

## Indigenous Musical Modes of Communication and their Relevance in Contemporary Times among the Boosi in Ghana

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### Abstract

The myriad indigenous musical instruments among the Boosi (Grunis) play important roles in their lives. For instance they are played during birth, marriage, death, harvesting time, house construction, festivals, worship time etc. Epistemologically, they consider the various ancestral musical instruments as an embodiment of their culture and belief systems. Indeed, as sources of communication, the instruments shape their language; hence, they possess spiritual forces that emotionalize the people in both happy and sad times. Unfortunately, the advent of Christianity and westernization has shelved the relevance of these indigenous instruments to the extent that most of them exist in oral history but are not documented. The study was done among the Boosi of Bongo District of the Upper East Region of Ghana. The aim of this work is to establish the contemporary relevance of the musical instruments, photo document them for posterity and also promote the cultural heritage of the Boosi. Methodologically, it was an ethnographical study. Data collected were purely qualitative using participatory approaches to elicit relevant information from key respondents. Nineteen musical instruments were identified and the distinctive messages they communicate were noted. It was disclosed that a good number of the musical instruments were not known to the younger generation.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Musical modes, Communication, Relevance, Contemporary Times, Grunis

### Background

Indigenous African music has an enormous impact on its indigenes due to the messages (communication) it carries across in all fields of endeavour because music in this part of the world is intimately linked with language and many languages including that of Boosi are “tone languages”. Citing Kamien (1994), “tone languages permit the use of music for communication: drummers, trumpeters, and other musicians convey messages and tell stories by imitating the rhythms and pitch fluctuations of words”. Unfortunately, little attention is paid to indigenous music with its intrinsic connotations in Africa. A lot of the varieties of musical instruments are not documented for the benefit of the current youth and generations to be born in Africa. Those that are documented are “Eurocentric” in form. That is, documentation of African music was done by European musicologists similar to their own context. Though recent African musical scholars like Prof. J.H Kwabena Nketia of the University of Ghana have made an attempt to document African music, they have not given equal attention to the musical instruments that have been used over a century.

Literature support for African music as a tool for communication and for development therefore, has revealed a grey area for what can be termed as “ethno-musical social investigation”. Dargie (1992) shares this concern of ‘grayness’ by highlighting the complexity of the African environment in stating that “..... African music has a long history that has been orally transmitted from one generation to the other and captured in written form by western explorers. Writings on African music are largely based on western theoretical frameworks with little or no reference to their African origins .....”. This apt description of the situation indicates that most African scholars, especially from the sciences, have given little attention to expression of their perspectives on their own music.

According to Stone (1998), dance, music, and story-telling are parts of the ways of expressing the daily lives of the African people. Hence, it is difficult to separate music from the cultural context of the African. This implies that indigenous musical instruments associated with identified ethnic groupings play an important role in their history. It symbolizes their musical identity, and also creates a tangible link to their ancestral beliefs. This view is aptly demonstrated by Ampomah (2003), who opined that “...in traditional African societies, music is not separated from other spheres of life, such as ceremony, ritual, recreation and religion [African Religion]”. Indeed, religious influences of Christianity and Islam have also had influences on African music (Stone, 1998). Stone continues in positing that African indigenous beliefs suffered a long history of suppression by colonists. A number of indigenous songs and instruments have been kept away from western Christian church services until recently. Africans who decided to join Christianity were encouraged to disassociate themselves with traditional

musical practices while others continued to practice African traditional beliefs secretly. Alongside, religious influences are influences from various external cultures. *This notwithstanding, some aspects of African music can be said to be enduring.*

Mariare and Logan (2005) argued that African music is best understood by rejecting the notion that it is “*primitive*” music. He introduces the notion of “*ear opening*” to challenge a predisposition to understanding African music with unbiased minds. He moves the discourse further by considering the role of music and games as a functional part of an African child’s natural development. Maraire’s findings were the nearest gotten to establish a vital link between traditional modes of communication and development in the literature.

These issues as well as empirical encounters with music during several years of work with rural communities in northern Ghana motivated the conduct of this research and the discussions that emanated from it.

Methodologically, this is an ethnographical study of the various musical instruments among the Boosis (Grunis) in the Bongo District of Ghana. Data collected were purely qualitative in nature using participatory approaches to elicit relevant information from key respondents that included instrument crafters, players and singers. Also, soothsayers and the District staff of the Centre for National Culture (CNC) were involved. An in-depth Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was also organized to gather detailed data on the cultural, religious and other socio-economic relevance of the musical instruments identified. Some of the photo shots on musical instruments and artists are vividly presented below. This has been done with the expressed permission (with due regard to ethical considerations) of respondents.

