

Women Participation in Drumming in the Northern Region of Ghana

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Abstract

This study specifically explored the cultural, social and spiritual factors that deter women from participating in traditional drumming practices in Bawku-Natinga. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and observational studies with 30 selected members of the Bawku-Natinga community. The study revealed the community's beliefs regarding women's participation in drumming, highlighting the spiritual connotation of drums, the perceived adverse effects of women touching drums and the embedded gender roles that influence these activities. The study not only uncovered the underlying reasons behind the lack of female's participation in drumming but also proposed tangible strategies to challenge these entrenched beliefs, including instituting training for talented women in the ensemble who are willing to take up drumming roles.

Keywords: Drumming, rituals, customs, gender and spiritual connotations.

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Introduction

Women, world over, play significant role in the socio- economic development of every society. This can be realized from what they do right at home and in the society where they live. In an article shared by Renne (2004) about the role of women in the family, she mentioned:

“The woman performs the role of wife, partner, organizer, administrator, director, re-creator, disburser, economist, mother, disciplinarian, teacher, health officer, artist and queen in the family at the same time.”

On the contrary, she thinks today, civilization and societal change are motivating woman to leave the narrow sphere of the family circle to work with their full potentials outside the family for the enrichment of society. This means that women in society can assume some functional roles of men provided they are capable.

In a typical African society such as Ghana, one would not hasten to say music is an essential component of the way of life because there is no part of its human activity without music, in which men, women and children participate. For instance, during festivals, parties, funerals, enstoolment and other social gatherings, the presence of music cannot be overlooked. African music has many uses and as a result does not only function as an accompaniment to the various activities in the community, but also for entertainment during games and storytelling (*Osibi-asa* in wrestling among the Coastal Fantes and *Mboguo* in *Anansesem* among the Akans). This is why Nketia (1963) opine, music has a social role and this is seen in the following areas of human undertakings throughout the ages. Music has been an integral part of worship, in praise and in supplication to God or the gods. The importance of music in African traditional religion particularly is borne out in the saying, “The gods will not descend without music.”

This is an indication that many stages in the life of man in the African setting are marked

with the performance of music, for instance the rites of passage (Birth, Puberty, Marriage and Death).

Even though the contribution of female in music making is of paramount importance in all musical settings, their roles in drumming in Africa are very limited as compared to the female’s participation in drumming in the western world. Females play active roles and contribute well to both instrumental and vocal music in the western world irrespective of the instruments involved, be it a drum. For instance, “Turtle Women Rising” is a women’s ceremonial band as an organization. Turtle Women Rising exists because of a woman’s vision. They mentioned:

“We stand with the endorsement of women elders and we provide an invitation for the women to return to their ceremonial roles by tending to the drum.”

According to them, their core team is women with 25 or more years of walking with the drum and raising their voices in song and celebration to tend the fire, the spirit of the divine feminine, and the spirit of life. It has been observed that, in some communities in Africa, when it is time for playing instruments during traditional musical performances, it is only the men that are allowed to play the drums with women relegated to background. If there should be any role at all, it is the hand clapping and chorus singing.

Again, in Africa, women in the society were seen as housewives, bearers of children, traders and farmers. Traditionally, the childbearing ability of women is described as the means by which lineage ancestors were allowed to be reborn. Further on, since agricultural production or farming was the main economic activity in many indigenous African communities, women worked on the farm often. As a result, the profit made financially as benefit for engaging in farming was used to keep or run the home, while those

economic benefits accrued by the men from their engagements were either invested or put into ventures that were alleged to be that of the extended family. This ideology of how wealth was managed in the indigenous homes of some African communities made men to be seen as superior to women. By virtue of this, drumming among other things which is seen as a major role in music making in these communities is assigned to men only. While dancing, singing and clapping being the minor ones were assigned to women.

Furthermore, in Africa, drums used in ensembles were carved or constructed in the local communities by experts of traditional music and dance. They use skins of cow, goat, sheep or and antelope as well as wood and nylon strings. This construction sometimes goes through spiritual rituals by soaking the drum skin with some leaves which prevent women from touching because they are seen to be impure due to their menstrual cycle. Meaning, from the onset, these women don't have the opportunity to touch these drums, let alone playing.

