

## Remembering Enslavement through Expressive Culture: Animistic Metaphors Contesting Notions of Victimhood among the Balsa of Ghana

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### Abstract

*This paper examines how the Balsa ethnic group in northern Ghana by means of expressive culture revealed in their oral traditions and songs continue to remember and relive their experiences of survival from the threats and violence that slave raiding imposed upon them during the latter part of the nineteenth century. The paper pays attention to the ways in which animistic metaphors reflected through popular culture provide an opportunity to better understand the processes of metaphorizing and subverting narratives of victimhood among this subaltern group. This paper attempts to show that the songs are not “invented” solely “as a reflection of the coded discourse” sometimes surrounding the experiences of captivity and enslavement within this culture, but more importantly, they reveal how animistic metaphors encode the discourse of overturning the images of victimhood.*

**Keywords: Balsa, Enslavement, Metaphor, Orality, Song, Victimhood.**

## Introduction

This paper examines how the Balsa ethnic group in northern Ghana by means of expressive culture revealed in their oral traditions and songs continue to remember and relive their experiences of survival from the threats and violence that slave raiding imposed upon them during the latter part of the nineteenth century. The paper particularly pays attention to the ways in which animals have been used in their songs as metaphors through which we can reflect on how they have imaginatively chosen to weave a counter narrative to the dominant images of themselves as victims and, by extension, a significant part of northern Ghana. For the Balsa, enslavement was traumatic and it is still so in retrospect, mediated through imagination and representation through songs. Captivity and force servitude was not something directly experienced by these people but came to be central to their attempts to create an identity predicated on its remembrance through their oral traditions.

Slave raiding with its attendant characteristics of pillage, systematic violence and enslavement among this subaltern group created a stigmatized identity: an identity predicated on the representations of subjugation and victimhood. The context of representation has thus always revolved around that of victims and prey on the one hand and conquerors/predators on another hand. Yet underlying these dominant narratives of victimhood is another equally significant narrative that does not always feature within historical sources: a narrative of a people who have challenged these representations by fighting back.

This paper problematizes this predator/victim dynamic by focusing on the contestation and re-interpretation of Balsa's collective history and identity through animistic metaphors. The metaphor in terms of its construction is intrinsically related to the group's epistemology. In this sense, the metaphor then becomes a window for assessing the group's knowledge stock. These animistic metaphors serve as counter narratives and an avenue for self-representation in a discourse dominated by the ideology of victimhood.

The songs, as I attempt to show, do not simply recount collective loss and suffering; crucially, I argue that they are a politically and rhetorically significant cultural form of contestation, representation and survival. This aspect of the 'poetics' of representation in Balsa songs has received very little critical attention in the literature, hence the attempt in this paper to show that the songs are not "invented" solely "as a reflection of the coded discourse" sometimes surrounding the experiences of captivity and enslavement within this culture, but more importantly, they reveal how animistic metaphors encode the discourse of overturning the images of victimhood.

Indeed, scholars have drawn our attention to the nature of trauma, oppression and its relationship with the notions of victimhood (see Montville, 1989; Confino, 2005: 46-75; Larson, 1999: 1). Larson has, for example, shown how "...collective identities and memories of trauma are deeply intertwined". "Most ethnic minorities", Larson has noted, "anchor their collective identities in the remembrance of past and present victimization". Victims of social trauma and their descendants in Larson's view, "often engage in purposeful remembrance as a form of empowerment and identity formation". Confino (2005: 46-75) has also pointed out how after the second world war, for example, the notions of victimhood, self-pity, and suffering became organizing metaphors to help understand the war. The African-American slave experience has also provided a context within which people have sought to use the notions of victimhood to define descendants of the enslaved.

