

Introduction

About Life and Health



Of Life and Health is an anthropological study of an African health system focusing on epistemological language that expounds the cultural understanding of life transmission and sustenance across living beings and elements. It builds a cultural lexicon about life by studying the religious, including ritual and artistic expressions, within a specific culture. It describes how the institutionalization of cults such as the rain and earth cults, the cult of the ancestors, the cult for spirit and life-force of nature (*kɔntɔnmɛ*) or nature spirits and the initiation cult of the *bagr* society each deal with different aspects of sustaining life and healing it into a condition of prolific reproduction.

As an anthropological study of a culture-specific health system, I approach the topic as an all-encompassing life issue developed by the Dagara people and population to understand nature and the ways in which living beings, elements and objects (including humans) relate to nature. Its content consists of ethnographic description and analysis of six cultic institutions within an African society, the Dagara people of northern Ghana and southern Burkina Faso. The cultural practices of establishing and maintaining these institutions metaphorically expound notions and understandings about life and health as they are culturally conceived and practically experienced. I write from within an African (the Dagara) frame of mind and thought perspective. More specifically, I adopt the scientific,¹ metaphysical and cultural thought frameworks of the Dagara people of northern Ghana and southern Burkina Faso to deal with the broad subject: Life and Health. I begin the book by contending that every

knowledge system has its specific language and jargon as a created symbolic order that it uses to see and understand the reality that it chooses as a focus of study. Hence, the focus of the book is to pose and to socio-culturally analyse the answers to questions such as: what is life and what does it mean to have life and to be a healthy being in nature? What is involved in the embodiment and transmission of life across beings and elements in nature? How is life sustained in different life-forms and beings within the order of nature? And what causes discontinuities of life in human beings and other life-forms, and what is done when these situations occur? The answers I provide are based on ethnographic data acquired through periods of fieldwork conducted over a twenty-year period and my lifetime association with the Dagara people and culture since birth. I will explain my fieldwork practice and results and will elaborate on the method and theory employed.

In terms of method and analysis, the book is ethnographically driven, focusing on the indigenous knowledge system of the Dagara people of northern Ghana and southern Burkina Faso to outline their medical and health systems within their culturally constructed paradigms. Thus, following my elaboration on fieldwork practice and situating myself within Dagara culture, I continue the study by elaborating on the symbolic nature of the relevant language embedded in the cultural system and via which Dagara indigenous thought processes of the primordial human minds are constantly being used for the production, dissemination and documentation of scientific and cultural knowledge within the community. In order to deal with the problem of language, I posit and demonstrate that a primordial scientific language within a human community exists as the initial structuring structure of symbolic codes and as schemes of linguistic competences that are designed to facilitate knowledge production. I also go beyond the views expounded by structural anthropology, especially in the context of binary systems of oppositions and bricolage, to claim that one can gain an understanding of the language through the study of myth, religion and art within a specific cultural context. I do not, however, enter into a dialogue with current anthropological studies on healing and cults, since my focus is to look from within the metaphysical and philosophical nature of healing and cults as a theory of knowledge.

Therefore, my main objective is to make a detailed exegesis of given cultural and social institutions within which life and health issues are academically documented and evaluated. Based on my more than twenty years of participant observation and lifetime embeddedness within Dagara society and culture, I have come to identify six main cultic institutions, each represented by the construction of a typical shrine, within which this is being done. These include the two main all-embracing cults outlin-

ing and defining Dagara cosmology, namely, the earth cult encompassing the space-below and the rain cult encompassing the space-above. Life in its various forms and nature is considered as a pre-existing property of cosmic nature that is embodied in various forms at specific times and for definite periods. The transferences, sustenance and consequent release of human life back to cosmic nature are the concern of the four other cultic institutions that serve as the focus of attention in the book. They include the Dagara mythical and religious cult (Dagara *bagr*); the ancestral cult (*kpime*); the cult of nonhuman nature beings (*kɔntɔnmɛ*); and the healing cult of medicine (*tibe*). Before going further in illustrating how I will go about achieving this objective, let me elaborate more fully upon the Dagara social and cultural fields and physical environments, and situate myself and my research into their cults of healing and their philosophy of life.

