

The Social Structure of the Dagara of the North Western Ghana, Through the Clan System and Clan Appellations

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Abstract:-The study relied on the assistance of key informants to identify a number of respondents who were then randomly sampled for the purposes of this study. The study was to establish the existing social structure of the Dagara and the importance attached to the clan system and clan appellations. The study revealed among others that the non-human relatives of the Dagara play a role of paramount importance in the survival of these clans. They played a salvific role in the lives of these clans. So, as a sign of gratitude and appreciation, these clans regarded these non-human relatives as their consanguine. To kill one means suicide or fratricide.

Keywords: Social, structure, Dagara, clan, appellations.

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper is to establish what the Dagara social structure is. The question that captures the attention of this research is whether the Dagara are matrilineal, patrilineal or both. In carrying out this research, the first part of this paper provides answers to who are the Dagara people and where are they located?

According to him, in the existing literature, one comes across names like, Dagaaba, Dagari, Dagarti, Dagaati, Dagaba, Dagaabas, Daga-Wiili, LoDagaa, LoWiili, LoDagaba, and Dagaare. The reader is often confused as to which name accurately describes these people and which does not or whether the several names designate different tribal groups or they refer to the same people. This could create the impression of an identity crisis of these people Mwinlaaro 1999).

The Dagara have a number of dialect groups with two of them being the principal ones. The two are the Dagaaba and the Dagara dialect groups. The Dagara dialect group lives in the extreme northwestern corner of Ghana and the south western corner of Burkina Faso. They call themselves and their dialect Dagara. Hence one is a Dagara, and speaks Dagara.

The Dagara live in village settlements, some of which have developed into townships today. Each village rather than being a political unit was a ritual area united by the institution of the *Tengan*, the Earth Shrine. Each settlement is made of a cluster of clan settlements. Clansmen settled together. It is the *Tengan* shrine that united these different

clan settlements into one village under one *Tengan sob* (the Priest of the Earth Spirit). Each clan also has its head, the *Yir Nikpee* (Elder of the house). The ancestral shrine also unites them (Kuukure 1995).

Like other West African agricultural communities, the lineage emerges as a localized, land-owning group. Dispersed descent groups are linked by clanship. Authority, then, is delegated to the senior living member of the patrilineage. Within each *Yiilu* (clan), it is the oldest man of the oldest generation who has charge of maintaining the rules and customs. The power of the *Yirnikpee* (the elder of the clan) is especially spiritual, and he is assisted in its exercise, by the elders of the same generation (*yirniBERE*). Decisions on issues concerning the clan are arrived at through family meetings and discussions and informal consensus.

From the physical dimension to the metaphysical, the Dagara lived experiences found explanation both in respect of their relationship with their fellows and also their interaction with their environment, as well as beings in the wild that took interest in the affairs of the people in question. Thus, the Dagara are a clan conglomerated and totemic people whose lives in antique times were punctuated by warped connections with their “patri-houses and matri-houses” (Tengan 1996), and even animals which acted in varying ways to the rescue of the lives of people under circumstances of danger and near death.

For example, in old times, during the period of slavery and wars of conquest, Africa was one of the most insecure amphi-theatres upon which the hunting-sport of slave-raiding and tribal feuds were acted. Europeans and Arabs were the wildest hunters who violated especially the West African Coast in the way they trafficked men and women, (Thorkild 2002). Some, in demonstration of male machismo, kidnapped other families in exchange for food, a concept labelled as *panyaring* (Ofosu-Apiah 1969). In summary, inasmuch as the Dagara-Birfɔɔr-Lobi like other African peoples, at this time were, vicious hunters of animals and human beings, they themselves were hunted by both animals and humans thus creating “a state of man against man” (1651).

According to Pɔl Dar and Ziembo Aba-e-faa of Varempera, it was at this point that some animals and birds

we shall call non-human relatives, acted in solidarity cooperation towards the salvation of individuals or groups of individuals, a deed which compelled the targeted beneficiaries to decree and declare to their kinsmen never to harm, kill nor eat the flesh of those animals. The question that this paper looks at is: What is the place and relevance of the clan system and clan appellations among the Dagara of the North Western Ghana?

II. BRIEF LITERATURE

That which captures the attention of this study is the relevance of the Dagara clan system clan appellations. It intends to investigate whether the Dagara are matri-clan or patri-clan and the relevance of clan appellations on the Dagara. This section reviews literature on the social structure of the Dagara.

