

# Original Research Article

## Knowledge of Traditional Cloth (Lowεgya) Produced in the Nandom District in the Upper West Region of Ghana

### ABSTRACT

**Aims:** This study traced the origin of traditional cloths (Lowεgya) in the Nandom District of Ghana, looking at the different types of cloths produced, their names, symbolism and significance of these traditional cloths in the Dagara culture. The study was carried out in the Nandom district in the Upper West Region of Ghana.

**Methodology:** The study was qualitative in nature and employed random and purposive sampling methods for the study. Eight (8) participants were selected for the study as the results started replicating when the researchers got to the 8<sup>th</sup> person. Thematic method of analysis was used to analyze the responses that were provided by the respondents.

**Results:** The study showed that 'Lowεgya' as a traditional cloth is an ancestral cloth produced by Dagara ancestors in the Upper West Region of Ghana. Lowεgya was revealed to possess some symbolism and significance in the society. Some of the cloths that were identified during the study are; *Kpognali, kaakublu, kyinkyin pen, Lier pen among others* and each of these cloths are named representing an animal or an occasion. Concerning the results, the use of Dagara traditional cloth (Lowεgya) will help strengthen and preserve the culture of the people.

**Conclusion:** The various cloths identified will help people to determine the kind of cloth to buy for a particular occasion.

*Keywords: Dagara, Lowεgya, Traditional cloth, Colour, Symbolism.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional cloths play a key role in the lives of people, especially during their ceremonial occasions [1]. Most of these cloths are being produced by the indigenes because the idea of designing the cloth comes from them. Traditional cloths are historically originated and they come with a lot of significance. For example, they communicate cultural identity of the person. In Ghana, many cultures have their traditional cloths, some looks similar but the pattern of weave, colour of the fabric and the weight are some significant things that differentiates them.

The traditional cloth used by the people of Nandom district called 'Lowεgya' communicates their cultural heritage and identity to people around them [2]. [3] stated that Botswana is one of the countries that hold its culture esteem when it comes to the use of traditional cloth. When a person is born, he or she appears naked but due to morality, we struggle to clothe the person in order not to expose his or her nakedness. We come naked from God but going back demands clothing the person when he or she

dies [4]. According to John, an informant from Nandom, 'when our forefathers realized that there was shame in being naked, they resorted to weaving Lowegyia in order to clothe themselves'. The first cloth that was woven was *Lien/Lier pen*, which was a strip cloth woven on sticks. This strip cloth was used to wrap around the private part of a person as a coverage. This was later sewn as '*Bawlaga*' a pant-like shorts for the men. In the Upper West Region, naming of traditional cloths was done using the names of animals and achievements of people. Among some tribes, naming of traditional cloths is done using the dominating yarn colour in the pattern of the cloth, and the end-users [5].

They sew the traditional cloths (*Lowegyia*) into different styles of costumes for both men and women. These costumes have gone through a lot of modifications as well as the cloth. According to an informant from Kogle in the Nandom District, Dagara first used '*Lowegyia*' to sew '*Bawlaga*' and '*taparaje*' to be worn with a small smock, later they sewed '*vaapew*' (a very big smock) with '*kurlan*', but recently they have now migrated from '*vaapew*' to '*gyiiwaa*' which is not big as compared to '*vaapew*', with a hat (*kpawoo*). The trouser (*kurlan*) is sewn loosely from the waist down below the knees and sewn fitting to the ankles. The waist of the '*Kurlan*' is wide with a string as fastener. The waist is gathered, which makes the crotch bulky when worn. The women were using two pieces of cloths with a blouse. Due to modernisation, women now use the cloth to sew slit and kaba as well as straight dresses.

With the use of this cloth, there is one similarity which the people of the five Northern regions share, that is the colour of the fabric. Some cultures attach meaning to the colours of their traditional cloth [6] but this is different from the culture of Dagara people as well as other cultures within the Northern part of the country, who do not attach any meaning to the colour of fabrics they use. Any colour of the cloth can be used for their occasions provided it is a '*Lowegyia*'.

