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Significance of the Bride-chamber Practice as a Traditional Way of Educating and Integrating the Bride into Some Dagara Communities of Ghana, the Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso

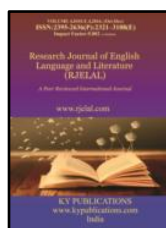
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ABSTRACT

Customary marriage is one of the few socio-cultural practices in Ghana that have stood the test of time. In view of its socio-cultural importance, marriage officials are mandated to demand evidence of having fulfilled its requirement before endorsing Christian or Islamic marriage custom. As the Dagaaba of the Upper West Region of Ghana use two different but congruous terms to describe marriage from the bride and the groom's perspectives, the family and community into which the woman is married expect her to conduct herself in conformity with some cultural standards. It is against this background that some Dagaaba communities have instituted the bride chamber practice to educate the bride in particular on their cultural norms which is deemed crucial to the sustainability of the marriage. However, in the wake of urbanization, inter-ethnic and cross-cultural marriages as well as Christianity and Islam, the relevance of the bride-chamber culture is being threatened. Considering its socio-cultural significance to the Dagara communities, the bride chamber practice should be encouraged because educating the couple on their responsibilities enhances the marriage and curbs the spate of divorce that has plagued most societies these days. It is also a useful and interesting cultural heritage whose practice should be upheld and preserved for posterity.

Keywords: customary marriage, bridegroom, bride chamber, cross-cultural, cultural heritage.

1.0 Introduction

Marriage is essentially a universal human practice since its concept is more or less the same all over the world. Anderson (2013) explains that marriage is based on the universal truth that a man and a woman are complementary, the biological fact that procreation depends on a man and a woman and the reality that children need to be provided with comfort through the shared responsibility of their parents.

Although the Bible and the Quran have not given a precise definition of marriage, they have commented on matters concerning marriage in reference to certain religious characters and situations. In Genesis 2:18-12 for instance, in referring to the solitary life of Adam; God said, "It is not good that a man should be alone, I will make him a helper fit for him (ESV). In a similar vein, the Quran, in 16:72 says "And Allah has made for you your mates of your own nature, and made for you

out of them sons and daughters" (Noble Quran). Today, however, it is not uncommon to hear of same sex marriage, a phenomenon that has been endorsed by some countries and religious denominations

In Africa and elsewhere, marriage is considered not to be simply an individual affair but as a matter of great concern to the families of the couple and the community to which they belong (Sarpong, 1974). In Ghana therefore, marriage is contracted to conform to the custom of the ethnic group from which the couple, especially the woman originates (Kobby, 2011).

1.1 Background

The Dagaaba social structure is predominantly patriarchal and exogamous, and as such different but congruous terms are used to refer to marriage from the perspective of the man and the woman. *Pog-di* (wife taking) on the one hand is the term used by the man and his kinsfolk when referring to the marriage in question, *sirikuli* (going home to a husband) on the other hand, is an expression used by the woman and members of her agnatic home to mean she is married or getting married. Thus in Dagaabaland, a man takes a wife (*di-poga*) but a woman "goes home to a husband" (*kuli sira*). It is against this socio-cultural background that some sections of the Dagaaba communities instituted the bride-chamber practice known as "*Pog- Paaalideo*" in order to prepare and psych up the bride to fit into her new role as a wife in the groom's community. Like all other ethnic groups in Ghana, through customary marriage, the Dagaaba society controls and harmonizes, such basic facts of life as sex, parenthood, siblingship and socialization (Tengan, 1990). Essentially every bride, irrespective of the type of marriage contracted has to go through the bride-chamber practice. However, it does not apply to a widow who has remarried one of her deceased husband's kinsmen since she is presumed to have already gone through the same practice during her first marriage.

The details of what constitutes the bride – chamber practice may vary slightly according to the different sections of Dagaaba community but generally, the bride is always the centre of attraction. Although the bride-chamber tradition is

still relevant today, its practice is being affected by modernity attributed to urbanization, science and technology as well as the influence of universal religion such as Christianity and Islam. The youth now prefer these modern forms of entertainment such as television shows, movies both local and foreign as well as dance to culturally rewarding practices such as the bride-chamber tradition and thus missing out on their socio-cultural importance. This spate of modernity is deplored by Assimeng (1999) when he observed that the consequences of such changes tend to restructure social relations and modify the meaning and content of social interaction. Although culture is dynamic and hence subject to different facets of change with time, the various ethnic groups in Ghana must be sensitized by cultural experts or connoisseurs to safeguard and preserve their distinct cultural values against the invasion of foreign cultures for; in Sarpong's own words, "It is of importance to note that culture is learnt and that it does not depend on inborn instincts or reflexes, or any other biologically inherited forms" (Sarpong, 1974).