The Social Organization of the Dagara

Socially, the Dagara are organized under a dual clan system, namely “Yiilu” or “Saabiir” (Patriclan) and “Bellu” or “Ma-biir” (Matri-clan). According to Bekye (1991), traditionally, the Dagara communities are based on the concept of family (yir) which includes all who are descendants of the same putative ancestor and all who are members of the same lineage (yirdem). First is the Yiilu (Patri-clan). Social relationships in the Dagara society are based on Patri-clans. People are linked by Patrilineal ties and every agnatic lineage trace its descent to a putative male ancestor (Saakom been). As such they are seen as one (ancestral seed) “boore-been and they belong to one family (Yirbeen-dem). These Patri-clans have a unifying bond of descent and so the members of each clan are seen as “siblings” (yebr). They either enjoy common acquisition and recognition or suffer common prohibitions and castigation.

Even though, the Dagara are generally exogamous, there are times they are endogamous. People of the same Patri-clan share the same totems and praise songs or appellations. They stay together at times in a given geographical area or village, and cooperate with one another. Immovable property is inherited through the Patri-clan. The “Yiilu” or Patri-clan is common to all the Dagara/Dagaaba. Here the oldest man of the Patri-lineage with other elders maintains law and order. How wonderful it would have been if all Dagaaba, all tribes and in fact all humanity could see one another as children of one Father, God (i.e. Saa-biir).

The most popular Patri-clans among the Dagara are: The Dikpiele, Tiedeme, Nabegle, Zage, Nakyiele and Dantiele form one clan. While the Kpiele, Kusiele, Kuselbe, Yirpaale, Puryiile and Kuwere also form one clan. The Metuole form a unit. The Gane, Gbane, Berwuole, Birfuole, Bernyiine and Yon-yoole form one clan. The Bekuone clan includes Logyiile, Nakyemwaame, Damole and Dakyare. The Bimbige also includes: Taambile and Kpanyangme (Soum-Dery 2000).

The Hayore and Batane also form one clan. Every Dagara belongs to one or the other Patri-clan. These Patri-

clans have a unifying bond of descent and so the members of each Patri-clan are seen as “siblings.” They either enjoy common acquisitions and recognition or suffer common prohibitions and castigation. The Patri-clans are generally exogamous and they are endogamous too. People of the same patrician, share the same totems and praise songs or appellations (Tuurey 1982). They stay together at times in a given geographical area and cooperate with one another. It is a belief that from a Dagao’s right palm an expert can tell the Yiilu of the person. Immovable property is inherited through the Patri-clan.

Though the Dagara are patrilineal, they practice a dual system of inheritance, based on ‘matri-house’ and ‘patri-house’. Inheritance of immovable property was from father to son while inheritance of movable property such as livestock was acquired from the mother (Doggu 2015).

Second is the “Bellu” or “Ma-biir” (Matri-clan). In Barker’s (1999), opinion, members of the matrikin are more spatially dispersed than those of the patrikin (Barker in Doggu 2015). People who belong to the same Matri-clan claim to have descended from one common putative ancestress. The matri-clans are classified under different trades or professions of specific maternal ancestress. It is the female principle one gets from mothers at birth. This is because each child is said to have inherited his or her skin the mother. Members of the same Matri-clan (Ma-biir) see themselves as relatives but his relationship is not blood relationship as they can intermarry if they are not so closely related paternally.

Also, they are not consanguine because “Bellu” means “deceit” or imitation”. It does not constitute an organic group nor has it repercussions of real relationships. Its genealogical lineage cannot be traced, as the ancestry is a myth. The origin of “Bellu” is linked with the exaltation of certain female activities: like the brewing of Pito (local beer), making of sheabutter, pottery etc. which made some women famous. Moveable property is inherited through the Matri-clan to the “Arbile”, that is the (uterine nephew). This happens among only the lobri dialect speakers. Matrilineal problems and conflicts are solved at this level. If all the Dagara, all races and all humanity could see one another as children of one Father (God) and one Mother Eve, the mother of all humanity and Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ (Ma-biir) there would be peace the world.

Some Dagara Patri-clans and Their Non-Human Relatives

Doggu (2015), establishes the point that all clans have prohibitions and taboos (kyiiru), which is normally in the form of an object, animal, a bird or an insect. The Dagara notion of taboo or avoidance is “kyiiru,” which refers to the non-human relatives of a given Patri-clan among the Dagara who are taken from their physical and religious environment. There are some mythological or foundational stories that trace the relationships between the various Patri-clans and their non-human relatives.

