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POETRY AND GENDER: THE CHANGING STATUS OF DAGAARE WOMEN

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolving roles of Dagaare women in Dagaare oral poetry, and with that transformation, their changing status in the society. The issues of women as they are reflected in the oral poems they sing are also examined. Resources from fifty women, including discussions with people knowledgeable in Dagaare oral arts were gathered and analysed to understand how the situation of the Dagaare woman is changing. Particular women performers were also picked and their poems recorded for analysis, and they were also interviewed on their views on their changing roles and position in the society.

The status of women is examined vis-à-vis their prestige, economic and political power in the society and is seen to be inexorably changing as their economic base improves and they gain more and more recognition in their society.

Institutional factors that promote change such as migration, activities of NGOs and the Churches are also examined. One of the recommendations made is that much more needs to be done to give women an even higher status in the society.

Résumé

La communication étudie l'évolution du rôle des femmes Dagaare dans la poésie orale dagaare en identifiant les changements qu'elle a entraîné au niveau de leurs statuts dans la société. Les problèmes des femmes tels qu'ils sont représentés dans les poèmes oraux sont aussi étudiés. Les informations recueillies auprès de cinquante personnes interrogées y compris des entretiens avec des personnes bien informées sur les arts oraux des Dagaaris sont rassemblées et analysées afin de comprendre l'évolution de la situation des femmes dagaare. Certaines femmes artistes ont été choisies et leurs poésies enregistrées pour les analyses. Elles ont été également interrogées pour savoir leurs opinions sur l'évolution de leurs rôles et leur position dans la société.

Le statut des femmes a été examiné eu égard à leur prestige, leur pouvoir économique et politique dans la société. Le statut des femmes change d'une manière inexorable lorsque s'améliore leur situation économique et par conséquent, elles jouissent d'une reconnaissance plus importante dans la société.

Les facteurs institutionnels qui favorisent les changement viz: la migration, les activités des ONG et les Eglises, sont aussi pris en compte dans le travail. L'une des recommandations faites parmi d'autres, est qu'il reste encore beaucoup à faire pour accorder aux femmes un statut plus noble dans la société.

Introduction

Change is taking place all the time in all human societies, sometimes manifesting as a sudden and catastrophic event, and may involve a complete change in the ideology of the society. Often however, it is a gradual and hardly perceptible process (Beattie 1964: 241) The role of Dagaare women in oral poetry and with it their statuses in Dagaare society have been changing in just such a barely perceptible way.

The main forms of poetry traditionally created among the Dagaaba are dirges (*lagni*), praise songs (*dannu*), play songs (*anlee* and *koori*) and esoteric religious chants like those of the Bagre

festival and the *summa* mask. The playing of xylophones (*gyile*) and drums (*tumpaani* and *gangari*) may also be included. It is praise songs and play songs that women have traditionally performed. In most other Ghanaian societies including the Dagomba and the Ewe, singing of dirges is the preserve of women (Awoonor 1976: 96). Among the Dagaaba however, it was unknown for a woman to chant a dirge at a funeral ground. She might however wail or dance to the chanting of the male dirge singers. Women were also mostly excluded from traditional religious ceremonies and the chants associated with them, because they were considered impure or not reliable enough to be able to keep the esoteric secrets of cults such as the *summa* mask. It was a taboo for a woman to perform on the xylophone or on the drums. The legend about the making of xylophones has it that the blood of the fairy who taught men to make the xylophone is still a part of the instrument and so because women menstruate, they did not play it (Wiggins 1988: 3). There was no actual prohibition forbidding them from playing, but the traditional belief that a woman who performs on the xylophone or the drums would be rendered barren was a powerful deterrent. Because of the social stigma and ostracism that accompanies childlessness, no woman would risk becoming barren. *Tumpaani*, the "talking drums," are considered by Dagaaba to be infused with spirituality which would be profaned by the touch of a woman.

In recent times however, it has been noticed that increasing numbers of women have begun to chant dirges at funeral grounds to the accompaniment of xylophones and calabash drums. Also, starting from the example of the churches, women have become accepted as players of xylophones and drums. It may therefore be assumed that this great change in the role of women in Dagaare oral poetry is not isolated nor is it confined to the sphere of literature, but is a change involving all other areas of social life.

