

# The Materials Used in Performing Scarifices among The Dagara of the North Western of Ghana

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**Abstract:-** This phenomenological study investigated the materials required for sacrifices of the Dagara people of the Upper West region of Ghana. Different occasions require different sacrifices. Different scholars suggest different materials used in performing sacrifice. This, invariably, depends, to a large extent, on their understanding of what sacrifice is. The descriptive analytical sample survey was the research design used to purposively study Nandom, Lawra and Jirapa areas of the region. Data gathered was systematically analysed with key findings being that the Dagara people had different types of sacrifices for different occasions. The research findings were as follows, that the Dagara carries his/her object of sacrifice from home, that most sacrifices require domestic animals but in a few cases domestic items such as flour, pito and ash could be used. The most popular animal used in the sacrifice is the fowl. Lastly, different sacrifices require different animals.

**Key words:** Materials, performing, sacrifices.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Dagara live in the extreme section of the north-western part of Ghana in the Upper West Region. They form the largest ethnic group in that part of Ghana. There are also a number of Dagara in the Republic of Burkina Faso. Kuukure (1995), describes the location of the settlement of the Dagara in these words:

“The Dagarti people...live on both sides of the Black Volta River, which at that point forms a boundary between the Republic of Ghana and Ivory Coast and Upper Volta [now Burkina Faso]. These people live largely in the North West corner of Ghana, Spreading across the border of Upper Volta, right up to the 12 parallel north. They are concentrated particularly around the area where longitude 3 west and Latitude 11 north cross. But they thin out along the Volta, particularly astride longitude 3 west, southward to latitude 10 north. Besides *Naangmen* the Dagara also acknowledge the existence of other spiritual beings. These are created by *Naangmen* to serve as his messengers and to be intermediaries between *Naangmen* and human beings. As created beings they share some characteristics with human beings but as spiritual beings they are closer to *Naangmen* than human beings are. Although these spiritual beings could be benevolent, they cannot, nevertheless, be compared with the

goodness, kindness and patience of *Naangmen*. For the Dagara, “just as the minor deities could be benevolent so they could be malevolent and wicked and very exacting in their demands. These minor deities are generally tolerated, rather than loved.

Like other African peoples, the Dagara, as a group of people, has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates all departments of life so fully that it is not easy to or possible always to isolate it.

In the religious beliefs of the Dagara, the belief in a Supreme Being, *Naangmen*, who is the supernatural ruling power that created all people, the universe and all that the universe contains, is paramount. It is *Naangmen* who created the “next world” where all human beings will go after leaving this world.

In the religious practice of the Dagara, sacrifice is the means of communicating with these supernatural beings. The Dagara, like the Ibo of Nigeria, believes that his many desires can be obtained if he has proper recourse to the ancestors and the spirits. So formal prayer is almost invariably tied up with sacrifice. The Dagara, like the Ibo of Nigeria, wants to give something to make his prayer more expressive, more touching, and more efficient. Sacrifice, thus, is the keystone of the Dagara religion. It constitutes the supreme prayer, that which could not be removed without seriously compromising the relationship between them and the divine world.

The question that this research seeks to provide an answer to is what material(s) is or are used in performing sacrifices among the Dagara of the Upper West Region of Ghana?

## II. BRIEF REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### *The Definition and Description of Sacrifice*

Different scholars have given different definitions of what constitutes sacrifice based on their environment and

peculiar local situations. This essay will just focus on a few. Francis A. Arinze (1970), sees sacrifice in two senses; the popular or personal meaning and the ritual meaning. "In the popular sense sacrifice means some renunciation for a motive... Ritual sacrifice, on the other hand, has its strict and proper place only in religious public worship". Arinze further made a distinction between general and particular meaning of sacrifice. In the general sense, "the devout man consecrated to God is a sacrifice; so is our body when chastised by temperance, so is the soul obedient to God. Taken in the strict sense, sacrifice is restricted to that elicited act of the virtue of religion which is in the genus of oblation."

Thirdly, Arinze distinguishes between internal and external sacrifices. "Internal sacrifice is the internal offering of ourselves to God who is our Creator, Preserver and Final End. External sacrifices are the external manifestation of this interior act when 'something is done' to the things offered to God. For Arinze, internal sacrifice is the soul of exterior sacrifice and is absolutely required for its moral worth.

Awolalu (1979), in his work also looks at the secular as well as the religious understanding of sacrifice. In the secular sense he sees sacrifice as forgoing for a particular cause that which is precious; denying oneself certain benefits and advantages for a particular purpose.

