

Spiritual Foundations of Dagbamba Religion and Culture

This essay will describe the multifaceted religious environment of the Dagbamba people of northern Ghana.¹ Among the Dagbamba, Islam and animism are the dominant religious forms. There is an increasing penetration of Christianity which I shall not discuss here. Although there has been a Catholic presence for some time, and although there is a stronger Catholic presence in the Francophone country of Burkina Faso to the north, the recent efforts of Protestant missions have also had effect particularly among animists in villages. A number of American denominations are directly involved in the region, and others are indirectly involved through missions that have branched upward from southern Ghana. Primarily evangelical in character, the Protestant missions have also been energetic in providing developmental assistance such as clinics, agricultural inputs and literacy programs. Nonetheless, it is premature to assess either the longterm or even the immediate impact of Christianity on mainstream cultural patterns. The Christian missions have met no hostility from local Muslims, though fervent proselytizing does not seem suited to the cultural ambience, and some Muslims complained to me that Christians like to argue too much. To the extent that there is a competition for converts, however, it is rather Islam that continues to attract more new adherents. This essay will begin by placing the Dagbamba in a regional context, then proceed to describe the major examples of religious manifestation, and then conclude with a discussion of the Dagbamba kinship system as the cultural foundation of religious sentiment.

The Volta Basin in West Africa is a large savanna area nestled between the sweeping curve of the Niger River and the beginning of the tropical forest. The Volta Basin includes northern Ghana, northern Togo, the northern Republic of Benin and a major portion of Burkina Faso. This area, where the branches of the Volta River begin their journey, might well be characterized as a cultural laboratory of pre-colonial West Africa. The impressive states and confederations to north and south appear more consummate in their cultural hegemony: whatever traces that remain of the early inhabitants of the Ashanti, Dahomey, Songhay or Mande states seem insignificant in the anthropological record. The

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anthropological study of the Volta Basin, in contrast, has explored a landscape of varied social and cultural systems. From detailed studies of the great state of Mossi in Burkina Faso to the tiny Talensi area in northern Ghana, anthropologists have presented us with a number of fine ethnographies that nonetheless convey a sense of diversity in the region.

The area is united linguistically within the Central Gur branch of Gur languages, one of the major divisions of Niger-Congo. The dominance of Central Gur on the linguistic map suggests a common heritage for both the small-scale societies and the hierarchical states of the Mossi, Mamprusi and Dagbamba. To account for the broad axis of social organization among a linguistically related population, our most compelling conceptions typically reflect an image of layers of cultural patterns resulting from historical influences. Thus, much attention has been devoted to state formation, which has been generally considered to be an imported innovation imposed upon some of the aboriginal inhabitants more than five hundred years ago.² Added to this layer of experience is the introduction of Islam three or four hundred years ago.³ The period of profound western contact extends only briefly, less than a hundred years. Each of these historical influences has settled on the region only to an extent, bounded in its own effect yet also bound to the others in intricate ways. The small societies exist beside and sometimes under varying degrees of dominance by larger states; and within the larger states, the standards of the great historical influences are borne by distinct yet intimately connected groups. It is this jostling mix of experience that creates the impression of a panorama of cultural forms in complex relationships.

The ancient state of Dagbon in Northern Ghana, home to the Dagbamba people, certainly merits description as such a meeting ground. The boundaries of Dagbon are roughly an oval surrounding two towns that generally appear on global maps, Tamale in the west and Yendi in the east. The boundaries of the oval are just over a hundred miles east to west and about seventy miles north to south. About 450,000 people currently speak the local language, Dagbani, which belongs to the Oti-Volta group within Central Gur, though the number of Dagbani speakers includes some smaller cultural groups who are shifting from their earlier languages. Dagbani is the most widely-spoken indigenous language of the Northern and Upper Regions of Ghana. Among the other Oti-Volta languages are Nanuni, Mumpruli, Frafra-Nankani, Dagaare-Waale, Talni, Kusaal, Buli, Konkomba, Bimoba and Bassari; Moore is the major language of Burkina Faso. There are varying degrees of inter-comprehensibility among these languages, to the extent that their relationship can be compared to Romance languages. Within Dagbani, there are significant dialectical differences from east to west, with some further blurring at the periphery.⁴

A common language has long been a conventional means to establish the boundaries of a given culture. However, the Dagbani language is still not standardized, and we know little about the region's linguistic patterns during the past five hundred years. Although many contemporary perspectives subordinate the notion of cultural integrity, thus avoiding holistic metaphors of culture, Dagbamba themselves occasionally characterize themselves as Dagbani speakers. The interjection *Ŋŋɔ'iya*, which is typically used to preface speech, means roughly, "Excuse me, what I want to say is." Dagbamba cite usage of the word as a gloss for saying "someone who is a Dagbana," as in "Anyone who says '*Ŋŋɔ'iya*'" meaning "any Dagbana." The relevant linguistic issue in this essay is not so much to decide whom to include in Dagbamba culture. Rather, given the broader linguistic base, one might wonder whether one could legitimately extend a sense of regional cultural patterns into a conception of a cultural foundation for the Dagbamba. The purpose of loosening the linguistic criterion is to go beyond the clear idea we have about where the Dagbamba are in order to get closer to knowing about their way of life or about what it means to be a Dagbana.

Relying on sympathies that are reasonable to pursue even though somewhat more vague than linguistic factors, we might look as well at other fundamental elements of cultural life. The Dagbamba are distinguished from their neighbors by their elaborate political organization, a hierarchy of patrilineal chieftaincies that exerts authority over those who live in the towns and villages of the Dagbamba state. Their paramount chief, known as the Yaa-Naa, is in Yendi, and most other chiefs move from town to town, shifting their positions upward within a complex system with twelve major divisional chieftaincies under the Yaa-Naa. The reasons why the Dagbamba political system has attracted its share of scholarly attention are partly in recognition of an ancient and venerable achievement: since its founding, the state of Dagbon has been ruled by a single line, making Dagbon perhaps the oldest continuous dynasty in the world. Understanding the complex process of succession was an important concern of the British colonial administration and continues to preoccupy the Ghanaian national government.⁵

It has also been reasonable to assume that understanding the origin and development of the Dagbamba state would yield insight into the differentiation of the region's cultural groups. The generally accepted account of the region's history is that during the fifteenth century, the Dagbamba arrived in the region from the east, probably from a Hausa area. They had passed through the Guruma areas of Burkina Faso and occupied various places in northeastern Ghana before arriving at an area about twenty miles north of where Tamale now is. With horses and spears in their military technology, they conquered the indigenous inhabitants

and imposed their chieftaincy over the area that became Dagbon. The modern chiefs of Dagbon are descended directly from those early rulers. What we do not know is how many Dagbamba there were. Gradually, the Dagbamba were assimilated into the local population, and the fact that Dagbani is closer to the local languages than to Hausa would indicate that the conquerors were few in number. Five centuries and more than thirty chiefs after the Dagbamba arrived in the region, Dagbamba drummers say that there is no Dagbani whose family cannot be traced to some point on the line of the chiefs, and that there is no one whom they cannot praise with the proverbial praise-name of a former chief.