### **Presentation and Analysis**

The study was done among the Boosi (Grunis) people of the Bongo District of the Upper East Region of Ghana. It is hoped that the findings here will stimulate similar investigations in order to give African music its proper place within the context of *endogenous development*. Also, part of the objective of this work was to document the various instruments for posterity such that loses could be avoided.

This piece of write-up covers the following areas:

- Modes of communication
- Traditional communication instruments
- Amalgamation of instruments
- Women role in the use of instruments
- Influence of instruments on the culture of the people
- Social Change and its Impact on the Boosi Culture
- Proposed areas of putting instruments into effective use

Photos of some of the musical instruments have been inserted to aid readers and the youth of the Boosi to learn more about their set-ups and relevant uses.

### **Modes of communication**

Findings in the field revealed that the ethnic groups have ways of communicating among themselves. The most outstanding modes include:

- Verbal (by word of mouth): That is, interpersonal communication which is audibly spoken, using the mouth. The indigenes verbally spoke Grooni.
- Non-verbal (sign language or body movements): This mode of communication was found to be useful among the People but rarely relied on.
- Use of instruments: Instruments were also found to be commonly used as media of communication. Messages of all kinds, especially during rites of passages are passed through such instruments.

### **Types of Traditional Communication Instruments**

Several communication instruments were found in the study area. It was, however, disclosed that some were little known within the system. African musical instruments can be classified under idiophones (percussions or concussion), membranophones (e.g. drums), aerophones (e.g. trumpets and horns), chordophones (e.g. string instruments), electrophones (e.g. synthesizers) (Maraire and Logan, 2005). From the study, several communication instruments identified were found to have been made of Maraire’s and Logan’s (ibid) classification. Below are nineteen of such instruments identified and the distinctive messages they communicate:

#### **NANSASE:**

They are idiophones. They are knee or ankle buzzers. They are made from metal and tied around the knee or ankle, so that when the dancer stamps his/her feet, a distinctive sound is produced. Each unique sound produced, gives an indication of the occasion. They are used to dance “solma”, “galib” and “gin gango” among others. Smaller kinds are sometimes worn around the hands by drummers.

#### **NINLONGO:**

This is made from an iron metal. It is made with two openings at both ends where a piece of string is tied. Two rings are made to accompany it. These rings are worn around the fingers and made to strike the metal to produce determined sound. The set of the instruments is used in performing “yongo”. “Yongo” is a monthly dance performed by the youth in the night to signify the end of the rainy season. Also, community members perform

“yongo”, for three days in broad daylight immediately after the annual harvest.

#### MOLLAA

It is a horn fife. The “mollaa” is made from the horn of an antelope and is similar to “dopebgo”. The difference in them is the sound each produce. “mollaa” is used during a war dance to recount the past wars that their ancestors fought. It is also used by search and rescue-parties and during the performance of the funeral rites of a great warrior.

#### PITSI

They are made of metal in the form of knots and worn in the middle finger. Expert traditional musicians strike them together to produce melodramatic beats. Occasions that they are used include sooth-saying (chanting), ritual rites and war dance performances.

#### WIA

This instrument is also a fife carved from wood. The “wia” belongs to the aero-phone “family” but very small as compared to “dopebgo”, “mollaa” and “gingelga”. “Wia” appears to be a generic name. They are of different uses. For example, there is the “yongo weia” which produces rhythmic sound for dancing. The second type is used to sing and interpret sounds and a third type blown to punctuate a praise singers’ messages. It can also be blown solo. In the past, it was reliably used to communicate among shepherds in the field.

#### GINGELGA

This is a long fife. It is a local whistle made from hard wood like the “dopebgo” or “mollaa”. It is used in an ensemble during war dance. A communication sound is produced by blowing air into it with the mouth. The “gingelga” is featured more in war dances and can be played Solo or in combination with other instruments.

#### DOPEBGO

It is made out of a scooped hard piece of wood with the upper end bigger than the lower end. Air is blown into the instrument through the upper end and the sound required is produced. “Dopebgo” is used to announce the performance of war dance, funerals. It is also blown to signify the death of an elderly person outside the community and to set in motion preparation by family members to go and bring the corpse home.

