

A Study of Riddles among the Dagara of Ghana and Burkina Faso

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ABSTRACT

This study examines closely riddles of the Dagara people of West Africa, emphasizing the importance of the genre as a cultural tradition. The riddles that are analyzed were collected during a folktale narration session in the Nandom area of the Upper West Region of Ghana. The author argues that the distinction between riddle and other folklore genres such as the proverb is a very nebulous one, and that Western definitions of folklore terms do not always fit neatly into Dagara definition of the same terms. He argues that in some cases, an enigma or a puzzle can also be a riddle and a folktale at the same time. He demonstrates his thesis with an analysis of puzzle-enigmas that were narrated as riddles during a folktale session. Drawing on previous studies on African riddles such as that of Ruth Finnegan, the author identifies the main characteristics of Dagara riddles; a genre that is ultimately inspired by the flora and fauna of Dagaraland. The author argues that riddles as metaphors are a logical association of objects or human behaviour, and he concludes his study with a call for the inclusion of folklore study in elementary school curricula.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article is the product of a larger research project that I am undertaking on Dagara verbal art; a project in which I am studying riddles, proverbs, folktales, folk songs, and the role of praise singers and xylophonists as verbal artists. It is a study on the function of the riddle as a genre and not just only on its quality as a verbal art. Though there are various studies that have been done on Dagara folklore in general, research I have conducted has not revealed any available study that has focused on Dagara riddles. Most publications on Dagara culture, or folklore specifically, that have been done in Burkina Faso over the years were not readily available to me. However, there are a few publications in both Burkina Faso and Ghana that I was able to access. For example Sebastian Bemile (1983) and Paschal Kyoore (2009) have respectively published translations of Dagara folktales that they collected; and Luke Bangnikon (1999) has published a collection of Dagara proverbs with explanations of the meaning of the proverbs. In addition, Gervase Angsotinge (1986, 2005) has done some work on Dagara folklore, focusing specifically on folktales. Also, studies done by Constantin Gbâane Dabire (1978, 1983), and Timothée Naayüle Mèda Sagkaa (1973) on Dagara culture have been pathbreaking and influential in subsequent works published by Dagara researchers in Burkina Faso. However, none of the aforementioned publications is specifically on riddles. I hope this modest study will raise more interest in research on the genre as it is practiced among the Dagara people.

Verbal art involves a form of communication expressed in words, thus emphasizing its oral nature. The verbal art of a people is by nature a dynamic literature. The written form on the other hand is static by its very nature, though its interpretation changes and takes new forms based on new theories and also on the evolution of thought among the society in which the art was produced, as well as among the world of the critics themselves. The oral form however takes on a natural dynamism that is often driven by how much interest succeeding generations demonstrate in oral literature, the evolution of socio-political institutions, as well as the manner in which foreign cultures impact the indigenous culture that produces that verbal art. All these assertions are certainly true of the Dagara population. European education and Christian missionary evangelization among the Dagara people are certainly factors that have impacted and continue to impact how verbal art evolves in their communities across borders.

My research was done primarily in the Nandom area of northern Ghana, though I traveled to Diébougou in Burkina Faso to obtain material in French and Dagara published at the Catholic mission there. Both the language and the people are called “Dagara” (Der 1989: 1). The Dagara people live in northwest Ghana and southwest Burkina Faso. The Dagara, and the Dagaaba (who speak Dàgààré) in Ghana are the same ethnic group, and they and the Wala speak three main dialects of the same language (Nakuma 1998: 16).

I collected and translated folktales over several years in the Nandom area of the Upper West region of Ghana. During some of the folktale sessions, the participants told riddles as a prelude to the folktale narration. The folktales and riddles were recorded on video and audio cassettes. Because of the scope of the area where the research was undertaken, and also because different terms are often used in the different dialects of the people called Dagara/Dagaaba, it is important to emphasize that my article focuses on riddles of the Dagara-speaking people. It is also important for the reader to understand that the riddles that are the focus of my study were not collected in a session specifically on riddles. They were collected in the context of a story-telling session. There were over thirty children and adults ranging in age from five years to about fifty years old. The riddles were told mainly by the younger members of the audience, presumably because of their interest in the genre, and also because they found it as a good prelude to the story-telling session. The region inhabited by the Dagara in Ghana and Burkina Faso is characterized by a savanna landscape, unlike the forest landscape that covers southern Ghana. Being in

the sahelian zone, Dagaraland is directly affected by the vagaries of the weather in a region that sees frequent insufficient rainfall or outright draughts. Also, the main livelihood for people in the area is farming and raising of animals. Dagara riddles cover virtually every theme in life, and like proverbs there is a preoccupation with the flora and fauna that characterizes Dagaraland.

The first part of the study defines riddles in the context of other types of orature, and dwells particularly on previous study done by Ruth Finnegan. Her work on African folklore has been influential on research in the field that was published in later decades.

2. RIDDLES AND OTHER FORMS OF ORATURE

Through the mode of usage in speech, the “*zukpar*” (proverb) is distinguished from the “*zupkar lɔrba*” (riddle). The singular is “*zupkar*” and the plural is “*zukpai*”. Because the word “*zupkar*” means both a proverb and a riddle, the distinction is made not only through the choice of words in the utterance but also through the context in which they are uttered. Folktale sessions are often introduced with the utterance: “*ti lɔb zupkai*”, which means, “let us tell riddles”. The riddles session serves as a prelude to the narration of folktales. However, when “*zupkar*” is used to mean a proverb, it might be introduced by the following phrase: “*Dagara tɛri zupkar kang*”, which means “the Dagara people have a certain saying”. Parents can use proverbs to teach children important lessons about their behaviour and about life. Praise singers (*lang kone*) also often use proverbs in their dirges. A long utterance by a praise singer performing at a funeral might be in the form of a proverb, and this kind of utterance leaves the audience with much to reflect on.