This study is to bring to the fore the socio-cultural importance of the bride chamber practice in sustaining marriages among the Dagaaba. It is also to serve as a wake up call to the people to cherish and be encouraged to uphold or revive similar cultural practices that can help in sustaining marriages and projecting their identity, as Marcus Garvey rightly put it, "A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots". In addition to these, it will serve as a source of reference for both researchers and students in similar fields who wish to explore broader avenues in the quest for documentation.

1.2 Methodology

This study is accomplished largely through the researcher's personal experience; growing up in a community where the bride-chamber practice is well instituted offered the researcher the opportunity to participate in several bride-chamber practices that enabled the researcher to acquire in-depth personal experience relevant to this study. Since one cannot claim to be omniscient in all issues related to the Dagaaba cultural practices, a number of persons from some Manlaala-speaking Dagaaba

communities well groomed in the bride chamber-practice were interviewed face to face to obtain both overt and covert information relevant to the study (See names at the Appendix). Information obtained from the informants was used to complement the researcher's personal information but where what was obtained was hitherto unknown to the researcher but was deemed relevant to this study; it is used as supplementary information to what is already known. The translation of the various Dagaaba terminologies and the songs were done by a Dagaare language specialist engaged by the researcher for the purposes of translation only. In addition to the interviews conducted, it is worth mentioning Edward B. Tengan's "Dagaaba and Sissala Traditional Marriage in the Light of Christianity (1990)" a book which provided the researcher with very useful insight into some aspects of the Dagaaba marriage system that was relied upon for the purpose of this study.

1.3 Types of marriages in Dagaabaland

The courting process begins with the man and his friends exchanging pleasantries with the girl's siblings and social friends in the girl's village. According to E. B. Tengan (1990) the Dagaaba have varied means by which marriage is contracted in conformity with standard ethics. Although some of them are becoming less practicable with time, they still remain culturally legitimate means of marriage. The most recognized and popular ways of contracting marriages include marriage by elopement (*Pog-ira*). This happens when one of the contesting parties who are convinced the woman is particularly fond of them decides to elope with her to outwit the other contestants.

Marriage by betrothal (*pog-pibahaa*). This is often the case when a man claims as a wife to be a female child who has just been born. Marriage by courtship (*Pogbieli*) is a means of marriage in which the bride is courted for some time and finally escorted in a formal ceremony to the groom's home. Marriage by inheritance (*pog-kuori*) that is, when a man marries the widow of his deceased brother or cousin soon after the final funeral rites have been performed. Marriage by adoption. In this case, the girl is brought in very young ostensibly as a baby-

sitter (*biyogla*) but in fact, the ulterior motif is to groom her for marriage. Closely related to marriage by adoption is the practice of *dendeolung* that is when a woman encourages her husband to marry her own relative(s) for personal reasons; when she is unable to give birth or simply, to avert a situation that will prompt her husband to marry another woman who may turn out to be a very quarrelsome and recalcitrant rival. Other less dramatic means of marriage may include "*tin-pogo*", that is marriage between a patient and her healer. *Baloo-Poga* (friendship wife) is marriage contracted to strengthen the bond of friendship between families, or friends. *Pog-di-Kuroo* (gift marriage), usually happens when a man who distinguishes himself in his career or hobby is given a wife by his admirers or fans in order to be associated with him just as a man who rendered a useful service to a family could be appreciated by the head of the family giving out one of their daughters in marriage to him.

2.0 The Bride Chamber Practice

Among the Manlaala Dagaaba community, as soon as the bride is escorted into the groom's community (usually at night), she is made to spend the night with the groom's mother. The next morning after she has been introduced to the elders of the household, the groom's mother or aunt leads her to the venue which has been designated for the bride-chamber activities in the community. The venue is usually the home of a dignified and affable elderly woman often referred to as the *pog-yidiera*. The bride is to be in chambers for seven market days going through the *pog-paali deo* (bride-chamber) Process.

Subsequently, a white cloth is tied to a very long stick (*gbagli* or *Sankoro*) in the form of a flag and hoisted on top the house. This is to announce to everybody in the community, including strangers or passers-by that a bride is lodged in that home. According to Dong, one of the informants, it also signifies the pride of the community that one of its members has recently obtained a wife. This assertion was complemented by Suglo, one of the two female informants that in the past when the practice of eloping with married women was also allowed, a red flag was hoisted alongside the white one to signify an act of courage or valour on the part

of the new husband’s community. It was further revealed that this sometimes triggered retaliatory measures from the aggrieved husband’s community, culminating in rivalry that set them apart. When this happened, members of the communities involved were not allowed to inter-marry, a practice known as *dataalung*. In some communities, especially among the lo-Dagaaba, this form of rivalry have persisted to these days.

