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PAS Hall Of Fame 2022 Bernard Woma

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2022 Hall of Fame Bernard Woma

By Robert Damm

As a newborn in the Upper West Region of Ghana, Bernard Woma's hands were clenched in fists, as if he was clutching xylophone mallets, a sign to his family that he was destined to become a gyl player. According to Julie Beauregard, "Bernard explained that the highest level of gyl player, known as a *guba*, is recognized upon birth by a spiritualist. A baby may be found to possess... the 'gift of [being a] musician,' which then should be encouraged to develop by providing access to a xylophone upon which to practice from infancy."¹

Born in 1966, Bernard Woma was a virtuoso musician and global ambassador of Dagara music. He began playing the gyl at the age of two. As he grew, so did his regional reputation for his musical abilities. The gyl is the single-row xylophone of the Lobi and Dagara people of Ghana and Burkina Faso. The bars are tuned to a pentatonic scale and played with rubber mallets with very thick shafts. Hollow gourds (each with small sound holes covered with thin paper or membrane from spider-egg casings) are secured to the frame of the instrument and give the gyl its characteristic "buzzy" timbre. The gyl is the symbol of Dagara cultural identity. Bernard shared in his master's thesis that the name *gyl* translates as "gather," referring to the oral history of the Dagara people's connection with the gyl:

When the hunters brought the instrument to the community, the people were so baffled with its amazing sound that they began gathering around to listen to its wonderful music. As the hunters began playing the instrument, they told the gathered crowd to dance to the music. In amazement, the men started jumping and leaping high in the air while the women danced gently and gracefully to this "sweet" music.²

In 1982, Bernard moved to the capital city of Accra, where he played gyl for the Dagara community. Although the gyl is played in a variety of contexts, it is strongly linked to funerals. Bernard explained:

An elderly person's funeral and/or the funeral of an important personage may include dancing and other esoteric rituals performed by the family or the deceased's social group in the community. Such performances symbolically reenact the deceased's life history as well as their social status in the community. Thus, as public rituals, funeral ceremonies call for a communal responsibility not only to organize a befitting rite of passage for the departed soul but also for people to celebrate the life of their community member. The occasion also provides the opportunity for the Dagara people to re-enact their ancestral beliefs and cultural practices through music, dance, and dirge singing. In sum, funeral rituals reflect how the Dagara people reaffirm their traditional customs and social values.³

In 1989, Bernard became the solo xylophonist for Ghana's National Dance Company at the National Theatre of Ghana. Dr. Karolyn Stonefelt's letter supporting Woma's nomination to the PAS Hall of Fame delineated that, "Since 1989, with a continuing span of some 28 years as an international concert artist and visiting scholar, Bernard presented solo gyl performances in England, Germany, Japan, South Korea, France, The Netherlands, Indonesia, Martinique, Denmark, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, and he performed in no less than 45 states of the continental United States." Documentation of his exceptional performing skills can be heard on seven solo CD albums and as a guest collaborator on five additional CD recordings.

"While we might tend to think of Bernard in the context of our personal experiences with him as a specialist of sorts, we realize he was indeed a multifaceted, multitalented, complex human being, an artist of the highest magnitude," Stonefelt said. Robert F. Arnové, Professor Emeritus at Indiana University, wrote in his supporting letter that, "As a percussionist, Bernard Woma had an illustrious career internationally. In his relatively short life, he achieved world-class levels of excellence on the gyl and various African drums. He transcended barriers of poverty and geography to become a renowned artist." Mark



Stone wrote that, “Bernard was the most respected xylophone player in the Dagara community,” while Dr. Elizabeth DeLamater and Dr. Bill Sallak called Bernard “one of the greatest Dagara gyil players who ever lived.”

In 1999, Bernard established the Dagara Music Center (DMC) in Ghana, where he taught traditional music, dance, and arts in a friendly learning environment that attracted students from around the world. Dr. Stonefelt indicated that the DMC was Woma’s proudest accomplishment and “most significant contribution to the field of education.”