Researching *Life and Health* among the Dagara

Background

I began formal participant observation and academic study of Dagara society and culture in the early 1990s when I registered as a graduate student of anthropology at the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium. This is after I had gone through my childhood and part of my adulthood experiences as a Dagara citizen growing up and later living in the Dagara land. The unconscious observations I made as a Dagara child and adult have helped shape my anthropological approaches and practice. My parents were among the first generation of Dagara people to adopt Catholicism as it was presented to them by the Missionary Society of Africa generally known as the White Fathers, who in the early 1900s, having failed to make any impact on the North African Islamic communities in terms of religious conversion, turned their attention to the populations of Sub-Saharan Africa. They arrived in northwest Ghana via Burkina Faso and north eastern Ghana in 1921, a time when colonial rule was still trying to develop roots and to take shape in the region. At the socio-political level, all the African populations were attempting at the same time to deal with changes initiated by the colonial authorities and to respond to the sociocultural persuasions of Judeo-Christian missionaries to abandon their cultures and religion. Academic studies dealing with the colonial and missionary situations over the last two centuries are numerous and very detailed. Any dialogue with these does not form part of my current project. I have, since the beginning of my writing career, always engaged in this dialogue. Hence, in 2000 I wrote *Hoe-Farming and Social Relations among the Dagara of Northwestern Ghana and Southwestern Burkina Faso*

(Tengan 2000a), in which I situated Dagara hoe-farming activity within its cultural and social context including the events of change, especially the events of colonization and missionary activity. More recently, I have mobilized local Dagara scholarship from various backgrounds and disciplines to engage in the documentation of the cultural history of northern Ghana, including the integration of foreign religions (Christianity and Islam) and foreign political structures (European colonialism and modern urbanization) into African social and cultural structures. These research activities have resulted in my editing and publishing two titles on religion culture and society in Northern Ghana: *Christianity and Cultural History in Northern Ghana: A Portrait of Cardinal Peter Poreku Dery (1918–2008)* (Tengan 2013) and; *Religion, Culture, Society and Integral Human development: Proceedings of Cardinal Poreku Dery Third Colloquium* (Tengan 2017). It is not my intention in this volume to restate the content and arguments of these titles so that I can properly situate my current thoughts; yet, I assume that the reader will consider them as necessary background reading. However, here I will insert a biographical note about my informal education and participant observation of Dagara society to help the reader properly understand and appreciate the approach adopted for the current work.

Childhood Participation and Observation

My childhood participation in Dagara society and culture began early in my life and reflected the dynamic changes taking place at the time. Let me recall an incident I described in 1999 that captured my participant observation of birth ritual ceremony.

One of the most significant moments of ritual in which I participated fully, the birth of my twin brother and sister, took place in 1959 when I was five years old. Our family was living in Gwo, a village in the current Nandom district of northwest Ghana, 10 km southeast of Nandom. My father was employed there as a catechist recruited by the Catholic Church to promote primary evangelization. One day in September, I woke up early and as I crossed the courtyard to go to the bathroom, I heard an unexpected command from my father. ‘Don’t leave the house or go anywhere this morning. Stay with your mother.’ From the bathroom, I went into the long common room (*chaara*),² where I found my mother walking to and fro. She had hardly any clothes on. I stood for some time at the door, watching. When she went into the kitchen, I followed, and I continued to follow her round the house until she told me to go and summon Zaato-ma, an elderly woman who lived about half a kilometre to the southeast of our house.