Finnegan has rightly observed that in Africa, riddles are often very closely related to proverbs. Riddles are expressed briefly and concisely, and involve analogy of meaning, sound, rhythm, or tone. The two forms are sometimes combined in the “proverb-riddle”. Riddles also sometimes are closely related to other literary forms such as enigmas and dilemma tales, stories and epigrams, or praise names. Nonetheless, African riddles have a distinct form and are the domain of children, and, unlike proverbs, are for entertainment rather than for serious consideration (Finnegan 1970: 426). What distinguishes Dagara riddles from the way Finnegan characterizes African riddles is that though it is true that they are mostly for entertainment, some do convey very profound meaning that demand thorough reflection on the part of listeners. In this case, a riddle is given the sort of importance that is accorded proverbs because of the seriousness of the social issue that it invites the audience to reflect upon.

Finnegan makes an important distinction between European riddles and African riddles. The former tend to be an explicit question to which an answer is solicited from the respondent. She further asserts that an African riddle on the other hand is not usually outwardly interrogative in form but rather in the form of a statement. Contrary to what Finnegan asserts about African riddles, the nature of Dagara riddles is such that they can be both outwardly interrogative or merely a statement. Finnegan explains further that the point in riddles is normally in some play of images, visual, acoustic, or situational, rather than, as in many English riddles, in puns or play on words (Finnegan 1970: 427). The audience must figure out the relationship between certain animate or inanimate objects that are evoked in the riddle. According to Finnegan:

In fact, many riddles need a double process to solve them, for the analogy in the initial statement may not be immediately obvious; therefore the solver must first select the salient features of the object or situation mentioned, and then go on to identify a similar object (Finnegan 1970: 427-428).

Finnegan also observes that acoustic images are common in riddles and that very often the “question” consists of just one word or phrase to suggest the answer through its sound alone. The sound might be a direct onomatopoeic expression (Finnegan 1970: 429). For example, a Dagara riddle goes like this: “*hu uu uu hu uu*”. The answer to the riddle is “*le gbulusu mhag tuo*”. The onomatopoeia in the riddle suggests how difficult it is to hoist a heavy load onto one’s back. The answer says that you bundle it up and carry it. As we see here, the riddle selects the salient features of the sound in order to identify an action associated with the riddle—carrying heavy load. Furthermore, in the riddle there is a call-and-response between the riddler and the riddlee which aptly describes in these few words the whole process of bundling up a heavy load and hoisting it onto one’s back. What Finnegan says about ideophones is very true for Dagara riddles. She suggests through the reading of riddles from various African ethnic groups that:

More often the acoustic analogy implicit in the question [in riddles] is not immediately obvious, for ideophones conventionally recognized in one culture are used to convey an acoustic image to members of that culture (Finnegan 1970: 430).

She explains further that the meaning connected to the ideophone is not a “natural” one that would be recognized by someone who is unacquainted with the culture. Someone who is unfamiliar with the Dagara language and with the culture would not be able to see the correlation between the riddle and the answer above.

Finnegan has also observed that riddle-proverbs seem to be fairly common among many ethnic groups. She mentions the Efik and the Anang Ibibio of southern Nigeria among others. Finnegan also asserts that riddles sometimes shade into other forms of oral literature such as enigmas, dilemmas and puzzles (Finnegan 1970: 433). Among the Dagara people, the distinction between the English terms that Finnegan uses is blurred. The word “*zupkar*” translates the different English terms that Finnegan employs: puzzle, riddle, proverb, as well as enigma. However, “enigma”, and “puzzle” can also be more accurately distinguished from a proverb and a riddle by qualifiers: “*yel siεle*”, “*yel sɔgla*”, “ or “*yel banguura*”¹. Each of these terms has various connotations that distinguish it from the others. Yet, they all evoke something that is a mystery, difficult to unravel, or that is simply unknown. In the context of folktale narration, a puzzle, a dilemma or an enigma is narrated as a folktale, though in the psyche of the narrator and the audience the various qualifiers cited above help to unravel the purpose and the meaning of the narrative.

Coming back to my argument about the multiple meanings of Dagara terms, here is an example of a Dagara dilemma that is at the same time a riddle and a tale. A certain man has six sons. One day when he goes out, at the end of the day he does not return home. The worried children sense that obviously something must have happened to their father. One of the sons has a gift of premonition and tells the others that their father has lost his way. A second son has the gift of being able to trace the steps of a person in the same way that a dog does. He leads his brothers on the right way to where the father lost his way. When they find him, he is stuck in a river deep in the mud. One of the sons has a special gift that enables him to swallow all the water in the river so that they can save their father from certain death. But as soon as all the water in the river is sucked out and the father is released from the mud, a huge hungry eagle which has been flying around in the area looking for prey swoops down, grabs the father between its claws, and flies away. Fortunately, among the six sons is one whose gift is that of being a sharp shooter. He throws a cudgel at the eagle and it releases the father from its claws. The father is falling down from several hundred feet in the sky and is going to crash to his death. One son who also has his

¹ I acknowledge help that I sought from a number of fellow Dagara people to figure out the best Dagara terms for an “enigma”.

own special gift catches the father in mid air and saves him from crashing to his death. So the father is saved. One elder called Leander Lober who had narrated several folktales for me at the same session narrated this tale-enigma-riddle to me. At the end of the story, he posed the following question to me: “Which of the six sons do you think saved the father’s life?” My spontaneous answer was that all the six sons contributed equally to saving their father’s life. Lober congratulated me for giving the right answer to his question and explained further that without the first son’s contribution, the second son would not have had the opportunity to do what he did, and that the chain continued in that manner till the last son’s contribution. He commented that he did not understand why some people suggest that one of the sons contributed more than the rest. According to him, there is no logic in such an answer. Now, going back to Finnegan’s distinction between the different forms of oral literature, is this a tale, a riddle, an enigma, or a puzzle? The Dagara would say that it is all of them, and this clearly demonstrates the importance of being aware that in African verbal art definition of terms does not always fit neatly into the sort of classifications that are made in Western culture. Context can make a big difference in determining how a narration can be qualified in varied ways.

Riddles, according to Finnegan, can be categorized into oppositional/non-oppositional (which can be divided into sub-types), and literal/metaphorical groups (Finnegan 1970: 435). However, Finnegan rightly recognizes the limitations of applying this model to the study of African riddles. She believes that the typical European oppositional type is not so common in Africa, and that non-oppositional types are more common. She also contends that metaphorical rather than a literal emphasis too seems to be the characteristic of African riddles; and in addition to analogies of sound, tone, or rhythm, analogy of content is also prevalent in African riddles (Finnegan 1970: 435).