Theorising about women needs a basis in the context of culture at the interface of culture and women's social space (Kolawole 1998). This is particularly so in myths about women which become a determinant of the self-image of women. Over a long period of time, images of women projected through mythical allusions, which uphold the position of women in the society in relation to that of men and play down women's achievements, begin to be accepted by the general society and become part and parcel of women's image in the society. Writers now highlight the danger of consistently depicting women with negative images. There is a great diversity of reactions to the issue of women's portrayal, many situating women within the patriarchal setting, assuming therefore that women's position in the society is inevitable, as a result of the patriarchy, and that (therefore) nothing can be done about it. Others see women as the victims of the traditional system in which they live, which might not be susceptible to change. Yet others do not see any problem with women's empowerment, for they see women as always having been empowered (Kolawole 1998: 15-16).

Oral literature provides the domain in which individuals in different social roles comment upon power relationships in society and create knowledge about it. However, people producing oral literature are not just commenting on society, but are involved in power relations either supporting or subverting those in power. The forms of art they are involved in are imbued with power, which can provoke, move, direct, prevent, overturn, and recast social reality (Furniss and Gunner 1995: 3). Women can thus redefine the terms of their signification in the context of the oral arts, creating new myths and symbols to replace the old terms that are detrimental to their image. The traditional conceptions and expectations of women are undergoing transformation from the introduction of factors of change, which offer opportunities for advancement and/or enhancement of the social status of women (Development and Women Studies Programme 1992). With the NGOs, churches, and other agencies working among the people, augmenting the influence of education, and contact with the cultures of other ethnic groups, the status of women is slowly but relentlessly changing.

Women in Traditional Dagaare Society

The Dagaaba, organised according to clans, which trace descent patrilineally from a putative ancestor, nevertheless recognise the importance of their uterine kin group as well, and maintain a joking relationship with it. However, they would not accept any form of dominance from uterine kinsmen (Tuurey 1982: 19).

In anthropological and sociological studies, status refers to relative power, wealth and honour, esteem or prestige (Oppong and Abu 1987). Most of these elements are identified in the traditional Dagaare male, but only a few can be identified in the traditional female. Power radiates from the elders of the eldest generation and goes down through the males to the youngest generation of males. Power is thus gerontocratic, and remains firmly in the hands of males.

Even identity favours males, as, though a man may not lose his membership in the clan nor leave his clan to become a member of another clan, a woman becomes a member of her husband's clan, albeit a member with low status. Though such a married woman has complementary status with the males of her generation in her patrilineage, once married, even her own patrikin consider her as belonging to her husband's clan rather than to her natal clan.

Ownership of land is vested in the clan heads and the land priests (*Tendaamba*), and is parcelled out to the males of the clan because it is only males who inherit land. Even the males do not have absolute ownership of the land to do with it what they will, as they only hold it in trust for subsequent generations. As an important factor of production, particularly for the agrarian Dagaaba, this practice securely puts wealth in the hands of males to the exclusion of females. Among the Lobr, one of the Dagaare groups, a woman may, through industry, attain a high status and acquire a *bellu* name, which is passed on from the mother and may be passed on matrilineally through daughters. Sons may use the *bellu* name, but they cannot pass it on to their sons. Among other Dagaare groups, even though women may become rich through such income generating activities as *pito* brewing, pottery and basket weaving, there is no recognised social status accorded their effort. The fact that they are well off may not even be noticed, in the light of their husband's influence and control over the wealth. A woman who has it and flaunts it may be called *pognaa* meaning "woman chief," but this is by no means a praise name, rather a derogatory remark meaning the woman is headstrong.

The inferior status of women among the Dagaaba is mentioned by Goody (1962: 60), who in writing about witches mentioned the role inferiority of women, saying that they have a subordinate position in both social and physical terms. Honour and prestige would normally not be attached to the figure of a woman. She is considered a possession of her husband's family, paid for with the cattle and/or other prestations so that she can be of economic and other benefit to her husband. However, Goody writes that when a woman has a grown up son with children of his own, she is said to have become a *yir sob*, a "house owner" (Goody 1962: 79). Goody continues that if a woman has borne three or four children, she is allowed to look in the granary of the house, an act that would otherwise not be acceptable for a wife. This is because she has now satisfactorily performed her reproductive role.

