

Alexis B. TENGAN

The Art of Mythical Composition and Narration

Dagara White *Bagr*



P.I.E. Peter Lang

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“African Thoughts and Perspectives”

No. 6

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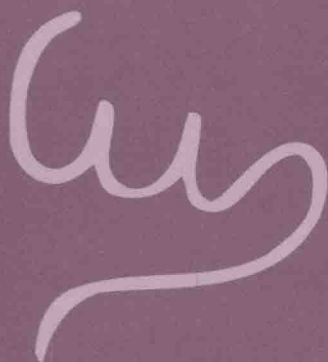
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Throughout history, oral cultures lacking the medium of writing have relied on secret cults and societies to keep the authoritative versions of their sacred compositions, originally passed on to them as myths of divine origins, alive and remembered.

In this book, the author, after many years spent observing secret rites, presents different versions of the White *Bagr* mythical narrative, following the ritual calendar. These rites, which are found among the Dagara/Lobi societies in West Africa, form a crucial part of the year-long rites of initiation of selected neophytes into *bagr* society.

In addition to giving a detailed ethnographic description of this society, its initiation rites and a bilingual version of their mythical narrations, the author seeks to explain how memory is constructed, retained and transmitted in orature, and what it takes to give a proper oration, without errors, slips of the tongue and deviation, as well as examining how the performance is critically received by *bagr* society and the Dagara people.

Alexis B. TENGAN works as an independent scholar and as a teacher at St John's International School near Brussels. For many years he has been an academic associate at the Catholic University of Louvain, where he monitors a seminar within a Master's program on cultures and development. Recently he has widened his research to include the relationship between art, medicine and religion in Africa, and has been collecting data and artworks with the intention of creating an ethnographic museum in Ghana.

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This is an initiatory graphic symbol found among the West Africa civilisations.

In its original context, which is initiatory, it symbolises the knowledge which it is named after – fán, meaning “knowledge” in Bambara, a language spoken in Mali and in the region of Mandé.

It is also the symbol of science and of plenitude of being.

It is taught to the initiate to encourage him to be open and to warn him against the accumulation of useless knowledge.

For this reason, it is also the symbol of fulfilment.

In the frame of this series, it symbolises the diffusion of knowledge coming from Africa and its contribution to the enrichment of mankind.

Alexis B. TENGAN

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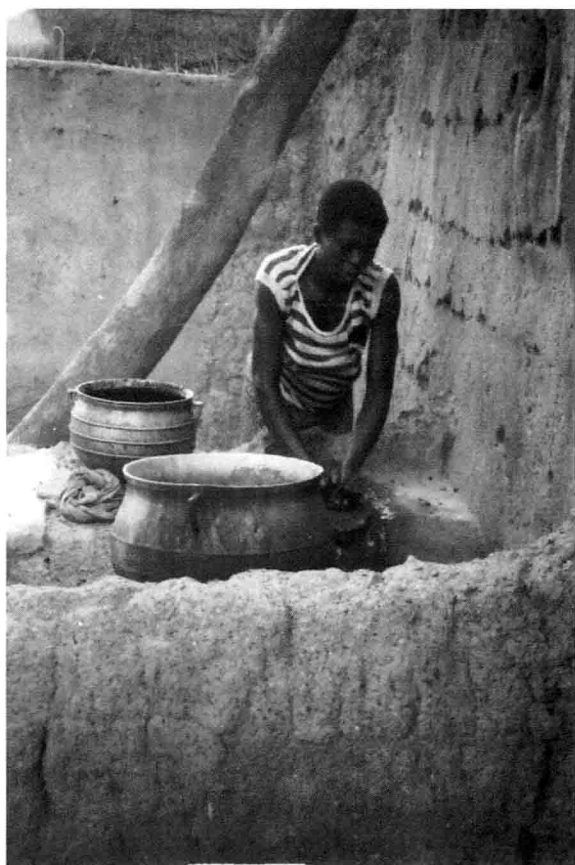


Figure 1: A Woman at the grinding Mill



Figure 2: The feeding trough for the dog is also the main musical instrument (*bagr* xylophone) for *bagr* narration



Figure 3: The house dogs feeding from the troughs after they have been used as musical instruments during a *bagr* ritual