Finnegan comments that “in general form riddles seem to represent a relatively fixed type of oral literature” and also that because they tend to be brief, there is little stress on performance (Finnegan 1970: 437). She also observes that the creative aspect may be limited because riddles are the domain of children. I would contend that if there is any limitation on creativity in riddling, it is not because riddling is a domain of children. Rather, it is because of the nature of riddles as opposed to folktales for instance in which the narrator can be creative in modifying the characters and the actions in the tale. Also, though there is less performance in Dagara riddling than in folktale narration, the level of performance in riddling can be elevated depending on the personalities of the children participating in the riddling session.

Because riddles can be about every sphere of nature or human life, it is primordial to understand the customs of a society in order to understand its riddles and to appreciate their importance in the culture. In his study on the mythical narratives in Dagara *bagr*, Alexis Tengan devotes a few pages to the importance of the riddle in the Dagara *bagr* ritual mythology (Tengan: 2006). According to him, the Dagara people view riddles as puzzling questions and answers mainly as entertainment for children and also for enhancing children’s cognitive development (Tengan 2006: 59). He illustrates how a riddle is used in the black *bagr* narrative to create a relationship between Rain and Earth in a dialogue between them about farming, the main source of livelihood for the Dagara people. Tengan illustrates how “the riddle becomes a rich source for formulating proverbs and creating symbols which are culturally meaningful” (Tengan 2006: 65). As explained above, the distinction that some Western scholars have made in the past between a riddle and a proverb is very problematic in the context of the study of African folklore. According to Tengan (2006: 59-60) “in ordinary context, [the] Dagara view riddles as puzzling questions and answers mainly designed for children to pass their leisure time and to test each other’s ability to remember and recollect”. He further explains that the word “*zupkar*” is a compound word that consists of two words: “*zumε*” and “*kpar*”. The first word refers to the accumulation of things experienced and knowledge acquired in the past. The second word refers to things stuck together due to the nature of the surfaces or

due to particular circumstances. So, in his assertion, when children tell riddles, they are “ferreting” in their childhood consciousness for two statements that are culturally related in meaning and structure. If riddles among the Dagara people are viewed as “puzzling questions” that can serve as entertainment for children, what happens during a riddling session? The next section of the study addresses this question with an analysis of the formulae that are employed by the participants of a riddling session.

3. RIDDLES SESSION

A riddles session is normally introduced by an incantation that is a call-and-response. It can take the following format:

<i>Zupkai zupkai,</i>	<i>Riddles riddles</i>
<i>Ni lɔbr ni lɔbr</i>	<i>Tell them, tell them</i>
<i>So kuɔ bɛ yi</i>	<i>Taken your bath but not clean</i>
<i>Zɛ kââ bɛ ta</i>	<i>Rub on lotion but not the whole body</i>
<i>Ba-kpagl ni nyie</i>	<i>Dry riverside farm produces yams</i>
<i>Ba zuli ni zumɛ</i>	<i>Deep water with fish</i>
<i>Ka-gbou ni kyi</i>	<i>Thick millet farm with millet</i>
<i>Gabili ni tug</i>	<i>Small ebony trees make a bush</i>
<i>Burmnaa gbɛgang</i>	<i>Short goat with one broken leg</i>
<i>Kpâkpole ni nuur</i>	<i>Featherless chicken with chicken</i>
<i>Bibiir ni gure</i>	<i>Children, here come the riddles</i>

The call-and-response is based on contrasts. The second part of each phrase is either an exposition of a desired situation that is a pleasant correlation with the first part of the phrase, or an undesired situation that contrasts with what prevails in the first part of the phrase. For example, it is expected that a deep river would have fish, but it is undesirable to take your bath and not be clean or to have a short goat with a broken leg.

Among the Dagara people, riddles are a great source of entertainment when children gather in the night after the house chores are done and people have eaten their supper. The beginning of a riddles session can be introduced with the following phrase: “*zupkai zupkai*” [riddles, riddles]. The audience responds with “*ni lɔbr ni lɔbr*”. [tell them, tell them]. With this introductory call-and-response chanting, the riddle telling session begins. A riddle session that is a prelude to a story-telling session may call for the following introductory formula.

First narrator: “*N ku n naab*” [I slaughter my cow].

A member of the audience: “*N ir a nyââ*” [I choose the chest]

First narrator: “*N lɛ ku n naab*” [Again, I slaughter my cow]

A member of the audience: “*N ir a gbɛ*” [I choose a leg]

First narrator: “*N lɛ ku n naab*” [Again, I slaughter my cow]

A member of the audience: “*N ir a puor*” [I choose the stomach]

First narrator: “*N lɛ ku n naab*” [Again, I slaughter my cow]

A member of the audience: “*N ir a nyagɛ*” [I choose the intestines]

First narrator: “*N lɛ ku n naab*” [Again, I slaughter my cow]

A member of the audience: “*N ir a zu*” [I choose the head]

The formula is often used as a prelude to a folktale narration session, and was used by the members of the participants who narrated riddles and folktales to me at the same session. This call-and-response goes on until the members of the audience have chosen all the vital parts of the meat that people cherish. The last person that picks a part of the carcass tells the first riddle. It is a challenge to see who can outwit the others by telling riddles to which the answers are elusive. In their study of riddles among the Mbeere people of Kenya, Glazier and Glazier (1976: 192) report that the signal to begin riddling is repeated as a formulaic phrase after the answer to each riddle is given. According to them, the recurrent opening formula in Mbeere riddling thus underscores the formal nature of the verbal encounter. In Dagara riddling in contrast, though certain opening formulae might be repeated once in a while by some of the riddlers, it is not the case that the opening formula is repeated after the answer to each riddle is given.

