

Strategies for the Promotion of the Dagaare Language

By

Vengvengnaa Bonglakyere Bɔdɔmɔ
[Adams Bodomo]

University of Vienna, Austria

adams.bodomo@univie.ac.at

Keynote address at the Dagaare Language and Culture Development Conference,
September 17 – 18, 2021, GNAT Hall, Wa, Upper West Region, Ghana

Abstract

In this article, I propose some strategies for the development of the Dagaare language and its associated culture. I first do a retrospective account of what has been done in historical and in contemporary times before identifying what various stakeholders can do to further sustain, develop, and revitalize Dagaare language and culture.

Kyɛngmaao

A aatekele nye poɔ N boɔrɔ ka N manne la yeɛ mine te nang na de nyɔge ne, a toɔ e ka a te Dagaare kɔkɔre do saa. N piili la a yeɛ mannoo a kaa nye lenɛɛ noba yaga nang song kɔ a kɔnɔre nye lɛɛ a wa ta zenɛ. N nang wa e a a lɛ baare, N paa wuli la lenɛɛ te zaa kpɛleng nang na toɔ song zeɛle a te Dagaare kɔkɔre ane a te saakonng ka a do saa.

Outline

1. Introduction
 2. Past and Present Efforts for the Promotion of Dagaare
 3. Formal Efforts to study and promote Dagaare
 4. Future Strategies for the Promotion and Revitalization of Dagaare:
Stakeholder Roles
 5. Conclusion
-

1. Introduction

- Important theme: *Development of Dagaare orthography and culture in the contemporary era: contributions of stakeholders*
 - **Much of African history often begins with the arrival of Western actors and other foreigners.** Even in the history of the study and promotion of **Africa's own indigenous languages** we still have this kind of discourse showing that promoting our own languages begins with the arrival of European missionaries.
-

- In Bemile (2000), we read the following: “The first attempts to promote literacy in Ghanaian languages were made by **European missionaries, and their Ghanaian church members**, whose policy it was to learn and teach Ghanaian languages.” (Bemile 2000: 204).
- ➔ One wonders then how these languages survived until the arrival of the missionaries!
-

- This is an important issue to raise if we are to take accurate stock of the efforts in the past to **preserve, sustain, revitalize, and promote our language and culture** over several hundreds of years since the era of the great Mabilia (“Mole Dagomba”) empires in the 11th Century, founded and led by Emperor Naa Gbewaa and his successors.
 - **Two main questions** guide us in our discussion:
 - What were the original/past efforts to promote Dagaare?
 - What strategies can stakeholders develop to promote and sustain the Dagaare language and the culture associated with it?
-

2. Past and Present Efforts for the Promotion of Dagaare

- Efforts to preserve and promote Dagaare long before contact with foreigners took the form of several activities involving **oral literature (orature)** and **oral literacy (oracy)**. Literacy must, therefore, not be seen as only written literacy (writeracy).
 - It is when we look at issues in this more nuanced analysis of literacy that we can now point to **numerous activities that sustained and promoted Dagaare and other Mabilia and African languages long before the arrival of European missionaries and colonizers.**
-

Traditional values that recognise the need to teach, preserve, revitalize, and promote Dagaare include the following:

Communicating with the Ancestors

In Dagaare culture one can normally only make sacrifices and pour libation to the ancestors **in Dagaare**. Any attempt to speak foreign languages or even mix Dagaare with foreign language words and phrases during a libation process and during sacrifice to the kpenne (ie ancestors) is often frowned upon by the elders.

Cultural Pressure on Dagaare expatriate Parents

It has become common knowledge that Dagaaba who live away from Dagao in places like southern Ghana and even outside of Ghana who are not able to impart knowledge of the Dagaare language and its culture to their children get **ridiculed and blamed**. This kind cultural pressure **is a way of ensuring language development in young Dagaaba**. Even for Dagaaba at home who are unable to encourage their offspring to be all round in Dagaare culture there are cultural pressures to discourage such situations. An example is the dance song titled: **ka neε bie'ng ba bong bawaa tenee paalong bie naa**, translated approximately as 'if anybody's child doesn't know how to dance, that child is not a child of our community'.

A developed Griot Institution

Griots are praise singers and custodians of **oral history** who are well-versed in **proverbial use of the language**. These people are admired and held in high esteem. Artists such as dirge singers have a place of choice in Dagaare arts.

