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CULTURAL STUDY OF SISAALA ZENSI

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Abstract

The xylophone is a vital African cultural artefact, embodying ethnic historical narratives, sociocultural identity, and ancestral connections. While Ghanaian ethnomusicological research has predominantly focused on the Dagara, Birifor, and Lobi xylophone traditions, the Sisaala zensi (xylophone) of the Upper West Region remains underexplored. This study addresses this lacuna by investigating the cultural nuances of Sisaala zensi, employing Griswold's cultural diamond model within qualitative ethnographic design. Data were gathered via field observations, semi-structured interviews, and photography from seventeen (17) veteran xylophonists and crafters, sampled through exponential non-discriminative snowball and expert purposive sampling techniques. Findings reveal the Sisaala zensi's mystical origin, crafting processes, and its central role in ancestral transitions and identity construction. Notwithstanding the established cultural significance of Sisaala zensi, its survival is threatened by religious stigma, neglect, and declining communal interest. The study concludes that the Sisaala zensi remains a powerful symbol of cultural identity but risks extinction due to the alarming decline in its cultural usage in recent times. To safeguard the cultural heritage of Sisaala zensi, the study recommends that the veteran Sisaala xylophone crafters and players should establish a legally recognised association such as Sisaala Xylophone Association (SiXA). The SiXA should lead community-based xylophone apprenticeship programmes in the Sisaala enclave, initiate annual Sisaala Xylophone Festival, and engage in regular media sensitisation campaigns. This helps to ensure intergenerational transmission of Sisaala xylophone traditions, preserving and revitalising its rich cultural heritage for the current and future generations.

Keywords: crafting, cultural heritage, cultural study, Sisaala zensi, xylophone.

1. Introduction

Africa is renowned for its rich cultural heritage, encompassing a wide array of indigenous visual and performing arts traditions. Among these is the xylophone, an instrument deeply embedded in the sociocultural fabric of several African communities. Across the continent, its use in ritual, ceremonial, and entertainment contexts has made it both a musical and symbolic artefact. Consequently, the xylophone has received considerable scholarly attention, as evidenced by studies from Nigeria

(Oparaocha, 2023; Onyedum, 2020; Ekong & Udoh, 2018), Mali (Maxwell, 1999), Burkina Faso (McPherson, 2019; Strand, 2009), and Côte d'Ivoire (Zemp & Soro, 2010) among others. Oparaocha (2023) and Onyedum (2020) discussed the vitality of the xylophone both as an indigenous musical instrument and as a cultural artefact in the traditional Igbo culture. Similarly, the cultural relevance of *Ikon* (xylophone) in Ibibio culture regarding the New Dawn Entertainers in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, was examined (Ekong & Udoh, 2018). All studies by Oparaocha (2023), Onyedum (2020), and Ekong and Udoh (2018) highlight the cultural relevance of the xylophone in Nigeria, signalling the need for similar studies to be extended to other parts of Africa to reveal the various cultural contexts of the xylophone on the continent. Additionally, Maxwell (1999) studied the Malian context where the xylophone is found to be indispensable in Mande culture. In contributing to the study of xylophone art in Africa, Strand (2009) devoted her doctoral dissertation to reconstructing the tradition and identity of the Sambla xylophone of Burkina Faso. Strand found that the *baan* (xylophone) tradition is embedded in the cultural life of Sambla to the extent that it has become an essential element to all ritual and social events and the centre of Sambla's musical life. Strand's findings about the sociocultural relevance of the xylophone to the Sambla people of Burkina Faso are well affirmed by McPherson (2019).

From the Ghanaian context, several studies have discussed the cultural relevance of the xylophone, revealing its association with the Sisaala, Dagaaba, Birifor, and Lobi people of the Upper West Region (Boahen & Annin, 2015; Dankwa, 2021; Hogan, 2011; Imoro, 2021; Kuutiero, 2016; Kyiileyang, 2024; Nketia, 1979; Phyfferoen, 2005a; 2005b; Wiggins & Kobom, 1992). Boahen and Annin (2015) examined the *gyile* (xylophone) genre among the Dagaaba people of Ghana. In that study, Boahen and Annin revealed the origin, legends, and myths of *gyil* music; the organology of the *gyil*; the ensemble; literary analysis of some xylophone songs; and the melodic and percussive rhythmic patterns of the xylophone genre of the Dagaaba people of Ghana. Moreover, Dankwa's (2021) study interpreted *gyil* (xylophone) music and its role in Dagara funerals in Ghana and established that *gyil* music is essential because of its effectiveness in propelling funeral attendants to express their emotions in culturally acceptable ways, as well as truly representing Dagara funeral cultural identity. Still, in the Dagara context of Ghana, Kyiileyang (2024) analysed the poetic intricacies of Dagara *lógyil* (xylophone) musical texts of Niyágákũũ's funeral, one of the renowned Dàgàrà xylophonists of Nandom-Kuselle. Kyiileyang found that the *lógyil* of Niyágákũũ's funeral was one of the most elaborate expositions of several significant literary features, such as idiomatic proverbs, repetition, rhythm, parallelism, and elliptical expressions. Cultural nuances of Lobi and Birifor xylophones and xylophonists were also investigated, respectively (Imoro, 2021; Hogan, 2011; Phyfferoen, 2005a).

While studies on the Dagara, Lobi, and Birifor xylophone art abound, as discussed, scholarly attention to the Sisaala's equally vibrant xylophonic culture in Ghana remains conspicuously limited. The existing studies (Dankwa, 2021; Imoro, 2021; Kyiileyang, 2024; Phyfferoen, 2005a) only peripherally acknowledge Sisaala as one of the xylophonic ethnic groups in the Upper West Region, relegating Sisaala's unique xylophone artistic traditions to brief mentions rather than substantive inquiry. Linwood's (1995) comparative research on tuned percussion in Indonesia and Africa and Seavoy's (1982) exploration of Sisaala xylophone traditions, both rooted in Western etic-scholarly perspectives, underscored the urgent need for emic research conducted by Sisaala scholars to illuminate insider perspectives. The paucity of in-depth emic cultural study of Sisaala xylophone art has left a significant lacuna in ethnomusicological research, obscuring the historical evolution, sociocultural contexts, and traditional frameworks that shape Sisaala xylophone artistry. Addressing this gap, the current study offers a critical examination of Sisaala xylophone artistic traditions from an emic perspective, interrogating its origins, sociocultural functions, artisanal practices, and contemporary status. By doing so, it seeks to preserve, promote, and uniquely position this indigenous heritage of the Sisaala people within Ghana's broader musical landscape, ensuring its recognition as an integral thread in the nation's cultural tapestry.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Sociologists and anthropologists have attempted to reconstruct, conceptualise and/or theorise human culture. Inferential and generalised interpretation of such documentation shows that culture can be defined as the totality of peculiar traits, characters, values, language, knowledge, belief, art, law, customs, social norms, taboos, and values that mark out a people from other groups of people or societies (Ikechukwu & Ogbo, 2018; Idang, 2015). Amidst the several sociological and anthropological concepts, theories, and models such as culture theory, culturalism, multiculturalism, the culture diamond, and others that guide the study of culture, the current study, which focuses on the cultural nuances of *Sissala zensi* (xylophone), was situated within the context of Griswold's (1994) cultural diamond model. Griswold's (1994) cultural diamond model was selected for this study due to its structured, relational framework for analysing cultural objects within their social contexts, a critical advantage over broader or reductionist viewpoints on culture. The cultural diamond model (Figure 1), comprising four interconnected elements, is an accounting device intended to encourage a fuller contextual understanding of a cultural object from the social world of its creators (Griswold, 2013; 1994). In contextualising the four elements, Griswold asserts that cultural objects represent the symbols, beliefs, values, and practices of a people. In the context of the current study, the *Sisaala zensi* (xylophone) represents the cultural object under inquiry. Furthermore, the cultural creators component of Griswold's cultural diamond model includes the individuals, artists, organisations, and systems that produce and distribute cultural objects. In the current study, the cultural creators refer to the *Sisaala* xylophone crafters, who are part of the investigation. Whereas Griswold defines the cultural receivers to mean the people who experience the cultural objects, the social world element of the model pertains to the context in which culture is created and experienced. In the case of this study, cultural receivers refer to the *Sisaala* people whose sociocultural worldview about the xylophone (a cultural object) is the subject of inquiry. Therefore, the four-point cultural diamond model (Figure 1) provided a suitable framework for guiding the study of the *Sisaala zensi* (xylophone) as a cultural object, its *Sissala* producers and consumers (receivers), and the various cultural contexts underpinning its use by the *Sissala* people in the *Sisaala* East Municipality and *Sisaala* West District in the Upper West Region of northern Ghana.

