



The bagre considered

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Esther Goody recently spent some time among the LoBirifor, a group rather similar to the LoDagaba with whom I worked in the north-west of Ghana. When she arrived and an effort was being made to introduce her to the community, she was told, 'we Birifor value above all our funerals and our Bagre'. It made me realize that I had not wasted my time in dwelling on those two aspects of society, nor had I chosen them at random.

Variation

I have remarked before that the Bagre is thought of as being one but is in fact many. Or, to phrase it in another way, the actors see it as one, the observer notices the differences. Both are right. The Bagre is one 'cult', though it has no unitary organisation and exists as innumerable 'lodges'; if you are a member of one, you are by and large a member of all. Moreover the rites and recitation are deemed equivalent, even when they are far from being the same.

In any one community, they are thought of as the same and are partly kept that way by the complementary exchange of ritual services; a Speaker has to be called in from another lineage. Just as you do not bury your own dead, so you do not perform (lead) your own Bagre. Nevertheless, variations do occur in the rites but especially in the recitation, which is long and complex. Is the Speaker inventive with the recitation? Is there time to fill? As I have argued and tried to demonstrate in publishing two versions and in editing, with my collaborator S. W. D. K. Gandah, many others, the variation is greater between different Speakers but even the same Speaker produces different versions on different occasions. There is no absolutely fixed form either at the level of the individual or of the group, and that is probably characteristic of all those long oral recitations sometimes called myths.

I argue that the differences are not only minor, though they may begin as such. Cumulatively such changes mount up and they produce some very significant differences of content, especially in that part of the recitation less closely

*Page de gauche : Females
parading around the market*

tied to ritual. We have now recorded and transcribed many versions of the Bagre, all from Birifu with the exception of one from Lawra, which is quite different in its construction. We jointly published one of the Birifu versions (1981) but the others await an offer of publication from some source or other. In the earlier (1972) version which I published, an extensive segment of the Black Bagre dealt with the way the first man crossed the river that divides this world from the next and had a meeting with a stranger, who was God himself. In the many versions that we recorded some twenty years later that incident had all but disappeared. A passing reference to the crossing of a river was left, but no-one, without a written text of the earlier recitation, could possibly have reconstructed what had vanished.

However the characteristic of these differences is that the actors do not recognize them as something substantial. For them, individually, there is in theory a model (in the mind?) from which all diverge. The only problem is that for each individual the model is different. One of the reasons for this view is that the versions of different Speakers cannot be put down in writing and compared side by side. That simple technique of editing is the means by which we establish similarity and difference, which is not a matter of definition but of measurement.

Nevertheless some differences the actors do perceive in another light. The version we recorded among the LoDagaba of Lawra contained a long narration, rhythmic but not sung, which recounted the legend of how the Kusiele clan came to the settlement and how they rediscovered the Bagre. While each version contains some justification of why they do these things, this was the only one that combined such an explanation with a tale developed from the usual clan legend.

There is a great diversity of types of knowledge contained in the Bagre recitations. The White Bagre remains much the same, an account of the progression of the rituals themselves with little variation. But the Black differs in many ways. In the Lawra Bagre it seems to consist largely of the rhythmic prose version of the story of the coming of the Kusiele clan to that area. However since our version is incomplete, there may be a recitation closer to the Birifu (LoWiili) ones. The first of these is, as I have remarked, more theocentric than any others from the area, more directed to the words and doings of God. In another version from the Gumble section of Birifu, there is some elaboration of star lore that we do not find in other recorded examples. Indeed we do not in my experience find it elsewhere in LoDagaa culture, although again my experience is not deep enough to be absolutely definitive on this point.

What appears to be happening is that different Speakers elaborate certain themes and underplay others, in a rather individual way. At a more humble level we see such

variation in the way that some may choose to elaborate an account of the technique of making iron, others that of brewing, both techniques having been taught to the first man and his family at the beginning of time. The freedom to elaborate is considerable and is openly encouraged, so that different themes get taken up and 'taught' to the next batch of neophytes.

Secret knowledge

The Bagre is secret knowledge both at the level of formalised action ('ritual') and of formalised language. The inter-relation between these two is complex. The action is accompanied by words (and some silences), since the neophytes who are being initiated have to be told what to do. Those words operate on several levels. There are the informal instructions of the guides, junior initiates who accompany each neophyte, the formal orders from the 'master of ceremonies', the songs that punctuate the proceedings and finally the Bagre recitation itself, one part of which, the White Bagre, or Bag Pla, is itself a kind of summing of events up to that present point in the long series of ceremonies.

