

THE THIRD BAGRE





Bagre shrine (Bo wen) in the neck of the granary at Bonyiri's house, Chaa, Birifu, 1969.

THE THIRD BAGRE

A MYTH REVISITED

Jack Goody

and

S.W.D.K. (Kum) Gandah

CAROLINA ACADEMIC PRESS

Durham, North Carolina

*Carolina Academic Press
Ritual Studies Monographs*



Pamela J. Stewart
and
Andrew Strathern
Series Editors

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ISBN 0-89089-229-6
LCCN 2003107363

CAROLINA ACADEMIC PRESS

700 Kent Street
Durham, NC 27701
Tel (919) 489-7486
Fax (919) 493-5668
www.cap-press.com

Printed in the United States of America

This book is dedicated to my friend and collaborator, S.W.D.K. Gandah. We worked together on and off for some fifty years and he checked all my writings on the Bagre. He would have done the same with the present introduction had he not died in Accra, Ghana, early in 2001 (JRG).





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Foreword

Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern

Series Editors

We are delighted to present Jack Goody's *The Third Bagre: A Myth Revisited* as the third title in this Series.¹ The materials that are presented here are valuable representations of expressive performance, of identity formation, and of emplacement through ritual contextualization and myth narration. The performance itself is encoded with perceived values, historical identities, and a keen awareness of the fluidity of social existence within a local cosmological framework, all expressed through narratives of events. *The Third Bagre* clearly demonstrates the importance of memory and emplaced activities in the establishment and the retention of local identities and in the maintenance of an overall cosmic balance between humans, the spirit world, and the environment.

Goody's Introduction to this collection astutely points to the simultaneous fixity and fluidity of myth and oral recitation, "The myth unlocks no single door as it exists in the plural, changing radically over time. It is obviously one part of culture but hardly a key to the whole. That at least is the case with the Bagre". We find a strong parallel with this statement in the materials that we have ourselves gathered from the Hagen (Western Highlands Province) and Duna (Southern Highlands Province) areas of Papua New Guinea.

Among Hageners we have argued that mythic narratives deal with "the connections between people and the land, . . . [and reveal] differences in the ways that people conceptualize their claims in circumstances of change" (Stewart and Strathern 2001: 79). In different versions of origin stories we find fluidity and fixity co-expressed. For example, the power of Sky Beings is thought to be perpetual (or fixed) while at the same time this power is capable of temporally and spatially re-creating (moving) its presence: thus, being fluid. The same sort of duality is found in Hagen balladic recitations (Strathern and Stewart 2000; Stewart and Strathern 2002a).

For the Duna, historical memories of former ritual sites remain powerful sources of knowledge as well as reservoirs of emotional representations of local identity. One way in which this knowledge is used is through the singing/chanting of balladic tales called *pikono*. These performances recount the ways that people experience their lives and how they envision their ritual practices and beliefs intersubjectively.² This expres-

1. The first volume in the Ritual Studies Monograph Series was '*The Spirit is Coming!*' *A Photographic-Textual Exposition of the Female Spirit Cult Performance in Mt. Hagen* (Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart), 1999, Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh. The second volume in this Series was *Fragments From Forests and Libraries, Essays by Valerio Valeri* (Janet Hoskins, ed.), 2001, Carolina Academic Press.
2. *Pikono* utilizes a much wider vocabulary than day-to-day Duna speech. This adds to the pleasure of the experience for the listener. The recitations can go on for hours, sometimes beginning at sundown and lasting until early morning. The performance itself is conducted in darkness,

sive genre is interwoven into the fabric of Duna life. New performers learn how to adopt and refashion the old stories, weaving new meanings into them and embellishing them.

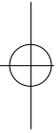
Another form of recited knowledge among the Duna is *malu* (origin stories/genealogies).³ In the 1990s *malu* were beginning to acquire a new use in the marshaling of narratives to negotiate with mining companies and those exploring for oil (Stewart and Strathern 2000a, 2000b, 2002b). For example, in 1999 an oil company began drilling in the Duna's Strickland river area. While we were living nearby, a new myth was suddenly created and spread throughout the valley. This myth, which appeared in several variations, brought together and re-energized *malu* knowledge and ritual knowledge from other arenas. Central to the myth were the actions of a female spirit, the *Payame Ima* (a guardian of the environment), and the image of a giant, the *tindi auwene* (ground-owner), whose body was said to be riddled with holes through the actions of mining operations: the narratives said that the giant's body stretches to all corners of Papua New Guinea where mines have been established, but his heart was positioned directly under the drilling bit at the Strickland river (Stewart and Strathern 2002c). This myth-creation showed how people try to come to grips with dramatic changes and bring them into a realm they can understand and feel they can partly control. The most knowledgeable leaders in different groups highlighted particular aspects of their *malu* narratives so as to better connect their clan with the potential new source of wealth (in this case oil). This narrative is a striking instance of the power of myth. Like the materials that Goody presents here, oral narratives continue to be an important part of life. They intertwine practical, symbolic, and ideological concerns and continue to be used in ingenious ways.

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the singer should not have light shown on him, relieving the listener from visual stimuli and thus freeing the mind's eye to develop images from the sung/chanted words. *Pikono* describe relationships between the local people and their landscape (environment), including the spirit beings who dwell there.