The predominant instruments used in Africa are Membrnophones and ideophones. Some of these membranophones such as *Donno* (a double-headed hourglass shaped) found in Akan and some northern communities in Ghana are melodic as well as rhythmic (Amuah, Adum- Atta & Arthur (2004). Drummers control a *Donno's* pitche by cuddling and releasing the strings that go from one drumhead to the other, usually under the armpit. Changes based on the intensity of pressure on the strings affect the tension on the drumheads and determines the pitch production when the drum is stroke. It can be noted that, one's arm segment from the shoulder to the elbow naturally presses in on the upper rear section of the *Donno* strings. Although the upper arm is not the most important source of pressure on the *Donno*, it

is part of the technique. For other types of membranaphones, found in Ghana such as *Patia*, *fɔmtɔmfrɔ*, *Atimevu*, *Apetema* etc. have shapes that do not need cuddling and releasing. They are either played with the palm or a stick to alter the sound produced. All the playing techniques described above involved in playing these drums demand so much strength and energy to produce a good rhythm and sound. Women on the other hand who are regarded as a weaker sex as compared to men in the African indigenous setting are not allowed to participate in drum playing as a result of the gravity of energy involved.

Apart from all these subjects raised earlier, the issue of gender has affected the role women play in the African traditional society. Johnson and Kolodney (2005) say that socialization occurs as boys and girls are exposed to different model and learn what is appropriated for each gender. This process starts at birth where the immediate parents or guardians are the first people to teach gender roles. It continues in the pre-school years through Junior High School, Senior High School and even in the Universities. Nketia, (1982) is of the view that,

“Takada dance drumming which comes from the Anlo-Ewe people of south eastern Ghana was a music that symbolizes a historic struggle of Anlo-women to excise their human right to free speech. Traditionally only men were given the opportunity to be the spokesperson, composer and the choreographer of African rituals. Women were expected not to argue with the men for the right to participate in the formation of these rituals. Drum playing was the central medium of communication among the Anlo-Ewe people.”

So far as women were denied of their access to drumming, they were being denied the right to communicate through same medium. The same way women in Bawku-Natinga were deprived from playing drums to music meant for them. A typical example is the *Tora* music which is meant for women but the drums

played by the men. This was confirmed by Agordoh (1994) who established that, *Tora* was a *Dagomba* women's musical type. Presently, it is performed all over Northern Ghana, specifically, the *Maprusis*, *Nanumbasa* and *Dagombas*. Though a recreational dance, it is however performed at funerals and other occasions like marriage ceremonies, public durbars, festivals and visit of state dignitaries. Although, the performance of *Tora* is strictly a women's affair, men also take part by playing the musical instruments. Another observation was made by Manuh (1998) who said, while many musical instruments are played exclusively by men, women often provide the voice of Africa's music. This legacy carries on from traditional to contemporary music and many of today's most popular singers in Africa are women. She also states that:

“women musicians have not made notable achievements as regards to playing instruments. Lack of personal time, educational resources and encouragement has greatly contributed to women not playing instruments.”

Mastering a particular instrument needs time to study it and rehearsing almost every day. Meanwhile, from preliminary interview, the researchers gathered that, it is not easy for women to get someone who is willing to teach them how to play drums. Also, lack of resources-instrument and venues where rehearsals can take place has been another stumbling block for women as regards learning how to play drum. Essandoh (2006) remarked on this subject after he observed that, Ghanaian communities are made up of both men and women, young and old on which basis music is organized but there are certain things reserved for men only. The contribution of females to music making as far as instrumental roles are concerned is very minimal and limited to only vocal music. He said females have been exempted from the playing of instrument such as membranophone, chordophones and aerophones. Basically, the tradition of

Northern Region of Ghana frowns on the handling and playing of drums by women. Acquah (2008), quoting Nzewi (2003) makes reference to the same cultural experience that “ in the maiden's musical group of women in Africa, men play drums for them. He states that other scholars such as Nketia (1963, 1968, 1989), Maultsby (1990) and Gourlay (1982) have given the same exposure to African musical instruments, stressing the roles of men and women in the sociocultural context of the African community. It is becoming uncertain the factors militating against the participation of women in drumming in Northern Region of Ghana. It is also not known the perception of the masses about women participation in drumming in the communities and the sociocultural impact that would be made when women participate in drumming. In view of this, study intends:

- to investigate the factors that had led to the non-participation of women in drumming in the Northern Region.
- to find out the community's opinion on drumming among women in the Northern Region.
- to investigate the possible means to erase the perception about women involvement in drumming.