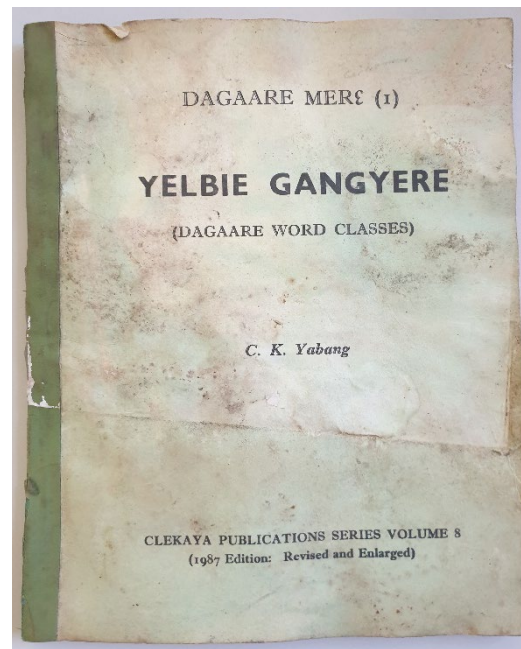
➔ I have just listed three main activities but there are certainly more that can be added on to this.

3. Formal Efforts to study and promote Dagaare

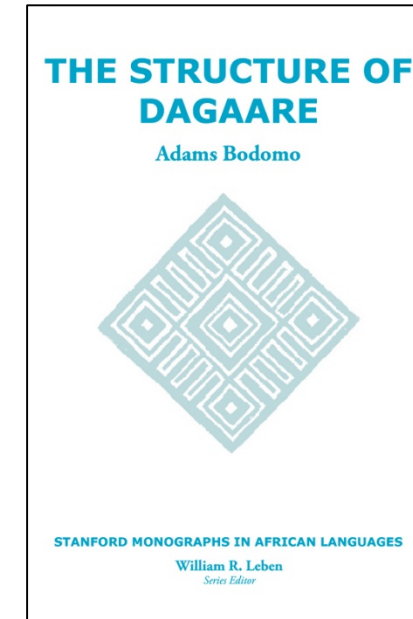
- Dagaare is one of about 10 to 20 languages that feature on the curriculum in higher educational institutions in Ghana. Many scholars and other stakeholders have contributed to the provision of resources for the study, preservation, and development of the language. I will group them together as grammars, dictionaries, readers and proficiency course books, language guides and online websites, books on history and society, and a standard orthography. These do not include unpublished and semi-published theses written on the language and its culture.
-

Grammars and Dictionaries

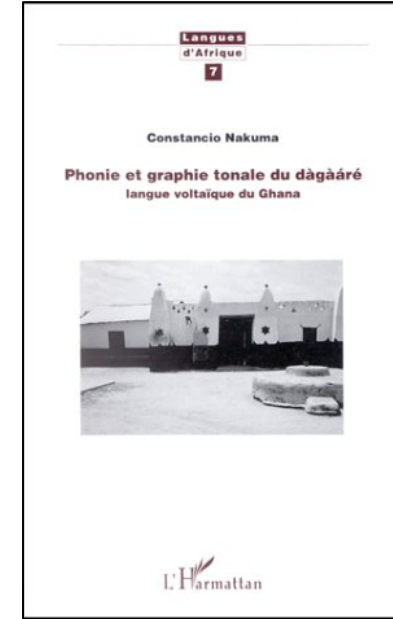
- Phonology of Dagaare (Kennedy)
- Description Phonologique de la Langue Dagara (Girault)
- Dagaare Grammar (Dakubu)
- Dagaare – English Dictionary (Durand)
- A Dagaare – Cantonese – English Lexicon (Bodomo)
- etc.



