

”Ka Biε Ba Yor”^{*1}: Labor Migration among the Dagaaba of the Upper West Region of Ghana, 1936–1957

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ABSTRACT

The Upper West region (UWR) of Ghana has served as a reservoir of labor for the southern part of the country for most of the twentieth century and today one can find at least three generations of migrants in any given community whose experiences both mirror and differ substantially from migrants in other parts of Africa. Attempts to explain this phenomenon have centered on theories of overpopulation, taxation, lack of resources, and “bright lights,” which compelled northerners – Dagaaba to migrate to the south in search of wage labor. These explanations of migration are inadequate because they are constrained by a static, normative vision of the lone twentieth century migrant worker traveling south in search of wage labor bereft of pre-colonial precedents. This article contributes to the on-going discussion on labor migration in Africa by foregrounding the internal ways in which communities themselves shaped migration through extended social debates over production and reproduction.

Keywords: *Labor Migration, Dagaaba, Upper West Region, Ghana*

INTRODUCTION

The first attempts to investigate the causes and effects of labor migration on African societies came in the 1930s and 1940s in southern Africa, “within the context of heightened colonial fears about what was perceived to be a causal relationship between labor migration and the low standards of nutrition, the unchecked spread of venereal diseases, and the sharply declining birth rates” (Lovett 1996: 2). In West Africa however, no attempts were made to investigate

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¹ Ka Biε Ba Yor (lit. “if a child does not travel”). It is part of a saying/proverb among the Dagaaba that ka biε ba yor, u kun bang dunia (lit. if a child does not travel, s/he will not know the world).

labor migration until the late 1950s mainly because of the lack of a large settler population and therefore, the less obvious impact of migration on society (Masser et al. 1975).

Though historians have recently taken interest in African migration studies, this rich field as Manchuelle (1997) observes, remains the exclusive domain of sociologists and economists. Thus, the existing historiography on African migration processes and their origins is fragmentary and centered on migrants' adjustment to urban life rather than the migration process itself (Masser et al. 1975).

This article focuses on the lived experiences of the Dagaaba men² mostly from the Nadowli district of the UWR³ who migrated to southern Ghana between 1936, when forced labor was officially abolished in the Gold Coast, and 1957 when the Gold Coast attained independence from Great Britain. It explores why people whose land was not expropriated, who were neither forced, nor overburdened by tax obligations (as some scholars tend to argue), who remembered of their past as “it rained well and we had enough to eat” willingly migrated to other parts of the country in search of wage labor. While their predecessors were forced to migrate to the south by harsh colonial policies, the Dagaaba men who migrated between 1936 and 1957 did so willingly – in the absence of force or coercion. I will argue that Dagaaba men migrated and continue to migrate today for a complex set of reasons that are rooted in the internal socioeconomic dynamics of their societies, which change over time, generation, and space. This article departs from the scholarly tradition that explained labor migration in African societies as a colonial construction and solely in terms of push-pull factors. Dagaaba migration to southern Ghana between 1936 and 1957 was an adventure – “to see the world” and gain experience. It did not begin with colonial conquest; it had its roots in the pre-colonial past – in the slave trade, but more especially, in the period following Asante's defeat of Gonja (18th century) through the Zabarima and Samorian invasions of the northwest in the late 19th century.⁴ Although the imposition of

² While not discounting the role of women in the migration process, I focus mainly on the experiences of men because they formed the bulk of migrants during the period under review. The few women who migrated during the period said that they did so along side their husbands – they migrated because of their husbands.

³ The Upper West region was created in 1983 by subdividing the then Upper Region into two (Upper East and Upper West) regions. With a total area of 18,476sq.km and a population of 576, 583, the region is not only the youngest but also the least populated of the ten regions in Ghana. See *Ghana 2000 Population and Housing Census: Summary Report of Final Results*, (Accra: Ghana Statistical Service, 2002): 23.

⁴ The literature that has addressed northern Ghana's relations with the south, especially with Asante in the pre-colonial era is vast. However, there is consensus that “the non-centralized societies to the north and east formed a pool of manpower that the Gonja raided to supply themselves and Asante with slaves. See for example, Jack Goody, *The Over-Kingdom of Gonja*, in *West African Kingdoms in the Nineteenth Century*, D. Forde and P.M. Kaberry (eds.), Oxford; Oxford University Press, (1967): 182-183. See also Ivor Wilks, *The Northern Factor in Asante History*. Legon: University of Ghana Press, (1961).

colonial rule may have transformed the nature and pattern of migration, Dagaaba migration to southern Ghana during the colonial period, was not new.