Anyone can tell a riddle, and when that is done, it is assumed by the audience that an answer to the riddle is solicited. When the audience does not know the answer to the riddle or if all the answers that have been given are wrong, somebody throws in the towel, so to speak, with the phrase “*de fu naa*” declaring that they don’t know the answer, thus inviting the riddler to give the answer to the riddle. A riddle narrator can keep on giving riddles until someone gets the right answer to one of the riddles and then takes over to also pose his or her riddles. Nonetheless, it is not a rule of thumb that an individual cannot allow others to tell their riddles even if nobody gets the correct answer to his or her riddles. An audience admires a riddler’s ability to tell riddles of which the answers are elusive to the audience. However, it would be considered selfish to monopolize the session. Courtesy demands that everyone present get a chance to give a riddle, even if it is a simple one and it is likely that everyone would know the answer to it. An interesting session is one in which children from neighbouring villages get the chance to show off their knowledge of riddles and to keep children from the other village guessing wrongly the answers to the riddles. Sometimes, adults participate in a riddle-telling session, and it is the delight of children to have adults present, because then they can learn a great deal from them to retell the same riddles in another session. In the Dagara culture, children view proverbs as the domain of adults because of the nature of the genre and

what it takes to master them. Because of the terminologies used in the Dagara language to refer to riddles and proverbs respectively, I propose to analyze in the next section the difference between the two genres.

4. DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PROVERBS AND RIDDLES

In a study of Gbaya riddles, Philip Noss (2006: 39) explains that, “The riddle and the proverb are closely related as metaphorical form. Indeed, some riddles and proverbs may be distinguished only by the context in which they occur”. He argues further that there is often intertextuality between riddles and proverbs. Noss’s assertion is not true of only the Gbaya people. How do the Dagara distinguish between what in English are called “proverb” and “riddle”? The problem of translation arises because both of them are called by the same name; “*zupkar*”. My informant Dang Bangnituo’s way of distinguishing between the two is helpful. He calls the proverb: “*Er wa lɔb*” [pose in the context of a speech]. The riddle by contrast is used only in the context of a riddle session. Children gather to entertain themselves by testing one another’s knowledge of riddles—*zupkai*. Proverbs on the other hand are not uttered merely for entertainment. Rather, a context and the composition of an audience may call for the utterance of proverbs. The distinction that Pepicello and Green (1984: 124) make between the genres is useful here:

On the one hand, proverb and riddle characteristically are placed in opposition by virtue of the goals of their respective performances. Proverbs seek to reduce confusion through the artful relocation of a real social problem; riddles seek to create fictitious problems, competitive events that intensify social disparity (Pepicello and Green 1984: 124).

They observe further that proverbs seek to enhance sociability. On the other hand, riddling performances are competitive rather than co-operative enterprises. Rather than working with the audience to restore proper perception of a situation, the riddler foists confusion on his or her audience by a variety of means. Also, despite the resolution of conflict with the supplying of the answer, riddles seek to generate tension as consciously as proverbs try to ameliorate it (Pepicello and Green 1984: 125). Dagara riddlers and riddlees revel in this creating and resolving of “tension” in riddle sessions. It is the “tension” that riddlers provoke that creates and sustains the interest among children in a riddling session.

Bangnituo explained the importance of riddles among the Dagara with a proverb. Do children tell riddles merely for entertainment or is there some other social function that riddles fulfill? According to Bangnituo, telling riddles is a way for children to maintain the knowledge of the customs of their ancestors. In an oral society, it is a way of maintaining traditions that should be passed on from generation to generation. Here is the proverb that Bangnituo uttered to explain his point: “*Wone bε yiire, ulε nu bε buɔlε nikura*” [the person who hears and does not forget is the one we call an elder]. He gave the example of he himself. He is more knowledgeable about Dagara proverbs and other folklore than some elders. In other words, wisdom makes one an elder.

What is the origin of riddles? That is a very difficult question to answer. Bangnituo believes that nobody knows the origin of riddles. According to him, oral tradition has it that it started long ago, though nobody knows the name of the ancestor from whom riddles originated. The practice of riddle telling was that when an elder had eaten his supper and was full, he would call his children and grandchildren together in order to tell them riddles. The elder does this to ensure that future generations can maintain this oral tradition. He wants to safeguard a tradition that was handed down to him by his grandparents. To explain further his theory that nobody knows when riddles were invented, Bangnituo used one of the proverbs

that he had uttered earlier on when he gave me a series of proverbs: “*Gbile báá nu ti dugli*” [we are cooking the dog secretly]. What the proverb suggests is that we have not unearthed the mystery of the origin of riddles. In spite of Bangnituo’s speculation that we do not know the origin of riddles among the Dagara people, I wonder if the answer to the “riddle” of the origin of this oral tradition could be found in the Dagara *bagr* myth. If Rain and the Sky communicate through riddles in the black *bagr*, is it not possible that we can research the possibility of riddles originating from this myth? According to Dagara anthropologist Alexis Tengan, in the *Bagr* myth, the *Konton* (fairy) and *Naamwin* (God) are the two entities mainly responsible for our knowledge on farming. *Konton* is responsible for all the practical knowledge such as how to build sheds and homes, how to till the land and make mounds in the farm, as well as how to plant, tender, and harvest crops. It is also responsible for our knowledge on how to cook and to brew pito. Tengan further explains that *Naamwin* is responsible for giving human beings the seeds for both the wild crops and the good ones which are cultivated for food, and it is *Konton* again who helps human beings to select the good seeds from the wild ones. *Konton* appears as a significant being any time human beings have to deal with poverty, penury, need, or want whereas *Naamwin* will appear when he has to deal with riches and abundance². “*Konton*” is such a common character in Dagara folktales. My assertion that maybe we could find the origin of Dagara riddles in the *Bagr* myth is at this point only a speculation. The subject needs more research.

In Dagara culture, the distinction between a proverb and a riddle is made only by a qualifier since the word for both is “*zupkar*”. What makes the distinction in the use of the two English terms even more problematic is that it is the same expression for “to give a riddle” and “to give a proverb”: “*lɔb zupkar*”. Riddles solicit an answer, and the answer is called a “*zupkar bir*”. This is what distinguishes a riddle from a proverb. Yet, there is another genre which by its nature is so close to the riddle that the association between the two genres is an interesting one. I propose, in the next section to focus on the puzzle-riddle.