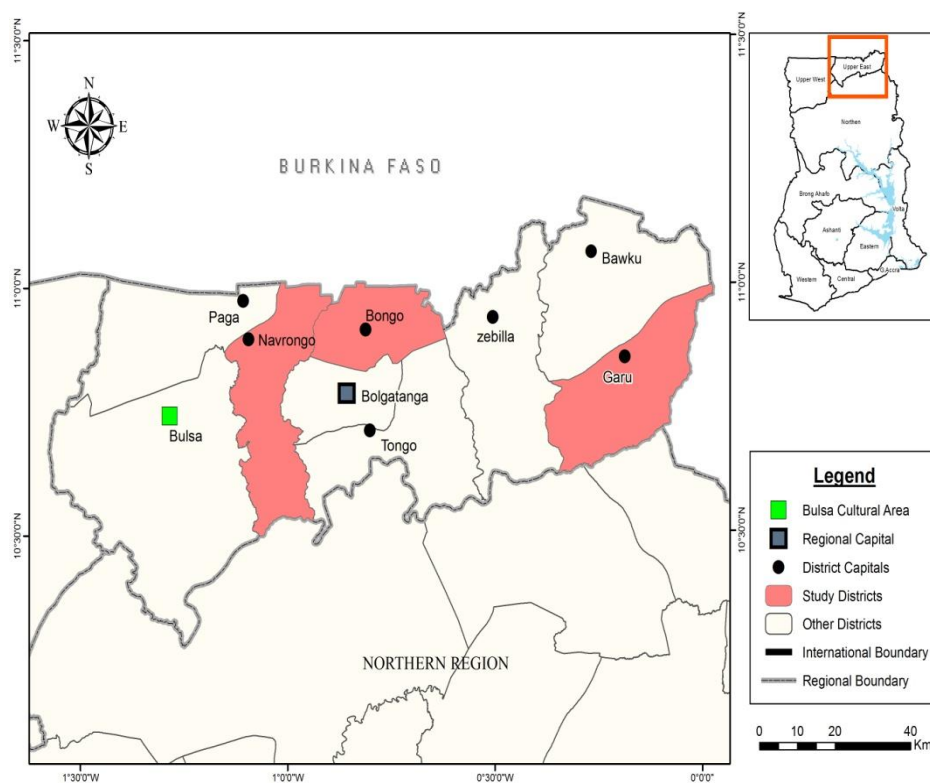
The terms *victim* and *victimhood* are fundamentally concerned with human suffering and the expressions of power. Constructions of victimhood thus involve the re-inscribing of oppression and the negative ways

in which such experiences affect individuals and sometimes communities (see Montville, 1993; Hooks, 1989; Elias, 1986; Rosenberg, 2003; & Wilke, 2007). Montville (1993) has reminded us that victimhood usually revolves around three main components: (1) “a history of violent, traumatic aggression and loss; (2) a conviction that the aggression was unjustified by any standard and (3) an often unuttered fear on the part of the victim group that the aggressor will strike again at some feasible time in the future”.

Although Montville was certainly not reflecting within the context of the slave trade and enslavement, there is a basis upon which his formulations can inform our appreciation of victimhood within the collective psyche of Balsa. Slave raiding was a violent and traumatic loss and the fear resulting from the anticipation that the slave raider would always strike again, coupled with the social stigma of an enslaved culture, produces images of the “victim”.

### **Methodology**

This paper draws from a corpus of songs I collected between September 2004 and December 2005, when I first became interested in the oral history and literary manifestations of the slave trade within northern Ghana, particularly Balsa. During my fieldwork, informants often alluded to how memories of enslavement and the slave trade are still recollected, preserved and transmitted within their culture, through popular culture. The transcriptions and translations of the songs into texts were made possible with the help of native speakers skilled in the translation process and who are familiar with the cultural and historical contexts of the study. Remembering the threats of captivity within these communities is often an emotional and psychological experience. Consequently, narratives and communal memory of the experience are not always explicit but coded and expressed through metaphor. The metaphor then becomes a significant cultural and rhetorical tool for understanding the people’s collective experiences.