1. LABOR MIGRATION: A WEST AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

A number of studies conducted in West Africa in the late 1950s and 1960s privileged economic factors as principally responsible for labor migration. Kirk-Greene (1956) for example, concluded that the “Hill Tribes” of Northern Adamawa (Nigeria) migrated to acquire tax-money and that young men in particular, migrated in order to purchase material goods like clothes and shoes. Similarly, Skinner’s (1965) study of the Mossi of Burkina Faso revealed that their mass migration to southern Ghana and the Ivory Coast was motivated by economic reasons. According to Skinner (1965: 66) when migrants were asked why they left, “the answers were similar and extremely repetitious; I am poor; I need money to pay taxes and to buy clothes.”

In the post independence period migration studies in West Africa tended to focus on the problems of urbanization and the impact of urban unemployment on national development (Masser et al. 1975: 5). The socioeconomic situation of migrants was emphasized and focus was on the problems that migrants were likely to face at their destinations rather than the problems that might have compelled them to leave their homes in the first place (ibid).

The most commonly used model to explain labor migration in West Africa however, stressed historical and structural factors embedded in a number of theories including the dependency theory, the center-periphery framework and the global accumulation perspective. Amin (1974) for example, argues that the overall strategy of colonial-style development is the root cause of labor migration. To him, in the process of development, migration becomes a channel through which labor is drawn from the periphery into the capitalist core.

More recently, Cordell and others (1996) have emphasized the internal dynamics of West African societies, especially the household in shaping the migration phenomenon. Though the household approach is very insightful, I suggest, we need to re-examine the composition of the African household – beyond a homogeneous entity comprising of a husband, wife and children. For example, how do we explain migration decisions in polygynous families or households, which are still very common in Africa today? Based on the findings of this study, I argue that migration decisions in most households, especially polygynous families are at the very least, conspiracies between mothers and children but not with fathers or other family members.⁵

⁵ The majority of interviewees (90 per cent) used the term *zor* (to run away) to describe their migration to the south. But all of them admitted that they had discussed their decision to migrate with their mothers but not their fathers. Some even said that it was their mothers who gave them the money to travel.

In the northern Ghanaian context, a number of studies have been conducted to investigate labor migration since the 1960s but the majority of them are development-oriented (see for example, Hilton 1966; Hunter 1967; Dickson 1968; Thomas 1973; Plang 1979, Songsore 1983, Brukum 1998). Basically, what these studies tried to do was to view labor migration as a direct aftermath of a deliberate colonial policy to under-develop the north. Songsore and Denkabe (1995: 10) for example, argue that the present underdevelopment of the northern sector of the country has been the result of a deliberate colonial policy to starve the north of development by turning it into a labor reserve to serve the interests of the southern cocoa and mining industries, and the metropolitan economy. Thus the standard texts on migration, especially the works of Caldwell (1969); Hill (1963); Crisp (1984); Songsore (1983) and more recently Songsore and Denkabe (1995); Dumett (1998) and Brukum (1998) have focused mainly on the role of the state in shaping the processes of migration and uneven-development in the country to the almost total exclusion of the voices of the migrants themselves, and change over time.

Only Van Hear (1982) conducted a rigorous examination of labor migration in northern Ghana and described how northern labor was recruited and incorporated into capitalist agriculture. In his view, many northerners were incorporated as migrant laborers for the cocoa industry, while those who remained were turned from “predominantly subsistence cultivation to small-scale production for the market ...which sustained the export economy of the south” (p.3) Lentz and Erlmann (1989), for their part, have traced the origins of an urban labor force in Ghana to developments in the industrial sector after World War II and during the immediate post independence period. To them, the majority of this emerging labor force was drawn from migrants from the northern part of the country.

In recent years, attention has been paid to the increasing feminization of migrant labor in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa. Agarwal and others (1994: 2), for example, in their study on the working girl child (*kayayoo*) observed that many young girls from the north migrate south to work in Accra and other cities. These girls (*kayayoo*s), who are mostly school drop-outs, view “self employment as the only way to acquire minimum assets for either better marriage prospects or greater economic stability,” they added. While these studies are vital to our understanding of north-south migration in Ghana, they exclude the experiences of ordinary men and women in shaping these processes. Yet it is essential that household reproduction and local communities take center stage in investigations of labor migration.

2. LOCATING THE DAGAABA IN NORTHERN GHANA

The Dagaaba are located in the UWR in the northwestern corner of Ghana. They occupy three (Nadowli, Jirapa-Lambusie and Lawra-Nadom) of the five

administrative districts of the region and constitutes about 56 per cent of the population. The other groups are the Wala (16 per cent) and Sisala (15 per cent). The organization of Dagaaba society features a communal mode of production in which village communities are relatively autonomous, and the earth-priest (*tendaana*) mediates between people and the land (Songsore & Denkabe 1995). According to Songsore and Denkabe (1995: 74), “if social differentiation at the level of the larger society could be described as rudimentary for most areas [in today’s Upper West Region], the same could be said for the household political economy.”