#### GULIGO

This is a side-drum. It is one of the main kinds of communication instruments that are often used during occasions. It is made of a double end hollow wood or empty small sized tin. The hollow ends are covered preferably with the skin of a cow and are drummed/played with stick. It is used in an ensemble. Other instruments used along side with the “guligo” include “lugi”, “bima,wia”. The “guligo” is usually selectively used to announce funerals of Tindanas, Chiefs and elder persons. It is also used in funeral rites performances. Other imitated type of the “guligo” is called “koligo”. It is made of metal and played during occasions like marriage ceremonies, festivals, community durbars, and other social events.

#### SINYAASI

It is made of a piece of calabash shaped into a required size. Ropes from straw are strung in holes perforated on the shaped calabash and the same kinds of ropes are woven round it to the top. Some pebbles are put inside the instrument before the top end is tied up. The “sinyasi” is used by shaking it to produce coordinated or ratting sound during dancing musical performance. It is also good for choral music performance.

#### SINYAGRE

This is an instruments made out a small calabash with its original content scooped and some pebbles replaced. The hole through where the original content was removed is then closed up. The “sinyagre” is used by shaking it with both hands. It can be played by a solo artist but it is often combined with “duringa” or “koligo” in a group performance.

#### DURINGA

This is a violin (“goji”). It is made from a medium size calabash patched with goatskin and a string passed through the calabash. The string is tied from end to end with the hair of a horsetail, bending the stick a little. A bow is also made from another stick, which is used to strike the “duringa” to produce sound. “Sinyaga” are combined with “duringa” to produce appropriate rhythm. This instrument is also accompanied with rattles. “Duringa” can be played during funerals, festivals, and other social functions. Others use it at market squares and social grounds to court young ladies for marriage.

#### BATAWOO

It is also a stalk fife. “Botawoo” is usually blown to signify the beginning of the dry season. Also, it is used to invite friends to work in one’s farm scheduled earlier. It is sometimes used to insult persons at a distance. It is also blown to indicate the end of an entertainment.

#### BIMTE

It is a calabash drum. The top part of the calabash is opened to a required size and patched preferably with a goatskin. Communication sound is produced by hitting the skin with the palms. “Bimte” is usually played at the site of a grave to invite the community or clan together to perform rituals. It is also played to thank the gods for a good harvest and to mark the end of farming season. When a new market is to be constructed or opened, it is

played again. There are spiritual connotations to the sound it produces.

#### KOLIGO

It is similar to the “duringa” but it is strung with a string instead of the hair of a horsetail. Sound can be produced by using a soft piece of an object such as a piece of cowhide to strike it. It can be played by solo artist or in a group with “sinyagre”. “Koligo” is often played at leisure time to entertain people/visitors. Others play it to beg (‘diplomatic begging’).

#### LUNGA

This is an “hour-glass drum” popularly call “dondo” in Akan. It is carved from a piece of wood that is hard and weather resistant. Both ends are patched with goat skin using ropes. It is either armpit or hand manipulation to produce varied sounds/melodies. A stick is usually used to strike the skin for the sound to be produced. They ‘Lunga’ are made of different sizes to ensure that the sounds vary in an ensemble. “Lunga” can be played solo. When played may announce funerals, presence of mourning, war time and also for entertainment.

#### TINTANE

This is made from the horn of a bush cow. Air is blown through a hole with the mouth to produce sound. They are used in varied sizes in an ensemble to provide “yongo dance”.

It can also be used to gather warriors for war

#### BENKONE

The “benkone” and “tintane” are alike. The difference between them is the sound. “Benkone” has a deeper and louder sound. They are used in an ensemble to provide music for “yongo” dance.

#### LITINGA

The ‘Litinga’ is made from the stalk of a guinea corn plant. It is a flute with three to four holes at the end. There are two varieties. One is blown from a hole made at the side towards the end. They can be used in solo performances or in an ensemble. Praise singers effectively use them.

#### KINKANSI

These are made from broken calabash. They are made into round small pieces, varying in sizes.

