

# **The Dagaare-Speaking Communities of West Africa**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper is a portrayal of some cultural aspects of the dagaare-speaking people of the north western corner of Ghana and adjacent areas of Burkina Faso and Cote d'Ivoire. Some of the topics covered include marriage, the role of rituals, death and funeral ceremonies and the political system. The paper also highlights some of the differences and commonalities between them and their neighbors.

## Introduction

The culture area covered in this paper includes the north western corner of Ghana (formerly known as Gold Coast) and adjacent areas of Burkina Faso (used to be referred to as Upper Volta/Haute Volta) and Cote d'Ivoire (was popularly known as Ivory Coast), as illustrated by the map in Appendix A. This geographical location or *Dagara Country*, as Somé calls it, (and which I refer to as *Dagawie*), is like any typical savannah country. It is a land of low trees, whose numbers vary inversely with the human population, but are nowhere more dense than the average orchard. The year is abruptly divided into dry and wet seasons, the latter lasting from April through October. The "complexion" of countryside changes dramatically from one season to the other: In the wet season, the scattered homesteads are surrounded by tall patches of cereals (maize, millet, and sorghum), and in the uncultivated bush areas, high and thick grass shoots between leafy trees. When the rains cease, the sun quickly dries up the grass, leaving the entire Dagawie looking brown, barren, and bare as bush fires consume the remains of the vegetation.

Dagawie is inhabited by various Dagaare-speaking communities that form a continuum both of dialect and of culture. However, within this cultural uniformity, there are certain local variations. An attempt will be made to identify and compare the commonalities and differences that exist between the various Dagaare-speaking communities. In addition, I will try to show how the Dagaare-speaking communities are, to a considerable degree, a unified cultural group. I will also show how Dagaare-speaking communities are in some ways different from and in other ways similar to their neighbors - the Wala, Tallensi and Sisala.

There is no accepted name for the inhabitants of these Dagaare-speaking communities (who I refer to as the *Dagaaba*, although others like Somé, 1994, refer to them as Dagara). They are a people without a specific tribal designation but who, from the standpoint of their culture, are a relatively homogeneous community. Although most Dagaare-speakers tend to focus on the differences between them and the other communities, the resemblances are certainly more numerous. The Dagaaba gain their livelihood through cultivation by hoe of guinea-corn (sorghum), maize, millet, groundnut (peanuts), cowpeas, and root crops such as cassava, sweet potatoes and yam. Cattle, sheep, goats, dogs, chickens, and guinea-fowl are kept as livestock, and food supplies are occasionally augmented by the flesh of wild animals, fish, oysters, and turtles from the rivers and pools, and by wild leaves and fruits, especially those of the dawa-dawa, the baobab, and the shea (noted for its oil-bearing nut).

Until recently, all Dagaaba were farmers and hunters. In addition, some men specialized in black smithing, others in playing and making xylophones, still others in divination and other activities of a magico-religious nature. The only full-time specialists, mostly traders, were to be found in the villages or quarters of foreigners that were distributed along the main trade routes. The inhabitants of these were mainly Moslem, and their relationships with the indigenous peoples were limited to the market place. The compact villages of foreigners stood in great contrast to the dispersed settlements of the indigenous people, whose houses are scattered unevenly over the arable land, fifty to a hundred yards apart (Goody, 1962).