For the religious connotation of sacrifice, Awolalu observes that in one sense one can say that sacrifice is an act of making an offering (of animal or vegetable life, of blood, drink or of any objects) to a deity or spiritual being. In another sense sacrifice can be seen as anything consecrated and offered to God or a divinity. "In other words, an offering of any kind laid on an altar or otherwise presented to a deity or divinities for definite purposes is a sacrifice"

This definition sees sacrifice as any religious act rendering something material to a supernatural being or beings for a particular intent. This is a rather loose definition that does not consider the differentiation between sacrifice and offering. One wonders whether every offering to a deity can be described as a sacrifice.

Nelson-Adjakpey (1982), sacrifice is "the act of offering something to a deity as expression and manifestation of one's total dependence on that deity." Nelson-Adjakpey explains that because of the relationship existing between the deity and man through a special covenant, man uses the precious gift of sacrifice to renew this covenant or for the re-establishment of this covenant when broken through human weakness. In his view, therefore, sacrifice is an act that expresses man's dependence on the supernatural. At the same time it is a forum for renewal of man's friendship with the deity as well as a means of reconciliation with the deity when man's weakness breaks the friendship with the deity. Nelson-Adjakpey's definition points to some important ends of sacrifice, namely, the manifestation of man's dependence on the divine world and the maintenance of man's friendship with the divine. Sacrifice thus serves as a means of

reconciliation between man and his deity whenever man in his weakness damages the relationship. This gives sacrifice a moral undertone.

Kuukure (1995), states that, "it is sacrifice each time an offering or part of it is destroyed; it is symbolic act by which an object or person passes from the profane to the sacred". Kuukure further explains that sacrifice is a process, which assures the communication between the sacred world and the profane through the intermediary of a victim which is consecrated and destroyed during the ceremony. This definition implies that sacrifice is a forum for communication and dialogue between humans and the divine through the sacrificial victim that makes this dialogue between an otherwise different entities possible.

Mbiti (1969), however, would prefer to reserve the term 'sacrifice' for cases where animal life is destroyed in order to present the animal whole to God, supernatural beings, spirits or the living dead. Offerings then will refer to all other cases which do not involve the killing of an animal.

#### *The Materials Used in Sacrifices*

Different scholars suggest different materials used in performing sacrifice. This, invariably, depends, to a large extent, on their understanding of what sacrifice is. Sarpong, who sees sacrifice as the presentation of any gift to a god observes, "All kinds of food, drinks and animals and objects may be used in sacrifice". He, however, hastens to add that "what is actually offered depends upon the taste of the god or the occasion."

Awolalu (1979), agrees with Sarpong because he sees sacrifice as "an offering of animal or vegetable, of blood, drink or of any object(s) to a deity or spiritual being." This suggests that anything can be a material for offering sacrifices. Mbiti (1969), does not agree with this. He contends that the main material that distinguishes sacrifice from other ritual offerings is the inclusion of an animal victim.

For Zahan (1970), when we talk of sacrifice in Africa "we mean the flowing blood of a slaughtered animal." For him, "victims of religious practices are almost always chosen from among domestic animals. It is almost as if through these sacrifices man was trying to offer the invisible powers something of himself." Zahan also observes "the dominant place of the chicken in African liturgy." He made an observation to the effect that the chicken was a universal sacrificial animal, "for it is used as much by nomadics as by sedentary peoples, by farmers as by pastoralists, in the savannah as in the forest". He notes that this is the case because the chicken is cheap to obtain, easy to raise, symbolic in bodily peculiarities, coloration, voice, laying and disposition. In addition, Zahan agrees that offerings usually precedes sacrifices for the purpose of facilitating contact with the invisible by making them relaxed, calm and tranquil or by making them animated, excited and moved. "Cool water, milk, honey and light cereal porridges are cited as examples of

soothing offerings. Palm wine, various beers, meads and all fermented drinks constitute the erethistic offerings” used in sacrifices. Only the religious specialist knows the dosage of these offerings as well as the priority to be observed.

#### *Materials and Victims of Dagara Sacrifice*

The selection of sacrificial materials among the Dagara is as important as the decision itself to offer the sacrifice. One other important fact attracts the attention of the observer, victims of religious practices among the Dagara are almost always chosen from among domestic animals. It is therefore, all kinds of food, drinks, animals and object that may be used in sacrifice as it is the case among the Ashantis.

