

## **The Dagaaba Traditional Belief System: A Documentary for Posterity**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Contemporary Dagaaba writers, poets, and scholars are increasingly engaging with their ancestral heritage, weaving traditional spiritual motifs into their works as a form of cultural reclamation and intellectual resistance. The Dagaaba Traditional Belief System: A Documentary for Posterity explores the enduring spiritual worldview, ancestral practices, and sacred rituals of the Dagaaba people of north-western Ghana and southern Burkina Faso. This documentary project aims to preserve and document the core tenets of the Dagaaba indigenous religion, including its cosmology, ritual performances, oral traditions, and sacred spaces, all of which are deeply interwoven with daily life and communal identity. Amid increasing modernization, religious transformation, and cultural erosion, the documentary serves as a visual archive for future generations and a scholarly resource for those interested in African indigenous religions, cultural heritage, and epistemologies rooted in oral and ritual traditions. Through close readings of a selected text; Namalnee, this study examines how literature becomes a site for cultural preservation, resistance, and the reimagining of indigenous epistemologies. It situates this revival within broader postcolonial and decolonial literary movements in Africa, arguing that Dagaaba literature offers a powerful model for

the continuity and transformation of indigenous belief systems. The study presents a belief system that continues to shape the spiritual and cultural landscape of the Dagaaba people. It calls attention to the urgency of preserving intangible heritage and repositioning African spiritualities in contemporary cultural discourse.

**Keywords:** *Dagaaba spirituality, Dagaaba cosmology, Indigenous religion, Dagaaba rituals, Dagaaba cultural heritage, Sacred practices*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This study is a literary documentary of the Dagaaba traditional belief system. It identifies some traditional beliefs as portrayed in a tragic play *Namalnee*. It focuses on a critical analysis of how the Dagaaba traditional belief system reflected in the text and beyond. The study is aimed at discovering the traditional and philosophical underpinnings that give rise to a clear understanding of the complexity of the Dagaaba belief system of life. It covers almost all spheres of human endeavor such as politics, religion, social, economic etc. Issues bothering spirituality, divination, dreams and their interpretations, taboos, spiritual animals, sacred places, days, moments and other tangible objects and their connotations among others that reflect the Dagaaba traditional belief system are discussed in this study. The study is in five sections. Section 1 is the introduction, which covers the background information, research questions and significance of the study. Section 2 presents the background of the study. Here, relevant literature that is related to the study is reviewed. In section 3, the methodology is discussed while section 4 is the discussion of the data. Finally, section 5 concludes the study.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### *The Dagaaba*

Dagaare shares very close affinity with other languages of the Gur branch of the Niger-Congo language family like Dagbanli, Moore, Gurune, Mampruli, and Kusaal. Bodomo (2000) refers to these West Oti-Volta languages as Mabilia. Dagaare is the language of the Dagaaba who live in Dagao, a predominantly agricultural community, found in the north-west part of Ghana called the Upper West Region and adjoining areas of Burkina Faso and Northern region.

Dagaare, Dagara, Waale and Birifor are the four major dialects that make up the language. However, there are some other scholars, in Ghana and African francophone linguists in Burkina Faso, who would include Wule and others as dialects of Dagaare. The standard Dagaare is the one which was approved by a language committee to be used and studied in School at all levels of education. The discussions on this work are focused on the standard Dagaare because it is the one that represents the other dialects at the National level. Dagaare refers to the language and the term Dagaaba (singular, Dagao) also refers to the people, Bodomo (1997, 2000), Saanchi (2006, 2007) and Nanbigne (2008). Bodomo (1997) identified the major towns covered by this linguistic group in Ghana to include Lawra, Kaleo, Nandom Wa, Jirapa, Ullo, Daffiama, Hamile and Nadowli all in the Upper West Region. The language is also spoken in Tuna and its surrounding areas in the Northern Region of Ghana which shares boundary with the Upper West Region.

### ***Synopsis of B. P. Kansoh's Namalnee***

The play *Namalnee* which literally means; *Will harm person*, is a play written in Dagaare by B. P. Kansoh in 1984. Its literary and philosophical meaning could be interpreted to mean, *if a person intends to do bad or something evil to another person, he/she will end up harming oneself*. *Namalnee* is a **tragic** play that is structured into three (3) acts and thirteen (13) scenes that is 5, 3 and 5 respectively.