3. *Malu* include the "mythical" origins of a particular Duna clan group and record the sacred places of the clans. Many of the spirit beings that are referred to in *pikono* narratives also appear in parts of *malu* narratives.

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The Bagre in All Its Variety

The Bagre is the name of a 'secret' association found among the LoDagaa of North West Ghana and in neighbouring communities. We have already published two volumes containing a transcription and translation of the long work that is recited in the course of the complex initiation recitals in the settlement of Birifu. The first was called *The Myth of the Bagre* (1972), the second, translated into French as well as English, *Une Recitation du Bagré* (1981). The present work contains further transcription and translations, especially from other settlements, the parishes of Gomble and Biro, which are 'under' Birifu where the other versions were recorded, but mainly from Lawra situated some ten miles away, which preserves most of the ritual but offers a very different 'myth' to accompany it.

To understand the recitation, one needs some knowledge of the association, the accompanying rituals and to some extent the society itself. These I will provide briefly later. But I want to begin by saying something about the importance of this recitation for the study of 'myth', for the study of standardized oral forms ('oral literature'), for the study of 'primitive thought' and for the comparative study of cognitive processes such as memory.

The 'Myth of the Bagre' is the long recitation, in rhythmic speech, and in 1949 I recorded a version by dictation from Benima Dagarti necessarily outside the ritual setting; inside would obviously have been impossible before the advent of portable tape recorders, a fact well worth remembering when considering earlier versions of oral performance. It took me some ten days to write down and many years to annotate and translate, first with the aid of assistants in the locality, and especially in the later stages helped by S.W.D.K. (Kum) Gandah, a teacher, entrepreneur, politician, from the same settlement of Birifu who had come to England in the 1960s as the result of political difficulties, and with whom I later collaborated on further versions. That first version was published by the Clarendon Press, Oxford, in 1972.

Meanwhile, Gandah and I returned in 1970 with the aim of recording a version actually being recited. But it was not the right time of the year for the ceremonies and my companion had to persuade his Nayiili lineage, with a few other kinsfolk, to perform outside the chief's house. I myself could not approach too close because of my uninitiated status but I installed myself in a hut nearby where I operated the tape recorder and made notes. That is the recitation we published in Paris in *Classiques africaines* (Goody and Gandah 1981). This recital included another version of the White, the Black, and the Funeral Bagre which should only be performed at the death of a member. Its presentation on this occasion aroused doubts in the minds of some members and subsequent misfortunes were attributed to this event. The only recordings made in the context of an actual ceremonial performance are the versions published in this present volume and recorded in Ngmanbili, in Gomble, Biro and in Lawra.

One of these was recorded in a central part of Birifu where the previous versions were recorded; that is the Ngmanbili Black. Then there is one White and one Black

from a parish on the outskirts of Birifu, namely Goble, and a further version of the Black from the neighbouring parish of Biro, which was recited a few days later by the same Speaker but which is substantially shorter (1646 lines compared with 2781). A very different series of recordings comes from the local administrative centre of Lawra, situated some ten miles to the north of Birifu. There a similar sequence of ceremonies was performed, with more or less the same gestures and significances. But here we recorded not simply the main recitations but all the verbal interaction that went on while the rituals were being performed and leading up to the former. Some of this transcription may seem inconsequential, even noise, but it gives a first hand idea of what takes place at such performances and how they are organized. These recordings include the recitation of the White Bagre, much reduced compared with the Birifu versions; the Black is virtually absent, partly I believe due to the failure of our machinery. But they also include a long legend of how the clan organizing the performances, the Kusiele patriline, arrived in the vicinity and how it began to perform the Bagre. This legend is recited both in prose and in verse—that is in the short rhythmic phrases I transcribe as ‘lines’, each of which has one or two strongly stressed syllables.

Why should we consider the Bagre important for social science and for the humanities generally? The first point has to do with the nature of ‘culture’ in this and other oral societies. For the recordings reproduced show how great a measure of variation can exist in the performances of oral cultures; not in all their facets but in the case of long recitations I would be prepared to say ‘has to exist’. That idea knocks on the head any question of such works (myths is one name used for them) being taken as a foundation ‘text’ for a particular social order since they are always plural and the variation between the versions is very considerable. Look in this case at the difference between the Lawra Bagre and the Birifu Bagre. Both can be assumed to have emerged from one common ancestor yet the subsequent divergence has been radical, in orientation as well as in content and length. In one case the stress is on a cosmological account, in the other on a migration story, each embodying quite different quests of origin. Long recitations are certainly not the only form of cultural activity that displays such a range of variation. Even the rituals of Bagre, which offer more continuity, show some significant changes as between Birifu and Lawra. Such variations have been concealed because most fieldwork in oral cultures, even intensive fieldwork, takes place over a short period and in a limited area. Temporal changes of this kind are either ignored or seen as long-term ‘social change’ rather than as a regular feature of oral cultures which are consequently conceived as more rule bound, more conforming, more traditional, hence less inventive, than they actually are. I return to this notion of traditional when discussing sociological concepts of modernity.