“As the DMC provided a resource for many students and scholars, it also provided immediate opportunities for members of Bernard’s community in terms of employment, performance, education, and teaching responsibilities. The DMC employs approximately eleven educators, ten staff members, and 24 performing artists with the Saakumu Dance Troupe.”⁴ DeLamater and Sallak described this legacy as “benefitting to Bernard’s family, the Dagara people, and the nation of Ghana.” Regarding Bernard’s lasting influence they wrote, “Bernard was a tireless advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion. He encouraged everyone to participate in his culture. This commitment to sharing his music with everyone extended beyond his immediate teaching and performances to include his service.”

According to the DMC website: “During his life, Bernard touched thousands of people with his music, teaching, and compassion for others. His legacy will live on in all those who were fortunate to learn from him and observe his passion for the gyil, traditional Ghanaian music, and his overall love of life. All of us at the DMC are committed to ensuring that we honor Bernard’s memory by continuing his work and providing opportunities for more people to learn about themselves, Ghana, and the world through music.”⁵

Another example of Bernard’s commitment to community advocacy and sustainability are the funeral pyres he provided for his village:

Through the DMC, Bernard raised funds to construct a reusable, metal funeral pyre. In the Dagara funeral tradition, the deceased is displayed publicly on a wooden pyre for the members of the community to view and pay their respects. After the funeral, these pyres would need to be destroyed, depleting many local resources. Due to deforestation of the Upper West region, the funeral pyres were becoming increasingly difficult to build. Bernard sought a sustainable solution to maintain these funeral traditions while reducing the ecological impact of funeral practices within his homeland. His campaign raised funds to build two pyres which are still in use by the local community. The pyres serve as physical reminders of Bernard’s legacy of sustaining traditional practices.⁶

Bernard formed his own dance troupe, Saakumu, in 1997. The word *saakumu* means “traditions,” and the group’s varied repertoire represented ceremonial, recreational, and contem-

porary African dance traditions. “Saakuma is recognized as one of the leading cultural performing troupes in Ghana and is hired to perform at weddings, funerals, and corporate functions throughout the country and has entertained many government officials and foreign dignitaries...The troupe has also won many regional and national cultural competitions.⁷ Saakuma continues to play Bernard’s instruments and music; the ensemble performed for the virtual PASIC 2020.

Bernard’s compositions for gyil included works that showcased the instrument in new contexts. In 2008, he premiered “Gyil Jumbie Concerto,” composed by Woma and David Rogers for gyil trio and symphony orchestra, with the South Dakota Symphony Orchestra. And in 2011 he premiered his “Gyil Yeru Concerto” with the Albany (N.Y.) Symphony Orchestra. In no way did Bernard believe that situating the gyil within the Eurocentric orchestra’s concerto structure was necessary to “legitimize” the instrument. Rather, these experimental innovations explored new cultural fusions and brought the gyil to wider audiences.

Born in a rural village where most people never went to school, Bernard earned a bachelor’s degree in International Studies from the State University of New York at Fredonia (2008), and two master’s degrees from Indiana University – one in African Studies and Folklore (2012) and a second in Ethnomusicology (2015). He performed and presented workshops at numerous PASICs. Mark Stone believes that, “Bernard had the unique ability to break down the complex melodies and



rhythms of the Dagara xylophone tradition without in any way watering down the music.”

