
Knowledge of Traditional Cloth (Lowεgya) Produced in the Nandom District in the Upper West Region of Ghana

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Aim: The study focused on the traditional cloth produced by the Dagara people in the Nandom District. The paper investigated the origin of Dagara traditional cloth, the types of cloths produced among Dagara people, names of the cloths. It further looked at symbolism and the significance of traditional cloths produced in Dagara culture.

Methodology: The study was qualitative and employed random and purposive sampling techniques to select participants for the study. Data were gathered from Dagara people in the Nandom District using Semi-structured interviews. Data were then transcribed and analysed using the Thematic method of analysis.

Results: The study revealed that Lowεgya is a significant traditional cloth among Dagara. It was also revealed that *Kpognali*, *kaakublu*, *kyinkyin pen*, *Lier pen* among others are some of the cloths produced by Dagara people and each of these cloths is named representing the name of an animal, part of an animal or an event. It was also found out that the various cloths are used based on the status of the person.

Conclusion: Information about this cloth will help the younger generation to gain some knowledge about their traditional cloth and also improve the social, spiritual and physical aspects of the cloth.

Keywords: *Dagara; Lowegya; traditional cloth; colour; symbolism.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional cloth plays a key role in the culture of people, especially during ceremonial occasions [1]. Most of these cloths are being produced by the indigenes because the idea of designing the cloths come from them. Traditional cloth is historically significant and comes with meaningful culture and symbolic features. For example, traditional cloth communicates a person's cultural identity. Ayu Lan Praseja's concept in designing a cloth for Indonesians for example communicates the nature and behaviour of the people [2]. In Ghana, most cultures have specific traditional cloths purposely for their ceremonial occasions. Though some might look similar, the colour, weave and weight of the fabrics differ.

The traditional cloth of Dagara is called 'Lowegya' which communicates their heritage and identity to other people of different cultural backgrounds [3, 4] stated that Botswana is one of the countries that holds its culture esteem when it comes to the use of traditional cloth. When a person is born, he or she appears naked but due to morality, we struggle to clothe the person in order not to expose his or her nakedness. We came naked from God but going back demands we clothe the person when he or she dies [5]. According to John, an informant from Nandom, 'when our forefathers realised that there was shame in being naked, they resorted to weaving Lowegya to clothe themselves. The first cloth that was woven was *Lien/Lier pen*, which was a strip of cloth woven on sticks. This strip of cloth was used to wrap around the private part of a person as coverage. This was later sewn as '*Bawlaga*' a pant-like shorts for men. In the Upper West Region, the naming of traditional cloth was done using the names of animals and the achievements of people. Among some tribes, the naming of traditional cloth is through the end-user and the colour of the yarn [6].

Lowegya was sewn into different costumes for the people and due to modernisation, more styles have now emerged from these costumes. The costumes have gone through a lot of modifications as well as the cloth. As narrated by an informant from Kogle, '*Bawlaga*' was the first pant-like shorts sewn from this fabric, later another costume emerged called '*taparaje*' with a small smock, these were worn for special occasions and were expensive to acquire. As technology advanced, '*vaapew*' (a very big

smock) with '*kurlan*' and *kpawoo* (a hat), also emerged as the modernisation of *taparaje* and the small smock. These were sewn to cover most parts of the body. As years went by, another smock appeared which is not big as *vaapew*. This was called *gyiiwaa*. Women were using only two pieces of cloths to cover the lower part of their body until a blouse was sewn. Due to modernisation, women now use cloth to sew slits and Kaba as well as straight dresses.

Among some tribes in Ghana, the colours of fabrics play significant role in all their ceremonial activities. The colours sometimes signify the mood of the occasion, it could be a happy or sad occasion [7]. He further explained that Adinkra (red and black) is for a funeral celebration which signifies goodbye. This does not correspond with Dagara people as any colour at all can be used for any kind of occasion. Colour does not play a role in their culture. Segregation in the use of a costume among Dagara lies in the type of fabric and costume. Costumes or fabrics used by adults cannot be used by children. Yoruba in Nigeria for example has a cloth called the *sombre olowu dudu* used for funeral celebrations and its use depends on the status and age of the dead [8]. This, therefore, calls for the need to bring out information on the traditional cloths used by the Dagara people.

