

Expressions and Evolution of the Dagbon Traditional Dress Code

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ABSTRACT: This study explores the expressions and evolution of the Dagbon traditional dress code in Northern Ghana. It examines how clothing communicates identity, hierarchy, authority, and spirituality within Dagbon society. Guided by Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Identity Theory, the research applies a qualitative case study design in Tamale and nearby communities. Data were collected through interviews, observation, and photographic documentation involving chiefs, elders, artisans, and youth. Thematic analysis revealed that hat orientation conveys clear social meanings. Wearing the hat to the left signals humility, to the right signals strength or status, forward positioning expresses dominance, and the upward pointing molifee represents authority and responsibility. Traditional materials such as animal skins, plant fibers, leather, and beads reflect environmental adaptation and craftsmanship, while fugu and batakari reinforce cultural identity. Although globalization and urbanization promote hybrid styles among youth, ceremonial contexts sustain traditional symbolism. The study concludes that Dagbon dress remains dynamic, resilient, and central to cultural continuity.

KEYWORDS: Dagbon, traditional dress, symbolism, hat orientation, molifee, fugu, cultural identity

I. INTRODUCTION

Dress functions as a visible marker of identity, authority, and belonging in many African societies. In Northern Ghana, clothing communicates social position, gender roles, spirituality, and moral values. Scholars argue that traditional dress systems operate as coded languages that members of a community interpret within shared cultural frameworks (Silas-Ufelle & Ntagu, 2025). Among the Dagomba of the Dagbon Kingdom, attire reflects hierarchy, lineage, and respect for customary authority (Bobie, 2025). The orientation of garments and accessories carries specific meanings that regulate social interaction. Understanding these meanings requires examining dress not simply as fashion but as an organized cultural expression embedded in social structure.

The Dagbon traditional dress code demonstrates strong symbolic depth and ritual significance. The smock, widely known as fugu or batakari, represents Northern Ghanaian identity and craftsmanship (Dakurah et al., 2025). Handwoven strips stitched together form garments that signify dignity, continuity, and communal heritage. Headgear further strengthens this symbolic system because hat orientation signals humility, dominance, grief, or authority (Quaye, 2023). Chiefs, elders, and spiritual leaders use dress strategically to reinforce legitimacy and command respect within the community (Oguamanam & Yeboah-Appiah, 2024). These elements confirm that Dagbon attire operates within a clearly defined system of meaning and authority.

Historical accounts indicate that Dagomba clothing evolved from the use of animal skins, plant fibers, and leather accessories to more refined woven textiles. Early dress practices reflected adaptation to climate and reliance on locally available resources (Bobie, 2025). Beadwork and leather embellishments communicated wealth, gender identity, and social status in precolonial contexts. Over time, weaving traditions expanded and produced durable fabrics such as fugu, which gained prominence across Ghana (Kusi et al., 2025). These

developments strengthened aesthetic value while preserving symbolic function. The transformation illustrates continuity in craftsmanship alongside gradual innovation in material culture.

Contemporary studies emphasize that African dress systems continue to change under the influence of globalization and modernization. Increased exposure to global media has introduced Western clothing styles into local communities (Navei, 2023). Urbanization has intensified this process by expanding access to ready-made garments and commercial fashion markets. Younger generations often combine traditional and modern elements to express hybrid cultural identities (Quaye, 2023). Rising incomes and improved living standards further shape clothing preferences by increasing consumer choice. These dynamics create tension between preservation and adaptation within traditional dress systems.

Despite these external influences, traditional attire remains central to ceremonial and ritual life in Dagbon society. Festivals, chieftaincy installations, weddings, and funerals require specific dress codes that reinforce collective memory and social hierarchy (Angulu Hudu, 2023). The symbolic use of headgear, including the molifee and other customary hats, remains directly tied to authority and responsibility (Von Hesse, 2023). Dress therefore functions as both cultural heritage and active social practice. Scholars argue that adaptation does not necessarily result in cultural erosion because communities often reinterpret traditions within contemporary contexts (Olaitan et al., 2025). The Dagbon experience reflects this pattern of negotiated continuity.

