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The Art of Mythical Composition and Narration

Dagara White *Bagr*

Introduction

Rites of Mythical Narratives and Orature

About Mythical Narratives in Ritual

Anthropological study on the art of African mythical oration in ritual and as orature (oral literature), as opposed to the science of myth and mythology, is certainly one of the most difficult themes to conceptualise in terms of approach, theory, methodology and subject matter. It is perhaps because of the difficulties involved that there have not been many ethnographic studies focusing on it. It seems to be different in character from such subject areas as kinship and witchcraft, the subject matter and methodological approaches, as Godelier and others have mentioned, can partly be invented by anthropologists (Godelier *et al.* 1998). Mythical narratives in ritual are so much part of the oral art and as Elizabeth Tonkin (1989: 39) points out, the oral art "is after all a part of language, which is so large a part of human experience and action that very many approaches must be part of it". In other words, we are here dealing largely with issues of human experience formulated in and through speech and as such much of it tends to escape the gaze of the participant observer. Indeed, the few anthropological studies on African oral texts in the past have not gone beyond the accidental collection and documentation of narratives that happen to be part of their subject areas of interest. Hence, Abiola Irele commenting in the 1980s (1981: 12) observed that anthropologists have been basically engaged in the "collection of oral literature" by using their own "editorial apparatus that both document and evaluate the primary material they are presenting". It might well be true to say that, at the onset, much of the existing source data on oral literature depended on anthropological fieldwork or works akin to it. However it will be a mistake to think that African anthropology has ever, in its evolution, focused on studying the rites and narrative of mythical orature as a unique subject in the same way as it has focused on kinship, ritual, religion or witchcraft. The few "edited documents" appearing as studies in oral texts are always linked to the analysis of other subject areas which happen to be the main concerns of these scholars. The notable deviation from this trend but mainly focusing on

the study of the spoken word as part of cosmology and metaphysics was the French school of thought led by Marcel Griaule (1965)[1].

It is in looking beyond African anthropology that one tends to notice the development of methodological and theoretical frameworks for the study of oral literature and narratives in general. Yet, these have also heavily side-lined mythical narratives in ritual as typical literary genre and mythology as a science. Two subject areas, namely, literature (English and French) and history, have taken a lead in this. Historians, as Karin Barber (1989: 1) points out, "seem increasingly to be regarding oral texts as raw material which, subject to certain amount of processing, will yield historical or as the unmediated voices of an alien past". Hence, oral narratives are viewed as a means to understanding the nature of the facts that go into the processing of Africa history. Indeed, the method and approach pioneered by Jan Vansina (1961, 1964; 2006) and David Henige (1982) builds on the assumption that the oral text is an important foundational documentary source for the reconstruction of the reliable history of Africa.

Similarly, at the onset, scholars of literature, mainly with English and French literatures as background of study, tended to define oral narratives as essentially folklore and to view it as an essential part of culture or as the classical documentary corpus via which the original intellectual production takes place. According to Abiola Irele;

> The oral literature represents our classical tradition – i.e. that body of texts which lies behind us as a complete and enduring literature, though constantly being renewed, and which most profoundly informs the world view of our peoples, and is thus at the same time the foundation and expressive channel of a fundamental African mental universe.

Over the years, the study of oral literature has developed beyond questions about its very existence and character (Ruth Finnegan; 1970) to a clear and systematic analysis of its "background, character and continuity" (Isidore Okpewho; 1992). In the process, the narrative genre has been recognised as a significant character in its production. As such, different genre of oral narratives including the story, myth, epic, tale, chants, songs, etc. which are often published as public performances[2]

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[1]   The ideas developed by Marcel Griaule and his school are very significant for the topic and I will be discussing them in greater detail much later in this chapter. As far as general anthropology is concerned, I am aware of the enormous amount work done Amerindian societies especially the works of Lévi-Strauss. The difficulty with these is that myth is main viewed as an artefact that is far removed from the living culture that produced it.

