

CHAPTER THREE

LEARNING ABOUT COMMUNITY RESILIENCE FROM THE LANGUAGE OF THE DAGARA

Recognizing a Conceptual Space across Gender and Generations

David Fletcher

Coady International Institute
St. Francis Xavier University
Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada
Email: dfletche@stfx.ca

ABSTRACT

Resilience and community resilience are becoming more common in academic and international development discourses. In this paper, the author shares conceptual vocabulary related to community resilience in the language of the Dagara of the Lawra-Nandom area of the Upper West Region of Ghana. The concepts were identified as part of a qualitative, participatory research study to illuminate community resilience with the Dagara from their own perspectives. The conceptual vocabulary, identified in iterative discussions with the research team members who are native Dagare speakers, and with Dagara male and female interviewees, was deepened with an intergenerational and gendered vocabulary mapping method. Key concepts such as kanyir (patience and courage), kpeng (the strength needed to manage challenges) and marpii (perseverance) provide a constellation of individual characteristics that enable people to be resilient. Bang milo (manoeuvre through difficulties) was expressed as a particularly important and unique quality of Dagara women. The process expressed through words like mille (to twist), and the expressions te ire ne bila bila (we are doing small, small) and te tera 'a fang (we are capable, we can do it) illustrate the active process by which Dagara people respond to and overcome challenges. Fundamental Dagara concepts of longta (belongingness), nolong (unity and togetherness), and certain influential proverbs demonstrate the importance of transforming the concept of resilience from an individualistic paradigm to one of community resilience, in which the individual contributes to community resilience and the community contributes to individual resilience with the sum being greater than the parts. This acknowledgement of conceptual vocabulary in the Dagare language helps to construct a conceptual space for the further exploration of community resilience with the Dagara from an endogenous development perspective that literal translations would not provide.

INTRODUCTION

Resilience and community resilience are becoming increasingly common in academic and international development discourses (Berkes & Folke, 1998; IFRCRCS, 2004; Miller et al., 2010). Meanings and interpretations of community resilience (i.e. responding positively to chronic challenges) vary from different disciplinary perspectives, but there is much agreement that building community resilience is important for communities of today confronted with the impacts of climate change, globalization, environmental variability, social breakdown and cultural loss (Fletcher, 2005; Kirmayer et al, 2009; Kulig, Edge & Joyce, 2008; Seccombe, 2002). What is less visible in the discourses is how communities themselves view resilience and understand their own capacities and processes for community resilience. Exploring the meaning of community resilience from inside different cultural perspectives is therefore an initial step in illuminating endogenous mechanisms that can strengthen resilience, and more importantly, a necessary step in ensuring the concepts resonate with local knowledge systems and world views and does not become another example of an imported, potentially colonizing concept. Meaning is communicated through language, and therefore an understanding of concepts related to resilience in communities' own indigenous languages is particularly useful.

In this paper, conceptual vocabulary related to community resilience in the language of the Dagara of Lawra-Nandom area of the Upper West Region of Ghana is introduced. Concepts in Dagare, the language of

the Dagara,¹ are discussed, conceptual vocabulary for resilience as a characteristic of the Dagara is outlined, resilience as a process of responding to challenges is described and the importance of community resilience is highlighted. Through the analysis of this conceptual vocabulary, emphasizing the importance of context and drawing on the richness of gender and generational differences, the parameters of a conceptual space connected to Dagara worldviews that can be used for further exploration into community resilience with the Dagara is proposed.

METHODOLOGY

This analysis is part of a larger study on illuminating community resilience with the Dagara. That qualitative research study included three phases: (1) a preliminary study with 13 key informants (8 male; 5 female) to identify indigenous and contextual issues related to community resilience in 2008; (2) a data collection phase including individual interviews and focus groups with 143 people (85 males; 58 females) in 2010, and (3) a community validation phase of follow-up interviews and focus group discussions with 117 people (60 males; 57 females) in 2011. These phases were conducted in collaboration with two Dagara speakers (a man and a woman) who were members of the research team. A thread that ran parallel to the larger process of iterative research design, data collection, analysis and interpretation was an exploration of the language being used by Dagara in talking about concepts related to community resilience. As the phases unfolded the research team members and interviewees were asked for significant terms, expressions and proverbs in Dagare that related to the concepts being discussed, and were asked to translate English terms into Dagare. Direct literal translation and ‘itemizing’ of concepts was not sufficient to capture the contextualized meaning of the concepts.