The traditional historians of Dagbon, a lineage-based guild of drummers, are those who know the most about the first chiefs of the towns. The story of such a distant time is shrouded in darkness, they say, and the story is also shrouded in secrecy: it is not told publicly, and its telling must be accompanied by sacrifices of animals. According to the drummers, the Dagbamba came as warriors under a single leader. At that time, there were no Dagbamba. Later, a quarrel among brothers, the children of the regional cultural icon named Naa Gbewaa, caused the group to separate, with some going north to found the Mamprusi state and others south to found the Nanumba state, each brother carrying the seed of chieftaincy. All three groups trace their starting to Naa Gbewaa. The Dagbamba chief who remained, Naa Shitɔbu, instructed his son, Naa Nyaysi, to wage war and place Dagbamba chiefs to rule over the towns, thus to secure chieftaincy for his descendants. At the time, each town was ruled by a local priest of the land. Such a land-priest is called *tindana* in Dagbani. Up to today, there are *tindanas*⁶ throughout the region and into the Mossi area of Burkina Faso. The word comes from *tiŋa*, meaning “town” or “land,” with the suffix *-lana*, which means “holder” or “owner.” In this case, the notion of stewardship of the well-being of the town predominates the notion of actual ownership, for the notion of *tiŋa* includes the land within and around the town that is related to the god or shrine of the place, known in Dagbani as the *buyli* (plural, *buya*), to which the *tindana* must make appropriate sacrifices. The usurpation of the *tindanas* was not complete, for the chiefs could not perform the sacrifices to local spiritual manifestations, and the surviving *tindanas* or their heirs returned to the towns for that purpose.

The gods of the land are many and diverse. Every Dagbamba town has at least one *buyli*, but there are a number of important *buya* that attract supplicants from other towns. Most notable are the Pong Tamale *buyli* at the town of the same name, and *Naawuni*, at the river between Dalun and Singa: both of these *buya* are known for acting strongly in cases of witchcraft and theft. There are also *buya* which one may beg for children or for health. Some of the important *buya*

are beyond the borders of Dagbon. The one the Dagbamba call *Yabyili*, “grandfather’s house,” is in the Talensi area on the plateau above Tongo, just south of Bolgatanga. People from all the regions of Ghana and even from other countries visit the shrine at *Yabyili* to cure sickness or barrenness or poverty or any pressing worry. I was told, “The *buya* were there before the Muslim religion came, and the gods are there today and tomorrow. They have been there for a very long time, and they are not for us Dagbamba alone. *Yabyili* is strong for every tribe. Some of the gods we have here are in other towns. *Yabyili* is in the Talensi land, and the *tindana* is a Talensi. There is a god at Yapei called *Bunnyamaashe*, and we Dagbamba go there, but Yapei is in the Gonja land, and the *tindana* there is a Gonja. There is a god at Chito called *Lansa*; Chito is on the road going to Salaga, in the Gonja land. And so, it is not ‘This is my tribe’s god’ or ‘This is not my tribe’s god.’ Anybody of any tribe can go to a god. That is how it is and people go to see the gods. If it is a true god, it is there for everyone.”

Buyli can refer both to the god and to the place where a sacrifice is made. The gods have various forms and are frequently associated with animals. The *buyli* at Pong Tamale is rain. *Naawuni* is a crocodile. As noted, these two are frequently called to act in cases of theft or witchcraft. *Zeyibu*, the god at Tampion, is a monitor lizard, and Tampion has another *buyli* in the form of bees. The bees at Tampion will not allow taxes to be collected at the market there. *Jaagbo*, the god at Tolon, is in the form of a snake. There is a god at Tamale called *Kpalanga* in the form of trees. *Takpala*, the god at Galiwe, is also a small tree: one of Yaa-Naa Zanjina’s wives went to *Takpala* to beg for a child and gave birth to Yaa-Naa Garba, and it has become a custom that new Yaa-Naas must go to make a sacrifice there, as well as at many other shrines. If a woman who goes to beg for a child is successful, the child often takes the name of the god. Thus in Dagbon, someone named *Lansa* either was given birth with the help of the *Lansa buyli* or was named after a grandparent who was a child of that god. Similarly, someone named *Tambo* is named after the *Tambo buyli* at the town of Sang. Children who are from *Yabyili* (Grandfather’s house) are called *Yapaya* (Grandfather’s woman) or *Yabdoo* (Grandfather’s man). It is also typical that a *buyli* will give a sign if the chief or the *tindana* of the town is going to die; if there is an animal associated with the *buyli*, that animal will enter the town. Also, a *buyli* must be “repaired” or “made well” annually with a sacrifice, normally at the start of the planting season. Every *buyli* is unique, but the ones that are considered strongest are the Pong Tamale *buyli*, *Naawuni* and *Yabyili*, as well as those to which the Yaa-Naa must sacrifice.

Up to now, most Dagbamba towns have both a chief and a *tindana*, and the *tindana* remains in charge of annual sacrifices and other matters regarding the *buyli* and the town. The *tindanas* inherit their positions in a variety of ways, mainly from father to eldest son, but matrilineal succession is not uncommon, and some *tindanas* are women.⁷ In some towns, the office can pass to the *tindana*'s sister's son, or it can alternate, passing from father to daughter to daughter's son. When a *tindana* dies, which one of the eligible people will be the new *tindana* is determined by divination or signs. Wherever that person is, a delegation of *tindanas* and elders will find him, stand in a circle around him, and notify him by throwing a donkey's tail at him, symbolizing the "old thing" that the *tindana* holds. At that point, the person's life just changes at once, and he or she returns home to assume the office. It is worth noting that another group of spiritual specialists, the soothsayers, inherit their bag of paraphernalia from their mother's brother. The contrast between chiefs and *tindanas* is more than a contrast of matrilineal and patrilineal customs, of older and newer systems. The chief is considered a "stranger" who has come to "sit" in the town and hopes to "go out from" the town as he advances through the chieftaincy hierarchy; the *tindana* is "a child of the town," rooted to the town by birth and by the office he will not leave until he dies. Four of the twelve divisional chieftaincies (Gushegu, Tolon, Kumbungu, and Gukpeogu) and several less powerful chieftaincies are given to commoners, that is, those who are not children or grandchildren of a Yaa-Naa; these chiefs resemble *tindanas* in that they do not move to another chieftaincy, they are from their towns, and they have a more active role to play in rituals.