They refer to the era of “Bong” that is the time of the slave-raiders who plagued the land of the Dagara. These slave-raiders were Babatu and Samory both Muslim slave raiders and the Zabagsi (Zambaremas), who were giants on horse-back. These non-human relatives of the Patri-clans played a salvation role in the lives of each Patri-clan during these slave raids. They are some totemic animals, birds, food, reptiles of supra humans, which are prohibited or venerated by one or the other Patri-clan. The Dagara have various terms they use to refer to these non-human relative of theirs. First is “sigra” which means “a guardian spirit”. It is a protector spirit of a person.

Second is, “dume”, which means “totem.” It is the particular Patri-clan’s protector or saviour. Third is “kyiiru” it means “avoidance”. It refers to the fact that both the guardian spirit and the totem should not be eaten but respected and protected. Both the guardian spirit and the totem can be seen as avoidance in terms of killing or eating in the Dagara society.

Here are some of the Dagara Patri-clans and their non-human relatives.

III. METHODOLOGY

Since the focus of this study was to establish the relevance of the clan system and clan appellations to the Dagara. Such a study required a case study approach. The case study approach was used for investigating the research problem. A case study is defined as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context (Yin, 1994).

The study design was particularly selected because it offers a greater opportunity to explain the links between the Dagara social structure and their clan system as well as their taboos. This case study approach therefore gave us, the opportunity to relate the real-life experiences of the Dagara and their non-human relations. These experiences could be compared with others elsewhere that have been investigated and documented. This is consistent with Yin’s (1994), assertion that case studies enable the researcher to deal with a full variety of evidence-documents, artifacts, interviews and observations. The target population of this study comprised some a cross section of the Dagara knowledge community, made up of men and women in the Dagara society.

A purposive sampling was also used to identify the respondents, with the assistance of a key informant, after which random sampling approach was used to select respondents for interviews to be administered. The sample size included sixty respondents (60), out of a total population of four hundred people, representing 16% of the entire population. Of the sixty (60) respondents, the breakdown was as follows; knowledgeable men (5), elderly men (25), knowledgeable women (3) and elderly women (27). The difficulty in itself became a limitation to the study since it was

difficult to get more knowledgeable people in the Dagara culture and their social structure.

The open ended nature of questions asked allowed for respondents to talk freely, thus, much information was made available. The study basically used interviews on four areas. First was that which focused on the background of the Dagara, next was the social structure of the Dagara, the relevance of their clan system and finally their non-human relatives or totems.

The data gathered was organized in a systematic way under the items used in preparing the interview guide. It was then edited to remove less important information and to fill in gaps created during the interviews. This was done by the use of the audio recordings to update the written notes taken during the interviews. After the editing, the data was then analyzed to make it meaningful and understandable. Care was taken during this stage to represent as accurately as possible the ideas of the informants. Where possible, the ideas of the informants were written verbatim in the native language. Where things were not clear to the researchers, they went back to the informants to seek clarification.

IV. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The question this paper set out to answer was: How relevant is the clan system and clan appellations on the lives of the Dagara of the North western Ghana? It also tries to establish the social structure of the Dagara of the north western Ghana, whether the Dagara are matri-clan or patri-clan. This section therefore focuses on the data gathered from the field in relation to the various clan systems and why each clan holds a particular totem in high esteem. The discussion begins with the Dikpiele.

A) *The Dikpiele and the Monkey*

The research revealed that the Tiedeme “people of the tree” or “People of Tie near Tugu”, Dikpiele, “people of Dikpe” Naayiile “people of the chief’s house or well –to-do” Nabegle”, “shift a bit to the other side” and Zage “people of the sitting room” are all from the same Patri-clan.

One of my main informants, Mr. Betuku Bedekuru Bonaventure from Piina, who is a Dikpiele, according to his version, he recounts that in the long distant past, an elder of the clan, who had two wives, asked his children to go and farm a very big farm. This they did and finished the whole farm that very day. When the said elder came to inspect the work, he was so over-joyed and delighted to see that the children had finished the big farm.

So he wanted to reward them with a very fat bull to kill and eat so, he pretended and said they should come home and he would show them “some big job of the chief to do again.” (Be kulwa o wawul be Naatonkpeekang a bele tong.)

However, he meant to give them the fat bull to kill. Nonetheless, the legend has it that, the children of the second wife mysteriously and magically used their hoes’ handles as

their tails and turned into monkeys. Meanwhile the children of the first wife went home and their father gave them the fat bull to make merry with. So, the children of the first wife of the Dikpiele elder said they could not eat their own “Siblings” thus they taboo the monkey. That is why one of their appellations is “Golongolong Mwaazie” meaning, “Zigzag red monkey”. This describes the movements of the monkey, the totem of the Dikpiele’s clan.