As soon as I arrived at her front yard, Zaato-ma emerged and asked if my mother was ready now. I told her that my mother had asked me to come and summon her. Without going back into the house, she followed me as I led the way back to our courtyard. We entered the house at the same time as Godolia, our twelve-year-old baby nurse. She had just returned from the stream with a pot of water on her head. Zaato-ma asked my mother if she should summon Veenica, another elderly woman whose house was about ten minutes' walk away to the southwest of ours. My mother nodded silently and Zaato-ma asked me to do the summoning. When I returned, I realized that Zaato-ma had already prepared a hearth in the courtyard close to the open bath yard. There was a water channel running from there into the bath yard and out into the front yard.³

The construction of the hearth consisted of placing three big stones to create a triangular space. I went over to Zaato-ma as she was just completing this task. She told me to fetch the small stool my mother used to sit on to prepare Tuozaafi – pastry made with the flour of a cereal such as millet or maize to go with vegetable soup. It is a staple food of the Dagara. Zaato-ma asked me to place the stool in the middle of the hearth. After a few minutes, my mother came out of the long common room and as she walked towards the temporary hearth, the one piece of cloth she wore around her loins fell to the ground. I immediately picked it up and tried to give it to her, but Zaato-ma told me to put it away. I put the cloth in a corner and went to stand by my mother, who was by now sitting on the stool in the middle of the hearth. She was writhing with pain. A few moments later, Celina, a woman from the same house as Veenica, whom I had not summoned, entered the courtyard with Veenica. She went into the kitchen to join Godolia. Veenica came over to us.

When the child was about to be born, Zaato-ma instructed my mother to get up from the stool and squat on her toes. My mother told me to take the stool away. She placed her hands on two of the hearthstones and, as Zaato-ma was sitting on the third, the two became very close to each other in an intimate way. She and Veenica were intermittently shouting at my mother to 'push hard' (*uuni*). After a few minutes, the first child came out. Zaato-ma instructed my mother to stay in the same position until she was told to do otherwise. In the meantime, Zaato-ma was holding on to the child. Suddenly, with panic on her face, she shouted across to Celina and Godolia in the kitchen to come out. In a moment, they were at hand with a basin of water and pieces of cloth. But Zaato-ma ignored them and instructed Celina to take the child. She examined my mother briefly and quickly resumed the position she was in before asking my mother to 'push hard'. My attention continued to focus on what was happening around my mother and I could not see what Celina and Godolia

were doing. Moreover, the tempo of activity increased substantially from the moment Zaato-ma shouted across to Celina, and I felt from then on that I was trying to do two things at once and not one at a time.

The second child soon came out and I gave my mother the stool to sit on again. Zaato-ma continued to work on my mother, but by now I did not feel like observing too closely. However, she soon called me to bring the bottom half of a broken pot (*sɛr*) that my mother had placed close to the entrance of the house. I placed it near the hearth and she asked me to hold on to it. She filled it with the placenta (*zɛl*) and other blood tissue from my mother. Then she asked me to go out to the compost heap and dig a pit there. Soon after, when I had almost finished, Godolia brought out the broken pot with its contents. She inspected the size and depth of the pit and asked me to dig a bit deeper. When the pit was ready, she asked me to face a westerly direction (the position of the setting sun), adopt the position I usually take when hoeing and hold the broken pot in my left hand. She adopted a similar position, but held on to the pot with her right hand. We lifted the broken pot together, swung it three times across the mouth of the pit and poured the contents in. Godolia took the neck of a broken pot (*syɔgla*) and covered the pit with it. She instructed me to seal the pit with earth from the refuse dump and to plant any seed of my choice on it or to transplant a tree if I wished.⁴

When I had completed my work, I went back into the house, only to realize that it was full of women from all the houses of the neighbourhood. With so many women in the house, I suddenly realized that there was nothing more for me to do. The rites initiating my brother and sister into our family, our house, Dagara society and *bagr* activities in the religious and cultural sense were complete (Tengan 1999).

There are many more incidents that I cannot recount here, but that have contributed to the anthropological and ethnographic analysis of the current manuscript. I will pass them by and will insert a biographical note on my parents and other family members who first brought me into contact with Dagara society and culture.