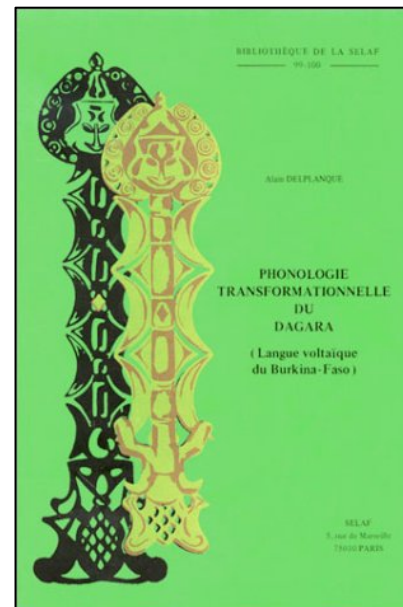
Yelbie Gangere [Dagaare Word Classes] (Cletus Yabang)



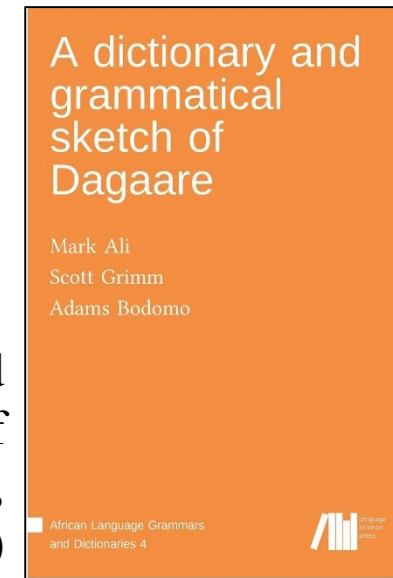
Structure of Dagaare (Bodomo)



Phonie et Graphie Tonale du Dagaare (Nakuma)



Phonologie Transformationnelle du Dagara (Delplanque)



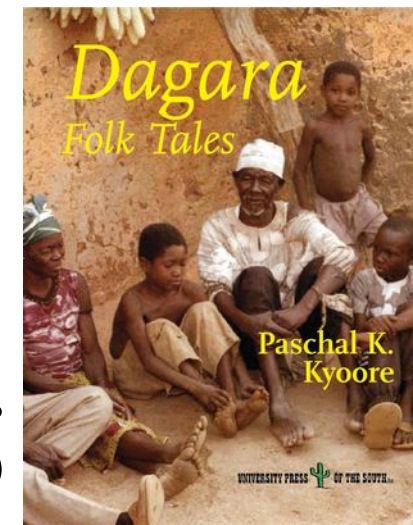
A Dictionary and Grammatical Sketch of Dagaare (Ali, Grimm, and Bodomo)

Readers and Proficiency Books

- Te Koobo Yele (Zakpaa)
- Naa Konga: A Collection of Dagaaba Folktales (Kuuwaabong)
- Ka Te Yele Dagaare (Bodomo)
- etc.



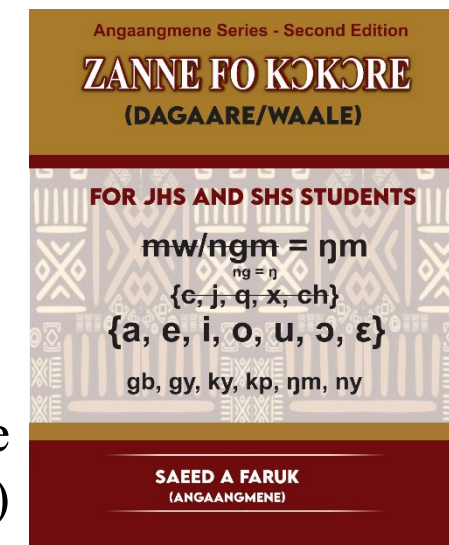
Dagaare Sinsolong
(Zakpaa)



Dagara Folktales
(Kyoore)



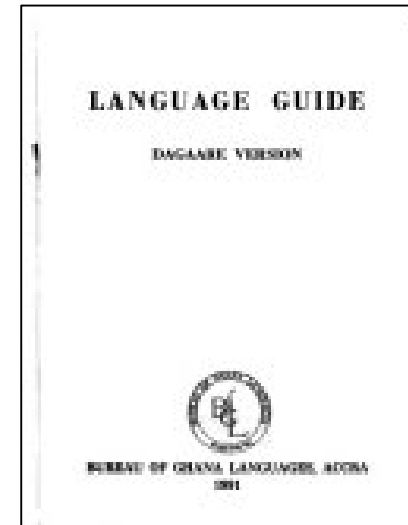
Yé Gorógoró Yaa:
Dagaare Folktales in
Parallel Texts
(Ali and Bodomo)