As in other parts of northern Ghana, the household structure of authority is patriarchal and based on male-headed units of extended families, consisting of one or several wives, their children and often extended with unmarried or elderly relatives. The most important means of production, land, is controlled by men because of the belief that male hunters established village boundaries (Songsore and Denkabe 1995: 74). The region is characterized by a single rainfall season which falls between May and October (wet season) with an average total of 100–115 cm of rain per annum. Despite the pattern of rainfall, the economy is predominately agricultural with over 80 per cent of the population depending on farming for their livelihood (Songsore and Denkabe 1995: 1). Other economic activities include fishing and trading in village markets, many of which follow a six-day cycle. The non-literacy rate in the region is very high (75.5 per cent) and is higher for females (69.4 per cent) than it is for males. This brief overview of the geography, socioeconomic and political organization of the Dagaaba provides the context through which we can examine the reasons why men from the area migrated to southern Ghana between 1936 and 1957.

3. DAGAABA MIGRATION TO SOUTHERN GHANA, 1936–1957

While the roots of Dagaaba migration to southern Ghana can be traced to the pre-colonial past, the imposition of colonial rule and the establishment of a capitalist economy in the Gold Coast led to the incorporation of the Northern Territories and its people into the colonial and international economies.⁶ The Dagaaba like other regional peoples were required to contribute their labor resources to colonial pursuits in the mines, plantations and other sectors of the economy mainly in the southern regions of the country. As such, the first batch of state-sponsored recruited laborers from the Northwestern Province (now UWR) was sent to the mines at Tarkwa in 1909.⁷

⁶ Northern Ghana was annexed and incorporated into the rest of the Gold Coast together with Asante in 1901. For a detailed discussion, see Kimble, David. *A Political History of Ghana, 1850-1928*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963.

⁷ Mines Labor, 1909, Northern Regional Archives of Ghana (NRG), NRG 8/17/1, Tamale.

It comes as no surprise that most explanations of north-south migration view it as a colonial construction and linked to the functions of capitalism. But as Manchuelle (1997: 8) points out, economic motivations alone are not enough to explain the migratory behaviors of people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds throughout sub-Saharan Africa. It is therefore important that a search for the reasons why people in sub-Saharan Africa migrate in search for wage labor be extended beyond the simplistic explanations embedded in push-pull theories because as we shall see, Dagaaba men migrated between 1936 and 1957 for a set of complex reasons.

In order to understand the reasons why Dagaaba men willingly migrated to the south between 1936 and 1957, I conducted interviews among 50 returned migrants aged 60 years or more mostly from the Nadowli District.⁸ Based on the evidence that these men provided, I will argue that between 1936 and 1957, Dagaaba men migrated to southern Ghana for two reasons: first, “to see the world” – a world that was “created” for them by the colonial state in the south. Second, to satisfy their taste for European consumer goods, a taste they acquired as a result of the influences of colonial rule. Colonialism had lured these men not only into “wanting” but into “needing” European manufactured goods such as bicycles, towels, walking sticks, hats, and blankets (to mention a few).⁹ In contrast to other parts of the continent, colonial taxation and the payment of bride-price were not causes of labor migration among the Dagaaba.

From the sample, 80 per cent mentioned adventure – “to see the world and gain experience” as the main reason why they migrated to the south. To them, migration was an opportunity to gain new ideas and learn things that they would otherwise not know if they had stayed at home. This is explained by the pattern of development in Ghana which was and still is such that all the social amenities are concentrated in the southern part of the country. Ladouceur (1979: 252) offers the most compelling view on this in his study of political change in northern Ghana. He notes, “development, however defined, always seemed a mirage on the horizon, the southern horizon, for the Northerners’ images of the meaning of development in an African context were and continue to be derived from what they observed in Southern Ghana.”

This suggests that if northerners wanted to have a taste of modern facilities, they had to travel to the south. For example, I asked an interviewee whether he had migrated to the south to work as a young man and why?

Yes, who didn’t want to see places? I wanted to go and see how the place looked like but my father will not let me go. But later, when I was for

⁸ The interviews were conducted in ten villages in the district namely, Kaleo, Charia, Jang, Ombo, Kaaha, Sankana, Takpo, Nator, Navilli and Nadowli. All the 50 interviewees were farmers and none of them had a formal education.

⁹ Timothy Burke made a similar observation among Zimbabwean migrants. See, Timothy Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption, and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe*, (Durham, NC, 1996).

myself, I went to Tarkwa and worked in the mines for nine months. I wanted to see ‘Kumasi.’¹⁰

Although this interviewee did not say why his father refused to let him go, there is a sense of parental control in his story. He was only able to go to ‘Kumasi’ when he was “for himself” – independent. Clearly, he wanted to go to ‘Kumasi’ “to see the world” as all others were doing.