## **Some Commonalities and Differences among the Dagaaba**

### **A General Overview**

From one Dagaare-speaking community to another, there are various differences and similarities. There is a certain homogeneity of culture over the whole area, but it is only relative; for customs change gradually from settlement to settlement. For example, the dialects of the language seem to be drifting apart, especially those divided by the political boundary between Ghana and Burkina Faso. The differences that exist among the Dagaaba are as concrete as those that exist between the Kachin and the Lakher. These differences have been substantiated by intensive field observation, and confirmed by both local usage and the opinion of other observers. The inhabitants of these communities, the Dagaaba, do recognize the cultural and linguistic differences that obtain in the area, the local variations that exist within a considerable degree of cultural uniformity, and refer to them by placing particular customary practices in relation to certain categories (such as "lobi" and "Dagarti" – Lo and Daga – see maps in Appendices B and C), a practice which, as Jack Goody correctly observes, resembles the English use of "westerners" and "Easterners". So one hears such names as Sapaare, Losaale, Ngmelere, Nandome, Jiribale, etc, which are names derived from the settlements in which the people live. Goody noted that the outside observer needs a set of fixed, not relative, terms to guide him, and that one of the great difficulties in the ethnography of this region is the fact that outside observers invariably take these relative terms as fixed "tribal" designations (Goody, 1967). Being a native *Dagao* (singular of Dagaaba), I hope that my perspective will blend well with that of the outside observer to produce new insights into the Dagaaba culture.

The Dagaaba have received little attention from standard ethnographers. Goody (1967) explains that this neglect is partly due to the terminological complexities of the region, and also to the fact that, where not ignored, the Dagaaba have been muddled and confused. Goody (ibid.) cites Murdock (1959:79) as mixing up the pagan, acephalous Wiili with the Muslim, centralized Wala, and including the Dagari among the Grusi rather than among the Mole (Mossi) speakers. According to Goody, Girault (1958), a Catholic priest interested mostly in the linguistics of dagaare, regarded his (Goody's) dialect boundary demarcations as too complicated and threw all the Dagaari-speaking peoples of Ghana into one commodious container; a simplification which, linguistically, may be reasonable, but which ethnographically is not. Goody warns that in grouping inhabitants under a name (like Lobi - Lo), one must still recognize both the cultural differences within the group and relative nature of the name used to designate them.

Some of the differences that exist between the Dagaare-speaking communities are somehow subtle and not easily noticeable by the on-looker. For example, although the staple dish among the Dagaaba is *saabo* (called "to" in many other African languages), the constitution/texture of this millet, sorghum or maize-based meal may vary from one community to the other. In addition, the soup that is eaten with the *saabo* may be prepared in a slightly different manner in spite of the fact that virtually the same ingredients may be used in each case. Similarly, *pito*, a mildly alcoholic beverage made of sorghum, is common in all the communities of Dagawie. However, the taste and level of alcohol of this beverage may vary from community to community and from one *pito*-house (where *pito* is brewed for sale) to the other within the same community. In addition, from one Dagaare-speaking community to another, funeral xylophones may sound different both in terms of the tunes and the tempo of the music. During the funeral celebration, people may be required to run and wail as they approach the funeral ground, in other cases, they may be required to simply wail as they get closer to the funeral home. In the next few sub-sections, I will address some of these commonalities and differences in selected key cultural phenomena including kinship, marriage, death/funeral ceremonies, rituals and the political system.

### **Kinship Relations and Residential Groups:**

Kinship terms can be confusing to the casual observer of the Dagaaba. The terms "brothers" and "sisters" do not only refer to people one shares parents with but also to all cousins. There is no Dagaare equivalent of the term "cousin". Similarly, wives of males of the same descent may refer to each other's children as "daughters" or "sons".

There is no such word as ‘step-child’ although children generally know who their real mothers are and women may sometimes treat step-children differently from the way they treat their own children.

Another confusing term is *n pog*, my wife, used by both males and females, in reference to a brother’s wife. There is usually a joking relationship between people and their brothers’ wives. A woman pretends to be a man when cracking jokes with the brother’s wife, hence the use of ‘my wife’ or *n pog*, which she may also use in everyday language outside the joking context. *N pog* may also be used by a grandfather in reference to a granddaughter and *n seere* (my husband) used by a grandmother in reference to a grandson. Grandchildren and grandparents usually have a joking relationship that facilitates a special type of bonding, making it easier for the old ones to impart their knowledge and wisdom on the little ones. The above joking relationships are different from what exists between all Dagaaba and one of their neighboring groups – the Frafra – which is referred to as *loloroung*. The Frafra are *lolorobo* or joking partners of the Dagaaba and this has nothing to do with the *denie* or play that exists between kinsmen as exemplified above.