Before the Dagara comes forward for the rite of sacrifice, he must first make sure that he has procured the required materials and victims for the sacrifice, dictated either by divination or by the prevailing circumstances of convention. Where, for example a sacrifice is to be offered to a well-known divinity like *Tengan* (earth goddess) or the *Kpimɛ* (ancestral spirits) in appreciation for some favour received, convention rather than divination dictates the materials and victims to be used. This is the case because such periodic sacrifices to these particular divinities have come to assume a fixed form in terms of materials over the years because of regular and constant observation. If a *bagr-bugrɛ* (soothsayer) is consulted in such regular sacrifices it is either to find out whether additional offering could be made to the usual ones or not. But where unhappy circumstances like sickness, accidents, and deaths push someone to go and consult a soothsayer to find out the cause of it, the deity concerned and what sacrifice to offer, then divination will determine the materials and victims to be offered at such a sacrifice. In a case where the sacrifice is in fulfilment of a vow made to a particular divinity, the materials and victims would be in conformity with the supplicant's promise; yet in all cases the taste of the divinity must always be a determining factor. To offer a thanksgiving sacrifice, the 'sacrificer' must know the taste and taboos of the deity concerned; if not he/she may rather incur the wrath of the deity instead of rather its pleasure if by mistake a tabooed material is offered. In the case when the soothsayer is consulted, it is the deities concerned who demand what should be offered; the soothsayer only communicates the desires of the deity to his client. Each deity also has its favourite sacrificial materials. For instance, *Tengan*'s favourite animal is the cow and in the place of the cow, it may accept a sheep. The *Tengan* does not like a goat so much. *Tengan* also likes floor and pito. It takes salt but detests pepper. The ancestors like cocks, especially red or white ones. They are very proud to get a cow from their living relatives, they are happy with a sheep or even a goat. They, (the ancestors) like *Tengan*, enjoy floor, pito, salt but do not take pepper. But the hot blood flowing from a healthy, favourite victim gratifies the heart of every deity. Hence victims and materials of sacrifice vary from one circumstance to another and from one deity to another, depending on taste of the deity.

Yet, one important thing that attracts the attention of any observer of the materials used in sacrificial rites among the Dagara is the fact that these materials are always chosen from the home. As has been observed by Zahan about African people, "Victims of religious practices are always chosen among domestic animals." For the Dagara, animals that are foreign to the people, though they may now become part and parcel of the domestic animals are not offered in sacrifice. For instance, the Dagara, for sacrificial purposes, does not use donkeys, horses, pigs, pigeons, ducks and turkeys for sacrifices. Foreign materials such as cloth and foreign drinks like gin, brandy, wine and beer are hardly part of Dagara sacrificial materials. Through the sacrificial gifts and victims, it appears, the Dagara wants to offer the divinities something of himself, the work of his own hands. Hence, his sacrificial materials are drawn from both animal world and plant kingdom well known, especially, to their ancestors of old. But for the Dagara, though plant products may accompany the sacrificial victims, the main materials of sacrifice are always those from the animal world.

This is because, for the Dagara, *Lile zii bɛwa kyira bagr bemaaliɛ* (if a chicken's blood does not flow, then it can be said a sacrifice has not been offered). Domestic animals, apart from the blood within them, "receive their subsistence from the hands of men; their life depends on contact with their masters and some among them eat the food as he."

One other important thing that the researchers discovered was the dominant place of the chicken in the Dagara rite of sacrifice. Without a chicken there can be no sacrifice. This bird accompanies the materials at every sacrifice to every divinity. Its liturgical name is *bagr-maalu-lile* (or simply, *bagr-lile*) that is, "sacrificial-chicken". A number of reasons were assigned for the popularity of the chicken in the Dagara rite of sacrifice. They include the following:

- i. The chicken is not costly and so even the poor person can obtain one easily;
- ii. Raising chickens poses no problem among the Dagara because they are raised freely without much concern for their food, laying or reproduction. Hence, there are chickens roaming around in every home;
- iii. As a sacrificial victim, the Dagara find no other animal that offers as many individual variations as the chicken; bodily peculiarities, colouration, voice, size vary so greatly that there are hardly any two that resemble each other;
- iv. The Dagara believe that the chicken is the first domestic animal that was given to them; it was given them mainly for sacrificial purpose. But the main importance of the chicken lies in its symbolism. It is the posture that the slaughtered chicken assumes when it dies that indicates whether the sacrifice is accepted by the divinity or not.

Zahan recognizes this importance of the chicken in African liturgy when he observed, when talking of the dominant place of the chicken in African liturgy, that “in a single African ethnic group, we were able to distinguish more than seventy kinds of chicken representing the appropriate victims for as many different kinds of sacrifices.”

We have already talked about the chicken as an important victim in every Dagara rite of sacrifice. We can have a small chicken (*lile*), a hen (*nuɔ*) or a cock (*nura*). Still in the bird family we have the guinea fowl (*kang*). This, however, is only used in substitutionary sacrifices. The Dagara also use the following animals in offering sacrifice: the goat, which can be a she goat (*bunyang*) or a he-goat (*bra/brale*). The goat is described as a “white animal” (*dung-pla*) or “slim animal” (*dung-baala*) when it is used in making a sacrifice. These names signify that the goat is a simpler animal than the sheep and the cow when it comes to ritual performances. It is used for less serious sacrifices than the sheep and the cow. The sheep is described as a “black animal” (*dung-sebla*). This description had nothing to do with colour.