**Figure 1: The map of Ghana showing the Upper East region**  
Source: Cartographic Unit, University of Cape Coast, Ghana

## Context

Northern Ghana is an important cultural and geographical space relative to its role in the three distinct and yet inter-related slave systems: the Trans-Atlantic, Trans-Saharan and domestic. Although memories of these distinct types are often blurred, fragments of the devastating consequences of slave raiding and the threats of enslavement still resonate within their oral traditions. Significant studies have emerged dealing with northern Ghana's role in the slave trade (see, Yarak, 1989; Der, 1998; Perbi, 2004; Austin, 2005; Allman & Parker, 2005). A central animating metaphor in the bulk of these studies is the focus on northern Ghana as a "slave supply base" and a "victim society". Although some studies such as Opoku-Agyemang (2007), Howell (2007) and Saboro (2013) have investigated issues of cultural adaptations and resistance to enslavement among certain northern communities, there is still more to be explored.

As part of European negative and stereotypical conceptualization(s) of most people of African origin, the prevailing images that came to be associated with people of northern origin were that of people who were primitive, backward and outside of the European Christian civilized order (see Holsey, 2008). Their physical distance from the coast and the nature of their social geography produced images of being cut off from civilized people. They thus came to be regarded by most dominant groups of the south – and later by Europeans – as primitive people who had no social consequence except to be raided and traded as labour commodities (ibid).

Indeed, the very images of the *donkor*, a term used by the Asante/Akan ethnic group of Ghana to designate a category of slaves, with time, came to refer to captives from northern Ghana. The term connotes the notion of outsiders or a socially excluded category. This term, Allman & Parker (2005: 31), have suggested, expresses “an identity outside of jural corporateness and indeed on a fringe of perceptions of humanity”. The *Gurunsi* and other *nnonkofo*, Allman & Parker have pointed out (ibid), “stood on the lowest rung of the Akan scale of civilization”

Northern Ghana’s subservient status relative to their experiences of enslavement within the broader context of the history of the slave trade in Africa has often been prominent “as ciphers in the historical, social and political arithmetic, not as subjects of social history”, but sometimes “as objects and quantities” (Smallwood, 2007: 7) and as the marginalized *other* (see, for example, Allman & Parker, 2005:29-37; Holsey, 2008:81-102). It is this conservative and stereotypical cultural offensive that some of these songs by the *Bulsa* seek to counter.

### **Bulsa: A Social and Cultural Profile**

*Bulsa* can be considered as a post-enslaved society found in the Upper East Region of Ghana (as can be seen in Figure 1). During the latter part of the nineteenth century, *Bulsa* felt the brunt of the slave trade with the emergence of *Zabarima* and *Asante* slave raiders who took to raiding less centralized communities and taking people into slavery. The bulk of these slaves captured during the *Zabarima* slave raids were often sold in the *Salaga* market to *Asante* slave dealers. Notable slave raiders often mentioned in oral accounts of captivity within communities in northern Ghana, especially the *Bulsa*, include *Babatu*, *Alfa Hano*, *Gazare* and *Samori*; although *Samori* is believed to have undertaken little or no activity within the *Bulsa* area. *Babatu* is, particularly, remembered as the most ruthless. In addition to *Babatu* the *Bulsa* also sometimes mention the *Asantes* as part of the slave dealing hegemony.

*Der* (1998:30) confirms this by pointing out that *Asante* slave raiders often destroyed property, particularly livestock and foodstuff, and captured people. *Der* has intimated that “during the period of *Asante*’s influence, ‘no man could say he possessed anything of his own. His wives, children and property were all at the mercy of passing *Asantes*’”. After the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, the *Asantes* could no longer export their slaves through European ports at the coast and, therefore, had to retain these slaves in *Asante*’s society as labourers and domestic servants (*Der*, 1998: 19).

