



(LYRCD 7321)

GHANA – MUSIC OF THE NORTHERN TRIBES
Recorded by Verna Gillis

Traveling northward in Ghana, one passes successively through the open coastal region, the tropical rain forest of Ashanti, the slightly sparser landscape of Brong Ahafo, and finally the much drier savannah of the Northern and Upper regions. This last area is the homeland of the peoples represented on this recording. The music made by them is extremely diverse in regard to its form, its instrumentation and vocal techniques, the uses to which it is put and the meaning it has for its performers.

Those who are Muslim, such as the Mamprusi or Kusasi, may perform songs of praise that recall events and persons of religious, historical or political importance. The first selection is an example of this.

Tracks:

1. Mamprusi performed by Mr. Yamgbalga, Leader - 6:50

This selection is Muslim and was lead by Mr. Yamgbalga. Leader and chorus, accompanied by several donnos (hourglass-shaped pressure drums). Recorded in Tamale.

In this ensemble the leader begins with a solo section in free rhythm. Then he and the chorus alternate – the former producing both musical and textual variations and the latter responding with an essentially unchanging part. The donnos, played by the singers, change in pitch as they are squeezed. The drum is held under the left arm and is stick-beaten. The pitches and rhythms thus produced are based on verbal texts.

2. Grunshi Performed by Mr. Achigive Azupio, Leader- 7:12

Mr. Azupio, with two pairs of singers accompanied by the guluzoro and gulusago laced drums. Recorded in the Chinana District, west of Bolgatanga.

The Grunshi of the extreme north actually comprise several distinct subgroups such as the Kasena and Frafra. Like many other stateless societies of the area, they have until recently been largely unaffected either by the Muslim states or by Europeans. The vocal style heard here in which two pairs of singers alternate in the performing of parallel lines, certainly owes nothing to Muslim or European sources. The music here is praise singing. Such songs are created by musical specialists (lem pulu: composers) who are highly regarded for their art, especially in regard to the composing of song texts. The lem pulu usually works and performs with a certain group (normally three men plus himself) to whom he teaches the songs. This music is primarily for listening, and its texts may deal with a wide range of subject matter – from the composer's personal life to biting social comment.

3. Frafra performed by A.B. Lunnaa - 5:23

Frafra is a Christian piece, performed by the leader and chorus, accompanied by a slyari (calabash rattle). Recorded in Bolgatanga. Many musical occasions of people in the north coincide with the harvesting of crops, usually in October or November after the rainy season has ended. The siyari is played by throwing it rapidly from one hand to the other.

4. Kusasi performed by Akurugu - 4:55

This song (Muslim) is performed by the singer accompanying himself in a gonje (bowed lute). Recorded in Bolgatanga. The Kusai live in the extreme northeast of Ghana. Among them, as well as the Mamprusi, Dagomba and Gonja to the south, the institution of praise singer is found. When such a singer performs as a soloist he very commonly accompanies himself on an instrument such as the gonje. This bowed instrument is found among many societies throughout the western Sudan, particularly where Islam has had some influence.

5. Dagarti Group -performed by Dagaabas Bawa - 5:25

Dagart (Catholic) Group – Dagaabas Bawa; leader Michael Bazoroviireh. Xylophone (guil) solo, recorded in Tamale.

6. Dagarti performed by Dagarti Dancing Group - 6:10

Dagarti Gylil, wile (flute) ganga (drum) and male singers. Agarti Dancing Group; Leader – James Kulu. Recorded in Kumasi, district of Ayeduase. The Dagarti live in the extreme northwest of Ghana and extend into Upper Volta as well. They belong to the group of people often called LoDagaa, which includes the Lobi, Birifor and several other subgroups as well. All of these people traditionally use the xylophone for funerals, initiation ceremonies and recreational dancing.

The single Dagarti xylophone heard on track 5, called Dagaa gylil or simply gylil, is approximately five feet long and has seventeen keys, each with a corresponding gourd resonator. During a funeral there would normally be two gylile, one played in the style heard here and the other providing a series of supporting patterns.

A number of Dagarti, like other people throughout Ghana, have moved from their traditional area to the large cities in order to seek temporary or permanent employment. Thus the ensemble heard on track 6 was recorded in Kumasi, the Ashanti regional capital. This example features a gylil upon which one person plays a melody while another plays rhythmic patterns on the largest key. A ganga – a cylindrical double-headed drum – may also be heard, as well as a notched flute called wile. A group of male singers reproduces some of the melodic patterns of the gylil.

7. Kasena performed by Kasena Nankans - 2:30

Kasena Nankans (Christian) Group – Two male singers accompany themselves on two zing (calabash halves). Recorded in Tamale.

8. Kasena Ensemble – performed by Kasena Nankans 2:43

Ensemble of weii (notched flutes), gulu (cylindrical drums) and gungonga (pressure drums). Music for the Nagila Dance. Recorded Narongo. Gulu are two-headed cylindrical drums played with two curved sticks or a stick and a hand. The hourglass drum is called gungonga. A complete ensemble includes six or seven flutes. The highest pitch one (wubala) plays the most important part of the melody and may improvise on it. The flutes in the middle register play one or two notes in hocket with the wubala, as does also a lower pitched flute. The performance of such music is related to chiefs.

9. Performance by Kasena Nankans - 4:19

In this selection the singer accompanies himself on a kono (strummed lute). Recorded in Tamale. The kono is often used to accompany praise singing, but in this example, the intention seems to be to imitate flute music. The tuning of the kono differs from one instrument to another.

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Credits:

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Cover photograph: Mr. Yamgbalga (Track 1)

Suggested Reading:

Beby, Francis, African Music – A People's Art, Lawrence Hill & Co., New York, 1975.

Nketia, Nwabena, African Music in Ghana, Evanston, Ill; Northwestern University Press, 1963.

Nketia, Nwabena, The Music of Africa, W.W. Norton & Co., Inc. New York, 1974.



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