This is a play which centers on a young orphan by name Ankaabale whose parents are told to have died as a result of the spiritual and wicket deeds of Maaleko, the uncle of Ankaabale. After the death of the parents, the boy is subjected to various forms of humiliations and misdeeds in the hands of Maaleko and his wicket wife Tolagma. The inhumane treatment this boy receives from his uncle and his wife ranges from denial of food, insults, lies told on him, breaking of his fingernails with the hammer and the like. He is unjustly made to pay for the wrong doings of their own son Bayoo. Ankaabale never enjoys his God given human rights with any peace of mind. It so happens that Bayoo keeps stealing the father's money and Ankaabale will always be accused of it to the extent that they break his fingernails with a hammer. On one of such usual theft cases, Bayoo indirectly curses himself by pronouncing the Land god/Earth goddess on the person who steals the money just to pretend in the face of the parents when he knows very well that he himself is the

perpetuator of the act. Eventually, the god never spares Bayoo's life and the innocent Ankaabale is again accused of having a hand in the death of Bayoo. He is therefore made to go through the ancient practice, trial by ordeal. As tradition demands, the accused person(s) is usually made to drink *yo bēē*, a poisonous substance usually prepared by a virgin under the directives of the gods to prove one's innocence in the presence of the *Teŋe Naa* (Chief of the area), *Tendaana* (Land priest), elders as well as all other citizens.

Akonwe a young princess quickly entangles herself by volunteering to prepare the substance under the influence of her brother Nenfaayeli, the friend of Ankaabale so that they can manipulate the content of the substance. At the point of drinking the substance the young orphan is not given a fair hearing to narrate his experience. The Earth goddess disguises herself into an old lady, cautions the chief and elders but they wouldn't listen. Ankaabale takes the *yo bδδ* and survives it, then his uncle is fined to purify the land for defiling it with falsehood. Experience has it that nobody ever takes the *yo bēē* and survives it even though it is claimed to be meant for proving one's innocence.

The dream of Ankaabale and Akonwe getting married to each other will not see the light of the day as long as they continue to live with Maaleko hence, the plot by Ankaabale, Nenfaayeli and Akonwe to get him killed which is also one of the taboos of the land. At the point of the execution of their plot, the Earth goddess again appears as an old lady and cautions them but they take her for a different woman and wouldn't listen to her. Spiritual birds such as *Vig* (awl), *ηmane* (dove) and *Gogō* (horn bill) all show up to caution them against the act they are about to commit but all these things land on deaf ears. Their plan fails and the wrath of the gods falls back on them. Ankaabale accidentally kills his friend Nenfaayeli and upon realizing, also kills himself. Akonwe upon getting the news of the death of her would-be husband and her own brother, takes the real *yo bēē* and goes to join them and also die. Maaleko cannot hold himself hence, he confuses his wife, takes a rope, and goes out to commits suicide with the play ending in such a **tragic** form.

## ***Tradition***

Tradition is what has been passed on from generation to generation. According to Valliere (2022), the word, “tradition” comes from the Latin word, “traditio” which means handing over. Tradition has to do with beliefs, customs, ways of life, and cultural practices (Ikeke, 2022: 225, 233). He is of the view that in African traditional religion, only the Supreme Being is worshipped while others are also of the view that, Africans worship some animals or other gods. In the perspective of Ikeke, only the supreme being should be adored and worshipped, though other created things and creatures can be revered as they carry the vital force of the almighty. For Mahohoma (2020: 5), apart from the belief in ancestors, the Shona also believes in a Supreme Being who is, however, unknowable. The belief in the Supreme Being and other invisible forces is very crucial to this study.

## ***Belief***

Valliere (2022) avers that, a belief or practice in any field of culture may be said to be a tradition to the extent that it is received from the hands, lips, or the example of others rather than being discovered or invented. He opines that a belief is received on the assumption that the authors and transmitters are reliable and therefore the tradition valid; and that it is received with the express command and conscious intention of further transmission without substantial change. To Ikeke (2022: 225-226), traditional beliefs refer to convictions or ideals or notions about reality and things in the universe that particular culture or group of people hold to be true, and these beliefs have been transmitted from ancient times or previous generations.