Zanne Fo Kòkòre
(Saeed Faruk)

Other Language and Culture Resources – Language Guides, Internet Lexicons and Discussion Fora

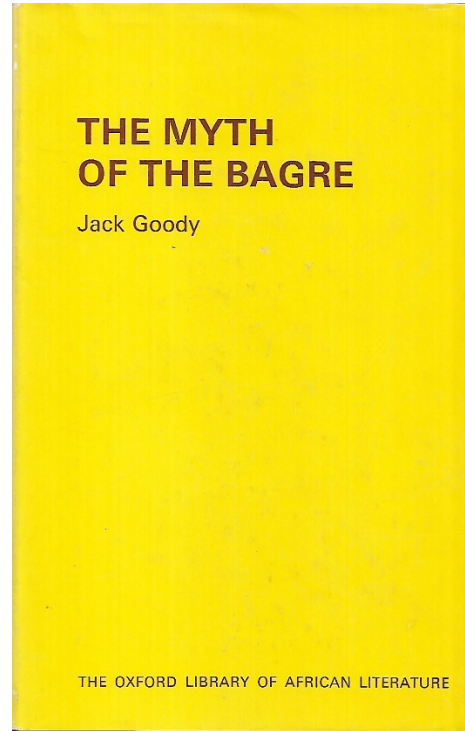
- Dagaare Yong (Bodomo, Mwinlaaru and Babuna)
- Dagara Heritage Preservation (Joseph Ziem)
- etc.



Language Guide –
Dagaare
(Bureau of Ghana
Languages)

History and Society

- Social Organizations
- Wa and its People (Douga)
- etc.



Myth of Bagre (Goody)

- All these **various efforts**, especially, works on phonology led to the creation of a **standard Dagaare orthography**, led by a Dagaare Committee under the aegis of the Catholic Church based in Jirapa, as follows:
 - Dagaare is a two-tone language, but tone is not marked in the standard orthography. Here is the **Standard Dagaare alphabet**, which has 31 graphemes, comprising 24 monographs (representing 19 consonants and 7 vowels), 6 diagraphs and 1 triagraph:
-



• A, a	as in	báná lá wààná	‘It is they who are coming’
• B, b	as in	báá	‘dog’
• D, d	as in	dúní	‘knee’
• E, e	as in	kpéré	‘to cut up’;
	also as in	féntéré	‘ring’
• ε, ε	as in	géré	‘going’
• F, f	as in	fànfánè	‘soap’
• G, g	as in	gánè	‘book’
• GB, gb	as in	gbéré	‘leg’
• GY, gy	as in	gyilé	‘xylophones’
• H, h	as in	húólì	‘to mock at someone’



- I, i as in bìbìírí ‘children’
 - K, k as in kànnè ‘to read’
 - KP, kp as in kpááré ‘occiput’
 - KY, ky as in kpéngé ‘to walk’
 - L, l as in láá ‘bowl’
 - M, m as in má ‘mother’
 - N, n as in néé ‘person’
 - NG, ng as in bòngó ‘donkey’
 - NY, ny as in nyé ‘to see’
 - NGM, ngm as in ngmén ‘God’
-



• O, o	as in	zòró	running’;
	also as in	tólóng	‘heat’
• ɔ, ɔ	as in	sówóló	‘kind of dish’
• P, p	as in	pènnè	‘to rest’
• R, r	as in	pùrì	‘to burst’
• S, s	as in	sénsé	‘cakes’
• T, t	as in	tùòrì	‘to meet’
• U, u	as in	dùndúló	‘worms’
• V, v	as in	vóóróng	‘breath’, ‘life’
• W, w	as in	wááó	‘snake’
• Y, y	as in	yánngáá	‘grandchild’
• Z, z	as in	zàgá	‘pen’

- It is one of the aims of this conference to discuss issues of orthography. It would be important to note that issues of writing system go beyond just mere orthography. We have to make decisions, for instance, as to how we combine words (e.g. issues of compounding) and how words are structured in the sentence (issues of spacing between different word classes). In this sense, we would need insights from the morphology and syntax of the language.
 - In the next section of this brief speech addressing the theme, we will focus on proposing strategies for ensuring a strong future for the Dagaare language and the culture associated with it.
-