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Preface

The publication of all the four segments of the white *bagr* following my publication of the black *bagr* narrative in 2006 has always been a religious obligation which I cannot permanently defer for whatever reason. There are many legitimate reasons that have held me back from engaging in this task full time and producing the results much earlier than now. Indeed, I have as yet, not been able to fully make a documentary collection of the white *bagr* of dance, which I am aware, is as long and as complicated as the black *bagr* narration. Whereas I do view the publication of the all the segments of *bagr* mythical narrations as an obligation to fulfill within a life time, the efforts I have made so far, in terms of what is now available for public viewing, allow me to publish at this moment the next three segments with the understanding that scholars and other people interested in the *bagr* myth would have had enough background information to understand where I am coming from. In other words, this book necessarily follows from two previous publications devoted to Dagara *bagr*, that is, *Dagara Bagr: ritualizing myth of social foundation* (1999) and *Mythical Narratives in Ritual: Dagara black bagr* (2006). It is also drawing on the efforts I have made to document the *bagr* collection as endangered archive through The British Library Endangered Archives Programme which is support by the Arcdia Trust, digital copies of all the narratives transcribed here are now available on line for scholarly use (see Tengan 2008).

As an object of study, the series of initiation ritual activities which include the ritual oratory narration of the *bagr* myth cannot be conceived in linear time structure except when a particular individual participation as a neophyte or as an student observer is taken as the focus. *Bagr* initiation activities follow the cyclical passage of the seasons and the completion of the whole cycle of events depend partly on the point of one's entry and partly on the internal logic of the narrative sequence initiated by the community. As a student of *bagr*, I began my observation of oratory narration at the very end of the black *bagr* (*bagr chur*) festivities at Kelbelle in Burkina Faso (Tengan 1999). During this occasion, I was only allowed to make a recording of the narration for the afternoon session that I participated, namely, the white *bagr* of black beans and the white *bagr* of white beans. I had missed, for that moment, the rites for the black *bagr* narration; and since I could not stay for the night, I also missed the white *bagr* of bambara beans and the white *bagr*

of dance. As I progressed with my student observation and study of *bagr*, I came to record the black *bagr* and the white *bagr* of bambara beans much later and from a different settlement, Cheboggu settlement in Ghana. I must stress, however, that many of the *bagr* members from Cheboggu were part of the *bagr* community at Kelbelle. Indeed, the two settlement communities were originally staying together in one village until recently when a faction migrated across the border into Burkina Faso. Because of this relationships, the two communities operate with a common agenda and time schedule with regards to *bagr* calendar. It is believed that the calendar is consistent with the internal logic of *bagr* itself as a religious and cultural institution.

Taking this into consideration I have opted to present the research material neither following the order that I made the collection nor according to their place of origin but according to the internal logic via which the series of initiation rituals and narration sessions of *bagr* are ideally performed within these community (see Tengan 1999; 2006). The ideal sequence for the ritual narration of the white *bagr* has as order the rites and narration of the white *bagr* of black beans, the white *bagr* of white beans, the white *bagr* of bambara beans and the white *bagr* of dance. This is the order I have decided to follow. In the course of the study, however, I have had the opportunity to attend two separate ritual occasions when the white *bagr* of black beans narration was part of the ritual sequence. I have here opted to present the two versions together placing them in the time order I participated in the ritual ceremonies.

Produced within the context of ritual orature and religious services, factors influencing the thought processes of the narrators and the creation of the narratives are varied. There are the recollections of collective memory and common practices coming from the bodily habitus of the individual as well as the society and improvisations of descriptive situations arising within the context of *bagr* initiation ritual performances as art and drama. Indeed, one could say that, description of the series of ritual activities for the different phases of *bagr* initiation structured in definite and formal sequences constitute the oratory content material of *bagr* narration. Though improvisations may take place in terms of appropriate insertions and comments, as a religious ritual one has to follow strictly the given ritual order sequence and all diversions or digressions or omissions are considered as serious errors that must be corrected immediately by any member of the community capable of continuing with the narration. Since, this is the most significant mark for authenticity and correctness for any of the white *bagr* narrations, I have decided to follow strictly this norm and where errors have been committed to insert my own footnote comments on the nature of the error. Indeed, my introductory chapters and paragraphs coming before each

narration are attempting to put each of the narration into the formal and specific situational contexts leading to its production. They do not serve as analysis of the narration.

It has been a challenge to all the private individuals who have continued to believe in me and to support my work. I refer in particular to the late Peter Cardinal Porekuu Dery who has continued even beyond the grave to support me in all ways, to my wife An Debyser and our children and Marcelle De Cleene for their continued support and affection. At this point I can quote for them the following Dagara proverb: *Naab be puoré bãã ì* (The cow cannot say thank you enough to the river); since I will always continue to rely on your support.

Alexis Bekyane Tengan

Zaventem, July 2011