Opening the space for discussions, deep listening and engaging in conversation with the Dagara provided thicker descriptions of relevant concepts from the perspectives of Dagara world views. Investing time in participating in the community discourse enabled the conceptual vocabulary to gradually consolidate and crystallize. Research team members challenged themselves to explore the influence of context and provide translation of ideas and concepts related to resilience throughout the research phases. This qualitative, iterative methodology, (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Huberman & Miles, 2002) drawing on discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1994) is claimed as an appropriate, indigenous methodology (Denzin, Lincoln & Smith, 2008; Smith, 2001; Wilson, 2008) that provided significant insights. In conversation with interviewees or focus group participants the Dagara team members fluently translated and facilitated the interactions with others. As they did, subtle differences in vocabulary emerged and coalesced around certain terms and phrases over time. This coming together was the result of evolving understandings and interpretations of community resilience with Dagara. As a non-Dagare speaker I added appreciative and provocative questions to encourage elaboration and clearer articulation of concepts from the Dagara perspective. The two-pronged discussions, with both insider and outsider perspectives, greatly enhanced the deep exploration of conceptual understandings and differences. These combined methods that evolved over the course of the research enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. An early adoption of terms to use as Dagare translations of English concepts would have been premature. Such a starting point would also have set parameters around the Dagara community discourse of community resilience that would not have been based on an endogenous perspective.

In addition to these interpretive discussions with the research team members about language that ran parallel to the larger three-phase research study on illuminating community resilience, a vocabulary mapping method was utilized. This vocabulary mapping, by gender and generation, was conceptualized by Prof David Millar, an endogenous development researcher from the area. This method explores the vocabulary around certain concepts with people of different generations and genders. By consistently and consciously asking questions and taking note of the different vocabulary used, researchers can map, and begin to interpret the deeper meaning of concepts in their cultural context across gender and generational divides (D. Millar, personal communication, April, 2010). Integrating this method within the larger study was valuable in creating a contextualized description of community resilience and was essential in enabling the team to produce this paper focusing on community resilience in the language of the Dagara.

The research team members made early inputs into the formulation of this paper and reviewed and provided useful feedback on midway and final drafts. Without their thoughtful and thorough involvement throughout this process this paper would not have been possible.² It was their own critical reflection and

¹ Dagara is the name of the ethno-linguistic group of approximately one million people living in the northwest corner of Ghana and southern Burkina Faso. Dagare is the language they speak.

² Research Team members and native Dagare speakers were Vida Sogonir Gum and Gbedi Samuel Mandela Zuma, with assistance from a colleague Daniel Faabelangne Banuoku. Their contributions in translation, interpretation, and cross-

tenacity as researchers, as Dagara insiders, and Dagare native speakers that generated the discussions and analysis upon which these findings are based. Any misinterpretations and mistakes remain the responsibility of this author.

LANGUAGE AND RESILIENCE AMONG THE DAGARA

Concepts in the Language of the Dagara

Mo kogr be e kong gaae [to stir food for a long time is not sleeping hungry].

The understanding of terms and concepts in the Dagara language (i.e., Dagare) is not only an identification of vocabulary, but an exploration of expressions, proverbs, songs and their usage in different contexts. As the Dagara proverb above illustrates, Dagare is pragmatic and contextual. A simple phrase can capture the profound value and importance of accepting a patient endurance of life. The phrase also encapsulates the time of the evening, just after dark, when a woman or young girl of the family is stirring the locally grown corn flour to make food for others who have worked hard on their farms for the day and are hungry. It can be a time of companionship, sharing and contentment—even if young ones are impatient to fill their bellies. In translating the above proverb into English there is the likely risk of taking the concept out of its context and corrupting its intended meaning. Using the word, “endurance,” for example, can have the positive connotation of an Olympic marathon runner who has the strength of going the distance. In contrast is the negative connotation of a disabled child regularly putting up with humiliation and hurt at the hands of other children. Neither of these images accurately captures the meaning of the original proverb. The Dagara even say proverbs are not to be explained and interpreted; they are to be understood. To the Dagara, a proverb is whole on its own and provides a meaning that is consistent and resonant with their world view. A proverb is open to each listener’s interpretation and is, like all communication, subtly influenced by locality, time, place, and the tone and intention of the speaker.

The Dagara comprise four main subgroups whose dialects form a linguistic continuum: Northern Dagare, Central Dagare, Western Dagare (Birifor), and Southern Dagare (Bodomo, 1997). Northern Dagare is spoken in the Lawra-Nandom area of Upper West Region and across the border in Burkina Faso. In the Lawra-Nandom area, where this study is focussed, there are a number of dialectical differences and accents signifying whether one is from Lawra, Nandom, Zambo, or Babile areas.³ Even within the Birifor Traditional Area, which covers an area of less than 300 square kilometres of which Babile is part, there are different dialects (i.e., Northern Dagare, Western Dagare, and other localized variations) which influence the words and meanings of particular phrases (F. Bacho, personal communication, March 31, 2011).

Language and meaning are also influenced by gender and age. The opening proverb can have subtly different meanings when it is spoken by a man or a woman. For a woman, it can express the hard work and nurturing that is involved in feeding her family. For a man, it can express the recognition that he may have to wait some time before he is fed and that he should have faith that he will get something to eat before the evening is done. An older person might be gently rebuking a younger one about his or her restlessness and worry about being fed, while a youth in school, aspiring to urbanized ways, might be accepting a traditional meal even though she or he may have preferred something packaged and presented differently. All of these nuances are significant in exploring the community discourse around resilience and community resilience.