In response to a question whether he had traveled to ‘Kumasi’ to work as a young man another interviewee remarked:

What kind of ‘Kumasi’ are you talking about? Do you know anybody in this whole area who has not gone to ‘Kumasi’ before? All these old men you see around have all gone to ‘Kumasi’ before. At the time we were growing up, it was every young man’s *nyanka*¹¹ to travel to ‘Kumasi’. If you did not go, you could not move with your peers. So I also went there to see things for myself.¹²

He continued that he returned home and went back to the south again and recounted his experiences in ‘Kumasi’ in very illuminating ways. He also explained that:

When I was growing up, nothing worried us as things are today. It rained well and we had enough to eat. So when we went to ‘Kumasi’ it was not because we were suffering. We just wanted to *nye dunia* (see the world). This time, it’s no longer raining and when you farm you get nothing. That is why all the young men are running away to ‘Kumasi.’¹³

Another interviewee said that he went to ‘Kumasi’ several times:

I went to Odumasi, Prestea, Takoradi and Tarkwa. I went to all these places. When I was a young man, there was enough food and everything was fine but I did not know any place. Then you hear ‘Kumasi,’ ‘Kumasi,’ so I also decided to go and see for myself. “You see” when you travel, you come back home feeling proud because when your friends talk, you can also say something.¹⁴

¹⁰ Interview with Bornaah Jebuni (92 years) on August 5, 1999. Kaleo. Kumasi is the second largest city in Ghana and the capital of the Ashanti Region. However, Kumasi as used in this context and several others does not mean the city of Kumasi itself. This is because northerners generally refer to the whole of southern sector of the country as Kumasi so I will make a distinction between the two by putting ‘Kumasi’ as used in this context in quotation marks.

¹¹ The closest translation of the term *nyanka* is pride, but in the local language (Dagaari) it means something more than pride (*polibu*).

¹² Interview with Raphael Eledi (c.80 years) on August 5, 1999. Charia. Raphael did not know his date of birth but he said that he was over twenty years old before he went to ‘Kumasi’ and remembered that this took place in 1948.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Interview with Hillary Kanyegbani (70 years) on 5 August 1999. Charia.

What these stories suggest is that migrating to ‘Kumasi’ was a fashion or a form of initiation to prove that one had reached the age of adulthood, and was a dream for every young man at that time. In other words, peer pressure and age-group dynamics were key factors in the decision to migrate in order “to see the world and gain experience,” as a majority of them put it. Like these interviewees, another remarked that he did not want to wait for anybody to come back and tell him stories so he decided to go and see things for himself. “You know the saying that ‘*ka biε ba yor*’ he won’t know the world? That was why I went there.”¹⁵

Like migrants in other parts of Africa, especially southern Africa where migration to the mines in South Africa was seen as a proof of maturity, Dagaaba migrants also saw travel to ‘Kumasi’ as increasing their chances of attracting young women for marriage. For example, an interviewee remarked that “if you did not go to ‘Kumasi,’ the girls will not even mind you when you talk to them.” According to him, all the girls were interested in pupil-teachers (school-leavers) or people who had traveled down south and were capable of sending them there one day. Thus, the only way young men who did not have the opportunity to go to school could attract girls was to travel to the south.¹⁶ This suggests that even though women during the period under review did not migrate themselves to find work as the males were doing, their role in the decision of young men to migrate can not be underestimated.

Such concerns among Dagaaba migrants are consistent with views from other parts of Africa for the same period. For example, Skinner (1975: 27) observed that Mossi migrants “were motivated by the maxim that *Qui n’a pas été à Kumassi n’ira pas au paradis* (he who has not been to ‘Kumasi’ will not go to heaven),” and that the majority of Burkinabé migrated to southern Ghana simply because of this maxim. Likewise, Schapera (1947: 116–117) noted that among the Tswana, “going out to work for the first time is regarded by many youth as a form of adventure, and some admittedly go mainly in order to experience for themselves the attractions and excitement described by their more experienced elders.” These examples suggest that the view of labor migration as an “adventure” was not limited to Dagaaba migrants or even migrants from West Africa alone. However, while these similarities can be explained by what Songsore (1983) has termed “the logic of predatory colonial capitalism,” – the bifurcation of the colonial state, which was the same everywhere in Africa, the Dagaaba case appears unique because unlike their counterparts in other parts of Africa who either migrated because of tax obligations or to acquire money for bride-price payments, they did not migrate for such reasons.

The view that labor migration between the mid-1930s and late 1950s was an “adventure” for Dagaaba is further reflected in nicknames unique to their generation – names such as: *Yobanyeng* (lit. travel and learn sense), *Yonye*,

¹⁵ Interview with Issifu Badigu (68 years) on 2 March 2002. Takpo.

¹⁶ Interview with Simon Kanbambe (62 years) on 15 January 2002. Nanville.