2. Method

Research Design

The study used a qualitative research paradigm with a case study design. This design allowed the researchers to collect data in the natural setting of the participants. For Yin (2003) one of the considerable situations to use a case study in research is when the study wants to answer “how” and “why”. Case study is a more flexible and dynamic research design, thus, its flexibility helped to address research questions in this study. These research questions were:

1. Why are women not allowed by to play drums among Bawku-Natinga?

2. How can the perception and superstition about drumming among women in Bawku-Natinga be erased?
3. What will be the sociocultural impact if women are allowed to take part in drumming in the Northern Region community?

Study Area

Bawku municipality is one of the nine districts in the Upper East Region found in the Northern part of Ghana. It has a total land area of about 1215.05 sq km. It shares boundaries with Burkina Faso, the Republic of Togo, Bawku West District and Garu-Tempene District to the North, East, West and South respectively. Bawku is the capital of the district, while Natinga is a sub-community in Bawku District with an estimated total population of about 205849 people. Natinga has (10) ten sub-chiefs who help in administrating duties within the area.

Study Population

The participants of this study include sub-divisional chiefs and some subjects of the Bawku-Natinga community. In all, thirty (30) people participated in the study. Ten (10) individuals were interviewed, that was, sub-chiefs and a subject in each area. Five (5) sub-chiefs were chosen where another five (5) females were also chosen from the area of authority of each of the five sub-chiefs. Furthermore, twenty (20) members of *Tora* local ensemble in the area were observed.

Sample procedure

The method used in sampling was the cluster approach. This was because the area of study was large with ten (10) areas made up of sub-chiefs. The cluster sampling method was very instrumental in the selection of five electoral areas for the study. This was achieved by grouping the ten (10) electoral areas into five clusters within which an area was picked from each cluster using simple random sampling. In

addition, a quota sampling was used in selecting a sample size. The procedure used for selecting a 'quota' of respondents to be chosen from the population was the drawing of a sampling frame across the five random selected electoral areas (out of the ten) which was used to select respondents on the basis of quota allotted to each electoral area. With this, two (2) respondents each were selected in the electoral areas being a chief and a female subject. Finally, a purposive sampling technique was applied by concentrating on *Tora* ensemble made up of twenty (20) members, five (5) males and fifteen (15) females.

Data Collection Instruments

The main instruments used for data collection were interview and observation. The interview schedule for the respondents was divided into three (3) sections which covered women participation in drumming, the role of women in the ensemble and suggestions as to how to erase the view of gender difference, perception and superstition around women's participation in drumming. Meanwhile, the researcher observed by visiting rehearsal sessions and performances of a *Tora* ensemble to study and find the distribution of instrumental roles in it, the way the local people in Bawku-Natinga organize their indigenous music and the active role females play in the making of the music in the community. These data collection instruments were necessary because they helped the researcher to establish the facts done within, five months- December 2021 to April 2022. The first step in the phases structured for data collection in the study was done by chatting and having an informal interview with the sub-chiefs, who were locally known as *Gbadana* and some subjects of Bawku-Natinga. This was done by visiting them in their individual homes, just to establish good rapport with them. The second phase was the researchers' formal interview

schedule, where relevant information was gathered regarding the study. This was done between 27th December 2021 and 10th January 2022 at the homes and work places of respondents. Furthermore, between 12th and 20th February 2022, the rehearsal section of a *Tora* ensemble was observed. Information obtained were consistently cross-checked to obtain consistency in data collected.

Results and Discussion

The researchers made a field trip to the rehearsals of the *Tora* ensemble in month of December 2022 and January, 2023 which was the normal rehearsal time for the ensemble. It was formal rehearsal, because it took into consideration the laid down procedures and structures that governs their meeting or rehearsal. The people present were the dancers and the singers who were females and the instrumentalist who were males. The rehearsal was an hour activity which took off every Saturday between 3 and 4pm. This was very suitable for the women because they were able to finish early and go back to attend to their house hold chores.