Belief system is an organized way of trying to explain the world around us. It is something that distinguishes human beings and becomes an integral part of culture (Odey, 2010: 294). To Odey, the source of all belief systems, whether religious or art, is an attempt to describe the world in some way. The Dagaaba have a unique belief system as part of their culture that identifies them as an outstanding group. This uniqueness of this belief system is very vital to the growing youth and the unborn generation.

According to Mahohoma (2020: 7), domestic animals are a blessing from ancestors and cattle and goats are used for propitiation and atonement rites. To him, the bull is

dedicated to the ancestor as a symbol of family fecundity and fertility. He further opines that there are certain trees associated with the presence of ancestors and people usually gather or sacrifice around such sacred trees. He identified the fig tree as one where people usually gather around for spiritual exercises. The fig tree to him is believed to afford worshippers a mystical experience of God and ancestors. Ikeke (2022) on the other hand talks about the veneration and believes in some animals. Different human societies especially traditional cultures and indigenous people have designated some animals as sacred animals that should be venerated and prevented from being killed or destroyed. This belief and practice accord with modern-day ideologies advocating animal ethics and recognition of the moral status of animals (Ikeke, 2022: 224).

A shrine is a holy or sacred place which is dedicated to a specific deity, ancestor, hero, martyr, saint or similar figure. Shrines often contain idols, relics or other such objects associated with the figure being venerated (Nwachukwu, 2017: 24). The Dagaaba also believe in the potency of the shrine and consider it as a holy and sacred place as well where sacrifices are offered to the gods.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The research design that the researcher resorted to in this study is an ethnographic design with a qualitative approach to describing the data and the analysis. Kankam & Weiler (2010) consider research to be qualitative when it tries to uncover complexities and understand meaning. To them, qualitative approach offers researchers the opportunity for their ideas to be understood by their readers and public. Owu-Ewie (2017), states that qualitative data deals with rough materials researchers collect to solve a research problem.

Population for this study comprise chiefs, opinion leaders as well as the elderly in Eremon in the Lawra municipality in the Upper West Region of Ghana. Through the field work, the researcher gathered data to analyse traditional belief of the Dagaaba. The researcher extracted first-hand information coupled with document as secondary data. The researcher had unstructured interviews with participants for the extraction of rich data. Chiefs, opinion leaders as well as the elderly in the community were considered as the custodians of Dagaaba culture. Issues of ethics were very much

considered in this study. The researcher declared the purpose of the study to the participants, and they were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Appropriate protocols were observed to protect the integrity of the participants. Customs were respected as required by the communities' cultural practices.

#### **4. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

In this study, the data revealed the significance roles that some animals and birds play in the Dagaaba traditional belief system. They are varied in terms of communication with the dead and ancestors, foretelling future events like fortunes and misfortunes. They also communicate to foretell long life and death together with prosperity and challenging situations that may befall an individual in life.

##### ***Spirituality***

To Mahohoma (2020: 4), ancestor veneration forms the foundation of Shona traditional spirituality and that it dominates their thinking pattern to such an extent that it shapes their culture, social life, politics and economic life. He believes that a person can approach ancestors through the sanction of the family and tribal spirits who make their own applications in the invisible realm.

According to Yemeh (2002), the chief among the Dagaaba people is highly venerated being the political leader of the people while the *Tendaana* who is the spiritual leader is also very well respected. Doggu (2015) however has it that, the *Tendaana* (owner of the land) is the religious cum political head at village level. To him, in consultation with a council of elders, who are family heads in their own right, the *Tendaana* promulgates and administers law and order that affect cultural, religious, and economic life as well all forms of social practices in the area under his jurisdiction. This study cites with this scholar in the sense that the *Tendaana* whose main duty is to protect and safeguard the spiritual life of the people may as well perform some political functions in disguise among the Dagaaba people. The chief for a fact has the duty to man the political affairs of the people. All these are revealed in the data gathered in this study where we encounter the *Tendaana* performing various roles including religious and judicial functions with the council of elders. Responses from participants during this study revealed a similar scenario. It is discovered that the Dagaaba believe so much in the *Tendaana* and he play an

intermediary role between the people and the gods. The supplications and petitions of the people are sent through him and so, any unhealthy dealings of the Tendaana will result in calamities in the community.

