

Music and Historical Consciousness among the Dagbamba of Ghana*

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The Dagbamba people of northern Ghana have been studied from a number of vantage points, but their main claims to fame in the scholarly literature have had to do with politics. First, they have been the focus of several projects that inquired into the nature of their traditional political system and into related issues of state formation in West Africa because, more than five hundred years ago, the Dagbamba consolidated one of the earliest centralized political states south of the Niger bend, the traditional state of Dagbon.¹ Second, they have been a focus for journalists as well as scholars because of an extended and continuing chieftaincy dispute that highlights the interplay between the traditional political system and the Ghanaian government.² One can occasionally see coverage of the situation in magazines like *West Africa*.

* Sections of this essay were developed in an earlier publication, "The Relevance of Ethnomusicology to Anthropology: Strategies of Inquiry and Interpretation," in *African Musicology: Current Trends*, vol. 1, *A Festschrift Presented to J. H. Kwabena Nketia*, ed. Jacqueline Cogdell Djedje and William G. Carter (Los Angeles: African Studies Center, UCLA; African Studies Association and Crossroads Press, 1989), 59-92.

¹ *Dagbamba* is the plural form; an individual is a *Dagbana*. Their language is *Dagbani*. The traditional state is *Dagbon*.

² J. D. Fage, "Reflections on the Early History of the Mossi-Dagomba Group of States," in *The Historian in Tropical Africa*, ed. J. Vansina, R. Mauny, and L. V. Thomas (London: International African Institute and Oxford University Press, 1964); Phyllis Ferguson and Ivor Wilks, "Chiefs, Constitutions, and the British in Northern Ghana," in *West African Chiefs: Their Changing Status under*

B

Nearly twenty-five years ago, I went to Dagbon to study music,³ and my research is an example of how the study of music can lead into broader ethnographic concerns.⁴ I hope to earn for the Dagbamba another type of distinction that will be based on an appreciation of the way they use music to articulate images of their history and then act out those images within their community life. In their traditional state, music and dance play an important role in bringing historical meaning down to the level of participatory social action. The foundation of their musical repertoire and their historiography is an epic body of historical knowledge known as *Samban' luja*, literally, "outside drumming," because it is sung and drummed outside the house of the chief in major towns. The

Colonial Rule and Independence, ed. Michael Crowder and Obaro Ikime (New York: African Publishing Corp., 1970); Ghana Government, *Report of the Yendi Skin Affairs Committee of Inquiry* (Accra, Ghana: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1974); Paul Ladouceur, "The Yendi Chieftaincy Dispute and Ghanaian Politics," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 6 (1972):97-115; Paul Ladouceur, *Chiefs and Politicians: The Politics of Regionalism in Northern Ghana* (London and New York: Longman, 1979; Emmanuel Forster Tamakloe, ed., *A Brief History of the Dagbamba People* (Accra, Ghana: Government Printing Office, 1931), also in A. W. Cardinall, *Tales Told in Togoland* (Westport, Conn.: Negro Universities Press, 1970 [London: Oxford University Press, 1931]); H. A. Blair and A. C. Duncan-Johnstone, eds., *Enquiry into the Constitution and Organization of the Dagbon Kingdom* (Accra, Ghana: Government Printing Office, 1931); Martin Staniland, *The Lions of Dagbon: Political Change in Northern Ghana* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

³ John Miller Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); John Miller Chernoff, "Music-Making Children of Africa," *Natural History* 88, no. 9 (November 1979):68-75; "The Drums of Dagbon," in *Repercussions: A Celebration of African-American Music*, ed. Geoffrey Haydon and Dennis Marks (London: Century Publishing, 1985); John M. Chernoff, *Master Drummers of Dagbon*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass.: Rounder Records 5016); John M. Chernoff, *Master Drummers of Dagbon*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Rounder Records 5046).