Kpemornye, *Gaazienye* (lit. travel and see), and *Yobanzie* (lit. travel and know places), *Tanye* (lit. get there and see), *Kabiεbayor* (lit. if a child does not travel...), and many others that migrants adopted as part of their experience in the migrant labor system in the south. What is interesting about these nicknames is that they not only convey memories of the “adventure” that most of these migrants claimed to have embarked upon, but they also explain the nature of their experiences in the south. For example, an interviewee explained how he got his nick name, *Kabiεbayor*:

This world is such that you have to travel in order to see other places and learn sense. You can’t just sit here in your village and think that you are a ‘man’; you have to travel and when you do, you have to be proud of it.¹⁷

He continued that because of his name, he does not need to tell people that he ever traveled to ‘Kumasi’. Anyone who hears the name knows what it means. Though he is still very proud of his experiences in the south, he admits that those were difficult and hard times. He lamented that “it was not like today where you need a cocoa sack or a big basket to go and collect your pay and cannot count [describing the devaluation of the Ghanaian Cedi today]. Those days we worked really hard for nothing.”¹⁸

Nevertheless, a report on the conditions of labor in the Northern Territories during the tide of colonialism noted that:

It has been frequently stated and is now generally accepted that the reasons why the men leave the North for work in the Colony and Ashanti are as follows: to make money to take home either as savings or as goods, ...[and] because there is little to keep them in the North during the dry season when there is no farming to be done and food and water are short.¹⁹

This view of the causes of labor migration in northern Ghana has echoed over the years (see for example, Berg 1965; Nabila 1974). Admittedly, these reasons might explain why people migrated and still migrate, especially from rural to urban centers at a particular point in time, but the causes of labor migration are not static. As such, these explanations do not provide a general theory that would help us understand why people migrate in and out of different geographical areas across time.

Table 1 below illustrates the numbers and percentages of people counted away from home from the main ethnic groups of the Northwestern Province in 1948 and 1960.²⁰ The figures show that in 1948 only 9.8 per cent of the total

¹⁷ Interview with Charles Dandiibu (66 years) on 6 February 2002. Kaleo.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Annual Report on the Conditions of Labor in the Northern Territories for 1952, Northern Regional Archives of Ghana (NRG), NRG 8/17/8, Tamale.

²⁰ It is important to note that during the colonial period, Gonja was part of the Northwestern Province.

population was away from home. In 1960, the figure increased to 34.8 per cent of the total population. But what is really important about the 1960 figures is the number of Dagaaba women represented – in comparison to the number of males. This can be explained by the fact that the 1960s did not only mark a shift in the nature or composition of Dagaaba migrants but it also marked the beginning of shifts in the reasons why people migrated (see for example, Abdul-Korah 2004).

Table 1. *Numbers and Percentages of Main Northwestern Ethnic Groups Counted outside Northern Ghana, 1948 and 1960.*

Ethnic Group	1960 Males	% of Total	1960 Females	% of Total	1948 Number	% of Total
Dagaaba	24,860	24.1	10,570	10.7	11,725	9.8
Lobi	3,330	16.8	1,970	11.1	2,516	6.2
Wala	5,560	23.0	4,320	18.7	3,153	12.2
Sissala	5,080	17.4	2,930	9.7	1,784	4.2
Gonja	5,200	16.2	5,200	16.5	1,411	2.9
Total	44,030	19.5	24,990	13.3	20,589	7.1

Source: Jacob, Songsore, 1983. Intra-regional and Inter-regional Labor Migration in Historical Perspectives: The Case of North Western Ghana, Port Harcourt: Port Harcourt, p 17; see also Songsore and Denkabe, (1995): 28.

Though Songsore (1983) argued that the 1948 figures could be attributed to lack of transportation or transportation difficulties, my research findings suggest that there was little economic incentive to migrate to the south at this time. In most cases, the things that migrants brought back home with them were usually distributed in such a way that the migrants themselves ended up with very little. For example, an interviewee said that he worked in the south for one year and brought home £3.00; and after the chief, elders and other family members had taken their share, he had only 20 shillings left for himself.²¹ Several others described how their boxes were opened by the elders and many valuable items taken away from them. Writing about the same period (mid-1930s and 1940s), McCoy (1988: 38) notes in his personal memoir that:

On arrival back in their villages, the migrant laborers' first visit was to the chief. They told him what they had received in payment for their work and handed the money over to him. In some cases the chief would keep a good part of it for himself and return the rest. Each man would then present the remainder to the elder or head of his compound. If the latter were generous, he might allow him some pocket money, but it was never very much. No wonder the Dagaaba were reluctant to return to Kumasi under such arrangements.

²¹ Interview with Kobina Jebuni (70 years) on 5 January 2002. Kaleo.

McCoy went on to describe how the managers of one of the mines in the south wrote to them that they should announce their intention to recruit labor to the people and that they would arrange for their transportation to the mines in the south. Though he believed that the terms of the recruitment were generous and more attractive than they had been in the past, the majority of Dagaaba young men declined the offer. He notes, “their response to the offer, when we brought it to their attention, was anything but enthusiastic” (ibid). This suggests that the social structure of the Dagaaba did not warrant the toil that migrants had to go through in the mines and plantations. As McCoy again points out, it was not only strange but also shocking that when “the lorries did arrive, the drivers were surprised to find so few waiting to accept the offer of free transportation, advance pay and guaranteed seasonal employment” (ibid). This therefore reinforces my argument that the reasons why Dagaaba men migrated to the south between 1936 and 1957 were not economic.