Assimeng (1990: 58), writing generally about women in Ghana, notes that various myths, taboos, customs and traditions had historically assigned women to a ritually and therefore socio-politically inferior status. He suggests that a principal cause of this discriminatory attitude that is regarded as spirit-charged and polluting.

Through all this, the traditional woman is expected to be reticent and take things stoically, because she has been socialised to believe that suffering in silence is a virtue (Mugo 1994: 62).

Institutional Factors Promoting the Change of Status

Change occurs when there are certain factors to trigger the change. Change in the status of Dagaare women can be attributed to general growing enlightenment as a result of travel among other ethnic groups, education, the activities of the churches and the NGOs. Certain roles that the economic situation of the Dagaaba has forced women to assume have also played no small part in changing the status of Dagaare women.

Since the time of the colonial administration, when the Northern territories were considered a "labour reserve" (Songsore and Denkabe 1995: 1), Dagaaba have been travelling to the cocoa farms and the mines in the south of Ghana in search of work. The Dagaaba seem to love to travel, as can be shown by names such as *Yonye* (Travel and see); *Yochilli* (Travel and mature); *Yobanzie* (Travel and know places). Initially, they did not take their wives along with them, but left them in their villages and sent them remittances. These days however, things have changed and both men and women migrate down to the south of Ghana where they come into contact with cultures of ethnic groups in the south. The Akan woman for example, traditionally has a great degree of autonomy in her society and holds the power of decision making in many activities (Boaten I 1993: 92). Since cultures in contact with each other end up influencing each other, Dagaare women who have sojourned in the south of Ghana gain a certain amount of emancipation which their colleagues in Dagao do not have. These somewhat emancipated women finally influence their peers back at home. Though this might not have changed the situation of the Dagaare woman, the enlightenment that it has brought about would eventually help to bring about changes in the status of Dagaare women. It is not only the women who benefited from travelling and contact with other cultures, since the men too, seeing how other men co-exist with their spouses, became more tolerant of their wives' exhibition of emancipation. They should for example endure their wives joining social groups and taking part in the activities of the group.

Education has played a great part in the enlightenment, which is helping Dagaare women to recognise their rights. Though women were generally not sent to school, more and more of the younger generation are going through some schooling. This gives women the chance to know what is going on around them, the changes in the world, and the status that women have in other places, and as a result they are aware that their lot is not inevitable.

The churches, particularly the Catholic Church, have played an important part in the changing status of Dagaare women. Right from the time missionaries moved into the Dagaare area in 1929, the missionaries have preached equality between the sexes. Apart from preaching, the church did its best to ban the practice among its members of those elements of culture which were thought to be inimical to the status and well being of women. Catholic Action, a Catholic association, taught girls to resist the traditional mode of "catching" girls, where the girl to be married was waylaid and abducted to the suitor's house, thus making the marriage a *fait accompli*. Dagaare girls of the Catholic Action were supposed to rally to her aid. In addition, girls were no longer to accept marriage through mediation without having first met face to face with the suitor and given their consent (Bekye 1987: 41-43). Apart from this kind of direct action the churches also played a part in the changing social status of Dagaare women in more subtle ways. The Catholic Church has provided the best of education in the Upper West Region of Ghana. Girls were not ignored as the church built a big girl's secondary school in Jirapa, the St. Anne's Vocational Institute at Nandom, and the St. Claire's Vocational Institute in Tumu, all catering to the education and training of girls in vocational skills, through which they would be self sufficient and therefore not be dependent on a man.

The Non-Governmental Organisations that operate in the Upper West Region have played their part in direct ways to change the status of women. Agents of NGOs such as the Centre for the Development of People (CEDEP), *Suntaa-Nuntaa*, "Help each other, love each other" the 31st December Women's Movement and some government agencies such as the National

Commission on Women and Development (NCWD) and the Non Formal Education Division (NFED), directly educate women on their rights as persons of equal status with men, and on their potential. They organise women into social groups and co-operatives and at meetings of these groups discussions are held to enlighten the members on what they could do to make their lives better and to increase their standing in the society. The *Suntaa-Nuntaa* organisation is engaged in this through encouraging and helping women in tree nursing and planting as an income-generating venture. In this way women are repairing the damage to the environment that the society has caused, and while making some income, they are also earning the recognition of the society. Co-operatives of women are helped with small loans by agencies such as the National Boards for Small-Scale Industries (NBSSI), Africa 2000 and IFAD, and with inventory credit by Technoserve, to enable them to engage in many income-generating ventures. Dagaare women have fully embraced this, as shown by the ninety-nine women's groups that are operating in the Wa and Nadowli districts (Songsore and Denkabe 1995: 130-132).