⁴ John M. Chernoff and Alhaji Ibrahim Abdulai, *A Drummer's Testament: The Culture of the Dagbamba of Northern Ghana*, 3 vols. With the collaboration of Kissmal Ibrahim Hussein, Benjamin D. Sunkari, Mustapha Muhammed, and Alhaji Mumuni Abdulai (to be published by the University of Chicago Press).

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Samban' luja is one prototype of what we might call a "drum history." To me, a *Samban' luja* performance recalls an image of preclassical Greece, when Homer and his colleagues were singing epics about the Trojan War. It is not easy to see something like that anywhere in the world. I once attended a drum history performance with a poet. He fantasized himself appearing before such a forum, and he kept mumbling, "This is incredible! This is incredible!" Actually, it is normal for a drummer who is about to sing a *Samban' luja*, particularly for the first time, to be quite worried, and it is no wonder. He has to sing more or less non-stop for about eight hours, finding his way through his story and remembering countless details. And, he is not just entertaining the people: he is singing about history and conveying historical knowledge to people who are already knowledgeable themselves.

I would note that when I first went to Dagbon in 1971, I knew virtually nothing about the complex relationship of music and history in that society. I merely started working in Dagbon with the idea of taking Dagbamba music as one example within a broader framework that would use the study of music as a way of looking at social relations in general. My early work in Dagbon and in other cultural areas led to a book called *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*.⁵ The main point I tried to make in that book is that in many African societies, music is an agent for the articulation of generative cultural themes and for the socialization of indigenous values. My argument hinged on demonstrating that the stylistic elements in African musical idioms exist within contexts of interaction that sustain and socialize particular modes of participation. Despite a number of significant works by symbolic anthropologists on the influence of cultural systems of meaning on social structure and history,⁶ the area of musical culture has not

⁵ Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*.

⁶ For example: Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); James W. Fernandez, *Bwiti: An Ethnography of the Religious Imagination in Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

received much attention from social anthropologists because music has seemed so far from the political and economic realities that are the basis of functionalist perspectives on social systems. I believe that in Africa, because of the way that musical style or communication can influence or even dominate situational interaction, because of the particular modes of participation that musical settings institute, and because of the aesthetic sensitivity and contextual awareness required of musicians and participants, ethnomusicologists and ethnographers may hope that attention to musical data can lead to significant generalizations about culture and that these generalizations can be grounded in social action, that is, in performances.

When I decided to continue my research in West Africa, I returned to Dagbon with the idea of elaborating on the broader themes of my early work through detailed investigation of a single society. Essentially, it was because of my involvement with music that I began to have access to historical data and to the types of issues historical knowledge presents to those responsible for passing it on. Thus, rather than looking at the drum history primarily from the standpoint of an historian interested in reconstructing Dagbamba history or a classicist critic interested in its poetic form and improvisational dynamics, I looked at it in terms of its symbolic and social meanings and how those meanings are expressed in musical contexts. This perspective was a nice fit with my original interest because, instead of dealing with historical knowledge as we do, Dagbamba bring it down to participatory contexts and express it through music and dance.

In an African context, the Dagbamba are not really all that unique in this regard. In many African societies, music fulfills functions that other societies delegate to different types of institutions. In Africa, music is an agent for the socialization of indigenous values.⁷ Music serves a crucial integrative function within many types of

⁷ Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*; Robert Farris Thompson, *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act in the Collection of Katherine Coryton White* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974).

institutionalized activities,⁸ and musicians perform a complex social role in community occasions.⁹ Music and dance sometimes provide the generative dynamics of large- and small-scale social movements.¹⁰ In many African societies, musicians are the acknowledged authorities on history and custom¹¹ and, particularly in the Western Sudan, often have important political functions.¹² In Dagbamba

⁸ A. M. Jones, *Studies in African Music*, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1959); Charles Keil, *Tiv Song* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); Alan P. Merriam, "African Music," in *Continuity and Change in African Cultures*, ed. William R. Bascom and Melville J. Herskovits (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959); Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964); Hugo Zemp, *Musique Dan: La musique dans la pensée et la vie sociale d'une société africaine* (Paris: Mouton and École Pratique des Hautes Études, 1971).