In some Dagaaba communities, a considerably settled agriculture and inheritance of rights of tillage by a close agnatic kin leads, after a number of generations, to the formation of a group of compounds inhabited by males descended from a common patrilineal ancestor and constituting a unilineal descent group with specific genealogical connections. In these communities, inheritance is within farming groups. Such a group consists of brothers and their sons, where the surviving full brother or senior son will become farm-owner after the death of a family head. This successor must provide land for his dead brother’s children when they desire to farm by themselves.

Among the Dagaaba, most houses are made of mud and/or cement with either thatched, laterite or aluminum roofs. They are usually a cluster of compounds inhabited by several nuclear families of the same descent. A typical patrilineage inhabits some seven large compounds situated about a hundred yards apart from each other. A description by Goody (1967) of a typical compound in Birifu, a Dagaare-speaking community, is typical of most compounds in Dagawie:

The eight-foot high walls of these compounds are built entirely of mud. They are divided into a number of rooms roofed with timber and covered in puddled earth (*tene*). The entrance to these rooms is from a

long central chamber which abuts on an open semi-circular yard surrounded by a wall of the same height as the compound itself. Such a group of rooms forms a self-contained section of the house; I have seen openings connecting them with other similar sets only in the case of two full brothers who farmed together and in one other instance (...). Otherwise one can only get from one to the other by means of the roof. The one doorway in the outside wall leads into the byre and provides access to the remainder of the homestead. (Goody, 1967:38).

Each of these compounds is inhabited by, among others, an elementary family, consisting of a man, his wife or wives and children. Such a family is established through marriage. This cultural phenomenon, marriage, among the Dagaaba is given more attention in the next section.

## **Marriage**

Incest taboo is observed in all the Dagaare-speaking communities of West Africa. In some cases, the slightest indication of a blood relationship, no matter how distant, is enough reason for a prospective couple not to be allowed to proceed with their marriage plans. In other cases, matrilateral cross-cousin marriages are permissible and encouraged. Among the LoWiili, a woman's first-born girl is encouraged to marry (and sometimes, as an infant, betrothed to) her maternal uncle's son (i.e. marriage between the children of a sister and a brother). This is supposed to strengthen the relationship between a woman's patrikin and her husband's kin, who are now her kin due to the marriage. Such matrilateral cross cousin marriages may also involve a woman's sons and girls from the woman's patrikin. These kinds of marriages give parents the peace of mind (knowing who their children are getting married to) and also help establish satisfactory relations between the in-laws.

Marriage, among most Dagaaba, is virilocal. A woman has to leave her own father's house and join her in-laws/husband's patrikin. Until death or divorce, she lives away from the main body of her agnatic kin. Due to the general lack of transportation, the need to keep in touch with one's patrikin, attending every funeral, visiting the sick, etc., girls are encouraged not to marry to men from villages that are not a walking distance (seven miles or less may be considered as the preferred distance) away from their agnatic home. Similarly, since in-laws are expected to attend each other's relatives' funeral ceremonies, parents are particular about how far away their sons go to seek marriage partners. In fact, all the kinsmen of a young man of marriage age

keep their eyes open for the suitable would-be bride and may make suggestions to the young man as to who is available and ready for marriage in the near by villages. In some cases, the selection of a wife and all marriage arrangements are made without the in-put of the groom. The groom is supposed to take their word for it, when his kinsmen bring home a lady and say, 'this is the best woman for you'. According to the Dagaaba elders, an ideal bride is one that is hard-working, physically fit and strong enough to be a *pog kura* (female farmer, capable of all performing such activities as sowing, carrying large loads of firewood, giving birth to as many boys as possible, etc.), and comes from a family with good health and conduct.