5. PUZZLE-RIDDLES

During story-telling sessions, preceding the narration of tales, participants often pose puzzles to each other, and these puzzles are long riddles. The puzzle-riddles serve a more didactic purpose than the shorter riddles because they contain a moral lesson that the narrator wants to share with the members of the audience. I will analyze a few of the puzzle-riddles. Here is one. You are going to cross the river but you have a hyena, a goat, and a bundle of millet. There is a boat on your side of the river which you can use to cross the river. However, only two “people” or objects at a time can cross in the boat. How would you take your “goods” across the river without any harm being done to any of them? Goats like millet, so if you left the goat with the bundle of millet, it would certainly eat it. Neither can you leave the hyena alone with the goat, because hyenas love goat meat. You are faced with a dilemma. The answer to the puzzle is as follows. You first take the goat across and leave the hyena and the bundle of millet. Hyenas don’t eat millet, so the millet would be safe. You come back and take the hyena across, leave it there and bring back the goat. Next, you take the bundle of millet across and leave it with the hyena on the other side. The last thing you do is come back and take the goat across. In this manner, all your “goods” would be taken across the river intact. In order to appreciate the reasoning behind the puzzle and the answer to it, one needs to understand the natural behaviour of the animals involved: the hyena and the goat. Here is another puzzle. You go to see a traditional healer (*tii irɛ*) for medicine for an ailment. He tells you that to cure your ailment, you need the fresh fruits of a specific plant. You search for the plant and find it with lots of fruits. However, it is a climbing plant and is found on a tree that is right in the middle of a very

² Private communication with Alexis Tengan.

deep river. To complicate your task, there is a mad man sitting on a branch of the tree and you cannot avoid him if you want to climb onto the tree to pluck the fruits of the climbing plant. You are afraid that if you try to climb the tree, the mad man will kill you or fight with you until you fall into the deep river. What do you do in order to get the fruits that you need for the medicine? The answer to the puzzle is as follows. You take stones and hurl them at the mad man, pretending that you want to hit him with the stones. You keep hurling stones at him until he gets angry and want to retaliate. He will then pluck the fruits of the climbing tree and also angrily hurl them at you. You keep throwing the stones at him so that he too will keep throwing the fruits at you until you get enough fruits for the medicine. You pick them up and leave the mad man alone.

The answer to the puzzle is not an obvious one. There is no natural correlation between a mad man, fruits of a tree that can be used to cure an illness, and a deep river. However, the narrator of the puzzle-riddle makes a correlation by creating an enigma that calls for a resolution. What the children participating in the riddle session are encouraged to do is think logically in order to find the solution to the puzzle. The answer to the puzzle requires a certain type of behaviour on the part of the person faced with the dilemma in order to provoke the right type of reaction from the other person that can help to solve his problem.

The next puzzle challenges the behaviour of suitors courting a woman, and serves as a moral lesson to the audience. Three men are befriending the same woman who lives on the other side of the border across the river in Burkina Faso (*Mangarɲ*, as the Dagara people call the country). One day, the first suitor had the premonition that the lady had died, and he informed the other two. Together, the three men set out on their journey to the funeral. They had to cross the big river that is the natural border between Ghana and Burkina Faso (Black Volta) in order to get to the funeral village. When they got to the river, the second suitor took his walking stick and hit on the water. Instantly, the river parted into two and they crossed to the other side. When they got to the funeral house and upon seeing the corpse of their lover, the third suitor by some supernatural powers brought her back to life. So, which of the three suitors should the woman marry?

The answer to the puzzle is as follows. The woman should follow Dagara custom and treat her suitors as tradition demands of a host; that is, with a certain type of protocol. This means cooking for them to eat, and serving them drinks. After that, she should announce to them politely that since she loves them all equally, she cannot marry any of them. So, they should go back to Ghana, and each one should find a different woman to marry. In this manner, the woman avoids the conflict of conscience that would haunt her if she were to pick one of the suitors to marry. After all, if she is still alive today, it is thanks to the contribution that each of the three suitors made to bring her back to life. None of them can claim that his action was more important than that of the other two. The puzzle and the answer to it are similar to the puzzle that was posed by Leandor Lober during a story-telling session, and which we analyzed above.

The third riddle-puzzle is about three witches and their children. There are three witches, each of whom has one child. The six people are traveling across the river to neighbouring Burkina Faso (*Mangarɲ*). When they get to the Black Volta River, they see a boat on their side of the river that they can use. However, only two people at a time can cross in the boat. If any of the witches leaves her child with the others, they will eat the child up. Also, all the six people know how to row a boat across a river. The dilemma is how they will get all of them to cross the river without running the risk of having any child being eaten up by one of the witches. The answer to the puzzle is as follows. Two of the children will cross the river and when they get there, one of them will stay. The other one will come back and pick up the third child to send across. So, right now, all the children have crossed to the other side, and all the three parents are still together waiting to cross. One of the children will come back with the boat and stay

by the side of his parent. Meanwhile the two other witches whose children have crossed will take the boat and row across to join them. When they get to the other side, each one will stand by her child to make sure that nothing happens to him. Next, one witch with her child will cross back to the Ghana side. She will then leave the child to stay with the other child, while she and the other witch will cross together to the Burkina side. The one child on the Burkina side who is standing by the parent will now take the boat and come back to the Ghana side to pick up one of the children across to the Burkina side. Now, the two children on the Burkina side can each stand by their respective parents. The parent of the child who is still now left on the Ghana side, will take the boat and row across to pick up her child to send to the Burkina side. Everybody has now crossed over to Burkina safely.

The answer to the puzzle demands that the children think critically about how the three witches can maneuver to get themselves and their children across the river safely. Finding the solution to the puzzle requires analyzing the potential consequences of each step that the six people take. This riddle-puzzle is an example of how riddles are not just childish plays that only entertain, but rather an art that helps children develop critical and logical thinking.

Some riddle-puzzles are shorter though they are equally challenging in terms of requiring logical thinking on the part of the audience. Here is one. A chief sends you to the market to buy a chicken for him and says you should buy neither a cock nor a female chicken. What do you do? The answer goes like this. You go to the market and send a message to the chief telling him that you have bought the chicken. Tell him he needs to send someone for it, but that he cannot send a male or a female. The chief would see the folly in his demand, and in this way you will show that you are more intelligent than the person that wields power over you.