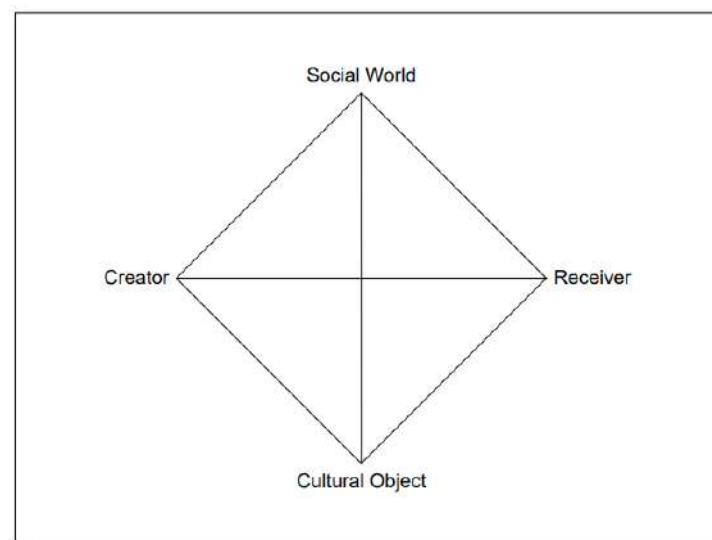


Figure 1: Cultural Diamond (Source: Griswold, 1994).

2.2 Nature of African Xylophone

The xylophone is an indigenous African wooden percussion musical artefact (Figure 2). Generally, it is made of a wooden horizontal sloppy framework with graduated sizes of carved wooden keys carefully woven atop varied sizes of their corresponding resonant gourds, as documented by scholars (Hogan, 2011; Kpieta, 2016; Yip, 2015; Navei, 2024; Strand, 2009). It is important to note that the nature and type of wood used in carving the keys determine the sound quality of the xylophone

(Onyedum, 2020). Hardwoods such as shea tree (Boahen & Annin, 2015), mahogany (Onyedum, 2020; Kuutiero, 2016), and camwood (Onyedum, 2020), among others, are best used for the xylophone keys due to their durability and ability to produce the desired melodious sound. In Africa, xylophones come with varied lengths, sizes, and numbers of keys. Some African xylophones have up to twenty-two (Boahen & Annin, 2015) or twenty-three keys (Strand, 2009). The xylophone of the Bambara and Minyanka people of central Mali has 17 keys (Maxwell, 1999). With specific reference to Nigeria, Onyedum (2020) describes various types of xylophones such as “horn-xylophone designed from animal horns, gourd xylophone, 2-row bucket xylophone, 8-12 row xylophone mounted on banana stems and 12-18 row xylophone mounted on wooden frame or box ... [and] a modern xylophone known as chromatic xylophones” (p. 403). In the case of Ghana, the Birifor, Dagaaba, and Sisaala xylophones differ in size and tuning, where the Birifor normally has 14 wooden keys (Boahen & Annin, 2015; Hogan, 2011; Kyiileyang, 2024), with the Dagaaba and Sisaala xylophones reported to have up to 17 or 18 keys (Boahen & Annin, 2015; Hogan, 2011; Navei, 2024; Wiggins & Kobom, 1992). The xylophone is played using two locally designed rubber mallets (Boahen & Annin, 2015; Yip, 2015; Maxwell, 1999), as observed in Figures 2 (A, B, and C).



A. A Seventeen-Key Malian Xylophone with Its Mallet-Beaters Atop (Source: Maxwell, 1999).



B. A Twenty-Three-Key Burkinabe Xylophone with Its Mallet-Beaters Atop (Source: McPherson, 2019).



C. A Pair of Fourteen-Key *Logyil* of Ghana (Kyiileyang, 2024)

Figure 2(A, B & C): Various Types of African Xylophones.

The keys of the xylophones simultaneously and exponentially correlate in size with specially selected and affixed gourds (Figure 3A). The gourds, which hang beneath each key per the pitch of the corresponding key, act as resonators that produce the usual buzzing sound of the xylophone (Imoro, 2021; Maxwell, 1999). The aforementioned authors concur that each gourd resonator had some perforations sealed with spider silk (Figure 3B) in the olden days, now typically replaced with light plane polythene, which vibrates to produce the buzzing sound effect when the xylophone is played.



A. Gourd Resonators of a Xylophone Arranged from Smallest to Biggest



B. Gourd Resonators Sealed with Spider Silk

Figure 3 (A&B): Gourd Resonators of Xylophones (Source: Maxwell, 1999).

It is also worth noting that, in Africa, xylophones are often played by experts (xylophonists) during sociocultural occasions. In parts of Africa, particularly Ghana, xylophonists are not only recognised in society because of their invaluable sociocultural roles, but they are revered on the premise that their talents are scarce and divine (Dankwa, 2021). However, apprenticeship and training to become a xylophonist are allowed (Kuutiero, 2016). This suggests that the art of xylophone playing in Africa is both innate and learnable.

2.3 Cultural Underpinnings of Indigenous African Xylophone Art

The xylophone is a cultural artefact that occupies a valuable part of the historical and sociocultural foundations of some African ethnic societies. Strand (2009) notes that the xylophone is one of the oldest and most diverse musical instrumental traditions in West Africa. With specific reference to Burkina Faso, Strand asserts that the xylophone is one of the deepest wells of cultural wealth in understanding the sociocultural lives of the Sambla people. The xylophone is the primary musical instrument played during naming ceremonies, traditional marriage rites, funerals, festivals, and other social events (Strand, 2009). Strand also observes that the Sambla people, culturally, deploy the xylophone during group farming activities (Figure 4A), as Zemp and Soro (2010) similarly observed in Côte d'Ivoire (Figure 4B), to motivate farmers to easily overcome tedious work such as land clearing, tilling, and weeding in cropped fields.

Following close behind the men is the *baan* [xylophone], playing from a repertoire of work songs that regulate the speed and rhythm of the work, giving the men something to focus on while making their way through their tedious, exhausting work, occasionally stopping to dance a few steps and compliment the musicians [Figure 4 A & B] (Strand, 2009, p. 129).



A. Sambla Farmers of Burkina Faso
(Source: Strand, 2009)



B. Senufo Farmers of Côte d'Ivoire
(Source: Zemp & Soro, 2010).

Figure 4(A&B): Cultural Use of the Xylophone for Agricultural Activities in Africa.

The cultural relevance of the xylophone in Nigeria is also discussed (Oparaocha, 2023; Onyedum, 2020; Ekong & Udoh, 2018). According to Oparaocha (2023), the cultural significance of the xylophone is deeply rooted in traditional Igbo culture, as it is not only an artistic expression but also serves as a symbol of identity and spirituality, as well as facilitates communal cohesion, as it connects them to their ancestors when played during social gatherings such as weddings, funerals, and festivals. In furtherance, the xylophone is said to underpin the sociocultural lives (funerals, weddings, festivals, and other social events) of the Sisaala, Dagaara, Birifor, and Lobi people in the Upper West Region of Ghana (Imoro, 2021; Kpieta, 2016; Linwood, 1995; Seavoy, 1982; Yip, 2015). According to Imoro (2021, p. 302), “xylophones are a primary cultural icon and instrumental resource for the Birifor and Lobi people” of northern Ghana. Figure 5 typifies the use of the xylophone for traditional funeral rites among the Dagaaba people of Jirapa, Ghana (Kpieta, 2016).