My parents had experienced their own childhood education at the time when Dagara society and particularly the sociocultural institutions were undergoing great pressures and stress. My maternal grandparents had crossed the Volta River from present-day Burkina Faso, fleeing the colonial war campaigns by the French that aimed to bring an end to the Lobi rebellion of 1908 and 1909 (UNESCO *General History of Africa*, Vol. VII, p. 69). By the time my mother was born, her parents had already relocated from two villages across the river to the current village settlement of Ko in the present-day Nandom district. My mother was still a child approaching her teenage years when the Missionaries of Africa came to settle in

northwest Ghana. Her childhood experience is captured in two episodes that now and then she would recount to us as children. The missionaries had, as a conversion strategy, the establishment of church parishes, educational and health institutions (schools, vocational training, clinics and hospitals) as catchment points of the local population. Through these institutions, they sought to create a class of local elites consisting of catechists, priests, religious nuns, teachers and doctors who would assist in the conversion process. My mother wanted to attend one of the educational institutions. The colonial administration had earlier in the century established the only school in the area to cater for the children of the chiefs. The ordinary people like my mother stood little chance of getting into this school. She therefore joined the congregation of religious nuns, not with the intention of becoming a nun, but in the hope of being sent to school. My personal recollections of her story are as follows:

There was no way I would have been accepted in the government school in Lawra. I therefore went to the nunnery of the White Sisters in Nandom as they were called at the time. Every year they sent some of the girls to begin school with the congregation in Jirapa. However, I was never one of those selected but was always chosen to work in one of the local clinics. After three years working in the clinic, I decided to quit. When I told the sisters about my decision they asked me to pray over it and to speak with the spiritual director for the convent Fr. Joseph-Edouard De Serres.⁵ The meeting was scheduled as a confession process and I found him very understanding. I told him frankly about my frustrations of not being sent to school. I further said that in my heart, I thought it better to leave and have children who might become priests. He said he supported my decision and that he would support my children if I ever had any. He has been true to his word. (Personal conversation)

My mother left the convent soon afterwards to marry and later gave birth to ten children: six boys and four girls. Eight of these survived into adulthood and she made good on her word by educating all of them to their highest potential. The circumstances leading to the death of two of the boys was the second narrative she often recounted to us. She would begin by giving short statements of facts about the death of the first of the two, who they named Charles. She would simply say:

Charles was my second born. He died a toddler. We were staying at the Catechist school in Kaleo where your father was undergoing his three years' training to be catechist. He fell sick and we could not find the right medicine for him. As for Paul, I have never understood what happened. I had always had misgivings about the efficiency of the nuns and their assistants to ensure that I got a successful delivery. After four successful deliveries at home I thought it was time to follow the trend of the day and have my fifth

delivery at the maternity clinic. My experiences as a novice nun working in the clinic did not give me much confidence that the nuns were very good at the job of delivery. I still remember the cases when they could not help women who, after delivering their children the afterbirth would not come out. I had insisted that they call on your great-grand-uncle, Bartholomew Logo, who is a traditional healer and had the medicine for such cases. They did call on him and he was able to help the women. I did not experience anything unusual with the labour when I went to the clinic and cannot explain why I had a stillborn baby. It was a boy. We baptized him and named him Paul. There was no funeral for him. We buried him with the afterbirth and I came home as if nothing has happened. (Personal conversation)

Unlike the recent migration of my maternal grandparents who crossed the Volta River from the northern frontier due to the colonial wars, my paternal grandparents came from the southwest, first settling in Tangasie near Nadowli before moving further north to Tome in the current Nandom district where my father was born and later to Lambusie district where we now have our family home. At the time of his birth, slave-raiding occurred simultaneously with wars of colonization and constant movement was the best response to both situations. This is well captured by Goody in 1965 when he made the following assessment of the region:

Slave-raiding in the Lawra District was most severe where it adjoins Grusi territory; travelling only a little further north, Binger expressed surprise at seeing a Grusi village which had escaped pillage by the Zaberima and the Mossi slave-raiders. The south of the Lawra district lay on the periphery of their sphere of action and incursions were consequently infrequent. At the rumour of their coming or at the sight of headless bodies drifting down the Volta, the inhabitants would rush across the river, abandoning their granaries to the horsemen; at dusk, the men would secretly creep back to collect some food and when sufficient confidence had been gained the population would return to their homes. Slave-raiding left little traces of any permanent effect on the institutions of the Lobi and Dagari-speaking peoples. (Goody 1967: 13)

Both my paternal grandparents died when my father was still a young boy, leaving him and his younger brother and sister to grow up fending for themselves. He had some luck negotiating the life of an orphan within these difficult times by judiciously using his position as a child of a prescribed cross-cousin marriage. His mother was the sister of my great-grand-uncle Bartholomew Logo, who became the head of the extended family and initiated the most recent family migration into our current settlement in Piina, a Sisaala country (see Tengan 2000a: 261–71). As the most senior male child of a cross-cousin marriage, he not only stood first in line to inherit the moveable property of Bartholomew Logo, but also to

become the priestly custodian and tenderer of those categories of shrines and healing cults culturally defined as feminine and of matrilineal origins. Hence, he was given the symbolic name ‘Tengan’ (earth priest), the earth cult and shrine being the most significant among the feminine cults in Dagara cosmology and is also of equal standing to the male cult of Rain. By the time that missionary Catholicism had begun to take root in Dagara society, Bartholomew had already acquired and established all the cultic institutions that a head of a Dagara house-based community should have to ensure that their religious, cultural and economic institutions function properly for the wellbeing of their members. My father assisted Bartholomew in the establishment and tendering of these shrines and cults.

As an adult head of an extended family and as a young man respectively, Bartholomew and my father followed the standard adult catechism classes delivered by the missionaries and passed the required examinations and were baptized into Catholicism in the mid 1930s. The examination consisted of answering orally prepared questions and answers taught to them as catechumens. The question, prepared for the universal church and applied globally, did not seek to give any explanation about faith or moral or doctrine. Moreover, the translations were guided by the Dagara assistants employed by the missionaries to teach them the Dagara language and culture. The assistants did a good job in terms of translating

Table 0.1 Questions and answers taken from ‘The Penny Catechism’

<i>English question and response</i>	<i>Dagara cultural translation given by catechist</i>	<i>English translation of cultural translation</i>
Q: Who made you? A: God made me.	Q: Aãnu ir fu bing téngzu? A: Naawmin ir me bing téng-zu.	Q: Who has chosen you and settled you on the earth? A: The Deity of richness has chosen me and settled me on earth.
Q: Why did God make you? A: God made me to know him, to love him, and to serve him in this world and to be happy with him in the next.	Q: Naawmn ir fu ε fu ire bunu? A: Naawmin ir me bin téngzu, N bang ul; N none ul; N iyangne ul; Eh paa tuo kyén téngvula; ti wo nuo tigigle.	Q: What are the Deity’s expectations from you after he has chosen you? A: The Deity has settled me on earth so that I can know him, I can love him; and I can honour him; and after which I will travel to the good earth where I will have everlasting enjoyment.

the terms as close to Dagara cultural context as possible and, as such, formulated the Christian message in the context of Dagara philosophy and religion. Let me give a few examples of these questions and answers taken from 'The Penny Catechism'.