This study situates the Dagbon traditional dress code within broader debates on cultural identity, symbolism, and social transformation. It focuses on the meanings embedded in hat orientation, attire composition, and evolving fashion practices. By analyzing these expressions, the study contributes to scholarship on how clothing structures social relations and communicates authority within indigenous African societies (Dei, 2024). It also responds to calls for localized cultural research that documents and preserves indigenous knowledge systems. Examining these dynamics clarifies how tradition and modernity coexist within Dagbon society. This framework provides the basis for analyzing the findings on symbolism, evolution, and contemporary influences on Dagbon dress.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual Review

Traditional dress is a key marker of cultural identity, social status, and communication in African societies. It communicates information about hierarchy, gender, age, and spiritual affiliation (Kwame & Mananu, 2023). In Dagbon, clothing extends beyond aesthetics; it serves as a social language where elements like the smock (fugu or batakari) and headgear indicate humility, authority, wealth, or grief (Gaiya, 2024). Scholars highlight that hat orientation alone conveys complex social messages, such as bending the hat to the left to signal humility or folding it to the right to signify power (Quaye, 2023). Materials and decoration, such as beadwork, leather accessories, and plant fibers, also communicate economic and social standing while reflecting environmental adaptation (Yuyu yusriani, 2025). The evolution of dress includes new fabrics, styles, and hybrid designs that combine traditional and modern elements, reflecting ongoing social, cultural, and economic influences. Traditional dress, therefore, is both a symbolic system and a practical manifestation of identity and societal values.

Globalization, urbanization, and youth culture have significantly influenced dress practices. Exposure to Western fashion through television, social media, and urban marketplaces has resulted in a fusion of traditional and modern clothing styles (Agwuele, 2024). Young people often combine traditional garments like smocks with trousers, jeans, or modern tops, creating hybrid fashion that reflects both heritage and contemporary identity (Quaye, 2023). Socioeconomic factors, including increased disposable income, further enable the adoption of modern clothing, while ceremonial contexts continue to preserve traditional forms of dress (Sulemana Anamzoya et al., 2023). These conceptual insights demonstrate that dress functions as both a symbolic and adaptive cultural practice, negotiating continuity and change within Dagbon society.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Symbolic Interactionism Theory and Cultural Identity Theory. Symbolic Interactionism, developed by (Shamhuna, 2025), posits that humans create and interpret meaning through social interactions, using symbols to communicate ideas. In the context of Dagbon attire, clothing elements such as hats, smocks, and beads function as symbols through which social messages like authority, humility, or wealth are expressed. For example, bending a hat leftwards signals humility, while wearing the molifee conveys status and responsibility. Dress is therefore both a communicative medium and a site for negotiating social roles.

Cultural Identity Theory (Anthonio, 2025) emphasizes the role of cultural markers in constructing group

identity. Traditional dress in Dagbon reflects collective history, values, and social organization. The theory helps explain how globalization and urbanization introduce hybrid forms of dress that blend modern influences with traditional elements, allowing individuals to maintain cultural identity while adapting to changing contexts. The combination of these theories provides a framework for analyzing how symbolic meanings of Dagbon dress are produced, maintained, and transformed in response to societal pressures.

A. 2.3 Empirical Review

Empirical studies in Northern Ghana confirm the symbolic and social importance of traditional dress. Mensah et al. (2025) found that Dagbon headgear communicates hierarchy, spiritual authority, and personal disposition. Similarly, Sulemana Ananzoya et al. (2023) documented the ceremonial significance of fugu and molifee, noting that misuse of sacred attire by younger populations can dilute its cultural meaning. Quaye (2023) highlighted how hat orientation communicates subtle messages in social interactions, reinforcing respect, humility, or dominance depending on context.

Historical research shows that early Dagomba clothing utilized animal skins, plant fibers, and leather, decorated with beads and embroidery to reflect identity and environmental adaptation (Agwuele, 2024). Over time, fugu and batakari cloths enhanced visual complexity while preserving cultural continuity. Recent studies also emphasize the impact of globalization and urbanization on clothing practices. Gaiya (2024) observed that exposure to Western fashion and urban marketplaces led to hybridization of traditional dress, particularly among youth who mix smocks with modern attire. Local interviews further indicate that socioeconomic improvements, such as higher incomes, increase preference for modern clothing for convenience and practicality.