A. Playing of Xylophone for Mourners



B. Two Corpses Staged and Mourned

Figure 5 (A&B): Cultural Use of Xylophone for Funeral Rites by Dagaaba People of Jirapa in Ghana (Source: Kpieta, 2016).

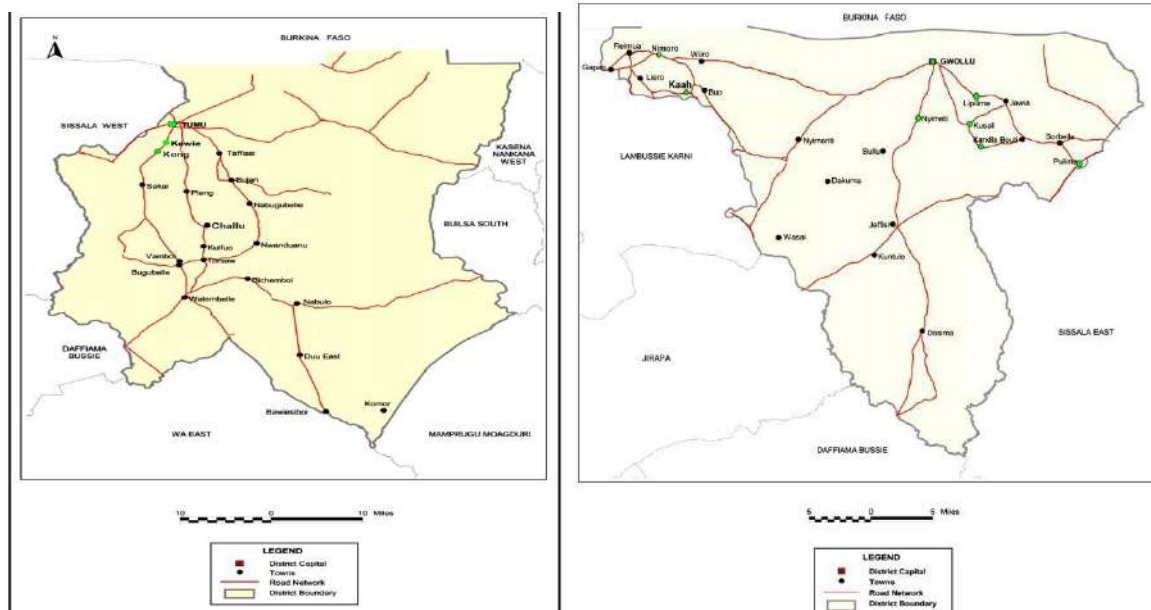
Dankwa (2021) establishes that, besides the gyl (xylophone) serving as a cultural identity and authenticity at traditional Dagaaba funerals, it produces culturally essential funeral music that moves funeral attendants to express their emotions in culturally acceptable ways that cannot be found with any other musical instrument. Based on the literature discussed, the xylophone is a significant cultural object used for birth rites, marriage rites, funerals, agricultural activities, festivals, entertainment, and other social events in Africa.

Notwithstanding this, traditional use of the xylophone in Africa is on the decline, directly aligning with the broader challenges facing indigenous African musical heritage. In Nigeria, rapid urbanisation, globalisation, and Western musical influences have diminished the prominence of indigenous instruments like the Igbo xylophone, despite its integration into contemporary genres such as highlife and gospel, where it retains a distinctive cultural resonance (Oparaocha, 2023; Akwaowo, 2019). Colonial legacies have further marginalised indigenous African xylophone traditions, branding them satanic or outdated, where preference for foreign musical instruments and styles is surging in

contemporary Africa (Kassim, 2008). The colonial stigma of the African xylophone as a satanic instrument, coupled with youth preferences for Westernised pop music, has disrupted intergenerational transmission, preservation, and promotion of African xylophone traditions, prompting even traditional composers to blend African and Eurocentric elements (Kassim, 2008; Blench, 2009). A parallel crisis is evident among Ghana's Sisaala ethnicity, whose xylophone tradition has sharply declined due to rapid Islamisation, contrasting with the resilience of the LoDagaba xylophone culture (Linwood, 1995). Research shows that the Sisaala people engaged in massive destruction of their shrines and traditional musical instruments such as xylophones as a sign of their conversion to the Islamic religion, thereby accelerating Sisaala cultural erosion (Linwood, 1995; Seavoy, 1982). With Sisaala xylophone makers now scarce (Linwood, 1995), it is a truism that modernity and religious shifts have converged to threaten Sisaala musical (xylophone) heritage. Since these observations were made about the cultural erosion of Sisaala xylophone traditions as far back as 1982 and 1995 (Linwood, 1995; Seavoy, 1982), an aspect of the current study explores its current state and the way forward.

3. Methodology

Cultural studies are inherently ethnographic in nature (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Consensually, studies affirm that ethnographic research, sometimes known as cultural anthropology or naturalistic inquiry, is one of the best major approaches to qualitative research that deals with the discovery and description of the culture of a group of people (Sharma & Sarkar, 2019; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; O'Reilly, 2012; Sangasubana, 2011; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Accordingly, this study, which explores the cultural nuances of Sisaala *zensi* (xylophone) in the Upper West Region of northern Ghana, is well-suited. Sisaala is frequently misspelled in various documentations to include *Sissala*, *Issala*, *Isal*, *Sisala*, *Hissala*, *Isaalo*, *Isala*, and *Nsihaa* (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014; Moran, 2006; Rattray, 1931). This study therefore sticks to the accepted spelling, *Sisaala*, as recommended in the Sisaali orthography guide (Sisaali Literacy and Development Program, 2015), with *Sissala* only used when referring to existing documentations. The study was approached from an emic perspective. The emic approach, with the researcher being both Sisaala and a born xylophonist, leveraged this shared background to prevent distortion, ensuring authentic, deep, and diverse interpretations of the study's findings (Jennings, 2012). The study employed triangulated data collection instruments such as obtrusive field observation, a semi-structured interview tool, and photography to elicit data on Sisaala xylophone traditions; their historical and cultural foundation, production processes, customs, taboos, rituals, cultural relevance, and current state in the Sisaala West and East enclaves of the Upper West Region of Ghana. The systematic triangulation of data sources and instrumentation ensured a multifaceted understanding of the research phenomenon while addressing potential researcher biases, thereby enhancing the study's trustworthiness, authenticity, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Ahmed, 2024; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). With the scope of the study, xylophonists and xylophone crafters constituted the research population due to their expertise. However, access to expert xylophonists in the area was limited, possibly due to the broader decline in indigenous Ghanaian cultural practices, often attributed to the encroaching influence of foreign religions and modernity (Navei, 2024; 2023; 2021; Linwood, 1995). This challenge necessitated the adoption of a snowball sampling technique to access expert knowledge holders. Therefore, using exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling and expert purposive sampling, a total of seventeen (17) individuals with at least 25 years of experience in xylophone crafting and/or performance were scouted in various communities across both Sissala East Municipality and Sissala West District as key cultural informants. These communities included Tumu, Kowie, and Kong in the Sisaala East Municipality (Figure 6A). The rest were from Sisaala West District, including Nyimeti, Pulima, Gwollu, Kandia, Kusali, Liplime, Nimoro, and Kaah (Figure 6B).



A. Map of Sissala East Municipality

B. Map of Sissala West District

Figure 6(A&B): Maps of the Study Area (Adapted from Ghana Statistical Service, 2014).