There is a particular problem raised by this aspect of the Bagre for anthropological analysis. It is often assumed that a recorded version of an oral myth stands in the same relationship to the society that produced it as the Old Testament did to ancient Hebrew society, rather as the myth and ritual school assumed there was a direct and unique relationship between the two. It is on that basis that much discussion of ‘myth’ (in the sense of long oral recitation of a cosmological kind) has taken place. But directly we see that these forms vary so greatly, and not I submit around a determined core but rather as a syntagmatic chain, the problem takes on a different character. We

can no longer see, as Lévi-Strauss did in his monumental studies of South American mythology, a single recitation as a unique key to the interpretation of a culture. The myth unlocks no single door as it exists in the plural, changing radically over time. It is obviously one part of culture but hardly a key to the whole. That at least is the case with the Bagre. The first part which discusses ritual (the White Bagre) remains relatively the same in these various versions. As I have remarked elsewhere, the order of the ceremonies is something that participants do tend to remember 'by heart'. One leads to another as Christmas does to Epiphany and that in turn to Easter. Occasionally people make a mistake in the sequence but they are soon corrected. That sequence is central to the White Bagre which consists essentially of an outline and very partial account of what has to be done at each of the ceremonies that take place at varying intervals. The account is elaborated differently in each version, and in the First Bagre it is much more extensive, including a version of the story of how the younger brother was led to begin to perform the Bagre as well as some theoretical discussion about the role of various supernatural agencies, including God himself, in the scheme of things. Its length was 6133 lines compared with 1204 in the present version (Gomble).

The more speculative, philosophical, Black Bagre, changes much more radically. How radically we see from the Lawra Bagre in which all these other recordings were made but indeed performed by members of the same clan as the Gomble Bagre in Birifu). Here the recitations are very different and the Black has in effect been replaced by a clan legend or 'history', what I call the Coming of the Kusiele, of which we find no parallel in Birifu. Yet the local population see it all as the same ritual/recitation, the Bagre, and may attend each other's performances as full members. However the differences are enormous, as we can see from the text and translation. For earlier scholars that version in the First Bagre would have been the only one in (recorded) existence and could easily have been taken as paradigmatic. Indeed that has been the case with that version when it was published, at least by some literate members of the LoDagaa society itself. However the further recordings and transcriptions show it cannot be understood in this way. In my fieldwork I might have first come across and published a very different version than the one I did. Yet how often has this possibility been ignored in parallel cases when we are dealing with the rather limited material (compared with the potential available) recorded from oral cultures. That was a problem that could be overlooked with earlier techniques of recording but has changed radically with the electronic age.

That raises a further analytical problem. I have distinguished between myths as specific recitations and mythologies which are not found as such as a cultural form but are pieced together by observers (and occasionally by actors) from statements about a particular cosmology from a variety of sources. This enterprise presumes that one can extract a common set of ideas from an undefined range of cultural interactions, from recitations, songs, everyday speech and from the replies to the enquirer's queries. But if variation in belief is as wide as a study of the Bagre suggests, such a procedure must be highly dangerous and misleading. One cannot add up the different notions of God, or of creation, and come out with a single adequate statement.

The same would be true of music, both of song and of the music played on the xylophone, which is often a thematic elaboration of an old song or of an invented one.

In the absence of a literate notation there is no composition in the Western sense. But there is invention and there is change. Of course there are songs as in the Bagre that have to be repeated at every performance although one may doubt whether they are performed and sung in exactly the same way each time—the degree of variation could only be ascertained by careful musical recording and analysis. But from the standpoint of the authors they are the same song and my informal observations suggest that a large measure of identity exists. That is not true of much of the xylophone music that accompanies the dance. The player will make up, adapt or borrow a song and then elaborate variations over a period of fifteen minutes or more. In these recitals, invention is given an important place and there is no question of repetition being valued for its own sake, as many concepts of the traditional would suggest.

This problem about ‘myth’ is one to which J.L. Siran draws attention in his illuminating booklet, *L’Illusion mythique* (1998). He points out that for the Dogon, the prototypical West African society studied by Griaule and his associates in France, there is no ‘*recit*’, no standardised oral form, but the so-called ‘myth’ consists of a cosmology constructed by the (anthropological) observer. That is the difference between what I have hesitatingly called ‘the Myth of the Bagre’ among the LoDagaa and the myth of the Dogon as recounted by the anthropologists. Mine is a straight translation, theirs a construction (a mythology).

Siran thinks that the notion of myth presumes a previous text; hence he objects to my term ‘recitation’ for the Bagre. It is true that the term *may* presume a text as when one recites a poem by Baudelaire. But that notion is not intrinsic to the usage, at least in English. In French too *recit* can include any narrative whether there is a written text or not. Even in the absence of such a writing, some authors have used the notion of *texte* with regard to oral narratives and cultural performances in general. For me that is confusing because although people have precedents, such a usage assimilates oral production too closely to the model of the fixed text in written cultures. There is an enormous degree of invention, elaboration as well as memorisation in the Bagre, and I would argue in any long form of this kind (*genre*). While one usage of recitation would be inappropriate, I do not see that, reverting to ‘*recit*’, another is not perfectly suitable; indeed Siran himself uses the word ‘*recit*’ on many occasions.

