

A NOTE ON THE ROLE OF THE FATHER'S SISTER  
IN DAGBON

Tait has pointed out<sup>1</sup> that the most common sorcery accusations in Dagbon fall within the household and that the relative most feared as a sorcerer, or as one who may pray to her ancestors to remove protection from a victim in the same descent group, is the father's sister the 'pirba' and that the most common victims are young men. In stating these observations Tait regretted that he was unable to give any quantitative evidence. He also remarked that it is old widows who are the most frequently accused group of people and they are often cared for by relatives who are classed as their 'brothers' or 'sons', but who may have previously seen little of these relatives. The tensions in such a system, he says, are apparent.

Quantitative evidence and observation show that he has raised an interesting question. Here I wish to make the point that socialization is one important factor generating the existing tensions in the father's sister - brother's child relationship.

Analysis of household censuses proves that the sisters of many compound heads do indeed reside within their households playing the role of 'pirba' to their children. In a sample of over fifty compounds 43% were found to have full or classificatory resident female siblings of the male heads. Moreover many girls are brought up by their father's sisters and not by their own mothers. These are functions of two important features of Dagomba family custom one is that divorced, widowed and separated women typically do to reside with a brother and that it is customary for a woman to raise one of her brother's daughters and for a man to raise one of his sister's sons. Genealogies recorded show that it is very common for one or more of a man's daughter to be raised by his sister. Whether as the senior woman in her brother's compound, where she takes precedence in domestic affairs over his wives, or as the educator of his brother's daughter in her husband's compound, the 'pirba' plays a significant role as a socialising agent.

Children's responses concerning the relatives with whom they are emotionally and socially involved also support this observation that the father's sister plays an important role in the lives of her brother's children, the major social and emotional involvement with kin outside the nuclear family is with her. (see Table below) Seven per cent of the children concerned replied that she was kind and loved and that social interaction with her was frequent, but only two per cent said that they sought her company during their holidays or that they enjoyed being with her. Rather thirty per cent of all replies stating positive dislike for a variety of reasons were directed against her.

Here then we have some quantitative evidence supporting the observations that the father's sister is present in a considerable number of households and that she is also the object of much kin-directed dislike. But that this dislike is simply because she is considered an 'economic burden' upon the young men of the household as Tait suggests (op cit) seems unlikely. The antagonism appears to be present before the young people are of an age to shoulder much economic responsibility and to be engendered in the early socialization process, when she is likely to play a significant role in the child's upbringing.

- 
1. A sorcery Hunt in Dagomba D. Tait. Africa April 1963.

TABLE  
SCHOOL CHILDREN'S ATTITUDES TOWARDS THEIR  
RELATIVES

An analysis of the replies of 93 Dagomba middle school children to questions concerning their relatives. The number included 61 boys and 32 girls.

Kin	Loved	Kind	enjoy company of	like to spend half-days with	TOTAL Favourable replies	Respected	Disliked	Total emotional responses	Worked for	Taught by	Seen Often	Total replies about social interaction
F	30	35	42	33	34	50	2	30	48	37	26	34
M	34	27	23	28	28	27	1	18	19	30	37	28
Sib	7	12	23	9	13	3	30	15	13	9	11	11
F'ss	7	7	4	2	5	3	30	13	4	7	9	7
MsB	6	6	4	12	7	8	8	8	6	5	5	5.5
GF	5	3	2	9	5	2	6.5	4	4	9	2	5.5
GM	6	3	2	2	3	1	5	3	2	3	5	3
FsrB	3	1.5		4	2	2	1	1.5	2			1.5
FjrB	1	4			1.9	3	10	5	1		3	2.5
MsrS	1	1		1	1	1		5	1		1	1.5
MjrS		5			1		6.5	2			1	5
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

The analysis of these replies appears to give a clear indication as to which relatives play the most significant role in the children's lives and their positive, negative or ambivalent attitudes towards them. Reasons given

for liking relatives included sending to school and giving uniforms, money, books, food. Reasons for disliking relatives included beating, abuse, jealousy and witchcraft (in the last case the accused was a father's sister).

Note:

The term 'pirba' refers to full and classificatory sisters of the father. Observation indicates that the more distantly related father's sisters are the more likely to be accused of witchcraft (personal communication. T. Sulemana).

C. Oppong