During the seven-day period enculturation, women in the community especially those who have the wherewithal, carefully select some of their decent outfits and lend them to the bridal host. These are intended for the bride as she is supposed to be elegantly dressed to march her status as a

Dagaare:

Bodari la mbaban
 Amine kagang juu paala daari la
 Ka dao aning poga dig bee kyiua taa
 Ana iwala, n ye ana l wala
 Ana dogi bie, ana dogi biihi

English Translation:

What day was it, I do not know
 It was perhaps a new moon’s day
 A man and a woman lock legs together
 For what purpose, I asked, for what purpose?
 To produce a child, I mean to produce children

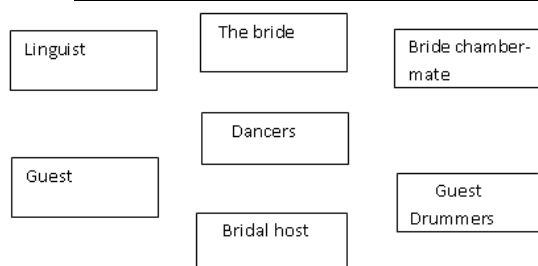


Fig 1. Sitting Arrangement:

However, any departure from the prescribed code of behaviour like coming in late or getting into the chamber with one’s hat on incurs a penalty, normally a token which culprits pay in good faith. In fact some guests deliberately break the rule just to attract attention and add to the fun of the occasion. While the women in the community take turn to serve the bride local delicacies such as *bombo* or *Sawala*, the men provide her with varied food stuffs like yam, rice, millet and guinea-fowls.

These activities continue until the seventh day which also marks the climax of the bride-chamber process; a day the bride is made to return to the groom’s family home. In the evening, everybody gathers at the venue to celebrate and witness the occasion. The climax is when the bride is asked to identify and choose certain individuals. She is presented with a cooked chicken carefully

queen (*pog-naa*) during the period. Thenceforth, the venue becomes a place for conviviality; every evening, the young folk in the community gather to eat and drink “*dang*” a local drink brewed from guinea-corn and to entertain themselves to the delight of the bride. Gorgeously dressed, the bride is flanked by a chamber-maid “*Zinkpegla*” and a linguist designates “*Kpambia*”. The sitting arrangement always conforms to a bride-chamber style. The atmosphere is generally gay; as some of the guest –entertainers play *kora* (*gombiri*) others take to the arena and dance to the delight of the bride and the host. The songs are usually typical of the bride chamber standard; vulgar and humorous:

chopped up for the ceremony. First, she is asked to identify her husband (*sira*) among the men paraded. This she does by presenting him with the thigh of the chicken amidst cheers and compliments. As soon as the excitement dies down, she is asked to choose her male confidant (*seni*) by presenting him with the wing of the chicken. Then, she chooses her female confidant (*kyena*) using the other wing. It was found out that the use of chicken to designate her husband and confidants is symbolic, for; traditionally it is the head of the family who is entitled to the thigh of a chicken, hence presenting him with the thigh of the chicken, she acknowledges that she is going to be absolutely submissive to him and treat him as expected of a wife in the traditional context. This can be inferred from the background that the Dagara social structure which is typically patriarchal accords the man a central place in the community. However, today, the Dagara society like many others throughout the world is undergoing a rapid transformation and in practice the woman is being accorded a considerable space in the society thanks to the benefits of formal education and the existence of institutions on women affairs. Collaboration between Government institutions such as Ministry of Women and Children Affairs and

NGO'S are not only ensuring that excesses of cultural practices that affect women are halted but also, empowering women and the female-child to assert their right and contribute meaningfully to the community's development. The '*seni*' and the '*kyena*' are persons she would have already borne in mind through her daily interactions with the guests at the bridal home. The next stage of the ceremony is when the bride is expected to answer a series of questions pertinent to her connubial role. These are questions whose answers she would have been taught and made to rehearse for the occasion. The first question is asked metaphorically: '*If you find yourself on the farm with your husband and it suddenly begins to rain, would you allow him to use your basket to provide shelter for his hen and its chicks?*' The answer to this question is expected to be "yes". The explanation given to this expression borders on the uxorial rights of the man in accordance with Dagaaba tradition. It also confirms the assertion that the use of figurative language among the Dagaaba people was as Apperson puts it, "a crystallized summary of popular wisdom fancy or ideal" (Bangnikon 1999).