B) The Bekuone clan and the fish of the well

The study also discovered that according to the oral tradition or legend of the Bekuone clan that at the time of Bong an elder of theirs was given a hot chase by a slave-raider. As he ran for his dear life, he saw a well and jumped into it. By divine providence and protection, a big fish was in that well and it came up and covered the escapee. When the panting slave-raider got to the well he could find nothing but the fish. Frustrated and disappointed the inhuman slave-raider went away. Nevertheless, the Bekuone elder stayed in the well to ensure that his foe had gone then he came out of the well (It is surprising that this elder was neither hurt nor drowned) anyway God protects the weak and nature protects innocent sufferer. When he came out of the well he realised that he was thirsty.

When he looked around, he saw some cattle egrets in a group and suspected they must be at some water source. When he got there he saw that the cattle egrets had fouled the water with their droppings. Albeit, he complained, he quenched his thirst with the dirty water.

But for the fish of the well, the Bekuone elder would have been captured captive. When the said ancestor went home and related the story, as appreciation, it was decreed that all Bekuone should treat the fish in the well as their “father’s child”. The cattle egrets are also the kinsmen of the Bekuone because they showed their elder the water source. Thus, some appellations of the Bekuone Patri-clan are: “Bile zumob mal” which literally means “the fish of the well eat and pacify” and “kyankyampulanye sang kuo” that is, “cattle –egret shits spoil water”.

Also, the Bekuone taboo fruits from a tree, which is half dried and half wet. Furthermore, they taboo the following: “Mwanzagla,” that is, “an empty calabash” and “burale bile” that is, “the kid of a Billy-goat.” According to my informant, Mr. Betuku Bedekuru Bonaventure to see the birth of a Billy-goat and the fruiting of a half-dead tree is impossibility and a mystery.

C) The Kusiele and the porridge in the Basket (Piepuo Saab)

Similarly, one of the opinion leaders had this to say about the Kusiele. According to her (Mrs. Mary Assumpta), the Kusiele do not eat porridge in a basket. She asserts that in the distant past, the wife of their elder kept porridge in some big basket and asked her hungry child to go and remove it and eat. However, the child was so small that he could not reach the bottom of the big basket. So in an attempt to bend and get the

food he fell inside the basket and broke his neck and subsequently died. It was after such a bitter experience that the elders of the Kusiele clan decreed that no member of their clan should eat porridge in a basket. Any member who refuses and eats porridge from the basket becomes a simpleton.

Also, the Kusiele taboo a cat. This is because that at the time of Bong (slave trade), the cat saved some of their members by covering their footprints so that the slave-raiders could not trace and capture them thus after that incident they considered the cat as their kin.

D) The Kpiele and the Rain

The case of the Kpiele is exceptional. Their kyiiuru is the personified Rain. The Kpiele’s belief is that the Rain elected their ancestor and he was initiated into the “Doro seb,” a ritual where he was taught how to communicate with the Rain to determine when it should rain and when it should not rain. So by extension, all Kpiele have the Rain as their kyiiuru. They are praised as “Saabiir” that means “Rain children” they are the “Rain makers” or the Rain chasers in the Dagara society.

E) The Bimbige and the vulture

In our interaction with Mr. Richard Yitireh, himself a member of this Patri-clan, emphasized that they have the vulture as their Kyiiuru because it showed them their dead brother at the era of the Bong. That a brother of theirs was given a hot pursuit by the slave-raiders and so he escaped into the bush to take refuge there.

Despite the fact that he escaped from his foes, he joined the heavenly choir in the bush may be because of heart failure, hunger or thirst. So, after the raid his relatives went out in search of him but to no avail.

On one of their rounds the searching team saw some vultures hovering in the sky. They went that way and found their brother dead, though not eaten by wild animals and birds because these large vultures were chasing them away from devouring the corpse. (Funny that the vultures themselves did not devour the corpses, since these bold-headed vultures with their brown suits are noted for that).

They picked the corpse home and related the story that the vultures directed them to their dead brother. It was there and then that the Bimbige elders decreed that the vultures were their kinsmen and should not be killed and any member of the Bimbige Patri-clan who kills a vulture commits fratricide and must pacify.

F) Gbane and the Leopard (Nyuo)

According to our informant, Mr. Bede Maaniasie Bongne, a gifted blind musician from Kukya, who is a member of the Berwuole clan recounts that the Berwuole, the Gbaane and the Gane have the Leopard and the Antelope as their (taboo) kyiiuru. This is because they are all Siblings with Berwon, the farmer as the first born, Gbaane, the hunter as the

second born and Gane the gentleman or the walker as the last born.