The supernatural plays an important role in the lives of the Dagaaba. Not only do the Dagaaba recognize the presence of *Naaymene* (God) who is the creator of everything, they also believe in other supernatural things such as sacred places and animals. In the case of Adu-Boahen<sup>1</sup>, Frimpong, Mensah and Okyere (2023: 17), they believe that rivers serve as the abode of deities and that offenders of such places do not go scot-free. Punishments as well as sanctions are put in place to enforce the adherence of the various inhibitions in order to safeguard our natural resources. To them, it is believed by the communities that curses are invoked on offenders instantly and so it is also with the Dagaaba. Indeed, the next most revered god to *Naaymene* is the *Tengan* (Earth goddess). Therefore, utmost attention and great care is taken to perform all sacrifices regarding and involving the *Tengan*. An omission or any foul play somewhere along the line could lead to death, and all these have reflected in B. P. Kansoh's play. This is testified in page 9 where it is mentioned that when the land gods are not well pacified, it will result in series of death. Indeed, the *Tendaana* and the elders failed to perform the right sacrifices. Eventually, the manifestation is the fact that two children of the chief, Ankaabale and his own wicket uncle Maaleko lost their lives mysteriously as a form of punishment by the gods. Prior to the serial sudden death, the Earth goddess disguises herself into an old woman and appeared to caution the chief and elders against false witness and abuse of power against an innocent boy, Ankaabale but they never listened hence, the unpleasant outcome which is a series of death landed on the chief 's family. He had two (2) of his children dead with their friend Ankaabale.

The Dagaaba believe that the supernatural beings can interact directly with the living. This is the exact case when the *Tengan* turned into an old lady and warned Akonwe against the falsehood in the preparation of *yɔɔ bɛɛ* with the pretend that she was doing it under the directives of the gods. It is a strong belief among the Dagaaba that the gods especially the Earth goddess does not bear false witnesses. In an attempt to tarnish the image of the gods, instant justice in the form of caution, warning, plague of mysterious diseases and sicknesses and in the extreme situation, death among



others are usually meted out to the perpetrators of such acts. Bayo kept stealing his father's money while Ankaabale was always falsely accused of been the thief to the extent that Bayo took things for granted and thought he could play the fool with the gods by invoking the curses of the Earth goddess on the person who has been stealing the money. This is when he said, *Ka le nee na nan zu a ne a teje la we!* (p.18). Low and behold, when the god's exhibited justice by not sparing his life, it became another starting point of accusation against Ankaabale has been the brain behind the death of Bayo. Similarly, Akonwe landed herself into trouble by trying to soil the image of the gods. For her selfish interest, Akonwe did not follow the tradition to present the actual *yoo* which was supposed to be meant for trying the innocence of Ankaabale for been accused of as the killer of Bayo. Hence, the trouble turned on her to lose her life. Therefore, no one blasphemes the name of the gods and goes unpunished among the Dagaaba. This is why Akonwe landed herself into trouble by losing her life after soiling the name of the gods.

Another instance of the belief in the existence of the spirit beings and their interaction with the living is the case that we often find people calling on the gods openly through libation prayer to come to their aid. In Kansoh's play, Ankaabale is seen calling and invoking the spirits of his late parents to come to his rescue while working on the field after Maaleko had broken his fingernails with a hammer the previous day. He says.

<i>N saamine ne n mamine,</i>	<i>My parents,</i>
<i>Ye kye be la</i>	<i>You are not around</i>
<i>A ba la nyere meji be?</i>	<i>And cannot see too?</i>
<i>Noo la k'e kpe,</i>	<i>You are enjoying,</i>
<i>A ba la teere bale yelebo?</i>	<i>And not bothered about your son?</i>
<i>N Saa ne n ma,</i>	<i>My father and my mother,</i>
<i>Ye yeji faare ma n woore nan! (p.20). Just save me from my burden!</i>	

This is evidence that spirits are always with the living and the belief that they can always come to the aid of the living in times of difficulties and calamities.