However, field observation of Sisaala xylophone performances covered the Sisaala enclave in the Sisaala West district and Sisaala municipality. Since ethnographic research is iterative and inductive (O'Reilly, 2012), the analysis of findings during the writing of the final report was not discretely done but inextricably interlinked in a coherent, thematic, and descriptive simplicity for easy understanding as prescribed by Braun and Clarke (2006). As a key aspect of qualitative ethnographic research, ethical considerations, including obtaining written consent and ensuring data confidentiality, were strictly adhered to at various phases of the study. Critically, respondents' real names were pseudonymised in the study to ensure their anonymity.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Historical Foundation of Sisaala Xylophone

The xylophone is locally referred to as *zensi*, *jensi*, or *jengsi*, depending on the dialectal variations among the Sisaala communities, as identified during fieldwork. In this study, *zensi* is adapted to represent the variant Sisaala dialectical nomenclatures for the xylophone. Interviews with veteran Sisaala xylophonists and crafters on the historical foundation of Sisaala *zensi* offer a rich tapestry of myth, cultural musicological innovation, and identity. Central to this oral history is the figure of a Sisaala hunter whose encounter with supernatural beings known in Sisaala as *kantomo* (dwarfs) precipitated the historical evolution of indigenous Sisaala musical instrumentation culture, with specific reference to the xylophone, concurring with existing narratives in parts of Africa (Boahen & Annin, 2015; Dankwa, 2021; 2018; Kyiileyang, 2024; Woma, 2012; Strand, 2009). This historical account, while mystical, reflects the broader anthropological concept of the social world influencing the creation and meaning of cultural objects, where the xylophone functions not only as a musical instrument but also as a bearer of ancestral knowledge and spiritual authority (Griswold, 2013; 1994). In narrating the historical antecedents of Sisaala *zensi*, the respondents variously concurred that during a hunting expedition in time immemorial, a Sisaala hunter came across a sudden, striking instrumental melody in forested bushes. Intrigued by the melody, the hunter secretly traced its direction only to discover that the melody emerged from a strange straw-made zither locally referred to as a *chemo* (Figure 7A). An elderly Sisaala xylophone crafter revealed that:

At his hideout, the hunter observed one of the dwarfs play various melodies from the *chemo* for the rest to dance, which the hunter became perplexed and enthused with. As the hunter was glued to the perplexing sight and melodious auditory of *chemo* and the various dances of the dwarfs, he was suddenly ambushed by other dwarfs and taken hostage. The hunter stayed

with the dwarfs for several years, during which he adopted the dwarfs' ways of life, including subsistence practices, spirituality, and the expertise to produce, play, and dance to the *chemo*. (Sisaala Xylophone Crafter 1, Personal communication, July 23, 2024)

All the respondents except one corroborated that although the hunter's disappearance caused unrest among his relatives and the entire community, their numerous consultations with spiritualists revealed that the hunter was to return in due course, irrespective of the period of his disappearance, which did happen. "...Having acquired the *chemo* crafting and performance skills, the hunter escaped from the dwarfs and returned home with a *chemo* musical instrument, which he played to the admiration of the community members" (Sisaala Xylophone Crafter 3, Personal communication, August 12, 2024). The prolonged stay of the hunter with the dwarfs, his secret learning of the dwarfs' musical artistry, and his eventual bolted return to his community with a *chemo* reflect African folklore that posits that the historicity of the xylophone originates from a hunter tricking dwarfs to learn the art through subterfuge (Hogan, 2011). The study found a sole respondent offering a divergent account on the historical root of Sisaala *zensi*. Although he acknowledged that the Sisaala *zensi* originated from the *chemo* (zither) through a hunter's encounter with *kantomu* (dwarfs), he narrated that the hunter, captivated by the melody upon encountering the dwarfs playing the *chemo*, killed them and took the instrument for use. This narrative aligns with Wiggins and Kobom's (1992) report, which also described the hunter's lethal confrontation with the dwarfs. However, the majority of respondents questioned the logic of this violent account. They argued that if the hunter killed the dwarfs, he could not have acquired the necessary expertise to play the instrument or facilitate its transition into the xylophone. This suggests that the historicity of the Sisaala *zensi* represents a foundational act of cultural collaboration between the Sisaala hunter and the dwarfs, rather than an act of violence.

The respondents explained that the straw-made *chemo* (Figure 7A) is a solo instrument held vertically by both hands and played by plucking the strings with the thumbs. Some of the respondents who are expert players of *chemo* revealed that the keys of *chemo* are sharply divided into two sets of distinctly different tunings beginning from its middle point. "To produce a melody from *chemo*, both thumbs are placed on the middle point of the instrument where the left thumb plays towards the left while the right thumb contrastingly plays towards the right" (Sisaala Xylophonist 5, personal communication, September 14, 2024). The respondents added that the continued use of *chemo* by the hunter and his Sisaala community folks for entertainment formed the historical foundation of indigenous Sisaala musical culture, out of which the xylophone emerged. This presents a contrasting novel historical narrative, indicating that among the Sisaala, the *chemo* preceded the xylophone. In contrast to the folklore of the Birifor, Dagara, and Lobi people of Ghana (Kyiileyang, 2024; Hogan, 2011; Goody, 1962), as well as the Sambla of Burkina Faso (Strand, 2009), the xylophone was directly acquired from dwarfs, thereby positioning the Sisaala *chemo* (zither) historical transformation into *zensi* (xylophone) as a unique cultural variant.

Subsequently, the hunter returned to the dwarfs only to see that they had transformed the *chemo*'s string tuning sequence into two sets of wooden slab keys xylophone, where the tuning of each xylophone (Figure 7B) represents one side of the *chemo*, as corroborated by the respondents. This explains why Sisaala xylophones are played in paired sets, equivalent to a single *chemo*. Respondents elaborated that, though the hunter's return to the dwarfs for further knowledge was initially met with scepticism following his earlier abrupt departure, he ultimately learned their technique of transforming the *chemo* into xylophones. The *chemo*'s structural complexity (Figure 7A), with two distinct tonal halves, suggests Sisaala's longstanding cultural innovation and advanced understanding of acoustics, challenging the assumptions that all forms of civilisation, namely arts, music, and others, existed in Europe (Ekiegin & Anthony, 2024; Weber, 1930). Respondents' emphasis on the instrument's dual tuning, requiring simultaneous yet contrasting thumb movements, highlights a performative sophistication that aligns with Nketia's (1979) observations on the polyrhythmic foundations of West African music. The study established that the hunter's return to his community with two xylophones astonished his community folks due to the xylophones' louder sound and greater durability compared to the *chemo*. Although alike in tune with *chemo*, the xylophone became the predominant Sisaala musical instrument, explored first for entertainment and later used for various

cultural performances, as variously corroborated by all the respondents. Based on this narrative, the respondents argued that the Sisaala people are the originators of the xylophone, from which other ethnic groups in Ghana learned.



Figure 7A: Sisaala Chemo of Kong
(Source: Fieldwork, 2024).



Figure 7B: Sisaala Xylophone of Nyimeti
(Source: Fieldwork, 2024).

4.2 Customs and Traditions Involved in Crafting Sisaala Zensi

The crafting of the Sisaala zensi is deeply interwoven with cultural symbolism, ecological considerations, and customary protocols that reflect the instrument's centrality to Sisaala identity. The respondents described the Sisaala *zensi* as a complex cultural artefact due to strict adherence to customs and traditions in its crafting and usage. Its crafting process involves meticulously integrating traditional knowledge, local materials, and skilled craftsmanship, as corroborated by the Sisaala expert xylophone crafters in the study area. For its cultural complexity, the construction of the typical Sisaala *zensi* is customarily reserved for a few noble craftsmen with perplexing artistic ingenuity and experience.