The Ethnographic Field

I began researching and writing about Dagara society and culture as a doctoral student by looking at their principal activity, hoe-farming, that both sustains them and gives them their social and cultural identity and thinking structures. The concluding remarks I made after that study served as the starting point for my studies into Dagara life and health issues. I stated then that:

The life of a hoe-farmer consists partly in cultivating farmlands and rearing animals within settled environments laid out as houses, homesteads and village settlements; and partly in relating with persons and institutions within extending habitats. The hoe-farmer sees the two parts of his work as complementing and re-enforcing one another. One cannot cultivate crops and rear animals without relating with persons and institutions, and one is only relating with persons and institutions when one is in the mode of cultivating and rearing. The purpose of doing this is to know his world and to maintain it in the ways prescribed by his society and culture. Paradoxically, to cultivate and to rear entail the same knowledge processes as relating with persons and institutions. In other words, hoe-farming is an individual as well as a social mode of thinking about the universe and the constituted world in relation to how to cultivate, to rear, to manage relations, to socially organise, and to create the necessary intellectual as well as practical items and tools needed for different activities. (Tengan 2000a: 295)

The realization that Dagara life consists of relating to persons and institutions led me to focus my attention on their cultic institutions and shrines following my background research into hoe-farming. I adopted three sociocultural fields for the study and developed an appropriate approach for each field. The three fields include the religious field embedded in the Dagara *bagr* initiation of rites and mythical narrative processes (Tengan 1999, 2006, 2012), the symbolic/artistic field embedded in the built composition of cults and shrine objects, and the social fields of custodianship, guardianship and parenting. My approach to the religious institution of *bagr* was to become an associate member of the *bagr* society and to participate in the different initiation rites and other religious meetings and gatherings. I have outlined on many occasions my method of entry and have already published much of the ethnographic material that I now use for the study undertaken in this volume. Second, in order to under-

stand the symbolic and artistic field and to study the character of those who are custodians to cults and shrines, I began the collection of religious and sacred items and objects, including those designated in former times as ‘fetish’ and ‘magical’ from different cultures and religions. To do so, I developed and continued to maintain close contacts and relationships with religious persons and leaders from different traditions, including Catholic priests, traditional healers and diviners, African Islamic healers and clerics (Mallams). My approach in relation to these individuals has been to use my knowledge and position as a religious studies teacher to engage them in conversations and debates on diverse subjects and topics. These conversations and debates have occurred both on a formal and an informal basis.

Thus, as a member of the *bagr* society, I formally commissioned artists and healers to make for my own personal use several religious and healing objects that I am entitled to have. These were also occasions for me to learn more about these objects, including their composition and use. From professional healers, I observed healing processes and took part in discussions about sick patients and their ailments. Furthermore, over the years, I have organized conferences and workshops in the field, during which I have brought along the members of the society who were schooled and educated according to the modern system as well as those who have acquired their knowledge through the informal traditional system.

Structuring Content

Even though I have limited my study to the ethnographic and anthropological analysis of six cultic institutions as they deal with life processes within the Dagara sociocultural context, the content of this book largely deals with the fundamental issues surrounding life and death – issues common to all societies and cultures. In Chapter 1, however, I first deal generally with the need to develop a scientific language appropriate for the study of African scientific views on life, including its sustenance and healing processes. I intimate that this scientific language is embedded as a symbolic structure within the semantic expressions of religious and ritual practices and artistic creativity. Hence, in this chapter I move on to briefly discuss the nature of the lexicon and grammatical structure constituting this scientific language and conclude with a demonstrative use of the language to outline the condition of all life and particularly human life within nature, including the cosmic and cultural structures and experiences. The limited objective here is to fully put into perspective the system of thought and cultural philosophy about life as it is experienced as a property of cosmic nature. The main issues outlined concern the

conception of life itself as a property of nature, of life as something that cannot be created or destroyed, and of life as a property that is commonly shared by all animated beings and elements.

