

**Paschal Kyiiripuo  
Kyoore**

**DAGARA  
FOLK TALES**

From  
Ghana and Burkina Faso

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of the South**

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## **DEDICATION**

To my wife Martha Kamanda, and our children Ezekiel  
Naamwinyonaakyiirimepuo, Zephaniah Vieluyele, Zechariah  
Muomaalme.

May you never forget where you come from, and may you cherish  
human dignity in its purest form.

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## PREFACE

The tales published here were collected during my fieldwork at Nandom in the Upper West Region of Ghana. The Dagara live in Northwestern Ghana, Southwestern Burkina Faso and Northeastern Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast). The Dagara and the Dagaaba in Ghana are the same ethnic group, though they speak different dialects of the same language.

Like every Dagara who grows up in the Dagara community, I developed the passion for folk tales in my childhood. I grew up in my little village called Dabagteng, one of the numerous villages that are part of the Catholic parish of Nandom. When we finished our household chores, after supper we would gather around to tell stories. Because of the way Dagara traditional houses are built, we would sit on the rooftop of our house (in the form of an open room) which is also where everyone slept during the dry season when the weather was very warm, and also when we did not have to worry about rains. This is very convenient, especially during the season when the weather is warm because of the “harmattan” winds that

blow in the region. From the rooftop of our house where we gathered around with other children from the village, we often could see bush fires burning on top of some of the hills in neighbouring Burkina Faso, which is just across the big Black Volta river in our village. On the other side of the river live some of our own Dagara people who because of European colonial enterprise and the balkanization of the African continent now belong to a different nation than we do.

It is from these folk tale and riddle-telling sessions that we all learned these stories which are passed on orally from generation to generation. We also learned some of the stories from our friends at school, because sometimes we would narrate them as we walked several miles back home in the evening after school. The Dagara often describe people as being like one of the animal characters in our folk tales. Characterizing someone as an animal character in a folk tale can be a positive or a negative attribute, depending on the nature of that animal character in Dagara folklore. For example, if a person is doing something that people wonder about because it is dangerous or brave, they often say, “*Aa be nye Bader na zom woba!*” which means, “Who has not seen Spider

riding an elephant". The saying originates from a folk tale in which Spider boasted to everyone that he was going to trick Elephant and ride on his back. Nobody took him seriously because they could not fathom how Spider could fool Elephant into allowing him to ride on his back. Yet, Spider did just that, to the astonishment of everyone, and without Elephant even realizing that Spider had tricked him. What Spider accomplished through his trickery was both risky and courageous.

My storytelling session with the children at Nandom was interspersed with dancing, and of course singing. Children in particular like stories with songs. Among our people (as is the case with all African societies), storytelling serves an important didactic and moral function. It enhances children's memory and teaches children as well as adults about acceptable codes of behaviour. Folk tales teach people about the individual's responsibility toward the collectivity, so storytelling is a pedagogical tool that is used to moralize to the community. Though individual valour is acknowledged and rewarded, the Dagara people are constantly reminded of how the behaviour of an individual reflects on the

family and the clan, and how the community at large would be judged and perceived by outsiders.

Christian evangelization and the advent of European formal education have had a tremendous impact on the socio-political structure of the Dagara people. Children of the middle class, who attend schools in big cities because their parents are employed in those locations and dwell there, are losing direct touch with the experiences that I had growing up in my village. Reading tales in a book is not the same experience as learning them through story telling as is done daily in rural communities. Story telling develops children's cognitive abilities in a way that reading alone cannot. I was delighted during my fieldwork that school children were eager to gather around to share with me the stories that have been handed down to them from past generations.

My most sincere wish is that the practice of storytelling should never die among my people. I have decided to publish this collection of Dagara folk tales with the hope that we can share with our readers the importance of the meaning and the value of these tales in our lives. Naturally, the English translation of folk tales originally told in the Dagara language does not convey the



complete linguistic and cultural flavour of the original versions. Nonetheless, I hope that the reader can, after reading these stories, develop the habit of retelling them orally. Also, readers should know that in my translation, I have tried to be as close as possible to the original versions told by the narrators, even though a translation never really captures the full “flavour” of the original language.

The written form is the only available medium for me to share these stories with people from other communities who do not speak the Dagara language, and might never have the chance to travel to Dagaraland. The titles I have given to the stories are my own, since the narrators generally do not give titles to their tales.