“Black” in the Dagara notion means serious, important or strong and white means mild, simple, or weak. Hence when a sacrifice demands a sheep it means it is a very important sacrifice. One involving a goat is also important but not as important as that involving a sheep. In the category of the sheep, we have the female sheep (*Peru/pernyang*) and the ram (*pra*). Any of the two can be used for sacrifices depending on the preference of the deity. Still, within the mammal group is the cow, the highest sacrificial victim. The cow is *Tengan's* favourite as well as that of the ancestors. The female is described as *nasera*, if it is young and *nanyang* if it is mature one. A mature bull is referred to as *nader* while a young one is known as *naderle*. The cow is a higher *dung-sebla* than the sheep but in the absence of the cow a sheep is accepted as an appropriate substitute.

Liquids that are used in offering sacrifices include cool water (*kuɔmaaru*) and pito (*daa*). In every Dagara sacrifice cool water is given to the divinity to drink before the ‘offerer’ of the sacrifice can state his intention. This expresses their culture of receiving visitors. The first thing a Dagara offers a visitor is cool water. Hence, at sacrifices the Dagara believe that the divinities come to visit them; they therefore offer them water before they could begin to talk with them. The priest pours the water on the representation and says,

*Nyi ir de kuɔ mhaaru ε* Rise and take water  
*berwoyeru* and listen a to us

Where pito is given, the unfermented one is poured on the divinity. The fermented one is placed in a pot besides the shrine. The Dagara is afraid to give fermented drinks to the divinities for fear that they may give them too much which may make them intoxicated such that they may not pay attention to their plea. They believe that their deities are finite

beings with some of the weakness that human beings have. Hence, they are capable of over drinking and getting drunk. Pito is offered at thanksgiving sacrifices. They are often, though not always, joyful occasions when pito is brewed and the community is involved. Sacrifices that involve pito are annual thanksgiving sacrifices at the *Tengan*, and ancestral shrines. That of *Tengan* is simply called *Tengan-daa* (*Tengan's* Pito) and that offered at the ancestral shrine is referred to as *bagr-maal-daa* or *kapaala-daa* (sacrificial pito or pito of the new crop). At such thanksgiving sacrifices, millet flour is also offered. These two types of materials, pito (*daa*) and flour (*ɔɔ*) represent all the farm products.

One other domestic element that also features prominently in Dagara sacrifices is ashes (*tampelu*). Before the Dagara approaches the divinity, ashes are used to make a circle around the shrine. This is meant to drive away all evil things from the area and to make the environment holy and divine. If the sacrifice is propitiatory sacrifice, ashes are also used to plead for forgivingness and to cool the anger of the divinity involved. In such a sad type of sacrifice, the priest approaches the shrine with a calabash of cool ashes.

Ashes are very symbolic to the Dagara. In their social life ashes are used in reconciling two quarrelling parties. For instance, if two families of the same clan have a serious prolonged disagreement a mediator (*tampelu sob*) brings ashes to the leaders of the two families and throwing the ashes before them, the mediator reminds the two factions of their family ties, the importance of peace and the danger of conflict. He then “orders” that they should stop what they are doing immediately and live as one. The quarrelling families will reconcile there and then. Also, ashes are used as a means of consolation in times of sudden deaths in the community.

For example, if a person’s relative dies in an accident or some sudden death, a person is sent to the deceased relative. On arrival, he prepares the person psychologically after which he will hold the person and gently put some ashes on his shoulder saying, “With these ashes I want you to accept the information that your brother ‘N’ is no more.” In their sacrificial rites, ashes play the role of pleading for forgivingness from the deities. It also symbolizes reconciliation between the divine and the profane. In the rite of sacrifices, ashes are further used to ward off evil spirits and to sanctify the sacrificial area. When the sacrifice is offer outside a shrine ashes are used to circle the altar of the sacrifice to ward off evil spirits.

It has been observed in this section that the Dagara do not approach their object of sacrifice without first acquiring the materials and victims for the rite. It is also observed that all their sacrificial materials are drawn from the home. Foreign as well as wild animals are never used in sacrifices. The materials are always from the plant and the animal worlds. The chicken has been identified as the most essential sacrificial animal. Though sacrificial materials and victims vary from situation to situation and from deity to deity



the chicken is always part of all sacrifices and without it there is no sacrifice.

One other important observation that is made in this section is the fascinating nature of the blood of the sacrificial victim in the thinking of the Dagara people. Without this life-sustaining liquid, the Dagara cannot find any other element on which to inscribe his prayer. Hence, for these people, sacrifice is the flowing blood of the sacrificial animal. Finally, we see that water is the first thing that is offered in every Dagara sacrifice. Pito and flour come in when the sacrifice is a joyful one while ashes are used when the sacrifice is a propitiatory sacrifice. Ashes have another use of sanctifying the sacrificial environment and setting it apart for the rite to take place.