### *Tangible objects and animals*

Apart from the invisible forces influencing man's life, the Dagaaba also believe in the spiritual potency of tangible objects such as animals, birds, rivers, trees and hills. These objects and animals are believed to have some spiritual powers in diverse ways, and which can direct man's activities in life and also cause an effect depending on the situation and the kind of object or animal. Animals/birds such as, the *naao* (cow), *yelpelaa* (white cockroach), *vig* (awl), *ηmane* (dove), *doɔɔ* (mud fish) among others are perceived to be spiritual in the Dagaaba tradition. In one way or the other, these animals/birds surfaced in various scenes in *Namalnee* with their causes and effects. The Dagaaba people believe in the existence of witchcraft and the *naao* is said to be one animal that possesses witchcraft. According to Adu-Boahen1, Frimpong, Mensah and Okyere (2023: 17), rivers serve as the abode of deities. Prior to the unfortunate serial death of Aŋkaabale and his affiliates in Kansoh's play, he narrated a dream to his friend Nenfaayeli in which he found himself in an encounter with a bull at *Doɔɔ baa* (stream of doɔɔ). He wrestled the bull until he was able to overpower it, but then the bull had hurt him. *Doɔɔ* are some kinds of fish commonly found under the earth around clay areas and some riverbanks. They are believed among the Dagaaba to be some kind of 'spiritual/evil fish' therefore, Aŋkaabale finding himself there in an encounter with the bull in itself threatens danger and a sign of bad luck. The dream was interpreted to mean that the bull is a witch and once it hurt him, meant that there was trouble. However, been able to flaw the bull on the part of Aŋkaabale equally meant that he would be victorious in the midst of any calamities that might have been destined ahead of him.

Further on witchcraft, the encounter between Akonwe and an old woman after she was recovering from her coma after Aŋkaabale was made to drink the *yɔɔ* and some later developments are all manifestations of the belief in witchcraft. The old lady prophesied using her witchcraft's powers that Akonwe and Aŋkaabale can never get married, and which eventually came to light. The very statement she made is: *Õõ! A mɔɔ na nyɛ la eebo eŋ? A kamasele dagoli ŋa fo nan ηmaa taa kye koŋ pegl'o nyɛ la waa* (p.46). In reply, Akonwe instructed all the old women to take leave of her presence, and that it is through their witchcraft that they are killing strong men. Thus: *Yɛ iri yire! A yɛ sɔ-yɛle ama la ka ye koora ne bikpele* (p.47). Another instance is

when Akonwe again instructed another old woman to leave their presence with her witchcraft when she was conversing with Ankaabale as to how they will execute their plan of killing Maaleko. However, the Dagaaba strongly believe in the statement that; *tulo ba taa leere barebo yoo!* (P.39). This talks about the irreversible nature of incurring the displeasure of the gods by a Dagao which is clearly stated by the Earth goddess who disguised herself into an old lady. That has how come Ankaabale called on the gods by saying: *Ye soŋ ma!* (p.59) yet he never enjoyed the mercies of the gods. Ankaabale, Nenfaayeli, Akonwe and Maaleko in one way or the other entangled themselves by committing one or two of the taboos of the land hence, their tragic death. In page 35 the taboos of the land are spelled out categorically to include abomination of blood shared on the land through a fight and also by influencing one another into death. These are made known to every member of the land yet because of selfish interest, Nenfaayeli and Akonwe influenced Ankaabale into venturing to kill Maaleko which cannot happen without blood shared on the land. The Dagaaba believe that the gods of the land do not bear false witness. This is a justification in the play where Akonwe said: *A Naanmene n'a bonfola zaa ba e nenyeni soobo, ka te na e k'a koŋ soŋ te* (p.57) yet the gods didn't come to their aid hence, their evil plan failed and turned on them to rather lose their lives.