The work of these agencies with women does not in any way mean that men are completely cut off. According to Mr. Stan Dery¹ program manager of CEDEP, men are encouraged to attend some of the focus group discussions so that during the discussions the two groups would begin to understand each other more.

Women in the Literary Milieu of the Dagaaba

Furniss and Gunner (1995: 3) write that performers of oral literature go beyond being mere commentators and are involved in relations of power in terms of supporting or subverting those in power. They continue, that the forms of oral literature are themselves invested with power, in the words and texts which have the ability to provoke, move, direct, prevent, overrun and recast social reality. A performer has the ability not only to represent power relations, but also to transform these relations. According to Lucy Duran's 1995 article, "*Jelimusow*: The superwomen of Malian music", women are constantly redefining the terms of their signification in general social discourse, not leaving the other sex to determine the terms by which women are signified. Furniss and Gunner (1995: 5) further see oral literature as constituting a field in which political process and the representation of daily social life are central. Song and poetry are an integral part of the way African people are commenting on the happenings in their societies. Sutherland-Addy (2000: 14) underlines women's redefinition of themselves when she says that women interact intensively with the rest of society in complementary and conflicting ways, finding an outlet in self expression to deal with the tangle of emotions emanating from their social experience.

It is in the church that a lot of girls have had the courage to play the xylophone and the drums as members of the choir. In this non-traditional space, there were none of the fears that they would have in the traditional space. On the other hand, they were encouraged by the preaching of equity between men and women "in the sight of God." On Good Fridays in the Catholic Church among the Dagaaba, a funeral is held for the death of Jesus Christ in the full traditional way. During these services, women began to sing dirges. Nobody took this as a serious effort on the part of women to break into the field of dirge singing, but it served as an encouragement to women to consider singing dirges in earnest.

The very tradition that did not give women the chance to perform dirges actually alternatively provided the opportunity for women to practice singing dirges. Among the Dagaaba, there exists a joking relationship between grandchildren and grandparents. During the funerals of grandparents, especially when they have lived to a ripe old age, females who are grandchildren of the deceased, irrespective of their ages, dress up in smocks like men and come out to sing dirges in praise of their grandparent. This is usually after the first bitter edge of the death has

¹ Interview at CEDEP offices in Wa on the 19th of January, 2000.

been taken off with very serious mourning and dirge singing. This transvestite behaviour reduces the seriousness of the dirge singing as the females are seen to be posing as men. It is taken that men are singing the dirge. It is understood by everybody around that the dirge singers are grandchildren (classificatory or otherwise) of the deceased and that they are joking with their grandparent. Often, an accomplished male dirge singer might sing a duet with the female singer, making corrections for her and in this way unwittingly actually training her to become a good dirge signer, though nobody would have believed that she would actually sing dirges in earnest. It is in just this fashion that a lot of young men learn to sing dirges.

Apart from this opportunity to sing dirges that is created by the joking relationship between grandparents and grandchildren, the fact of women being the main performers of *dannu*,² praise songs, gives them the skills to sing *kolagni*,³ the actual dirge sung at the funeral grounds. Praises form the basis of the dirge, and other issues are then brought in. Women are already adept in singing praises, so it is just a matter of bringing in topical issues to make the dirge. The type of dirge that women usually sing, *komuɔɔ*,⁴ comprises just praises without many other topics of note being brought in.

The *Suntaa-Nuntaa* organisation, a Non-Governmental Organisation working with women's groups in agro-forestry and empowerment of women, uses drama and other oral arts to organise the women they work with. During the performances of women in these meetings they use the Dagaare drums that are used for dances such as *bawa*, but they do not depend on or ask men to play for them. They go ahead and do the playing themselves, saying that after all the men are not a part of the group so they do not have any business coming to play for them. This shows that the women are determined to maintain the integrity of their groups and do not want any influence from their menfolk. They hitherto did not usually exhibit such independence of mind

The Status of Women in the Oral Poetry of the Dagaaba

Dirges

There are different dirges performed among the Dagaaba, *kolagni* and *komuɔɔ*. The former used to be performed exclusively by males.