[2]   It is clear that for such leading writers as Opkewho performance has always been at the heart of the study of oral literature. As such, the attention has mainly been on the artist's creativity and use of language in performing narratives composed by or in

have continued to develop and to received great attention in scholarship. On the contrary, mythical narratives in ritual often published in restricted occasions and out of the public view, such as in formal ceremony, religious services and rites of initiation, have not yet found their way as a typical genre of oral literature. They have remained as incidental commentaries used to illustrate themes in such areas as ritual, myth and divination. They are constantly viewed as fragmented verses and continue to be badly defined as poetic sayings whose meaning is not immediately clear to the ordinary public. Yet, as far as the African condition is concerned, the ritual drama, particularly the initiatory and the religious ritual drama, remain the most intense and formal scenic instance during which creative mythical narratives are composed and recited in their entirety and as 'textured literature'. Mythical narratives in ritual as literature seem to me to be the foundational representation of "that body of text which lies behind us as a complete and enduring literature, though constantly being renewed". As such, this book is an anthropological exploration into this domain by focusing on the mythical narrative of the *bagr* initiation ritualised narratives among the Dagara of northern Ghana as ethnographic material. However, instead of focusing on performance, it is a focused ethnographic exploration into the methods and approaches used in creating or composing and reproducing mythical narratives in ritual and publishing them as "reference documents" likely to be used for subsequent cultural and social performances. In this light, mythical narratives in ritual are foundational and have special significance.

The Significance of the Study of Mythical Narratives in Ritual

As to be expected, the practice of approaching oral literature and its texts using the same tools as those tested and approved for written literature have often denied science orature the opportunity of presenting its own intellectual devices by which it continually engages in the production and transmission of its own textual narratives. Indeed, most scholars on African oral narratives in general appear, from the way they write, to be ignorant of the techniques by which African cultures create oral narratives specifically for ritual purposes. Some have postulated that the oral narrative in general, is a fossilised body of text that has to be renewed according to the circumstances. According to Isidore Okpewho (1983: 1-2) many scholars are responding in this way to oral tradition either as an attempt to preserve tradition, or observe tradition or, refine tradition.

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tradition. The intention of these studies is hardly on how these traditional narratives are composed in the first place and by whom?

From this study, I hope to present enough ethnographic evidence to show that oral mythical narratives in ritual is not about fossilised text that either have to be renewed or refined or observed, but a type of documentary creativity that should be viewed as literary creativity and documentation of knowledge. I do, however, concede that the study is limited in that it is based on an ethnographic observation of a peculiar narrative genre that is also culture specific. For some fifteen years now, I have been studying the production of a particular mythical narrative in ritual found uniquely among the Dagara and Lobi peoples of Northwest Ghana and Southwest Burkina Faso. This is the *bagr* mythical narrative that is always embedded in the *bagr* rites of initiation (see Tengan 1999; 2000; 2005; 2006; 2008)[3]. Scholars of various disciplines and traditions working in this region have always been aware of *bagr* as an important cultural feature that should be fully understood. However, Jack Goody (1972; 1981; 2002) remains the only scholar who has devoted significant attention to the study of *bagr* as an initiation ritual and as a mythical narrative and my current efforts should be viewed as an attempt to fill the gaps left by Goody. As Goody confirms in his study, the body of data constituting any single *bagr* mythical narrative in ritual "is far greater than for any other long oral recitation to date" ever found in Africa. As a result, a focus on *bagr* narratives could serve as the ideal conduit for a comprehensive study on the composition of oral narrative in ritual drama. This is more so because *bagr* mythical narratives in ritual are never exclusively consisting of only one kind of oral genre and are not singularly focused in terms of theme and style. As such they might turn out to be the ideal text for the full understanding of how oral cultures create and publish foundational and classical narratives that are underpinning all cultural and social performances and drama and that are continually being renewed and used by popular culture.

Indeed, what is at stake here is the application of aspects of oral literature to rites of initiation that is also serving as the perfect channel for the transmission of cultural knowledge. It is in this sense that one can define the study as an applied study in literature. Yet, because of my training, it is heavily relying on ethnographic and anthropological approaches in as far as it is documenting and analysing the multiple voices of women, men and children involved in the production of ritual

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[3]   In these studies, I first outlined the socio-cultural life of the Dagara as a hoe-farming society and situated *bagr* as one of the foundational institutions of Dagara society (Tengan 1998; 2000). I then subsequently described the process of narrating *bagr* myth in ritual (Tengan 1999) and followed this up with a major volume (Tengan 2006a) presenting the historical conditions possibly responsible for the emergence of *bagr* as an institution and the black *bagr* narration in ritual context. Also, *bagr* narrative recordings are now available as archival documents (see Tengan 2008). I therefore consider the current volume as a study that is building on these past results.