1.1 Objectives

1. Explore the history of Dagara traditional cloths
2. Identify cloths produced in the Nandom district

2. METHODOLOGY

The study explored the origin and types of traditional cloth "*Lowegya*" produced in the Nandom District. The qualitative research design was used to carry out the study. Qualitative research is a way of exploring and understanding individuals or groups, a social or human problem [9]. Semi-structured interview questions were developed by the researchers and used to gather information from the respondents. The interview questions were pretested in Cape Coast by purposely selecting Dagara people. After the pre-test, the researchers restructured the questions to make the instrument valid and reliable for the final data collection.

Random sampling was used to select the communities whilst the purposive sampling technique was used to select the respondents who are Dagara in the Nandom District. Twelve (12) respondents were proposed for the study but in the process of data collection, 8 respondents were finally selected due to the point of saturation. Data were collected in the local dialect after which they were cross-checked to ensure the results are reliable after which they were then transcribed into English for analysis. The results were read over to identify themes. The thematic method of analysis was employed to analyse the themes that emerged from the study.

Pseudonyms were used to represent the names of respondents. These are fake names used to protect the identities of the respondents.

3. RESULTS

3.1 History of 'Lowεgya'

As a cultural costume, it was revealed that respondents witnessed the production of their traditional cloth by their ancestors. The garment that was used by their ancestors until the introduction of the cloth was the bark of a tree called 'ponpon', some specific leaves, and animals' skins. According to a participant:

"the bark of a tree was beaten and combed to make it soft. This was worn around the waist. The skin of a calf was also used to cover some parts of the body".

Some historical evidence suggested that the Moshi people introduced weaving and cloth to most parts of the northern enclave. A respondent confirmed this by stating that:

"The traditional cloth was once called Moshi cloth (Moosiri pεn) but later the ancestors were able to weave one similar to that of the Moshi cloth which was then called 'Lowεgya pεn'".

Another participant having a different view believed variations exist between moshi cloths and true Dagara cloths indicating that, moshi people did not directly influence their ancestral cloths production processes as he claimed:

"It was kapok blend with cotton fibres that our ancestors started twisting into yarns and used in weaving the traditional cloths".

3.2 Names of Traditional Cloths in Nandom

3.2.1 Liεn or liεr pεn

This fabric was first woven from raw cotton fibres. All the participants confirmed that the cream colour of this cloth is derived from the natural colour of the fibres. This cloth is wrapped around the private part of the dead as underwear before clothe is put on the decease. One of the respondents, Alice stated:

"it is a tradition for every corpse to be dressed in this fabric before putting on any other form of cloth(es) despite the status of the person. It has been passed on from generation to generation".



Fig. 1. Liεn or Liεr Pεn

3.2.2 Kpognali

Another cloth produced by the ancestors of Dagara is 'Kpognali'. A respondent, Ambrose testified that:

"This cloth is very heavy and thick in nature due to the raw fibres from Kapok and cotton which produced thicker hand-spun yarns used in weaving the fabric".

Another respondent Simon stated:

"Kpognali was normally used to cover the stage mounted (paala) to provide room for the dead to be seated during a funeral. This cloth signifies wealth. It can also be worn by traditional leaders and the rich in the society".



Fig. 2. Kpognali

3.2.3 Kaakublu pɛn

The cloth in Fig. 3 below is another traditional cloth produced by the Dagara people for special occasions. Maalu confirmed that:

"This cloth has both dark and bright colours and is mostly used at happy occasions but can also be used during sad events".