The male and female confidants also take turns to ask her questions bothering on whether she would always confide in them or consult them whenever she needs advice especially when there is a misunderstanding in her marital home. To all these questions she is expected to answer in the affirmative. A few days later, the two confidants, that is the *seni* and the *kyena* will have to demonstrate their gratitude to her for choosing them among several others as her intimate friends by presenting her with guinea-fowls and a bowl of *dawadawa* or shea-butter respectively.

At this stage, someone among the audience would ask her "to whom will you serve the crumps (*sakori*) of the last dinner you scooped from the cooking pot?" she is supposed to answer, "To the *yidan-dao*" (head of the family). The most obvious reason for this answer as explained by an informant is that the Dagaaba society, like all other agrarian societies in Ghana sometimes is confronted with the vicissitude of their occupation which is drought and scarcity (*wari*). During such difficult times, the head of the family sometimes discreetly forgoes his

share of dinner just to ensure that every member of the house hold has something to eat, hence he might be starving the next morning as a result of going without dinner. The fact that she recognizes what the head of the family could be going through and is willing to serve him demonstrates her level of maturity because ordinarily, the crumbs are meant for children but every well groomed woman would first consider serving the man and would only serve the children after he declines the offer.

The last question the bride is asked before the guests disperse is based on two words, *kurubu* and *kpaalu*. *Kurubu* means to forge and shape an iron usually into a hoe or an adze by a blacksmith. In other words, it means to make a tool or an implement. When the hoe or adze is bought and used to a point where it depreciates or becomes blunt, it is sent back to the smith who reconditions and sharpens it, and this is what is known as *kpaalu*. Being a typically agrarian society, the Dagaaba are known for their extensive use of the adze (*lari*) and the different shapes of hoe (*kuuri*) in their farming activities. The contextual meaning of *kurubu* and *kpaalu* in this instance symbolically represents life and livelihood in the Dagaaba tradition as they are the main implements used in tilling the land which they depend upon for their livelihood. As expected of the bride, answering *kurubu* means she has come to stay and to build a family. Her answer attracts loud cheers and compliment from the audience. This means she recognizes the traditional role of a Dagaaba woman who represents home and comfort to the family to which she now belongs. Beside her conjugal duties as a spouse she is expected to demonstrate such qualities as hardworking, respectfulness and fecundity. Kwekudee (2014) summaries a traditional Dagara bride's quality in the following words:

According to the Dagaaba elders an ideal bride is one that is hardworking, physically fit and strong enough to be a *pog-kura* (female farmer) capable of all performing such activities as sowing carrying large loads of fire wood giving birth to as many children as possible However, if she chooses *kpaalu* it implies she has only visited the groom and his community on

purpose and will be leaving them as and when she pleases, just as the client will leave the blacksmiths work shop as soon as he or she is served. In fact, it will be considered very unusual if not bizarre for the bride to give such a response since the bridal host ensures that she is taught and made to rehearse the answers before going through the ceremony.

As this stage marks the end of the occasion, a basket is passed round for the guests to drop in whatever contributions they have for her. The amount of money realized on this occasion together with what has accrued from fines and other donations will later be given to her as seed capital to start a modest trade. Wishing her good night, the guests take their leave. The host waits until all is quiet and under the cover of darkness, she leads the bride to the groom's family home and hands her over to either the grooms mother or any elderly woman acting in that capacity.

Among some Manlaala speaking Dagaaba community, the bride may have to stay with the groom's mother or any elderly woman in the household for three more days before she moves in to live with the groom permanently. On the third day some rituals are performed geared towards preparing her psychologically for her first sexual encounter. In the course of the day, the groom's mother may ask her to tidy up his room and lay the bed. Then, towards evening, the groom's brothers and male cousins cook chicken. This is called "*Sen-nuo*" which literally means "lovers chicken". In an atmosphere devoid of any religious rites, they treat themselves to the chicken whilst poking fun at her with elements of sexual innuendos. They invite her to partake in the chicken but if she appears too shy to eat with them, they simply reserve a portion of it for her.

Culturally there exist a kind of joke between a woman and her husband's siblings and cousins among the Dagaaba. This is commonly referred to as "*dieng-taa*" which literally means "play-mates". In this respect a husband's brother, cousin or sister jokingly refers to her as "*nzeni*" which means "my love". In fact, this joking relationship sometimes begins right from the inception of the marriage or even during courtship. At bed-time, the bride is asked by the groom's

mother to move in and spend the night with him but, as is often the case, if she appears too shy or too timid to do as she has been told, she is led to the door-steps of the groom and coaxed to go in. However, if she turns out to be intransigent and refuses to be prevailed upon she may be forced into the groom's room and warned to stay.