and religious drama. The narrative corpus, which is the main fulcrum supporting all the ritual acts and scenes as observed, consist of over ten hours of tape recording of recitations made by various specialists. The difficulty of getting all this material published has been enormous for me. Indeed, it was never going to be possible to publish all of the narratives I have collected so far in a single volume. As such, only one version of what has come to be known as the black *bagr* recited continuously in 1994 by a single author and in one ritual scene has been published in a book form with an extended introduction and limited analysis (Tengan 2006). The rest of the recorded material is now also available for scholarship as archival material in CD, VCD and DVD digital media (Tengan 2006). This volume is therefore a continuation of what I had set out to accomplish in the first volume and the through the Endangered Archive Project (Tengan 2006a, 2008), namely, an exploration into the science of creating and documenting mythical narratives as classical texts for social and cultural use.

As to the details of this particular volume, it is as a whole focusing on the science and art of mythical production as literary documentary knowledge for cultural reference using the first three segments of the white *bagr* narratives as ethnographic text and ritual practice. As such, it is a focused descriptive analysis of the relationship between different professional and social individuals and groups engaged in the academic production, ritualising, and ritual use of mythical narratives and text as social and religious products. In terms of problematic, it is a focused study on the science of the spoken word (orature) in terms of textual creativity, publication, fluidity and their variations. These will inevitably involve discussions on authorship, individual identity, narrative errors and quality of narratives. It is also partly viewed as a focused study on the ritualising of text as performance which is evidently leading to questions on memory, textual representation and publication within the context of religious and sacred practice and the transmission of cultural knowledge as literature.

In order to deal properly with these issues, I have divided the book into two parts. Part one consists of the introductory chapters including this one. They deal with the relationship between ritual, literature and oral mythical narratives viewed within the cultural context of *bagr* rites of initiation in Dagara society. As such, in order to recapitulate the main points dealt with in the previous studies, the rest of this chapter will explore the meaning of *bagr* and its traditional importance to Dagara society and culture[4]. Chapter two will discuss further the ethnographic

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[4] I have already dealt with the historical background to *bagr* as an institution in an earlier publication (see Tengan 2006)

background and social significance of ritualising mythology among the Dagara of Northern Ghana and Southern Burkina Faso. As complement to the historical and cosmological contexts outlined in the most recent volume, the chapter will also focus on religious change and social transformation within recent times in as much as these changes and transformations are affecting the notion of *bagr*. This is meant to ex- plain the significant notion of *bagr,* the term used in the book to denote ritualising myth as part of an initiation process. Finally, it explores the relevant position of *bagr* as a social and a cultural institution in Dagara society. In part two, I will explain the theoretical and methodological approach via which mythical narratives in ritual are composed. Briefly, it is dealing with the literary character, genre and structure of composi- tion of the text as perceived by the *bagr* community. In addition to the theoretical and methodological discussion, I will also be focusing on how theory and method are embedded in the ritual and ceremonial acts of initiation. Hence, this section is also an ethnographic description of ritual, social and cultural scenes and how these correspond to textual narratives composed and recited as part of the initiation ceremony during the white *bagr*.

In the second part I am focusing on documenting and commenting on the literary and cultural features of the mythical narratives produced as text, basically, the first three segments of the white *bagr* narratives[5]. Hence, as background, I will discuss the science of publishing intellec- tual knowledge within the oral culture. The discussion focuses on the problem of representation of knowledge as an object of thought, the process of distancing thought from its author and the accuracy of its documentation as a text for public use. The problems of authorship and accuracy in documentation come up again in chapter six. However, the emphasis in the chapter is on the cultural definition and use of memory in knowledge acquisition and processing. Case studies of particular instances during ritual events narrating the white *bagr* are discussed in the in this part in order to illustrate the nature of the problem. Also, I will make reference to the white *bagr* narrative cases introduced here in order to engage in a limited literary critique and analysis of mythical narrations in ritual by referring to perceived errors and narrative disputes as observed during this particular study. The rest of the book, the largest portion, consists of a bilingual documentation of narrative segments of the white *bagr* in Dagara and English narrated in ritual. Though I have

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[5]   The first three segments of the white *bagr* include the white *bagr* of black beans, the white *bagr* of white beans and the white *bagr* of bambara beans. The fourth segment, the white *bagr* of dance has a unique and complicated structure and is as long as the black *bagr* and we are not able, as yet, to fully document it.

tried to define *bagr* in many previous occasions, I should discuss again briefly its meaning here before proceeding further.