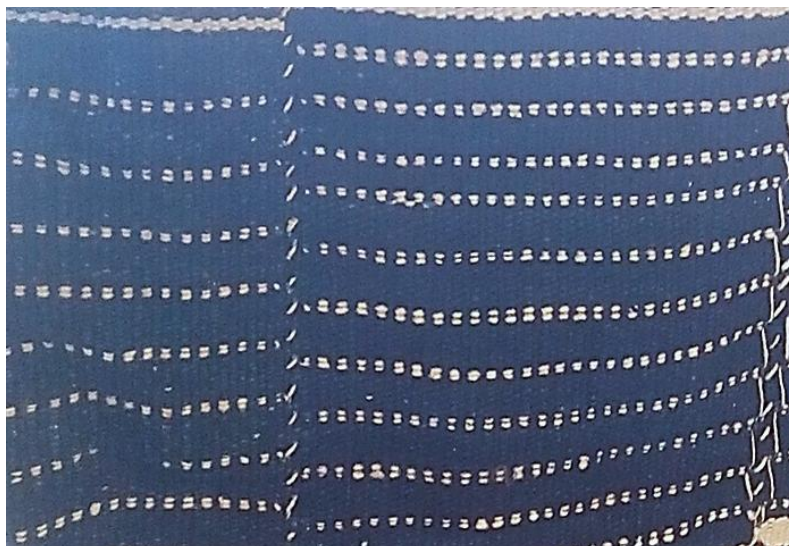


Fig. 3. Kaakublu

3.2.4 Kyinkyin pɛn

Below is another traditional cloth called *Kyinkyin pɛn*. Lucius a respondent stated that:

“Historically, people of high status in the society, old people and the rich are those who can be clothed in this cloth when they die”.



Fig. 4. Kyinkyin pɛn

3.2.5 Bɛɔɔ

Another traditional cloth named, ‘*Bɛɔɔ*’ as indicated in Fig. 5 is used for spiritual activities by the chief priest, hunters etc. A respondent noted that:

“It is mostly used to bury very old men when they die but very old women after passing on are clothed in Bɛɔɔ during their funeral celebration”.



Fig. 5. Bɛɔɔ

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 History of Lowegya

Dagara were once called 'Lobr' and the cloth in Dagara is *wɛgya* therefore they combined 'Lobr' with '*wɛgya*' and it became '*Lowɛgya*'. When their ancestors succeeded in making the traditional cloth, to enhance its use for the men, '*Bawlaga*' was sewn out of it whilst the women wrapped a small piece of cloth in the form of a pant and wrapped the rest in the form of a skirt around the pant with leaves inserted around the waistline. *Bawlaga* normally has two extensions (robes) at the waistline of both side seams and another robe attached at the middle end of the crotch at the back and these extensions are then tied at the back.

The weaving of cloth differs from one culture to the other. Oral history indicated that, kapok fibres (*gon bolle*) blended with cotton fibres were used by Dagara people in the Upper West Region to produce yarns ('*fomiwr*') which were used in weaving their traditional cloth called '*Lowɛgya*'. Kapok as a fibre is easily accessible in most parts of sub-Sahara Africa. It is a silky fibre used in stuffing pillows, bedding among others but it's believed historically to be used in combination with other fibres like cotton to produce fabrics. It has a thin cell wall, large lumen, low density, and feels harsh which makes it difficult to use only kapok to produce a fabric. They could have imported cotton or other fibres from different countries to produce their fabric but kapok was accessible as well as cotton but not in large quantities [10]. The art of weaving a fabric was made possible through their wisdom and creativity.

Some researchers reported that the Moshi people brought '*Lowɛgya*' cloth to Ghana and this was adopted as a traditional cloth in the Northern region [11]. This report is in contrast to the thoughts of the earlier respondents. From the responses gathered it was realised that Moshi people brought some cloths to the town and their idea of weaving was adopted by Dagara ancestors. This implies that the idea of weaving among Dagara originated from the Moshi people.

