

# Agency, Social Status and Performing Marriage in Postcolonial Societies

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## Abstract

This article examines contextually-grounded perspectives on the socio-political significance of marriage in contemporary Ghanaian society. Drawing on qualitative interviews among men and women in northwestern Ghana, this article argues that, beyond historicizing the institution of monogamous marriage, women's agency in desiring, and navigating marriages are performatively agentic and tied to attaining a myriad of socio-cultural, economic and political capital. Situated within the constrained articulations of participants, our findings alert us to complex negotiations and manoeuvres through which men and women aspire for specific forms of masculinities and femininities within the larger gender hierarchies.

## Keywords

Marriage, Ghana, Dagaaba, gender, patriarchy

## Introduction

How and why does marriage matter to Dagaaba men and women in their social lives? In what way (s) does marriage matter differently to Dagaaba men and women across generations? African marriage practices have become important arenas of theoretical and empirical inquiry across different academic disciplines (e.g., Bunting et al., 2016; Burrill, 2015; Posel and Rudwick, 2013; Shapiro and Gebreselassie, 2014). A growing body of research has examined African marriage practices as linked to configurations of kinship and social organization (e.g., Dery, 1987; Fortes, 1962; Gyekye, 1996; Radcliffe-Brown and Forde, 1950) as well as performances and negotiations of bride price (Abdul-Korah, 2014; Comaroff, 1980; Goody and Tambiah, 1973). Other studies have also examined and addressed questions of adaptations and navigations of marital expectations (e.g., Cooper, 1997; Healy-Clancy, 2014; Parkin and Nyamwaya, 1987). The proliferation of research on African

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marriage economy has not gone without a considerable measure of resistance, contestation, and even contradiction. While feminist scholars, especially those with keen interest in the diversity of African family structures, have highlighted how marriages unfold within shifting structures, economy, and material constraints in African societies (e.g., Amadiume, 1987; Bakare-Yusuf, 2004; Oyewùmí, 1997), other arguments have maintained that African marriage remains deeply disempowering to the struggles for a gender transformative society (McCoy, 1988). Situated primarily within these competing debates, this paper foregrounds marriage processes within larger historical trajectories, socioeconomic constraints, and demographic changes among the Dagaaba of northwestern Ghana. The younger generation of Dagaaba men and women may have better choices and agency in contemporary marriage processes and negotiations, yet they may not truly be luckier than their older folks as many practices and ideals of marriage have been in tension with competing ideals of neoliberalism and global capitalism. Dagara women in particular are gaining access to educational, economic, and political opportunities; an intervention attributable to the long-standing commitment of Ghanaian feminists. This potentially enables women to access the labour market as much as their male folks, although men still enjoy greater patriarchal privileges and power than women. While we acknowledge how marriage among the Dagaaba has transformed over time and space, such transformations and changes interact with other domains of Dagaaba life, including cultural metaphors and sensibilities. We argue that the Dagaaba concept of marriage should be broadly understood within its past–present–future contexts. For the purposes of our argument in this paper, we highlight how the indigenous systems, structures, meanings, and sensibilities among the Dagaaba have been disrupted by colonialism and neoliberalism. Our analysis highlights the controversies and tensions that cast doubt about a universal global narrative on marriage and social identities. With Dagara men and women increasingly in contact with other cultures in rural and urban spaces, our aim in this paper is to engage in a kind of conversation that brings to the fore, how men and women are negotiating marriage in their everyday relationships and interactions. This study draws on qualitative interviews conducted with 20 adult men and 20 women in heterosexual marriages across urban and rural settings in northwestern Ghana. Some of our participants grew up during the period of colonialism with the oldest being 70 years old (born in 1948) while the youngest participant was 25 years old (born in 1990). Participants were of diverse and heterogeneous backgrounds, including residential, generational, and socioeconomic statuses. Given that participants cut across different centuries and considering the modernity that the 21st century enables, it is vitally important to engage with the shifting landscape to explore whether such changes are furthering or closing gaps in the ideas and discourses of the Dagaaba concept of *kultaa* (marriage). Situated within the poststructuralist feminist theory of inquiry, our analysis endeavours to speak to locally grounded realities and experiences in particular ways that complicate dominant narratives on marriage. In particular, we treat the range of responses from our participants as forms of discursive performativities played out in the interview space. Such discursive accounts, we suggest, only reveal the subjective experiences of people's marriage lives and may not necessarily represent the absolute truth.

As we critically engage with the multiple stories being told by our participants, mostly with relatively low educational attainment and poor socioeconomic backgrounds, we wish to highlight our own privileged position. As we engage with field data, we are simultaneously engaging with our histories as colonized people, as well as our shifting positionalities as beneficiaries of neoliberal capitalism. However, we position ourselves as critical indigenous researchers. Being reflexive and critical of our identities enables us to contribute to long-standing postcolonial feminist commitment to generating relevant, non-alienable, and transformative research among postcolonial subjects (Spivak and Riach, 2016). As such, we acknowledge the challenges associated with translation of concepts from a largely oral context to a Western academic context. To this extent, we note that it is impossible to do

justice, completely, to this translation since some concepts naturally do not travel well. For instance, the Dagaaba cosmology is composed of the living and the non-living; visible and invisible worlds and fluid ontology between the physical and ancestral realms. Certain forms of power, or motivations for action (including motherhood and proximity to certain religious clans through marriage) have otherworldly impetuses. While we acknowledge the co-construction of knowledge by both the researchers and participants, it is certainly important to mention that our findings are not intended to be representative opinions of all Dagara men and women.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. After the introduction, we engage with the Dagaaba cosmology of personhood (*ninsaalu*) and humanity (*donɛɛ*) and how these backbones of the Dagaaba ontology were disrupted, caricatured, and badly alienated by the injustices of colonialism and imperialism. Following this, we discuss the various themes underpinning the narratives of participants.