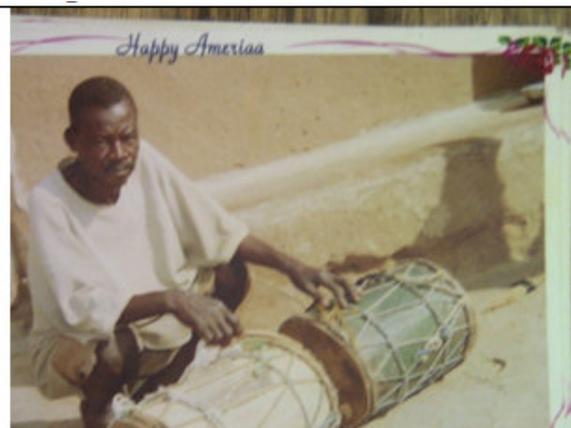
A small hole is bored in the middle of each. They are pushed into a stick preferably at the end of the millet stalk. Both ends are locked with another small stick at the bottom end. They are shaken to produce required sound. It is noted that the Boosi people in Bongo have several communication instruments. Not all however, have been identified for this work due to time constraint and respondents inability to remember them off hand. Some of the instruments were no more found in the system and so are not included in the pictures.

#### Photo Exhibition of some main Boosi Instruments





**Lunga Artist**



**Guligo Sculpture**



**Bimte, Sinyari and Koligo**



**Youth having fun blowing Wia**



**Dopebgo**



**Wia**

### **Amalgamation of Instruments**

The study also revealed that even though some of the instruments could be played solo, combining them in an orchestral/ensemble convey much more meaning with regard to the sort of messages conveyed. Perfect rhythms indeed are provided when combined.

Also, some of the occasions during which some of the instruments are played involve long hours of performances. In that light, “group show” enables participants meet the time frame for display since there are usually breathing spaces. In this case, instrumentalists become more frenzied and are played for longer hours.

Besides, different instruments provide variety of fine tones and beats to meet the required taste and occasion. In that order, varied rhythms are produced which ginger the audience to participate fully by dancing, singing or otherwise. It was also noted that varied dance performances or musical entertainment have specific instruments that are normally combined to reinforce one another. Some of the combinations include:

- “Guligo”, “lusi”, “sinyagre”, “wia” and “bimte” are played together for “pogne” dance (free style dance).
- “Nansasi”, “bimke”, “lunga”, “wia” also for “solma” dance.

- “Duringa”, “sinyaga” for “duringa” dance
- “Koligo”, “sinyaga” also for “koligo” dance
- “Delono”, “tintama”, “benkoma”, “dopebgo”, “mollaa”, “gingelga” and “lusi” for “dea” dance (war dance)

Generally, it was noticed from the study that solo artists were found mainly as praise singers in the communities they come from. Their relevance were not only felt in their respective communities but also in other communities where serious marketing is observed. Other places they were often sited were festive occasions. In all these, artists played the instruments and sang for money and/or gifts. The aged Director of CNC opined thus: “if a group of percussionists combined the instruments well before you, were moved to offer them gifts without them begging”.

#### **Role of Women in the Use of Instruments**

The interviewed communities hinted that the male groups dominate in the use of communication instruments as dictated by culture. All the same, women were discovered to have used some of the instruments in some of their daily activities. The only instruments to have been manipulated solely by women among the lot included:

- “Sinkaasi”;
- “Sinyaasi”;
- “Sinyaka” (use by women vocalist).

These instruments are used individually or in combination to provide motivating and rhythmic songs during productive ventures engaged by women. Some of the productive ventures they often venture in accompanied with songs are:

- During farming (especially women associated farmer groups)
- Plastering of homes with local materials
- When hired to draw water for house construction and other women related activities.

Responses from the women indicated that for many of these activities engaged in, they are able to execute the task faster and with dexterity due to the influence of the instruments alongside the songs. The idea that women do not play or use most of the communication instruments does not mean that they cannot use them when given the chance. Such barriers were found to have been based on antiquated cultural grounds sanctioned by culture.

#### **Influence of Instruments on the Culture of the People**

The communication instruments play a vital role in developing the people’s culture. It was made clear that the traditional communication devices were often used during all unfolding events be it happy or sad occasions. A respondent intimated that “*if there is no drumming and music, there is no funeral, there is no marriage and there is no installation of chiefs*”.

Their instruments are, therefore, part and parcel of their own lives. As was revealed in the FGD, events such as funerals and funeral rites, marriage ceremonies, ritual rites, sooth saying, farming, craftwork, wars among others are all carried out through the influence of such traditional communication instruments. In most of such occasions, the pass is recounted and lessons drawn out of it. They are the occasions where the young ones learn more about their pass history and even watched the way the instruments are drummed or played and imitate when are alone to perform.

Hence, music and dance have utilitarian function as it is used for everyday activities: for a child’s naming ceremony, tutelage, initiation rites, hunting and fishing practices, agricultural production, national ceremonies, war times, religious and other auspicious occasions. Their central role is to recount history, define and ascribe lineage, transfer knowledge and skills, challenge and motivate action through praise singing.