Before the rehearsal started the main cantor paid homage to the instrumentalist by kneeling down in front of them. When she returned, she started the opening warm-up song which was soon taken over by the other singers and dancers. From observation, *Tora* was a game-like music in which two dancers knock their buttocks together in time to the cadence moment in the drumming. Each dancer knocked twice. The dancing was reserved for the women because they were seen to have more flesh at their buttocks and could make the dancing attractive. Another role played by women was to sing songs on call and response format because songs formed an essential part of *Tora* music. The women used all kinds of vocal techniques prevalent to the northern part of Ghana; that is glides, glissando, nasal voice quality, melismatic treatment of text among others on

in their repertoire. They were assigned the singing because of their melodious voices.

The researcher realized that, there was also clapping of hands which was mainly done by women. The handclap in *Tora* functioned as a musical time line. This time lines shaped the rhythmic contour of the music and provides an important rhythmic partner for each part. For example, the dancers' steps were timed in unison with the handclaps.

Instruments used in the dance were basically the *gungon*, the *Lunna* and hand clapping. Two *gungon* were used in *Tora* music which were all played by men. The source of sound of the two drums was the membrane. In *Tora*, the two *gungon* drummers either played in unison, or one drummer chooses to repeat basic variations while the second drummer plays a more intriguing solo. The *Lunna* (a double-headed hourglass shaped drum), also called *Donno* by the Akans of Ghana, unlike the *gungon*, the frame is curved. The curved nature of the wooden frame of *Lunna* gives a change of sound when a player compressed and released with the arm under the armpit. The source of sound was the membrane where curved sticks were used in playing. Women were not allowed to play because of the energy involved in playing.

From the interview, respondents expressed different views on the reason why females were not allowed to participate in drumming in Bawku-Natinga. When asked whether women play drums in the community, all the respondents said no. The following reasons were given.

A respondent said:

“The reason why women are not allowed to drum is that, since time immemorial, men are the ones seen playing drum and so people in the community see it as the responsibility of men to drum.”

For Abugre,

“Women are not allowed to play drums because they are seen as naturally weaker than men.”

Madam Yenti Mariam, a female respondent, disclosed that, lot of situations abounds in the Northern traditional areas where music is required. She stated that, of relevance to the women is the phenomenon of singing and dancing. Although songs and dancing add beauty to music making in the Bawku Natinga, they had value and more important effect of curbing recalcitrant and criminal minded members of the community and so to her, the women do not touch the drums at all. According to an interviewee, women were not allowed to play drums in the Bawku-Natinga community due to some prevailing tradition and customs. She stated that it is a very big taboo for women to drum and it is also against the customs and the tradition of the area of the study. It is belief that when a woman plays drums, there are going to be spiritual dangers which would affect any victim for the rest of her life. She said failure to obey these rules can lead to swelling of any woman who touches the drum.

The findings brought to light that, there has been a perception and superstitious connotation around women and drumming from the past. The researchers were made aware that, there is an impression that, females that play musical instruments would have a non-stop menstruation. It was alluded that, this act continues (Menstruation) until the person involved dies. It is belief that drums have spiritual powers which apart from the abnormal menstruation, are capable of making women suffer unusual abdominal pains. It was gathered that; this may even lead to life time barrenness. More so, there is also an ideology that females who would be involved in drumming would develop a very big testicle (locally called *pua*) which originally is a part of the male genital organ.

Through interview with one of the sub-chiefs (locally known as *Naaba*) in Bawku-Natinga, it was revealed that, women do not drum because they were considered not pure because of their menstrual circle. Drums were considered sacred, as sometimes even worshipped as gods. If a woman were to touch the drum, then she would cause harm to the drum and make the drum lose all of its power due to her impure nature. Therefore, women were not permitted to touch the drum. These myths hinder women from drumming hence for many years, women have been stereotyped as docile and meek individuals. More so, the rigid gender roles have disenfranchised women on a number of levels. Women were taught that drumming along with a number of other cultural and economic opportunities are out of reach because women do not have the capabilities to achieve them.