What comes out clearly in this section is that the materials used in sacrifice depend on the community in which the sacrifice is offered, the occasion, and the divinity's taste. But it appears here that domestic animals and materials are often preferred.

### III. METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

The research was done within the discipline of the Phenomenological Study of Religion following Husserl's phenomenological principles of *epoche* and *eidetic intuition*. *Eidetic intuition* demands that the student of religion should build structure and name objects based on what the believers themselves tell the researcher (s). This method was used because it allowed the researchers to interact creatively with the phenomenon under investigation. In addition, this method challenged the researchers to remain objective as well as "get inside" the ritual life of the Dagara in order to view their world as far as it was possible, as a believer does.

The descriptive analytical sample survey was the research design that was used by the researchers. This design was employed because it is the most appropriate design for a phenomenological research method. As a descriptive design the researchers went to the field to observe things for themselves and to ask the traditional believers to inform the researcher those sacrificial rites that were observed and how these rites influenced their moral lives. The design thus called for a critical and analytical description; a description that was very faithful to the opinions of the believers. The universe of the research comprised all Dagara traditional believers living within the Upper West Region of Ghana.

In order to obtain a representative sample for the study, the sample was taken from three main sections of the population: Nandom, to the extreme north, Lawra, in the central, and Jirapa, in the south of the Upper West Region.

These areas were selected purposively because of their strategic locations. They also represented the two major dialectical groups of the Dagara ethnic group. While Nandom is mainly a Dagara speaking area, Jirapa is mainly a Dagaare speaking area. Lawra, on its part, is a place where both Dagara and Dagaare speaking groups are found. In each of

these major sections a number of villages were further sampled. Five villages were selected in each area using the purposive sampling method with the help of the research assistants that were used in some of the areas. In fact, the main duty of these research assistants was to help the researchers to select the appropriate villages and meet the right people. In these villages the units were then selected for the research. In each village the target groups for the research were stratified into five strata thus; the *TenganSob* and his elders, soothsayers, clan/household elders, priests, medicine men, and the "lay believers". This group comprised; male and female, young and old, illiterate and literate, depending on each particular situation.

Out of this target sample for formal interview, the researchers were able to interview twenty-two (22) people in Jirapa, twenty (20) people in Nandom, and twenty-three (23) people in Lawra, making a total of sixty-five (65) people. This does not include the many other people who were interviewed accidentally or in groups.

Table 1: Distribution of population formally interviewed

Area	Target	Actually interviewed	Missed out
Nandom	25	18	7
Lawra	25	23	2
Jirapa	25	22	3
Total	75	63	12

Source: Field Data, 2019

The instruments used for data collection included participant observation and interview schedule. The researchers interacted with the people observing their day to day activities in as much as it was associated with the problem under investigation. They observed, for instance, the preparations towards sacrifice, how the sacrifice was really offered, the participants at the sacrifice, gestures, postures, symbols, symbolism, officiating ministers, language and prayers, and materials used, at the rite of sacrifice. The researchers also visited some shrines and saw the objects of Dagara sacrifice for themselves.

The data gathered was organized in a systematic way under the items used in preparing the interview guide. It was then edited to remove less important information and to fill in gaps created during the interviews. This was done by the use of the audio recordings to update the written notes taken during the interviews. After the editing, the data was then analyzed to make it meaningful and understandable. Care was taken during this stage to represent as accurately as possible the ideas of the informants. Where possible, the ideas of the informants were written verbatim in the native language. Where things were not clear to the researchers, went back to the informants to seek clarification.

### IV. DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

The question that this paper set out to answer was: What are the materials used in performing sacrifices among the Dagara of the Upper West of Ghana? To answer such a question, there will be the need to explain how the Dagara perceive sacrifice.

In the religious life of the African traditional believer sacrifice occupies an important place. Dominique Zahan articulated this idea most appropriately when he stated, "African spiritual life is so impregnated with the idea of immolation that it is impossible to find a people on that continent whose religious practices do not include the slaughter of the most diverse victims." Zahan went on to say that it can even be said that sacrifice is the keystone of the African religion because "it constitutes the supreme 'prayer,' that which could not be renounced without seriously compromising the relationship between man and the invisible." This assertion of Zahan perfectly expresses the situation of the Dagara of northern Ghana. In this chapter, discussions will be focused on the Dagara notion of sacrifice and the materials and animals that are used in offering sacrifice among the Dagara. In looking at the Dagara concept of sacrifice, an attempt shall be made at identifying the elements that, when present, we have sacrifice and when missing there is no sacrifice.

