

**THE INDIVIDUAL'S FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN
THE DAGARA SOCIETY: MYTH OR REALITY?**

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Introduction

The question that is raised in this paper would have been pointless without the generally biased perception of the Dagara society by some scholars. For instance, it has often been said of the Dagara society that it is "acephalous", which implies that it has no central power that holds the right to exert violence. In consequence, there is absolutely no restriction to the freedom of a Dagara. It has also been said that the Dagara society is "egalitarian". This refers to the absence of any form of social stratification which distinguishes a high and a low class of people, the former being entitled to some privileges by their high social status and the latter being denied such privileges. Contrary to other societies where hypergamy and hypogamy are practiced, isogamy prevails in the Dagara society. The avoidance of such barriers to freedom, is in itself, the greater evidence of freedom, and this is the merit of the Dagara society.

The organization of the Dagara society is primarily based on "kinship that creates an extremely complex network" of relationship (Some Valere, 1996) which actually functions to provide social security. In that network, the individual figures as the shadow of his own macro or microcosm. Therefore, to cause a prejudice to the individual is also to cause prejudice to the network of relationship he has.

In principle, then, the Dagara society ought to be seen as a society where freedom of expression and undertaking is fully granted. However how can freedom of expression be a reality in a society where even, a certain type of speech, can "kill". A series of questions may stem from this point.

How can freedom of expression fully operate in a society that is considered to be "egalitarian", and where father and son, mother and daughter, eldest and youngest are socially bound in a vertical relationship?

How can freedom of expression be functional in a society that is isogamic and egalitarian and yet where women, although are recognized as efficient and necessary social partners, occupy a low rank?

As it appears, there are serious questions, doubts and even contradictions that are compelling us to reconsider what has so far been taken for granted. The interest of the analysis is not just to point out those questions and contradictions, but to seek the conditions under which individual and collective freedom of expression is exerted in the Dagara society.

The Dagara, an acephalous society

For many authors, the Dagara society, has been "acephalous". According to Labouret (1931: 215), for instance, "the ties that hold the society under scrutiny together are so loose that, one is inclined, at first sight, to believe that complete anarchy is the rule of a land where there are no chiefs and no villages".

Labouret was investigating the Lobi, however, what he said about them in terms of organization is true of the Dagara as well. Whereas Labouret was somehow hesitant to talk about a possible complete anarchy, Lieutenant Fabre's was more assertive:

*"As one travels across the country of the Dagara where total anarchy is the rule, the lack of cohesion can still be noticed. Except for the authority of heads of family, there is no authority anywhere. The villagers are, therefore, debating endlessly. Anarchy was and still is complete among the Dagara. No authority whatsoever was to be found there, except for the authority of the chief of the village in a few rare cases"*¹.

Besides colonial administrators, Goody was one of the rare anthropologists who stayed in the country of the Dagara. In terms of their social organization, Goody (1962:3) reported that

*"The people with whom I am dealing have no centralized political system, and settlements do not automatically group themselves into larger territorially defined units that one can call a society or a tribe"*².

Similarly, Reverend Father Jean Hebert (1976:3)³ who lived 40 years among the Dagara makes the following observation:

"It was a society with no State, no central authority over the different Dagara clans and villages".

The various qualifications of the Dagara are sometimes balanced and often exaggerated. In contrast with all these qualifications, what do the Dagara say about their own social organization?

They all recognize two essential things

1. In their social organization, there is no centralized political structure "that is responsible for public service management" and reserves an absolute right to exert violence. Somé Bozie Bernard (1969:16)⁴, the first Dagara anthropologist, pointed out that: "The Dagara never had a political hierarchy as such at any level whatsoever: ethnic, region or even the village. They have been living with no commandment". He continues: "In the whole Dagara country and in the small regional unit that we call "canton", there is no institution comparable to a government which has the charge of public affairs. However, there is, chieftaincy of the land" (p. 19)
2. A keen sense of freedom that Somé Valere finds to be actually "excessive". According to Somda Nurukior (1984:88)⁵, "investigators of the colonial days as well as those in the present recognise and admit the Dagara's leaning for independence". Indeed, Lieutenant Greigert said that "the indigenous are all proud and cheered freedom" (ANS. IG. 327 cited in Somda, p. 89.) Hebert explained that leaning for freedom is a major characteristic feature of the Dagara. That spirit of independence is indeed evidenced by the following material and behavioral facts:
 - a) The resentment for any centralized authority
 - b) Dispersed nature of dwellings. If the distance between the dwellings corresponds to the need for farming lands, it also corresponds to that need for independence and freedom.