The purpose here is, within the limits of the English language, to capture some of these nuances of meaning and establish a starting point for the exploration and illumination of community resilience with the Dagara. It is not possible to make a direct translation of words like *resilience* or *community* into Dagare without imposing subtle meanings and ways of thinking onto the Dagara worldview. Similarly, taking some of the words or phrases used in Dagara community discourse and translating them into English loses much of the conceptual power of Dagare—the translation would be only a misted reflection of the true intended meanings.

checking are gratefully acknowledged, as are the contributions of the Dagara women and men who were interviewed for this study and the communities of which they are a part.

³ Dialectical differences and different orthologies are significant in Dagare and are subject to continued linguistic research (Bemile, 2000). Even after this paper had been checked and cross-checked by Dagare teachers a reviewer found phrases and spellings that he considered incorrect. The intent is this version is that a compromise has been found that captures conceptual meanings even if there remain certain inconsistencies.

In order to share Dagara wisdom with a broader audience, however, some acceptable compromises were reached for inclusion in this English language article. There is a Dagara proverb explaining how absolute knowledge is never attained: *yan be tar bang baaru e*. There is the journey, however, in working towards uncovering that knowledge. Providing English translations of Dagare in this study helps to identify the conceptual space for illuminating community resilience as it is experienced by Dagara people.

Conceptual Vocabulary for Resilience as a Characteristic of the Dagara

A common saying among the Dagara is: *kanyir tuon kpeng*, literally, “patience conquers strength.” This saying introduces *kanyir* as a powerful concept related to the resilience of individuals and communities. *Kanyir* as a personal characteristic or trait is conceptualized as patience by most Dagara speakers during this research, but as they elaborate, it is much more than just the English concept of patience.

Kanyir is described as patience and courage and is the overarching term that captures the strength and spirit that individuals possess and express to overcome challenges. *Kanyir* itself is understood as a combination of *marpii* and *deblo*. *Marpii* signifies the ability to stick to something, the characteristics of perseverance and the commitment one demonstrates by not easily running away from problems. *Deblo* is a word for strength or manliness and connotes the pride for strength in fulfilling the role of a man in Dagara society. This role includes the ability to farm, to hunt, to support a family, to contribute to and earn respect for one’s family and clan, and to mature and gain wisdom in life. Manliness in this sense would be in contrast to boyishness: an immature stage where one is still vulnerable and has not yet learned the necessary skills and knowledge to fulfill one’s role in society.

Kpeng is another word for strength and is a subset of the *deblo* concept. *Kpeng* is understood as the strength needed to manage challenges or live through difficulties. A common greeting in Dagare is to ask people “*fo/ye kpeme na?*” (Are you strong?) and is used to inquire how one is making out through the daily journey of life. The characteristics of *kpeng* expressed over a long period of time can lead to *deblo* (manliness), and *deblo* combined with *marpii* (perseverance) leads to *kanyir* (patience and courage) or the trait of personal resilience.

Dagare is a rich and complex language, however, and further exploration and conceptual deconstruction is necessary to begin to capture the constellations of terms that relate to resilience. Associated with *marpii*, for example, is the concept of *poglo*, a pledge or a resolution to get something concrete done. The aspect of personal will is significant here in that *marpii*, one’s “stick-to-it-ness,” is dependent on *poglo*, the will power and the resolve—expressed internally or publicly to the community—to get something done.

A Dagara woman may be described as *pog*, one having the ability to accomplish something and stand tall among her fellow women. The expression “*o gang ni deb*” may also be used to describe a woman who is particularly strong in facing challenges and is able to surpass other women. *Deblo* used in this sense can be interpreted in multiple ways. The gendered concept of *deblo* as manliness and strength when applied to a woman could be taken to mean “she is as strong as a man,” but this is an example where the translation of concepts and world views into another’s language can delegitimize authentic interpretation. Applying the term *manliness* as a descriptor to the character of a female can be interpreted as a reflection of the sexual division of labour and the subjugation of females. If one accepts, however, that the Dagara have legitimate, equitable, and yet different roles for women and men in society, applying *manliness* as a descriptor to the character of a female can be a celebration of the positive power of an individual being able to express the characteristics of one not usually found in such a role. Describing a particular woman as having *deblo* may mean simply that she has shown the ability to express a character trait that is more often expressed by mature men. One highly respected woman leader in the research area is known as “Mr.” She has been given the name because of her expression of certain character traits and accepts it proudly. In the Dagara context, it does not necessarily mean men are considered strong and women weak. There is the danger here of essentializing the roles of women and men in Dagara society, and further analysis of sociological constructs of gender and power would be valuable. At this point it is important to recognize that the characteristic of *deblo* can be applied to people of both sexes.⁴

Deblo is further complicated when used by people of different generations. *Deblo*, as explained above is the responsibility for strength and manliness within the Dagara society and is used in this way by older generations. The younger generation, however, may use *deblo* only to refer to sexual prowess or the ability to engage in sexual activities and father children. This meaning is confirmed by elders as an aspect of *deblo*, but not the only aspect. They describe *deblo* as much more than this, emphasizing the multiple responsibilities of a mature male to his family and community, and explained it is one of the concepts that the younger generation

⁴ Alternatively, a reviewer commented these statements could be interpreted as manliness being a standard to which all should aspire, as strong willed men are called *deb* while others are teased as *pog*. Further gender analysis of concepts related to community resilience will need to be explored in future studies.

traditionally would learn more about during the Bagre Festival. This traditional festival for males and females, which is educational and an initiation into the ways of the Dagara people, is not practised as frequently as in the past, thus leading to an incomplete understanding of *deblo*.