As I have argued, migration is a dynamic process – the reasons why people migrate in search of wage labor change over time and generation. As such, it comes as no surprise that even though factors such as the need “to see the world” and “learn sense” as migrants put it, continued to be the dominant or most salient reasons why the majority migrated to the south during the period under review, there were others, especially those who migrated between the mid and late 1950s who were motivated by a combination of other factors – economic and social. For example, nearly ten per cent of the returned migrants interviewed mentioned economic factors in addition to “seeing the world,” as the reasons why they migrated to the south. As one interviewee clearly put it, “everybody knows that when you are going to ‘Kumasi’ you are going to see places,”²² so he did not have to explain his reason for migrating. In other words, the adventurous aspect of migration was obvious or a given. This interviewee said that he migrated to Obuasi to work in the mines because he wanted to buy a sewing machine and as soon as he bought it, he moved to Kumasi to learn to be a professional tailor. Another interviewee for his part said that he went to the south simply because he wanted to buy a bicycle. According to him, he asked for his uncle’s bicycle to visit his grandmother and he refused to give it to him so he decided to migrate in order to buy one for himself.²³ Another interviewee who had migrated to work in ‘Kumasi’ several times also mentioned that when he returned home in 1955, he did not want to go back again, but that he had to go back the following year because:

I came home without a bicycle and everyday there is a funeral here or there and you have to walk. So I went back to “Takodaadi” and worked in the hospital as a janitor for one year. I bought the bicycle for £12 and returned home on “Independence Day.” That was the day I arrived here in the village.²⁴

²² Interview with Martin Binbu (64 years) on 3 February 2002. Jang.

²³ Interview with Yakubu Yahaya (65 years) on 1 March 2002. Kaleo.

²⁴ Interview with Hillary Konkow (70 years) on 6 August 1999. Nadowli.

The need for a bicycle, which was very crucial in every young man's life, sent him back to 'Kumasi' as a migrant laborer. That is, his inability to generate cash income at home to buy the bicycle sent him back to 'Kumasi'. This is important because as Père (1988) points out, the bicycle had by the end of the twentieth century replaced the bow and arrow as the most important symbol of male courage and virility. Even more important is the fact that bicycles served as the most important means of transport in the region – allowing people to farm much further away from their homes.

The reasons for the slight shift in emphasis in the stories by the close of the 1950s – from “adventure” to the need to acquire various personal items such as bicycles as I have indicated are not remote. The influx of European goods, including bicycles, into Ghanaian markets had conditioned people, in this case, Dagaaba migrants, not only into wanting, but into needing these goods. “If you were a young man and you did not have a bicycle, your friends will laugh at you” an interviewee remarked. However, what is worth noting is that those migrants who were motivated by economic factors were “target” migrants. All of them said that they migrated in order to get money to buy a specific item and once they bought the item, they returned home.

In the Gold Coast, as in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, it is believed that after the abolition of forced labor in 1936, the colonial state employed taxation as a measure to directly or indirectly induce labor mobility to the areas endowed with colonial economic resources. However, the stories that returned migrants told suggests that even if this strategy worked in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa or even in the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast, it certainly did not work for the Dagaaba. In other words, if taxation or taxes were imposed on the Dagaaba in order to induce them to migrate to the south, it failed to achieve its purpose. For example, in answer to a question about the impact of taxation on their lives and whether taxation was an issue in their decision to migrate, the majority (90 per cent) of interviewees responded that, left to taxation alone, they would not have migrated because they could afford to pay their taxes through the sale of animals (sheep and goats) and birds (fowls and guinea fowls).

Some even mentioned other unorthodox ways of evading taxes such as going to stay in the farm or going on hunting expeditions for days or even weeks during the tax period. Like the Baule of the Ivory Coast, as Manchuelle (1997: 8) observed, “taxation did not achieve the purpose for which it was imposed” among the Dagaaba. It is clear from the above that economic factors were not a key motivation or reason why Dagaaba men migrated to 'Kumasi' during this period. However, while the majority as we have seen was motivated by adventure, others were motivated by social factors and it is to these social concerns of migrants that I now turn.

Some interviewees mentioned social factors as reasons for migrating to 'Kumasi,' and among them, the most important were witchcraft, domestic disputes and crime. Unfortunately, the literature on witchcraft in Ghana has focused mainly on southern communities, especially on Akan, Nzima and

Ashanti (see for example, Rattray 1959; Field 1960; Debrunner 1959; Bannerman-Richter 1982). But as Bannerman-Richter (1982) points out, in Ghana, as in other parts of West Africa, all the ethnic groups share the same witchcraft beliefs and attitudes in various shades and forms. He notes, “in all Akan, and probably in the entire nation of Ghana, and possibly even all West Africa, there is hardly [a] ... home where witchcraft is regarded as fiction. Not only are witches real, they are formidable and their tentacles reach far and wide” (p. 94).

