Conclusion

The *baansi* are vital to the survival of Dagbon's culture. They are living libraries/archives for Dagbon. The *baansi* are the link to every social fibre of the Dagbon society, they warn and guide the society. They also act as a bridge between the past, present and the future generations so their importance in the survival of the cultural traditions of Dagbon cannot be overemphasized. The living libraries (*baansi*), educate, inform, entertain, and record history, thus playing a key role in everyday life of the people of Dagbon state.

They are the custodians of oral history in Dagbon and their importance in the Dagbon State cannot be underestimated. The history of the Dagbon nation has been kept by *baansi*, who recount it at important ceremonies such as rituals performed at installation, naming of babies, funeral ceremonies observance and during festivals. Salifu (2008) re-echos Oppong, (1971) by emphasizing that the drummers act as family historians, royal advisors, cultural specialists and entertainers and in the view of Chista and Abdullahi (2010) they are "walking libraries." It is thus undisputable that the *Baansi* are knowledgeable in the history and wisdom of Dagbon. They therefore continue to remain a major source of preserving that rich and living tradition of the people Dagbon.

Recommendations

In our quest for information as scholars, we must not shy away from seeking information from the indigenous people, as they can help us to solve some of the social, political and economic issues we face in our country today. They have all the wisdom, and knowledge to engage us. Secondly, the living libraries the *baansi* of Dagbon reflects an ideological base that serves as an important source of knowledge for living. It encapsulates the history and philosophy of the people. Yet, this rich traditional cultural knowledge will be annihilated unless given the benefits of innovative storage and dissemination media. It is important to store and share it in forms that make sense to those who use it for living. On the other hand, are the public libraries which have the benefits of modern technology for storage and sharing, but remain out of reach of many, especially the (illiterate) living libraries. Public libraries can use Information Communication Technology (ICT), to provide access to the dissemination of IK of local communities to global audiences, thus securing the preservation of IK.

Public libraries can learn from living libraries by using "barefoot" librarians to their audiences and create fora for socializations within their practice while living libraries can benefit from digital, written, video, and audio media form the public libraries.

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