With no supra-societal power, the Dagara enjoyed an unrestricted liberty. Does this conclusion follow from reality?

An erroneous political characterisation

It is true that, in its organization, the Dagara society has no specialised institution like the state. Does this imply *ipso facto* the absence of a political structure? The absolutely negative characterisation of the Dagara society could have been shaded, had their authors asked that simple question. In any case, these characterizations are erroneous and are explainable from both an epistemological and ideological point of view:

a) Epistemological view point

Upon his arrival in the region⁶, the colonialist indeed did not find the classical socio-political organization he was used to. He therefore considered that he was dealing

with an anarchical society, hence the erroneous characterisations which were repeated over by those who found their interest in doing so.

b) Ideological view point

The behavior of the colonialist and his local allies found its justification in the negative appreciation of the socio-political organization of the Dagara. According to Hebert, "The over-exaggerated opinion about the disorganization of the Dagara long-lived because it was serving the interest of some Dioula and foreign chiefs" (p. 3.)⁷

A few years later, Ki Zerbo (1983)⁸ outlined the objectives of a pedagogy which consisted in the diffusion of such prejudices: "Let it be noticed that [...] cultural contempt can lead to colonization as a moral obligation". Ki Zerbo further explains that colonization stems "from well-defined prejudices of the will of cultural power" (Preface of Jeanne Marie Kambou Ferrand's book, 1993, p. II).

Finally, what is the political status of the social organization of the Dagara?

The Dagara: A society with a specific political structure

In their investigation of the political system of the Dagara, several authors (except Rev. Father Hebert)⁹ committed a mistake in failing to detect a peculiarity: the diffusion of that political organization into daily life. Otherwise, in terms of authority, they could have noticed that the Dagara society is articulated into 3 levels of commandment which are social, political and managerial. These are the following:

- 1) the extended family (*yir*),
- 2) the patrilineage (*dog-lu*)^{9a}
- 3) the chieftaincy of the land (*tegan-yele*)¹⁰

1) The extended family

This expression is not to be understood with its modern and western connotation. It is not the home, nor the nucleus family. Rather, it is the first "locus and means" according to Morice Alain (1987). It is the "immediate localized authority" (p.4). The responsible person at that level, the *yir-sob*, leads the works, manages daily life and the members obey him. Beyond this level, we find the patrilineage or *dog-lu*.

2) The patrilineage or *dog-lu*

This second stage of commandment, social and political management is, according to Hebert¹¹, "represented by the elders of the clan, mostly by those from the original

settlement which is regarded as the mother land. It has a great but distant moral authority" p. 4. It is entitled to reconcile or to mediate when there are conflicts. The different power holders such as the *Kuber sob* (the one that ensures that every punishment is executed) are selected from this group. The *Kuber sob* helps the chief of the land; the *Suo sob* or the sacrificer, the *Saa sob* or master of the rain, the *Bagr buure* or the fortune-teller and so on. Above them, there is the third level of commandment.

3) The chieftaincy of the land or *tegan-yele*

The chief of the land, *Tegan sob*, with his counsel, wield a double-faceted power: a traditionally bestowed power of great importance on one hand, and a rather discrete political power on the other hand. Later on, at the advent of colonization, the political power was held by a different person: the *Teg sob*. With his counsel, he handles political matters at his competence. The *Teg sob* is the most respected authority. With the notables of the second level, he forms an undisputed collegial authority. As it appears, the Dagara do have a socio-political organization. Logically, it has its own system of social regulation which implies a scale of sanctions, the heaviest of which is the speech, some type of a comminatory speech by a notable, an elder, a father, a chief of the land, and so on. Is it then possible to talk of total anarchy and to implicitly conclude to the existence of an unrestricted freedom in a society that actually has a three-faceted political structure? Definitely, the answer is No. It is more by conviction than by a desire to argue as Hebert pointed out: "That society was not anarchical in any way. On the contrary, it was organized and extremely well organized although the feeling of independence was keen" (p. 3). Therefore, other prejudices such as the pretended egalitarianism that was formed from a rapid and an inaccurate observation of the functioning of the Dagara society become unacceptable. As Somé Valere asserts,

"contrary to a widespread idea, the Dagara society, like other similar societies, is far from being an harmonious egalitarian society. There are social differentiation within that society which are hidden by the active solidarity which stems from the maintenance of certain forms of organization of the communities"^{11b}. (P. 12).