Associated with *deblo*, *marpii*, *kanyir*, and, therefore, the characteristics that make one resilient are also the ideas of *fanga* (firm) and *zukupeng* (daring, brave and courageous). These concepts have very positive connotations in the Dagara world view and both males and females are praised for expressing them. On occasion, *zukupeng* can connote the sense of strong-headedness, but even then it is considered a valuable trait for someone to have in order to survive in a challenging environment. Combined with these traits related to strength are the notions of *yelmenga* (honesty and truthfulness). For the Dagara, these traits are required to maintain the integrity of a Dagara individual. As one elder explained, "If you are not honest, respectful and disciplined, you are a fake Dagara."

There are some significant differences revealed in an exploration of the concepts of resilience by and with Dagara women. *Bang milo*, for example, is a common expression used to describe how women are able to manoeuvre through difficulties. The expression is often applied during times of food shortages when women experiment with limited ingredients and somehow make something nutritious for their families to eat. As both women and men explained it, *bang milo* is the ability of women to create something "out of the blue." *Bang milo* names the ability of women to strategize in an impoverished environment and to confront and cope with acute situations. *Bang milo* is also more than this as it is "what women do" to contribute to the family and Dagara community living in a chronically challenging environment.

A related expression is *kpe te mil*. This is an expression a man might whisper to his wife when unexpected relatives arrive with a problem. *Kpe te mil* means, "Go in and do something (so we can maintain the relationship and show proper hospitality)." As a male elder described it, "Before you realize it she has gone out and seen one or two friends and the problem is solved". The connotation is that woman can perform magic to create something for the guests and solve the issue they have brought. Both of these expressions celebrate the creativity and resourcefulness of women during times of need. Both are characteristics related to resilience.

Dagara people will also say *pogbe zore ni nimbaalo*, signifying that women are sympathetic and have great love for humanity. This kind heartedness as a trait most often found in Dagara women is combined with *kanyir* to connote how women have the ability to endure even when something is paining them and to maintain their caring and nurturing towards others in the community. This personal resilience of Dagara women then becomes one of the bridges to community resilience.

Both Dagara women and men speak of Dagara women as never being idle, of having the stamina and perseverance of doing something to support the family. This use of *kanyir* as a positive and powerful characteristic of Dagara women reinforces the expression, *fo tere kanyir*, one with patience can boil stones. It reinforces the determination of women to keep working at things to benefit their family and community. Yet, before moving deeper into an interpretation of the Dagara conceptualization of community resilience, there are two other aspects of resilience that came up frequently in the discourse that are important to consider: *diibo* and *kyillo*.

In literal translation, *diibo* is faith and *kyillo* is hope and both have significant meanings in the Dagara context. *Diibo* is an integral part of the Dagara world view and cosmivision and is intimately related to the everyday spirituality of Dagara people. *Diibo* relates to a trust in God, other spirits, and the ancestors to help the Dagara people through difficulties and to live life fully. One key informant stated that the Dagara have faith in the role God has given them at this time, "to till the earth in order to survive." A community leader elaborated that "rural people believe ancestors protected them, helped them come out from problems and saved their lives and therefore they don't want to leave those things behind." This faith is a powerful force in Dagara society as it provides a confidence to "keep on keeping on" because of the *diibo* in God and ancestors to enable people to have a life worth living. It is linked to *saakumnu*, ancestorcentrism and the cosmivision of the Dagara.

In the Dagara cosmivision, cause and effect are interpreted in particular ways and the fault for a community difficulty such as drought or a poor harvest can be attributed to the behaviour of human beings (D. Millar, personal communication, March 21, 2011). The *diibo* people have ensures that the relationship with earth, rain, plants, and the metaphysical world will produce what the community needs to eat. It is inappropriate human behaviour that may have compromised relationships with the rain, depleted the soil, or allowed weeds to grow that limited harvest. This faith and understanding of relationships and interdependence with the spiritual world and the elements make the Dagara a proud people, with important value-based and moral codes that regulate behaviour. *Kyiru* (taboos) are an important part of family and clan norms and are practiced because of the belief that breaking them will cause a break in important relationships with the natural and metaphysical world. The *saakumnu* of the Dagara people has intricate links to concepts of community resilience.