4.2 Names of Traditional Cloths in Nandom

The cloths identified were of different types and colours, with each performing a unique function. Each cloth is named after something and is used

according to the status of people in the community. Similarly, the Yoruba's, a tribe of Nigeria, have a traditional cloth called 'Aso oke' [12].

Dagara for some reasons named some of their traditional cloths using names of animals or parts of the animals such as '*kaakublu*' (feather of a guinea fowl). The naming of the '*Lowɛgya*' cloths in the Nandom district historically, does not corroborate how the Frafras in the Upper East Region name their traditional cloths though they have similar traditional cloths. The naming of traditional cloths among the Frafra is based on the "arrangement of patterns, the dominating yarn colour in the pattern, the yarn colours used and the end-users of the cloth" [6]. Ga-Dangme people also name their fabrics based on events and occasions, and these influences the names and motifs of the fabric [13].

4.2.1 Liɛn or liɛr pɛn

Historically, this cloth became the first cloth to be created by the ancestors of Dagara. It is believed to have been produced from kapok fibres and had gotten its colour from the natural fibres of Kapok that were used without any additives or treatment as seen in modern times. To use this cloth, traditionally, the first child of the dead person has to be the one to put it on the dead. The one used by males is called '*Bawlaga*' whilst the females remain '*Liɛr/Liɛn pɛn*'. If the dead is a man, the first son is recommended. On the other hand, if the dead is a female her first daughter will have to do it. If he or she does not have a child, his sister's or brother's child can do it. '*Liɛr pɛn*' means '*wa liɛri mɛ*' (meaning come and replace me). As the person presents the cloth to the dead, it means you are ready to replace him or her in life by supporting and providing for the family as the dead journey into the ancestral world.

4.2.2 Kpognali

This cloth is named after a cow with multiple colours. It was used to cover the 'Paala' (bier). '*Paala*' is an adorned stage arranged where the dead are normally seated during a funeral celebration. In Dagara tradition, the corpse is laid on stage mostly in a seated posture except for children, not lying down as seen in most other traditions across the country. Children who are not up to 2 years or cannot sit on their own when they die are seated on the laps of someone for a funeral celebration to commence. The *Kpognali*

can be sewn into 'gyiiwaa', 'kpar nu-voru' (sleeveless smock), 'kpar nuru' (smock with sleeves) and 'kurlan' (pantalons).

4.2.3 Kaakublu pɛn

This cloth has the name of guinea fowl feathers. It can be used during funeral celebrations, marriage ceremonies, festivals, chief enskinment and other ceremonial occasions. This fabric is woven from cotton fibres. It is blue-black with two white stripes of thread. It is used by all categories of people.

4.2.4 Kyinkyin pɛn

Kyinkyin is a type of bird with multiple colours ranging from black to green, among others found in the forest. Ancestors named this cloth after that bird. This is one of the prominent cloths that was used in the district. Due to cultural diversity and the introduction of technology, this cloth is getting extinct. The producers testified that, when traditional leaders, chief priests, the rich and very old people die in society, they have to be dressed in this cloth to show their status. It was very expensive to afford. Its use according to status has not changed, it is still practised in the Nandom district as corpses of high status are often seen on the bier in this fabric during the funeral celebration. It is believed that if they dress a commoner in this cloth with the tail of an animal, the dead body will begin to rot.

4.2.5 Bɛgɔ

This cloth bears the name of a black shiny snake mostly found in farms during the rainy season. This is a dark blue fabric used to dress the corpse of elderly people, traditional leaders or the rich in society. The chief priests also, during their consultation with the gods, dresses in this cloth, with accompanying attachments. The same applies to the hunters who sew their attachments to the costume and are used whenever they are to go to the bush for hunting. This cloth from the perspective of its uses can be described as a spiritual cloth used by prominent people in society.