The relevance and the interest of the question now become evident: Is there any freedom of expression in the Dagara society? What are the conditions of its application, if there is any? The notion of individual "freedom of expression" needs to be defined.

The individual's freedom of expression

Leaving aside philosophical considerations, the individual's freedom of expression can be defined as being the individual's physical, moral and intellectual ability to

express himself. To express oneself is more than making gestures or producing sounds that express one's intention, idea or thought. It is also and more importantly the ability to decide on one's own capacity to engage in such an act. The individual's freedom of expression is therefore his/her ability to knowingly say or do whatever that contributes to the individual's welfare with no other restrictions than those that are explicitly or implicitly imposed by common agreement. The individual's freedom of expression, for instance, is illustrated by the ability to take a decision with regard to matters of marriage and marriage partner, leaving the father's home and settling wherever one wants, or making a living on an activity of one's own choice, as well as being able to express one's indignation about a situation of unfairness. Does this kind of freedom of expression for the individual exist in the Dagara society? Two considerations are to be made before providing the appropriate answer to that question:

- a) consideration of the traditional context of which some features are still prevailing today, and
- b) consideration of the context of a society that is irreversibly changing.

The traditional context.

Considering the practice in the past and some of its remnants in the present, we are right to assert that an individual's freedom of expression in the traditional society was severely restricted. This fact is disturbing in that children were completely submitted to their fathers' will¹² and could not do or undertake anything prior to their fathers' approval. The father was submitted to the head of the family who is either his own biological father or his generational father¹³, or a collateral of both of them. The head of the family, in turn, was submitted to the head of the lineage who was at the apex. The latter, in turn, was submitted to the oracle, that is the chief of the land. If the chief of the land had authority over the living as their representative, he was always completely submitted to the spirits of the ancestors and is faithfully transmitting their will to the living. Although from a historical perspective females had some consideration, they were however treated as being inferior to males, whereas the younger were treated as being inferior to the elder. This description brings us to believe in the existence of the great deference characteristic of the Dagara society. That impression, however, yields to an impression of lack of individual freedom of expression as voluntary or involuntary transgressions of some practices frighten and involved penalties that vary depending on the degree of the presumed guilt. A few examples here would make the point.

To be a son: a confinement in a status of absolute inferiority

Many excesses and privations find their justification in the Dagara proverb: *ile be dag mo nj-gyele* meaning that "the chick cannot have the pretension of being ante-

rior to the egg". Based on this principle, the status of the son is inferior to that of his paternals, that of the younger to that of the elder, and that of the daughter to that of her mother. Constantin Dabire (1983:138)¹⁴ admits that this proverb expresses "an everlasting debt of gratitude and filial piety". Because of this debt "he must be constantly devoted (humble and submitted) to the one he owes life to". In the Dagara society, the children have no pretension with their fathers or with their elders. Constantin Dabire puts it in the following terms:

"When the father concedes to start a dialogue, he always has the last word. Overt rebellion or lack of respect (insults, hits, ...) is severely punished and the punishment can ultimately go as far as expulsion from home [...]. Ritual atonement, for insulting one's father is so difficult that the angry child would contain his anger or leave the home before his father curses him" p. 39.

The immediate implications of the status of inferiority

1) Forced marriage

The very first implication appears when it comes to marriage. Marriage negotiations are always conducted by a paternal (the biological father, an uncle or a collateral or even by an elder brother) who decides the appropriate age for the young man to contract marriage. The young man who chooses his marriage partner on his own commits a serious outrage to his parents. He can make that choice only at his third marriage, but then he has to conduct the negotiations himself and face all the expenses involved. For his first and second marriages, the negotiations and expenses are entirely the responsibilities of his paternal and maternal respectively. The young man could not make any opposition to the choice of his wife by his parents without exposing himself to severe sanctions. If that was not a forced marriage, it was very close to it. Yet, what follows is even more surprising.