Kyillo (hope) has similar connotations. When someone is very sick people may say, *Naamwine na song fo na*, "God will help, there is great hope that He will help one out of problems". *Diibo* and *kyillo* have only positive connotations for the Dagara. A telling example was given by an elder that *kanyir* (patience) is not about waiting, but about doing the hard work of sowing seeds and having the *diibo* (faith) that they will grow,

and accepting responsibility to tend and harvest that growth. In western scientific discourse, faith and hope are often associated with fatalism and predeterminism that takes away from individual agency in peoples' lives. This association is not the case in the cosmivision of the Dagara where they are very clear that it is the actions of individuals and communities that will determine their fate. Sometimes the actions of one community member against another—either physically or spiritually—can also cause difficulties. People can be cursed or bewitched. There is great trust in God and the ancestors, however, and it is only when that trust is broken that problems will be encountered.

The word *kyillo* was also translated by some key informants as “rejoice.” It was explained as “seeing the positive end and celebrating it even before you get there.” Such *kyillo* provides the Dagara people with much inner strength. It is understood that it is not just in seeing the positive in day to day life and celebrating overcoming obstacles, but it also refers to becoming ancestors of the people and continuing to have a role to play and being honoured for that role even after death.

Resilience as a Process of Responding to Challenges

Kanyir was also described as the ability to overcome obstacles, and that “sense of something inside” that provided people with the power to carry on. People related the expression, *a be e yel*, used to encourage people to go on with an attitude of “I will do it,” or *te tera 'a fang*, “we have the strength, we are capable, we can do it.” Variations are also used for people to challenge others to come and do something for the good of the family. These motivational expressions were related in numerous situations and talked about as being imbibed by Dagara children from infancy. They capture an underlying inner drive that is nurtured in young people to succeed and do well by having a strong sense of self confidence. As one elder described it; “*kanyir* is about patience, hope, striving, knowing one will succeed in the end. It is the moral fibre to spur you on.”

Ter kanyir, for example, is often used with students in school. When students become discouraged from reading and are asking themselves, “why am I here?” an older person might say *ter kanyir* to encourage them to close their eyes from a nice life and study hard. Another proverb, *fon wa ter kanyiria, fo marpeng*, captures the importance of perseverance or stick-to-it-ness. The literal translation is, “a tick on one’s body sucking blood is strong and does not easily go away.” A young person might also be told, *yang muo nimir* (put a red eye), meaning put in full effort and be very hardworking in what you are doing. Another proverb related to hard work and perseverance is *virie na kpi midi tur*, (the person who nearly dies wins a thousand).

Concerning the process of “how” one responds to challenging situations one commonly hears, *te ire ne bila bila* (we are doing small, small) in Dagare. The connotation is that one is managing, doing okay, potentially encountering problems and suffering, but still going on with life. A wealthy person and a very poor person who may experience quite different realities will use the same expression. *Ti mi moure le*, is used to reflect that one is doing his or her best to cope with the situation. *Te mi kyaa mour* (we are still trying) or *te mi kyaa yang fang* (we are still putting in effort) reflects the spirit that no matter the situation we are working to overcome it. *Kpier le a me mour a fo kpier le* is an expression that captures a recognition that choices may be limited but one still does what one can to try and live, maybe not living at the standard he or she would like, but also trying to do the best possible.

In hearing about the process of responding to challenges, the Dagara words *mille* and *tuonuo* were also used frequently. *Mille* is a word used in many expressions, literally meaning “to twist.” It is taken from the actions of a bean plant that will twist its way up a stick to grow tall and strong. It does not try and grow straight up, but manoeuvres its way, often in a round- about path, using whatever it can get a hold on to reach its objective. This sense of manoeuvring was commonly referred to in discussions of how individuals and communities respond to challenges. The same word, *mille*, was used for managing through a situation or doing whatever it takes to recover from an accident.

Similarly, *tuonuo* is the word used to describe overcoming something. The meaning implied was very much the process one has to go through to overcome some particular challenge that was contextually and temporally specific. *Tuo* literally means suffer or struggle. *Nuo* means enjoy. *Tuonuo* can be interpreted to mean to suffer through something to reach enjoyment in the end. In the process of overcoming something a person would always need to be innovative and to adapt to the specific circumstances. *Tuonuo* is what people do to respond to the challenges of life. For example, the expression *won tuo bang yah* (pain makes you sensible) is common, and people believe if individuals have not experienced suffering they cannot be sensible. Dagara elders were clear that it is experience that makes one sensible. “When you are exposed to a challenging situation you are able to refer back to similar situations in the past and then develop your own mechanism for dealing with it”, they said. They also shared the proverb *kanyir sob no pier nasera biro*. Literally this means when a young cow delivers and has to be milked for the first time it might kick, but you cannot be discouraged. The interpretation is that pain and difficulties must be worked through to achieve success. As one young

woman said, “*a teng zuu kpemme na* (the world is hard and you need to be strong and to condition yourself and psyche yourself up to live in it).”