It was after more than two centuries and sixteen chiefs, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, that Islam established a significant influence in Dagbon: at that time, a great Yaa-Naa, Muhammad Zanjina, brought learned Muslims to instruct the Dagbamba in the religion of Islam. Dagbamba say that Naa Zanjina "lit a lantern and opened the eyes of Dagbon," and they call him the "light of Dagbon." Islam was not unknown before Naa Zanjina: in the early to mid-seventeenth century, there were Muslim scholars of both Wangara and Hausa origin who passed through the Mossi state and into Dagbon and through Larabanga in the Gonja area. Nonetheless, Dagbamba attribute the introduction of Islam to Naa Zanjina because it was during his time that the people embraced Islam. Among the titled Muslim elders in the state, most are of Hausa origin, and there are only a few important titled family lines descended from Mossi and Wangara missionaries. At this time, somewhat more than half of the Dagbamba are Muslim. Many important customs are performed according to Muslim teachings, from the naming of children to weddings to funerals. In addition, there

is the full complement of religious organization and practice: Arabic schools, mosques, public prayer, clerics, Ramadan fasting, festivals, and so on. Recently, the Ahmadiyya movement has established a strong presence.

Insofar as adherents consider Islam the “final” religion, combining spiritual awareness with a guide for correct living, Dagbamba Muslims look to Islam for ideas about every aspect of life. Their splendid piety rests on the foundation of their unfaltering belief in God and their appreciation of the practical benefits of Muslim wisdom. Many Dagbamba distinguish three types of Muslims. In the first category are those who are able to read the Holy Qu’ran and who follow its teachings as well. The clerics are included in this group. In Dagbani, a cleric is called *afa* (plural, *afanima*), and a broader term in West African English is the Hausa word *maalam*. The next group is more numerous and includes those who cannot read but who pray in a Muslim way. Both types of Muslims are considered believers, those who have faith in the Muslim religion. Finally, there are those who pray but who also sacrifice to a *buyli* and to household shrines. People in towns are more likely than villagers to be Muslims: in eastern Dagbon, where there are many Konkomba people in the villages, the distinction is more pronounced; in western Dagbon as well, there are some particular towns where the local gods are strong. It is somewhat difficult to generalize about the distribution of Islam. For example, with regard to the four “elder’s” divisional chieftaincies of Tolon, Kumbungu, Gushegu, and Gukpegu, I have noted that these four chiefs resemble *tindanas*: they are not from the line of the Yaa-Naa but from the line of their town; they do not leave their towns to take another chieftaincy; even if there is a *tindana* in the town, they are also able to perform sacrifices to the *buya*. Nonetheless, Kumbungu and the villages around it are known for the number of their learned Muslims; by the same token, although the people of Tolon and the villages around it are more attached to the *buya* than to Islam, the late chief of Tolon, Alhaji Yakubu Alaasan Tali, was a figure of great national prominence and highly learned in Islam.

It is clear that by the time the militant Islam that penetrated the Niger Basin had passed through the Mossi states to reach Dagbon, it had lost much of its puritanical edge. That is not to say that Dagbamba Muslims are not devout. Dagbon was the major channel for Islam to penetrate further south in what is now Ghana, and Dagbamba maalams have for years, even centuries, been in attendance at the court of the Asantehene in Kumasi. Still, the overall impression is one of a society in which the practice of Islam is tempered by a number of other cultural factors. For a rather routine example, one can observe the normal situation of married women. Women are active economically, and many run their own

businesses without restrictions. There are only a very few households where the wives do not go outside the house; more typically, married women in public wear their veils atop their heads like scarves, without covering their faces. Nonetheless, Muslim social codes apply to women in such matters as inheritance. In many areas of Dagbamba social life, Islamic practice is compartmentalized. The most obvious illustration is the chiefs, who are Muslims and who have Muslim elders yet who also observe a number of animist practices such as coordinating the *tindana*'s sacrifices on behalf of the town.

Community celebrations are decidedly syncretistic. The five festivals in each year are all attributed Islamic origin: the fire festival (*Buyim*), the birthday of the Holy Prophet (*Damba*), the whipping of guinea-fowls (*Kpini*), the end of Ramadan (*Konyuri*), and the prayers during the pilgrimage month (*Chimsi*). One focal point of the *Buyim* (Fire) festival is the opening by malaams of talismans projecting the type of year in store for the town, a gathering on the morning after a torch-throwing procession. No malaam would go near the previous night's activities, in which young people carrying weapons dance to the ancient drumming of the *tindanas* and where, in the past, grudges were often settled. *Damba* is the biggest festival, and although maalams circulate to tell stories of the Holy Prophet, the festival is mainly a festival of chieftaincy, full of dancing and processions. The drummers say that when *Damba* was introduced by Naa Zanjina, he explained how Muslims celebrate the festival, but he said that because the Dagbamba were not "standing all that much inside the Muslim religion," they should celebrate the festival in a Dagbamba way, with drumming and dancing. I was told that another way to understand the *Damba* festival is that it began as a Muslim festival, but the chiefs "collected it and made it to be theirs." The other three festivals are less elaborate. Regarding the Guinea Fowl Festival (*Kpini Chuyu*), I was told: "The story behind the Guinea Fowl Festival is very clear on the part of the Holy Prophet Mohammed. But look at how we celebrate the Guinea Fowl Festival: you remove all the feathers of a guinea fowl, and you get a stick and start whipping it, and you will be telling the guinea fowl, 'You! You refused to give water to God's child, the Holy Prophet Mohammed.' And you will be whipping the guinea fowl and abusing it before you slaughter it. Do you think maalams do this? Maalams don't have anything or any work to do inside the Guinea Fowl Festival. But everybody knows that the Guinea Fowl Festival came from the Islamic religion." The two other festivals, *Konyuri Chuyu* (the Water Drinking Festival) and *Chimsi Chuyu*, take place at the end of Ramadan and during the pilgrimage month. All the Muslims in a town gather at one location for prayers; apart from a few ancillary activities, the major event in towns with important chiefs is a performance by

drummers of a selection from the epic body of the Dagbamba historical tradition, which chronicles the lives and accomplishments of the chiefs. Thus, although the rationale for the festivals is Muslim, the actual performances are directed toward many other facets of the social spectrum.

These facets reflect not only pre-Islamic religion but more particularly the deeper spiritual aspects of Dagbamba culture itself, which in this vein may be considered as a reflection of a descent group. Whenever one wants to understand African religious sentiments, it is usually prudent to follow the precept that ritual and religion will have strong associations with the family. Given the regional culture base, it is quite appropriate, therefore, to contemplate Dagbamba spirituality within a framework similar to the one sketched by Meyer Fortes, whose body of work on the Talensi is one of the greatest ethnographic efforts ever undertaken.⁸ Fortes' work concentrated on the religious elements of the Talensi kinship system to provide one of our most intimate views of what has been called "ancestor worship" or "ancestorism" as a way of practical morality, grounded in divination and sacrifice.⁹ On a broader political level, that of clan organization, similar religious sentiments support the notion of the tribe as a group of relatives. Fortes' detailed attention to the psychological dimensions of spiritual concerns provide a remarkably intimate portrait of the ways in which religious customs help Talensi through the crises of personal growth and responsibility; his broader analyses demonstrate the role of religion in providing specific resolutions for crises of social cohesion.