#### *The Dagara Concept of Sacrifice*

Francis Arinze defines sacrifice as "an offering to God by a priest of a sensible thing through its immolation, in acknowledgement of His domination and man's subjection." This definition brings out two issues: the aim of sacrifice and the object of sacrifice. The definition seems to suggest that the aim of sacrifice is to show the greatness of God and the lowliness of the human being. The object of sacrifice is God. Both issues made this definition unattractive to the Dagara. The Dagara do not offer sacrifices for adoration purposes neither do they offer sacrifices to God. Awolalu's definition which sees sacrifice as an offering of any kind laid on an altar or otherwise presented to a deity or divinities for a definite purpose appears to be more accurate in that it points out that sacrifices are offered for specific purposes not to God but to the deities. However Awolalu sees all offerings as sacrifices. This is not the case among the Dagara. The Dagara, together with Mbiti, prefer to reserve the term 'sacrifice' for cases where animal life is destroyed in order to present the animal whole to God, supernatural beings, spirits or the living dead. Offerings will then refer to those cases where animal blood is not involved. With this an attempt can then be made at definition of Dagara sacrifice.

*Bagr-Maalu*, as sacrifice, can be seen as a ritual act of repairing or preventing the damage caused by sin to the relationship between a believer and the supernatural beings by the means of offering the prescribed materials and victims to the object of belief in a ritual ceremony through the mediation of a ritual expert, (the priest) and using the flowing blood of the sacrificial animal, especially that of a chicken. The act is

also meant to restore the damaged relationship, pacify the offended deity, and win back its favour and affection. It may also aim at maintaining and sustaining the relationship so that the occurrence of the sin can be prevented. In the last case, *bagr-maalu* is seen as the ritual lubricant that facilitates the cordiality between the believer and the object of belief. The mood, words and the entire atmosphere of the particular *bagr-maalu* séance will tell the careful observer whether the sin is already committed and is being propitiated in the rite or the rite is meant to keep a happy relationship between believers and their objects of beliefs. The researcher's observation among the Dagara is that sacrifice is performed only when an animal blood flows, especially that of a chicken. Among the Dagara there is a clear distinction between a sacrifice and an offering. Offerings are those rites where food items and other items like money and cloth, are offered without animal blood. Though in every sacrifice offerings are made offerings alone are not a sacrifice. The Dagara call sacrifice *bagr-maalu* and refer to offerings simply as *maalu*.

This definition or understanding of sacrifice brings out the goal of every Dagara sacrifice and in fact, their whole religion. The goal of sacrifice is always to maintain, sustain, and enhance a good relationship between the supernatural beings and human beings so that human beings may get the favours and support from these supernatural beings while the supernatural beings get the obedience and respect from the human beings. In this way every sacrifice is always a sort of renewal of this "covenant" between humans and the divine. This idea will be made clearer when the types of *bagr-maalu* are discussed. This idea will be made clearer when the types of *bagr-maalu* are discussed.

The most important elements that make a rite a sacrifice among the Dagara are: in the first place, the dialogue between the sacrificing community and the deity concerned; secondly, the flowing blood of the sacrificial animal, especially that of the sacrificial chicken (*bagr-maal-lile*), and thirdly, the acceptance of the sacrifice by the deity indicated by the way the sacrificial chicken dies. The only indication that the sacrifice is accepted is when the sacrificial chicken dies facing upwards, with the back to *Tengan* and the stomach to *Naangmen*. At this moment the materials and victims that are used in *bagr-maalu* will be considered.

#### *Materials and Victims of Dagara Sacrifice*

The selection of sacrificial materials among the Dagara is as important as the decision itself to offer the sacrifice. One other important fact attracts the attention of the observer, victims of religious practices among the Dagara are almost always chosen from among domestic animals. It is therefore, all kinds of food, drinks, animals and object that may be used in sacrifice as it is the case among the Ashantis. We shall now consider these materials.

Before the Dagara comes forward for the rite of sacrifice, he must first make sure that he has procured the required materials and victims for the sacrifice, dictated either

by divination or by the prevailing circumstances of convention. Where, for example a sacrifice is to be offered to a well-known divinity like *Tengan* or the *Kpimɛin* appreciation for some favour received, convention rather than divination dictates the materials and victims to be used. This is the case because such periodic sacrifices to these particular divinities have come to assume a fixed form in terms of materials over the years because of regular and constant observation. If a *bagr-bugrɛ* (soothsayer) is consulted in such regular sacrifices it is either to find out whether additional offering could be made to the usual ones or not. But where unhappy circumstances like sickness, accidents, and deaths push someone to go and consult a soothsayer to find out the cause of it, the deity concerned and what sacrifice to offer, then divination will determine the materials and victims to be offered at such a sacrifice. In a case where the sacrifice is in fulfilment of a vow made to a particular divinity, the materials and victims would be in conformity with the supplicant's promise; yet in all cases the taste of the divinity must always be a determinant factor. To offer a thanksgiving sacrifice, the sacrificer must know the taste and taboos of the deity concerned; if not he may rather incur the wrath of the deity instead of rather its pleasure if by mistake a tabooed material is offered. In the case when the soothsayer is consulted it is the deities concerned who demand what should be offered; the soothsayer only communicates the desires of the deity to his client. Each deity also has its favourite sacrificial materials. For instance, *Tengan's* favorite animal is cow and in its place it accepts it may accept a sheep but do not like a goat so much. *Tengan* also likes floor and pito. It takes salt but detests pepper. The ancestors like cocks, especially red or white ones. They are very proud to get a cow from their living relatives but they are happy a sheep or even a goat. They, like *Tengan*, enjoys floor, pito, salt but do not take pepper. But the hot blood flowing from a healthy, favourite victim gratifies the heart of every deity. Hence victims and materials of sacrifice vary from one circumstance to another and from one deity to another, depending on taste of the deity.