In describing the process of resilience, Dagara people spoke about adaptation and innovation. *Lieb fo menga* is an expression meaning “change yourself” and is used in the context of getting out of a negative situation or counteracting a bad situation. It reflects the belief that individuals have to change or adapt their strategies sometimes in order to achieve success. People also say *faa fo mence yin* (to help yourself) or *fo mona* (you have done your best, but there is still one more thing to do). There is also a connotation around change, that is, if something new is being introduced one should agree to receive it, embrace it, and try any new things and see whether he or she will be good. This is the concept *sog deb*.

It was only on rare occasions during interviews that Dagara people spoke of *zagr fo* (refusal or resistance) as another strategy for overcoming challenges. *Zagr fo* (direct refusal) was less common and although the concept of *zagr fo* (becoming awake to recognize when one is being cheated and fighting for one’s rights) is known, it was rarely articulated. People used the expression *kpan kpang kpeng* to describe someone who is strong-headed and will agitate for something. Much more commonly acknowledged, however, is the person with *kanyir*.

In several in-depth interviews where the concepts described above were explored, the interview team also asked about *ar-kpeng* (resistant), *besagfo* (resistance) and *zebr* (fighting) as approaches to change. *Ar-kpeng* was described as standing firm in one’s resolution, as remaining focussed and being consistent, and as standing strong, regardless of the situation. People did not quickly engage in dialogue about these strategies, however. People saw a role for them at certain times, but generally these strategies had neutral or negative connotations. One of the few positive examples of resistance that was brought forward was of the Ashanti Queen, Yaa Asantewaa, who spurred the warriors to continue a fight against the British colonialists when the warriors were resigned to defeat. This example is not of the Dagara people, but it was shared as a positive example from the Ghanaian experience which was claimed as an integral part of the Dagara experience since independence. Whether this is a result of a national identity that supersedes an ethnic identity or whether it is simply a reflection of a national education curriculum that emphasizes certain stories is to be contested. Other stories of resistance by Dagara people may or may not exist, or may not be owned, celebrated or remembered in post-independence memories. The aspect of resistance as a dimension of the process of resilience deserves to be explored further in the context of the sense of justice and fairness for the Dagara.

As explained earlier, *kanyir* connotes “whatever comes one’s way must be accepted as the will of God.” It is important to identify, then, the possibilities for the Dagara to deal with “whatever comes,” what is the sense of the obstacles or risk factors for Dagara communities. Certainly there are occurrences of shocks or acute events that can lead to disastrous situations. People spoke of *kol* (famine), *koupaal* (flood), and *yel ura* (other acute sudden events) or *yel tuo* (accidents). There was an ability to speak of these events in the past or present; however, there appeared some reluctance to speak of the possibility of these events happening in the future. People were more apt to speak of the current state of the land as the greatest risk factor in their communities’ life. *Teng bala zie yina* was a commonly-heard expression from all generations, both male and female, meaning the land is exhausted, that the land is hopeless. In English this might be deemed personification: subscribing to a world view that only persons can feel and the land cannot feel. There is a strong connotation in this expression that the land is a living entity, that the land can feel tired and exhausted and that the land can feel hopeless about the future. This expression alludes to the beliefs and spirituality of the Dagara people and the appreciation of the spirit of the earth. In interviews with school-aged youth they were more likely to use an English technical term and say the land is infertile or degraded, and distance themselves from the spiritual connection.

Another expression, *a teng sanga* or *zie yina*, captures the sense that the land is not as it used to be, and signifies for many that God is angry because there has been a death or another human transgression on the farm. Adult and older generations are very clear about their spiritual relationship with the land and think deeply about how the current environmental risks and vulnerabilities being experienced are intimately connected to the relationship between the Dagara and the spirit of the land – and a gradual eroding of respect for these spiritual connections. People were asked about *foukona* (threats) and *zubiodem* (vulnerabilities) in their lives. Both men and women were eager to speak of their *doge* (suffering) and *yelwoni* or *yelfere* (facing difficulties), but in most cases this talk led back to their relationship with the land and the depletion of that relationship. As one elder stated, “We are of the land,” and another added, “The role God gave us is to be here and till the land.”

In our interactions with women and men, we heard little about forms of suffering such as *yelbe wanta* (misunderstandings) and *zebr* (conflict or fighting). Sometimes people spoke of situations that caused *tulo* (hot food), meaning the situation had potential for great trouble. On rare occasions people brought forward experiences of *dogru*, or “chronic suffering from time immemorial.” The example given for this was the stigma experienced in some communities as a result of discrimination because people of their community were known to have been bought generations ago as slaves. People did speak of *bong sang* (the time of the slave trade) and the brutality of that time, but it was not discussed frequently. In Dagara *feru manu* (distress) and *laadime*

(extreme suffering) are most often reserved for chronic challenges as a result of the reduced production of the land and the fragility of people's relationship with the land. People spoke of being *mwello* (squeezed from different directions), making it difficult to survive. Some people in the younger generation used the term *wahala* to speak of problems or difficulties. This word is common in the Upper West Region and even in other parts of Ghana, but it is not a Dagara word. It is a word from the Hausa language, a trading language common throughout much of West Africa. The common usage of this Hausa word in Dagara community discourse could reflect not only the importation of foreign words into Dagara, but the penetration of foreign problems into the Dagara way of life.