Another type of arrangement for first marriages is elopement, which occurs at the age of puberty. The girl is persuaded to leave with her admirer to his home or she may be seized by his kinsmen/colleagues at a dance, market place, or while sleeping at night and forcibly brought to her would-be husband's home. Although elopement is usually done with the girl's consent, she is expected to resist and scream the loudest possible to show that she is up-right, morally, and not a bitch. Similarly, although some of the girl's relatives may have been aware of the plan to elope, they may express anger publicly. The resistance to elopement marks the beginning of a period of intensive interaction between the girl's filial and conjugal ties, within which the necessary steps are taken to finalize the courtship and marriage process.

Other marriages may have less dramatic beginnings. After a young man declares his interest in a girl, his kinsmen accompany him to present his proposal formerly to the kinsmen of the girl. During this period of courtship, the kinsmen of the young man are expected to shower gifts in the form of pito, cola-nuts and money on their in-laws each time they make a trip to the girl's village. When both parties are satisfied with the way issues have handled during the courtship period, a day is fixed for the bride wealth (*kyeru*) to be brought to the girl's family. After the transfer of bride wealth has taken place, the girl (who carries with her a number of accessories including calabashes, bowl/basins and baskets) is accompanied by her kinsmen to her husband's home. This is known as *pog bielle*.

Although all marriages among the Dagaaba involve courtship (*pog bo*) and the transfer of bride wealth/*kyeru*, the details of what goes on during courtship and what constitutes the bride wealth vary from one community to the other. For example, Goody (1967), reported that among the LoWiili, the bride wealth is not accepted on the first day it is presented. It is only on the third occasion that the bride wealth is finally accepted as being the accurate amount required. This is not the case among

other communities like the Sapaare and the Jiribale. However, as to what constitutes a bride wealth, these two communities tend to differ. For example, the amount of bride wealth required for a wife from Sapaare will be insufficient to obtain a wife from a Jiribale community.

In general, bride wealth among the Dagaaba usually involves some amount of cowries, cash, and livestock. The proportions of these various items may vary but will almost always involve a number of cowries. The cowries and/or cash portion is referred to as the *pog libie*. Among the LoWiili, the bride wealth consists of a cock and guinea-fowl to the in-laws, and the *pog libie*, a sum of approximately 20,000 cowries, usually, the same amount that was paid for the girl's mother. Various rituals accompany the counting and transfer of bride wealth by the groom's family to the bride's agnatic home. Once the patrikin of the bride receive the bride wealth, they also perform a number of rituals during the counting, distribution and storing of it. In general, the bride wealth received for a daughter is used to get a wife for a son. Whereas paying the bride wealth of a young man's first wife is the obligation of his family elders, if he wishes to become polygamous, he will generally be solely responsible for paying the bride wealth of these subsequent wives.

The various rituals performed during the counting and transfer by the groom's relatives as well as those (the rituals) that go on during the counting and acceptance of the bride wealth, are tied to the fertility and fidelity of the bride. If some of the rituals are not well done, the woman could have difficulty bearing children during the marriage. It is also believed that once those rituals have been performed and the bride wealth accepted, then any infidelity on the part of the woman could result in her death if she does not confess immediately and go through purification rites/rituals. The next section is an elaboration on the role of rituals among the Dagaaba.

### **The Role of Rituals**

Until recently, rituals have played a dominant role in the lives of Dagaaba. Although they are no longer as pervasive, they still occur to a considerable degree. Being hunting and agricultural societies, the Dagaare-speaking communities have animal ceremonialism (or rituals around slain animals) and a calendar cycle of rites around crops. The subsistence work (activities like farming and hunting) links humans together while rituals link them to gods or God. The role of rituals among the Dagaaba can best be illustrated by this brief exchange between Somé (1993) and his grandfather,

Somé: Why do people do rituals?

Grandfather: Do you know why you go to the bathroom? Do you know why you urinate?

Somé: Of course I know. I can't help it.

Grandfather: Well then, you know why we do rituals. (p. 42).