Siran further objects that the Dogon have no category term (*genre* name) for their ‘myth’. Neither have the LoDagaa, even though it is an actual standardised form. One would hardly expect such a name to exist in any language where almost by definition there is only one instance. It is the same for the Bagre which is certainly not an *aserk-pang*, a story, tale; and it is the same for the Bible or for any other holy book seen as the word of God. However it does not seem inappropriate for observers to provide a category term if they perceive similarities across cultures and this is what we (not only anthropologists) do very frequently. That a society of humans (or of butterflies) has no ethnocategory is a relevant but not determining fact for instituting such a concept. It is for this reason I used the word ‘myth’ to describe the recitation known as the Bagre in order to draw attention to the very general similarities with other long cosmological recitations like that of the Zuni of North America.

Siran has a third objection to the word myth and this occupies the major part of his book. It refers to the same general point that I made in an early article on ‘Religion

and ritual: the definitional problem' (1961) that arose out of my work on LoDagaa funerals. I regarded the usage of the word 'ritual' as indicating acts for which observers had no 'rational' explanation in terms of their accepted means-ends relationships, in terms, that is, of their own world view or orientation. Siran makes a similar point about 'myth' and 'mythical' which he rightly claims are used to describe the beliefs of others to which we don't subscribe, excluding from the category even our own account of the supernatural, as in the Bible. Clearly that position is unsustainable. But I would not go so far as to include in this objection our 'scientific' beliefs which seem to me of a different order. Firstly, they set aside the supernatural element. Secondly they are subject to continual scrutiny, to confirmation and disconfirmation, in the manner discussed by Kuhn (1962), for Europe or by Lloyd (1991) for ancient Greece. Parallel techno-scientific procedures exist in other cultures, as Malinowski insisted for the Trobrianders, but they are not given the same cultural prominence nor explicit experimental validation. Notions of proof, to follow Lloyd's usage, are part of cultural history and develop significantly with writing; they are not static over the long term.

Siran is quite correct in refusing to characterize the thought (mentality) of oral cultures, of 'simple societies', as mythical or mytheopoetic, as distinct from 'scientific' or indeed 'rational' (as others have proclaimed). If there is a difference, it cannot be phrased in these terms, since both co-exist (though in different degrees). However he places the difference, for example, between Europe and South America at another level altogether, at that of underlying schemata as between the flying (/Vol-/) of the latter and the look (/Regard-/) of the former. These schemata are a priori for each individual and for Durkheim constitute the fundamental categories of the understanding that originated in society. Exactly how was never clear.

The question that remains is the scope and binding (or organizing) nature of these schemata. If they encapsulate differences, are those differences related (as earlier ones have certainly been) to differences in scientific and technological achievements? While we can agree with Malinowski (and Siran) that both these types of activity are always present, they are clearly present to different degrees; there have been cumulative developments in forms of proof (or disproof) and forms of experimentation. These seem to me differences with which any history of culture has to engage, but not at the level of mentalities, of fixed patterns of thought, rather of the presence or absence of what I have called 'technologies of the intellect' and their consequences. As I have insisted that does not imply a Great Divide but it allows for a plurality of developmental changes in, for example, the means and mode of communication.

The most general problem raised by the Bagre material for the social sciences pertains to this last point. Much sociological thinking, today and in the past, is based around the contrast between the traditional and the modern, as in the work of Max Weber and in the assumptions of most sociologists since his day. Traditional societies were marked by custom and were relatively static, following precedent automatically rather than working things out 'rationally'. Such views were given a more specifically anthropological slant in the writings of Levy-Bruhl, as in *The Soul of the Primitive* (1928). I do not wish to question the fact that the rhythm of social change, especially technological and scientific change, has increased enormously in the last four hundred years. But that the simpler societies were static, did not act 'reflexively' as the current

jargon has it, thinking of reflexivity as a feature of modernity and not of tradition, that notion has to be set completely on one side (at least as far as religion is concerned) when we look at the variations in the recitation of the Bagre. As I have argued, these are not simply verbal variants around a permanent core but include radical changes of philosophical attitude, for example, as between creationist and evolutionary perspectives on the origin of the world, or between theological and more materialist views of the creation of culture (Goody 1998).

The sociologist Giddens sees reflexivity as a characteristic of modernity (1991: 20), as a breakthrough from tradition where largely face-to-face communities act in accordance with custom. In making this claim the author takes up the long-established dichotomous view of tradition and modernity expounded by Max Weber. Reflexivity means people think about the world and their position in it. According to this view, in pre-modern societies, they do not. I argue that this notion of ‘How Natives Think’ is even cruder than the much-criticized approach of Levy-Bruhl since it no longer enquires into differences but is based purely on the supposed absence of reflexivity, of thinking. Pre-moderns are seen not as active agents but as passive actors. They are seen as passive actors who accept what culture hands down to them as tradition. That conception may be largely true of some elements of culture such as language, which necessarily changes only slowly—otherwise there would be little intergenerational understanding. Or of earlier technology, agricultural for example, where it would be dangerous to set aside tried methods unless one is sure of the alternatives, otherwise the supply of food may suffer. It is much less true of ritual and even less true of ‘myth’ in the sense of long recitations which, as in the case of the Bagre, vary greatly over time and space, including in highly significant spheres like notions of the High God and of the creation of the world. In these and other areas, culture, precedent or even mental templates may lay down some vague parameters but within these boundaries, individual reciters speculate widely about the nature of supernatural beings and their relation with the universe. They do not seem too constrained by past formulations of the problem.