### ***Sacred moments and places***

Post (2010, 17) has it that the term “sacred place” has a long history in the phenomenology of religion. Chisi (Holy Day) is the day of rest in honour of the ancestors, the guardians of the land. (Mahohoma, 2020: 10). Socially, the Dagaaba have some market days in the week that are forbidden for people to engage in other economic ventures as well as some social obligations. For example, *Takɔdaa* is one of such days which forbids people from going to work on their farms. The *Takɔdaa* in some cultures like the Akan is what is known as *Dabɔne*. Such days are considered *bebifaare* (bad days) among the Dagaaba people and anyone who ventures to work on the farm on such days may incur the displeasure of the gods and as well face some unfortunate bad luck and punishments by the gods. Burying corpses on such days is equally forbidden. A classical demonstration of this belief is the situation in *Namalnee* where the body of Bayɔɔ was dragged and thrown away into the *yaakpolo* (grave yard) as his death coincided with *Takɔdaa*. This is expressed in page 41 in the

following sentence: *Bayɔɔ kpi la omeɲe kũũ; kye zene naɲ e bebifaa, ba na vu o la gaa lɔɔ eɲ a yaakpolo pɔɔ*. This is a statement made by the spokesperson of the chief after Aɲkaabale survived his trial by ordeal.

*Pĩ kũũ* (tragic death) thus; death through accident, poison, flood, snake bite, suicide among others are considered bad death and therefore are not accorded the normal funeral rites and celebration among the Dagaaba. The Dagaaba believe that according such death the normal funeral rites will attract various sanctions including more death in the family hence, this also accounted for the reason why Bayɔɔ's body was not buried but dragged and dumped at the *yaakpolo*. Even though his death coincided with *bebifaa* which forbids people from burying corpse, the body could have been kept overnight to be buried the next day. However, any attempt to have done that would have complicated the situation as his death was not a normal one but been the cause of the Earth goddess. In effect, because Bayɔɔ died a *pĩ kũũ*, he did not receive a befitting funeral celebration and burial which is supposed to be the norm of the Dagaaba people to pay so much last respect to the deceased as fare well.

### ***Land defilement, purification and banishment***

As a traditional belief, any act by any member of the community that defiles the land or committed against the gods of the land will not go away freely with it. It is believed among the Dagaaba that any form of defilement in terms of the land, purifications have to be done else, calamities will befall the community. Immediate actions may be taken by way of asking for forgiveness and purification of the land by performing various sacrifice and rituals to advert the situation and to prevent further calamities. In the case of *Namalnee*, Maaleko having offended the gods and equally defiling the land by falsely accusing Aɲkaabale to go through the ancient practice; trial by ordeal, is fined some animals and items for the purification of the land by the *Tendaana*. This assertion is seen in the following expression: *Maaleko, fo veɲɛɛ la k'a bie di vi. Fo na iri la peroo, a eɲ lezare ane noore ata, a de dãã doge* (p.40). At the very beginning of the play, the issue of spirituality and the purification of the land is discussed by Naayie, Maaleko and Kyiruu. Naayie spiritually foresees and warns that the village will one day experience serious disasters when he said; *Ye baɲ ka te teɲe ɲa daɲ na nyɔge la vũũ* (p.14)! The statement added by Kyiruu that; *Bɔɲkpeere yãã kpe la a teɲe* (p.15), tells us of how evil forces have entered the village and

therefore urgent attention is needed to address and prevent any such threatening disasters. In response, Maaleko believes that it is best for the *Tendaana* and the elders to take immediate actions by consulting the diviners and performing sacrifices to the gods to stop any impending calamities on the land. This he expresses by saying; “...*a maaloo velaa da ba e ηaa!*” (p.15). He stressed that now is the best time to have taken measures to purify the land.