Yet, one important thing that attracts the attention of any observer of the materials used in sacrificial rites among the Dagara is the fact that these materials are always chosen from the home. As has been observed by Zahan about African people, "Victims of religious practices are always chosen among domestic animals." For the Dagara, animals that are foreign to the people, though they may now become part and parcel of the domestic animals are not offered in sacrifice. For instance, the Dagara, for sacrificial purposes, does not use donkeys, horse, pigs, pigeons, ducks and turkeys for sacrifices. Foreign materials such as cloth and foreign drinks like gin, brandy, wine and beer are hardly part of Dagara sacrificial materials. Through the sacrificial gifts and victims, it appears, the Dagara wants to offer the divinities something of himself, the work of his own hands. Hence, his sacrificial materials are drawn from both animal world and plant kingdom well known, especially, to their ancestors of old. But for the Dagara, though plant products may accompany the

sacrificial victims, the main materials of sacrifice are always those from the animal world.

This is because, for the Dagara, *Lile zii bewa kyira bagr bɛmaaliɛ* (if a chicken's blood does not flow a sacrifice has not been offered). Domestic animals, apart from the blood within them, "receive their subsistence from the hands of men; their life depends on contact with their masters and some among them eat the food as he."

One other important thing that the researchers discovered was the dominant place of the chicken in the Dagara rite of sacrifice. Without a chicken there can be no sacrifice. This bird accompanies the materials at every sacrifice to every divinity. Its liturgical name is *bagr-maalu-lile* (or simply, *bagr-lile*) that is, "sacrificial-chicken". A number of reasons were assigned for the popularity of the chicken in the Dagara rite of sacrifice. They include the following:

- v. The chicken is not costly and so even the poor person can obtain one easily;
- vi. Raising chickens poses no problem among the Dagara because they are raised freely without much concern for their food, laying or reproduction. Hence, there are chickens roaming around in every home;
- vii. As a sacrificial victim, the Dagara find no other animal that offers as many individual variations as the chicken; bodily peculiarities, colouration, voice, size vary so greatly that there are hardly any two that resemble each other;
- viii. The Dagara believe that the chicken is the first domestic animal that was given to them; it was given them mainly for sacrificial purpose. But the main importance of the chicken lies in its symbolism. It is the posture that the slaughtered chicken assumes when it dies that indicates whether the sacrifice is accepted by the divinity or not.

Zahan recognizes this importance of the chicken in African liturgy when he observed, when talking of the dominant place of the chicken in African liturgy, that "in a single African ethnic group we were able to distinguish more than seventy kinds of chicken representing the appropriate victims for as many different kinds of sacrifices."

We have already talked about the chicken as an important victim in every Dagara rite of sacrifice. We can have a small chicken (*lile*), a hen (*nuɔ*) or a cock (*nura*). Still in the bird family we have the guinea fowl (*kang*). This, however, is only used in substitutionary sacrifices. The Dagara also use the following animals in offering sacrifice: the goat, which can be a she goat (*bunyang*) or a he-goat (*bra/brale*). The goat is described as a "white animal" (*dung-pla*) or "slim animal" (*dung-baala*) when it is used in making a sacrifice. These names signify that the goat is a simpler animal than the sheep and the cow when it comes to ritual performances. It is used for less serious sacrifices than the sheep and the cow. The



sheep is described as a “black animal” (*dung-sebla*). This description had nothing to do with colour.

“Black” in the Dagara notion means serious, important or strong and white means mild, simple, or weak. Hence when a sacrifice demands a sheep it means it is a very important sacrifice. One involving a goat is also important but not as important as that involving a sheep. In the category of the sheep we have the female sheep (*Peru/pernyang*) and the ram (*pra*). Any of the two can be used for sacrifice depending on the preference of the deity. Still within the mammal group is the cow, the highest sacrificial victim. The cow is *Tengan*’s favourite as well as that of the ancestors. The female is described as *nasera*, if it is young and *nanyang* if it is mature one. A mature bull is referred to as *nader* while a young one is known as *naderle*. The cow is a higher *dung-sebla* than the sheep but in the absence of the cow a sheep is accepted as an appropriate substitute.