⁹ S. Kobla Ladzekpo, "The Social Mechanics of Good Music: A Description of Dance Clubs among the Anlo Ewe-Speaking People of Ghana," *African Music* 5, no. 1 (1971):6-22; J. H. Kwabena Nketia, *Drumming in Akan Communities of Ghana* (London: University of Ghana and Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1963).

¹⁰ John Blacking, "The Role of Music in the Culture of the Venda of the Northern Transvaal," in *Studies in Ethnomusicology*, vol. 2, ed. M. Kolinski (New York: Oak Publications, 1965); John Blacking, "Music and the Historical Process in Vendaland," in *Essays on Music and History in Africa*, ed. Klaus P. Wachsmann (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1971); T. O. Ranger, *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa, 1890-1970: The Beni Ngoma* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1975).

¹¹ David W. Ames, "A Sociocultural View of Hausa Musical Activity," in *The Traditional Artist in African Societies*, ed. Warren L. d'Azevedo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973); David W. Ames, "Igbo and Hausa Musicians: A Comparative Examination," *Ethnomusicology* 17 (1973):25-78; Ayo Bankole, Judith Bush, and Sadek H. Samaan, "The Yoruba Master Drummer," *African Arts* 8, no. 2 (winter 1975):48-56, 77-78; Paul Berliner, *The Soul of Mbira: Music and Traditions of the Shona People of Zimbabwe* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978).

¹² Charles Cutter, "The Politics of Music in Mali," *African Arts* 1, no. 3 (spring 1968):38-39, 74-77; Roderic Knight, "The Manding Contexts," in *Performance Practice*, ed. G. Behague (London: Greenwood Press, 1984); Gordon Innes, *Sunjata: Three Mandinka Versions* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1974); Thomas A. Hale, *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist: Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press and Center for African Studies, 1990).

F society, these musicians are drummers, with distinct lineage groupings and hierarchical chieftaincy organizations. Indeed, during the chieftaincy dispute that I mentioned, when issues concerning Dagbamba custom were brought before national government committees of inquiry, the expert witnesses for the contesting parties were drummers. Dagbamba drummers undergo formal training for years and, like most intellectuals, continue their acquisition of knowledge throughout life.¹³ Not only do Dagbamba assert that drummers have "the facts" about historical and social realities, but they also assert that, "If something is happening and there are no drummers present, then you should know that what is happening is not something important."

By way of background, let me note that according to most reckoning, the Dagbamba entered their present traditional area sometime during the fourteenth century. Since its founding over five hundred years ago, the traditional state of Dagbon¹⁴ has been ruled by a single family in one line, making Dagbon perhaps the oldest continuous dynasty in the world. The Dagbamba have influenced the surrounding peoples of northern Ghana, and they played a role in the routing of precolonial trade and the penetration of Islam into southern Ghana.¹⁵ Early studies by colonial officers emphasized the political sector, focusing on historical data in an effort to clarify and even codify chieftaincy succession patterns as an adjunct to indirect rule.¹⁶ Recent research has had the same focus, an aspect

¹³ Chernoff, "Music-Making Children of Africa" and "The Drums of Dagbon"; Christine Oppong, *Growing Up in Dagbon* (Accra-Tema, Ghana: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1973).

¹⁴ Fage, "Reflections on the Early History of the Mossi-Dagomba Group of States."

¹⁵ Ivor Wilks, *The Northern Factor in Ashanti History* (Legon, Ghana: Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, 1961); Ivor Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century: The Structure and Evolution of a Political Order* (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

¹⁶ Tamakloe, *A Brief History of the Dagbamba People*; Blair and Duncan-Johnstone, *Enquiry into the Constitution and Organization of the Dagbon Kingdom*; Staniland, *The Lions of Dagbon*.