Some cultures adore the use of colours for ceremonial occasions. There are cloths used for happy occasions and others for funeral services [7]. He further explained that Adinkra (red and black) in colour is a funeral cloth among the Akans which means goodbye, and originally the cloth was worn only by royals and spiritual leaders. This is similar to the Dagara culture as their *Lowegyia* are different and used according to categories of people in the society. For example, '*Kpognali*' which is a type of '*Lowegyia*' (traditional cloth) historically was used to cover the bier (*Paala*) where the dead is normally seated during funeral celebration. The Yoruba's in Nigeria also have a cloth called the *sombre olowu dudu* which is used for funeral celebrations depending on the status and age of the dead [6]. '*Bεgo*', is another type of '*Lowegyia*' used by very rich, old and traditional leaders during their funeral celebration. Another informant stated that this cloth cannot be used anyhow except the person is of high status. This, therefore, calls for the need to bring out information on the traditional cloths used by the Dagara people.

## 1.1 Objectives

1. Explore the history of Dagara traditional cloths
2. Identify cloths produced in the Nandom district

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The study explored the knowledge, origin and types of traditional cloths “Lowεgya” in the Nandom District. The qualitative method of research design was used to carry out the study. Qualitative research is a way of exploring and understanding of individuals or groups, a social or human problem [8]. Semi-structured interview questions were developed by the researchers and used to get information from the respondents.

Random sampling was used to select the communities whilst purposive sampling was used to select people for the data collection. Eight (8) participants were selected for the study as the results started replicating when the researchers got to the 8<sup>th</sup> person. The thematic method of analysis was employed to analyze the themes that emerged from the study.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1 History of ‘Lowεgya’

As a cultural costume, it was revealed that respondents witnessed the production of their traditional cloth by their ancestors. The garment that was used by their ancestors until the introduction of the cloth was the bark of a tree called ‘ponpon’, some specific leaves, and animals’ skins. According to a participant:

*“the bark of a tree was beaten and combed to make it soft. This was worn around the waist. The skin of a calf was also used to cover some parts of our bodies”.*

Some historical evidence suggested that Moshi people introduced weaving and cloth to most parts of the northern enclave. However, according to one of the respondents, the cloths produced by their ancestors can be differentiated from the cloths produced by the Moshi people, it is very heavy and harsh due to the way the fabric was woven:

*“It was kapok blend with cotton fibres that our ancestors started twisting into yarns and used to weave our traditional cloths. The first cloth produced was grey as our ancestors did not know how to colour fabrics”.*

According to a participant:

*“Our traditional cloth was once called Moshi cloth (Moosiri pεn) but later when our ancestors succeeded in weaving, they began to call ours ‘Lowεgya pen”.*

John also added that the cloth was sewn into what they call “bawlaga”, later their ancestors modified the ‘bawlaga’ into ‘taparaje’ and later elongated it into ‘kurlan’ (pantaloons):

*“Bawlaga is a small piece of fabric sewn in the form of a pant using hands and is worn to cover the private parts of men leaving their buttocks uncovered”.*

### 3.2 Names of Traditional Cloths in Nandom

#### 3.2.1 Liεn or liεr pεn

Figure 1 illustrates ‘Liεn/Liεr pεn’. This fabric was first woven from the raw cotton fibres. All the participants confirmed that the cream colour of this cloth is derived from the fibre.

It is used to cover the private parts of the dead before dressing. This stand was strongly defended with statement by one of the respondents:

*“No matter the status of the person, it is a must to put on this cloth before dressing. This is the cloth our great ancestor was first buried in, so we must use it accordingly”.*



Figure 1: *Liɛn* or *Liɛr Pɛn*

### 3.2.2 **Kpognali**

Figure 2, shows one of the traditional cloths woven by the ancestors of the Dagara people. Ambrose asserted that ‘*Kpognali*’ is a very thick fabric woven by their ancestors using kapok fibres. A respondent attested that:

*“Kpognali is a woven cloth used by our ancestors to cover the stage mounted (paala) during funeral celebration. Historically, if you go to a funeral and you see the ‘paala’ (bier) covered with this cloth, it means the people are well to do. It is to prevent the hot sun rays from reaching the corpse. It is also worn by the traditional leaders and those who are well-to-do”.*