This puzzle is similar to the most popular Dagara folktale. That folktale is about a little boy called Yagangnaa (wiser than the chief) who lives up to the meaning of his name and proves that he is indeed wiser than the tyrannical chief who has imposed a decree on his people. He outwits the tyrannical chief in several challenges that the chief throws at him. The puzzle in the folktale and the riddle demonstrate the Dagara people's abhorrence of tyrannical chiefs. Also, we can see here how riddles (as Finnegan has asserted) are related to stories and enigmas.

The previous sections of the study have focused on the similarities and differences between the riddle and other forms of orature. The next section analyzes more closely some of the riddles that were collection during the folktale-riddle telling session.

6. ANALYSIS OF RIDDLES

The riddle as a genre might have certain features that can be identified in most cultures. I propose in this section to analyze closely some of the riddles that were told by some of my informants in my field research. One prominent feature in Dagara riddles is the abundance of rhyming. Here is an example:

“Dole yεglε yεglε, dole yεgsεgε”

[small dawadawa tree, small dawadawa tree]

The audience responds:

“*kule pɛglɛ pɛglɛ, kule pɛŋkɛɛ*”

[thin hoe, thin hoe].

“*Yɛglɛ yɛglɛ*” rhymes with *pɛglɛ pɛglɛ*. Also, “*yɛglɛ yɛglɛ*”, “*pɛglɛ pɛglɛ*”, “*yɛgsɛgɛ*” and “*pɛŋkɛɛ*” have an *ɛ* alliteration sound. Onomatopoeic words are employed to create a rhyming sound, and this is very characteristic of Dagara riddles. Onomatopoeic sounds that have a specific meaning can be used to express animal or human behaviour. One riddle goes like this: “*Gbogborkyile kône hûû wui, hûû wui*” [A hyena cries with joy *hûû wui hûû wui*]. The answer is: “*Pɔ̄gnyââle kɔ̄ɛ ɛɛ hɛm ɛɛ hɛm*” [an old lady coughs *ɛɛ hɛm ɛɛ hɛm*]. The riddle expresses something pleasant: a hyena crying with joy. The answer to the riddle is a contrast since it expresses something unpleasant: the pain experienced by an old lady coughing. Also, the onomatopoeias in both the riddle and the answer are an expression of the sound that the characters make: a cry of joy in the riddle and a cry of pain in the answer. There is also a play of words in some onomatopoeias as is the case in some call-and-response riddles. An answer to a call leads to another question that is based on the last answer:

N ba burale ââ pob a zu?

Lhɛɛ kuɔ

Bunu kuɔ?

Kuɔ bure

Bunu bure?

Bure ire

Bunu ire?

Ire pɔ̄mɛ

Bunu pɔ̄mɛ

Pɔ̄mɛ pulu

[my friend the hegoat, who shaved your head?

Cudgel water

What water?

Water gushing out

What gushing?

Gushing and getting up

What getting up?

Rotting

What rotting?

Whitening of rotting]

The question-and-response riddle is longer than what is quoted here, but we can see how the last word in each answer leads to the next question. Though the association between the objects might not be so obvious, the play of words created by using an answer to create the next question is entertaining to the participants. Also, this riddling creates a story in which an individual is having a conversation with a hegoat, and the dialogue that is created is poetic. As Scheub (2002: 23) says of storytelling, “There never was a story without a poem”. The tale narrative characteristic of some Dagara riddles such as the one above is an important way in which riddlers involve their audience in the entertainment.

Some call-and-response riddles are also more clearly set in the tone of a story that is being narrated. Here is an example:

<i>N ba burale nyine fu kyere?</i>	<i>N kyere ni a be n na yi a</i>
<i>Buu nu be be?</i>	<i>ε saa wa nâ ti paali baa ti yi nu▷r</i>
<i>Fu bεkarεbii?</i>	<i>N karεnâ ε bulugri wa yi z▷rε</i>
<i>Fu bεdigr bii?</i>	<i>N digra ε pu▷ ti mwââ ▷rb mε</i>
<i>Fu bεd▷gr bii?</i>	<i>N d▷g ni zukpôkpolo kanη bin</i>

[my friend hegoat where are you going? I am going where I come from

What is there? It has rained and the river is flooded

Are you not draining out the water? I was draining it when a frog jumped out

Are you not chasing it? I am, but I am feeling stomach ache

Don't you give birth to children? I gave birth to some small-headed baby]

This is a short conversation between a hegoat and his friend. The conversation is shaped into a short story that the two characters narrate in the form of a dialogue. Addressing a character as “my friend” is fairly common among characters in Dagara folktales. It is particularly appropriate in this riddle-tale since we do not know the name of the character addressing the hegoat. The riddler and the riddlees personify the characters in the riddle-tale so that they can act out the story. The story form of the riddle is appropriate in a context in which riddles are often told as a prelude to the narration of folktales. Sometimes, the riddler utters one phrase and the interlocutor who gives the answer to the riddle tells a short story.

Elli Maranda distinguishes three degrees of complexity of riddles which she categorizes as: simple, compound, and string riddles (Maranda 1971: 196). By her definition, the first two call-and-response riddlings produce string riddles. The opening formula for Dagara folktale narration that was used in the riddling session (*n ku n naab*: I kill my cow) would also by her definition belong to this category of riddles.

Dagara riddles demand a certain logic and that induces critical thinking on the part of the children who are participating in the riddle-telling session. The logic is often embedded in a comparison of two things or two types of behaviour. Let us look at some examples of riddles with such features:

Riddle: “*Kyug been ε y▷ ten za*” [one moon, yet it roams around all the villages].

Answer: “*Saalbir been ε dug sεn ziεr*” [one okro yet enough to cook soup for a boyfriend].

In his study of Gbaya riddles, Noss (2006: 35) asserts that, “The metaphor [in a riddle] veils the reality of the object or the event that is in focus through the expression of an apparent contradiction or ambiguity”. This is true of riddles from other African communities. In this Dagara riddle, there is ambiguity in the manner in which both the riddle and the answer are expressed. The metaphor of one moon roaming around many villages, and of one okro being used to cook a meal for a boyfriend veils the meaning of both the riddle and the answer. In the riddle, “one moon” in the question is compared to “one okro” in the answer. Similarly, “all the villages” is compared to “soup for boyfriend”. Thus, the corresponding words and phrases in the riddle and the answer respectively are similes, though the word “like” is not employed since the question to a riddle and the answer to the riddle have to be separated. Dissimilar types of objects can be used to create the simile such as in the following:

Riddle: “*Lali duo yila pile*” [lots of clay pots under a climbing plant].