### Gender, marriage, and sexualities among the Dagaaba

From patches of predominantly rural agro-pastoral and hunting communities in the northwestern corner of the then Gold Coast, the Dagaaba are now found in every part of present-day Ghana, part of Burkina Faso, and Côte d'Ivoire (and the world, writ large). In precolonial *Dagarateng* (land of the Dagaaba), there was always deep social cohesion, solidarity and culture of care for one another (Dery, 1987; Yelapaala, 1992). From an era where everything, including children belonged to everyone in the community, where everyone saw him/herself as important, equal, and complementary in the family, and where no one could claim absolute power, cultural hegemony, and dominance over others based on intelligence, material possession, and gender, the onslaught of colonialism in the 1890s and its subsequent industrialization exploitation in the 1910s, as well as the introduction of heteropatriarchal Christian ideals and values in the early 1930s have hugely affected the social, economic, and political economy and governance system of the Dagaaba. Combining local level patriarchies with Victorian modelled patriarchies into a complex maze, colonialism introduced hierarchies of relationships and networks of power largely based on gender, cultural capital, material possession, and social networks. Social relationships became deeply predicated on explicit and gendered hierarchies. This disrupted many important components and sensibilities of the Dagaaba cosmology of personhood (*ninsaalu*) and humanity (*donɛɛ*). Dagara cosmology and sense of ontology included non-human entities such as the ancestral realm and nature. *Ninsaalu* therefore extended beyond the physical to the realm of the unseen. As a consequence of this, established cultural practices – including marriage – were conceptualized in the plural and to encompass the multiple intertwined and interdependent entities embodied by the *ninsaala* (person). The Dagaaba were among the first Christian converts in the whole of northern Ghana in the 1930s (McCoy, 1988). Needless to say, this wrought ontological disruptions to Dagara cosmology. Increasingly, the church and its heteropatriarchal ideals became important parameters in calibrating the meaning of the ideal 'man' or 'woman'.

One of the main institutions which suffered major casualties from colonial disruption is the Dagaaba family systems and structures. Polygamous and extended family structures were severely attacked, and their cultural imperatives devalued in lieu of a monogamous and nuclear family system where individuality is a privileged marker of personhood. This created enormous tensions and conflicts among men themselves and between men and women as they contest for cultural hegemony. Before colonialism, it is believed that Dagara women were celebrated for their embodiments of various virtues. For example, Suom-Dery (2000) has argued that Dagara women [not wives] were always treated as the *yir-miere* or *yir-kpeng* (i.e., homebuilder/backbone of the home [not house]), or *yir yel-maale* (the peace-maker of the home). The Dagaaba conceptualized 'home' to

be a corporate entity where several families of a common ancestral route live together under the guidance and protection of the *yir nimbere* (senior members). It was very common to see various cultural artefacts and statues erected in images of women to demonstrate their roles and worth in the society. By the 1930s, such practices were devalued and inferiorized by Christian values and ideals by labelling them as ‘un-Christian’. In the new family set up dictated by ostensible colonial and Christian ideals and values, men became heads of households (*yir-sob*) – giving men, in general, pragmatic power and hegemony, while the position of women shifted to a subordinate one. With neoliberalism’s continuous perpetuation of colonial values and ideals largely based on headship and authority (economic, social, and political), it is generally believed (falsely) that men are supposed to act as diligent breadwinners while women are responsible for the housework.