Komuɔɔ unlike *kolagni* are performed by only females. The women may sit around the corpse and chant these in an undertone accompanied by weeping. There are no topical issues brought into the singing of this type of dirge. There may just be mention of tribulations that the deceased or family went through in life, but the main focus is on virtues. These virtues are usually mentioned in the praise names that are given to the deceased.

Kolagni, on the other hand, are a very serious type of dirge with serious subject matter. These are performed at the funeral grounds when the funeral is still fresh and they are referred to as *kotuluu* (hot funeral). In the performance of a *kolagni*, as with all other types of Dagaare dirge, there is no composition that the performer already knows and performs. The Dagaare dirge is an impromptu composition sung by one, two or three dirge singers.

² *Dannu* are praises songs mainly sung by women. These however form the main part of the *kolagni*, a dirge which usually starts with an introductory wailing (*langmuɔɔ*) to set the rhythm, followed by the delineation of the lineage of the deceased, the praises forming the main part, and then some more wailing to tune down.

³ *Kolagni* are dirges sung at the funeral grounds while the body is lying in state or seated on the catafalque. These dirges are traditionally sung by only men and are considered a more serious form of dirge.

⁴ *Komuɔɔ* are dirges sung by the women gathered in the house to mourn, or those sitting around the corpse. This form of dirge is made up only of praises and is not different from *dannu* which is the preserve of women.

Women have now convincingly entered the field of singing *kolagni*. This does not mean that they did not have the skills before. My main informant on women's dirges, Pelbasuoye Seripe⁵ of Sankana, says that she did not have to learn by understudying any dirge singer, nor did she undergo any initiation to be able to sing. She believes her ability is God given, and it gives her self-confidence and high self-esteem.

*Ka wirin lan koo che n wien man yi*⁶

With a hundred whistles together, my whistle comes out clear.

She goes on to establish her superiority over others, (male singers from Takpo in the Nadowli district).

N muo nan ban kuori kan ban seu ban bi,

Piirikulaama,⁷ n muo nan ban kuori kan ba seu ban bi.

Since I sing dirges, am I not better than them,

Piirikulaama, since I sing dirges, am I not better than them.

At the funeral where this dirge was recorded the men from Takpo had been reluctant to give way to Pelbasuoye until a male dirge singer from her own village of Sankana took over, and then handed over to her. She could therefore not resist the jibe at them. This is just an example to show that Dagaare women are ready to fight for recognition. This particular woman is known as a *pog gandraa*, a hard-headed woman, who would not be pushed over by any man.

Women who have started singing dirges at funerals have financial consideration in mind too, for they earn some money, apart from the gift of money thrown down by mourners and relatives of the deceased in appreciation for the praises and good things said about the family and the dead. Indeed the novelty of women singing attracts more throwing of money.

Ka gyilin ba kono che unin u lazari nin pie.

If the xylophone is dull, it is still the 30 (cowries).

Some of the traditional roles of women feature in the dirges of women:

Sombonayiri Dachiema, on kuon waanin yiri

Jiribayima, on kuon waanin yiri...

Zebanuma on kuon mwaanin samba

Sankana lankonoma, on komaaru wieli.

Dachiema of Sombo royal house, fetch water to the house

Jiribayima, fetch water to the house...

Zebanuma, greet the visitors with water

Lankonoma of Sankana, get cool water and cool the mourners.

One of the specific duties of women is fetching of water. A man would never be required to go the stream to fetch water, nor to even fetch water for visitors to drink.

⁵ Interview at Sankana near Wa on the 15th of January, 2000.

⁶ This and the excerpts of the dirge that follow are from the performance of Pelbasuoye Seripe at a funeral of a young woman at Sankana on the 15 of January, 2000. The full texts of all excerpts used in this paper can found in the unpublished M. Phil thesis "The Role of Women in Dagaare Oral Poetry: An Indicator of the Changing Status of Women in the Society" presented to the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana by Edward Nanbigne in the year 2001.