Within this limited objective, I first, following Chapter 1, use the cultic institution of the ancestors to further elaborate on the language and scientific understanding of life transmission and transfers across bodies and other life-bearing elements, with a focus on human life. The father and mother figures within the family unit appear as the first line in the domain of life transmission and transference. Well over one hundred sacred objects and artifacts collected in bulk from two Dagara/Lobi ancestral shrines of families who have recently converted to Catholicism are used as phonemic symbols to outline and describe the foundational principles about life as observed within cosmic nature. These include the findings that life pre-exists outside the dimensions of space and time and prior to its embodiment within a being or life-bearing element. This is true for all life-forms, including human life, which is a choice that a being or an element makes to have a specially confined experience of earthly life. The focus is placed on the ancestors as beings who have accumulated sufficient experiential knowledge of earthly life within the recent past to enable them to guide the individual and the community make appropriate choices on earth. The choices could include such varied issues as the selection of parents and family for an individual, the conditions of choices around issues of fertility and barrenness, times of birth and death, the mythical conditions that lead to totemic, kinship and taboo relations and many others. The chapter describes and analyses the observed scientific methods and procedures put in place to ensure that the enumerated choices above, when properly made, lead to abundant and healthy life transmission within the human species.

The focus of Chapter 3 is on life sustenance and growth at its primitive stage and as it applies to all life-forms and beings. The analysis is about life conceived as a primordial property of cosmic nature that is pre-existing the embodiment of all life-forms and beings and is first transferred and embodied in the proto-atypical ancestral being for each life species. There is a specific focus on the proto-human ancestral being sometimes referred to as the proto-life beings of the wild (*kɔntɔn*) and their mythical world of cultural awareness. As an institution, the cult of *kɔntɔn* has, as primary attribute, the symbolization of nature's collective unconscious mind of experiential knowledge about life from its origins. This experiential knowledge is key for the proper sustenance of all life, including knowledge about the proper handling of the necessities of life such as food (cultivation, hunting and gathering), shelter (housing, settlement, etc.) and security (defence, social relations, etc.). Using the language of

mythology and the art of ritual narration, the chapter summarizes the content dealing with the origins, proper cultivation and processing of the staple foods and crops within Dagara society. It outlines the physical and social construction of the house and house objects, the cultural construction of the family and kin relations, and the rites and ceremonies that will ensure life sustenance in a healthy environment.

Chapters 4 and 5 on the *bagr* institution focus on avoiding dangers and threats to life within the human body as it continues to grow in plenitude. Chapter 4 deals with avoiding dangers that are linked to the very food substances and eating conditions that are basic for life sustenance. By developing a test grid as part of the three-year initiation ritual calendar into the *bagr* cult, the *bagr* society can handle all health-related issues concerning food cultivation, food preparation and eating habits. The chapter gives a detailed account of the religious and cultural prohibitions on consuming certain kinds of foods and drinks during specific occasions as a way of understanding illnesses and finding a cure for them. The chapter concludes by describing the culture of observing the eating habits of animals and using the knowledge acquired to develop cures for illnesses linked to the culture of animal and human eating habits.

As far as the Dagara health system is concerned, all dangers and threats to life that have the potential to cause fatalities must have a streak of a poisonous substance or effect (toxins) in them. Hence, Chapter 5 focuses on poisoning as the main cause of death for all life-forms and how to avoid it or how to deal with its imminent threats. Death itself is the deepest mystery of life and, as such, a metaphorical language is constructed around the practice of hunting and killing animals in order to properly deal with the issues of poisoning. In the first part of the chapter, the concept of poisoning is placed in a broad and wide perspective to include all manner of causes of pain and injury (physical, mental, psychological, spiritual in the form witchcraft and sorcery, etc.) that could lead to the ending of life in a specific form or death for a specific being. In this regard, the chapter focuses on the preparation of the appropriate poison that is most effective for the termination of life in different types of life-forms and beings. The reasoning is that this type of knowledge is essential for human beings in order to avoid the danger of poisoning and to eventually develop remedies that are related to different forms of poisoning ailments. A systematic analysis is undertaken of the cultural and scientific knowledge of preparing poison and hunting medicines that are eventually used for injuring and possibly killing different categories of animals and life-forms.