The expert Sisaala xylophone crafters concurred that the crafting process starts with a formal initial customary request known in Sisaali as *suke*, a ceremonial request analogous to Sisaala customary marriage negotiations. This reflects the Sisaala's conceptualisation of the xylophone as a productive asset akin to a wife, both essential for societal continuity. One respondent explained "...our xylophones sustain our cultural traditions through melody, while our wives synonymously procreate to ensure our demographic continuity, making both our xylophones and wives productive assets of our community" (Sisaala Xylophonist 7, personal communication, November 2, 2024). The study revealed that the *suke*, a ritual performed to ritually notify and involve the ancestors, entails varied offerings among xylophone artisans, contingent on the crafter's creative source, particularly his *zen-nala* (xylophone deity). While some artisans request items such as a fowl and a basket of millet for *suke*, others demand a fowl and 40 cowries, or even a red cock, guinea fowl, 663 cowries, and a cow. One respondent further specified that he sacrifices an additional sheep or dog to his *zen-nala* to seek divine favour for a successful crafting process. Such rituals underscore the belief that ancestral and spiritual clearance is a prerequisite for successful indigenous craftsmanship among the Sisaala ethnicity (Linwood, 1995), a finding recurrent in the Dagara context of a new xylophone construction, where similar ritual sacrifices are offered to appease dwarfs, the originators of the art (Dankwa, 2018; Woma, 2012). However, the Sisaala's explicit linkage of xylophone procurement to matrimonial negotiation rites introduces a unique metaphorical layer not extensively documented in neighbouring narratives on xylophone construction (Dankwa, 2021; 2018; Hogan, 2011; Imoro, 2021; Kuutiero, 2016; Kyiileyang, 2024; Nketia, 1979; Wiggins & Kobom, 1992; Woma, 2012).

After successfully meeting the initial *suke* requirement, the search for the right type of wood for the carving of the slab keys of the xylophone begins. The crafters considered this a major exercise, as an incorrect approach or choice of unsuitable wood leads to not only mysterious spiritual attacks, but the slab keys, laboriously produced, tend to become tuneless at the end of the process, thereby making the xylophone dysfunctional. Aware of these potential consequences, xylophone crafters strictly observe

preliminary precautions, which, many a time, involve some rituals. According to the crafters, thoroughly desiccated rosewood, seasoned for at least six years, is preferred and typically sourced from the bush, arguing that freshly cut or damp rosewood is unsuitable for xylophone construction. However, it was further emphasised that not all desiccated rosewoods are suitable, as some may possess inherent spiritual potency, rendering them inappropriate for use. A veteran crafter explained that:

A targeted desiccated rosewood is ritually marked with prepared herbs. On the next day, if I return to see the disappearance of the herbal mark, it means that such a wood is still spiritually potent and unsuitable to be harvested for the carving of the xylophone keys. However, if I detect the presence of the herbal marks, it suggests that such desiccated rosewood is not spiritually potent and remains suitable for the purpose. (Sisaala Xylophone Crafter 1, personal communication, July 23, 2024)

The accounts resonate with the findings of Linwood (1995), who affirms that Sisaala xylophone crafters paint straight lines of herbal medicine on trees earmarked for xylophone construction to determine their spiritual safety. The Sisaala's strict harvesting of desiccated rosewood for xylophone construction demonstrates their consciousness of ecological sustainability, as selective logging of forests often has a lesser impact on the ecosystem, particularly in the African context (Gatti et al., 2014). Additionally, the practice of ritually marking desiccated rosewood with herbs to assess their spiritual suitability for xylophone construction underscores a culturally unique approach that diverges sharply from neighboring West African xylophone construction traditions. While many African cultures prioritise selecting wood such as mahogany, camwood (Kuutiero, 2016; Onyedum, 2020), and even shea, an economic tree (Boahen & Annin, 2015), based solely on their acoustic properties, the Sisaala integrate animistic beliefs that sustain the environment, affirming their ecological consciousness. Following spiritual and suitability assessments, the xylophone crafter offers a prayer for success before felling the desiccated rosewood, either with a local axe or, occasionally, by igniting a controlled fire around its base, as similarly reported by Linwood (1995). The felled, desiccated rosewood undergoes a meticulous carving process, transforming it into tuned keys. The artisans explained that it is first sectioned into logs of varying lengths, each of which is split into rough slabs using an axe. These slabs are then meticulously carved into desirable shapes of individual xylophone keys using a local adze. Crafters emphasised that a standard Sisaala xylophone comprises seventeen (17), or eighteen (18) keys, which guide the carving process. The Sisaala *zensi*'s seventeen-key structure matches the Bambara-Minyanka xylophone in Mali, which also has seventeen keys (Maxwell, 1999). However, it differs from the Nigerian horn, gourd, and bucket xylophones, some of which have various rows ranging from 2 to 12 (Onyedum, 2020). It also contrasts with the Birifor fourteen-key xylophone (Boahen and Annin, 2015; Hogan, 2011; Kyiileyang, 2024). All the respondents concurred that the carving process for xylophone keys typically occurs at the crafter's farmstead. The rationale behind this was explained by one of the crafters: "...we do this to protect the ritual purity of the carver, protect the cultural sanctity of the process, avoid social disruptions, and shield the process from malevolent eyes" (Sisaala Xylophonist 3, personal communication, 8 August 2024). However, some of the crafters indicated that after the initial carving of the wood into rough shapes of portable slab keys at the farmstead, they could be carried home for a more detailed and meticulous carving only in a private space without public access. This reaffirms the ritual and customary procedures governing Sissala xylophone key carving processes, seeking to protect its melodious potency.

After final shaping, and smooth carving, the xylophone keys undergo tuning by precisely carving hollows with graduated depth and width on the inner parts of the keys (Figure 8), starting from the top to the bottom, to set their pitches coherently.

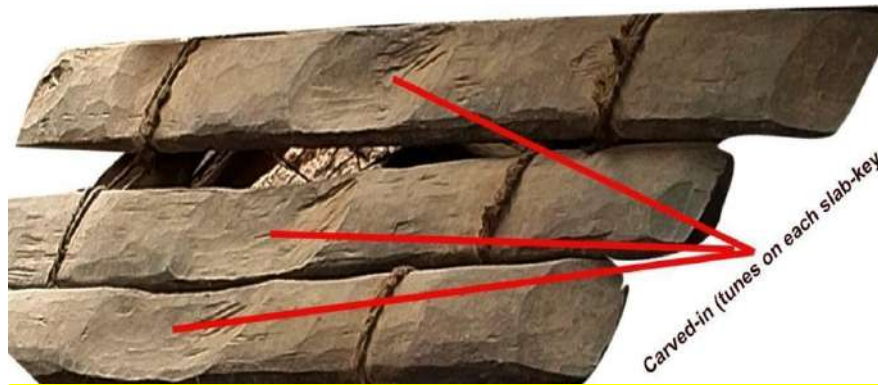


Figure 8: Carved-in Tunes (Voices) on the Inner Parts of the Xylophone Slab Keys (Source: Fieldwork, 2024).

The crafters refer to the xylophone's tunes as voices (*lijo*-singular & *lijse*-plural in Sisaali), which must align to produce coherent melodies. Each key's tune is defined by its inner carve-in's dimensions, size, depth, and width, proportionately adjusted to match the 17 or 18 keys' varied sizes, starting with the biggest. It was established that the Sisaala xylophone has three general classifications of tunes, such as *kle* (high), *buyieme* (mid), and *zenyu* (bass), as affirmed by Navei (2024), which strictly guide the tuning process. The tuning is, therefore, considered not only a highly demanding aspect but also the climax of the carving process that necessitates expert craftsmanship and precision. Crafters affirmed that a single misaligned *lijo* renders the xylophone dysfunctional. Therefore, tuning, they explained, is done meticulously by experts late at night, when greater serenity prevails, "to hear the voices of the keys clearly, unobstructed during their test-carving" (Sisaala Crafter 10, personal communication, 3 January 2025).