Most Dagaaba were, and some still are, like the parents of Somé (1993), for 'at least once a day we had something to say to our ancestors. At least once a day a word is addressed to the shrine of Nature, be it at home before undertaking a journey to the farm or to another village, be it in the farm before working at it.' (p. 42). Most of these Dagaaba will agree with Somé (ibid.) that 'visible wrongs have their roots in the world of the spirit. To deal only with their visibility is like trimming the leaves of a weed when you mean to uproot it. Ritual is the mechanism that uproots these dysfunctions. It offers a realm in which the unseen part of the dysfunction is worked on in ways that affect the seen.' (p. 43).

Every ritual is performed for a purpose. It may be a ritual performed in order to cure/prevent a wrong or to celebrate an event. It is therefore not unusual to perform some rituals at an individual's birth or death, at a harvest or at an initiation. Although the purpose and nature of each of the various rituals may have a general point of agreement, the details of these rituals tend to vary from one community to the other as illustrated in the sub-section on death/funeral ceremonies.

## **Death and Funeral Ceremonies**

Funeral ceremonies are the most elaborate of the ceremonial occasions of the Dagaaba, be it in terms of attendance, time taken, or emotion generated. There is a general belief in life after death, and funeral ceremonies are the means by which the actual passage of a human being from the Land of the Living (*tengzu*) to the Land of Dead (*dapaarewie*) is effected. Additionally, ancestor reverence and respect for the belief in the ability of the ancestors to protect, guide, and offer showers of blessing to the living, may be considered as the most important aspects of the relationship between the living and their supernatural agents. The ancestors are never dead. They merely continue to live in the other world of spirits and serve as media between their relatives and the spirits and gods.

All funeral rituals among the Dagaaba involve musicians, mourners and the assembled villagers and guests from neighboring villages. The music group usually

consists of xylophonists, drummers and singers. The singers improvise, recreate and reproduce through their songs the history of the family up to the death that resulted in the separation. The theme of the songs is a combination of the deeds and sorrows of the family. The best singer is one who can stir the maximum level of grief in the chief-mourners (*kotuodeme*, the closest relatives of the deceased) by his choice of words. The effect of the words of the singers is echoed and amplified by the tunes of the xylophones and the sounds of the drums, moving the community to grieve freely. Wailing, screaming, groaning, running, jumping, dancing and singing are all acceptable ways of expressing grief. Shedding of tears is highly recommended and admired. The *kotuodeme* are expected to shed a lot of tears and behave in a way that stirs sympathizers to share the grief to the fullest by shedding as many tears as possible.

The dead person, dressed in ceremonial outfit, is seated on a high wooden stool called *paala*, and surrounded by her/his valuable possessions. The stool is constructed from a special kind of tree. The singers, drummers and xylophonists are usually not far from the corpse and the entire funeral area is marked by turmoil and turbulence, as people act out their grief while others try to control themselves in order to calm down some of the *kotuodeme* from time to time. The *kotuodeme* are tagged with ropes (much like leashes) for identification purposes and for easy control by people who may want to calm them down by holding on to the rope. The more contributions and ropes one sent to other *kotuodeme* in the past, the more ropes and contributions one is likely to receive when one becomes a *kotuosobo* (singular for *kotuodeme*). Reciprocity is the guiding principle here. Although many people are likely to stop by at a funeral before continuing their daily business, the more funerals the deceased and *kotuodeme* attended, the more likely the funeral will be crowded by sympathizers from all walks of life. A well-attended funeral is an indication that the household has a high social reputation.

The length of funerals varies between one to five days. The final day is marked by the burial of the dead person. There are usually designated grave diggers and specially trained people who do the actual burying, for it is believed the dead is capable of preventing one from exiting the grave once the burial procedure is about to end. Renowned witches and medicine people are particularly notorious for challenging the under-takers. In such instances, only equally toughened witches or medicine people who have been trained to bury the dead will be entrusted with the task at hand.

Highly respected elders are usually buried in the middle of the family compound or in

front of the family house rather than in the cemetery. This is to keep them close to the family who are constantly being watched over by the dead elder or ancestor. From time to time, libation may be poured and sacrifices made on the grave. On other informal occasions, the grave may serve as a resting place for naps and for relaxing and chatting. The elders do not play an important role only after their death, but also while they are alive, as illustrated in the section below.