Most of this is secret to non-members, who are not allowed 'in the room' (*dipuo*) and cannot be told about what happens there, including the recitation. Nevertheless the Bagre is an occasion for general rejoicing, dancing, drinking, meeting members of the opposite sex, the talk and the company, in all these the settlement as a whole participates.

That is an important part of the meaning of the Bagre to the community. It is a time for music, song, dancing, 'poetry' (recitations), for food, beer, flirting and conversation, in other words the essence of a good 'party' anywhere. Whether people are members or not, they participate in this aspect of the proceedings. The major rewards go to those members who play prominent parts in the rituals and taking these parts is looked forward to with pleasure. However the considerable contributions of grain made by the families of the neophytes go to provide porridge and beer not only for the members, the initiated, but for the uninitiated (*dakume*) as well. But there are other meanings. One is the protection or cure which membership of the Bagre is thought to offer, and which forms the specific

Neophytes with their guides at the final ceremony (Bag gbelme, Bagre of bells)



grounds for incurring the expense needed to put someone through the rites. For there is no set age of entry; most are adolescents but some are children, some adult women and occasionally men. Thirdly, there is the aspect of belonging to a "club" with its "secret" signs, a club which has its own set of roles which people take pride in filling. Fourthly, there is the question of knowledge which the ceremony, and especially the recitation, provides. The ritual knowledge is largely self-contained or self-defeating. By that I mean its relevance is largely confined to the context of the ritual and what it offers as a cure for death, a formula for immortality, turns out to be nothing of the sort. The recitation is another matter. The Bagre deals with the invention of the world, but of the world in which the LoDagaa live, or lived at the beginning of the century, since little effort has gone into incorporating recent changes. The Black mostly deals with how mankind came to know about the things they do, above all the procreation of children, which God himself shows them how to carry out (though more precise knowledge is conveyed by the animals). In the Bagre, the Creator God is in fact represented not altogether differently from the visualisations that we permit ourselves, and precisely in his role as creator, when he is visited by the younger of the two original brothers to find out about the process of creating human beings. He is an old man, smoking a pipe and surrounded by leopards. Verbal representations of God are just permissible, but not pictorial, iconic ones.

The rest of man's knowledge was acquired indirectly through the beings of the wild (*k̄̄ t̄̄ m̄̄*) and a good deal the recitation is taken up with accounts of how mankind learnt



Members searching for the bells hidden under a baobab, the place of the guardian spirit of the clan

to make food, beer, iron, et cetera. However such knowledge is itself not secret nor is it especially accurate. The recitation deals with technology but not on a practical level; the concern is with the origin of things. I have often pondered the question of what knowledge the Bagre recitation imparts. The central theme is the limits of human understanding and action, especially in matters to do with life and death. Man did not make himself; God and the beings of the wild did so. But the beings of the wild can deceive, so too can the Bagre god, who is in some sense a refraction of the Creator God. God does not deceive: his is the right path, but his refractions and creations certainly may. So that although we perform the Bagre to conquer death, that is the focal rite of the first ceremonial sequence, the second teaches us that nothing can save us but that we have to do what we have to do. We perform the Bagre, we sacrifice, for smaller benefits, but mainly because our ancestors did so before us. Starting out by taking an optimistic, salvationist note with the neophytes, the Bagre ends up realistically pessimistic about ultimate realities, offering only perhaps the prospects of the life of an ancestor¹.

That of course is some kind of knowledge, but it is knowledge we knew already. In listening to the recitation, the neophyte learns something about the relationships of divinities to man. Some of this mythical knowledge is known by non-initiates explicitly through folktales, implicitly through leakage. What the Bagre does is to put such knowledge in a wider comprehensive framework, which ties up mythological ends in a particular way. As far as I am aware such a framework is only implicit in wider social interaction outside the myth itself. It is one of a very great number of rearrangements of the puzzle, which in the Bagre is constantly in progress. In ordinary life this plurality of frameworks is implicit and it would be an error to privilege one in relation to others, by arranging the pieces oneself or choosing the framework of one man (the respondent) or one speaker (the recitor). That is why different schema, set within certain broad limits about the relation of man to the beings of the wild and to God, are possible and why neighbouring societies, rather like uninitiated individuals, can operate perfectly well without one. Everybody has mythologies; not everyone has a mythology embodied in a myth.

1. It is significant that women are not initiated into the second stage of the Bagre ; they do not take major ritual roles nor do they undergo the process of disillusionment.