My interest in collecting folk tales sparked off a renewed interest in telling folk tales. This was especially revealing to me in my conversation with Leander Lober, one of the storytellers whose stories feature in this collection. Leander Lober (who affectionately called me his “junior bother” but who unfortunately passed away before I could publish the first volume of my collection) was also a praise singer (*lankone*) from a village called Náápààl, a few miles from Nandom in Ghana.

Any time I have had the opportunity to teach a course on African folk tales at my institution, I have experienced the joy and the satisfaction of sharing something special about my culture with my American students. The students too have always embraced with enthusiasm and curiosity the chance to learn something about a foreign culture.

Storytellers often choose to tell tales in which the characters “relate” to them in one way or the other. For example, young girls like to tell stories in which the character, or several of the characters are young girls who go about their daily duties the same way as young girls in the Dagara community normally would. They can empathize with these characters, and they try to impress this upon their audience. Young boys likewise might like to tell stories in which the characters do the daily chores that are often allocated to boys in the family. Elderly storytellers might tell stories that have poignant lessons for the younger members of the audience. Mothers for instance like to tell stories that teach a moral lesson to young girls about the choice of a life-long partner for marriage, because after all, in our African cultures, marriage is not just an individual affair but a matter that

concerns the whole extended family, and indeed the whole community. Every society has its value system, and the Dagara are no exception. The stories published in this collection do reflect the Dagara interpretation of the world in which they live, even if the world is represented in these stories by fictional human or animal characters. The Dagara can always identify individuals in society who behave like the characters in the folktales. They represent all facets of life such as greed, intelligence, fortitude, malice, hard work, pride, and generosity. These character traits might be recognized as universal human traits, but how we define them is what gives them a specificity of meaning and value in a given society. That is why it is dangerous to think that what we perceive for instance as positive achievement or negative behaviour in life in our culture are necessarily perceived the same way by people in other cultures.

Some of the tales are very short, and some of them comprise of a song from beginning to end. We can tell stories in the form of a song, and children revel the opportunity to sing along with the narrator. Also, the main characters in Dagara folk tales are the spider, the elephant, the rabbit, the tortoise, the monkey, the lion, the

hyena, the donkey, the goat, the leopard, certain wild birds, and many other animals that are found in that savannah region. Among the human characters, the hunter is the most popular. He interacts easily and often with the animal characters. Interestingly enough, there is a little animal which is bigger than a spider and which the Dagara people call “*napkaane*” or “*nabègle*” (hunter) because it normally carries a lot of pebbles around the body like a hunter going out on a hunting expedition carrying his weapons. Other main human characters are, the village chief, the old lady, the young boy, the sorcerer, and the beautiful young lady. Normally, these characters are not given any specific names, implying that they represent young boys, young girls, or old ladies in general. The most popular Dagara tale by large is one about a young boy called Yangangnaa, which means “Wiser-than-the-chief”, who is pitched against a chief in a battle of wits. The story is featured in this collection, and is one that most Dagara children would know, even if there are varying versions of some parts of the tale depending on the village in which the tale is told.

Dagara folk tales do not have a predictable end, and an audience that participates in a storytelling session does

not expect that stories should always have a happy ending. For the Dagara people, giving a happy ending to all tales would create an unrealistic fictional world. Folk tales might be fiction, but Dagara people expect that there is something about them that narrates life as it is. In real life, things are not always rosy and do not always turn out the way we expect or desire. It might sound too tragic to give a sad end to a story, but that is because sad things happen in life, and good people are not always protected from the evil machinations of others. Children understand why seemingly supernatural things happen in tales, and they also understand why sometimes characters that they empathize with in tales do not always see things work out in their favour.

Folk tales belong to the community and not individuals. In fact, it would be impossible to trace the original creators of folk tales which immediately become the “property” of the collectivity as soon as they begin to circulate. This says a lot about the Dagara notion of who “owns” knowledge. Printed material in the Western world (the term is such a generalization!) is the property of an individual, or individuals in the case of a collective work. Though I have transformed these folk tales of my people

into written form in English, I acknowledge that neither I nor the storytellers who feature here “own” the stories. So, as an African I am sharing our knowledge of folktales with my readers with the acknowledgement that it is our Dagara community that taught us these tales. We are only playing our role in society by continuing to teach them to our children with the hope that the tradition will continue to thrive. In fact, we have a duty to keep the tradition alive! I pay tribute to my storytellers by publishing this collection.