## **The Dagaaba Political System**

Inferring from Yelapaala's (1992) article, the political organization of the Dagaaba was, until the imposition of colonialism, decentralized in its general structure. From the outside, it might have appeared amorphous and not easily susceptible to analysis, for its organization and institutions were not defined in terms of the total territorial unit but in terms of sub-territorial areas *teni* (villages) referred to by Goody as parishes, and by Fortes in his study of the Tallensi as settlements. The political organization of each *teng* (village) exhibited a certain degree of centralization of authority with a very limited vertical structure. The central authority was cross-hauled from the elders (*ninbere*) of different kin-based groups within the territorial area. This body was the basic institution dealing with most issues of general community interest. All elders with the exception of the custodians of the land (*tendaana*) in certain cases, were theoretically co-equals in all deliberations. However, in matters that related to the *teng* and the land deity (*tengan*), the *tendaana* was the final authority. Thus depending on the issues involved, the central authority was either circular with its functions based on consultation and consensus, or unidirectional, from the *tendaana* downwards to the rest of society.

In every village (*teng*), this basic structure more or less replicated itself. Each *teng* however, enjoyed an independent autonomous existence from the others. Therefore, the society was at the same time centralized at the unit level and decentralized at the total societal level. Centralization within the small units provided the useful check on the abuses or excesses in the use of centralized political power. On very important and broader cultural or extraterritorial issues involving non-Dagaaba, such as warfare or resistance against slave raiding, these centralized institutions would coordinate, cooperate or deliberate as a larger central unit. However, these higher level organizations did not appear to involve the total territorial area of the Dagaaba. Yet, taking any territorial unit as a starting point, that unit was linked separately to all other contiguous units by a chain of common culture, common descent, and political or legal cooperation. Each of these other units was also separately and similarly linked to

yet other contiguous territorial units until the chain of interlocking linkages involve the entire Dagawie. Depending on the issues at stake, contiguity, consanguinity, historical ties and the level of sophistication in the native art of diplomacy, cooperation or integration between different territorial units was great or small in amplitude. The basic philosophy which guided the interaction of all central authorities at the larger unit level was equality. All component units functioned as co-equals, for the Dagaaba say that *doo bii pog ba gangna o to* (i.e., no man or woman is superior to their peer). This then, has been and continues to be the basis of egalitarian thought among the Dagaaba, what is called the traditional level. Within the national political structure, Dagaaba political thought, like all other traditional systems, is relegated to an inferior status.

Crime and punishment are just as much issues of politics as they of religion. Until recently, theft was a rare occurrence among the Dagaaba. It was taken as a very repulsive and anti-social act condemned by all, including the spirits and the ancestors who could be invoked whenever necessary to punish a thief severely. Theft is so much looked down upon that it is not uncommon to hear a person trying to prove her/his integrity, say that (s)he does not steal or rob – *N ba zuuro, n ba faara*. In a society where houses have virtually no door panels nor to locks, there is understandably a general need for trust and social cohesion. In Dagaare, the term *iibo* signifies the general normative value system covering established and accepted norms, principles, practices, procedures which govern life in general and disputing in particular. It is when a specific conduct is in conflict with the Dagaaba *iibo* that one may be characterized as deviant. In light of this concept of *iibo*, therefore, the Dagaaba may be viewed as a unified group, vis-á-vis other non-Dagaaba, including their neighbors. How the Dagaaba differ from and are similar to their neighbors is considered in the next section.

## **The Dagaaba and their Neighbors**

### **Some Basic Commonalities/Identifiable Differences:**

The Dagaaba share linguistic and other affinities with the inhabitants of the surrounding territories. For example, the Tallensi, Sisala, Gonja, and Konkomba, among others, also earn their living through cultivation by hoe of guinea-corn (sorghum), maize, millet, groundnut (peanuts), cowpeas, and root crops such as cassava, sweet potatoes and yam. Cattle, sheep, goats, dogs, chickens, and guinea-fowl are kept as livestock, and food supplies are occasionally augmented by

the flesh of wild animals, fish, oysters, and turtles from the rivers and pools, and by wild leaves and fruits, especially those of the dawa-dawa, the baobab, and the shea (noted for its oil-bearing nut).