Indeed, since the 1930s, there appears to have been a dramatic increase in witchcraft allegations throughout Ghana resulting in the emergence, especially in rural communities, of new shrines that were designed to provide supernatural protection to people of all walks of life. This continued through the 1950s mainly due to the rise of the “Nana Tongo” cult and also the proliferation of other cults such as Tigari, Senyon Kipo, Nangoro and many others from the northern part of the country into southern communities (Allman and Parker 2005). Field (1960: 13) for example, recorded a total of 2,537 cases concerning all aspects of life (prosperity, sickness, protection etc., etc.) reported by supplicants to deities in shrines in Ashanti during a routine *abisa*²⁵ and noted that the cause(s) of all these misfortunes was always witchcraft and or bad medicine.

Interestingly, though the word “witch” applies to both sexes in Ghana, it is used to refer to females in most cases. This, according to Bannerman-Richter (1982: 17) is due to the fact that it is generally accepted that the majority of witches are females. Females, he notes, “are also believed to be more active in bewitching and use their powers more frequently to cause harm than to do good; their brand of witchcraft is considered to be more potent, and they are more aggressive in their witching activities than males.” A female interviewee who had migrated to the south in the late 1950s and has since not returned to the Upper West Region explained the circumstances under which she left:

Hmm! It’s not everything that you talk about. But there is a popular saying back home that “*a wonbu mang kpe ning suogaa bogu*” (lit. It is only problems that will send a rabbit into a hole). But as I said it’s not everything that you talk about...*Suolung ban tuomo, n’ bie*” (lit. I was labeled a witch, my son). I was married but unfortunately for me I had two miscarriages. After the second miscarriage, rumor started in the village that I was a witch. Like a joke, the head of the family told me one morning to go to my parents. I went back to my parents and stayed there for a year and decided to come here because life was not worth living any more.²⁶

²⁵ *Abisa* is an Akan term which means to ask. It therefore refers to the session during which supplicants make their requests or present their problems to the deity.

²⁶ Interview with Mary (c 68 years) on 4 December 2001, (real name and place of interview withheld). This interviewee explained that her first two miscarriages were due to a medical condition and that after a couple visits to the hospital in the town she resides now, she became

Another female interviewee who also migrated because of witchcraft allegations attributed her plight to the complexities of Dagaaba society. She pointed out that even though both men and women participate in the craft, witchcraft allegations are gender specific – they defy masculinity because only women can be ostracized from society because of witchcraft allegations.²⁷

Closely connected to the witchcraft stories were other social issues such as domestic disputes and crime that returned migrants mentioned as reasons why they migrated to the south. For example, an interviewee explained that:

My step-father made me to go there. One day, I had an argument with the women on the farm. When they came home, they told my step-father he made me like this leaf lying down [worthless]. I got very angry and when Angaamwine [the man in this next house] returned from ‘Kumasi’ and was going back, I told my step-father that I wanted to join him to ‘Kumasi’. Though he was not happy, I left.²⁸

This and other similar stories are testimony that domestic disputes and the desire to escape parental control or elderly relatives, induced some Dagaaba to migrate and seek a livelihood away from home – in the south.

Similarly, another interviewee said that he ran away to ‘Kumasi’ because he was wrongly accused of stealing a goat and that his decision to run away was to avoid prosecution in the chief’s court, which would have jeopardized his chances of getting a wife.²⁹ This is consistent with Skinner’s (1985: 31) findings in Burkina Faso where by men who had committed crimes such as rape or theft, or those accused of adultery, ran away to Ghana or the Ivory Coast. Skinner however, argued that since these men “seldom returned home, this cannot be considered as true labor migration” (p.31). In contrast, I suggest that since these men left home in order to avoid punishment and by so doing, had to seek a livelihood through wage employment, they can be regarded as migrant laborers even though they were not “willing migrants,” as Manchuelle (1997) calls them.

As noted earlier, the need to obtain money to pay bride-price is often cited as one of the most important causes of labor migration in African societies. And several studies on labor migration in southern Africa in particular have linked the phenomenon to the need to acquire money in order to pay the bride-price (see for example, Schapera 1947, Watson 1958, Mbatha 1960). Bozzoli (1991: 82) for example notes that “for unmarried men, migration was to enable them to earn enough money to pay bride-wealth and the cost of wedding – in order to get married.” My research findings suggest no parallel process among Dagaaba

pregnant with a boy. She is the proud mother of five adult children. So she ended with a question that “*suoba taara la biehi?*” (lit. can a witch have children?).

²⁷ Interview with Saandeumah Dery (65 years) on 4 December 2001, (real name and place of interview withheld).

²⁸ Interview with Philip Dumba (63 years) on 8 January 2002. Nadowli.