### **Conceptual Framework**

*Aristotle* was one of the earliest scholars to have conceptualized the nature of the metaphor in his *poetics* and thus provided a basis upon which scholars were later to reflect on its significance as a linguistic, rhetorical and cultural trope in generating meaning (for examples, see *Leech*,1969;*Lakoff*&*Johnson*, 1980; *Black*,1982; *Ortony*, 1982; *Petrie*, 1982). *Semino* (2008: 1) has, for example, reminded us of how the metaphor is a “pervasive linguistic phenomenon”, “which is varied in its textual manifestations, versatile in the functions it may perform and central to many types of communication”.

Reflecting on metaphors of the slave trade especially within the context of West African literature, *Murphy* (2012:1) has pointed out that there is a coded discourse surrounding the slave trade in most parts of Africa and that “we must read into spaces where the slave trade lies lurking, beyond the layer of the explicit historical setting and into the realm of metaphor...”. She goes further to suggest that the “metaphor is not merely a literary tool” but “often carries and transports our often unspeakable meanings for us’. According to *Murphy* (2012: 9-10), “metaphor transfers our values, concerns, fears and recollections to

others”. More importantly, “they are carriers of meaning passed down through the generations, and can also act as translators, animators, and modifiers of meaning”.

Drawing methodological inspiration from Murphy, this paper focuses on the ways in which animistic metaphors encoded in songs provide an opportunity to better understand the processes of subverting narratives of victimhood within Bulsa culture. Animistic metaphors as used within this context refer to the apt ways in which Bulsa use animals within their culture to reflect on a social and cultural experience of resistance to the threats of captivity and enslavement, and to re-interpret their collective history — a history that has been constructed around the images of “prey”.

Conceptualizing how animals occupy a central place within the African collective imagination, Roberts (2004: 56) has shown how animals often appear as protagonists and subjects of African folklore. He has, for example, suggested that one way through which we sometimes understand our own identity as human beings is through the reflective behaviour of animals. Roberts has argued that “...what it means to be human “is often understood by recognizing contrasts to and similarities with animals”. This paper attempts to show how Bulsa have made creative use of some of the positive attributes of some animals to encode the discourse of bravery and heroism, thereby challenging the notion of the victim often ascribed to them.

Reflecting on the centrality of animals within Akan poetry, Nketia (1979: 23-33) has suggested that reference is made to a lot of animals and plants in Akan poetry because these animistic symbols “provide apt metaphors or similes, or compressed ways of reflecting upon social experience”. The Bulsa, for instance, are predominantly a pastoral people and hunting is a major activity. Most of them who hunt are therefore familiar with the behavioural patterns of the animals they hunt and domesticate. Consequently, some of their songs tend to convey a sense of animal symbolic behaviour used in reflecting upon their social experiences.

In examining how metaphor is used in contesting notions of victimhood afforded by the history of slave raiding, it is vital to question the nature of the metaphor itself so as to arrive at the contesting community’s own construct of self. In the case of the Bulsa, the song texts reveal that the metaphor sourced for contesting the narrative of victimhood is animistic. In this regard, a vital question to answer is why does this group appropriate metaphors from that specific domain? The answer to this question is that the community’s epistemology is constructed by and around the immediate environment. The domain of the metaphors therefore provides us a medium through which we can make a fair assessment of what is considered relevant knowledge in the community of Bulsa.

But in relation to the contesting of the narrative of victimhood, the metaphors and their domain provide an avenue for the victimized group to contest their victimhood status through an intellectualism. This point is vital because the attempt to reassert the self in the face of a discourse of victimhood, unlike the struggle against slave raiding, is one that is won and lost by means of the contest of ideas. Metaphor then is the plane of this contest. Secondly, the group’s independent choice of the metaphors to use is itself a tacit expression of revolt against any discourse on the group that is not owned by the group. The contesting of the ideas of victimhood expressed through the discourse of the other by the use of metaphor is symbolic of the reclaiming of the right to self-define one’s own identity. This, as such, increases the credibility of the counter discourse.