Another important indigenous institution which is still struggling to recover from colonial disruption is the Dagaaba concept of *kultaa*. The Dagaaba nomenclature, *kultaa*, which is the closest local term for the Western conception of marriage denotes a relationship in which a biologically mature woman willingly agrees to live with a man in his house as a husband and wife. Before the British colonial penetration and exploitation of present-day Ghana, oral history and various adages showed that *kultaa* was often regarded as a way to express fraternal bonding and deepen social relationships between families (Dery, 1987). While marriage in such a predominantly patrilineal society remains an almost compulsory cultural obligation, we must highlight how globally circulating tropes and changes of capitalism and neoliberalism, especially intractable poverty, high unemployment, rising costs of living, and the commodification and inflation of hitherto cheaper marriage-related costs pose significant threats to marriage for most postcolonial Dagara young men and women. In an increasingly capitalist driven era where trans(national) patriarchies interact to reproduce social hierarchies, values, and sensibilities, the process of getting married among the Dagaaba has recently been characterized by copious material exchanges mostly from the groom’s family to the family of the bride (Abdul-Korah, 2014). Imperialist ideologies, especially those launched by Christianity have further tampered with and/or eroded specific ideals, values, and practices associated with *kultaa* over time. Young men and women no longer strive to marry through the traditional customary ways and processes which used to be solely managed by the families of consenting couples. Young men and women have assumed more active roles and have shifted the boundaries between what kinsmen (*yir deme*) can and should do and what they should not. The Christian wedding has recently become an important neocolonial construct which defines what constitutes ‘proper and complete marriage’. This in itself creates tensions among young men and women who barely struggle to make ends meet. Even if the prevailing economic and material conditions are not the best of situations, young couples are fully aware of the social implications of conducting wedding ceremonies which do not attract the needed public gossip. This practice poses a significant challenge for most young men whose dreams of laying claims to cultural privileges associated with marriage are increasingly being suffocated by the challenges of neoliberal capitalism with most young men remaining unemployed or significantly underemployed over a long period of time. Most young men and women are increasingly migrating to urban cities to explore alternative possibilities which could enable them to fulfil the necessary requirements for a decent marriage (Abdul-Korah, 2014). The social pressure to get married appeared to be heavier among postcolonial Dagara women than their male folks as the former could remain unmarried as long as the prevailing economic and material conditions do not permit them. However, this does not mean that young Dagara men are free from the nagging social pressure from multiple stakeholders to marry and procreate to sustain the continuity of their lineage.

Another indigenous institution disrupted by colonialism is the political governance structures and systems of the Dagaaba. Various anthropological literature suggests that it was only until the latter part of the 19th century when discernible political positions were instituted by the colonial rulers among

Dagaaba communities. Yelapaala (1992) and Wilks (1989) posited that chieftaincy was imposed on the Dagaaba by the colonial administration in a manner that could facilitate colonialists' exploitive motives. Until this time, the Dagaaba operated and functioned under an indigenous system of governance where councils of *nimbere* (male and female elders) presided over matters of communal interests in a non-hierarchical arrangement. Both female and male elders could give their verdicts on a pending matter and such opinions were respected and taken seriously irrespective of one's gender. While not denying the pernicious reach of patriarchy, we note that age and seniority (and seniority for women can accrue from motherhood) work concomitantly with gender to allocate resources and power between men and women (Amadiume, 1987; Oyewùmi, 1997: 42). Among precolonial Dagaaba, an older married woman in a chief palace may leverage her affiliation to exercise patriarchal hegemony in the form of power and authority even over male heads of household of a non-chiefdom descent similar to the observation of Oyewùmi (2004: 4). Also, a female elder could order for the arrest and flogging of a young male whose behaviour could potentially ruin the social standing and reputation of a community. Consistent with the argument of Olúfunké Okome (2003: 73), we suggest that the complexity of being a 'married woman' and women's multiple biographies, especially in extended family structures in the Dagaaba cultural landscape, have largely been neglected. Several African feminist scholars have pointed to how colonialism and its assorted heteropatriarchal ideologies has eroded, and in some cases, deepened the sociopolitical and economic power imbalance between women and men in different parts of the African continent (e.g., Amadiume, 1987; Oyewùmi, 2004). As much as these scholars are at pain with erroneous representations of African married women as only subordinate in relation to their husbands, our own cultural background as Dagaaba alert us to the fact that power and authority disperse in a non-totalitarian manner among the Dagaaba similar to the observation of Oyewùmi (2004: 38) in Nigeria. Dislocating women from the socio-historical, religious, and political-institutional and discursive framings of marriage subordinate them and forecloses multiple possibilities for alternative framings, meanings, and interpretations.

Having had most indigenous institutions, values, and sensibilities disrupted, eroded, and devalued by colonialism and imperialism, postcolonial Dagaaba have grown increasingly aware and interested in colonial ideals and practices as quintessential representations of everyday social interactions and relationships. Importantly, marriage remains an integral part of the social ritual through which members of the Dagaaba community are expected to pass. A growing number of scholars (e.g., Adomako Ampofo, 2004; Gyekye, 1996: 77; Suom-Dery, 2000) have argued that marriage is a sacred rite of passage that elevates men and women into respectable social statuses. Whereas the dominant Western conception of marriage is an individual affair, marriage is a social phenomenon and a collective contract among the Dagaaba. The Dagaaba believe that marriage is not only a source of social identity, but a practice which ensures the continuity of a community or lineage which the ancestors established (Abdul-Korah, 2014; Dery, 1987; Kpiebaya, 1991). Against this backdrop, dominant cultural metaphors, folk tales, stories-telling, and adages are often used as forms of negative and positive reinforcements in inducing compliance and obedience to widely held norms, values, and practices, including marriage. Different stakeholders reproduce social pressure, including public shaming and names tagging to force people who may want to resist normative ideals, norms, and ideologies to comply. Among the Dagaaba, social events such as funerals are important spaces for both good and bad reasons. During a funeral, a Dagao can easily deduce whether the deceased led a 'responsible' lifestyle or not based on popular communal qualities such as marriage, hard work, honour, courage, honesty, and dedication to communal affairs. How people mourn, and the seriousness associated with various mourning modes during a funeral tells whether the deceased has met these milestones while she/he was alive or not. For example, an unmarried older man (*dookuor*) does not get the same seriousness and respect compared to a young married man with or without children. Various songs and dirges, encapsulating the broader Dagaaba concept of *iibo* – philosophy, history, norms, culture, and identity