Meaning of Mythical Narratives in Ritual (Bagr[6]) and their Cultural Importance

It is not possible to write on a central theme pertaining to a culture, such as the *bagr* is in Dagara culture, without losing sight of some nuances in meaning and some references of its use in various practices. In most cases, such basic concepts are so encompassing in meaning and use that they tend to permeate all aspects of the culture giving a biased twist in meaning to all other cultural notions that they happen to come into contact with. They do this because they are themselves loaded with different layers of symbolic meanings and are consequently capable of changing substantially the semantics of formal thoughts towards the direction of their own meaning. They do not only change the meaning of the thought content within which they form a part, but also their own proper meanings change depending on the context within which the thoughts are expressed. To write on any such issue is, therefore, to engage in the exposition of the whole culture. As Goody (1993) has rightly pointed out, funerals and *bagr* form important aspects of the Dagara/Lobi/Birfor societies and to dwell much on these two aspects of society is not a waste of time. On the other hand, one cannot claim to be dealing with all aspects of *bagr* within the limited conditions of writing be it several articles or many books.

With all the limitations and based on what I have done so far in other works, I have decided to first engage in explaining partially what *bagr* is and to setting out its importance in the social and cultural life of the Dagara[7]. If *bagr* has any meaning and importance, it is because Dagara society, as progenitor of the concept and the forms of practices that go with the thought of *bagr*, continue to hold on to it as something relevant for finding meaning with their lives. Indeed, not only is the concept and the practice of *bagr* an important feature in expressing and constructing meaning in peoples' lives, it is also the marked calendar of ritual and social events that continue to give and reinforce identities of individuals and social groups. Above all, it is the most significant intellectual sphere

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[6]   For the sake of fluidity, I will begin to use the Dagara term *bagr* to refer to the subject matter of this book. I shall in this case translate *bagr* as 'mythical narratives in ritual as literature'.

[7]   In my last volume that is focusing on transcription of the black *bagr* narrative, I outlined the historical circumstances possibly responsible for the genesis of *bagr* as an important cultural feature among the Dagara people. I will not be able to go over those events again since I consider this present work as a continuation of the first volume now published (Tengan: 2006)

via which the totality of Dagara society continually constructs its world and redefines its worldview. Indeed, at the practical level, it is via the rites of *bagr* that most expressed views and patterns of thought and behaviour end up as habitual activities and practices that can easily be observed in people's daily lives. At the intellectual level, *bagr* rites reveal what meaning is embedded in the perceived arrangement of society and the cosmos and how this meaning is a syntax made up of selected and well-ordered cultural symbols. The symbols, which include ordinary things, objects, animal, vegetal and imaginary beings also exist as codes and cues leading to the proper reading of the cultural syntax of meaning. These are indeed brought to focus through ritual performance when structure of social, cosmological and ordinary daily concepts of meaning are configured as mythical narratives[8] that can be learned and transmitted as cultural knowledge. Further, through the process of rituals, these mythical narratives get published as sacred text and sanctified as object of thought and worship.

The *bagr* society, a select group of initiated individuals, is responsible for the composition as well as directing the ritual drama of initiation which also include rites of reciting mythical narratives. As mentioned above, this book is partly a focused study on how individuals within the *bagr* society come by developing a mental scope and a narrative structure of thought that is enabling them to reproduce long narratives that are consistent with what is upheld as dogmatic cultural knowledge. There is no doubt that through training and practice, knowledge on culture history and social practice become translucent to them. Yet, how this knowledge is processed, stored and reproduced in such a way that it becomes an object of thought remain an area very much kept sacred to the group and so far, continue to elude the proper investigation and study of many anthropologists and social scientists.