A second theorizing that has to arise from the source of metaphor used by the Balsa in contesting the discourse of victimhood is that the counter discourse that is constructed has to be knowledge that is easily sustained by the folk or communal mind. This is an important way through which the group can constantly be aware of its own counter identity. This therefore accounts for the use of the animistic metaphors such as the cat, the lion, the elephant and the mouse since these are entities that individual members of the community interact with within the space of the community on a daily level.

The counter discourse and counter identity constructed through that discourse which contests victimhood therefore has reminders within the host community – in this case, the Balsa. A metaphor whose purpose is the construction of a counter group identity has to be common enough for members of the group to appreciate and understand the import of the metaphor. The animistic metaphors used clearly realize this effect since, as has already been pointed out, the Balsas are a pastoral community that rely traditionally on hunting, farming and gathering. Knowledge of animals in terms of their attributes is, to a large extent, commonplace amongst these people.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

Songs within this culture are learned rather informally. There are no formal structures through which this tradition is passed on. Songs are therefore significant mnemonic devices through which events of the past are kept alive. These songs are usually performed during funerals or festivals. The Balsas celebrate the feok festival; an annual thanksgiving festival to thank the gods for a good year's harvest. As part of the celebrations, Balsa relive their communal experiences by remembering the victory their ancestors had over slave raiding. Singing groups from different Balsa communities come together and perform these songs amidst drumming and dancing. In the section that follows, I discuss animal symbolic representations in the songs in detail.

### **Subverting the Lion's Predatory Narrative**

The point has already been made that the community's epistemology is constructed by and around its immediate environment and that knowledge of animals in terms of their attributes is, to a large extent, common amongst the Balsa. In their songs, the lion is used as a significant metaphor and a subversive strategy in weaving a counter narrative seeking to contest images of victimhood. The lion is regarded as "the king of the African savannah" and lions have been celebrated for their courage and strength across cultures. In one particular song, the lion is used to reflect on how Balsa fought and overcame predation. The song says:

*Ba tongbenle le ziim chorototo*  
*Ba tongbenle le ziim chorototo*  
*Ayieta dokdem tong benle le ziim*  
*Ba tonka gben duok/diak*  
*Dela ka dilate baa chaliya*

They fought and killed a male lion.  
They fought and killed a lion and blood is flowing.  
Ayieta's household have fought and killed a lion with blood.  
They fought and killed a male lion that is why people are running.

This song provides a window through which we can get a glimpse of how these communities often conceptualized the threats and violence of enslavement through the predatory behavior of the lion. In this song, the slave raider is metaphorized as a male lion: a symbol of power, of strength and of might. A major defining characteristic of the male lion is that it is territorial and has an intimidating presence. Bulsa's metaphorization of slave raiding and its attendant characteristics of plunder and pillage through the image of the lion therefore is intended to help us understand the ways in which they seek to convey and interpret the sense of fear and general insecurity that the slave raider and his cohorts initiated within communities. The presence of the lion within communities was intimidating and undermined social cohesion. This constant fear of the *lion* would invariably affect the smooth functioning of society and the various means through which society reproduces itself. The fear of capture has implications for local agriculture and the local economy. A people's productive capacities would be seriously impeded through fear of the unknown. The central animating metaphor in this song, however, in my opinion, was not what the lion *did* or was capable of doing but the ways in which this subaltern group responded to the lion's threats and intimidations.

One way Bulsa have thus sought to contest the images of the victim is their insistence that they also fought back. During fieldwork, informants always insisted, "their ancestors were not just passive to their plight, but that they also fought back". The song, for example, reinforces the fact that they not only "fought", but also "killed". "Killing" the "male lion" is informative. It is an attempt by Bulsa to subvert the narrative of passivity and cowardice often associated with oppressed people. The metaphor of the lion is significant because it underscores the collective sense of courage and bravery with which victims of captivity challenged their oppression. It takes courage and bravery to fight a lion.