– are sung during weddings and funerals with particular interest in humiliating or praising the dead person and sometimes, the living relatives. The dirge; ‘*o doo long bara la ye*’ (translated, ‘the man has passed away with his manhood’) symbolizes that the deceased has died either unmarried or has no surviving male child – he has no legacy. *Kuoro bine* (traditional dance) are always performed during the funerals of older men and women who are culturally deemed to have left behind exemplary legacies. The Dagaaba believe that such people only transition to join their ancestors (*yir-kpime*) while their legacies, especially male children, continue to perpetuate their good deeds on earth. For the Dagaaba, a *dookuor* is disqualified from an ancestral status and family headship, because it is generally believed that bachelorhood is almost always synonymous with individuality and greed; qualities which are uncharacteristic of pre-and postcolonial Dagaaba. It is common to hear Dagaaba make statements such as ‘*gandaa yina kye o nyuor pori*’ and ‘*nye pog nan veele kye kpi*’. These are translated respectively as ‘a great man has died but his name/legacies will forever be remembered’ and ‘a woman with pleasant personality is dead and gone’. These metaphors and how they are entwined with the Dagaaba cosmology of personhood play a significant role in demarcating differential treatment during funerals and other social events. Even in the face of rapid urbanization, globalization, and professional development, Dagara men and women are always reminded of their cultural obligations to their lineages back home and an ‘irresponsible’ lifestyle (e.g., refusal to marry) is most likely to attract the wrath of the society. Men and women who remain unmarried at a specific stage in their life are always subjected to scornful attitudes, demeaning comments, and gossip even when such people are economically independent. The next section speaks to some of these tensions around marriage and social identities.

In this section, we have argued against the epistemological disruptions and their associated delegitimizing consequences on what it may mean to be a Dagara man or woman. Grounding our argument within the past and present realities of postcolonial Ghana, we contend that the Dagaaba of northwestern Ghana are very much under the influence of globally circulating imperialist and neoliberal values, images, ideas, concepts, and ideologies.

### **‘A man becomes complete when he is able to marry and bear children’: marriage as a form of social identity**

This section explores participants’ reflections on how people react and treat others when they fail to conform to the expectations of their gender. Here, we explore ‘how’ and ‘why’ marriage has become so important or otherwise to participants. Throughout the transcripts, sex and gender were repeatedly cited as being critical in relationships. Der explained that:

A man becomes complete when he is able to marry and bear children. Your status as a man hangs on the balance when you do not have issues [children] with your wife. A bachelor is seen as a child. Society does not respect you compared to those who are younger but married. (Der, 45, rural employed)

The reflection of Aaron corroborates that of Der:

I have become a man now. Now that I am married, people call me a man and not a boy. I recently got married and you know, the next thing is giving birth. We’re expecting our first child. But that is not all; I need to provide for my family. My ability to deal with those responsibilities elevates my position further. (Aaron, 25, urban casual labourer)

The narratives of male participants on how marriage discursively privileges certain identities and access to specific arenas were similar to those of their female counterparts. Ayorma, argues that:

In our tradition, *pogkuor* (a spinster) is not allowed to open the barn and fetch food. It is a taboo. If you're of marriageable age, say 25, 30, 35 etc., and you're not married, people see you to be something else... you're treated as any common girl. You must marry, give birth, and be treated as a complete woman. You know, children are the future. (Ayorma, 40, urban professional)

Reflecting on respondents' narratives, it emerged that marriage is a highly important local signifier of adulthood. Normative notions of masculinities and femininities are deeply implicated in heteronormative relationships. We see participants attempting to reproduce gender binaries by positioning 'men' and 'women' as essentially opposite but complementary by way of reproduction. Importantly, what it means to be a 'correct' Dagara man is to be heteronormatively virile and sexually potent. And for the 'proper' Dagara woman, she needs to demonstrate her sexual attractiveness to men in order to get married and procreate. Resonating with Abdul-Korah (2014) and Adomako Ampofo and associates' (2009) findings, it seems reasonable to speculate that a man's ability to demonstrate his phallic competence and sexual prowess constitutes a major benchmark in demarcating authentic masculinities (of becoming a complete man) and 'othered' masculinities (of having one's status hanging). Ayorma's comments build on this strongly, highlighting that the fertility of women is a strong factor in determining femininity and womanhood. Access to and control over a barn are part of the economic and cultural capital that inform and influence women's strategic engagement with marriage. Ayorma's comments suggest that married women are aware of this differential access to this important cultural space – the barn – and exercise agency accordingly in getting and remaining married. There seems to be widespread understanding and normalized discourse among participants to suggest that desirable masculinities and femininities are worthy accomplishments when they strictly comply with a compulsory heteronormative social order (Butler, 1990). This normalized heteronormative social order requires that men, like women, express their sexualities with specific people ('husbands' and 'wives'). Subsequently, this normalized discourse is taken to putatively regulate intimate sexual relationships to the extent that the Dagaaba concept of marriage at once symbolizes an institution in which procreation is strongly emphasized (Dery et al., 2019). The narratives of both male and female participants highlight that a man's or woman's willingness and ability to marry and bear children signals embodiment of desirable masculinity and femininity. The completeness of womanhood as illustrated by Ayorma ('You must marry, give birth and be treated as a complete woman') is problematic and potentially forecloses alternative framings of femininities. Ayorma's use of the word 'must' seems to suggest that credible femininity could only be meaningfully gained through a heterosexual relationship. This is consistent with the findings of Dery et al. (2019).