⁷ This is a praise name given to the deceased. It means literally one who fetches water from a rocky pool. The village Sankana is a rocky place with very few water sources.

To be fair to the singer of the dirge that is used here, she also criticises what she thinks is bad about women. She laments that some women do not measure up to the task of being wives and that it would have been better for the husbands of such women to have remained single.

Pɔɔba yee ka kaɔa man zɔli bun che yɔli ka pɔɔa
Ba yeli ka pɔɔa ka kaɔa kun ven che zin.

Woman yee! Someone will take something and call her a wife
when they talk of wives and someone would not rather remain single.

The dirge singer thinks things have changed. There was a time when women used their beauty to get what they wanted from men. In the past, a woman could not go to a drinking bar and buy drinks for herself. A man would have had to take her and buy drinks for both of them. There is such a change in this that religious leaders and social workers have noticed what they term a negative change in the status of women - Dagaare women taking to the drinking of locally brewed liquor (akpeteshie). Now, women do not fear to show that they have the wealth to get what they want. According to the dirge, they even buy what only males used to buy and own.

N muɔ ba yeli ka pɔɔa mwaa vielun danin a daan
Pɔɔa la buo da gbulo wo nii.

Didn't I say women should take beauty and buy pito
Who is a woman, buying items like cattle.

Praise songs

Praise songs in Dagaare *dannu*, are so called because they involve naming the ancestors, and praising them. By association, the living descendants of the ancestors are praised. Women use these praise songs for the functional purpose of providing rhythm for work, such as grinding of millet, pounding things in a mortar or churning ground shea-nuts into butter, but because they are predominantly praise names their functionality does not feature in the text. Apart from the rhythm for work, songs also take away the tedium of the work. Women however are able to work into the songs, issues that are dear to their hearts or are of social importance to them or the society. They can pour out their woes through these songs, thus purging their emotions, and at the same time giving out pointed messages to listeners.

In the praise songs, not all the names used are actual names of ancestors. Some are names coined to show some attributes, and a Dagaare listener would understand what the message is, not from what is said, but from the name that has been used.

The excerpts of *Dannu* presented here are from the composition and performance of Sonaanma of Loho,⁸ renowned for her singing. Because of her singing, she still uses the big built up grinding stone in her house. She however claims that it is poverty that makes her do that tedious work instead of going to grind whatever she needs at the grinding mill. The singer sees herself as someone who was to have come to the world as a man. She has a humorous way of seeing her situation. She perhaps thinks that the situation of males in her society is better, and that her being a female was a mistake. She sees herself as a *gɔba*, a master xylophonist, and one whose gift was given by God. It is the talented male xylophonists who are called *gɔba*.

A gɔɔri ŋa, nie zaa nan pegi ma
Naamwin la di kumo.

⁸ The excerpts of *dannu* used here were composed and sung by Sonaanma Charia of Loho and recorded on the 4th of January, 1999. Loho is a village about five kilometers to the north of Wa.

This my xylophone talent, nobody initiated me into it
It is God who gave it to me.

She continues:

*A yeli mam man kono yuori yela ni
Che ban wa ye ko pugina kuon
Ka maan di bin
N le kuomin buu buu waana ka ba diu
Hai, man min di pa sani wo
A waanin Loho, a wayo dire nin nimha.*

That is why I have been crying for a penis
But they said we should have a swim
And I put it down
I jumped in the water buu, buu, when I returned it was gone
so I also took a useless vagina
And I came to Loho to be in destitution.

She is lamenting her struggle in life.

*Le man da man yi yee a mo mori kpali
Pa, yeli na kpe ma, a wo konkora an in baanhi.*

That is how I used to go out and struggle, for nothing.
Oh! This thing pains me, like bangles on a leper.

Her main lament is about her childlessness, in spite of her having given birth to as many as ten children who have all died leaving her childless and the butt of the society. The situation of the childless woman, in spite of the changing times, has not really improved among the Dagaaba.

She attributes the deaths of her children to witchcraft.

*Maan ba dogi nyohinii zaa,
kuun na zun la
Kaa naan m min nyila fiin
M ela Loho. Ana n la taa la kuun bi?
M min na, a danaan man zin, a nin bihi pie, maan
Ana n i wala, mba me bi?
N kula tuon yeli ka sobbihi yen ta so ba
Ba di soa, ba yiri la ban loora.*

I haven't given birth in vain
It is because of death
If not, I also got a few
I built Loho. Do I have death?
Even I, could be with ten children, I
What should I do, didn't I build?
I can't say witches should not eat them
They should eat, it is their house they are breaking.