2) The home confinement

As long as the biological father and the parallel uncles (on the father's side) are living, one remains a child. For this reason, no man can take the great responsibility of leaving the father's house and building his own house elsewhere. Doing so is perceived as an act of rebellion and is quickly and severely punished. In the philosophy of the Dagara, the father's house is more than a plain shelter. It is the instrument and the locus *par excellence* for security. The paternals live there and because it shelters the shrine of the ancestors, it is a holy place and has something sacred around it. There is a comminatory saying to dissuade the most stubborn minds to depart from it for ever: "*Bibi-be wone nu mwaare u tufra yir*"¹⁵. Only the most stubborn and misled child could dare build his own house elsewhere (while his father is still living). He was only allowed to build a "room (*dio*) with the door opening to the

father's yard" (Constantin Dabire, p. 132)¹⁵ There are further restrictions.

A son or a labourer?

The impression of a lack of freedom of expression for the individual is evidenced by the practice in the production and consumption units. Not only was the child not allowed to leave his father's house and to build his own, but also to cultivate his own field or make any substantial profit for himself. Willingly or unwillingly he has to cope with that situation of dependence until the conditions of his liberty are achieved. As Somé Valère (1996: 478)¹⁶ puts it "the younger eats with his elder (his father or his elder brother) until he becomes head of a household. He also devotes the largest part of his time working in the family fields. He stays in that situation of dependence until his father dies or allows him to settle on his own". As it appears, not only is the Dagara society organized, it is also highly structured in its functions. A very rigorous and complex hierarchy in which everybody keeps his rank in the family (*yir*) microcosm as well as in the village (*lew*) macrocosm. The rank is either lower or higher. It is lower, for instance, in comparison to the father, the mother, the parallels or any elder, but it is higher in comparison to the son, the nephews, their parallels, the younger brothers, and so on. No function can or should be assumed in opposition to the higher rank especially in opposition to the parents. According to Somé Valère (1996: 421)¹⁷ the society functions "on the principle of seniority" at all levels of its structure. This rigorous principle is certainly laid down in connection with the Dagara conception of society (and family in particular), a setting for an education that is "Spartan" in nature as the person who is in charge of its reproduction is overvalued. With the eyes and the logic of a different period, one may jump to the conclusion that there is no freedom of expression for the individual. However, that society has been in contact with other civilizations and cultures for over a century. The irresistible winds of modernity blow through it. Willingly or out of sheer necessity, it has to be in tune with a certain evolutionary process. This raises the following question: In the context of the irreversible evolution, what can be said about the individual's freedom of expression in the Dagara society of today?

The context of a changing society

The contact of the Dagara society with other civilizations, the western civilization in particular, is a dateable fact. It was in April 1897 (Somda, 1984)¹⁸ that the Dagara became aware of the existence of the White race because some Whites were travelling through their territory. On May 1897, Captain Cazemaju "signed a covenant with the King of Dieboungou" ¹⁹. The acceptance of this covenant also meant that the Dagara society was accepting *ipso facto* (at least in theory) the Western civilization with every thing that goes with it: its ideology, its "revolutionary" ideas, the school and the religion. First, the school was a formal setting where the Dagara could meet with other African peoples. Then it became a training place where the Dagara, like most of the African peoples, could learn the Western sciences and deepened their

sense of criticisms. Secured in their traditional education and having learned Western sciences, they can now take a step back and look with critical eyes at their own society in the content of the education they received and mostly at the very Spartan manner of its inculcation. Changes have been taking place ever since. We provide here with just a few illustrations of those changes.

1) The relationship between father and son

The relationship between a father and his son is no longer radically vertical. Dialogue between father and son is more and more tolerated. Furthermore, a son, in some cases, can politely but firmly contradict his father, an attitude which, in the traditional society, would have been perceived as an insult and could have resulted in the passing of judgement of guilt for such an offence.

2) Matrimonial matters

Changes are noticeable at three levels:

- a) It is now out of the question for a fathers to look for wives for the sons.
- b) In rare cases where this is still possible, the chosen partner can be refused and the marriage cancelled.
- c) Dowry as the condition of contracting a marriage has been banned by the Law since 1989 and young Dagara men are supportive of that Law.

All the forgoing was unthinkable in the context of the traditional society.

