

## A REVIEW

\* BY CHRISTINE OPPONG

### THE MYTH OF THE BAGRE

BY JACK GOODY

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381 pp. Illustrated.

The year 1972 saw the addition of yet another distinguished volume to both the Oxford Library of African Literature and the series of works dealing with various aspects of the social organization of the complex of communities termed Lodagaa in north western Ghana, which include, *The Social Organization of the Lowilli* (Goody, 1956) and *Death Property and the Ancestors* (Goody, 1962). In this recent book *The Myth of the Bagre*, Dr. Goody sets out to document a still flourishing myth and ritual apparently composed by the Lodagaa themselves or a similar people. He first recorded this in the village of Birifu some twenty years ago, a village fifty miles to the north of Wa and ten miles to the south of Lawra. First an account is given of the organization of the Bagre society, then some features of the myth are discussed and lastly the text of the myth, a translation and notes are presented. Dr. Goody's primary concern as he says, is to record the facts of the matter as he understands them. As he rightly points out in many previous discussions of African thought, symbolism and religion, it has been difficult to separate "news from the views" that is, the observer's comments from the actor's actions and words.

The Bagre still continues to be performed in Birifu. Indeed the author revisited the village in 1970 to see part of the ceremonies once more. Its influence is even thought to be spreading southwards and westwards. Already the Bagre performance and myth are common to a number of different communities and peoples.

The ceremony is performed during the dry season which stretches from October to March and is heralded by the ripening of the shea fruit. It takes place in the long room of the compound, the Bagre shrine being built in the

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\* Research Fellow in Social Anthropology.

neck of the granary which stands in the long room with its neck projecting through the flat roof. We are told that at the basis of the Bagre organization are the partrilineages, each of which decided when it will perform the ceremony at intervals of about four or more years. Each lineage is helped in the performance by other neighbouring groups.

The descriptions of the ceremonies and myth are detailed and vivid, giving us the impression of the long warm evenings in which there is, "the music of xylophones, the poetry of the myth, the dancing of the young, the conversation of the old and plenty of beer, food and girls" (p.12).

The Bagre myth is concerned mainly with the relationships between man, God and the Beings of the Wild, fairly-like creatures who, according to the myth, first showed men how to grow and cook food, make iron and shoot with bows and arrows. The Bagre rites appear in many ways to be like a funeral, but they are actually about birth, fertility and health. The association is a type of voluntary secret society, which the majority of the community members join, both men and women, young and old and its primary concern is the life and health of its members. Frequently fathers enter their children into the society to ward off trouble. For adults participation entails considerable social gratification; for the community a measure of integration is achieved through the co-operation of different members in the various stages of the rites. The main part of the ceremonies carried out at full moon are a special time for dancing, relaxation, enjoyment and courting. During the ceremonies the Bagre myth is recited by the senior men and repeated by the novices. Membership affords new knowledge as well as protection against death, disease and misfortune.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the book is the record of the Bagre myth, for as Dr. Goody says, "In the Bagre text, we have a document of African provenance which in length and complexity far surpasses anything so far recorded from the traditional oral cultures." (p.13). In fact "It is the only extensive text of this kind to emerge from Africa". (p.32). And as he points out "Its publication...provides a base for the examination of the intellectual processes of these societies" (p.13).

An excerpt from the translation of the opening invocation of the White Bagre gives some indication of the tone and style of the "poem". Man is looking for the mystical cause of misfortune and consults a diviner,

"Gods,  
Ancestors,  
Guardians,  
Beings of the wild,  
The leather bottles,  
Say we should perform,  
Because of the scorpions sting,  
Because of suicide,  
aches in the belly,

Pains in the head.  
 The elder brother  
 Slept badly.  
 He took some guinea corn  
 And hurried along  
 To the diviner  
 Who poured out his bag  
 And then said,  
 Let's grasp the stick.  
 They did so  
 And he picked up 'deity'  
 And he picked up 'the wild'  
 And he picked up 'sacrifice'.  
 He picked up 'deity'.  
 That was what  
 He picked up first.  
 He picked out 'deity'  
 And began to ask,  
 What 'deity'?  
 Deity of childbirth ?  
 Deity of farming ?  
 Deity of daughters ?  
 Deity of grandfathers ?  
 Deity of grandmothers ?  
 Deity of Bowstrings ?  
 Deity of chicken breeding ?  
 You reject them all.  
 Deity of meetings ?  
 The cowries fell favourably:  
 It was so."

Attention is drawn amongst other things to an important area for further exploration by those interested in the comparative study of social institutions, rather than literature or intellectual processes, that is the organization and functions of the Bagre association itself. One would very much like to know more about the wider distribution of such societies and the variations found in neighbouring districts. Obviously it would be illuminating to have more comparative data to throw light on the similarities and differences existing between the Bagre associations and the associations of diviners, such as those found among the nearby Dagomba and Gonja. The similarities are manifold in terminology (for instance a diviner in Dagbani is *Baga*) in activities, paraphernalia and symbols. As Dr. Goody states apart from medicine, the equipment the Bagre use is similar to that employed by diviners and their divinatory apparatus is in fact used at the death of senior members

and at the end of the Bagre dance. Recruitment through catching by the Bagre, a state revealed by a diviner and often following illness or disaster, is also reminiscent of recruitment to the diviners' profession.

In conclusion one might comment that *The Myth of the Bagre* offers a unique and invaluable contribution to African oral literature, to studies of comparative religion and to Ghanaian social anthropology. It will surely serve as a source of inspiration and information to scholars of Ghana from many disciplines.