The processing, storage and reproduction of knowledge as an object of thought, as many other studies show are by no means the only issues that Dagara *bagr* is dealing with. Thus, for example, Cecil de Rouville (1993) focusing on the sociological study of *bagr* practices, has outlined the different types of "buur" that exist among the Lobi of Burkina Faso and which equally apply to Dagara *bagr*. According to her, differences between the types lie in such practical practices as the body decorations of the neophytes, in the modalities of carrying out certain sacrifices, and in the places where different rituals are performed (on the roof or outside the house). She adds, however, that the differences seem to be more

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8   I suppose what I have just said for *bagr* is equally true for all mythical thinking and the original creativity of myths. In other words, one is here dealing with the beginnings of human thought and intelligence and the origination of knowledge formulation and accumulation.

linked to local variations than to their differences in type (de Rouville 1993). Goody, on the other hand, has focused on the variations in narratives and has consistently remarked that the actors themselves see *bagr* as one and do not consider any differences. Thus, he says:

> I have remarked before that the Bagre is thought of as being one but is in fact many. Or, to phrase it in another way, the actors see it as one, the observer notices the differences. Both are right. The Bagre is one 'cult', though it has no unitary organisation and exists as innumerable 'lodges'; if you are a member of one, you are by and large a member of all. Moreover the rites and recitation are deemed equivalent, even when they are far from being the same (Goody 1993).

The issues of variations and the differences between types of *bagr* are equally a focus of this book only because they form a central core as to how one sees the mental scope as horizon of the cosmos and of society. Yet, the focus on these themes, would not be based on the assumption that the actors do not know or cannot see the differences and variations in both ritual procedures and content of similar recitation because the very nature of *bagr* and its forms of practices are dependant very much on change in time and different spaces where rites are performed. As such, the book will tend to follow the actors' own option, that is, it will ignore the general discussion on the obvious variations in narratives and ritual types by assuming that the actors perspective – that *bagr* is one common mythology – though it might not be tallying with what is empirical in observation – is the appropriate one to have if one is to understand their mental scope and the reproduction of the narratives. Indeed, during my research on *bagr*, I have come across a lot of people who were very ignorant about the global cosmology and social organisation within which they were living and operation, but they were very much informed about the working mechanisms of those sectors that affect their daily lives. A lot of people, for example, will tell you off hand their patri-house totems and talk about their relations to other patri-houses that they have to deal with on daily and ritual basis but will be ignorant about all others outside their vicinity. However, there were others belonging to such professions as the *bagr* narrators who needed to have a complete horizon of the culture in order to understand different conditions and times and in different places. I did not have the impression that people will make such categorical statements about the nature of such an important topic as *bagr* unless they were sure they knew what they were talking about. Those who did not understand *bagr*, never talked about it. To show how knowledge about *bagr* was indeed limited to particular individuals, let me briefly explain Dagara social organisation and structure.

House-based Structure and the Global Mythical Horizon

The bases of Dagara social organisation is the complex structuring of social institutions and the belonging of each individual to a patri-lateral network of house-based categories and matri-lateral social groupings. Though some writers have tended to define the social pattern as double descent lineage and clan groupings (see Sabelli 1987: 18), the society itself does not refer to their society as primarily based on kinship and clan structure. The local Dagara terms used to describe the system (*yiirlu*) and (*bèllo*), suggest a house-based structure that is indeed using patrilateral and matrilateral principles to extend kinship and clan notions beyond recognition[9]. The system, as observed, does not preclude notions of kinship and genealogy as basic units through which social categories come to be formed and through which society continually reproduces its image. However, it does also make clear that the objective organisation of society along the house-based structure (*yiirlu*) and matrilateral group categories (*bèllo*) is not focusing on the structural relations of persons in institutional positions with kinship identities. (This type of structural relations is only restricted to the locality of the extended family residence or the house – *yir* – and does not cover the organisation of the whole society). To create a social structure that is organising the whole of society, the principles of genealogy and kinship are abandoned and a mythical reality of syntax consisting of objective cues and symbolic referents is created as source texture on how society should be organised and should continuously reproduce itself.