Culturally, it is forbidden for one to possess bad charms or poisonous substances intended to be used to harm another person in the community. The land god denounces such people in society hence, when one smuggles such substances into the community, it is believed that he/she has defile the land and when such individuals are caught, they are made to purify the land by the *Tendaana*. In the worse scenario where perpetrators of killings are discovered, such individuals may be banished from the community. So, it is an unpardonable taboo for one among the *Dagaaba* to kill another whether by physical or spiritual means except on a battlefield. The number of persons one is able to kill in a battlefield will measure the level of his manhood and bravery. A male is considered a ‘man’ among the *Dagaaba* if he happens to kill another person(s) otherwise one can be as old as a centurion, he will be considered a ‘woman’. Hence, it is a source of pride to the individual and his entire family when he is considered a ‘man’. This has how come the chief said he will not allow any ‘woman’ to marry his daughter *Akonwe* in B. P. Kansoh’s play. This is found in the statement made by *Nenfaayeli* that; *N saa yeli ka ka dɔɔ naane, pɔge ba der’o pɔgeyaa* (p.51). All these can be considered as driving forces that compelled *Aŋkaabale* and his friend *Nenfaayeli* to embark on their plot to lay ambush and kill *Maaleko* so that *Aŋkaabale* can have the opportunity to marry *Akonwe* since he was bent on marrying her. In the play *Maaleko* himself confirmed been the killer of *Aŋkaabale*’s parents which is a taboo on the land because it did not happen in a battlefield. Apart from that, close relations among the *Dagaaba* do not stage war against one another no matter what the situation may be. Hence, *Maaleko* met his sudden, untimely and unnatural death. It is a belief among the *Dagaaba* that, *tulo ba taa leere barebo*. That is, when one messes up especially when it has to do with killing another person which is not in a battlefield, he/she will certainly face the full rigor of the consequences from the gods. *Maaleko* in one way or the other took

human life couple with sharing of blood on the land when he broke Ankaabale's fingernails which is a serious offence and a taboo on the land among the Dagaaba. Subsequently, he did not go away with it but paid for it in the same coin by losing his life in such a shameful suicide.

### ***Divinity and Justice***

Divination through oracles, the word of the paramount ruler or a decision by a council of elders represented the truth (Falade, 2019: 9). According to Wilhelm (1967), cited in (Smith 2010) the mind of Heaven and the mind of Man are one and that diviners proved to be cultural middlemen between contending elements within their own local communities. Stressing divination as a part of the Dagaaba traditional belief system, the first point of call in times of any difficulties and misfortune in life is the consultation with the soothsayers and diviners. The Dagaaba believe that nothing strange happens naturally, but the gods and some forces are normally responsible for such happening hence, the *Tendaana* as the spiritual leader in the village will always consult the oracles and employ the services of the soothsayers as well to come out with reasons and solutions for any happenings. Doro-enne the *Tendaana* immediately solicited the concern of the chief of the area to call on the services of the diviners to find out as to why Akonwe collapsed and was in coma just when at the point Ankaabale was made to drink the *yoo*. *Naa see ka te la maaleŋ k'a bie ŋa zie. E ka ba soore woo nye (p.42)*. *Woo sooro* is a metaphoric expression that conceptualized the philosophical underpinning of the idea of consulting the diviners from the Dagaaba world view perspective.

As the *Tendaana* or the land priest is the intermediary or spiritual leader of the community among the Dagaaba and any act of misconduct or failure on his part to exercise justice and fairness in his dealings may attract sanctions to the whole village. Negligence to perform the necessary duties and sacrifices on the part of the *Tendaana* will mean a disrespect to the gods hence, such acts may invoke the anger of the gods thereby resulting in various forms of punishments and death of some members of the community. This belief of the Dagaaba people has reflected in *Namalnee* as the author expresses it in the following statement: *Tem-bobo da ba la maala a maalo, a veŋ ka a koora kuuni (p.9)*. The Chief and the *Tendaana* especially failed in their duties as political and spiritual leaders respectively, took

things for granted when the earth goddess appeared and cautioned them on different occasions. It is believed that no one among the Dagaaba can commit any act against the gods/ancestors and get away with it. However, when immediate actions are taken, with the offering of the rightful sacrifices and asking the gods for forgiveness, the gods and the ancestors will always listen and pardon them. Upon various threats and warnings even by the Earth goddess, the elders and *Tendaana* failed to take proactive measures to salvage the situation in *Namalnee*. The Earth goddess pronounces an impending calamity on the chief as he failed to pay heed to the numerous warnings by the gods against taking *Aṅkaabale* through the falsehood trial. The very threatening statement she made which came to light was *Naa! Mare pēēpēē saadōgre yuori, la, Ba-wa-nyε-ma-woore*. This statement was made after *Aṅkaabale* was forcefully taken through the trial. Eventually, the entire village faced a serial death marking a big loss in the play.