What interests us most is how participants position 'age' in relation to access to patriarchal hegemonies such as respect and recognition. Age becomes a deeply implicated social construct which both facilitates and obstructs equal access to patriarchal privileges. Participants' construct of age and how it enables various social subjects to access specific cultural privileges go beyond merely seniority. This is clearly illustrated in Ayorma's statement that: 'If you're of marriageable age, say 25, 30, 35 etc., and you're not married, people see you to be something else... you're treated as any common girl'. This comment raises important questions on the social significance of 'wifedom' over 'motherhood'. A woman ought to get married first to avoid being (mis)perceived as any 'common girl' before one could become a mother. While Aaron discursively constructed his status as a 'man' by virtue of his age (25 years) and marital status, there is a lot more to do in order to merit respect from society. Age, gender and marital status play crucial roles in determining how men and women negotiate power and access to cultural privileges daily. Being a biological man or woman in the Dagara tradition is not enough in earning adulthood. We would argue that

progression into adulthood through marriage is associated with authority and a higher social status in society. Unmarried men or women do not have equal access to defined patriarchal privileges which supposedly appear to be the bona fide rights of married people. The completeness and desirability of masculinities and femininities lies in their performative nature.

Importantly, participants' narratives also revealed their desire for inclusion into dominant frames of manhood and womanhood. Their narratives gestured toward expressing some sense of belonging evident by their own interest in upward social mobility. Using Foucault's (1991) reading of governmentality, we argue that for a Dagara man or woman to stay unmarried at a specific age means that she/he does not command dominant planks associated with desirable masculinities and femininities. Men and women who fail to marry and give birth are strongly vilified and shamed as less nationalistic as Dagaaba because 'children are the future', said Ayorma. This finding is consistent with Kpiebaya (1991) and Abdul-Korah (2014) who argued that the concept of marriage among the Dagaaba functions as a form of social insurance which ensures the existence and continuity of lineages. In a context where adoption of children is rarer, biological child bearing is an important source of social prestige and power over childlessness. It emerged that there are multiple power hierarchies in the ordering of social identities among men themselves, between men and women, and among women themselves in the Dagara tradition. Consistent with the argument of Olúfunké Okome (2003: 73) and Bakare-Yusuf (2004), our findings suggest that beyond gender, women and men are not homogeneous social subjects. Reading participants' comments through a critical intersectional lens, an unmarried woman becomes subordinated not because she is a female, but her subordination results from her position in the family first and foremost as an unmarried woman. Indeed, our findings alert us to the fact that the privileges that an adult married woman enjoys are not accessible to other adult unmarried women. These power relations are far from being fixed and are opened to contestation.

In all this, what must not be forgotten is the contemporary nature of monogamy and desire for direct biological progeny, in the Dagaaba socio-religious and political imaginary. Despite the recent, colonially sanctioned and religiously reinforced power of monogamy, it is still largely considered an anomaly to Dagara cultural traditions where plural marriages and sexual liaisons continue to be the norm. Contrary to its now largely patriarchal nature, we observe that women's sexualities were also not as heavily regulated as they are today. For instance, the conjugal compensation (*kyeru*) given in marriage contracts originally transferred naming privileges to men in cases of progeny in the marriage contract. *Kyeru* validates the marriage and also legitimizes the children as belonging to the patriline of the man. This means that motherhood and wifhood have become conflated since wifhood is a path to motherhood. Indeed, in families where it is difficult to have male children as heirs to family property and titles, an unmarried woman who is able to give birth to a male child is always celebrated as this allegedly sustains the continuity of the woman's natal family lineage. Whereas men could marry any number of wives they wanted, women's sexual activity was not regulated, and no one questioned the biological 'authenticity' of children born during the tenure of the marriage. In other words, the culture of do not ask, do not tell prevailed about who was doing what in the context of the marriage. Obviously, some of the loss of privileges that came with puritanism severely disempowered women and eroded these liberties. What troubles most contemporary Dagara women as revealed in our study is a strong desire of wifhood; the ability of a woman to identify herself as the legitimate wife of a man and not merely as the mother of a number of children. This itself is due to the discourses of modernity. However, interestingly, while the status of mother cannot be eroded, that of a wife is easily threatened where no offspring are produced. This reiterates the earlier observation that wifhood itself is a path to motherhood.