Saint Peter, Minnesota

*Paschal Kyiripuo Kyoore*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I extend my sincere thanks to all the children and adults who so willingly agreed to tell me folk tales, praise songs, riddles, and puzzles in Dagara, some of which I have translated here. Some of the tales they narrated appeared in the first volume of my collection of folk tales entitled *Folktales of the Dagara of West Africa*, which I published in 2009. The list includes the narrators as well as others who were part of the audience. Naturally, the members of the audience were part of the performance, since a storyteller does not perform alone. I missed the family names of a few participants but here is the list: the late Leander Lober, his son Francis Lober, Elvis Nifaakuu, Elma Nifaakuu, the late Mrs. Albina Nifaakuu, Joseph Kyoghr Kyoore, Jonathan Kyoghr Kyoore, Jude Kyoghr Kyoore, Jane Frances Kyoghr Kyoore, Paul Kyoghr Kyoore, Mrs. Lawrencia Kyoghr Kyoore Daayi, Pius Daayi, Caroline Daayi, Zenobia Kyoghr Kyoore, Mrs. Lawencia K. Kyoore, Alfred Kyoghr Kyoore, Forzia, Moori, Peter Kog, Patrick Kog, Agatha Kog, Pauline Dangme, Paulinus Dangme, Ruth Bayele, Kenneth Bayele, Elvis Dabuo, Justina Dizagl, Bede Dizagl, Bruce

Dizagl, Ben, Mary, and anyone else whose name I might have inadvertently omitted.



## CHAPTER 1

### YANGANGNAA AND THE TYRANICAL CHIEF

There was a certain chief who decreed to his people that anyone who had a new born child had to bring the child to him for naming. One day, one woman gave birth to a baby boy. Like everyone else in the village, she had to obey the chief's decree. As she was carrying the baby to the chief's house for the child to be named, the baby spoke from the crib and asked:

“Where are you taking me, mother?” The mother answered:

“The Chief said that if anybody gives birth to a child, she should bring the child to him for naming.” Upon hearing this, the baby told the mother:

“My name is Yangangnaa.<sup>1</sup> There is no need to go to the chief's house for him to name me. Go back home.” The mother obeyed the baby's request and went back home. Yagangnaa grew like every normal child in the village.

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<sup>1</sup> “Yagangnaa” means “more intelligent than the chief.” Thus, the boy's name itself is a challenge to the power and autocracy of the chief who flaunts the traditions of his people by his decree. In Dagara tradition, it is the responsibility of parents, and not that of someone else, to name their child.

One day, Yangangnaa and his friends went out to hunt lizards by the Chief's house. As it happened, one child shot at a lizard with his catapult and called out:

“Yangangnaa, come and see it on this side.”

The Chief heard the child call out to Yangangnaa and did not recognize the name as any of the names that he had given to children born in the land. So he called the children. He asked each one to tell him his name. When it came to Yangangnaa's turn he asked him:

“Who gave you this name?” Yangangnaa told him that he had given the name to himself. Obviously not happy that someone had defied his decree, the Chief thought of a way of punishing the parents of Yangangnaa for defying his decree.

After the children went home, the Chief sent for Yangangnaa. When Yangangnaa got to the Chief's house, the chief told him that he had a task for him. He gave Yangangnaa a big basket of millet mixed with pebbles. He instructed him to send the basket of millet to his mother. The mother was to separate the millet from the pebbles, to grind the millet and to make malt out of it, and to brew pito that same day for the Chief's farmers to drink. For the Chief had farmers helping him in his farm

that day. When Yangangnaa got home and gave the message to his mother, she started weeping, for as we all know, it was an impossible feat that the Chief was asking her to accomplish. First of all, it was manually impossible to remove all the pebbles in a big basket of millet. Secondly, it normally takes weeks to brew pito beer. The millet has to be soaked in water for some days until it begins to germinate. It is then taken out of the water, dried and ground into flour. This flour is then boiled for three days in a big pot for it to brew into pito. The women would then put yeast into the pito for it to ferment for some hours before it is ready to be drunk. Yangangnaa's mother saw clearly that the Chief was asking her to do the impossible. But Yangangnaa comforted the mother and told her not to weep.

