

Alexis B. TENGAN

Mythical Narratives in Ritual

Dagara Black Bagr



P.E.-Pence Lang

Preface

In oral cultures, ritual is undoubtedly one of the most important mediums via which society religiously and officially celebrates the narration of myths of origin and other knowledge systems of social and cultural importance worth remembering. Among the Dagara peoples of Northern Ghana and Southern Burkina Faso, rites of narration of myths and other composed texts tend to occupy central position in all social and cultural practices, not only in terms of religiously communicating with the sacred but also as a means of transmitting cultural knowledge. As a result, a cult devoted to the development and ritual recitation of oral narratives feature as a central institution in the social and cultural life of the people. The cult, as institution, including the rituals and the narratives that are associated with it and the initiation rites via which individuals become attached to the institution, is known as *bagr*. This book, as a first volume on the study of *bagr*, is a presentation of a narrated version of the *black bagr* the first of the two types of mythical narratives that together constitute the central focus during the seasonal performance of the rites of initiation into the *bagr* cult. The second type, the *white bagr*, consists of four narrative segments and far greatly exceeds the *black bagr* in terms of length and textual content. Hence, it is not possible for me to publish the two narrative types together in one common volume. The version of the *black bagr* narration being published here together with the *white bagr* segments that are not yet published, as is normally required during the rites of initiation, were recited in sequence following a prescribed order. In this particular instance, the *black bagr* was recited first by one reciting specialist then followed by the four segments of the *white bagr*. Theoretically four reciting specialists were originally designated to recite a segment each of the *white bagr*. This did not happen during this occasion, and hardly ever happens, as people tend to make serious errors, and according to the rule, have to step aside to give a chance for the one who has pointed out the error to make the needed correction and subsequently continue with the narration.

As to *bagr* in context, there already exists a large amount of published material on Dagara cultural history. Even though many of these do not deal with the mythical narratives of *bagr* and do not always cover in detail the subject matter of Dagara rituals and religion, they make it possible for me, only with an introduction, to publish this material as a

comprehensible document. Indeed, the term *bagr* and its religious significance, since it was first used by the French ethnologist, Henry Labouret in 1931, has become familiar to many scholars familiar with the general cultural history of the Volta Basin that is running across Northern Ghana and Southern Burkina Faso. Mythical productions and their ritualisations, perhaps, constitute the most significant intellectual contributions that individuals can make towards the development of an oral civilisation. The current work, as such, is a word for word translation of one narrative version as I heard it recited and ritually performed by one house community in the region. The whole narration was recorded on tape and only then was it possible for me to reproduce it in this line by line format. The people living in Guol's house in the village settlement of Chεboggio recognised my right to fully participate in the recitation and other performances and gave me permission to record by tape the whole narration. As they themselves said, recording is the only way one could possibly capture every word and phrase spoken without needlessly intruding the thoughts of the narrator. The actual organisation of the performance was done mainly by Jacob Delle and Vuuyin Aaderekuu. The latter is also the main narrator of the text and it is he who should hold the intellectual property right as editor.

Even though I had, for a long time, been aware of and viewing from a distance *bagr* ritual practices, I began to familiarise myself with it and to make close observations when I first attended some of its rituals in South Batie in Burkina Faso. Since then, I have participated in many of the initiation rituals and have recorded many segments of both the *black* and *white bagr* narratives.

Since 1994, when I first made this recording, I have been studying the narrative consistently, first by trying to get my ears accustomed to the musical rhythm of the ritual and be able to pick up the correct lyrics as spoken in Dagara language, and secondly by transcribing each line of text spoken. My translation in English is a close one and in spite of the great length of time spent in trying to get each word consistent with the Dagara meaning in the context given, I am aware that some gaps still exist. Most of these are, for the moment, beyond my capacity to see them and continuous reworking will not produce any better results. If we consider the text as a working tool and not as artistic work of perfection, there is no point in my delaying any further with its publication.

I acknowledge with gratitude all the private individuals who have continued to support and encourage me in my work. First, thanks to all the members of my extended family both in Ghana and Belgium without whose support, I will not be able to survive. I will particularly like to thank Marcelle De Cleene and Archbishop Porekuu Dery for their continued interest and support of my work. Much of the credit for the success of the work goes to my wife, An Debyser and our children for their moral support and understanding.

Alexis Bekyane Tengan
Zaventem, May 2005