Most often the Dagara community discourse is about chronic conditions of vulnerability that impact people's lives and not sudden disasters, hazards or shocks. This finding provides significant insight. Dagara people are more concerned with lifelong issues and long term sustainability for themselves and their communities than with predicting and reacting to acute events. This orientation is reflected in their language.

Resilience among Community Members

Dagara women and men live their lives within community. The separation identified in Western society between individual and community resilience is indistinct in Dagara society. Therefore, it is possible to build on the characteristics and traits of Dagara women and men—with the shared values and beliefs of the Dagara cosmovision and an understanding of the process of how one might respond to challenges—to explore some of the concepts embedded in the Dagara language that would suggest community resilience. The first of these is *yillo/yir*, or house in Dagara, which is much more than the physical structure of a house where an extended family lives. It is, more importantly, the social house or patriclan that an individual belongs to, which makes him or her part of an ancestral family that is represented almost anywhere Dagara people are found (Tengan, 1994). Similarly, *bello*, is the matriclan, one's mother's ancestral family that is also represented everywhere one finds Dagara people. It is these significant and intimate patriclan and matriclan relationships, supplemented by the *lonluore* (joking partners) and other ritualized relationships that bind the Dagara community together in a strong, complex web of community. *Fong* is the word for a physical village in Dagara, but captures in only a superficial way the sense of community that is so important to people and that must be conceptually at the centre of an understanding of community resilience for the Dagara.

Longta (belongingness) and *nolang* (unity and togetherness) are two fundamental concepts for the Dagara. *Longta* signifies very deep connections between individuals and clans within Dagara society. *Longta* has the meaning that “you are part of the other and the other is part of you”. This concept is powerful in that it binds the community together, gives them strength, and encapsulates both the rights and responsibilities one has in Dagara society. *Nolang* is spoken about as an essential ingredient in a household, a village and a clan. To have peace and prosperity *nolang* is necessary. Women speak of *nolang* specifically and of *songtaa* (to help others) as a form of women's solidarity that keeps the community strong.

There are also proverbs shared that capture the value of communality in the Dagara world view: *Nibe ayi be dang gem e* (two people cannot be foolish, people must iron out their differences through compromise and mutual understanding); *Ni bean be kore wob kuo o nyore*, (no one person can give an elephant water to drink, there must be cooperation to solve problems). At the same time, people realize there may be disagreements and tensions within relationships, reflected in the phrase *nyime ni zel mi langna kpier kye a nyime mi wa dun a zel bibir kang*, literally, “teeth and tongue stay under one roof, but teeth do bite tongue one day”. However, conflicts need to be moderated because both parties suffer whenever there is a quarrel: *nimir ba kono ka nyur tangna* (the eye cannot cry without the nose responding). These proverbs are significant for their messages, and also for their common usage to teach the younger generation values and a moral code through repetition and timely and appropriate articulation in everyday situations.

Baa lo eh baa lo ni baar diehn'u is also an important proverb for Dagara that captures the importance of community, cooperation, and the imperative to resolve differences. Literally, the proverb means “if two dogs are playing and one falls down, the other must also fall down for the game to continue.” This proverb vividly illustrates the spirit of compromise, togetherness, and support within Dagara culture, especially found among women.

It was also explained that it is common to praise households, families, or clans by saying, *debr ni be* (they are men), signifying they are men of bravery, men of trust, and men of calibre. Such families have the right to *toh nyaa* (touch their chest), or *mweh nyaa* (beat their chest in pride), which is usually positive, and inspirational—something to be emulated by others, although sometimes the attitude can become boastful and full of ego. People will also say of certain households, *be mourna* (they are doing well) or *yo villa* (they have a good name and can be an example for others). People will distinguish that a household can be rich (*be tera na*) in that they have acquired a lot of material goods, but they also need to be *nin saalo* (humanitarian) in order to

earn a good reputation. Such a positive reputation, and the respect such a family receives in the community, is important to the Dagara.

Frequently in discussions with communities, women and men of all age groups spoke of *tizaa fero tome* [the mutual responsibility or obligation one has as a member of the community for communal labour]. This expression was used frequently and was given various interpretations at different times. Some elders described it as something one is compelled to do, while others described it more as something one is expected to do and that one needs a very genuine reason for not being involved. A person could actually be fined by the village head if he or she did not take part. These different interpretations help to name the conceptual spectrum that includes participation, mutual responsibility, obligation, taboos, and imposed rules and regulations. For some Dagara people, the distinction related to communal labour was made on three levels: *yir tome* (obligatory household labour) *tizaa fero tome* (communal labour for which all members of a community have mutual responsibility), and *teng mal yella* (communal labour which a village head or other authority figure can impose on community members). People also spoke of *dien kob* which is the practice and expectation of young men to help work on their in-laws' farms during specific times of year to solidify the relationships between households and clans.