The poem is not entirely about herself, however. She sings about social issues.

In recent times, there has been a great lament among Dagaaba about young men not wanting to become responsible by marrying. There is always the comparison with by-gone years when

youths married by eighteen years of age. These days however, by twenty-five, they are still either in school or trying to be gainfully employed so that they can establish themselves and marry. The society however, thinks they are not serious about marrying. The singer devotes herself to the issue of bachelorhood. She sees the bachelor as a recalcitrant and irresponsible person.

*Dakuɔri kpaglagaa nyɔnfolon dogriba nuɔna,
Dakuɔri kpaglagaa pɔga bii bie.*

Uncaring bachelor, kin of freedom lovers,
Uncaring bachelor, no wife, no child.

Breaking from the song, she makes a comment about a young man standing by:

*Kaɲa turi gba chɔ ni. Ba zɔra biribiri u yeli chibe wo. U naan leun pel Pel. Bo un digra?
Bien muɔ kono bi?*

That is one of them hiding in the corner there. If they are running helter-skelter, he does not care. He would just run off like a shot. What is he taking? Is it a child that would be crying?

Play songs

Play songs, *anlee* and *kɔɔri*, have always been the preserve of women, and the medium through which they could have a bit of fun at other people's expense.⁹ Because of *anlee* songs, people were wary of misbehaving, lest the women make a song about their misdemeanours. There were limits, however, as to how far they could go in their songs, particularly if these were to be sung in the public domain and not secretly at home. The question is, do they now sing about things that they used not to sing about? Grace Azaanang, one of the women from whom I gathered *anlee* songs had this to say:

When I was young, anytime we sang certain songs, my uncle Matthew would appear with a cane and we would all have to do "440" to save ourselves.¹⁰

These days, women sing any song with impunity. Certainly, many songs are still about social issues, the common one being orphans and widows, and the fact that these are vulnerable people in the society.

*A bikpiibe yeli, u man pen la h'm h'm
A pɔgkuɔri yeli yee, u man pen la h'm h'm.
A bikpiibe yeli, u man penin la puɔ
U ba taa saa nin ma, u paa kpe yel ku ninbong.*

The orphan's problem, he moans h'm h'm
The widow's problem, she moans h'm h'm
The orphan's problem, he moans to himself
He has no father and mother, whom should he tell.

⁹ *Anlee* and *kɔɔri* are play songs but of different tempos. *Kɔɔri* is much more faster than *anlee*.

¹⁰ "440" is slang for to run fast and far, derived from the race of 440 yards. This is from an interview with Grace Azaanang on the 1st of February, 2000, at Charia.

Some songs comment on the situation of women in the society. The fact that a woman leaves the safety and love of her natal home to go and live with a husband in a house where she may be regarded as second class rankles with women now, and they sing their protest in no uncertain terms.

Naamwin! Bon la dogee hun i, dogee dogee dogee
A baki hu deu sau woo
A yi ti kuli nie bie
Ka nie bie leu tuura bu sau yela.

God! What is suffering that you created, suffering!
 To leave the food of your house
 And get married to somebody's son
 And somebody's son insults you because of food.

It is clear from some of the songs that Dagaare women are no longer ready to blindly follow their husbands even when they see that it would not do them any good. Their independence of thought is established, if not in reality, at least in song.

Kun kpenli dɔɔ yela ti nyen tiisan h'm h'm h'm
Kun kpenli dɔɔ yela ti nyen kɔɔtin h'm h'm h'm
Ka zie wa nyaana kaa dɔɔ bala bamii h'm h'm.

I won't sleep at a bus station because of a man
 I won't sleep in a courtroom because of a man
 And tomorrow the man would not regard me.

In recent time, some *Anlee* songs have become very boldly insulting to men, unlike the previous subtle hints of the songs. This may show that now women do not have such a high regard for the assumed superiority of men. The songs seem to suggest that the women would rather do without the males of the society if they had their way.