For a long time the belief has always been that the Dagara in history has been a stateless society lacking any objective centralising social institution (Goody 1958; Hawkins 1996, 2002; Somé 1998). Yet, the *bagr* mythology and the rites associated with it, as I intend to demonstrate in this book, tend to be the main fulcrum upon which society tend to mobilise itself. It is able to do this because of the house-based social structure. Additionally, I will demonstrate that *bagr* mythology and rites exist as the syntax of reality allowing society to reproduce meaning for itself by assigning definite meaning to the objective cues and symbolic referents beyond the objective concepts patri-lateral and matri-lateral kinship notions. Because of the centrality of the notion of the "house" as far as *bagr* mythology and rites are concerned, I should explain further the origin and meaning of the house-based model. In essence, the house-

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[9] I have written quite extensively on Dagara social structure and its house-based character (see Tengan 1998, 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2002). In order not to repeat what I have already said on these occasions, I am only giving the broad outlines and would urge readers to refer to these other detailed analysis on of the subject. The chapter following this will discuss in detail the metaphysical characteristics of the house as a thought model.

based structure, (*yiirlu*) originates from the residential and spatial concept, *yir* (house) and at that level refers exclusively to either "ego's" patrilineal exogamous kin-group as a domestic unit, *saa yir* (father's house) or to his matrilineal kin-group as a residential and domestic unit, *ma yir* (mother's house). Having originated from the "domestic" environment, the notion of house is extended into the global and public domain without shedding off its domestic characteristics. In other words, several domestic constituent units of the house are objectively marked and cognitively defined as public institutions significant for social and cultural attention. At the same time and from a global perspective each exogamous group or "house community", the largest social category possible within Dagara social structure, is not considered as an independent social formation that is made up of the same social characteristics as any of its kind. On the contrary, each community and the houses they put up, by adopting specific types and number of cues with symbolic references, becomes an atypical institution with unique characteristics. Following from this, each house community and house building is honoured with a special position within the global texture of social and cultural relations. The mode of identifying the character and institutional position of the different houses is embedded in the different notions as of the house taboo (*yir kyiiru*), the house totem (*yir sigra*), the system of joking relations (*dièno*) and the system of symbiotic and ritual collaboration (*lonluoro*) (see A. Tengan 2000 for further details). In order to properly situate *bagr* in the global social context, let me further explain the system by referring to ethnographic data.

As much of the ethnographic observation on Dagara society show, the Dagara house residence (*yir kpiera*) is a collection of individuals linked together by marriage and kinship principles, and also by an accepted myth of a common place of origin. All the individuals might either still be residing under the same roof (house) or will all still be referring to one particular house as the registered house of residence (*yir kura*). Each house (*yir*) is identified by the personal name of the one who first built the physical structure as a dwelling place. Thus, we speak of and identify Dèr's house (*Der yir*) and the people living in Dèr's house as Dèr's house people (*Dèr yir dém*). In terms of kinship principles, the composition of Dèr's household will be made up of Dèr as grandfather (*saakom*), his sons as fathers (*saaminè*) and his grandchildren as the house children (*yir bibiir*). The fathers and the children could attain their positions through birth and classificatory means and the children, in terms of gender, are all male. The females in the house will consist of Dèr's wives as grandmothers (*makum-minè*) and sons' wives as mothers (*ma-minè*). All those with the male gender, including children who are girls, belong to the same patri-lateral house category (*yiirlu*) as Dèr. Thus, if Dèr is Kusiélé, all these will belong to the

Kusiélé patrilateral house category and the house of Dèr can be referred to as a Kusiélé house (*kusiélé yir*). The marriage rule of exogamy among Dagara stipulates that members of the same patri-lateral house category cannot marry. All the women married into Dèr's household would have come from different house categories other than the Kusiélé house. Thus, in Dèr's house, we would have the Kusiélé as the main stock of patri-lateral house category but we would also have others, mainly of female gender, who would be belonging to several other patri-lateral house categories. Hence, some women might have come from the Kpièlè, Bèkuonè or Bimbiglè house categories. Yet, each of these has a defined social, cultural and ritual position in the global network of house categories. As such, they would not only relate to the Kusiélé members of the house through kinship and marriage ties and regulations but also would relate to them and to each other as the embodiment of the social and cultural attributes of their own house categories. What I am saying here is that a Kpièlè woman who is married into the Kusiélé patrilateral house category does not only become a wife or a mother or a grand-mother to one member or the other of the Kusiélé group but she is also the social institution embodying all that her own patrilateral category stands for within the global context of Dagara society.