In this way the example of the transmission of one cultural object, the Bagre, seems to me to say something about the transmission of information (of culture) more generally. In his provocative and stimulating book *Religion Explained* (2001), Pascal Boyer adapts the ideas of other, biologically-inclined, scholars in his analysis of the communication of ideas and practices. Cultural transmission, he writes, ‘could be to some extent described in the same way as genetic transmission’ (p.34). Following Dawkins he begins by seeing culture as a population of *memes* ‘which are just “copy-me” programs, like genes’. They are units of culture such as stories ‘that get people to speak or act in certain ways that make other people store a replicated version of these mental units’... ‘You hear them once, they get stored in memory, they lead to behaviours... that will implant copies... in other people’s memories’ (p.35). This mechanical description of cultural tradition may even correspond to a description of some written religions (where there is always a template to reduce or call attention to any variation). But it is, I suggest, inadequate for the process whereby the Bagre is transmitted and where ‘memory’ is much more ‘creative’ and ‘inventive’. So the idea of a template, whether structural, functional or genetic, is a good deal less persuasive.

In fact Boyer later rejects the notion of memes and of replication as misleading (p.40). 'People's ideas are sometimes roughly similar to those of other people around them, not because ideas can be downloaded from mind to mind but because they are reconstructed in a similar way'. But he still retains the notion of templates, intuitions and inferences. Cultural material is consistently being reshuffled according to inferences which are 'governed by special principles in the mind' and therefore the results are 'predictable' and 'non-random' (p.42).

Culture in Boyer's eyes 'is the name of a similarity'(p.35). That may well be true of the standard anthropological description of social interaction based on a short visit, which is nevertheless assumed to continue in the same (quasi-genetic) way over the centuries. It may also be the case with some versions of tradition, which assume a static society and a more or less exact 'handing over'. It may lie behind the discussion of national character, even in versions of anthropological history (Darnton 1984). And certainly it may be more true of some aspects of the social scene than of others. But it cannot be considered correct for the transmission of the Bagre *over time*, nor is it correct in Barth's description of religious and other concepts among the Baktaman of New Guinea.

The advantage that Boyer sees fixed memes as having for humankind may be better accounted for in communicative terms, having little to do with a template. I pronounce English words the way I do so that I can communicate with my fellows, but it is possible for me to move to France and to learn quite different language for the same purpose. That form of acquisition is basically different from genetic transmission, although it goes without saying that any human behaviour must be 'compatible' with the genetic. That in the end is a rather weak statement.

Later in his volume, Boyer recognizes that the account of memes does not allow for the wide variety of cultural forms that we find. On the other hand he does not see people's concepts as in 'constant flux'(p.45). Only some are subject to complex inferences and these tend to go in certain directions rather than others, depending upon their compatibility with mental templates; those become part of what is handed down (tradition), the rest are discarded. Inferences often constitute a centrifugal force that make representations 'diverge in unpredictable ways'. But in some domains, 'acting as a centripetal force, inferences and memories lead to roughly similar constructions even though the input may be quite different' 'because of a similar template' (p.46). The notion of similarity and indeed universality is very important to rehabilitate in the social sciences and one that has been neglected by current trends in cultural anthropology. But this account while ingenious seems vague, leaving many questions unanswered. My own emphasis, while not denying the possibility of 'templates', of preprogrammed ideas, would also see the universality of religious or other concepts as being more likely to originate in the confrontation of language-speaking humans with their environment. I have discussed this question at greater length in *Representations and Contradictions* (1997).

I imagine the 'initial situation' for religion as being one in which language-using primates are faced with the problem both of developing a system of sounds (phonology) and a system of representations/meaning about themselves and their environment. Mankind is forced to create verbal concepts in order to communicate. Whatever is there

beforehand in terms of animate/inanimate distinctions and the like is of great simplicity compared with what now emerges in order to communicate about things, persons and actions in their absence, by means of verbal representations, which by virtue of that fact are never the thing itself but always another level of reality, of conceptualisation. The binary nature of certain of these concepts, as they have been perceived in structuralist terms, is related not so much to the binary nature of the mind and its templates as to the way in which in linguistic terms we perceive our bodies and designate the world in general. The alternative is to see templates such as Boyer envisages presumably developing in pre-language-using primates. But how do we develop biologically a template for tools (or even persons) when we have no such instruments (or only in a very limited way)? Furthermore, what validation can there be for considering 'tools' as an 'ontological category' as distinct from looking at more concrete categories? The difference between these levels could also be described in terms of degrees of abstraction but here the more inclusive level is given a highly significant epithet of its own ('ontological') which seems to take the central assumptions for granted.