2.1 Significance and Modern day Challenges

The bride – chamber practice is essentially one of the timeless and unique cultural practices of the Dagaaba speaking communities that promotes or preserves their culture. The significance of the bride chamber practice is not only to inculcate doctrines and practices in the bride but to serve as an avenue for other suitors to acquaint themselves with courting skills or ethics in the traditional context.

Before the bride moves in to stay with her husband permanently the practice (*Pogpaali-deo*) affords her the opportunity to learn from the host and the guests, aspects of the cultural practices of her new community that may differ from those of her agnostic home. Even though she may be of the same ethnic background as the groom, the fundamental moral views of their communities may vary to some extent. She will in turn, impart these values onto her children at their tender age and those members of the household who are directly under her care and influence. In addition to this, she is offered the opportunity to first and foremost interact with the people in the community especially those she would be interacting with in her daily routine and to choose among them both a male and a female confidant. Moreover, the bride – chamber practice helps to build the bride's confidence level and thus minimizes the nostalgic feelings that might have plagued her as a result of leaving her parents probably for the first time in her life.

Unlike in the past, however, most Dagaaba communities have now been connected to the national grid so individuals and families now enjoy variety of entertainments in their communities and very often in the comfort of their homes. Urbanization and formal education have resulted in a high incidence of migration from one's community to different towns or cities or even countries for

better opportunities. In his work published in Nordic Journal of African Studies (2008) entitled labour Migration among the Dagaaba of the Upper West region 1936-1957 Gariba B. Kora asserted that among the ethnic groups in Ghana, the Dagaaba are number one ethnic group known for their social mobility from the north to the south long before British Colonization of African.

Owing to time constraint and the distance between where they live and their home town, lovers who want to get married may only make time to visit their home town just for the man and his kinsfolk to pay the bride-wealth as demanded by the woman's family. Then, they quickly return to their place of residence, thus ignoring the bride-chamber aspect of the marriage. This neglect of the bride chamber practice is even more pronounced during cross-cultural and inter-ethnic marriages, thus, marriage between a Dagaaba and a member of different race or ethnic group since the bride chamber practice may seem too alien or less relevant to the non-Dagaaba partner who is not in tune with the Dagaaba cultural practices. However, these differences can be mitigated if partners discuss or study each other's culture by way of researching and reading books on the subject (Egheripou, 2010).

Moreover, the acrimonious circumstances that sometimes precede some marriages these days defeat the very essence of the bride-chamber practice. For instance, pre-marital sex which sometimes results in pregnancy and the controversy that ensues most often downplays the importance of the bride-chamber practice especially if the man appears to have been compelled to marry the woman. Unlike in the olden days, traditional practices and education always made girls vigilant about their sexuality; many girls felt delighted to be chaste in order to enable them to go through cultural practices such as puberty rites (Selby, 2010).

Most adherents of universal religions such as Christianity and Islam who are required to fulfill the requirement of the customary law (PNDC law 172) often overlook the bride-chamber practice since what matters most to them is to pay the bride-wealth so as to get clearance for the solemnization

ceremony in their churches or mosques. This is what Busia meant when he said:

Thus, we now find cultural expression tied to religious expressions, a characteristic of the world religions of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. This is in sharp contrast with the traditional African who is in tune with his or her cultural practices since to him or her; cultural practices are primarily participation in rites or rituals which are indeed, an expression of belief. (Busia, 1963)

2.2 Conclusion and recommendation

The bride-chamber practice of the customary marriage system of Dagaaba communities should not in any way be compromised for the sake of modernity as its performance or practice equips the bride with the requisite socio-cultural knowledge to fit into her new role as a wife, a mother and a member of her new community and thus promotes the family's well-being and the community's interest at large.

Our planet is increasingly becoming a global village and what happens in one sphere quickly spreads to the other; cultures of the world have come much closer to one another, hence no society can live apart or in isolation without posing its own life long insecurity. However; efforts should be made to abandon cultural practices that are obsolete or inimical to the advancement of the societies and instead, promote cultural practices that project the positive values of societies and self-identification.

Therefore, conscious efforts in the form of education and sensitization should be made by the people and especially Dagaaba scholars to preserve and promote relatively less known but useful cultural heritage such as the bride chamber practice of the Dagaaba communities for now and for posterity.

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