Talensi and Dagbamba societies are certainly distinct from one another, but the animist religious foundation of the region percolates through most aspects of Dagbamba spirituality. In households that are not strongly within the fold of Islam, there are family shrines, places where the family "medicine" (*tim*) is. On the walls, or just outside the walls, of such compounds, there is a place where sacrifices are made. Some households have their shrines inside of a room in the house. These shrines are called *bayyuya*, and the singular form, *bayyuli*, also refers to the practice of attending to the ancestors. I was told, "The *bayyuli* is the god of the house. These housegods are not gods like the gods of the land. The gods of the land are older than the housegods. The gods of the land gave birth to all of them. People sacrifice to all of them. When they give any sacrifice, then we Dagbamba say they are repairing the god. And so it is not one way in Dagbon here; every town has got its way, and every family has also got its way." *Tilo*, *Jebuni*, *Wuni*, and *Wumbee* are the main housegods. *Wuni* is Dagbani for "god," and *Wumbee* is a contraction of the words *wuni* and *bia* (child), thus "god's child." These two are found outside a house. *Tilo* and *Jebuni* are inside. *Tilo* is a

calabash that is with an elder woman in the family; the sacrifice to *Tilo* involves millet beer. *Jebuni* is a pot, and it is repaired with a goat when the new yams first harvested. Not every house has a shrine; the *bayyuli* is normally at the house of the head of the family.

The meaning of the word *bayyuli* is to stand quietly or secretly and look at something, in the sense that the dead people in the family are lurking about and looking at the family. I was told, “Any of these gods that is in a family is standing as the old thing or the old talk that is in that family. The typical Dagbamba take it that when they are begging it, they are begging their dead people. When they are going to repair the god, they call the names of the dead people who have died. The one who is in front will say, ‘My grandfather so-and-so, this is your water I am giving you.’ He will pour the water on the ground. And he will say, ‘My grandmother so-and-so, give me good sleep to sleep.’ He will call all those he knows, and he will call those he doesn’t know and they have told him about them. Any child who is in the family, if he gets a bad talk and goes to consult a soothsayer, maybe the soothsayer will tell him, ‘*Tilo* says that you get and eat, and you don’t give him. That is why you are not getting what you want.’ Or he will say, ‘*Tilo* says that you have forgotten of him, and that is why your children are dying.’ When this person hears that, he will tell the family so that they will repair it for him. He can go and meet the woman who is looking after *Tilo*, and she will agree and they will go to repair it. Somebody can be there, and he is dreaming dreams. He will not know where he dreamed and went. He will see some people he doesn’t know. The old typical Dagbamba have said and put it down that he is seeing his dead people. They say that the dead people will come and stand outside the door of his room and be looking at him. He will be seeing them in his dream unless he goes to repair his housegod.”

This description of the ancestors and the family shrines shares much with the types of descriptions that have become part of the broader ethnographic record of the region. In Dagbon, too, the family provides the context for interpreting the vicissitudes of destiny, and even Muslims who have nothing to do with sacrificing to *Jebuni* or *Wuni* would acknowledge the relevance of ancestral presences. People who pride themselves on their Muslim faith ascribe suffering and the presence of evil in orthodox ways, to the will of God or the reality of Satan among us, and they remain steadfast in their prayers. There are quite a few Muslims, however, who would see nothing wrong with visiting a soothsayer to find out more about their problems. As noted above, the main spiritual elements of solving a crisis involve finding out what is going on and then determining the appropriate sacrifice. In Dagbon, it is primarily professional soothsayers who are able to see

the fundamental situation and prescribe the sacrifice. These soothsayers (*baysi*; singular, *baya*) work with a marvelous assortment of things -- bones, cowrie shells, sticks, twigs, stones, pieces of metal -- kept in a bag. These are called the *baybihi*, or “soothsayer’s children.” The *bay’ kolgu*, or “soothsayer’s bag,” is an “old thing” that is inherited: it passes through women, to a soothsayer’s sister’s son, and thus if a soothsayer dies, the bag will “catch” the new soothsayer from among the soothsayer’s nephews. Soothsayers “look” to see which of the nephews will be “caught” by the “old thing,” and the bag cannot be refused without risking dire consequences through bad luck (*zuyu biεyu*, literally, “bad head”). The new soothsayer is taught and tested by older soothsayers before beginning to practice. In Dagbon, there are others who “see,” notably a group known as *jinwarba* whose members look into fire to see; others look into a calabash of water. It is the soothsayers who are the main group of diviners. They are professionals, and they even have their own chiefs and elders.

When visiting a soothsayer who is very adept, one might have to take one’s turn after many other people who are waiting for a consultation. The actual consultation is typically a rather matter-of-fact affair. The client does not tell the soothsayer anything, but rather states the problem “in his heart.” The soothsayer calls God (“This morning, what is on the earth?”), throws his *baybihi* and studies them, and then he will start telling his client what he has seen about the client’s situation. There are some situations in which the soothsayer is asked to “look” into a particular matter, such as a sickness or a death or the naming of a child, yet there are others in which the problem is quite vague, and the soothsayer will “see” a particular interpersonal or familial dynamic and report it to the client. In some situations, of course, there is no sacrifice needed. The soothsayer may say that a particular death was natural, that is, that there was no witchcraft or medicine involved. Or the soothsayer may identify the ancestor whom a newborn baby has “inherited,” that is, who has come back and whose name the baby will take. Or the soothsayer may help in making decisions where a choice is made difficult by customary processes, for example, to identify the family member who is to inherit the bag of a deceased soothsayer or to identify the suitor who can be chosen to marry a widow without incurring bad luck. When, however, there is a problem involving the sickness or obstruction, after the soothsayer has identified the cause, he will recommend a sacrifice, which might involve repairing the housegod but often simply takes the form of alms such as giving beancakes (*maha*) soaked in milk to children or animals.

Most people who patronize soothsayers obviously have a degree of trust in soothsaying, but they may still consult more than one soothsayer in a crisis, and

the soothsaying does not appear to involve much effort at persuasion. The soothsayer is mainly concerned to see the situation clearly, to the best of his ability. There is a Dagbamba proverb that says, “Someone who is not a person, when he talks, don’t accept it and don’t refuse it.” The explanation of the proverb given me was, “If a soothsayer tells you something, you should also soothsay in your heart. Then you will take your own sense to add to the soothsayer’s talk, and you will judge it. When you go to a soothsayer to consult, when you come back home, you have to be thinking in your heart about what he told you. If you soothsay in your heart, sometimes you won’t see anything of what the soothsayer has told you. If you don’t see it, how will you mind it? But if you don’t soothsay in your heart, and you just follow the talk of soothsayers and you keep everything the soothsayers say, it won’t do. At that point, who are you? You will be left alone. He will tell you and you will say, ‘Yes,’ but in your heart you will say, ‘If my eye sees.’ As for the one your eye sees, that one is true. And so what the soothsayer tells you, don’t accept it and don’t refuse it.” One may ask: why bother with soothsayers? The soothsayers are there and doing their work, and some are amazingly perspicacious. Those who have trust in soothsaying are those who have also been seeing what the soothsayers tell them; by the same token, they go to soothsayers because to them, when anything happens, the soothsayers have been telling them the truth. To an outsider, soothsayers perform what might seem like wonders. Within their own context, the soothsayers are evaluated empirically, that is, by their accuracy. This link between pragmatism and mysticism can be observed commonly enough in many religious contexts, for the type of insight involved in divination is limited in its application and is not analyzed or worked into a larger epistemological or theological perspective. A Muslim Dagbana might find this point to be a critical shortcoming, and he would make the argument that the soothsayer’s calling the name of God shows hypocrisy; to a Muslim Dagbana, faith in God obviates the need to consult soothsayers.