4. Future Strategies for the Promotion and Revitalization of Dagaare: Stakeholder Roles

- One of the most important strategies is for all stakeholders to understand that Dagaare is part of a larger linguistic grouping that some of us have termed the **Mabia language group** (Bodomo, Abubakari and Issah (2020)) and work together to develop these languages.
 - Mabia: new name for unsatisfactory terms ('Gur', 'Langues Voltaïques', 'Mole-Dagbane languages') that refer to languages like Dagaare/ Dagara/ Waale, Sisaali, Buli, Kasem, Gurune, Kusaal, Mampruli, Konni, Dagbane, and Moore. The development of Dagaare must be organically linked to the development of Mabia and other Ghanaian and West African languages.
-

- ➔ We need the **same writing technologies** to harmonize our orthographies ➔ computer hardwares like keyboards and softwares like word processors
 - ➔ For example, it would be important that a common **Mabia orthography** avoids the following graphemes: γ ɔ ŋ ɲ ɪ ʊ
 - Some of the best orthographies like the Akan, Hausa and Swahili orthographies avoid these graphemes.
 - The most successful orthographies around the world observe important principles of **simplicity and economy**.
-

- Another advantage of **working together** as Mabilia language experts is that we could jointly develop **new words** for the expressions of existing and new, **evolving expressions in science and technology**. In producing new technical terms, we must take care to avoid being too much of language purists, such that we create terms that are not the most meaningful.
 - In fact, as an important strategy, I would like to propose the **formation of a coordinating committee for Mabilia Language Standards**, comprising ideally at least two members of each of the language committees of the individual language committees (e.g. Dagbane Language Committee, Dagaare language Committee, Gurune Language Committee, Sisaali Language Committee, Kusaal Language Committee, etc) to form the Coordinating Committee of Mabilia Language Standards.
-

The Role of Academics: More Dagaare Language Scholars

- More Dagaaba should be interested in the study of their language at **Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary levels** of the national educational system. It would be important for scholars to **not only produce top level academic publications** in journals **but also produce cutting edge educational materials like writing children's books, cataloguing nursery rythmes, producing short stories and folktales** that are parallel-texted into Dagaare and English (for Ghanaian Dagaaba) and Dagara – French (for Burkina Faso Dagaaba).
-

- **The development of Dagaare should not be left to only linguists and language scholars.** Dagaaba who study Science, technology, engineering and medicine (STEM) can contribute to the development of Dagaare in very profound ways. Dagaaba scientists must collaborate to **translate the most important STEM textbooks and readers into Dagaare.** It is for example, unacceptable that we have not been able to translate all the important technical terms associated with the COVID-19 pandemic to our rural folks who may not speak English fluently.
-

The Role of Local and National Government

- The national government must define a clear **national policy of education** (and well implemented by the local government) **that emphasises the study of Ghana's and Africa's own indigenous languages.**
 - **Localised trilingualism:** the youth of Ghana can be taught to be proficient in their mother tongues or language of cultural identity, in a major lingua franca of the country or Africa and in an international language (English or French).
→ Case of the Dagaaba: every Dagaare child in school develops literacy in at least three languages: Dagaare, and two others (a major African language) and a major foreign language, such as English.
-

The Private Sector

- **The private sector must develop a certain kind of corporate social responsibility (CSR) that emphasizes cultural development.** Traditional rulers must encourage their citizens to excel in Dagaare language and culture. Traditional festivals must emphasize competitions that let young citizens of their communities compete for excellence in various aspects of Dagaare language and culture. Private businesses ought to use parts of the CSR budgets to fund competitions and prizes for excellence in Dagaare language and culture. Private individuals and faith groups can even think of setting up scholarship schemes and awards, fellowships, and professorial chairs to promote excellence in the study of Dagaare language and culture.
-

The Role of the Youth: Better Use of the Internet and IT Resources

- The Youth are the future of any society and no language can survive without a huge amount of agency on the part of the youth. Our youth must be encouraged to make use of **traditional media** like radio and TV and **social media platforms** like Facebook, Instagram, and Whatsapp to create programmes that promote the use of the Dagaare language. Young writers must be encouraged to write engaging **literary works** like poetry, novels, and drama/plays, and to **produce films** that cut across ages and educational backgrounds in the Dagaare language. Literary prizes and awards must be set up to encourage the youth to evolve creative programmes that promote Dagaare language and culture.
-