In an interview with another participant in Bawku-Natinga he said there are rituals that were performed before any performance in the olden days. This ritual could be harmful to a woman or the occasion when females play the drum. Another respondent reveals how some females had been discourage and prevented by their fellow males from taking active role in drum playing. Gender roles are natured roles and responsibilities conferred on either gender as result of the social constructs of respective societies. For example, in some societies, farm work could be predominately male responsibilities while in others it is accepted as woman's affair. A respondent stated that, in the community of Bawku-Natinga women had a peculiar role that is generally critical. She said it is appreciated when women act as agents of propagation of its genetic stock, preservation of its culture, cohesion of society and economic growth, respectively through birthing and nurturing of babies, up bring of the children, exertion of collective moral

cohesive force for the common good, and partaking in socio-economic endeavours. While the younger female children are trained exclusively to take care of the household chores, such as fetching water, grinding maize, cooking and caring for younger siblings, on the contrary the males are exposed to the acquisition of musical knowledge and skills through exposure to musical situations created in the society in which he absorbs by active participation. The respondent said, even in some situations, it is the social role of the child to take over from his father or a relative in playing the drums or any instruments.

In order to erase the perception and superstition about drumming among women in Northern Region of Ghana, women should be exposed to drum training. This can contribute to enhance their ability to drum because it does not only take strength to drum but skills and techniques are required. To add, educating the public would be another good approach to erase the perception and superstition about women drumming. This is to say that the community should be enlightened about modernization and civilization where in the western world, women drum yet had not adverse effect. From another perspective, there are women who made significant contribution in academics, health care, finance, economy, education, and politics and so on. Apart from this, there are multitudes of women in the world in professions and callings who are daily making contributions that are helping the world much assuredly forward into globalized community of the 21st century, thus other women can use drum talents to also inspire and contribute to development.

It became evident in the findings that some respondents wanted some transformation where women would be given the opportunity to also exhibit their talent on traditional drums. This was indicated in the differences in

the speeches of some women the researchers interviewed. Though greater percentage of the male interviewees complained about the women who now play drums in the contemporary world, a few buy the idea and recommended that women can now be trained to play traditional drums because of current civilization.

Also, some respondents opined that talented women can train on the traditional drum in order to perform without men. This, they said would enhance and showcase the talents and capabilities of women in the Bawku-Natinga community. On the contrary, there is the tendency of community pride and cultural continuity. According to investigation, the chief who was asked to comment on women participation in drumming said they respect and are very proud of their customs and traditions. In effect, there should be things reserved for men only in the community in order to make them superior over women. He said, they the men are ready to pass this tradition on from generation to generation.

Conclusion

The research has brought to light some of the traditional perceptions about women in Bawku-Natinga in terms of their involvement in the playing of drums thus identifying the impact if women are allowed to drum in traditional music making. Drumming which was associated with prestige was preserved for men considering the fact that man was seen to be brave and "holy". Moreover, this study has confirmed, the peoples believe that traditional drums were not to be played by women because of old rituals and custom. It is a very big taboo for women to drum and it is also against the customs and the tradition of the area. It is believed that when a woman plays a drum there are going to be spiritual dangers which would affect any victim for the rest of her life failure to obey this rule can lead to a swelling of any women who touches the

drum. The researcher discovered that, in the community of Bawku-Natinga women had a peculiar role that is generally critical. In view of this, it is rather appreciated when women act as agents of propagation of its genetic stock, preservation of its cultured, cohesion of society and economic growth respectively through birthing and nurturing of babies, up bring of the children, exertion of collective moral cohesive force for the common good and partaking in socio-economic endeavour rather than playing a role like drumming in traditional music setting in Bawku-Natinga .

Recommendations

Below are some recommendations to be considered:

1. Tora ensembles in Bawku-Natinga should institute the training of women in the ensemble who are talented and willing to take up drumming roles.
2. The chiefs and elders should institute occasions in bawku-natinga where women will mount the whole ensemble to display on the drums, sing and dance.
3. Proper documentation should be made on drum patterns of Tora to make learning easy for women.

Further research

It is relevant to propose some of the areas requiring further exploration

1. One major musical type identified and discussed in this work through observation, known as *Tora* provides a basis for separate in-depth study, thus the difference between traditional *Tora* dance and the contemporary *Tora* dance can be looked at.
2. Women contribute a lot in the social and economic sphere of Bawku-Natinga therefore the researcher will propose a deep investigation into the role of women in the sociocultural

development of Bawku-Natinga community.

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