To explain this point more fully I made a list of some twenty-five patrilateral groups that make up Dagara society in Nandom area (Tengan 2000: 166-67). Based on their structural relations between the totems (*sigri*), taboos (*kyiiré*), traditional stories about their origins and rela-tions with one another, their present ritual and joking relationships, and how they function within the cosmology, I proceeded to show how each patrilateral group is an institutional unit of a multiplex structure and how each exists as a complement and at the same time a supplement to the whole social system.

Hence, as an example, according to Dagara cultural tradition, the house categories; Kpièlè, Kusiélé, Kuwèrè, Puryiilè, Yirpaalè and Kusèblè are thought to have constituted a single house unit of in the past. The reasons given for their present break up appear ridiculous when heard for the first time. Thus, the Kuwèrè are said to have cut open the stomach of one of their pregnant wives after an argument about the sex of the child. Because of this odious act, they were removed from the main group. A critical study of their totemic beliefs, taboo practices and joking relationships however, show that these stories of fissions are social and cultural constructions made for creating social and cultural institutions. Although these six house categories have become segment-ed, the Kpièlè, Kuwèrè and Puryiilé have the sky as a common totem but have different taboos. The Kpièlè taboo rain, the Kuwèrè taboo the crocodile and the Puryiilé taboo the leaves of the "puré tree". The other

three, Kusiélé, Yirpaalè and Kusèblè have the python as common totem but taboo respectively, cooked food in a basket, a new house and black stones. Drawing on information from Dagara cosmology, their concept of time and space and other ethnographic studies, it is possible to show how each house category is also a syntactic unit of thought in the construction of ideas on cosmology, socio-political institutions and cultural practices. Thus, for example, the Kpièlè, as a house category is also the location for rain as an institution. In thinking about a Kpièlè house, the society metaphorically and metonymically constructs modes of thought that show the relationship between sky/rain with other natural elements as the earth, the python, the trees etc and how these are significant for socio-political and cultural reasons. The house system as a whole, therefore, tend to outline a global system of Dagara thought

However, in order to fully outline a complete system of thought, a complimentary pattern is constructed via the notion of the matri-lateral social category (*bèllo*). Whereas the system of the house categories is focusing on the working structure of society and the layout of its social, cultural and political institutions, the matri-lateral system of social categories is outlining how creative knowledge and technical skills are generated, appropriated and structured; and how they are transmitted and subsequently identified with particular social groups. In order to do this, Dagara culture assumes that the acquisition and transmission of knowledge is partly innate and partly linked to the social origins of matri-lateral social categories (*bèllo*) which is classifying all humans into a specific number of social groups. Concretely, this is done by dividing all humans into two opposing social stems. The first stem, code named (Some) and out of which only one single social category has ever developed, is continually defined as male in gender and animal in nature. The second stem, code named (Da), consists of a common root out of which six parallel social categories emerged and continue to develop. Using semantics of the language and general cosmology, we go on to demonstrate how the term (Somè) does not only stand for a social category but also as a cognitive metaphor for the intelligent use of knowledge and skills and how these are explained through the concept of "black animals" in the bush. This type of knowledge leads to social awareness and the skilful manipulation of different types of situations within a given environment or context. This is different from generative knowledge and skill that are at the base of material, social and cultural productions. This type is embedded in the (Da) as a matrilateral social category and coded in the cultural notions of the "black trees".

I am aware that coded systems have different possible interpretations. In fact, the culture itself is very much aware of this and people are constantly debating among themselves the various uses and interpreta-

tions of codes. What I have done is to give the broad outlines of the modes of thinking and the general associations that the culture makes between different aspects of social categories or structure or institutions and the modes of thought. This association is done in an indirect way through the coded use of plants and animals; thus totemic and tabooed animals and plants for the patrilateral domain and black animals and trees for the matrilateral. It is in thinking about these animals and plants that one comes to understand how society is structured, categorised and institutionalised on the one hand and on the other hand, how knowledge, skills and intelligence become social attributes during production and reproduction. It is within these broad outlines of thought and the association of modes of thinking to aspects of society that such cultural practices, as *bagr*, are continually being reproduced as dramatised representations of the social and cultural life of the community. As representations, such practices tend to be based on pre-reflected intellectual creativity serving as guiding principles for the production and performance of the drama. It is our contention that this pre-reflected intellectual creativity exists in *bagr* and leads to the production of various types of oral texts which recitations form important parts in the total dramatised performance. It is my intention, at this stage, to focus on who does the pre-reflection in the intellectual creativity and how this is concretely produced? This also includes reflection on what accounts for the variations