It is a serious taboo for couples to be engaged in conversation while on bed in the night among the Dagaaba. This is expressed in the statement; *Dagaaba kyirunḡ kpon kaṅa la dōō ne o pōge naḡ vuuro “eer” ba seḡ poō tensoga: ka a le ba maḡ yaare kyε kpe ne a dōō tuloḡ* (p.7). The philosophical meaning of this however goes deeper beyond just mere conversation between couple while on bed, but the constant adherence to a woman’s advice by a man is what the statement stresses as a taboo. It is believed that when such a situation prevails, the woman will mislead the man by influencing him with her childish ideas after all the woman is always considered as a child in the Dagaaba tradition. Hence, the man will act in such a childish manner which will eventually result in misfortune on his part and in the unfortunate situation the misfortune may be extended to the entire family or village. This is the exact situation where *Maaleko* with his dubious intentions and constant adherence to the womanly advice from his wife landed him into irreversible deaths. *Bayōō* his son lost his life because *Maaleko* flouted the norms and committed himself against the taboo of constantly listening to the advice from his wife. *Maaleko* himself did not survive the test of time because he committed himself and went against some taboos of the land.

Among the Dagaaba it is strongly believed that if a man performs a criminal act here on earth the spirits of the dead will punish him with an ignoble death. In *Namalnee*

Aᅇkaabale had his fingernails broken with a hammer by his uncle Maaleko who used his spiritual and wicket powers to kill Aᅇkaabale's parents. Maaleko himself confirmed that he is responsible for the death of Aᅇkaabale's father when he addressed Aᅇkaabale in page 22 that; "*Fo saa da waa la zaa, ky'o bammo ba ta ma. Anaᅇ veᅇ k'o kpi; kyoo meᅇ na kpi l'a kũũ.*" He mentioned that Aᅇkaabale will equally die the kind of death his father had died and that has how come Maaleko falsely forcefully took Aᅇkaabale to the palace to have him go through the trial by ordeal when in actual fact he knew the boy will not survive should he take the *yoo* since no one ever took it and survived. Maaleko haven achieved his aim in life as to making sure that Aᅇkaabale dies, also did not live to enjoy peace and life as he so much desired. The spirits and the gods equally extended their invitation to him to join the ancestral world hence; he committed suicide shortly after the death of Aᅇkaabale and Nenfaayeli.

When it comes to issues regarding the Earth goddess, it is forbidden for women to have any say in it. This is specified in page 38 of Kansoh's play when the Earth goddess appeared before everybody who had gathered to witness Aᅇkaabale go through his trial. Maaleko questioned that: *Aᅇ la meᅇ ko pogeba sori ka ba yeᅇ teᅇgan yeᅇ?* Which means: Who also dares women to have a say in issues bothering the Land gods? This very question was posed to the Earth goddess who had turned into an old woman when she appeared to finally warn the chief and elders against falsely forcefully taking Aᅇkaabale through the trial. The Dagaaba view a woman to be a child hence, a woman in some context may not even have the opportunity to contribute to ordinary conversation involving men in the Dagaaba society. Because of this notion and believe, the advice, caution and warnings by the old woman were not taken seriously and adhered to by the elders which finally landed them into the unimaginable situation. The fact that women are not to mingle themselves with men on issues regarding the Earth goddess however contradicts the Dagaaba belief in the saying that; "*ba nᅇ la a kpenne.*" Thus, *the voice of the people is the voice of God.* This is because the Dagaaba believe in *gyenne* that is, the existence of evil spirits and that some of them and tangible objects like the rivers and mountains which possess some powers may from time-to-time disguise themselves into human beings and appear to interact with the living.



## 5. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the traditional belief system of the Dagaaba. It uncovered the belief in spirituality, sacred moments and animals. It also looks at a critical textual analysis which discussed the Dagaaba traditional belief system as portrayed in a tragic play *Namalnee* written in Dagaare. The findings have touched on traditional beliefs relating to the existence and potency of spirit beings, divination, the roles of various leaders among the Dagaaba, dreams and their interpretations among others. The perception and roles of a woman in terms of the Dagaaba traditional belief are all issues of great importance that are discussed in this study. Other very pertinent issues delved into include taboos and tangible objects such as animals and birds with their spiritual connotations.

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