## Marriage fantasy and women's desire for positive femininity

The fantasy associated with marriage and its contribution to positive femininity was clearly articulated among participants throughout the transcripts. Tuobakuro, spoke at length about her earlier frustration and discontentment with marriage. Despite Tuobakuro going through frustrations during her first marriage relationship, she argues that life was worthless outside of marriage. After experiencing life for two years post-separation, and having been subjected to gossip and ridicules, she has concluded that marriage, after all, remains a considered measure of the definition of womanhood:

As you can see, I am extremely happy that I am also a married woman now. If a woman even acquires the riches of the whole world and you remain unmarried, you're still nobody. People don't respect unmarried women here. You know that feeling... that feeling of not being treated as woman enough. People talk a lot about you as a *pɔg faa* [bad woman]. (Tuobakuro, 30, urban professional and a former divorcee)

Asked how she feels in her new position as a second wife in a polygamous home despite being a Christian, Tuobakuro enthusiastically explains that 'I am also a respected and complete woman... an adult. At least, people call me Mr A's wife. I am not a girl again (laughter). You know that joy of being a married woman; a mother'.

Maa-eri-faa, who recently got wedded in the Christian church argued that in addition to the self-fulfilment that Tuobakuro had alluded to, marriage gives her a sense of belonging and also enhances her social connection:

You know over here, *kultaa* [marriage] speaks a lot about you [a woman] than any other thing. You can be financially okay, I mean have plenty of money but once you're not married you're just like any other girl roaming in the community. Nobody recognizes your riches. That can be embarrassing but that is the fact. Once you're a mature woman like me and you're not a nun, you need a man at some point in time to make you complete. You can aspire to acquire everything necessary, but a man makes these things meaningful. I feel fulfilled as a woman now. (Maa-eri-faa, 25, rural professional)

Despite their different geographical locations, what makes for a fascinating reading of Maa-eri-faa's and Tuobakuro's narratives lies in their attempt to draw on a dominant cultural vocabulary to idealize femininity and womanhood. Their narratives even make for more nuanced and textured reading when read against the backdrop of the incompleteness of womanhood outside the context of heteronormative marriage; a position Maa-eri-faa maintained as factual ('That is the fact'). Both interlocutors described their own transition into married life as a journey full of memories and happiness. They are happy that at long last, they have arrived at a destination capable of giving them certain defined privileges that unmarried woman cannot access. Building on Kandiyoti's (1988) theory of patriarchal bargain, our findings suggest that the social power and gendered subjectivity inherent in patrilineal societies such as northwestern Ghana work to exclude unmarried women from the joy of a matrimonial home with a husband figure operating as the head.

The fantasy of being called an 'ideal woman' (not a *pɔg faa*) and the wife of a man underpins Maa-eri-faa and Tuobakuro's desperation. Their desperation to transition into a more respectable feminine position signalled a sharp discontinuity between being seen and treated as 'a nobody', or any ordinary 'girl' and their desires for upward mobility on the social ladder became intensified. It seems reasonable to suggest that for a Dagara woman to be recognized and treated as a 'complete person' in society's eyes, she must demonstrate strong commitment in upholding and participating fully in social practices that define her as a woman in relation to men and other women. Both interlocutors are strongly wary of the consequences of remaining unmarried and the cost of such resistance to their

position as credible Dagara women. Their feeling of self-fulfilment through marriage is probably most warranted in a context where heteronormative marriage has been valorized as an important brick that holds social identities in gender-determined hierarchies. They are convinced, though, that even if women are empowered to the highest echelon in society, men are inevitably important in making the life of a typical woman 'complete', 'worthy', and 'meaningful'. One must be careful in interpreting the narratives of participants beyond a Western notion of a complete and empowered woman. A close reading of participants' narratives alerts us to their negotiations of significant social pressure to progress through the rank and file of the Dagaaba social organization. It thus appears reasonable that questioning participants' desperation to quickly acquire the status of married women amounts to questioning the legitimacy of multiple patriarchies. We must not ignore the far-reaching impact of colonialism and its subsequent introduction of Christianity in the early 1930s. The Dagaaba were the first converts of Christianity, especially Catholicism in northwestern Ghana. Although the customary practice of marriage in principle puts 'wives' in a very precarious and subordinate position relative to 'husbands' in an ostensibly patrilineal society such as northwestern Ghana, women do not see it as such. We would suspect that participants' unwillingness to contest patriarchal institutions such as marriage is influenced by their own commitment in upholding and reinforcing Christian doctrines. Participants are aware that Christian doctrines encourage women who are not nuns; they need male husbands at some point in time to make them complete.