G of interest in and response to an extended chieftaincy dispute with national political implications.¹⁷ Other discussions of Dagbamba life have been only brief sketches within works that attempted to deal with all the diverse peoples of northern Ghana or with selected aspects of social processes in the Volta Basin.¹⁸ The historical literature has been reviewed,¹⁹ and the process of Islamization has also received detailed attention.²⁰

The Dagbamba entered their present traditional area as conquerors. With horses, spears, and arrows in their military technology, they subjugated the indigenous stateless tribes under an elaborate and competitive hierarchy of chieftaincies. They gradually intermingled and became agriculturists. Their staple crop is yams, but they do multiple plantings in their fields, and they rotate crops. Their other main food crops are sorghum (guinea corn), corn, millet, and beans; recently, intensive rice cultivation has been encouraged by the national government. The Dagbamba are patrilineal, virilocal, and polygamous. Marriages are relatively unstable, and divorce is common. Funerals are elaborate, and there is an annual cycle of festivals. Just over a majority are Muslim, and the remainder practice animism and what is often called "ancestor worship," focused to a great extent on local and household shrines, land-

¹⁷ Ferguson and Wilks, "Chiefs, Constitutions, and the British in Northern Ghana"; Ghana Government, *Report of the Yendi Skin Affairs Committee of Inquiry*; Ladouceur, "The Yendi Chieftaincy Dispute and Ghanaian Politics"; Ladouceur, *Chiefs and Politicians*; Staniland, *The Lions of Dagbon*.

¹⁸ A. W. Cardinall, *The Natives of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast: Their Customs, Religion, and Folklore* (London: George Routledge & Sons, [1925]); R. S. Rattray, *The Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932); Madeleine Manoukian, *Tribes of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast*, *Ethnographic Survey of Africa: West Africa*, pt. 5, ed. Daryll Forde (London: International African Institute, 1952).

¹⁹ Brigitta Benzing, *Die Geschichte und das Herrschaftssystem der Dagomba* (Meisenheim am Glan: Verlag Anton Hain, 1971).

²⁰ Phyllis Ferguson, "Islamization in Dagbon: A Study of the Alfanema of Yendi" (Ph.D. diss., University of Cambridge, 1972); Nehemia Levtzion, *Muslims and Chiefs in West Africa: A Study of Islam in the Middle Volta Basin in the Pre-Colonial Period* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).

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priests, soothsayers, medicine men, and witchcraft. There are several craft-guild lineages, such as drummers, and within the cohesive political framework of Dagbon, there are a number of groups that retain a degree of foreign lineal identity—assimilated Islamic scholars being one such group and many court officials of slave origins another.

In Dagbamba culture, seemingly divergent customs are layered into integrated patterns of institutionalized relationships and activities. The major strata can be broadly distinguished as: 1) the surviving customs of the original and assimilated inhabitants who are representative of the indigenous culture base shared in varying degrees by many small cultural groups in the region; 2) the political and technological innovations brought by the Dagbamba conquerors related to the Mossi, Mamprusi, and Nanumba peoples; 3) the Islamic customs introduced in the early eighteenth century through contact with Wangara and Hausa missionaries; and 4) the Western influence of the twentieth century. Significant complexes of customs have also developed through contact with Asante, Guruma, and Konkomba people. The complex integration of these many cultural trends within Dagbamba society has resulted in a thoroughly distinctive culture; yet, to an extent, Dagbon may be characterized as a cultural laboratory of the pre-colonial Volta Basin. Much of our knowledge of this highly structured traditional society has bearing on our understanding of the closely related states of Mossi, Mamprusi, and Nanumba and also has varying degrees of general application to many societies of the Volta Basin that share a number of cultural traits, most notably Tampolensi, Kantonsi, Talensi, Frafra, Kusasi, Wala, and Dagaba.