3) The unit of production and consumption

The principle of working together in the family fields remains but it is not as rigid as it was in the past. Today, the young man who seeks economic independence gets greater understanding and support. That is why more and more young Dagara men and girls are now moving into towns. In the past, they could only do so with the authorisation of their parents. In reality, the parents only decided whether or not the children could leave and for how long.

4) In religious matters.

The Dagara have moved from one extreme to another. Formerly they were confined in the practice of their traditional religion, but now, they have massively switched to Catholicism. The influence that Catholicism had on them was such that it became the unique sign for all true Dagara. It is not surprising, therefore, that about 75% of the Dagara intellectuals have been trained in the Catholic seminaries. The change

that can be observed at two levels today is an evidence of freedom in that matter.

- a) The young Dagara freely decides on his own which religion he wants to adhere to. For that reason, there are more and more Dagara Muslims, a conversion that would have been a real "scandal" in the past.
- b) Less and less Dagara young men now go to the seminaries without feeling any complex.

5) Girls' education and marriage

In fact, forced marriage is no longer practiced in the Dagara society. This is due more to the evolution of mentality than to the banishment of forced marriage by the Law. Today, no father or mother would venture to arrange such a marriage. The matrimonial system today is isogamic. Girls are now going to school like the boys and the women who work in the public administration or in the private sector have no complex whatsoever. Considered in the past as being only an agent for production and reproduction, the traditional society was unfavourable to the involvement of women in activities (which were thought to be exclusively for men) other than breeding of children. Marriage with an alien partner is now common, yet it was practically forbidden in the past. This implies that the Dagara society is opening up and is getting involved in the irreversible evolutionary trend. All these changes, that we have identified in various aspects, lead us to a kind of provisional but rather straightforward conclusion.

Conclusion

The analysis that we have just made shows that some of the stereotypes and negative views on the Dagara society now have weak foundations:

- 1) The Dagara society is not acephalous if this means that the Dagara society is anarchic with an appearance of order. All the implicit or explicit deductions fade away along with this stereotype. The Dagara society just could not be an object of historical or sociological curiosity
- 2) Mainly organized on kinship basis, the Dagara society is very hierarchical. Although it is strongly hierarchical, its sociological peculiarity lies in the absence of exclusive social classes. A superficial analysis that ignores the context and its rigorous functioning around the family – an important concept as well as a unifying reality – can easily lead to the conclusion that there is no freedom of expression for the individual. Beyond that jail-like appearance, the Dagara society actually promotes freedom. As a notable told us, "You can speak freely and with no fear as long as you do so from the status that is yours". A person always speaks or acts as an elder (father, mother) or a young person (son, daughter, and

so on). The role of an elder is not to punish but to serve as a model. This idea was better expressed by Claudette Savonnet Guyot (cited in Valere Somé (1996)) perfectly understood this idea when she compares the elders to "leaders" rather than to "rulers"²⁰.

- 3) The fact that elders easily accept the evolution is an evidence that the "leaders" are more concerned about imposing respect through persuasion rather than by using force. It is difficult to get a full understanding of how the Dagara society functions within a period of just one year. What is said about their society is simply a contribution to the understanding of the society. It is up to the Dagara to bring out their contribution by pointing out the errors that may appear in the observations or in the analysis of foreign observers. Beyond its polemic appearance, the present paper tries to meet this challenge.

Notes and References

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- 5) Somda, M.N. 1984 **La penetration coloniale en pays Dagara: 1896-1933**. These de Doctorat de 3e Cycle, Universite de Paris VII.
- 6) Herbert, J. 1976 *op. cit.*
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9a & b) Rev. Father Hebert uses the term *clan*. We prefer the term *patrilineage* which is founded on actual common ancestor and which corresponds to *dog lu*.

10) Hebert uses the term *figan*, a mispronunciation of *tegan* which constitutes a single morpheme and cannot be broken down further into meaningful parts.

11) Hebert *op. cit.*

11b) *ibid.* (p. 12)

12) Somé, N.D.V. 1996 **Anthropologie économique des Dagara du Burkina Faso et du Ghana: Lignages, terre et production. These Nouveau régime, Université de Paris VIII, Saint Denis, Tome 1 et 2.**

13) "Fathers" here implies the biological father and all his male siblings.

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18) Somda, M.N. 1984 *op. cit.*

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20) Guyot, C.S. 1996 cited in Somé, NDV. *op. cit.*