According to the Sisaala xylophone crafters, a significant ritual embedded in the construction of the instrument's keys is the ritual smoking of the keys. This process serves not only to dry them thoroughly but also to ritually imbue them with melodic properties. The ritual is performed after the successful carving and tuning of the xylophone's key set. A seasoned Sisaala xylophone crafter explained that:

... I arrange the carved keys horizontally across a dugout pit of considerable depth. The inner perimeters of the pit are evenly lined with classified melody-imbuing herbal substances comprising *fuo-tili* (electric fish), whirlwind-swept leafy debris, among others. I burn these materials in the pit, allowing them to smoulder gradually, which produces thick smoke over the keys. Periodically, I turn each key to ensure they are evenly smoked and that the melodic herbal essence is thoroughly absorbed, thereby enhancing their xylophonic resonance. I should note that my smoking process differs from those of other Sisaala xylophone crafters, particularly in the use of the melody-imbuing herbs, details of which I will not fully disclose in order not to face the wrath of my *zen-nala*. (Sisaala Crafter 10, personal communication, January 3, 2025)

It was substantiated that the incorporation of *fuo-tili* (electric fish) endows the keys with a striking, captivating melody that irresistibly compels listeners to move in rhythm, as if drawn by an unseen magnetic force. Meanwhile, the whirlwind-swept leafy debris amplifies the xylophone's acoustic reach, rendering its melody compellingly pervasive, akin to the far-reaching whirlwinds that bridge the earth and sky. Together, these classified elements produce a harmony that sparks profound fascination, eliciting an almost performative response in all who hear it.

In furtherance, other craftsmen offered differing accounts of their xylophone melody imbuing herbs, including exhumed human bones, bees, and other components, while emphasising the secrecy surrounding the precise herbal compositions believed to enhance the instrument's melodic potency. This aligns with earlier findings by Linwood (1995), who observed similar practices of ritual

confidentiality among West African musical instrument makers. The craftsmen further explained that the entire smoking process is conducted in isolation to prevent ordinary people from inhaling the smoke, which carries dire spiritual consequences. This rationale reaffirms why the carving and smoking of xylophone keys must be strictly confined to the crafter's farmstead. It is worth noting that the smoking of xylophone keys is not limited only to the Sisaala of Ghana, but it is similarly done by the Sambla in Burkina Faso (Strand, 2009). However, the Sambla crafters employ a purely technical method, using raised architectural structures to smoke-dry keys devoid of ritual (Strand, 2009), whereas the Sisaala integrate esoteric practices. This underscores the cultural distinctiveness of the Sisaala xylophone smoking process, framing it as an esoteric practice unique among West African traditions. This explains why Sisaala xylophone melodies remain unparalleled, solidifying their status as Ghana's originators of xylophone artistry, a claim uniformly upheld by all the respondents.

Another critical phase in the construction of the Sisaala xylophone is the armature frame made of *Mitragyna parvifolia*, strategically laced with leather strips. Structurally, the Sisaala xylophone widens at the top and tapers towards the base (Figures 7B & 9A), providing stability for sequential securing of the xylophone keys using tanned leather strips. The historical use of *Mitragyna parvifolia* is due to its amenability and durability, while leather is not only durable but also prevents slippage after construction, as affirmed by Linwood (1995). However, contemporary crafters increasingly substitute leather with nylon rope (Figure 9B), citing scarcity of animal hides due to declining local hunting and shifting dietary preferences for animal skin as meat. This adaptation, while pragmatic, compromises longevity and necessitates frequent maintenance, aligning with similar observations by Mensah (2018) on material substitutions in West African musical instrument-making.

Shield of Xylophone Intricately Woven with Leather Strips



A. Sisaala Xylophone with Wider Top and Tapered Bottom

Buzzing Membranes



B. Use of Nylons in Place of Leather to Secure the Keys onto the Armature while Polythene is Used to Seal Gourd Resonators.

Figure 9 (A & B): Structure of Sisaala Zensi (Source: Fieldwork, 2024).

Once the armature is constructed, the keys are securely fastened to it, together with their carefully selected gourd resonators. The gourd resonators (Figure 9B) serve as coherent acoustic amplifiers during play. The selection process begins by assigning the largest gourds to the lowest-pitched keys, progressively decreasing in size to match the smallest, highest-pitched keys. However, crafters universally concurred that determining the appropriate resonator for each xylophone key is not a serendipitous exercise. Instead, the process entails positioning a resonator beneath a key and striking the key deliberately with a beater to assess the gourd's pitch suitability. If mismatched, crafters try similarly sized gourds until the correct resonance is achieved. Veteran crafters can sometimes assess

pitch suitability by holding the gourd near their ear, thereby bypassing the need to test it beneath the keys. The crafters also affirmed that, after this selection process, the newly constructed xylophone is left for three to four days. It is then tested to ensure that all gourds resonate correctly with their keys. Any defective resonators undergo minor adjustments; either by adding further perforations or by sealing some existing ones with cow dung to refine their resonance. The xylophone is only deemed ready for use once total tonal coherence is achieved. This practice underscores that expertise in matching keys with suitable gourds is essential to produce a xylophone capable of the finest, most distinctive, and harmonious melody. Boahen and Annin (2015) documented a similar practice within the neighbouring Daagaba xylophone tradition, where gourd resonators are graduated in size according to the pitch of the keys. Comparable findings have been observed across West Africa, including Nigeria (Onyedum, 2020), Mali (Maxwell, 1999), and Burkina Faso (Struthers-Young, 2022; Strand, 2009). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that gourd resonators are commonly used in traditional xylophone construction, underscoring a widespread acoustic principle in African musical craftsmanship. Significant elements of the gourd resonators are the deliberate perforations on their bellies, sealed with spider egg sacs, or light polythene (Figure 9B), serving as buzzing membranes that amplify the xylophone's vibrational reach. These spider sacs, once abundant in Sisaala mudbrick dwellings, have declined due to modern architectural shifts towards zinc roofs and synthetic ceilings, which deter spider habitation, as revealed by the respondents. Consequently, the Sisaala xylophone crafters now use lightweight polythene (Figure 9B), though respondents unanimously noted its inferior acoustic properties. This substitution parallels broader trends in West Africa, where synthetic materials increasingly replace organic components in xylophone construction, potentially introducing slight acoustic distortions (Boahen & Annin, 2015; Struthers-Young, 2022).

A key complementary element of Sisaala xylophone construction, stressed by all the crafters, is the production of xylophone accessories such as the *zen-duulo* (beaters/strikers), *zen-chike* (wrist bells), and *bentere* (portable gourd drum). Traditional beaters featured latex heads made from *pen-pen*, a special creeping vine plant prized in Sisaali culture for yielding warmer, mellower, and more resonant tones. Modern variants, using recycled car tyres and tubes (Figure 10Ai), produce comparatively harsher sounds, corroborating Nketia's (1984) findings on the impact of materials on timbre.



i. Zen-duulo (Xylophone Strikers)



ii. Zen-chike (Xylophone Wrist Bells)



B Bentere

A Xylophone Strikers & Wrist Bells

Figure 10 (A& B): Sisaala Xylophone Accessories (Source: Fieldwork, 2024).

Wrist bells (Figures 10 Aii), fabricated locally with varied pitches, and *bentere* (Figure 10B), a special drum made of gourd and monitor lizard's skin, are played interstitially, enriching the xylophone's melodic complexity. This layered instrumentation exemplifies the Sisaala's sophisticated polyphonic xylophone traditions, worthy of preservation.

The construction of the Sisaala zensi is completed with the performance of a special thanksgiving, involving offerings and ritual sacrifices to both the crafter's ancestors and his *zen-nala* (xylophone deity) as corroborated by all the crafters. Following the sacrifice, the feathers, liver, and blood of the fowl are affixed to one of the gourd resonators. This act ensures the instrument's melodious longevity, functionality, and resilience against any evil eye that might seek to distort its sonic integrity during use at traditional ceremonies.

However, it was revealed that the crafting of miniature xylophones for leisure and entertainment purposes (Figure 11 A & B) does not necessarily follow the usual ritually complicated Sisaala xylophone crafting traditions.



A. Xylophonist Playing a Miniature Xylophone using his fingers



B. Bottom View of a Miniature Xylophone Showing its Gourd Resonators

Figure 11 (A & B): Sisaala Miniature Xylophone (Source: Fieldwork, 2024).