Among the Dagaaba and most of their neighbors, only the offspring of women who are married in the fully acceptable manner, are considered legitimate children of the society. If the society is patrilineal, these children belong by definition to the unilineal descent group of their father. Nevertheless, they have some rights in the mother's patriclan which in certain instances, could lead to residence with maternal kin. If this shift became permanent, it sometimes led to "attached" lineage, as among the Tallensi, or gradual incorporation as is found among the Dagaaba. Such continued attachment to one's clan among the Dagaaba results in multi-clan communities as opposed to the mon-clan settlements of the Konkomba and the Tallensi.

Additionally, although the Dagaaba share some linguistic and dietary similarities with such neighbors as the Wala, they do differ from them in many other respects. Whereas the Wala are mainly, traders and Muslims, the Dagaaba are mainly farmers/hunters, Christians or worshipers of traditional religion. Whereas the Dagaaba's major source of entertainment after a long day's work on the farm is drinking *pito* with friends and relatives, the Wala taboo *pito*-drinking because of their religion.

When the Dagaaba of Ghana and their neighbors travel to the southern part of the country however, all these differences are down-played and overlooked as they are placed in the same group of "northerners" or *pepeni*. To the southerner, there is no difference between the Dagao and any of these neighbors mentioned above for they all come from that far away part of the country, noted for its dryness, poverty and backwardness. In this kind of situation, the Dagao may tend not only to see a lot more in common between her/him and the other Dagaaba but also the other non-Dagaaba who are also fellow *papain*.

## Conclusion

Being a native Dagao, one of the questions that was of interest to me, as I researched on the Dagaaba, include how the contemporary situation is different from the reports of earlier ethnographic studies. Just like any other culture, the Dagaaba culture is not static, and must be changing at some pace.

When Jack Goody visited Birifu after more than a decade since his field study, he was

struck more by the continuities than the changes. The presence of a primary school and a literate chief at the time of his return had led him to anticipate more changes than what he saw. When he attended a funeral, he observed that the standing, dancing, contributions, mourning behavior, all seemed much as he had known them thirteen years earlier. Jack Goody attributed the apparent stand-still to the absence of any important cash crop and the emigration of the educated youth to the cities ( in other words, the low literacy rate).

Jack Goody may have overlooked another cause for the unchanging nature of the funeral ceremony: the therapeutic nature of the ritual. It is not accidental that one of the things that has remained considerably unchanged is the way funeral rites are performed. Funeral rites have proven their therapeutic worth to the people over the years and the people have responded by protecting them from change. Although, at a first glance, the funeral rites may seem too ‘primitive’, too elaborate and bothersome (in the eyes of an outsider or an alienated native like me), one only needs to lose a close relative while away from Dagawie to truly appreciate the significance of those elaborate funeral ceremonies and the role of ritual in general.

I could not agree more with Somé (1993), when he says that the loss of a cultural practice like the loss of initiation in the traditional culture opens a psychic spiritual hole that is rapidly destroying the soul of his people (Dagara, a dialectal variant of what I refer to as Dagaaba). The introduction of formal education and Christianity has resulted in cultural discontinuity, creating a condition that traps people in a meaningless and wayward life pattern. For example, something that used to be an uncommon sight - cases of theft - is now frequently being reported in remote villages every now and then. The trust that used to exist in many Dagaare-speaking communities is gradually being eroded. It is now possible to find doors with sophisticated locks as opposed to days of gaping doors.

Some changes that I consider positive include the decrease in incidences of a customary practice usually referred to as clitoridectomy. I look forward to the day when the practice will come to a complete end. I also hope that the cultivation by hoe may be improved one day to increase the chances of commercial farming rather than the subsistence farming that is still the norm.

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