A similar approach characterizes the Dagbamba perspective on “medicine” (*tim*), a term that includes herbal treatments for sickness as well as magical amulets and talismans. A Dagbana might compare medicines to the *buya* in that no one knows how they work, and no one knows whether the medicine treated a person or the person got better on his own, or by the grace of God. In any case, a *tindana* does not necessarily have medicine, but there are some shrines where people go for treatment of sickness. *Yabyili*, as noted, is known for treating infertility. Medicines themselves are distinct, each with its own name, and the knowledge involved in their acquisition and application is also particular. Someone who has medicine (a *timlana*) may be able to treat only one sickness; in

other words, he has the medicine for that sickness. By the same token, someone may have medicines for many different sicknesses. Therefore, any person with medicine has the extent of his knowledge. Medicines are typically passed within the family from father to son and mother to daughter. The way Dagbamba talk about it, the medicine is “inside” the family, an “old thing” in the family; someone’s grandfather “ate it and put it down for him.” Medicine is also “repaired” annually, with the same sacrifices that were made when it was acquired. Apart from those medicines used to treat sickness, there are many medicines that have magical efficacy. *Liliga* (vanishing) enables one to disappear from a place of danger. *Vua* (calling) enables hunters to call bush animals and also enables its owner to attract people to himself. *Kabre* (tying) is used to immobilize people or prevent them from taking certain actions. *Tahinga* (shouting) can make an animal or a person fall down. *Sutuli* protects its owner against knife or cutlass wounds. *Muhili* protects against bad medicines given in food. There is a type of *chilo*, the antimony that people use to line their eyes, that as a medicine enables one to see bad people. *Lukuri* is used to acquire wealth. *Teeli* (remembering) is used by drummers to help them with the vast amount of information they must control. *Zambaga* (a cat) is used by drummers to make their wrists flexible in beating. There are so many medicines of this type that one cannot count them. One of the things soothsayers often do is to direct people to the place where they can get the correct medicines for their problems. A person looking for medicine will not ask for it directly. He or she will greet the owner of the medicine with gifts several times, until the medicine owner asks, “As you have been greeting me, what do you want? Say it. Don’t hide it from me. Do you want what is going to protect you? Tell me.” The one with the medicine also will not speak directly to ask whether the person wants medicine. The medicine can be eaten or drunk, sewn into a talisman or waistband or a tail, bathed with, or given in the form of a powder; Dagbamba call all these ways that the person has “eaten” medicine.

Muslim maalam also have medicines that do most of the same things. Maalam’s medicines are in two main forms. *Walga* is made by taking an edible ink (currently made by boiling down sugar) and writing prayers on a board. The writing is then washed off the board into a container; part of the liquid will be drunk and the other part will be used in bathing. *Sabli* is a talisman made by a maalam who writes the appropriate prayers on a piece of paper that is then folded and sewn into a leather amulet. Muslim Dagbamba say that maalam’s medicines come from the Holy Qu’ran in the form of prayers. When going to a maalam for medicine, therefore, one gives the maalam a greeting of cola and kerosene. The kerosene is for the maalam’s lantern, so that he may be reading and praying.

Maalams also make medicine to treat sicknesses, generally in the form of *walga*. They also prepare talismans for protection, to be buried at the sides of houses. The effectiveness of the maalams' medicines is attributed to the power of God, though some maalams also acquire reputations for greatness based on the strength of their medicines, a reflection of both their knowledge and their ability to pray. Nonetheless, Muslims accept the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of medicine as ultimately beyond human control.

A similar sentiment also characterizes the animist view: medicine is compared to a small child; when one calls a child, the child may or may not come. Both animist and Muslim cases suggest a tautology of sorts, that is, those for whom a given medicine works have belief in it, and medicine works for those who have belief in it. This point should not suggest that people conceive of the degree or sincerity of their beliefs as a adjunct to acquiring or taking medicine. In fact, a Dagbamba proverb counsels against trusting too much in medicine: "If you have the medicine that says no one will beat you, you should sit down quietly." In any event, to someone who is worried about a problem or fearful of particular dangers, or to someone who is inheriting medicine, it is normal to watch for signs, to think about or seek a solution, or to pray for one's hopes. Still, the effective agent is outside the individual, ultimately with God. The basic perspective regarding the mystical agency of medicine remains one of pragmatism. People say that a town without medicine is not a good town, and by the same token, medicine cannot solve every problem every time. They note that the same medicine that is used to treat a sick person who recovers is used to treat a sick person who dies.

If it perhaps appears that the medicines of maalams and animists are variations on the same theme, the reason is that all people with medicine look to God as the creator of medicines, just as God is the creator of the gods. Belief in God is virtually universal, and people call on God to help in whatever they are going to do. Soothsayers, *tindanas*, medicine owners, Muslims: they all ask God to help them or help the god or help the medicine. In their lengthy greetings, when people see each other or say goodbye, they call the name of God, *Naawuni*, literally, the chief god: they say, "God should give us tomorrow," or "God should give us good sleep," or "God should hear our prayers," or "God should make it well" or "God should take us to the new year" or "God should let us meet again at the Damba Festival." Greetings go on and on with each prayerful utterances eliciting a responsive reply akin to an "amen." Simply put, the Dagbamba idea of God is that of the Creator, and therefore everything exists or works because of the power of God. This idea of God as the ultimate reality behind any other agent is a familiar motif in African religions, a motif that lends itself as well to an conception of remoteness.

Dagbamba say, “Nothing can be compared to God.” God is therefore beyond knowledge, with a presumed will or purpose that cannot be questioned. The indigenous view fits nicely with Islamic motifs, and it is difficult to separate the fundamental inspiration of piety between Muslims and animists, despite their many differences in practice. Both Muslims and animists observe the limits of human power. They note the scale of the earth and the scale of human endeavor. They note the transformations of germination and growth. And most conclusively, perhaps, they note that a human being cannot prevent the death of loved ones. Their frequent references to God remind them of both their intentions and their limitations and reinforce their piety. Maalams say that one should visit sick people in order to understand the fundamental frailty of human strength, so that a person may realize the importance of putting trust in God and accepting the will of God. For animists, neither the vicissitudes of the gods nor the bad purposes to which medicines can be used reflect poorly on God, and Dagbamba do not devote much attention to the issue of theodicy. A Dagbamba proverb, beaten as a praise-name by drummers, says simply, “A human being is bad; God is not bad.”