The divergence arises from contextual purpose and cultural intentionality. While Sisaala crafters maintain that full-sized Sisaala xylophones, rooted in ceremonial or spiritual roles, demand ritual adherence to uphold cultural legitimacy, ancestral reverence, and communal acoustics, whereas miniature versions prioritise leisure and entertainment through functional, accessible, and aesthetically simplified designs. This distinction reflects a broader cultural pattern observed in West African instrument-making traditions, where objects intended for sacred or communal rites demand strict adherence to customary procedures, while those for secular or individual use often relax such requirements (Linwood, 1995).

4.3 Deployment of Newly Constructed Sisaala Zensi

The respondents concurred that newly crafted pairs of Sisaala *zensi* (xylophone) are ceremonially debuted at a specifically organised communal entertainment event. There, both expert xylophonists and non-players test them simultaneously, announcing their arrival and signalling their integration into the community's cultural life. Following this introduction, they are first used for women's funerals, while male funerals are strictly prohibited to prevent ancestral wrath. A xylophonist stressed that "a mistaken deployment of newly crafted xylophones for a male funeral is considered a deliberate invitation to multiple deaths in the community, as such pairs of xylophones will always be put to use for mourning without rest" (Sisaala Xylophonist 16, personal communication, January 4, 2025). This gender-specific taboo, unreported by other scholars (Dankwa, 2018; Hogan, 2011; Imoro, 2021; Kyiileyang, 2024; Linwood, 1995; Strand, 2009; Maxwell, 1999), underscores the Sisaala's gendered cosmology, where female-associated xylophone debuting rituals mediate communal deaths.

Another finding that was emphasised by the respondents was the culture of xylophone maintenance. This includes regular structural enhancement, re-securing of the keys, and replacement of gourd resonators and membranes when necessary. Moreover, non-productive keys are retuned, but not a

routine practice. Xylophone maintenance, as espoused by the crafters, is, many a time, punctuated with ritual sacrifices to the xylophone deity, sustaining the melodic vitality of the xylophones. Furthermore, it was asserted by all the respondents that damaged components of the xylophone are highly respected and are either repurposed or reverently kept, reflecting the xylophone's status as a vessel of Sisaala cultural expression rather than a mere musical instrument.

4.4 Cultural Relevance of Sisaala Xylophone Art

The xylophone is a treasured indigenous musical artefact embodying the cultural values of the Sisaala people of northern Ghana. The study found that its melodies are deeply interwoven into various aspects of the social, customary, cultural, religious, and ceremonial life of the indigenous Sisaala people. The respondents revealed that the xylophone is the primary symbolic indigenous Sisaala musical instrument, connecting them with their historical roots, ancestral heritage, and cultural identity. The xylophone features prominently during traditional rites and ceremonies such as funerals (Figures 12A & 12E), customary marriages, festivals (Figure 12 B, C & D), communal farming events, and manual digging of wells, among several others. The Sisaala xylophonist-respondents held that the intricate rhythmic melody of the xylophone tends to, unavoidably, attract both cultural and non-cultural listeners, invoke spirits when desired, communicate with ancestors when the need be, and ensure social cohesion as all walks of life mingle to perform Sisaala xylophonic dances during cultural and ceremonial events. The respondents typified that during traditional Sisaala funerary rites, the xylophone's melodies serve as vehicles in transitioning departed souls to the ancestral world while comforting the bereaved psychologically, who perform the cultural and customary melodies in the company of loved ones. Such functions of the Sisaala xylophone reveal a novel acoustical tradition and cultural identity of the Sisaala people, where the cultural melody of *zensi* is not merely artistic expression but a medium of somatic, spiritual, and psychological mediation. The Sisaala xylophone's role in funerary rites, communal labour, and ancestral connections aligns with the broader West African xylophone traditions (Kpieta, 2016; Kyiileyang, 2024; Strand, 2009; Maxwell, 1999; Nketia, 1979). However, the Sisaala's belief that xylophone melodies facilitate ancestral communication, soul transition, and bereaved psychological therapy introduces both metaphysical and psychological dimensions less emphasised in the existing studies as aforementioned.



A. Ritual Procession with Xylophones at a Traditional Funeral at Bakuala, Sisaala East Municipality.



B. A Group of Sisaala Youth Performing Sisaala Xylophonic *Zenchemo* Dance at a Traditional Festival, Sisaala West District.



C. Sisaala Chiefs Performing Xylophonic *Zenchemo* Dance During the *Kvkɔɔ* Festival at Nimoro, Sissala West District.



D. Sisaala Praiser-Singers Embellishing Xylophone Cultural Melody using Local Instruments (Hoe-Blades & Others) at *Kvkɔɔ* Festival at Nimoro, Sissala West District.

Figure 12 (A, B, C & D): Sisaala Xylophonic Cultural Performances (Source: Fieldwork, 2024).

As the Sisaala xylophone art is deeply rooted in customary and cultural norms, it is governed by stringent taboos and customs. Paramount among these is the prohibition against public climbing of the xylophone by novice xylophonists, a seldom practice exclusively reserved for veteran xylophonists (*goku-hian* or *zensummɔ nɔhɔ*) to demonstrate prowess. This is mostly done during funerals of distinguished xylophonists, where the climbing of xylophones honours the deceased. Moreover, post-coital rituals require xylophonists to bathe before performance, underscoring purity. In furtherance, the funerals of revered players, or individuals of high social status, feature three or four xylophones played concurrently, symbolising high social status (Figure 12E). This supports Dankwa's (2021) assertion that xylophonists occupy revered, quasi-sacred positions in Ghanaian society.



Figure 12E: Three Xylophones Concurrently Played at a Traditional Sisaala *Yuo* (Funeral) at Wasai, Sissala West District.

Additionally, xylophonists, particularly those entangled in the adultery of a colleague's wife, are prohibited from playing xylophone together to avert discordant melodies. Accidental breakage of the xylophone's mallet (beater) during play portends dire consequences, requiring the spiritual attention of elders and deliverance. Also, errors during classified customary xylophonic performances, such as *gbieliwero* or *naliaba*, invite dire consequences such as death. The xylophone's shield (*Zen-nyuu*), a

leather-laced shield (Figure 9A), is a reserved seat for veteran xylophonists, who sit on it to provide spiritual protection to the performing xylophonists during public functions where targeted malevolent forces abound. Mastery of xylophone playing creativity, believed to be innate (*zen nala*) or acquired, dictates playing styles, with innate talent yielding profounder artistry and melody. Consequently, the study found no inherent gender-based restrictions in xylophone-playing expertise, contrasting with Linwood's (1995) report, which generalised that Sisaala women are prohibited from playing the instrument. However, traditional xylophone performances at public functions (funerals, festivals, and others) are strictly reserved for men. Women's participation occurs solely within entertainment contexts. The respondents justified that the exclusion arises from cultural safeguards, arguing that women xylophonists are denied access to the ritual secrets of xylophone traditions due to fears that their divorce and remarriage could lead to the leakage of esoteric knowledge from their former husbands' lineages to others. Additionally, women's regular menstrual cycles render them ritually impure and thus unfit to play at traditional functions, among other reasons. While existing studies attribute women's prohibition solely to menstruation (Dankwa, 2021; Wiggins & Kobom, 1992), this research reveals that the Sisaala xylophone tradition incorporates an added dimension of divorce-related knowledge protection.

4.5 Current State of Sisaala Xylophone Art

Consensually, all the respondents corroborated that the cultural significance of xylophone art is key in defining the Sisaala identity. Notwithstanding that, this cultural artistic treasure faces existential threats due to an alarming decline in its cultural usage in this contemporary era. According to all the respondents, Sisaala followers of foreign religions stigmatise xylophone performance as *haram* (sinful), specifically maligning its practitioners as *yabuka* (non-believers). This entrenched religious indoctrination, perpetuated by Sisaala converts, continues to marginalise traditional Sisaala xylophone traditions. This affirms previous reports that the Sisaala people engaged in the widespread destruction of their shrines and traditional musical instruments, particularly xylophones, to signify their conversion to Islam, thereby accelerating Sisaala cultural erosion (Linwood 1995; Seavoy 1982).