Boyer's theory of religion, culture and the mind presumes there is a core of stable notions that are selected because they correspond to intuitions derived from ontological categories. He sees such categories as being limited in number, Animal, Person, Tool, Natural Object and Plant ('more or less exhaust the lot' p.78). Ontological categories display a limited set of features some of which 'religion' violates (though the violations may be very conceptual). Is that presumption of stability justified? I have argued against it both with regard to the Bagre recitations over the short term (e.g. in *Food and Love*) and regarding cultural history over the longer term (in *Representations and Contradictions*), seeing the changes in representations, here verbal, as almost inevitable, given the possibilities for the selection of words, and at the level of ideas, given the contradictions that are inherent in the process of representation (which are never altogether what they seem), giving rise to an ambivalence that leads to the oscillation, *va-et-vient* of ideas.

Let me now turn the more detailed examination of the Bagre.

The Context

The series of Bagre performances begins about August and continues at irregular intervals over the dry season; the rainy season is too occupied with farming. The first ceremony is the Announcement of Bagre (*Bag puoru*, see Goody 1972), when the neophytes being proposed for membership are brought to the Bagre house, where the performance will be later carried out, the house of the 'Bagre mother'. They are brought there by their sponsors, the 'Bagre fathers', who provide the malted grain and other contributions which the neophytes need to contribute. These initial contributions are then measured by the Bagre joking partners. When they say the word, the neophytes and their sponsors disperse, prepared to be called back for the next ceremony.

The recorded ceremonies at Lawra begin with The Beating of the Malt. This is not the first of the ceremonies, but it is the first at which we were present there. In this case

the recitation took place in the byre of the chief's house, he being head of this lineage of the Kusiele clan. What is recited there is considerably different from the White and the Black Bagre of Birifu, which are also recited here but in a much shorter form. It consisted of a long recital in verse of 3724 'lines' and is essentially a legend of how the ancestors of the clan arrived in their present location, how Kontol, son of Dafor, left the settlement of Babile, now an important market centre on the main road some 10 miles south of Lawra, searching for farm land and general well-being.

...to make it good
for childbirth,
for hunting
and for raising chickens (442–45).

At line 1307 the formula is repeated with farming now added. Kontol eventually came close to what is now Lawra where he found signs of buffalo so he knew there was water nearby. The soil was good and the area had even been settled by earlier inhabitants, the Janni, who had left for the right bank of the River Volta (now Burkino Faso) at the approach of the Kusiele, abandoning their ruined houses, grinding places and other items they could not move.

Kontol called his people, settled there, and the boundaries of the parish, the Earth shrine area, were laid out. But in order to succeed in childbirth, farming, hunting and in raising livestock he realized he had to perform the same rites, especially the Bagre, as his forefathers had done. In this way we are presented with an account of the sequence of the ceremonies such as we find in the White Bagre of Birifu (the First and Second Bagres, and the Gomble White below). This recitation plays something of the same role as the Bagre of Birifu, because it tells of events leading up to the performance and then lists the ceremonies in order. It begins with the recitation up to the present performance of The Beating of the Malt.

In the account of the Lawra Bagre, the Beating of the Malt (2463) is preceded by the Measuring of the Malt (2001), then Bagre Greeting (2355), the Yam Ceremony (2367), and the Climbing of the Hill (2438). It is followed by Bagre Dance.

In the First Bagre of Birifu the sequence began with the Asperging of the Neophytes (*Bo puɔru*, p.64) and is followed by the Announcement (p.66), which involves 'measuring the malt' and is sometimes combined with the Asperging, the Ceremony of Beans (p.76) shortly after which yams are now eaten, the Ceremony of the Bean Flower (p.79), (The Beer of the Bagre Medicine, p.81), the Whitening Ceremony (p.81) and then the Beating of the Malt (p.88), leading to the Bagre Dance (p.92 followed by two shorter finalizing performances). The first two and the last two main ceremonies are obviously similar, even if the names differ. In the Second Bagre at Birifu, the Announcement of Bagre (l.2241) includes 'the measuring of the malt', then the eating of yams (2807), the Whitening Ceremony (l.2823), the Ceremony of Beans (2875), the Ceremony of the Bean Flower (2948), the Beating of the Malt and the Bagre Dance (3602). The differences in the ceremonies are much less than those in the recitation; members of different settlements can recognize what is happening but variation does occur.

Personnel

When a neophyte passes out he becomes a first grader, a White Bagre member (*Bo pla*). At a further ceremony, he will become a second grader, a Black Bagre member, who will have all the accoutrements as well as the medicine. If he sponsors a Bagre member, he becomes a Bagre father; if he sponsors the whole performance, using his house, he is the Bagre mother. The mother (always male) rates higher than the father. In addition there are the various Speakers who recite the Bagre, as well as the members who are asked to bring their musical instruments, xylophones or drums, to play (or be played) throughout the performances. The other major actors are the guides, who are first graders assigned to each neophyte to show them what and what not to do. They have a special responsibility for seeing that the neophytes obey the many prohibitions, food and others, that are placed upon them but from which they are gradually released. The guides may be male or female depending upon the sex of their charges.