The descendants of those who were raided thus take pride in the resistance of their ancestors using the lion metaphor to rewrite their history — a history of a new collective identity of a people who have transcended their tragedy through war. The onomatopoeic sound *chorototo* as seen in the song signifies ways in which blood pours on the ground. Blood as an archetypal image reinforces the fact that resistance to the threats of enslavement was predicated on war and bloodshed. The song thus suggests that communities were often willing to pay the price for freedom even to the detriment of their lives.

Reference to *Ayieta* in the song is significant. *Ayieta* is an ancestor whose name recurs in the oral traditions of the people as one who is believed to have led Bulsa against the slave raiders. The mention of his name reveals ways in which a people remember and celebrate their heroes. The song's reference to "Ayieta's household" having fought and killed the lion also reveals ways in which the fight against the slave raiding hegemony was a collective enterprise. Mobilizing households to fight against the slave raiding hegemony was a cultural imperative. People who fought and eventually killed a male lion cannot therefore be regarded as victims but as people who took their destinies into their own hands and circumvented the very institutions that sought to annihilate them completely through enslavement.

### **The Trope of the *Cat* as a Counter Representation Strategy**

In another song, "even if the mice are a multitude", we see how Bulsa imaginatively try to reconstruct and reinterpret their collective history through the relationship between two "domestic enemies": the cat and the mouse. The use of these two animistic metaphors is of symbolic significance because of the ways they reveal the issues of predation and counter predation. The song suggests that the relationship between victim and conqueror or prey and predator does not stay constant. This relationship that this particular song suggests is dictated by time and circumstances. The song says:



*Doomapoom de kook*  
*Doomapoom de kook*  
*Poom de kook*

*Poom de kook*  
*Dogbiak laa pa ηanta*  
*Ayieta*

Even if the mice are a multitude  
Even if the mice are a multitude  
Even a multitude  
Even a multitude  
The cat can stretch itself and catch them all  
Ayieta

This destructive image revealed in the metaphor of the mice is revealing. The destruction and damage that mice cause within a household is common knowledge. Their greatest economic threat is seen not only in how much they consume within the household, but how much gets thrown away due to the extensive damage they cause or the contamination that often arises as a result of their presence. Communal memories of the destruction caused by these mice often included the plunder of foodstuff and livestock. The destruction and contamination caused by these “mice” most often threatened the very ontological basis of Bulsa society. In spite of the seemingly destructive tendencies of the mice, the song reveals a counter predatory metaphor revealed through the image of the cat.

Bulsa’s epistemology of using the cat as a counter representation strategy in this song is significant. The cat is a domestic pet and largely carnivorous. The skill of the cat in killing household rodents, including mice, is well known. Cats are natural hunters, with the ability to track their prey and pounce with sharp claws and teeth. They are particularly effective at night, when their light-reflecting eyes allow them to see better than their prey. What the song celebrates through the deployment of this animistic metaphor is the capacity of the people to counteract the destructive activities of the slave raiders through a counter predatory metaphor. The lines,

Even if the mice are a multitude  
The cat can stretch itself and catch them all

are informative. The skill and agility of the cat is seen in its ability to “stretch itself and catch” its prey. Within the context of enslavement, the role of victim has been interchanged with the role of victor/predator. In this song, we thus see the attempt of Bulsa to subvert the victim narrative by attributing predatory characteristics to themselves thereby suggesting that the relationship between these variants are not permanent but are dictated by circumstances and time.