²⁹ Interview with Mwinnia K. (60 years) on 6 February 2002. Kaleo.

men. None of the 50 interviewees mentioned bride-price as a reason for his migration. This could be explained by the fact that among the Dagaaba, young men are by custom not responsible for paying the bride-price of their first wife. It is usually the responsibility of the father or the family head, and in cases where the immediate family cannot afford it, the clan head is contacted and it becomes a clan responsibility. However, if that fails (which seldom happens), the boy’s maternal uncles are consulted for help, but under no circumstances is the burden put on the young man himself.

According to custom, the only time that a man is directly responsible for paying the bride-price of his own wife is when he decides to marry a second wife. An elder from the Manlaala clan in Kaleo explained that the bride-price for any wives after a man’s first wife becomes his responsibility because if a man decides to marry a second wife, it means that he is financially capable of taking care of her and, as such, he should be able to pay the bride-price as well.³⁰ In case of a divorce, the bride-price is usually returned as soon as the woman remarries – making it possible for the man to re-marry. Though the need to obtain money to pay the bride-price may be an important cause of labor migration in some African societies, it was certainly not the case among Dagaaba who migrated between 1936 and 1957.

As indicated earlier, Dagaaba women who migrated to ‘Kumasi’ between 1936 and 1957 were not many as compared to those in subsequent generations (see for example, Abdul-Korah 2004). Their minor role can be explained by a number of factors. First, the pattern of labor migration during this period was seasonal or short-term. And since the men did not stay away for very long, women were usually left behind. Second, there was a genuine fear among men as an interviewee attested that their wives might be taken away from them by other men in the south. However, the few women who migrated to the south during this period said that they accompanied their husbands to ‘Kumasi’ – they went to the south because their husbands were there.

4. CONCLUSION

This article has outlined the reasons why Dagaaba men migrated to the south between 1936 and 1957. It has demonstrated that Dagaaba migration to southern Ghana was not a colonial construction – it predated colonialism. However, the annexation and eventual imposition of colonial rule in the Northern Territories as a whole initiated a process of uneven-development or polarization in the Gold Coast – a capitalist core and a non-capitalist periphery. With these developments, the direction and the number of people who migrated in search of wage labor changed.

The evidence presented here also suggests that the reasons why Dagaaba men migrated and continue to migrate are not static – they change overtime and

³⁰ Interview with Kojo Dong (80 years) on 10 February 2002. Kaleo.

generation. While the majority of those who migrated to the south during the period under review was motivated by “adventure” – “to see places and learn sense,” others, especially those who migrated by the close of the period did so for a different set or combination of reasons. This shift, as I argue elsewhere, continued over time and generations – from adventure to economic and to ecological (reasons) by the turn of the millennium.³¹

This article has also demonstrated that colonial taxation policies and the payment of the brideprice did not play the same role in Dagaaba migration as they did in other parts of Africa. As the majority of them remembered, “the taxes were not much” and they could afford to pay it by selling animals and birds. The article has also demonstrated that Dagaaba society was structured in a way that made negotiation possible during bride-price payment. As such, situations whereby young men would migrate in search of money purposely to pay a bride-price were mostly avoided if not eliminated. Even among the Dagaaba today, it is a very big disgrace on the part of a father to create a situation whereby a son would have to pay the bride-price of his first wife.

This discussion has also confirmed that migrants did not just respond to favorable conditions at the receiving end (destination), but they also weighed carefully the conditions at home before deciding whether to migrate or not. This is demonstrated by the lack of enthusiasm among potential migrants in the 1930s and 1950s cases cited above. The majority of the men who voluntarily migrated to ‘Kumasi’ during the colonial period did so mainly “to see the world,” a world that was “created” for them in that part of the country by the colonial state. A handful also migrated in order to satisfy their taste for European manufactured consumer goods such as bicycles, radio sets, walking sticks, tea kettles, hats, towels and many more – a taste that they acquired as a result of colonial influence.

As such, any attempt to set up an airtight model or theory to adequately explain the process of rural-urban migration in colonial sub-Saharan Africa as a UN (1990) report suggests, “faces severe and probably insurmountable problems in the form of the large number of non-economic and non-quantifiable factors operating in this most complex process.” As I have suggested, this is because the reasons why people migrated and continue to migrate are not fixed. Admittedly, migration into urban centers might be vital to national economic development, but it is misleading to suggest that all people who migrated from rural to urban centers did so for purely economic reasons.

³¹ In the course of the research, I realized that the reasons interviewees gave for migrating could be grouped under three broad headings (adventure, economic and ecological) over three generations or periods. See Gariba B. Abdul-Korah, *Migration, Ethnicity and Uneven-development in Ghana: The Case of the Upper West Region in the Twentieth Century*. PhD. Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2004. See also, Gariba B. Abdul-Korah, "Where Is Not Home: Dagaaba Migrants in the Brong Ahafo Region of Ghana, 1980 to the Present." *African Affairs*, 106/422 (2006), pp. 71-94.

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