When drummers pick up their drums for any important event, the first things they beat are a number of proverbs praising God. They start the drum history and many other types of beating with a song called *Dakoli N-nyɛ Bia* (A Bachelor is a Child), which has many variations that address the Dagbamba belief in God. The phrases are responded to with the refrain, “Truly, it is the Chief of chiefs”:

A bachelor is a child; a married person is senior.
The person who has someone to hold him will eat, My God; a person who
has no one to look after him will not eat. My God!
The person who has no owner should sit down. My God!
The one who says God is not chief, My God,
He should look at his front and look at his back, and know God is chief.
He should take a round thing and know what is inside it. My God.
The one who says that God is not God,
He should take a honeycomb and know its front and its back.
And know that God is God, the One who has chieftaincy.
The one who says that God is not God,
He should take a piece of cloth and know its wrong side.
And not God, and Who?
He is the one who takes one town’s prince and makes him another town’s
slave.
He is the one who takes one town’s slave and makes him another town’s
prince.

He is the one who takes someone with ten wives and makes him a bachelor,
 And takes a bachelor and makes him a man with ten wives,
 And takes a large-house owner and makes him a small-house owner,
 And takes a small-house owner and makes him a large-house owner.
 He is the one who makes a food-owners' child,
 and he then lets him eat left-over food from his fellow man's dishes.
 And not God, and Who?
 The one who creates a rich man's child and takes him to make a poor man,
 And takes a poor man's child and makes him a rich man.
 And not God, and Who?
 A small drummer takes his drumstick in his hand, and beats and cries God,
 the Chief of chiefs.
 A farmer's child takes a hoe in his hand, he farms and cries God, the Chief
 of chiefs.
 A horserider's child takes reins in his hand, he rides and cries God, the
 Chief of chiefs.
 The chief hunter's child takes a bow and enters the bush, he shoots and cries
 God, the Chief of chiefs.
 A small maalam takes paper in his hand, he reads and cries God, the Chief
 of chiefs.
 A cotton-spinner's child takes a spindle in his hand, he spins and cries God,
 the Chief of chiefs.
 Everyone's crying does not leave out God, the One with strength.
 And Who?
 Truly, it is God!
 My Lord God does his work of strength.
 He is the one who creates a mountain that cannot be climbed or passed.
 He is the one who makes a person and makes his head and his eyes.
 He is the one who makes man and makes his hands and his arms.
 And not God, and Who?
 Truly, it is God!

Dagbamba who are asked about God might frame their reply with images or ideas from this well-known song in their musical heritage.

Dagbamba society displays a mixture of religious customs in ways that we might think of as exclusive, yet certain basic sentiments seem present throughout the variety of religious forms one sees in Dagbon. It is not merely a matter of Muslim and non-Muslim customs existing side-by-side or intermingled, as has

been noted with regard to the major community festivals. Nor is there reason to infer that there is an issue of comparative depth of religious inspiration. There seems rather to be a continuum in which religious sentiment changes its center of attention rather than its profundity. The ancestorism that is the foundation of spirituality in the broader cultural region remains strong in Dagbon. There are Muslims who are strictly orthodox, and there are animists who do not mix anything they do with Islam. In between are a large number of people who can be served in similar ways by specialists from either group. Muslims do not keep and repair their housegods, and *tindanas* do not sit down and consult with maalam. But there are still occasions when some Muslims might go to seek advice from a soothsayer or treatment from a shrine. And there are some animists who will at least learn how to pray Muslim prayers so that they might participate in the assembled prayers during the *Chimsi* and *Konyuri* festivals; they even have a name, as one might expect, “festival prayers.” The boundaries of Islam are typically well-defined, and Islam has made great contributions to Dagbamba custom. To the Dagbamba, Islam has “opened their eyes” and helped them improve many aspects of their cultural life, yet they see Islam as an agent of “increase,” as something that has “added to” their tradition. When they wish to describe their culture in fundamental terms, that is, in terms of what makes them distinct as a people, most of them tend to talk about chieftaincy and, by implication, their descent group.

The heritage of their chieftaincy is what has separated the Dagbamba from the other peoples of the Volta Basin. Dagbon is a politically elaborate centralized state that has existed for centuries under a single dynasty. In the typical accounts of invasion and of the usurpation of the *tindanas*, it seems that the Dagbamba are portrayed as almost two groups: a ruling elite and a larger population of indigenous people who have been brought under the influence of the elite’s centralized and patrilineal political organization. The chiefs who move from town to town as they ascend the chieftaincy hierarchy are considered “strangers” to the towns, and with a few exceptions, it is the chiefs and the princes from the chieftaincy line who are qualified to contend for chieftaincy. As noted, though, since drummers can praise every Dagbamba with the name of a chief, the separation of chiefs and commoners that is such an evident social factor seems rather to be only an apparent reality. Perhaps the conquering horsemen were few in number and were themselves thoroughly assimilated, as the linguistic evidence might suggest. Perhaps the ancient *tindanas* were already evolving into a statist political system, as some historical data suggest,¹⁰ and the cultural transition under the conquerors was relatively seamless. The longevity of the ruling dynasty is itself a

kind of evidence that the establishment of the Dagbamba state did not involve immense cultural conflict: a rigidly stratified social structure would have tended toward excess, toward a greater degree of autocracy, or toward greater instability in the relations between the Yaa-Naa at the center of the system and the aristocracy at the periphery, as had occurred when the line of the original invaders split to form the Dagbamba, the Mamprusi and the Nanumba. In simplest yet most profound terms, what holds the Dagbamba together is the understanding that ultimately they are one family. This understanding is the foundation of the social cohesion that prevented constant political contestation and even occasional civil war from destroying the unity of the state. Throughout Dagbamba history, whenever there was a civil war among princes and chiefs, the contesting parties would come together at the end to bury their brothers and move on, holding the idea that they were a family. That family includes the commoners, who also consider themselves and are publicly shown by drummers to be members of the conquerors' descent group. Who then were the people who were conquered, if not the same people? I was told that it is a closely guarded cultural secret that the earliest chiefs, those who ruled before Naa Nyayisi's war against the *tindanas*, "came out of the *tindanas*."