Figure 2: Kpognali

### 3.2.3 Kaakublu pɛn

The cloth in Figure 3 below is another ‘Lowɛgya’ produced by Dagara people as their traditional cloth and is used during special occasions. A respondent explained:

*“Our ancestors wove this cloth with bright and dark colours so that we can use it for happy occasions, at the same time when sad events occur”.*



Figure 3: Kaakublu

### 3.2.4 Kyinkyin pɛn

*Kyinkyin pɛn* is another traditional cloth woven by the people of Nandom district. A respondent stated:

*“Historically, this cloth is used by people of high status, very old people when they die and the rich in society”.*

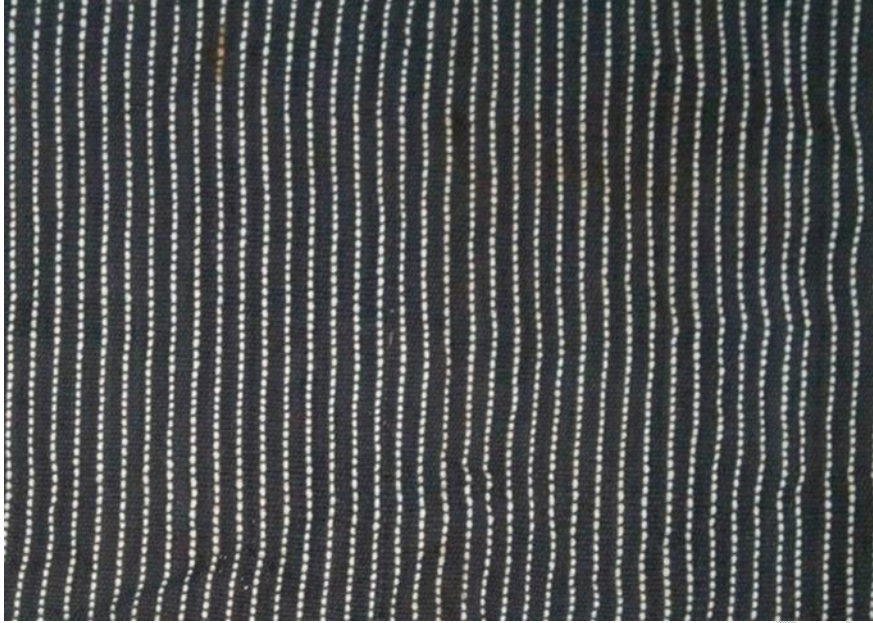


Figure 4: Kyinkyin pɛn

### 3.2.5 Bɛgɔ

As Dagaras use variety of woven cloths, ‘Bɛgɔ’ as indicated in figure 5 is another ‘lowɛgya’ cloth that was produced and used by the ancestors of Dagara people. According to the respondents, this cloth can also be used by the living for important ceremonies. One participant explained the use of this cloth:

*“It is recommended for men but very old women after passing on are clothed in Bɛgɔ during their funeral celebration”.*



Figure 5: Bεgo

## 4. DISCUSSION

### 4.1 History of Lowεgya

Dagara were once called 'Lobr' and cloth in Dagara is *wεgya* therefore they combined 'Lobr' with '*wεgya*' and it became '*Lowεgya*'. When the ancestors were successful in weaving their traditional cloth, they used the cloth to sew '*Bawlaga*' for men whilst the women wrapped a small piece of cloth in the form of a pant and wrapped the rest in the form of a skirt around the pant plus leaves inserted at the waistline. This special pant has two extensions on both sides and another on the middle-end and these extensions are then tied at the back.

The weaving of cloths differs from one culture to the other. Kapok fibre (*gon bollε*) blended with cotton fibre were used by Dagara people in the Upper West Region to produce yarns ('*fomiwr*') which were used in weaving their traditional cloth called '*Lowεgya*'. Kapok fibres can be found in almost every part of Africa. It is a fibre used in combination with other fibres to produce fabrics. It has thin cell wall, large lumen, low density, feels harsh which makes it difficult using only kapok to produce a fabric. They could have imported cotton or other fibres from different countries to produce their fabric but kapok was accessible as well as cotton but not in large quantities [9]. The art of weaving a fabric was made possible through their wisdom and creativity.