Answer: “*Birɛ duo nyââ zu*” [big breasts on the chest].

A correlation is made between “lots of clay pots” and “big breasts”, and also between “climbing plant” and “chest”. Physiologically, there is no correlation between these objects. However, in riddles they are made to fulfill the same function. As Harold Scheub has articulated:

Metaphor deals with the unlocking of mystery, the unknown... Metaphor speaks about one thing in terms that suggest another, involving the presentation of the facts of one category in the idioms appropriate to another, two things active together interacting and in the interaction producing meaning—tenor and vehicle (2002: 219).

We can see how the idea of clay pots under a plant is evoked in idioms that can suggest something in another category, namely big breasts on a person’s chest. Sometimes, the riddle is a challenge and the answer that it solicits is equally a challenge that is thrown to the interlocutor. In the following riddle and the answer, dealing with quantity is what poses the challenge.

Riddle: *Mââ bu n zɔkuɔ zɔ kub fu na tuɔ na ɔb baari?*

Answer: *Mââ mwââ n davura mwarbie kub fu na tuɔ na sɔr baari?*

[Riddle: If I give you a lot of soaked flour meal can you eat all of it?

Answer: If I give you my courtyard stars, can you count all of them?]

Among the Dagara, people who come to help their neighbour, friend, or relative with his or her farm work, are often fed with a meal made of millet flour. The millet is usually roasted and then ground into flour before it is soaked in water. All Dagara riddlers are familiar with this cultural practice. The riddle suggests that it is neither easy to eat a great quantity of soaked flour nor to count the numerous stars that one sees from a courtyard. What the riddle teaches little children is to figure out an answer to the riddle that would follow the same logic about quantity. Some other riddles weave around a logic involving strength. Here is an example: *Sigbir vur kakala nyââmi = Kûû nyɔg pɔlkpɛŋ nung* [a bee stings a *kakala* tree in the chest = death grabs a strong man by the hand].

The *kakala* tree is one of the strongest trees in the region. It serves a lot of purposes including the use of the leaves to feed animals. The strength of the tree is compared to death overcoming a strong person. Death is more powerful than the strong person much as the bee is stronger than the *kakala* tree. The power of the bee through its sting is compared with the strength of death that can overcome a physically strong man. Interestingly enough, the statement does not say directly that death overcomes the strong man. Rather, it says literally that death grabs the hand of the strong man, a rather symbolic way of representing what happens.

The use of metaphor is very common in Dagara riddles. The following riddle illustrates this:

Nɔpɛɛ ayi ûû piɛli taar = Mimie na

[two white hens laying next to each other = they are eyes]

The answer to such a riddle is not fixed, and demands creativity on the part of the riddler. A logical comparison of two white hens lying next to each other is fairly open and this explains why some Dagara riddles have more than one possible answer. All the riddle demands is some logical association of objects and actions. According to Maranda (1971: 209), “The fact that one riddle image or its slight variation can signify several answers does not prove that riddles are accidental. It only shows that some metaphors are considered more generally applicable than others”. She further observes that riddles create a surprise, and that every metaphor is a paradox, though she demonstrates in her study that paradox riddles are at least principally distinguishable from metaphor riddles. The above riddle which suggests eyes being represented by white hens laying eggs would be a metaphor riddle.

The call-and-response riddle can be a chorus sung by the riddler and the verses chanted by the rest of the children participating in the riddle-telling session. The riddler throwing the challenge starts by saying “*lubri lubri*”, the description of a funny way of walking by either a person or an animal. The response is: “*nuɔ kyen kula*” [a hen goes to fetch water at the river]; intimating that the hen walks in a rather funny manner. Indeed, in the Dagara language people often make fun of or insult a person as walking in a funny way like a hen. Next, the riddler says “*lɛ maale*” [again]. The next response can then vary. For example, it can be: “*patir dakogle*” [the little stool of a toad]. The chorus “*lɛ maale*” [again] is chanted again and again to keep soliciting different responses from the participants. Some of the responses are logical matching of animate or inanimate objects; for example: “*nyimɛ gyil zɛl*” [teeth surround the tongue]. One interesting thing is that it is the riddler who chants the chorus whereas the rest of the participants have to come up with the verses that are the responses, and characteristically, the riddles and the responses are logical associations of meanings.

Other features of Dagara riddles are: matching of small or big sizes in a riddle that solicits the matching in the answer, throwing a challenge; musicality for the pleasant sound even if there is no apparent logical correlation between the riddle and the answer; unnatural happenings; putting to the test an individual’s bravery; rejection of a supposed phenomenon as false; and reprimanding bad behaviour.

A riddle can also evoke the success or non-success in the accomplishment of a seemingly difficult task. For example:

Riddle: “*Tanη simir bεkyε guu kε kur pε*”

Answer: “*Wala gbεε mir mir bε ∩b guu εkyε bugmnεr*”

[**Riddle:** “They cannot uproot groundnuts on the hill, yet the tortoise is able to harvest them”.

Answer: “They cannot eat the bones of the tiny legs of a deer so they have to pound them with an object”.]

In the riddle, the tortoise accomplishes a difficult feat that humans cannot accomplish. The ground on a hill is very hard, and that makes it impossible to use a hoe to harvest groundnuts grown on the hill. Yet the tortoise, a little feeble animal, is able to harvest the groundnuts. The answer to the riddle also evokes a difficult feat. However, this time it is not accomplished. The legs of the cooked deer are considered tiny enough for people to be able to crack with their teeth. Unfortunately they are unable to do it and have to crush them with a heavy object.

In the association of objects and actions, one can suggest in the riddle that some situation is favourable for another situation or a happening to occur:

Riddle: “*Wule gbεl gbεl , n lu∩rε?*”

Answer: “*Zie mhâê bur bur n ku∩rii*”

[**Riddle:** “Long tree branch, should I climb it?”

Answer: “Very soft ground, should I farm on it?”]