According to the genealogy I was given, there were eight chiefs between the one who led the group of warriors to northern Ghana and Naa Gbewaa, Naa Nyayisi's grandfather. It was during the time of these leaders that many of the customs surrounding the Yaa-Naa's chieftaincy were established. Put another way, the earliest leaders were not Dagbamba chiefs but *tindanas*; they had taken over a *tindana's* chieftaincy and had become a part of the *tindana's* line, and only later did they extend their rule and establish the chieftaincies of the towns under one family. In that genealogy, it is significant that both the father's side and the mother's side of the chieftaincy line should enter and mingle with *tindanas*. In contrast, it is not unusual for conquering groups or ruling elites to hide their relation to their mother's side, which in time includes the line of the conquered or indigenous people from whom the conquerors took wives and gave birth. The secrecy with which this connection is hidden obviously supports the status quo, the idea that the elite is separated from the commoners, and thus the stratification of the state makes more sense to all concerned. Apart from a few drummers, the subtleties of the assimilation of the chiefs is not something people even think to inquire about. The reason this issue takes on religious significance is that the political system has been a major focus of spiritual intensity. The replacement of *tindanas* with chiefs may have taken only several generations, but the more immense cultural movement occurred gradually: the transition from ancestorism

within affiliated or isolated lineages to a system in which a single descent group gave a unified conception of a tribe or people. Along the way, the Dagbamba developed a complex set of institutions surrounding chieftaincy.¹¹

In much the same way that the Islam has accommodated the spiritual base of its adherents' lives, the political system has developed within the fundamental context of ancestral significance. The chieftaincy is inherited; Dagbamba say that chieftaincy is "in the bone," with the implication that there is never a break between "how a person started" and what he or she is. Turning around the obvious point that one cannot contest for most chieftaincies unless one has a claim through inheritance, one can view a claim to succession as a claim to direct descent from the original conquerors. This affiliation is posited even if the relationship is not direct. Thus, although most contestants for chieftaincy are indeed the children and grandchildren of chiefs, if a chief dies without children, it is possible for his nephew (his sister's son) or his grandson -- if that person is the one who is wanted for the chieftaincy -- to stand as his "son" who will claim his "father's" chieftaincy, thus maintaining a direct line. (His brother's sons are already in the direct line through his father or grandfather.) When Naa Nyaysi placed his followers as chiefs of the towns, some of them were his father's brothers and his own brothers, but these chiefs are called "sons" of Naa Nyaysi, and the drummers praise them as such. Despite what an outsider might assume, such issues of fictionalized legitimacy do not present ambiguities within the patterns of succession or within the genealogy. The main moral dilemma involved continues to be ancestral: in asserting one's unambiguous place in relation to the heritage of chieftaincy, the inheritor places himself in an ambiguous moral relationship to the past chiefs, his ancestors. Chiefs are motivated by their knowledge of the deeds of their fathers and forefathers in whose place they stand, and they measure themselves against the standards of the office they have inherited. In a crisis, they think of the past chiefs who are now dead. Their elders will remind them of what such-and-such a chief did. The drummers beat drums and address the chiefs with the praise-names of their ancestors.

At towns or villages with major chieftaincies, the installation of a new chief is often accompanied by a performance of the drum history, which is normally only beaten during the two festivals noted above. This performance will typically move to conclude with the line of the new chief. The drum history, a drummer told me, "tells a chief about his forefathers and lets a chief know what is inside chieftaincy. And for any Dagbana, whether man or woman, it tells that person who he is. The drum history will open his eyes to the old talks that are inside his family, and it is inside his praise that he will know his relationship to chieftaincy."

During the performance, an animal is sacrificed, and there are two explanations given for the sacrifice: first, the history often contains accounts of wars and bloodshed, and the blood of the sacrifice is necessary as commemoration; second, the spirits of the past chiefs are still around, roaming, and they are dangerous because they do not like to be talked about, but they can be placated with the blood of the sacrifice. Such ritual relations between living and dead are an important aspect of the association of history and ancestorism, in which the past chiefs are ancestors with regard to whom the living stand in ambiguous moral relation. The history itself has several examples of sitting chiefs who are reminded of the dead chiefs if they do not rise to the level of the tradition they have inherited.

The ceremonial environment of chieftaincy is extremely dense, and many customs serve to affirm the relationship between past and present chiefs. When a Yaa-Naa is installed, he wears or sits on or comes into contact with the regalia of the dead Yaa-Naas -- gowns, amulets, hats, walking sticks, stools. When a chief dies, Dagbamba say, "The chief is not dead. He is roaming." Formerly when a Yaa-Naa was terminally ill, nobody even saw him die: an elder would tie a bell to his leg, with the idea that when a person dies, he shakes himself; after the ringing of the bell, the elders would wait, and if the bell did not ring again, they would call a person with medicine to look into the room to see if the chief was dead or had transformed himself and gone away, and then they would announce simply, "The earth has shaken." When any major chief is buried, his body is lifted up and he is made to walk to his grave. When the new chief is installed, they say, "The chief has roamed and come back." The office of chieftaincy itself is called the "skin," after the animal skins on which the chief sits. The office, which represents the tradition of chieftaincy as well as the family of the chiefs, seems larger than the person holding it. During the time before the final funeral observances are performed and a new chief is chosen, anywhere from three months to a year, the eldest son of the dead chief sits in his father's place as the *Gboɣlana*, the "holder of the skin." When a new chief is chosen, he makes sacrifices at the shrines that have precedents in custom, not only to the *buyli* of the town but also to places of significance in the history of that chieftaincy. The installation is attended by other chiefs or their representatives, with various protocols of greeting and gift-giving that solidify the sense of family among the royals as well as put to rest the contentions of the unsuccessful rival claimants.

It is the Yaa-Naa who gives major chieftaincies, and although he is supposed to respect the recommendations of other chiefs and elders as well as the traditions of the various towns and villages, these chieftaincies are acknowledged

as being given to “the one the Yaa-Naa wants.” The Yaa-Naa himself, however, is chosen in an ambiguous way from among several people who are qualified for the chieftaincy by virtue of their position in the hierarchy. When the Yaa-Naa “is not there,” it is the elders of Yendi who choose the new chief by consensus, but the selection is not represented in that way. Rather, the selection is often represented as based on the divination of soothsayers, a point reminiscent of the selection of *tindanas*. In reality, the many titled elders in Yendi include several who have relatively greater say in the choice, as well as important roles in the installation procedures, as do powerful “elder” chiefs, particularly the chief of Gushegu. A large number of elders are each responsible for discrete sections of installation, and the failure of any one of them to perform his part can throw the whole proceeding into question. Nonetheless, the soothsayers are given the credit for finding a chief whose rule will benefit the people. The one chosen is “the one God wants,” not the one the elders want. Most drummers, if they decide to talk about the selection, will say that the soothsayers do not choose the Yaa-Naa, but one learned drummer I knew compared the involvement of soothsayers to a large mat that is hanging in front of the selection proceedings. What they are covering up, he told me, is the role of the elders. If not that, the disappointed claimants would have cause for complaint. The mystical element of the soothsayers’ vision prevents the highly politicized selection from appearing overtly political. The traditions surrounding the installation regalia lend further authority to the choice. The selection and installation of a Yaa-Naa involves many people, and their efforts are testimony to a sensitivity regarding the way in which the heritage continues to solve their problems for them.