Ka dɔɔ naan da dogma, n naan yeli la dɔɔ yeli
A dɔɔ muɔ waala bunboluu muɔ
A dɔɔ muɔ waala bunboluu muɔ
Nin laani laani laani.

If a man did not beget me, I would have talked about men
 What actually is a man
 What actually is a man
 A useless useless useless person.

Conclusion

This paper seeks to establish evidence for a change in the role of Dagaare women as manifested in the context and performance of oral literature of the society. The change in the part played by Dagaare women in the performance of oral literature should be an indication of a change in their status in the society.

Oral literature is a sphere that shows the improved social status of women as it leads to their being objects of admiration, imitation, deference, suggestion and attraction. Though a woman may be low in political and economical status, her social status may be high because of her involvement and/or achievement in the oral arts, which may make her an object of admiration in the society, and increase her own self-esteem.

The increased responsibility that women have in the maintenance of their families has given them more say in decision-making. They are more involved in the responsibility of family maintenance because there are more opportunities open to them to generate income, the use of which they control. Further augmenting ability of women to generate income is the fact that now they are able to own land in their own right; land which is deeded to them and which they can pass on to their children. This together with the avenues for small loans for income generating ventures gives women a new confidence in life so that they can now look to issues connected with attaining high prestige in their society. Society now recognises the indispensability of women and holds them in higher esteem as a result.

The change in the status of Dagaare women is however on a minimal scale, and more can be done to accelerate the changes that are taking place. With the intervention of the agents of change such as the churches, the NGOs and government agencies concerned with the improvement of women's position and condition in the societies, the regard that people have for women is rising. Women can now speak boldly in public and their suggestions would not be disregarded simply because they are women. However, only a few women are yet able to be so bold. It is hoped that more and more women would become involved to make definite changes. For something to really become accepted, it needs to be a more general occurrence so that it does not seem as if it is a few nonconformists challenging the status quo. It would be a real change when an outspoken woman is not called a *pog gandraa*, a headstrong woman.

The aim of the agents of change should be the creation of contented families that are able to meet their everyday needs. A happy family of that sort is less likely to live in an atmosphere of oppression. A couple would then be more amenable to ideas of gender equity.

An issue of concern however, is the negative change in the status of women where alcoholic drinks are concerned. Definitely, women are more independent now. What used not to occur when men had to buy drinks for women is becoming common. Drunkenness used to be associated with men, but now some women, from those in their teens to the elderly, are drunk as often as men. This trait is particularly common among those who have the time to go around attending funerals. The drinking of hard liquor like gin and *akpeteshie* by women is of great concern in the society. Though it shows a change in the status of women, they could be better off without that type of change.

Literature in any society serves both as an indicator of change and an arena where the change can occur. The change in status of Dagaare women, as reflected in the oral poetry, is not restricted to the private domain, but extends to the public domain too. Women now not only perform roles that were not traditionally assigned to them in the public domain, they have gone on to add dimensions that were little used or not used at all. Women are not hesitating to pour out their woes in their performances. The issues that disturb them in the society feature prominently in their poetry. The problems that come with childlessness and widowhood are major concerns, as well as the treatment they suffer from their husbands. Whatever happens in the society affects women too. They therefore sing about other issues such as irresponsibility and wickedness not just on the part of men, but also on the part of women. This is a step in the right direction, as women would be doing their own cause a disservice if they turned a blind eye to issues that women need to be admonished about, and rather adopted a confrontational posture with men.

The men of the Dagaare society have not prevented women from performing *kolagni*, which proves that, but for the fear concerning women's performance of the dirge, they would not have been left out of the performance for so long. The society has also undergone such a change that people are rather thrilled about women performing the dirge. The very fact that the attitude of Dagaaba to this change is mild shows that literature can be a safe space in which women can change and show change. It shows that literature is a dimension in which women can be what they are not in reality. There is clearly scope for further explanation of change for women through literature.

One area however where women have not made much of a breakthrough is in the playing of xylophones and drums. Though women are now known to play these instruments, they do so only in the non-traditional domains of churches or at meetings of women's groups. Only a few women have been known to play funeral xylophones at funeral grounds. These, however, were very elderly women who would no longer have any fear of being unable to bear children if they play the xylophone. A change would really be seen to have occurred when young women are able to perform on these instruments in public the way women now perform dirges. We may not have long to wait.

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