### **Contesting Weakness: Evocative image of the Elephant**

In the song, “They should go behind the elephant and push it down”, we are again presented with another powerful and evocative image represented in the elephant used as a means of contesting the narrative of victimhood. The song says,

*Ba taam yanku ŋaah nyih daasi lonsi*  
*Ba taam yanku ŋaah nyih daasi lonsi*  
*Ba nak yanku, a nak yanku*  
*Ba taam yanku ŋaah nyih*  
*Le kuasiŋ kama*  
*Ba taam yanku ŋaah nyih daasi lonsi*

They should go behind the elephant and push it down  
They should beat the elephant  
Beat the elephant  
They should go behind it for it will go down  
They should go behind the elephant and push it down

Although African cultural interpretations of the elephant vary considerably, its use in this song as metaphor reveals that Balsa are aware of its positive attributes. Balsa's knowledge of the elephant's symbolic significance to warrant their use of its image in their songs is therefore of great value. The elephant is enormous in size and has a great degree of stability. The elephant also signifies strength, dignity and royalty. The use of the elephant as a metaphor reveals a culture that wants to be perceived as strong and formidable rather than weak and docile. Through this song, the Bulsas relive memories of how their ancestors overcame slave raiding by pushing "down the elephant". That in spite of the elephant's huge stature, communal effort and determination pushed the elephant down. The song's insistence that "they should beat the elephant", and "go behind it "for it will go down" evokes ways in which Balsa seek to contest passivity. Beating and pushing the elephant down was certainly an enterprise predicated on courage and bravery.

As will soon become apparent, the victim/predator image together with the symbol of the elephant and how these seek to overturn the theme of victimhood is reinforced in another song. The novelty in the song as a valid and interesting source of historical documentation is seen in the ways this particular song reveals the complexity of how raiders can become victims and vice versa. For example, in one instance, the Bulsas refer to the slave raider as an elephant and in another instance; they refer to themselves as elephants. These songs also suggest that slavery sometimes creates uncertainty and thus imperil both victors and vanquished in the long term. This change of roles between victim and victor is illustrated through the song "The fight is between elephants". The song says,

*Yabta kpaliŋ*  
*Baderi maa ko yomma*  
*Baderi maa ko yomma*  
*Asiniensabisakayabta*  
*Yabta kpaliŋ ate kpaliŋ*  
*Ba deri maa ko yomma*

The fight is between elephants.  
They also killed slaves in the process.  
They also killed slaves in the process.  
Asiniensa children are elephants.  
The fight is between elephants.  
In the process, they also killed slaves.

This song alludes to the fight for communal redemption and the consequence of resistance. The song suggests that in the course of securing their freedom, some of the enslaved (here, people of Balsa) were also killed. In this song, the people of Asiniensa (Siniensa is a specific location of Balsa) see themselves as elephants and allude to the fact that the fight against communal oppression is a fight between elephants.

Asiniensa children are elephants  
The fight is between elephants

By indicating that the fight is between elephants, the community's memories seem to suggest that the role of victim and predator may not always remain the same. By these inferences, they attempt to carve a new image and identity for themselves: not as oppressed groups who were always running and at the mercy of slave raiders, but also as a people who took their destinies into their own hands by challenging their oppression.

### **Conclusion**

The central premise that formed the basis of this paper was that the history of slave raiding within certain communities in northern Ghana with particular reference to the Balsa cultural group created a stigmatized identity: an identity constructed around an ideology of victimhood. The preponderance of the literature reflects the view that northern Ghana was more of a slave supply base that fed into the three distinct but yet inter-related slave systems. Although within the last couple of years a new surge of scholarly works have appeared contesting the notions of passivity, the songs of Balsa discussed in this paper provide another significant window through which we can further interrogate the broader issues of victimhood and its counter representation.

In this paper, I have examined how the Balsa of Ghana by means of their songs have sought to subvert the narrative of victimhood that has typically been associated with them because of their history of enslavement. The distinctive contribution this paper makes to the extant literature is seen in its departure from the use of only historical sources but also engaging with the voices of the direct descendants of those for whom the slave experience was a "living wound". Although the collective remembrance of enslavement and the slave trade constitutes a profound wound, their songs suggest that the emphasis should rather be on the cultural values of self-sacrifice, resilience and communal strength. The songs herein discussed therefore lend credence to the fact that in spite of the terror and violence slave raiding imposed on the people of Balsa, they eventually survived.

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