Yangangnaa sent some gourd seeds to the Chief. He requested that the Chief should sow the seeds, which should then germinate and grow to bear fruits. He was supposed to harvest the gourd fruits the same day, make calashes out of the gourds, and dry them enough to be used by the farmers for drinking the pito that Yangangnaa's mother was brewing. When the Chief got the message from Yangangnaa, he knew that it was an

impossible feat to accomplish in one day. As we all know, it takes a whole farming season for seeds to germinate and grow to bear gourd fruits ready for harvest. Moreover, when gourd fruits are harvested and carved into calabashes, they have to be dried for some months before they can be used to drink any liquid. This is because the gourd calabash needs a long period of drying in order to lose its bitter taste. Nobody uses a fresh gourd calabash for drinking because of the bitter taste it would give to the drink. So the Chief immediately realized what the little boy Yangangnaa was up to and sent for the millet from Yangangnaa's mother. He realized that Yangangnaa had outwitted him by asking him to accomplish an equally impossible task.

The Chief sent for Yangangnaa. When Yangangnaa went to the chief's house, he gave him a bull. He then asked him to take home the bull, to look after it and to return to him after some months enough cattle to fill the Chief's kraal. The Chief said he needed the cattle to pay for the dowry of his sons who would marry soon. Yangangnaa took home the Chief's bull and started looking after it. But the following day, he went and climbed a tree by the Chief's palace. He then started

cutting down dry wood from the tree. When the Chief heard someone cutting wood from the tree, he came out to see who it was. When he saw that it was Yangangnaa, he was curious and asked him:

“What are you cutting the dry wood for?”

Yangangnaa calmly responded:

“My father gave birth yesterday. We need dry wood to warm the house and to cook some food for him.” When the Chief heard this, he laughed out loudly and said to Yangangnaa:

“Have you ever heard that a man has given birth to a child?” On hearing this comment from the Chief, Yangangnaa said:

“You know that a male cannot get pregnant and give birth to a child, yet you gave me a bull and expected me to look after it until it produces enough cattle by itself to fill a kraal for you to pay for the dowry of your sons?”

Bewildered at how Yangangnaa had outwitted him again, he asked him to return the bull he had given him. But the wicked Chief was not going to give up his malicious intentions towards Yangangnaa and his family. One day, he sent for Yangangnaa again. He told him that he was sending his son on an errand to a distant village.

He wanted Yangangnaa to accompany his son on the errand. Yangangnaa went home and prepared and came back to the Chief's house to do the errand with the Chief's son, as the Chief had requested. The Chief gave Yangangnaa a very beautiful smock and other expensive new clothes to wear. He then gave him a very elegant white horse to ride. But he dressed his own son in tattered clothes and gave him a very lean and weak horse to ride. There was a very big contrast in the way the two boys were dressed for the journey, and in the types of horses that they were riding. The Chief's son and Yangangnaa then set off for their journey.

But on the way, Yangangnaa suggested to the Chief's son:

“It is not right that I a poor person should be dressed in such elegant clothes and ride such a nice horse, while you the Chief's son should be dressed in such tattered clothes and ride such a weak and hungry-looking horse. Let us exchange clothes and horses.”

Convinced and flattered by what Yangangnaa suggested and worried about what people would think if they saw a chief's son dressed so poorly and riding such a miserable horse, the Chief's son agreed that they should

swap clothes and horses. After all, in his eyes, Yangangnaa's reasoning was very logical. It was all about the pride and the dignity of a chief's son and the honour of his family. Meanwhile the Chief had sent some well-armed people to hide in the bush by the path that the two boys were taking to go on their errand. He had instructed them that when the two boys were passing by they should kill the one that was well dressed and riding a beautiful white horse. So when Yangangnaa and the Chief's son got to the spot where the men were waiting in ambush, they immediately shot at the boy who was well dressed and riding a nice white horse. The poison of the arrow killed the boy instantly. They thought they had killed Yangangnaa and thus accomplished the Chief's goal! But to their surprise, Yangangnaa turned round with his horse and sped away while singing:

*Naa nu ku u bie è buolè n Yangangnaa*

*Naa nu ku u bie è buolè n Yangangnaa*

*Naa nu ku u bie è buolè n Yangangnaa*

*Naa nu ku u bie è buolè n Yangangnaa*

[The Chief has killed his own son and thinks it's me Yangangnaa  
The Chief has killed his own son and thinks it's me Yangangnaa  
The Chief has killed his own son and thinks it's me Yangangnaa  
The Chief has killed his own son and thinks it's me Yangangnaa].