Bagre Recitations

In the First Bagre, there were two recitations, the White and the Black. The White was recited to the first graders (the White Bagre members) and consisted largely of an account of the sequence of ceremonies themselves as well as the way that human woes led up to the present performances. The version of the Black was more cosmological as well as being more philosophical than subsequent ones; it recounted the visit of one of the two original men to Heaven where he greeted God and was shown the creation of a child. He was also taught much about how human beings came to learn of the world in which they now operate, but through the intermediaries of the beings of the wild rather than from God himself. Indeed a major theme is the struggle between the two, as well as the struggle between father and mother about the ownership of the child. The Second Bagre published in 1981 has a White Bagre which is substantially shorter than the First (3940 lines as compared with 6133) but the Black is slightly longer (5764 as against 5515). Both of the latter place little stress on either God or the beings of the wild. Man invents his/her own culture.

Two versions of the Black Bagre were recorded in Biro and Goble, outlying parts of Birifu, in 1979 where the recitor was the same in both cases, being the Headman of Biro. Hence the versions are similar in many ways, though the latter is 2781 lines in length, compared with 1646 in the former.

Both versions start with an invocation, in which he greets the Bagre god (*nminti*) and then the 'people of the room' including those of their forefathers who have recited the Bagre, leaving behind only the 'children' who fumble with it' and 'cannot know all' as their predecessors had done. Such oral recitations emphasize the perpetual debt and sense of inferiority one has to the ancestors, since unlike in a written culture their words cannot be recorded for posterity, but only imperfectly remembered, without the possibility of confirmation or correction.

Turning to the content, in Goble the people of the room, once the god 'has spoken', climb up to the roof top where they will see the stars. There then follows the men-

tion of a number of stars and constellations, the Star of God, the axe of God, the stones of the chief's granary (or the granary of a rich man), the cock and his chicks, these matters of the heavens. The Biro Bagre begins in a similar way, with different forefathers, but with the star of God, the axe, the cock but the head blacksmith replaces the stones of the chief's granary. In no other context do I know the LoDagaa developing a star-lore, an explicit knowledge of the heavens, nor did my colleague, K. Gandah. The night sky is always there and the constellations may always suggest the shape of objects to individual observers, suggestions which may resemble one another. That is an ever present possibility even when where star-lore is not 'institutionalized' in a more formal ('cultural') manner.¹

The account of man's beginning opens up further such possibilities. As distinct from the First (Birifu) Bagre, which I published in 1972, there are already people living on earth even before the 'creation' story begins - old men and little children living together in a house. There are also animals, the *dulu* bird who act likes the first men in the 1972 version by going to consult a diviner (about food); the diviner is a lizard whom the *dulu* later eats. He also needs protection against the rain. The (male) rain comes and fertilizes the female earth, as in other versions. Then we shift suddenly to the male and the female humans who are being rained on and who want shelter. The other versions too are concerned with man's initial helplessness in face of the world, not knowing how to provide himself with shelter or with food. The First Bagre (1972) I have described as theocentric because all these benefits come ultimately from God, but they do so, except for the initial act of procreation, through the intermediaries of the beings of the wild ('the fairies') who not only show man how things should be done ('God's path') but try to lead him astray in order to follow their own. It is the core of their struggle that dominates much of the first version of the Bagre, together with the problems of parenthood and the performance of the Bagre itself.

In later versions (e.g. the Second Bagre) I argue that it is much more a question of 'man makes himself' even though God provides him with some of his tools (see Goody 1998). In Goble and Biro we find another variant of the creation theme, perhaps more unexpected in view of all that has been written, including by myself, on the nature of the High God who retires from the world after the initial act of creation.

The relationship between God (*na-angmin*—chief god) and god (*ngmin*) is not at all clear from the First Bagre. I tried then to distinguish between the two by capitalizing God in the first case. But the myth speaks of god's breeze at a certain point (1409) and of God's breeze at another (1006). Both are possible. The god (*ngmin*) who descends (1991) to the Bagre ceremony I have translated as God, which was certainly against my principle of translation. It is elsewhere said to be the Bagre god (*ngmin*) who descends, for God himself we don't know where he is. But the Bagre god (one can never say Bagre Na-angmin, Bagre God) is certainly a refraction of God himself and may at times be identified with him.

1. 'We have no assurance', writes Stith Thompson about astral interpretations of mythologies, 'nor does it even seem likely, that most primitive peoples really concerned themselves with the heavenly bodies' (1951: 394). While that is hardly true of the sun and moon, there is certainly great variation in knowledge of the stars.

The place I have most obviously gone against my principles of translation was in the final passages of the White Bagre where the neophytes are asking the question

The beings of the wild
and God,
which of them brought Bagre (6005-7)?

God here should be 'god' (*ngmin*) but the recitation goes on:

they replied, 'well,
God created them,
put them on earth,
and they sat there empty-handed' (6008-11).

While *ngmin* is again used here, in LoDagaa belief it is God (*na-angmin*) who created us, even if he left us empty-handed. It was then the ancestors who found out what we needed to do. Elsewhere it is explained that they were helped by the beings of the wild. God (here *ngmin*) knows all about us but does not come down to earth because mankind would trouble him too much about their problems (6059). So he sent another person 'who is more powerful than us all' (6084). That person is the Bagre god (*Bo ngmin* or *wen*) who is the god who descends and intervenes in the performances.