The length and the condition of the tree branch make it tempting to climb. Likewise, the condition of the ground is very favourable for farming, since one would not need to exert too much energy in using the hoe. Thus, there are three sets of associations in the riddle and the answer. The first one is in the riddle in which the condition of the tree makes it tempting to climb. The second one is in the answer in which the soft soil makes it easy and attractive to farm. A third association is made between the established conditions in the riddle and those in the answer. This association is possible because the logical association established in the riddle invites a similar association in the answer that follows the same logic. The participants in the riddle-telling session would recognize and reject an answer to the riddle that fails to establish an acceptable logical association that is based on the logic in the riddle. This sort of game therefore calls for some understanding of logical reasoning on the part of the participants. How therefore could one conclude (as some Western scholars did in the past) that African riddles are only limited to an entertainment function and are devoid of deep philosophical thinking?

7. CONCLUSION

As I alluded to in the introduction to the study, Finnegan concluded from her study of riddles from certain regions of the African continent that riddles involve analogy of meaning, sound, and rhythm. From the different types of riddles that I have analyzed, what she says is true of Dagara riddles. One important feature of Dagara riddles is the logical association of objects and actions, rather than an association of themes in the questions and answers. To the uncritical mind, some associations of words and phrases sound nonsensical. However, it is in deciphering the meaning and the logic in the riddles that we can appreciate how much riddle telling enhances memory and logical thinking on the part of children and adults alike.

Pepicello and Green (1984) have theorized about how linguistic ambiguity is exploited in the riddle genre to produce wit. The riddler, they assert, in creating ambiguity in the form of the riddle, has a double advantage. Only he or she knows where in the composition of the riddle an ambiguity exists. Secondly, only the riddler knows at what linguistic level this ambiguity exists. Let us take for example, one of the riddles I have cited above: a bee stings a *kakala* tree in the chest = death grabs a strong man by the hand. The ambiguity in the riddle lies in the question of how a bee would sting a *kakala* tree in the “chest”. First of all, the bee would sting a living being with a chest, not a tree. The second level of ambiguity lies in the fact that there are many possibilities in the correlation between a bee stinging a tree and the object for which this could be a metaphor. So the idea that it is a metaphor for death laying its icy hands on a strong man is not the only possible answer to the riddle. In other words, because of the ambiguity that the riddle creates, the answer to the riddle is not obvious. However, what helps us see the logic in the answer to the riddle is what Pepicello and Green theorize about riddles. According to them, “riddle genre employs organizing principles within a conventional framework” (Pepicello and Green: 1984, 3). They further assert that in the artful manipulation of linguistic and aesthetic codes, we may find an affirmation of the cultural convention, the message, which is hidden in the riddle form. The message in this riddle is that death is more powerful than even the strongest person. This interpretation is only possible within the conventional framework that is established within Dagara culture.

The Dagara riddler strives to impress his or her audience by not only requiring the audience to see the logical correlation between things in order to decode the image but also in playing with the beautiful sound of words. According to Pepicello and Green (1984: 10) the conventional patterns in riddles are drawn from at least two interrelated systems: the linguistic and the aesthetic. Thus, in formulating the riddle, the riddler is not only interested in the linguistic manipulation of the Dagara language but also in how the riddle and the answer sound aesthetically to the audience. After all, riddles do not only call for critical thinking but also entertain.

What this researcher would like to pursue next on a study of Dagara riddles is to examine how much mutation in time and space, if any, has occurred in Dagara riddles since the migration of part of the Dagara population from Ghana into Burkina Faso. In his study of Gbaya (of Cameroon) riddles, Philip Noss observes that, “The riddle itself may be timeless or modern; yet the setting of the riddle is always direct and contemporary” (2006: 36). This is also true of Dagara riddles. He observes further that Gbaya riddles reflect historical and contemporary experiences. Mutations may occur not only in the content of the riddle, but also in the answer. Old riddles may find new answers, or more precise answers (Noss: 2006: 36). Future research on Dagara riddles will also focus on how much they reflect historical and contemporary events. Finally, we would like in the future to research how folklore can be integrated into Dagara school curriculum. In a study of riddles among the Haya of Northwestern Tanzania, Johnson Ishengoma (2005) argues for the integration of African oral traditions and other elements of traditional

learning into the modern school curriculum. Dagara children would benefit greatly if we integrated riddles and other genres of oral tradition into their elementary school education. Such an initiative would reinforce in formal Western-style education what children miss in traditional education sometimes because of migration into the urban centers. However, it would take a good initiative on the part of educators at both the local and national level for this to happen³.

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Tengan, Alexis. 2006. *Mythical Narratives in Ritual: Dagara Black Bagr*. Brussels: Peter Lang.

This anthropological study of hoe-farming in West Africa outlines the cultural meanings involved in working the land and rearing/raising society. Unlike other studies which usually focus on the kin-group as the basic social unit, this piece of work considers the house society or community as the most appropriate focus by which the Dagara people themselves tend to structure. This anthropological study of hoe-farming in West Africa outlines the cultural meanings involved in working the land and rearing/raising society. With many ethnographic details, the study shows how much the house figure functions as a physical and social institution in Dagara mode of thinking and also in the imagination including the intellectual sphere as an important concept. Burkina Faso attracts migrants from Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Mali, who often share common ethnic backgrounds with the Burkinabe. Despite its food shortages and high poverty rate, Burkina Faso has become a destination for refugees in recent years and hosts about 33,500 Malians as of May 2017. (2018). Contraceptive prevalence rate. geographic coordinates: 12 22 N, 1 31 W. time difference: UTC 0 (5 hours ahead of Washington, DC, during Standard Time). etymology: Ouagadougou is a Francophone spelling of the native name "Wogodogo," meaning "where people get honor and respect". Administrative divisions. Thus, in 1991, Burkina Faso finally agreed to undertake a SAP and was frequently praised for "its pursuit of economic liberalisation" and "its seeming commitment to the donor institutions" current assortment of favoured notions. Burkina thus entered into three cycles of Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facility (ESAF) compliance, each following a pattern similar to that experienced by Ghana. Thus, in a reflection of Ghana's development model, the first few years of the SAP in Burkina saw the introduction of general economic liberalisation that placed short-term stress on the both the poor and basic human services but would lay the foundation for future market reform.