5. Conclusion

- Our ancestors and forebears have bequeathed to us a **very rich language and the culture associated with it**. Dagaare is an important tool for us to understand the world and express ourselves in it. Our ancestors used rather subtle and intricate ways to evolve, develop, promote, and pass on this language to us. We owe it to them to **continue to develop, promote, and sharpen this powerful tool**.
 - Dagaare is our link to the past and our window to the world, to our future. We have a duty to pass it on to our offspring. We must collaborate among ourselves and with our Mabia brethren, with other Ghanaians and Africans at large to promote our languages and cultures.
-



- We must never ever study foreign languages like English and French to the neglect of our own languages. As the famous African writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, said: **"If you know all the languages of the world but not your mother tongue, that is enslavement. Knowing your mother tongue and all other languages too is empowerment."**
-



Υε barka yaga zaa!

- Ali, M. and A. Bodomo. 2021. *Yε Gorogoro Yaa: Dagaare Folktales in Parallel Texts*, LIT Verlag, Vienna.
- Ali, M., Grimm, S., Bodomo, A. (Ed.) 2021. *A dictionary and grammatical sketch of Dagaare* (African Language Grammars and Dictionaries 4). Berlin: Language Science Press. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4501694
- Bemile S.K. 2000. Promotion of Ghanaian languages and its impact on national unity: the Dagara language case. In: Lentz C., Nugent P. (eds) *Ethnicity in Ghana*. Palgrave Macmillan, London. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-62337-2_10
- Bodomo A., Abubakari H. & Issah, S. 2020. *Handbook of the Mabia Languages of West Africa*. Galda Verlag, Berlin, Germany.
- Bodomo, Adams. 1997. *The structure of Dagaare*. Stanford: CSLI. Bodomo, Adams. 2000. *Dagaare* (Languages of the World Materials No. 165). München, Germany: Lincom Europa.
- Bodomo, Adams. 2004. *A Dagaare-Cantonese-English lexicon for lexicographical field research training*. Cologne, Germany: Rudiger Köppe Verlag.
- Ka te Yele Dagaare. *A Proficiency Course in Dagaare Language and Culture*, Manuscript, University of Vienna.
- Bureau of Ghana Languages. 1991. *Dagaare Language Guide*. Ghana Publishing Corporation.
- Dagaare Language Committee. 1982. *A guide to Dagaare spelling*. Wa, Ghana: Catholic Press.
- Delplanque, A. 1983. *Phonologie Transformationnelle du Dagara*. Paris: SELAF.
- Durand, Rev. J.B. 1953. *Dagaare-English dictionary*. Catholic Mission Duplicator.
- Dougah, J. C. 1966. *Wa and its People*. Institute of African Studies, Legon.
- Girault, L. 1967. Description phonologique de la langue Dagara *Documents Linguistiques* 12. Université de Dakar.
- Goody, J. 1962. *Death, Property and the Ancestors*. London
- Goody, J. 1967. *The Social Organisation of the LoWiili*, IAS, London.
- Goody, J. 1972 *The Myth of the Bagre*, OLAS, Oxford.
- Kennedy, Jack. 1966. *Collected field reports on the phonology of Dagaari* (Collected Language Notes 6). University of Ghana, Accra: Institute of African Studies.
- Kropp Dakubu, Mary E. 2005. *Collected language notes on Dagaare grammar* (Collected Language Notes, Vol. 26). Legon, Ghana: Institute of Language Studies.
- Kuwaabong, Dannabang. 1992. *Naa Kɔnga: A Collection of Dagaaba Folktales*. Accra: Woeli Publishing Services.
- Kyoore, Paschal Kyiiripuo. 2011. *Dagara Folktales*. New Orleans: University Press of the South.
- Nakuma, Constancio. 1997. *Phonie et Graphie Tonale du Dagaare (Langue Voltaïque)*. Paris: Editions de l'Harmattan
- Yabang Cletus. 1987. *Yelbie Gangere (Dagaare Word Classes)*. Clekaya Publications Series, Volume 8.
- Zakpaa, B. B. 1978. *Te koobo yelε*. Accra, Ghana: Bureau of Ghana Languages.
- Zakpaa, B. B. (1977). *Dagaare Sinsolong*, Accra: Bureau of Ghanaian Languages.