Taken collectively, all of the words, proverbs, and practices described above which are ingrained and used commonly in Dagara language and cultural expression construct a conceptual space in which communality plays a significant role. This nuanced concept of togetherness that can be identified with *nolang* and then combined with *kanyir* helps to name and understand the Dagara view of community resilience. Some young people translated community resilience directly from English as *teng kpeno* (our strength), but it is more complicated than that.

CONCLUSION

It would be very limiting to translate a few Dagare words directly for the English concept of “community resilience”. It is much more valuable to engage in community conversations in Dagare, with Dagara women and men of different generations, to iteratively sketch out the broad conceptual space that relates to community resilience within the Dagara context. In performing this exercise, words, phrases, and proverbs in the Dagara language have been identified that relate to concepts, characteristics, and values related to resilience and the process of resilience. The exercise has also led to the recognition of the intricate link between individual Dagara people and their communities' resilience and the understanding that community resilience for the Dagara is much more than the sum of resilience of individuals. Individual resilience contributes to community resilience, community resilience contributes to individual resilience, and the sum is greater than the parts. As a result of these findings a conceptual space has been outlined for further exploration and illumination of community resilience with the Dagara people. Ultimately the articulation of detailed understandings of resilience should grow from this conceptual space and the sharing of endogenous mechanisms that exist, and that can be strengthened, to build more resilient communities in the future⁵.

REFERENCES

- Bangnikon, L. D. (1999). *Wisdom to guide you: A book of Dagara proverbs, wisdom and humour with English translations and comments*. Tamale, NR, Ghana: St. Charles Secondary (High) School.
- Bedekuru, A. E. (1996). *Exposition of the Dagara morality as brought out in their proverbs*. Wa, UWR, Ghana: Wa Catholic Press.
- 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: The limits of invention*. (204 – 225). New York: St. Martin's Press.

⁵ Thanks to Dr. Atia Apusigah who provided early inspiration, a review, and many helpful suggestions for the completion of this paper.

Berkes, F. & Folke, C. (1998). "Linking social and ecological systems for resilience and sustainability." In F. Berkes, & C. Folke (Eds.) *Linking social and ecological systems: management practices and social mechanisms for building resilience* (pp.1-26). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bodomo, A. (1997). *The structure of Dagaare*. Stanford, CA: CSLI.

Creswell, J.W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. (2005). *The Sage handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Denzin, N.K.; Lincoln, Y.S.; Smith, L.T. (2008). *Handbook of critical and indigenous methodologies*. Los Angeles: Sage.

Durand, J. B. (1953). *Dagaare – English Dictionary*. Navrongo, Ghana: St. John Bosco's Press.

Fletcher, D. (2005). "What is "community resilience"? Constructing a Transdisciplinary definition." Monogram. Interdisciplinary PhD program. Halifax: Dalhousie University.

Huberman, A.M. & Miles, M.B. (2002). *The Qualitative Research Companion*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. (2004). *World disasters report: focus on community resilience*. Geneva, Switzerland: International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

Kirmayer, L.J.; Sehdev, M.; Whitley, R.; Dandeneau, S.F.; Isaac, C. (2009). "Community Resilience: Models, Metaphors and Measures. *Journal of Aboriginal Health, November, 2009*. P. 62-117.

Kulig, J.C.; Edge, D. and Joyce, B. (2008). "Community resilience as a measure of collective health status: perspectives from rural communities." *Canadian Journal of Nursing Research 40 (3)*, p. 92-110.

Miller, F.; Osbahr, H.; Boyd, E.; Thomalla, F.; Bharwani, S.; Ziervogel, G.; Walker, B.; Birkmann, J.; van der Leeuw, S.; Rockstrom, J.; Hinkel, J.; Downing, T.; Folke, C. and Nelson, D. (2010). "Resilience and Vulnerability: Complimentary or conflicting concepts?" *Ecology and Society 15 (3)*: 11. [online]

Potter, J. & Wetherell, M. (1994). "Analyzing Discourse." In Bryman, A and Burgess, R.G. (eds). *Analyzing Qualitative Data*, London: Routledge.

Secombe, K. (2002). "Beating the odds" versus "changing the odds": poverty, resilience, and family policy. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 64(2)*, 384-394.

Smith, L.T. (2001). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. New York: Zed Books.

Tengan, E. B. (1994). *The social structure of the Dagara: The House and the Matriclan as axes of Dagara social organization* (The Victor Series 3). Tamale, Ghana: St. Victor's Major Seminary

Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is ceremony: indigenous research methods*. Halifax, Fernwood

REPRINTED FROM:

Apusigah, A.A. (Ed) (2015). *Bridging Worlds: interfacing indigenous and conventional knowledges for development in Ghana*. Accra: Sundel Services. P. 20-30.