According to him at the era of the Bong, the slave raiders were chasing a Gane elder to capture. Seeing that his enemies were about to catch up with him he saw a shrub and dashed into it to hide or for safety.

However, he woke up a sleeping leopard from its slumber and so he hid. But his foes did see him go into the shrub and so they rushed in to capture him. Unfortunately, they were being attacked and devoured by the roaring angry Leopard, for even nature fights for the vulnerably weak and the innocent. The Gane elder who saw all that was happening quietly took to his heels. Having related the story to his relatives upon his return it was decreed that the leopard is their non-human relative because it defended their kin.

Next is the Gbaane and the Antelope. Their annals have it that the Gbaane were saved by a stampeding herd of antelope at the time of the, “Bong” or slave-raiders. That when they were escaping from the “Bong” they saw some herd of Antelope and joined them and were able to escape. Thus they regarded the gallant and galloping antelope as a relative.

G) *The Benyiine and the Porcupine (Sien)*

According to Mr. Benjamin Nurubome and Mr. AlipoPorekuu who are both members of the Bernyiine Patri-clan, said they have the porcupine as their kyiiiru. They recounted that the porcupine saved some of their members who were fleeing from some slave-raiders at the time of the Bong. According to them, the escaping Bernyiine elders took refuge in a cave and by divine providence; a porcupine came and lay across the hole of the cave. So, the raiders could not find their game. Thus, they were saved by the porcupine and since one good turn deserves another they regarded the porcupine as their next of kin.

These are but a few of the mythological stories of some of the Dagara Patri-clans. According to Tengan (1990), the non-human relatives of the Dagara play a role of paramount importance in the survival of these clans. They played a salvific role in the lives of these clans. So, as a sign of gratitude and appreciation, these clans regarded these non-human relatives as their consanguine. To kill one means suicide or fratricide. In case a member of the patri-clan kills their non-human relative reparation has to be performed by their ritual head in order to repair or avert the calamities that would have befallen the individual or the patri-clan.

Also, the visit of the non-human relatives of the various Patri-clans to the house is a sign that some event of crucial importance is about to occur or it is a sign of bad omen. For instance, when a baby is born or an elder is about to die these animals used to pay visit to the house. During funerals, festivals and important events of the clans these animals come as a sign of solidarity. Their human relatives give them water, food and protection during such occasions. These non-human relatives are “saviours” of the various clans.

H) *The Birfuole and the Squirrel (Kyêê)*

Our research discovered that the name Birfuole is said to come from the response the ‘Tiedeme’ gave to their joking partners when were asked if they thought they owned the tree. The Tiedeme are said to have replied, “do you think that we are people who can be derided (*ne tier keti in ninfulébii*)”. All the Birfuole are believed to have lived together. But, one day, they realized that whenever they had a case to settle, members of a particular section of their house would come together and be “jumping on each other (uoungongn) like toads”. The members of the other section decided to dissociate themselves from the latter. They referred to the latter as the uoung-uongn and called themselves kyebere. This has led to the two main sub-divisions among the Birfuole, namely the Uong-uong and the kyebere.

The Birfuole were pursued by a raiding band of slavers, and in an attempt to elude their pursuers ran into a hole where a bear domiciled. The bear too felt endangered and dug enough sand to cover the people. The bear eventually escaped but buried the people who were in its hole. As luck would have it, they discovered a little opening that illumined their ‘dark room’ now. With some curiosity, one hit the opening and created a bigger hole. Everybody climbed out of the hole. When they came out, a squirrel that was basking in the shrubs ran fast into the hole where they came from. The people believed that it was the squirrel that created the opening which reflected the light that aided them to escape.

The elders of the group decreed that no kinsman anywhere should eat that animal because it was a relative and a saviour so to speak. The squirrel has been the totem of the people till today. These people are called the Birfuole or Gbetuole. They can be located in Yagha, Babile, Hamileareas in the Upper West Region of Ghana and in Burkina Faso, they can be found in Lengmoïn and Gyimoro.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study established that though the Dagara are more of a ‘patri-clan’ people, they also revere ‘matri-clan’ relationships. Therefore, they are respected, protected and venerated by their human relatives. So, the appellations and the dirges of the various patri-clans draw their content from the qualities of both the human and non-human relatives. Our forebears in their wisdom by so doing have tried to conserve the wild life by giving each important animal species protection by its human relatives.

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