More explicitly, women's observance of strict patriarchal practices embedded in heteronormative marriage such as women always yearning to be identified as the wives of Mr this or other is the most immediate manifestation of the unconscious but crucial role of women in maintaining and reproducing cultural images (as *pɔgminga*) and gendered statuses (as wives and husbands) that women, such as Tuobakuro and Maa-eri-faa, resist breaking the prevailing norm. While Tuobakuro did not articulate explicitly what necessitated her exit from her first marriage relationship, her return to a polygamous marital home signalled her own willingness to conform to dominant notions of positive femininity. Being a single woman or a divorcee of a certain age cohort is enough justification that a woman is a *pɔg faa* by local standards. Even if a woman's marital relationship is marked by frustrations, anguish, and misunderstandings, the fact that she remains the wife of a man is enough demonstration of her commitment to Christianized-traditional femininity. This means that women such as Tuobakuro and Maa-eri-faa, much like their folks, realize their dreams of being recognized as 'good women' (*pɔgminga*) in relation to others. The fulfilment and range of fantasies that they excitedly spoke about are derivatives of 'being more than merely oneself, but of being part of a greater whole' (Jackson, 2011: 161) in which the politics of social inclusion, persecutions, and exclusion are prevalent. The narratives of our interlocutors highlight the social pressure that most women in this part of Ghana are likely to experience daily in negotiating their femininities. In contrast to these social pressures and tensions that young women go through, young male participants, on the other hand, were less concerned about marriage, albeit they do not resist its socio-political significance.

### **Marriage and the reproduction of problematic discourses on masculinities and femininities**

In almost all the interviews, the concept of marriage was always deployed to reproduce problematic discourses on masculinities and femininities in many complex ways. For example, Kaarazie, believes that there is a huge social cost in resisting patriarchy as it intersects with the Dagaaba concept of marriage (*kultaa*). Re-echoing the voices of her female colleagues, Kaarazie's position is firm on this as she encourages her fellow women to be submissive and question less the consequences of patriarchy:

[We] all know that a woman will always be a woman and you must lower yourself for a man to marry you. But young women of today are losing out on this and marriages are collapsing. I am a mother for all. I tell young girls that if they don't maintain a good home, society is watching them. Society will blame you [woman] if you have a broken home. Even American presidential aspirant, Hilary Clinton, has a husband. Do you think that if she has not lowered herself, her husband would have been able to contain her? (Kaarazie, 50, urban professional and high-ranking member of a Christian Mothers Association in one of the branches in northwestern Ghana)

The idea that women always need to comport themselves and be submissive in order to be seen as 'marriageable', 'respectful', and 'ideal women' found purchase among male participants, too. Niebonzie, drew on his experience as a divorced husband to explain that:

Trust me, unmarried women are generally troublesome women. They have no idea what respect is. If you're a woman and you have no place for the authority of your husband, which man will come to marry you? Even if they come close, they have a particular interest either to 'chop' [spend] your wealth, or to 'hit-and-run'. (Niebonzie, 35, urban unemployed man)

Although Kaarazie and Niebonzie are of different genders, class, and generations, their narratives speak to a common theme; for women to maintain a stable home, they need to have sufficient command of the ethics of submissiveness. While Kaarazie draws on her leadership experience as a women's leader and Niebonzie draws on his lived experience as a divorced husband, both interlocutors make visible claim of moral crisis and cultural rupture among these women of today. While being uncritical of her own embodiment in reproducing damaging patriarchal ideologies and drawing on a social lexicon on femininity, Kaarazie insists that these young women of today are losing out on basic cultural norms that guide marriage and by extension femininities. Much like Kaarazie, Niebonzie unapologetically pathologized unmarried women as 'troublesome', 'disrespectful', and 'disruptive' to the social value and meaning of womanhood. At once, the density and complexity of these narratives do not only lie in their elaboration, but the communicative imperatives of the questions that both interlocutors are seeking answers for. Both questions are framed in differently textured ways yet speak directly to the normalization and promotion of masculine authority, male dominance, and the power of the husband's figure. Whichever approach that one uses to foreground these questions, the inherent patriarchal permit that enables husbands to always expect subservience and non-threatening behaviours and attitudes from women is most likely to be a common denominator. Both interlocutors engage in a cost-benefit analysis here. For Kaarazie, she conveniently posited that once you are born a woman, so must you always be otherwise you risk having a troubled marriage ('a woman will always be a woman and you must lower yourself for a man').

Drawing on her knowledge about culturally constructed notions of femininity and by referring to US Hilary Clinton as an embodiment of respectable global femininity, Kaarazie, once again, wears her uncritical cap here and ignores the revamping impact of patriarchy. In fact, Kaarazie could be seen as a benevolent agent of patriarchy. She, like Niebonzie, does this most effectively by blaming women whose families are unstable [broken home] as not being good enough to maintain good homes. The femininity of women is seen to be strongly tied to a woman's ability, despite all odds, to maintain a stable home and always satisfying the interest of the husband figure. The image of the masculine man is invoked here to suggest that it is not a man's business to keep stable homes, it is women's and this gendered demarcation appears almost a normalized practice.

Like Kaarazie, Niebonzie is strongly convinced that ('Trust me') once a woman veers off the normative lane of femininity by being unmarried, or by exercising some form of agency and resistance in disrupting what is largely perceived as an earned privilege of men ('respect'), she automatically reduces herself to an object for financial and sexual exploitation. In her position as a

'benevolent mother' ('mother for all'), Kaarazie argued that she tutored young girls to internalize cultural ethics of respectable femininity because women are always watched ('I tell young girls that if they don't maintain a good home, society is watching them'). The associated cost of being watched and probably shamed is to ensure that irrespective of whatever women go through in their marriages, they have a moral and cultural obligation to maintain a stable and comforting home.

## Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we have sought to explore how the Dagaaba concept of marriage shapes everyday discourses that inadvertently sanction and reproduce problematic notions of masculinities and femininities in complex ways. From the narratives of both male and female participants in this article, it is noteworthy to highlight a problematic underpinning of how socialization processes and the everyday policing of gendered identities play significant roles in producing gendered subjectivities in heteronormative relationships. Evidence from this article suggests that women are not sufficiently trained traditionally to aspire to positions that may be relevant to the Western notion of empowerment, rather women are traditionally expected to aspire to positions that require that they act as 'good wives' and 'mothers'; even if a woman rises as high as her intellect and energy can afford her, she remains 'incomplete', a 'nobody' in the society's eyes. Her femininity is thoroughly questioned if she is not heterosexually married to a biological man. Female participants were very clear about the sociocultural imperative of this and deviating from the mundane line of logic could be perilous to their femininities.

We may have poor judgement if we treat the narratives of female participants in this study as entirely mundane and lacking agency. Women in this study are knowledgeable about the cost of resisting patriarchy and how this resistance could thwart their own femininities and desire for upward social mobility within the larger gender hierarchies. They are aware that patriarchies are multiple and complex spheres of power and dominance. The narratives of Dagara women as revealed in this study, much like their male colleagues, suggest that women are aware that it takes the performance of submissiveness for Hilary Clinton, despite her high political profile, to remain married to a man. If she can negotiate this patriarchy and maintain her femininity as a 'submissive' and 'correct' woman, why cannot they [Dagaaba women] also do the same? With this sense of transnational femininity discourse and sense of agency, Dagaaba women as this article has revealed, exercise their agency in more critically aware self-serving ways than they are often portrayed to be doing. Dagaaba women organize their life priorities around heterosexual marriage since the Dagaaba concept of marriage (*kultaa*) remains a critical pathway to respectable social positions in society and not any form of tangible empowerment as previous research has suggested (Tsikata and Darkwah, 2014). The Western notion of women's empowerment may not be sufficient ground, at least within the constrained articulations of women in this study, to engage in critical analyses of identity and agency. Women are aware of the necessity to be empowered by gaining educational training, professional employment, and occupying leadership positions, but these notions of empowerment remain secondary and almost 'useless' to women if they are not married and maintain a stable home. Young men on the other hand argue that work and marriage go hand-in-hand. Their ability to secure work enhances their chances of providing for their families as patriarchal masculinities require.

Our findings challenge those of Burrill (2015: 32) who cited financial destitution, economic constraints, and spousal dependence as powerful incitements which almost always motivate African women into accepting marriage proposals from male suitors. This claim of financial motives as a central discourse shaping notions of marriage as advanced by Burrill is not entirely applicable to most of our female respondents. Some female informants were relatively successful lower-and middle-class and urban-based professional women who occupied various respectable

positions in society. However, our findings are consistent with Boye et al. (1991: 346) and Whitehouse (2016) who found that the fear of social ostracism, denial, and stigma overwhelmingly shaped women's decision to marry. Our findings suggest that women who are economically empowered, urban-based, and self-reliant may not necessarily need the approval of their kinsmen before consenting to a marriage. What may complicate and/or constrain women from exercising this agency (however small it is) is that Dagara women, like their male folks, must have to weigh the options against certain decisions and aspirations for individuated fulfilment. Some of these considerations reflect the Dagara *ninsaalu* ontology within the wider contexts of their cosmology. Considering that men and women operate in a social context with norms, expectations, and rules, social pressure may override personal interest.

In the Dagaaba cultural set up, the concept of marriage does not only symbolize sexual relations between a biological man and a woman; it is a complex enterprise regulated by extended family structures and identical communal norms and practices. Consistent with Abdul-Korah's (2014) finding, our analysis suggests that the borders and contours of the Dagaaba concept of marriage also become 'communal properties' that are strictly regulated by different stakeholders with various stakes. Cott (2000) argues that the notion of marriage operates as a form of political artefact often used to define who belongs to the nation and who does not. Resonating with this logic, we maintain that theorizing marriage beyond a public-private dichotomy is a useful way through which the link between marriage and citizenship could be thoroughly understood. Against the backdrop of public and private governmentality of the Dagaaba marriage economy, any man or woman of a marriageable age (as defined by the community) who fails either by design or accident to comply with the gender-conforming norms is strongly sanctioned and penalized because it is widely believed that 'children are the future'; children are not only the future, they are a significant measuring gauge through which notions of masculinity and femininity are grounded. Grounded within Foucault's (1991) reading of governmentality and Robson's (2009: 328) theorization of marriage as a form of 'political enterprise', we argue that marriage, as practised by the Dagaaba of northwestern Ghana, is deeply implicated in the politics of governmentality. Using this as a useful analytical frame, our analysis in this article allows us to see more clearly what it is that certain identities are variously monitored and excluded from the spectrum of acts, statutes, politics, and policies that animate the borderlands of marriage while others are socially rewarded as culturally 'correct' ways of expressing romantic relationships. Our findings further suggest that the Dagaaba concept of marriage is a form of political apparatus that is used to eroticize heteronormativity by regulating and legitimizing social relationships and hierarchies through acts, statutes, politics, and policies.


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