Bernard’s students will always remember his positive and encouraging style, which was reflected in his favorite proverbs. Dr. Corinna Cambell expounded on this practice in her master’s thesis:

Woma used many proverbs and phrases in lessons. Some of these might be specific to the Dagara, others are used more widely throughout Ghana, if not West Africa, and yet others are particular to him, his individual experiences, and frames of reference. Some sayings, including, “Bad dancing will not hurt the ground,” and “Every mistake is a new style,” are used among several Ghanaian teachers to encourage students. Woma was also fond of saying, “Kill your own snake,” and “If you’re going to babysit, don’t ask the name of the baby.” He used the first to tell his students to overcome their own obstacles, and this in turn usually meant they needed to spend time working to get a part down before he could help. The reasoning behind the latter proverb is that the babysitter is bound to learn the name of the baby at some point, and a student has likewise asked a question whose answer will become apparent later.⁸

Campbell added that one of Woma’s main philosophies was that you cannot teach a student many things at once: “Students will not be able to make sense of a complete song if they can’t hear the cycle first. He began by isolating the song, melody, and solo. He used versions of all three parts that used two hands. After learning the song and melody, Woma had his students practice switching between the two, careful not to lose the tempo or rhythm in the process. The song was then combined with the solo, and then all three were synthesized.”⁹

Bernard taught participants the traditional techniques of Dagara gyl music utilizing pedagogical concepts such as family relationships to represent melodic intervals and teaching

performance practice through melodic cycles. “The foundation of Dagara melodic cycles are basic intervallic relationships, but also the physical space between gyl notes,” wrote Vercelli. “As the tuning of the gyl varies between communities, the intervallic relationship between notes is also not standardized. This creates discrepancies in how the gyl is heard, but not in how the instrument is played... By removing the sonic difference and addressing the physical consistencies in gyl performance, Bernard was reinforcing important Dagara family relationships [i.e., brothers/sisters, uncles, nieces, and friends]. The identification of these relationships then becomes the foundation of establishing and understanding melodic cycles of Dagara gyl music... These cycles, called *yagme* in the Dagara language, provide a foundational harmonic accompaniment for many Dagara gyl repertoires... To develop accessibility, he created a series of pedagogical pieces which challenge students rhythmically, build technical facility on the gyl, but most importantly, reveal the underlying melodic cycle governing the musical structure.”¹⁰



Mark Stone concluded: "Bernard Woma was widely regarded as one of the greatest masters of African Music. He was a rare individual who possessed world-class musicianship, outstanding leadership, and a deep passion and talent for teaching." Delta David Gier, Music Director of the South Dakota Symphony Orchestra, wrote "[Woma] was a pioneer in the field of world music, both through his musicianship and in his ability to communicate culture and its values. His contributions to the field of percussive arts specifically and world/classical music in general will carry on through his students, his colleagues, and all of the audiences which he served so graciously."

All who knew Bernard Woma well enough to play the gyl with him will remember the way he instilled confidence in your ability to play the instrument. He was so in tune with the



music and the ensemble that if he heard you start to waver, he would make a subtle sound in his throat that meant "Come on, you can do it!" He was a master teacher who empowered thousands of students with his contagious passion for the joyfully communal music of the gyl.

Bernard Woma died in 2018.

ENDNOTES

1. Beauregard, Julie (2012) "Intercultural music transmission at the Dagara Music Center and development of musical interspace." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Rochester. p.66.
2. Woma, Bernard (2013) "The Socio-political dimensions of Dagara funeral ritual, music, and dirge." Master's Thesis, Indiana University. p.39.
3. Ibid, p.1
4. Vercelli, Michael B. (2020). "Constructing Dagara gyl pedagogy: The legacy of Bernard Woma." *African Music*, Vol. 11, Issue 2, pp. 61-62.
5. Dagara Music and Arts Center: <http://www.dagaramusic.org/>
6. Vercelli, pp. 62-63.
7. Dagara Music and Arts Center: <http://www.dagaramusic.org/>
8. Campbell, Corinna (2005) "Gyl music of the Dagarti people: Learning, performing, and representing a musical culture." Master's Thesis, Bowling Green State University. p.54
9. Ibid, p.48
10. Vercelli, pp. 64-66. **PN**



(L-R) Karolyn Stonefelt, Bernard Woma, Michael Vercelli, Mark Stone



Photo: Claudia Hansen

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