4.3 Colours

Respondents affirmed that Dagara historically does not prescribe fabric colours for ceremonies. To them, any colour at all is acceptable for any occasion, except red which cannot be used to bury the dead. When the participants were asked

why red colour cannot be used to bury the dead, they replied that their ancestors did not give them any reason but only told them it cannot be used. The respondents again insinuated that their use of colours do not have any meaning. This is different from the Akans in the Ashanti region, as the colours of traditional clothes are considered important and each use at an occasion communicates a meaning [14]. Opoku [14] further explained that colours such as; black, white, gold or yellow, and red for example; communicate feelings of love, melancholy, victory, purity, anger or crisis during an occasion. This means the recent colourful traditional cloths used by people in the Upper West Region of Ghana could be due to cultural adaptation. In this modern era, the availability of yarns of different colours in the district triggered the adoption of colourful cloth production among local weavers. Dagara ancestors' inability to place meaning in the colours of their cloths could be due to their inability to produce varied colours of cloths as natural sources for dyes of different colour yielding properties at the time were limited. However, most African fabrics produced are distinctly identified based on the colours and their significance in the fabrics [15]. Ollennu, et al. [13] also found out that among the Ga people, the use of colourful cloth determines the occasion to attend.

4.4 Symbolism of the Cloth

Each traditional cloth symbolizes something among the people. Dagara sees traditional cloth to symbolize who they are. It symbolizes their rich culture and identity wherever they find themselves. Lowɛgya symbolizes their ancestral inheritance and they also see it as their saviour in terms of cultural celebrations, a symbol of joy, happiness and a problem solver. In similar vein, use of the kola nut in Idjerhe culture symbolises hospitality, love, mutual trust, manliness, harmony, happiness, and togetherness with the gods and spirits [16]. Spiritually, it was revealed that using this cloth heals you from some ailments and spiritual problems. Those who produce the cloth and costume get profit from it, to solve their financial problems.

4.5 Significance of the Traditional Cloth

Most often items used by a specific group of people for their traditional activities represent something special and important among the people. The traditional cloth among Dagara performs significant roles. It showcases their

beauty, portrays their morality, shows their identity, cultural background and provides protection for both the dead and the living. The traditional cloth was also found to be something that help people to gain respect from people around them based on their status. Traditional cloth shows significant unity and identity among its people and it becomes very essential to pay attention to in activities surrounding its usage [17].

They consider the use of Lowεgya to be a good sign of behaviour and also see the wearer as morally sound. During ceremonial occasions, the cloth helps them showcase their love and gladness. A prominent aspect of Dagara culture is unity, whenever they see someone in their traditional cloth, they become attached to the person. Traditional cloth plays different roles based on social, cultural, geographical, psychological, and economic reasons and served physical requirements of mankind [18].

Economically, this cloth significantly helps the producers in the form of profit. The profit they gain from the sales of 'Lowεgya' improves their financial status. As the rate of production and purchase of this cloth increases, their standard of living becomes better.

5. CONCLUSION

It is important to let people know your traditional cloth, its origin, uses as well as significance of the cloth. Dagara has a traditional cloth called 'Lowεgya' in the local dialect. It was found out that this cloth was produced by their ancestors and is used during ceremonial occasions. 'Lowεgya' was first produced from raw cotton and kapok fibres which produced a rough feeling for the fabric but subsequently, cotton became the main fibre used due to its firmness and comfort. Traditional cloths (Lowεgya) are named after animals or events and sometimes the pattern of the weave of the fabric. The Colour of fabric among the indigenes does not play any major role in the cultural activities of the Dagara people which means any colour of fabric can be used on any occasion.

6. RECOMMENDATION

1. Proper and comprehensive documentation on the Dagara traditional cloth and culture should be considered to serve as a history for the future generation.

2. More innovation weaves within the Nandom traditional area should be encouraged by stakeholders in the field of textile to help create more job opportunities for the youth while preserving the cultural weave of the Dagara people.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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