Some researchers reported that the Moshi people brought '*Lowεgya*' cloth to Ghana and this was adopted as a traditional cloth in the Northern region [10]. This report is in contrast to the thoughts of the earlier respondents. Other respondents stated that the Moshi people came to their town with their woven cloths and as they were weaving Dagara ancestors grabbed their ideas and used them to weave their traditional cloth. This insinuates that the Moshi people who came to stay with the people of Nandom district taught Dagara how to convert fibres into yarn and used that to weave cloths.

### 4.2 Names of Traditional Cloths in Nandom

Dagara traditional cloths are of different types and colours, with each performing a unique function. Each cloth has a name and colour similar to the Yoruba's, a tribe of Nigeria, who have a traditional cloth called 'Aso oke' [11].

Dagara for some reasons named some of their traditional cloths using names of animals or parts of the animals such as '*kaakublu*' (feather of a guinea fowl). The naming of the '*Lowεgya*' cloths in the Nandom district historically, does not corroborate how the Frafras in the Upper East Region name their traditional cloths though they have similar traditional cloths. The naming of traditional cloths among the Frafra's is based on the "arrangement of patterns, the dominating yarn colour in the pattern, the yarn colours used and the end-users of the cloth" [5].

#### **4.2.1 Liɛn or liɛr pɛn**

Historically, this was the first cloth produced by the people of the Nandom district. It got its colour from the natural fibres of Kapok that was used without any additives or treatment as seen in modern times. To use this cloth, the first child of the dead person has to be the one to put it on the dead. The one used by males is called '*Bawлага*' whilst the females own remain '*Liɛr/Liɛn pɛn*'. If the dead is a man, the first son is recommended. On the other hand, if the dead is a female her first daughter will have to do it. If he or she does not have a child, his sister's or brother's child can do it. '*Liɛr pɛn*' means '*wa liɛri mɛ*' (meaning come and replace me). As the person presents the cloth to the dead, it means you are ready to replace him or her in life by supporting and providing for the family as the dead journey into the ancestral world.

#### **4.2.2 Kpognali**

It is a cloth named after a cow with multiple colours. It was used to cover the '*Paala*' (bier). '*Paala*' is a decorated stage mounted where the dead is normally seated during funeral celebration. In Dagara tradition, corpse is laid in stage mostly in seated posture except children, not lying down as seen in most other traditions across the country. Children who are not up to 2 years or cannot sit on their own when they die are seated on the laps of someone for funeral celebration to commence. The *Kpognali* can be sewn into '*gyiiwaa*', '*kpar nu-voru*' (sleeveless smock), '*kpar nuru*' (smock with sleeves) and '*kurlan*' (pantaloons).

#### **4.2.3 Kaakublu pɛn**

This cloth bears the name of guinea fowl feathers. This cloth can be used during funeral celebrations, marriage ceremonies, festivals, chief enskinment and other ceremonies. This fabric is woven from cotton fibres. It is blue-black with a white pattern of threads. It is used by all age categories in the district.

#### **4.2.4 Kyinkyin pɛn**

Kyinkyin is a type of bird in the forest. Ancestors named this cloth after that bird. This is one of the prominent cloth's that was used in the district. Due to cultural diversity and introduction of technology, this cloth is getting extinct. The producers testified that, when traditional leaders, chief priest, the rich and very old people die in the society, they have to be dressed in this cloth to show their status. It was very expensive to afford. Its use according to status has not changed, it is still practised in the Nandom district as corpses of high status are often seen on the bier in this fabric during funeral celebration. It is believed that if they dress a commoner in this cloth with the tail of an animal, the dead body will begin to rot.

#### **4.2.5 Bɛgo**

This cloth bears the name of a snake mostly found in farms during the rainy season. This is a dark blue fabric used to dress the corpse of elderly people, traditional leaders

or the rich in society. The chief priests also, during their consultation with the gods, dresses in this cloth, with accompanying attachments. The same applies to the hunters who sew their attachments to the costume and is used whenever they are to go to the bush for hunting. This cloth from the perspective of its uses can be described as a spiritual cloth used by prominent people in society.