The Bagr Select Group and Professionalism
in the House-based Structure

In order to conduct the complete rites of *bagr* narration, individuals will have to be recruited for initiation into the *bagr* select society. The recruitment process starts when an elder within the house category notices that one or more of the house members are persistently showing symptomatic behavioural characteristics consistent with problems the causes of which cannot be immediately determined. The symptoms could manifest themselves in diverse and unrelated ways among the different individuals and might include such outward signs as a health condition that cannot be immediately be diagnosed, sudden change in fortunes or social conditions or as one grows into adulthood one is displaying signs of being extraordinarily gifted for one profession or the other. Hence, unlike many other secret societies or initiatory processes in Africa, such as the Poro society among the Mende of Sierra Leone, where selection to membership is based on one specific identifying criterion such as gender, age or profession, *bagr* selection is open and inclusive of all categories of persons with varying symptoms. However, each selected individual is initiated into the group only with those who belong to the same housed based category as himself or herself. In other words each

group of initiates belong to the same patrilateral social group with the understanding that in the mythical times they shared a common house of residence.

As explained above this house structure is now divided into varying numbers of house or totemic groups with varied levels of structured group and individual relations. As I have already demonstrated in my previous works (Tengan 1998, 2000a, 2000b), each of the house structure is a complete and full replication of Dagara socio-cultural formation and practice as it exists for the whole of society. Also, through the matrilateral system (*bèllo*) of social relations that is combining with the virilocal system of marriage, every Dagara citizen in and out of the neighbourhood will tend to have different bonding relationships at different levels and with varied members and group categories of the house community performing *bagr* initiation rites at the time. As a consequence of these bonding relationships, the society that is congregating for the series of *bagr* initiatory rituals becomes a complete and perfect replica of the global Dagara society. This is re-enforced by the presence of the *bagr* society that will, as long as the series of ceremony last, constitute themselves into a separate pseudo "house community"[10] that will stand in counter-opposition to the host house society which has become a replica of the global Dagara society and from which the initiates are drawn. Hence, through this formula, even though all the initiates are exclusively drawn from one common house society they will become full members of the global *bagr* society with the right to participate fully in all *bagr* initiation ceremonies conducted within any house community throughout Dagaraland. Paradoxically, since the initiated members of the *bagr* society are all coming from all the different patrilateral house communities and categories and have been bonded together through initiation and based on kinship ideology, they also invariably congregate as a perfect replica of the global Dagara society. Apart from the counter-distinction between the house community and the *bagr* society, there is also a recognised differentiation between the individuals who cannot be initiated to *bagr* but are always present as 'free associates' called the *dakumé* (lit. dead wood) and those who have been initiated and must be present as a permanent group called the *bagè* (lit. fixed group). These two groups are always in competition with each

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[10] The officers conducting *bagr* ceremonies during the initiation period assume kinship tittles. Hence, the male and female sponsors who are also the general supervisors or masters of ceremony are referred to respectively as *bagr sãã* (*bagr* father) and *bagr ma* (*bagr* mother). Both the neophytes and the initiates of *bagr* do not have individual identities but go by the terminologies *bagli* (*bagr* children) and *bagbere* (*bagr* elders) respectively.

other and at the same time they are constantly taking a distance from each other.

Through the formula of double replications of Dagara society, of the different categorisations of social groups and of the creation of tensions of competition that is constantly creating situations of taking distance as well as bonding between groups and individuals, it is possible for the society to create a double reflection of itself in order to reveal its mythical origins as well as current socio-cultural constructions within which groups and individuals live. In other words, the rites of *bagr* and the mythical narratives that accompany them are principally about the mobilisation of the whole of Dagara society for the ritualisation of the myth of their social foundation. Even though this still remains the main objective of the rites, social and cultural changes since the beginning of the last century has redefined the way *bagr* is presented to the outside world. It is essential, in order to complete this background survey to study these changes.