Liquids that are used in offering sacrifices include cool water (*kuɔmaaru*) and pito (*daa*). In every Dagara sacrifice cool water is given to the divinity to drink before the ‘offerer’ of the sacrifice can state his intention. This expresses their culture of receiving visitors. The first thing a Dagara offers a visitor is cool water. Hence, at sacrifices the Dagara believe that the divinities come to visit them; they therefore offer them water before they could begin to talk with them. The priest pours the water on the representation and says,

*Nyi ir de kuɔ mhaaru ε* Rise and take water  
*berwoyeru* and listen a to us

Where pito is given, the unfermented one is poured on the divinity. The fermented one is placed in a pot besides the shrine. The Dagara is afraid to give fermented drinks to the divinities for fear that they may give them too much which may make them intoxicated such that they may not pay attention to their plea. They believe that their deities are finite beings with some of the weakness that human beings have. Hence they are capable of over drinking and getting drunk. Pito is offered at thanksgiving sacrifices. They are often, though not always, joyful occasions when pito is brewed and the community is involved. Sacrifices that involve pito are annual thanksgiving sacrifices at the *Tengan*, and ancestral shrines. That of *Tengan* is simply called *Tengan-daa* (*Tengan*’s Pito) and that offered at the ancestral shrine is referred to as *bagr-maal-daa* or *kapaala-daa* (sacrificial pito or pito of the new crop). At such thanksgiving sacrifices, millet flour is also offered. These two types of materials, pito (*daa*) and flour (*ɔɔ*) represent all the farm products.

One other domestic element that also features prominently in Dagara sacrifices is ashes (*tampelu*). Before the Dagara approaches the divinity ashes are used to make a circle around the shrine. This is meant to drive away all evil things from the area and to make the environment holy and divine. If the sacrifice is propitiatory sacrifice ashes are also

used to plead for forgiveness and to cool the anger of the divinity involved. In such a sad type of sacrifice, the priest approaches the shrine with a calabash of cool ashes.

Ashes are very symbolic to the Dagara. In their social life ashes are used in reconciling two quarrelling parties. For instance, if two families of the same clan have a serious prolonged disagreement a mediator (*tampelu sob*) brings ashes to the leaders of the two families and throwing the ashes before them, the mediator reminds the two factions of their family ties, the importance of peace and the danger of conflict. He then “orders” that they should stop what they are doing immediately and live as one. The quarrelling families will reconcile there and then. Also, ashes are used as a means of consolation in times of sudden deaths in the community. For example, if a person’s relative dies in an accident or some sudden death, a person is sent to the deceased relative. On arrival, he prepares the person psychologically after which he will hold the person and gently put some ashes on his shoulder saying, “With these ashes I want you to accept the information that your brother ‘N’ is no more.” In their sacrificial rites, ashes play the role of pleading for forgiveness from the deities. It also symbolizes reconciliation between the divine and the profane. In the rite of sacrifices, ashes are further used to ward off evil spirits and to sanctify the sacrificial area. When the sacrifice is offer outside a shrine ashes are used to circle the altar of the sacrifice to ward off evil spirits.

It has been observed in this section that the Dagara do not approach their object of sacrifice without first acquiring the materials and victims for the rite. It is also observed that all their sacrificial materials are drawn from the home. Foreign as well as wild animals are never used in sacrifices. The materials are always from the plant and the animal worlds. The chicken has been identified as the most essential sacrificial animal. Though sacrificial materials and victims vary from situation to situation and from deity to deity the chicken is always part of all sacrifices and without it there is no sacrifice.

One other important observation that is made in this section is the fascinating nature of the blood of the sacrificial victim in the thinking of the Dagara people. Without this life-sustaining liquid the Dagara cannot find any other element on which to inscribe his prayer. Hence, for these people, sacrifice is the flowing blood of the sacrificial animal. Finally, we see that water is the first thing that is offered in every Dagara sacrifices. Pito and flour come in when the sacrifice is a joyful one while ashes are used when the sacrifice is a propitiatory sacrifice. Ashes have another use of sanctifying the sacrificial environment and setting it apart for the rite to take place.

## V. CONCLUSION

In the light of the above syntheses the main conclusion to be drawn is that sacrifice plays an important role in the Dagara traditional believer hence particular attention is given to the materials used for sacrifice. The



materials for sacrifice must be very valuable things without blemish which must be acceptable to the Supreme Being or deities. The Dagara traditional believer is powerfully aware of the necessity of sacrifice in his life, hence the Dagara do not approach their object of sacrifice without first acquiring the materials and victims for the rite. It is also observed that all their sacrificial materials are drawn from the home. Foreign as well as wild animals are never used in sacrifices.

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