#### **4.3 Colours**

Respondents affirmed that Dagara, historically do not prescribe fabric colours for ceremonies. To them, any colour at all is acceptable for any occasion, except red which cannot be used to bury the dead. When the participants were asked why red colour cannot be used to bury the dead, they replied that their ancestors did not give them any reason but only told them it cannot be used. The respondents again insinuated that their use of colours does not have any meaning. This is different from the Akan's in the Ashanti region, as colours of traditional clothes are considered important and each use at an occasion communicates a meaning [12]. [12] further explained that colours such as; black, white, gold or yellow, and red for example; communicates the feelings of love, melancholy, victory, purity, anger or crisis during an occasion. This means the recent colourful traditional cloths which have been used by people in the Upper West Region of Ghana is a recent phenomenon that could be due to modernization. In recent times, colourful funeral cloths are being borrowed from the Akans during funeral celebrations. Dagara ancestors' inability to associate meaning to the colours of their cloths produced could be due to their inability to produce varied colours as they started the traditional cloth production. In this modern era, the availability of yarns of different colours in the district triggered the adoption of colourful cloth production among local weavers.

#### **4.4 The symbolism of the Traditional Cloth**

Every traditional cloth or costume symbolizes something in the culture of the people. Dagaras have a rich culture that is portrayed through their traditional cloth '*Lowεgya*'. According to the respondents, their traditional cloth symbolizes their rich culture.

Ziem and Maalo revealed

*.... Lowεgya symbolizes our ancestral inheritance and it is our saviour in terms of cultural celebrations, a symbol of joy and problem solver.*

As a problem solver, it can be spiritual, physical or financial. Those who produce the cloth and costume get profit from it, to solve their financial problems.

As part of the traditional cloth symbolizing their lives, another participant also contributed that the traditional cloth symbolizes their strength as Dagara.

#### **4.5 Significance of the Traditional Cloth**

Anything used by a specific group of people to represent their culture has its reasons of use. The use of '*Lowεgya*' among the people of Nandom district of Ghana performs significant roles which were pointed out by the respondents. All the respondents indicated that their traditional cloth is used to show their beauty, hide them from shame, show their identity, portray their culture and gives protection (covers the dead and living). Some respondents also felt that the use of traditional cloth helps one gain

respect from people and give you status. The social significance of 'Lowεgya' cloth is not ignored or overlooked as far as the study of 'Lowεgya' cloth is concerned that it's status and respect. Traditional cloth shows a significant unity, identity and it becomes very essential to pay attention when maintaining it [13].

They consider the use of Lowεgya to be a good sign of behaviour and also sees the wearer as morally sound. During ceremonial occasions, the cloth helps them display their joy, love and happiness. Due to the unity among Dagara, whenever they see someone in their traditional cloth, they become attached to the person. Traditional cloths play different roles based on social, cultural, geographical, psychological, economic reasons and physical requirements [14].

As part of the significance of the traditional cloth, producers saw the significance to be beyond cultural and social aspects. On the part of weaving and sewing this cloth, producers testified that it helps them economically. The profit they gain from the sales of 'Lowεgya' improves their financial status. As the rate of production and purchase of this cloth increases, their standard of living becomes better.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

It is important to let people know your traditional cloth, its origin, uses as well as the significance of the cloth. Dagara have a traditional cloth called 'Lowεgya' in the local dialect. It was found out that this cloth was produced by their ancestors and is used during their ceremonial occasions. 'Lowεgya' was first produced from raw cotton and kapok fibres which produced a rough feeling for the fabric but subsequently, cotton became the main fibre used due to its firmness and comfort. Traditional cloths (Lowεgya) are named after animals or events and sometimes the pattern of weave of the fabric. Colour of a fabric was proving not to play any major role in the cultural activities of Dagara people which means any colour of fabric can be used at any occasion.

## **6. RECOMMENDATION**

1. The use of Lowεgya will help strengthen the culture of Dagara people.
2. The various cloths identified will help people to determine the kind of cloth to acquire for a particular occasion.

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