Most Dagbamba look toward deeper elements of the customs they observe with an eye that respects the spiritual weight of their forebears’ experience and accepts the moral authority of the sanctions that accompany their customs. They reflect upon the importance of “what we grew up and met” as a benefit they can pass on to their children. They understand that it is their continuing involvement that revitalizes the heritage, but they also rely on the mystification and ritualization of enough elements of social processes to control contestation. As is the case with religious sentiment in many parts of the world, a mature understanding of their moral universe does not threaten their appreciation of the importance of faith and belief. As in other religions where a historical record is a factor in religious perspective and practice, it is difficult to distinguish the subtleties that might separate belief and knowledge, and it is also difficult to distinguish the work of God from the spiritual force of their traditions. The pragmatism that I have noted with regard to divination and medicine is no less

relevant in a broader context. People observe their tradition as it affects theirs and others' lives. They would understand the way modern psychologists describe culture or tradition as a challenge or a threat to a person who is growing up and must come to terms with it in order to achieve personhood. For Dagbamba, the resolution involves identifying with the wills of their parents and those who gave birth to them, as far back as they can know. The ancestors represent the tradition, and Dagbamba experience their tradition as a living body of thought; moreover, they acknowledge its effects in a manner that ascribes to it an intimation of agency. Their observations indicate that those who ignore its prohibitions often suffer; I was told, "What is forbidden does not walk. Nobody sees it. But it is waiting. It is only if you do it that you will see it and know it." At the same time, they can also understand the role of belief in pragmatic terms. I was told, "Formerly, the old people used to put their hands in their pockets. If a child did something bad, they would say, 'There is something in this pocket: it will catch you.' And the child would keep quiet. Can something that catches people be inside a pocket? But what the old people were saying is better than how some of this modern time's people have come to look through the pocket and see that there is nothing in the pocket. When there was something inside the pocket, it was good. It was hidden, and it had respect, and people were fearing it. But what they have removed from the pocket, nobody fears it, and it does not have respect."

In Dagbon, people's efforts to maintain and add to their tradition display a prolific reflection of ancestorism. In their religious imagination, they nurture and dwell within a deep intuition for how they started and its meaning for them. Reviewing the example of chieftaincy, it is quite easy to comprehend how the precedence of the office of chieftaincy over the person of the chief is reinforced by the broader cultural sentiments that bind the living family and the ancestors. In Dagbon, the important transition that distinguished the Dagbamba from the other cultural groups in the region can be envisioned as much in religious motifs as in political ones. The unification of the towns and villages under the rule of a centralized state was also the unification of separate families into a one larger family. The evolution of hierarchical political form was also the evolution of an elaborately segmented family. It is probably not important to choose which type of institutional processes, political or religious, might have had the greatest significance in the development of Dagbamba society. It is certainly logical to assume that the cultural capacity for that development had to have been in place and that Dagbamba history stands on that foundation. It is therefore justifiable to assert that in the Dagbamba context, the family should be perceived with an appreciation for its full spiritual power, and with such a perspective, we can at

least get a sense of the affinity between the people and their cultural creativity. This perspective is one of historical continuity. One can ascertain the presence of ancestorism in Dagbamba culture where religious motifs are apparent or obscure. From the many complexes of customs that surround the chieftaincy system that is their central institution; to the customs that reflect the way that Islam was adopted and institutionalized; to the many aspects of their daily life in which respect for older generations, for origins and for the heritage of the past guide their reasoning: we may appreciate that much of the deliberateness with which the Dagbamba maintain their traditions is a product of religious inspiration.

-- John M. Chernoff

NOTES:

1. Much of the primary data in this essay was developed with the aid of grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Science Foundation, the Social Science Research Council, and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. A comprehensive ethnography on the Dagbamba is in progress: John M. Chernoff and Alhaji Ibrahim Abdulai, with the collaboration of Alhaji Mumuni Abdulai, Kissmal Ibrahim Hussein, Benjamin Danjuma Sunkari and Mustapha Muhammed, *A Drummer's Testament: The Culture of the Dagbamba of Northern Ghana*, 3 volumes (<http://www.adrummerstestament.com>).
2. See J. D. Fage, "Reflections on the Early History of the Mossi-Dagomba Group of States," in *The Historian in Tropical Africa*, edited by J. Vansina, R. Mauny, and L. V. Thomas (London: International African Institute and Oxford University Press, 1964).
3. For a general account of the introduction of Islam to the region, see Nehemia Levtzion, *Muslims and Chiefs in West Africa: A Study of Islam in the Middle Volta Basin in the Pre-Colonial Period*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968.
4. For further information, see the chapters on Gur by Tony Naden in *The Languages of Ghana*, edited by M. E. Kropp-Dakubu (London: Kegan Paul International, 1988), pp. 12-49; and in *The Niger-Congo Languages*, edited by John Bendor-Samuel (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), pp. 141-68.
5. The main colonial document is H.A. Blair and A.C. Duncan-Johnstone, eds., *Enquiry into the Constitution and Organization of the Dagbon Kingdom* (Accra, Ghana: Government Printing Office, 1931). See also Phyllis Ferguson and Ivor Wilks, "Chiefs, Constitutions, and the British in Northern Ghana," in *West African Chiefs: Their Changing Status under Colonial Rule and Independence*, edited by Michael Crowder and Obaro Ikime (New York: African Publishing Corp, 1970). The records of national government involvement are mainly to be found in the various reports of committees of inquiry, such as Ghana Government, *Report of the Yendi Skin Affairs Committee of Inquiry* (Accra, Ghana: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1974) and *Report on the Yendi Skin Enquiry, December 1968 to July 1969* (Accra, Ghana: Ghana Publishing Corporation, n.d.).

6. The correct plural form of *tindana* is *tindaannima* or *tindamba*, but in the context of this essay I have anglicized the plural for simplicity.
7. A female *tindana* is called *tindaampaya*.
8. Meyer Fortes, *The Dynamics of Clanship among the Tallensi: Being the First Part of an Analysis of the Social Structure of a Trans-Volta Tribe* (London: Oxford University Press, 1945); *The Web of Kinship among the Tallensi* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949); *Oedipus and Job in West African Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959); *Religion, Morality, and the Person: Essays on Tallensi Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
9. Such terms have been criticized with much validity. See, for example, John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1970], pp. 11-12. My decision to use them is based simply on general convention.
10. See Peter Skalnik, "Early States in the Voltaic Basin," in *The Early State*, edited by Henri J.M. Claessen and Peter Skalnik (The Hague: Mouton, 1978), pp. 469-93; also, Skalnik, "The Dynamics of Early State Development in the Voltaic Area," in *Political Anthropology: The State of the Art*, edited by S. Lee Seaton and Henri J.M. Claessen (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), pp. 197-213.
11. For a comparative view on the Mamprusi, see Susan Drucker-Brown, *Ritual Aspects of Mamprusi Kingship* (Leiden: Afrika-Studiecentrum; Cambridge: African Studies Center, 1975).