The study also found that social neglect alarmingly exacerbates the decline in Sisaala xylophone practice. For instance, it has been observed that even on the rare occasions when xylophonists are invited to perform at social events, cultural shows, durbars of chiefs, festivals, and the like, they receive significantly lower compensation as compared with modern disc jockeys (DJs). The respondents further added that the practice of abandoning traditional Sisaala xylophone performances for modern DJ musical setups during most, if not all, social events is highly predominant in the Sisaala enclave, weakening indigenous Sisaala cultural life. Sisaala politicians also prioritise paying close to a hundred thousand Ghana Cedis (GHC 100,000.00) to individuals to engage in religious pilgrimages with less commitment towards Sisaala cultural preservation initiatives, as bemoaned by one of the respondents. Youth disengagement, fuelled by foreign religious identity, Western education, and globalisation, weakens the intergenerational transmission of Sisaala xylophone traditions. "There are some Sisaala communities without a xylophone. Their funerals and other rites of passage are performed in strict conjunction with Islamic or Christian dictates" (Sisaala Xylophonist 1, personal communication, August 8, 2024). The respondents added that one forum where Sisaala people appear to patronise Sisaala xylophonic cultural performances nowadays is during annual post-harvest festivals, which are also fast declining. On such occasions, some of the foreign faith-based Sisaala converts participate in the Sisaala xylophonic performances, with the majority of them enveloping the scenes as active observers and photographers, busily recording the performances using their smartphones. Even among some of those participating in Sisaala cultural performances, many adopt foreign religious attire (wearing of hijabs), as observed in Figures 13A and B.



A B

Figure 13 (A & B): Sisaala Ladies Performing Sisaala Xylophone Dance in Islamic Hijabs (Source: Fieldwork, 2024).

Interestingly, for Sisaala traditional funerals, which are rarely performed, the Sisaala rich xylophonic dances are massively patronised only at night to evade identification and *yabuka* stigmatisation, as corroborated by all the respondents. In light of this, all the respondents concurred on the need for renaissance through regular media (radio) campaigns to disabuse the minds of the indoctrinations perpetuated by foreign faith-based establishments in the Sisaala enclave who use the same medium. Respondents, however, lamented that while public sensitisation is undoubtedly the way forward, identifying suitable agents to deliver it poses a significant challenge, given the persistence of systemic apathy against Sisaala *zensi*.

Significantly, the phenomenon of xylophone owners abandoning their xylophones without repairs abounds across the Sisaala enclave. Figure 14 is an example of an abandoned Sisaala xylophone at the Gwollu community, the capital town of the Sisaala West District. Consequently, Sisaala xylophone artistry, once a rich cultural heritage, now faces an uncertain future. This precarious state stems from the dual pressures of eroding indigenous Sisaala cultural practices and the encroachment of foreign religious influences alongside modernity. Nevertheless, the scattered instances of discord within Sisaala communities ought not to overshadow the commendable efforts of the few Sisaala communities that have zealously preserved the continuity of the indigenous Sisaala xylophone traditions to the present day.



A. B

Figure 14 (A & B): Abandoned Xylophone in Gwollu Community (Source: Fieldwork, 2024).

The decline of Sisaala xylophone practice, attributed to religious stigmatisation, youth disengagement, and social neglect, reflects a West African regional trend. Dankwa (2021) and Kuutiero (2016) have documented similar challenges among the Birifor and Lobi of Ghana, where foreign religious ideologies and modernisation marginalise xylophone traditions. However, the Sisaala case is exacerbated by systemic apathy, where respondents noted politicians prioritising pilgrimage funding over cultural preservation, a phenomenon less highlighted in existing studies. The abandonment of xylophones in favour of DJs and modern instruments mirrors broader shifts in African musical practices, as noted by Onyedum (2020) in Nigeria. Yet, the Sisaala foreign religious converts' performance of xylophone music at night to evade stigma starkly reveals an identity crisis, necessitating reconsideration.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study elucidates the cultural nuances of the xylophone (*zensi*), revealing its profound historical and sociocultural significance among the Sisaala people of Ghana's Upper West Region. Rooted in Sisaala oral traditions, the *zensi*, an indigenous musical instrument, emerged from ancient mystical encounters between a Sisaala hunter and *kantomo* (dwarfs). The *zensi* embodies Sisaala cultural heritage, serving as a symbol of identity, a conduit for ancestral communication, a promoter of communal cohesion, and a medium for sociocultural expression. The study found intricate crafting processes of the Sisaala *zensi*, steeped in customary rituals, ecological mindfulness, and artisanal expertise, revealing a sophisticated interplay between tradition and sustainability, where desiccated rosewood, gourd resonators, and meticulous tuning techniques converge to produce a melodious cultural artefact (Sisaala *zensi*) with distinctive acoustic richness. Crucially, Sisaala *zensi* is not merely functional but governed by taboos, traditional protocols, and customary rites, affirming its role as a vessel of Sisaala sociocultural identity. Specifically, it permeates Sisaala sociocultural life, anchoring ceremonies from funerals to festivals, where its cultural melodies mediate between the physical and ancestral realms. However, the study reveals an alarming decline in its cultural usage due to stigmatisation by foreign religious institutions, social apathy, and generational attrition, which threaten to relegate this heritage to obscurity. The study also identified a shift from leather to nylon bindings, the replacement of spider egg sacs by polythene, and a decline in skilled craftsmen, symbolising the broader erosion of indigenous Sisaala xylophone knowledge. In light of these findings, the study concludes that while the Sisaala *zensi* remains a powerful symbol of cultural identity, it faces extinction due to an alarming decline in its sociocultural usage in recent times.

To safeguard Sisaala xylophone traditions, the study recommends that the veteran Sisaala xylophone crafters and players spearhead grassroots initiatives to reinforce the cultural pride and intergenerational transmission of Sisaala xylophone culture and artistic traditions. Firstly, they should initiate regular community-based sensitisation on the cultural importance of Sisaala xylophone art by offering to teach as many of the youth who are willing to learn the art. They should start with their wards and family members before extending to the larger community. Additionally, the xylophone crafters and xylophonists should form a legally constituted *Sisaala Xylophone Association (SiXA)* with a formidable leadership front to promote the cultural nuances of Sisaala *zensi* through media and other public platforms. This approach promotes apprenticeship in the art while securing a positive image about the rich and diverse cultural identity significance of Sisaala *zensi* in the minds of the masses to bridge the generational knowledge gap and preserve its traditions for posterity. Moreover, Sisaala xylophone crafters and players should seek the necessary technological and financial support to launch an online Sisaala *zensi* documentary series through which audio-video records of the Sisaala cultural xylophonic melodies and performances could be hosted for national and international patronage. Such archives would counterbalance the existing foreign religious stigmatisation by reasserting the Sisaala xylophone art's cultural legitimacy. With the meagre compensations extended to xylophonists, it is recommended that, through the established association (SiXA), xylophonists should collectively advocate for equitable remuneration when called to perform at social events or cultural festivals, leveraging their cultural authority to challenge the over-prioritisation of modern non-cultural DJ entertainers. To this end, SiXA should seek external

support from district assemblies in the Sissala enclave; relevant ministries (Culture, Tourism, and Creative Arts and others); cultural institutions (including the Centre for National Culture); global agencies (UNESCO, the African Cultural Regeneration Institute and others); Non-Governmental Organisations (Nubuke Foundation and others); and philanthropists to establish an annual Sisaala Xylophone Cultural Festival. This festival should integrate Sisaala xylophone music, dance, and crafting demonstrations to reignite communal interest, attract local tourism, and foster pride among Sisaala youth. Through these respondent-driven actions, the Sisaala people could reclaim stewardship of their xylophone cultural heritage, ensuring its continuity as a living tradition rather than becoming a relic of the past. For further research, focus could be placed on the customary manifestations and cultural intricacies of xylophone art during Sisaala traditional funerals. Biographical study of veteran Sisaala xylophonists and crafters is another plausible research area.

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