The final three chapters of the book (Chapters 6 and 7 and the Conclusion) complement each other and deal with a series of cults that aim

to deal with the dangers of poisoning and threats to the continuity of life embodied in various life-forms and beings. The analysis first demonstrates and outlines the scientific method via which Dagara healers diagnose and treat dangers and threats to life that are perceived and identified within the outlined concept of poisoning and wounding the body as a way of hunting. Hence, in Chapter 6, I use the ethnographic material from Dagara mythical narratives to illustrate the different levels and kinds of poisoning that can take place within the living body. The method used to illustrate my points is to use the cultural information of hunting down different categories of animals discussed above as a way of finding treatment for different levels of poisoning and other threats to life. These include treating physical wounds and injuries that are not fatal with earth material and soil (the case of the occiput of the monkey); the healing of poisoned being using only plant substances, such as boiling the roots and leaves of specific plants and trees (*garu*); the killing of the rabbit and the partridge with the poisoned arrow of *strophanthus*;⁶ the healing of the poisoned body using plant and animal (toad) material; using plant, animal and human fluids and speech; and using plant, animal and human psychology and spiritual means.

The art of constructing the cult of healing and the continued reshaping and reconstruction of its shrine appear as a metaphor for both diagnosing the nature of the poisoning and prescribing the healing substances that can act as an antidote to the poisoning. Thus, in Chapter 7, I give a detailed description and analysis of the healer and his putting together of the different elements to construct the healing shrine. This description also allows me to fully discuss the methods of diagnosing and prescribing healing substances or practices. In the Conclusion, I finish by describing observed diagnostic and healing procedures that I have observed as part of my fieldwork. The case studies demonstrate the common cosmological vision that healers share with their patients and how this is essential for healing to take place.

I have relied heavily on Dagara field data collected over many years from different regions in Ghana and Burkina Faso, and Dagara *bagr* mythical narratives, instructions and ritual practices that I have participated in, observed and recorded as primary material to support my ethnographic and anthropological analysis presented in this book. In that light, I will like to acknowledge all the *bagr* societies and members dotted throughout northern Ghana and southern Burkina Faso who have instructed me on the *bagr* philosophy and way of life. I had initially conducted fieldwork with many Dagara hoe-farmers within the same ethnographic region (1992–94) and they instructed me on Dagara culture of hoe-farming and social relations (Tengan 2000a). The field data I col-

lected back then constitutes a great deal of the reference material for this current work. I have tried to reference them scientifically in the best way possible and to acknowledge their knowledge contributions to the text.

I am aware of the large amount of ethnographic documentation produced by the most qualified anthropologists from different traditions, including the French, German and English and North American anthropological traditions, and spreading over a very long period. I acknowledge the important relevance of all these works to my anthropological education and thinking. The nature of the subject and the approach I have developed, including the scientific language used as a study of the subject, requires me to step away from most of these studies out there. In Chapter 1, I will proceed to explain in detail why this is so.

Notes

1. I use the term 'science'/'scientific' following the dictionary definition and consider them as culturally neutral terms and not in the sense according to which some might want to say there is Western science and ethnoscience. By 'scientific', I mean the 'intellectual and practical activity encompassing the systematic study of the structure and behaviour of the physical and natural world through observation and experiment' (dictionary definition from the Oxford English Dictionary).
2. In written literature, one can encounter *kyaara* instead of *chaara*. My personal experience with English-speakers wanting to pronounce my middle name, Bekyane, convinces me that it is most helpful to say 'ch' as it is pronounced in the English word 'chapter'.
3. The architectural structure of the Dagara house resembles that of the Batamaliba as described in Blier (1987); see also Fiéloux et al. (1993).
4. This practice is still going on today. The afterbirth of children born in hospital is given to the parents for the performance of the ritual.
5. Most of the missionary staff who came to northwest Ghana were French Canadians. Fathr Joseph-Edouard De Serres was from Trois Rivières, Canada and was first registered as a member of the Jirapa parish staff in 1941. He died while still on active duty in Nandom in 1972 and his funeral was a combination of Dagara religious rites and the Catholic funeral Mass.
6. *Strophanthus* is a genus of flowering plants in the *Apocynaceae* family. It is native primarily to tropical Africa.