A performance of the *Samban'luqa*, or drum history, normally occurs twice a year, and only in towns or villages ruled by a major chief. The two occasions are during the festival for breaking the fast at the end of Ramadan, on the evening when the new moon appears, and during the festival in the pilgrimage month, on the evening before the sacrifice. The drum history can also be beaten for the installation of a chief. After the evening meal, from around eight o'clock, the people of the town begin to gather outside the house

J

of the chief. The town's drummers assemble opposite the entrance, and several take turns praising their own ancestors in lengthy introductory sections. This prelude to a performance is referred to as "sweeping outside the compound" or "pounding [preparing the vegetables for] the soup." By around ten o'clock, the chief, accompanied by his wives and his elders, will come outside and sit. One of the chiefs of the town's drummers, or his delegate, will then take over the singing and begin the part of the history chosen for the performance. The drummer who sings stands alone and faces the chief across the compound. Holding an hourglass-shaped drum (*luqa*) over his shoulder, he is accompanied by as many as fifty to one hundred drummers seated behind him, beating responses to the verses of his song. Most of the drum history is recounted through the medium of stories about the lives of past chiefs, their ancestry and progeny, what they did and how they got their proverbial praise-names. A performance normally focuses on one particular chief or period, although, because the drummer will sing about that chief's forefathers and descendants, the performance can cover a lengthy time frame. The actual historical account in the *Samban'luqa* depends on the extent of the drummer's knowledge and also on the particular path the drummer chooses to take through the material. I was told, "The *Samban'luqa* tells Dagbamba how they were living in the olden days, and it also tells a chief what is inside chieftaincy."

close attention to what the drummers do and say. In concordant terms, they identify and discuss themselves with continual allusions to their historical background. To Dagbamba, the Dagbamba heritage is handed down not as a fixed body of tradition but as a living body of thought.²⁴ Their past is part of their present, constantly reviewed and revised and acted out in cultural events, and what they are doing at their musical gatherings is connecting themselves to their family. With regard to questions about historical continuity, what one hears from knowledgeable people is a very basic concept of political cohesion based on a family model. In simplest yet most profound terms, what has held the Dagbamba together is the understanding that, whatever their problems with one another as they struggle with the vagueness of chieftaincy succession and their own status as a group, ultimately they are one family. This understanding is the foundation of the social cohesion that has prevented constant political contestation and even occasional civil war from destroying the unity of the state. Throughout Dagbamba history, whenever there was a civil war among princes and chiefs, the contesting parties would come together at the end to bury their brothers and move on, holding the idea that they were a family. That family includes the commoners, who also consider themselves and are publicly shown by drummers to be members of the conquerors' descent group. Such ritual relations between living and dead are an important aspect of the association of history and family, in which the past chiefs are ancestors with regard to whom the living stand in ambiguous moral relation. The history itself presents several examples of sitting chiefs, like Naa Darizeyu and Naa Luro, who are reminded of the dead chiefs, should they not rise to the level of the tradition they have inherited. Within the broader Volta Basin culture area populated by people who speak languages similar to Dagbani, the Dagbamba share a spiritual foundation with groups that have projected the family as the ubiquitous context for interpreting the vicissitudes of destiny and as a way of conceptualizing practical

²⁴ The phrase "living body of thought" is from Ivor Wilks, private communication.

In Dagbon, despite the historical themes with which the *Samban' luga* seems to challenge the cultural ambience, an image of contestation and conflict does not appear to the same extent in popular conceptions of the state. There is a high level of historical erudition among people who are not drummers. They are quick to give credit to the drummers for the role the drummers play, for most people know their history and family lines in great detail because they pay

²³ This formulation of variables owes much to Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967).

L morality, grounded in divination and sacrifice.²⁵ The *Samban' luqa* and the political culture it portrays may be considered in this vein as a reflection of a descent group.