The difference between God and god is explained in response to a neophyte's question

The one
we follow
in this matter,
is it God (*na-angmin*) we follow
or is it a god (*ngmin*)?

To this the elder replies

'Well,
we follow
God.
He is the senior
but we can't see him.
It is god who comes down to people.
That is what we call god' (5251-8).

The difference is that

'A god is here
and God is there' (5241-2):

god is the one who is 'visible', who descends, and who is a refraction of God. That is why at times god is used for God (as the Creator) and why, in response to my colleague's prompting, I have sometimes translated *ngmin* by God, when I thought the usage reflected LoDagaa thought. That is a dangerous procedure but I did so only when my own interpretation and that of my collaborator, K. Gandah, coincided. (God's child, whom we follow, is Napolo whom he created).

In the Biro and Goble versions he intervenes directly and continues to do so. The rain came and the first man and woman feel cold.

They shivered with cold
and called on God.
When they had done so,
God it was
who came down quickly,
took a small hoe
and some axes,
gave them to the man
and he went to the bush (Gomble 218-26)

God himself provided man with his instruments, not the beings of the wild as in the First Bagre, nor was it left to man himself. After that intervention the man took over the work of building a house, with the help of 'the clever young girl' who was the 'woman', his wife, and who mixed the swish. He called his 'brothers' to come along to help him, just as he would today, leaving aside the question of their origin (or of his). The house being built, God 'performed his works'. The man went off to sleep and had an erection, so he called the woman. But she told him he had to come over to her. There was a quarrel but 'the clever young girl' came over after all and pulled out his penis and satisfied herself. The 'foolish man' then did the same. In the morning

...God, it was he
with all his wonders,
came down suddenly
and went and asked the woman (Gomble 456-59)

She told him what had happened and they were 'ashamed' at 'spoiling' one another but later got on with the matter of bringing forth a child. Why the shame?

It relates to the central prohibitions of the Bagre. These are of several major kinds. There are the food taboos which are placed on the neophytes at the Announcement and gradually lifted during the performances, beginning with that on the shea nut. It is because the fruit bat saves us from breaking this taboo, by showing us when the nut is ripe, that it is among our Bagre 'things'; this discovery begins the Bagre. Other foods too are forbidden, then allowed to the neophytes in the course of the ceremonies, some of which are even named after the food itself (e.g. the Bagre of Beans).

But the major emphasis insisted on throughout is the taboo on fighting and on sexual intercourse. Both have to be avoided during its course. The first prohibition (on quarrelling) occurs widely in other situations where people meet together, for example, in markets, where it is a particular example of the widespread institution of 'the peace of the market'. Again fighting, leading to the shedding of blood, is forbidden between members of the same parish that hold allegiance to the same Earth shrine. But fighting (quarrelling) is not universally frowned upon. One should fight in a just cause, for example, to defend oneself or a kinsman.

This conflicting valuation is even clearer with sexual intercourse. There is not the same obvious reason for banning one of the great pleasures of man and animals, though it is true that it may give rise to conflict and even to feud and war. But even legitimate sex, between man and wife, runs against the principles of Bagre where each neophyte is individually selected and individually processed. True, he or she is backed

and helped by kinsfolk. But in some significant ways Bagre over-rides the demands of kinship. For example, seniority in Bagre is not determined by birth but by the date of initiation (as is often the case in associations of this general kind). So the cross-cutting intimacy of sex is forbidden to the Bagre neophytes in a very severe manner. And at that time at least it is forbidden by god and by God. But the ambivalence has wider repercussions because, as in the Biblical story, there seems to be some qualms built into the sexual act itself, perhaps because it is so excluding.

Returning to the recitations, the central recording of the Lawra Bagre differs from all others partly because of its content which I have described, and partly because of its form. The content includes minimal versions of the White and Black as we have come across them elsewhere, but we do find both verse and prose versions of the Coming of the Kusiele, a clan legend that is essentially about the doings of the ancestor who found the clan's present lands and who inaugurated the Bagre. But he has no explicit help from God, from god or from the beings of the wild. He himself does what he has to do.

As far as form is concerned, the recording of the Lawra Bagre differs from all the others we have made in its very nature. In earlier cases we recorded only the recitation which is recognized by the actors as a special form of speech (what I have elsewhere called 'standard oral forms'). But here we allowed the recorder to continue during the rest of the ceremony when the senior members, the leading members in particular, were trying to organize the shape of what had to be done—and to agree upon the course of events. Such material provides an idea of the course of these proceedings, of the role of the leading members and the nature of their autonomy, of the degree of uncertainty that exists and of the role of consultation. It emphasizes how different the nature of such a ritual is from, say, the Christian Mass, or from a Buddhist ceremony in Taiwan, where everything proceeds according to the formula written down in a book which the priest constantly consults (Goody 1986). Here there is no written template, only the attempt to reconstruct a long and complex performance, with its accompanying recitation, from the memory of the leading participants. This recording offers an example of how that is done, which is very far from the outsider's notion of automatic and stable custom dominating the social scene. It should make us reconsider those ideas of 'traditional' society and 'primitive' mentality.

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Bouzigues, 2001

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