In all these roles of instruments and the music they produce, the evoking of the spirits and especially of the ancestors of the African is the aspect that is irreplaceable by other forms. This is characterized by various incantations, recitals, trances, and dirges.

These instruments are also symbolic of the different tribes and associations. In Northern Ghana, the Dagombas are noted for their big drums carried with a sling, the Frafra for their small drums handled in the armpits, the Kasenas with their whistles, and the Dagaabas with their xylophones and so on. All these cultural identities are significant and express the indigenous people’s worldviews on music and their ramifications within their socio-cultural milieu.

#### **Social Change and its Impact on the Boosi Culture**

Modern trends were found to have adulterated the community’s culture negatively.

Some of the trends included:

- the infiltrations of foreign religions thereby influencing many of the people to look at some of their cultural practices as evil and outmoded;
- the pursuit of western education that has also taken many young Boosis away who hardly have time to learn how to drum or play the instruments;

It was disclosed that as a result of these two main factors, the skills to construct and play the instruments are becoming extinct among the people. Those young ones who even happened to have stayed in their communities

throughout are not keen in acquiring the skills. The more worrying trend observed was that the aged who have the talents in the making and use of the instruments appear to be passing away without replacement. For instance, mention was made that the “**yongo**” dance in particular with the ensemble of “**benkoma**”, “**wiisi**”, “**tintama**” among others has been shunned by the community. Preference is given to modern musical instruments and lyrics by the youth.

It however, must be said that there appears to be a re-awakening of cultural consciousness among the African – *a renaissance*. This interest is partly due to the romanticized need for Africans in the Diasporas to (re)discover their roots. It also appears that the youth who despise the traditions often return to them as they age. The New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) and various continental, regional and national conventions, policies, and programmes have given leverage to such interests as well. Academic interests among African scholars in their culture and sciences are on the ascendancy giving rise to various researches and documentations like this one done by African’s institutions of higher learning.

#### **Proposed Areas of Putting Instruments into Effective Use**

For the purpose of getting the youth to develop interest in learning the use and construction of the instruments and ensure that they stand the test of time, the following measures have been suggested:

1. Cultural troops’ formation and competition should be encouraged in the communities.
2. To achieve the above, banking of the major communication instruments will be required to avoid their extinction among the tribal groups.
3. The Centre for National Culture (CNC) in Bongo and other Boosi Districts will need to be equipped so that they could:
  - a. Assist local residents with musical talents to improve upon them.
  - b. Get the youth in the communities mobilized and given adequate training to play the instruments and take active part in all cultural performances.
  - c. Annual cultural festivals should be organized in the Districts to get communities to compete in all forms of cultural display and also exhibit the various forms of the instruments. This process has the tendency to increase the people’s interest especially the youth and also bringing all musical artifacts of communication devices back into the system.
4. It is equally proposed that all basic schools should acquire some of the instruments and make them available occasionally for the pupils to learn.
5. The music of the Gurune people has potential big market value due to the existence of “rap” and “hip life” taste in them. In this light, talented local singers should be identified and helped to develop their songs for the international markets.
6. The perception of male dominance in the use of the instruments should be discouraged and females encouraged to play them alongside their male counterparts.
7. Weighty instruments should be developed further to make them lighter and well sounding than before. The modification should ensure that they withstand all seasonal changes of the weather and also fulfill the social and cultural obligations.
8. Above all, Dagaabas (Dagara) have encouraged their slaves – the Gurunes (Frafra) to stop hunting for “dog eggs” (caveat for joking relationship) and instead lobby to get more of the musical instruments transferred from traditional to the contemporary through the Pan-African Historical Theatre Festival (PANAFEST) “which has been instituted to establish links between Africans [and hence Ghanaians] on both sides of the Atlantic” (Ampomah, 2003).

For the above proposed areas to yield fruits, it requires the National Commission on Culture (NCC), traditional leadership including the various tribal groups and the government in general to play a lead role to get NGO’s and other development stakeholders interested in committing resources into such project(s).

The Centre for Cosmivision and Indigenous Knowledge (CECIK), an NGO in Northern Ghana which has championed this research intends to integrate this finding in her work with respect to *endogenous development*. As at now CECIK has been introduced to Participatory Video (PV) production with rural communities. The further development and longer term objective of the PV is to see how indigenous instruments and modes of communication could be integrated into this experience.

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