Given the regional culture base, it is no doubt prudent to contemplate Dagbamba spirituality and religious sentiment with regard to the precept that ritual and religion in that area of the world typically have strong associations with the family. The significant presence of ritual customs and sanctions within historical consciousness and political contexts points toward religious inspiration. The view that the formation of a centralized and feudal patriarchal state in Dagbon was an innovation brought by conquerors and imposed upon the aboriginal inhabitants of the region has perhaps been unduly influenced by Western scholarly interest in evolutionary schemes of historical development. From another vantage point, it is certainly logical to assume that the cultural capacity for that development had to have been in place and that Dagbamba history stands on that foundation. In Dagbon, the important transition that distinguished the Dagbamba from the other cultural groups in the region can be envisioned as much in religious motifs as in political ones, as much in terms of ritual aspects of kinship structures as of sanctioned authority structures. The unification of the towns and villages under the rule of a centralized state was also the unification of separate families into one larger family. The evolution of hierarchical political form was also the evolution of an elaborately segmented family.²⁶

²⁵ Among the greatest ethnographic efforts ever undertaken are Meyer Fortes's studies of the kinship system of a neighboring group, the Tallensi, who speak a closely related Oti-Volta language and who may therefore be presumed to share elements of a regional cultural base with the Dagbamba. See Meyer Fortes, *The Dynamics of Clanship among the Tallensi: Being the First Part of an Analysis of the Social Structure of a Trans-Volta Tribe* (London: Oxford University Press, 1945); *The Web of Kinship among the Tallensi* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949); *Oedipus and Job in West African Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959); *Religion, Morality, and the Person: Essays on Tallensi Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

²⁶ The diffusionist model of the origin of the Dagbamba state (and perhaps related Voltaic states), a model which presumes an imported link between

M In Dagbon, musical situations represent in unique ways the strengths and weaknesses of the Dagbamba aristocracy as a whole and in their relations with one another. It is proverbial wisdom, however, that the strength of a chief is a commoner, and the strength of a commoner is a chief. Demonstrating the link between the commoners and the central institution of chieftaincy is the work of the drummers. Every Dagbamba is the grandchild of a chief, the drummers claim, and they can use a drum to beat a praise-name for every Dagbamba. In musical contexts, the historical continuity of the Dagbamba state is displayed as a dimension of the extended family. In musical contexts, as in many aspects of Dagbamba daily life, a sincere respect for older generations, for origins, and for the heritage of the past guides people's reasoning, their imagination, and their art. In the Dagbamba case, musical contexts are crucial to informing our perception of deep structures of meaning and refining our appreciation of the deliberateness with which the Dagbamba maintain their traditions. In the final analysis, one probably need not choose which type of cultural processes might have had the greatest significance in the development of Dagbamba society: what is impressive is the way in which the complex institutionalization of many cultural processes is manifested in Dagbamba music and made accessible to the Dagbamba themselves through participation in public events. Because of this cultural achievement, the Dagbamba merit a respected place on the world stage. I would also hope that for scholars in various fields, the ideas advanced in this

patrilineal descent and statist ideas of chieftaincy and which projects a process of usurpation, conflict, assimilation, and evolutionary stratification, has been critiqued by Skalník (Peter Skalník, "Early States in the Voltaic Basin," in *The Early State*, ed. Henri J. M. Claessen and Peter Skalník (The Hague: Mouton [1978]), 469-93; Peter Skalník, "The Dynamics of Early State Development in the Voltaic Area," in *Political Anthropology: The State of the Art*, ed. S. Lee Seaton and Henri J. M. Claessen [The Hague: Mouton, (1979)], 197-213). Skalník, working from a perspective inspired by Vansina, has argued the logic of asserting that the indigenous inhabitants of Dagbon were probably already well into the process of state formation before the arrival of Dagbamba horsemen.

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essay indicate that a focus on music should not be the province of specialists, for musical events have the possibility to open a number of related and comparative dimensions to our perspectives on the people we meet in other cultures.