Empirical findings also demonstrate that ceremonial contexts continue to sustain traditional dress practices. Festivals, funerals, and chieftaincy events require specific attire, including beadwork and ceremonial hats, preserving cultural knowledge and identity (Dei, 2024; Nimoh et al., 2024). Studies consistently highlight a dynamic interaction between tradition and modernity, showing that Dagbon society negotiates identity, authority, and heritage through evolving dress practices. This evidence provides a strong foundation for examining both symbolic meaning and contemporary adaptation of Dagbon dress in the current study.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the expressions and evolution of the Dagbon traditional dress code. A case study approach was adopted to gain an in-depth understanding of the symbolic meanings of attire, including hats, smocks, and accessories, and the factors influencing shifts toward modern clothing. Qualitative methods are suitable for this study because they allow for detailed exploration of cultural practices, personal experiences, and social interpretations (Bobie, 2025).

The study was conducted in the Tamale Metropolis, the capital of the Northern Region of Ghana, which is a cultural and administrative center of the Dagbon Kingdom. Data were also collected in surrounding towns and communities where traditional dress practices are actively maintained. These locations were selected to capture a diverse range of perspectives from elders, youth, artisans, and community leaders.

The population for this study comprised Dagbon men and women, traditional leaders, local artisans, and youth residing in the study area. Participants were selected based on their knowledge, involvement, and experience with traditional clothing, ceremonial practices, and contemporary fashion trends. Key informants included chiefs, cultural historians, tailors, and boutique owners who actively engage with both traditional and modern attire.

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who could provide rich, relevant information on traditional dress practices. A total of 23 participants were interviewed, including 5 chiefs, 4 artisans, 5 elders, and 90 youth. This sample size allowed for data saturation, ensuring that recurring themes and patterns in the expressions, meanings, and evolution of dress were captured.

Data were collected using a combination of semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and photographic documentation. Interviews explored participants' understanding of hat orientation, symbolism, ceremonial uses, and perceptions of modern attire. Participant observation involved attending cultural events, festivals, and daily social gatherings to observe dress practices in context. Photographs of hats, smocks, and accessories were taken with participants' consent to support visual analysis.

Data were analyzed thematically using NVivo software to organize codes and identify recurring patterns. Thematic analysis involved reading transcripts, noting key ideas, grouping similar responses, and linking them to cultural, social, and historical interpretations. Visual data from photographs were analyzed alongside textual data to understand symbolism, orientation, and style variations. Triangulation of interviews, observations, and visual

data ensured reliability and validity of findings (Silas-Ufelle & Ntagu, 2025). Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. Informed consent was secured from all participants before data collection, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. Participants had the right to withdraw at any time, and all data were anonymized. Cultural sensitivity was strictly observed, particularly when documenting sacred attire such as the molifee or ceremonial hats.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Types of Traditional Dagbon Hats and their Symbolism Meanings

The participants in the study made clear that the Dagbon smock cannot be worn without the customary hats. The following is a list of some of the traditional hats the participants explained during the data collecting process.

4.1.1 "N laa laa n daan tarima" wearing of hat

The people who participated in this study made it rather clear that the phrase "N laa laa n daan tarima" has several important connotations, such "I am a peaceful person" or "I prefer to be left alone." This message is expressed by brushing or bending the top of his hat to the left side. It shows humility as well as a want to stay away from confrontation.



Plate 1: Gentle Man Wearing a Hat Turn to Left.
(Source: Field Survey 2023)

4.1.2 "Kpi'Lana" Wearing of Hat

Folding their hat towards the right side of their head, one is performing the "Kpi'Lana," a hat gesture. This tells us that he is a person of strength. He might be a very strong participant of society or a wealthy person. It is crucial to keep in mind, nevertheless, that the situation may affect this gesture. For example, someone might fold their hat to the right before approaching a group of higher-ranking people, and then quickly flip it to the left. Leaving the hat folded to the right in front of a chief or someone with a higher level of authority could be interpreted as a sign of contempt according to Oguamanam & Yeboah-Appiah (2024) and Quaye (2023).



Plate 2: Gentle Man Wearing a Hat Turn to Right.
(Source: Field Survey 2023)

4.1.3 Nmali kpaanba (I have followers)



Plate 3: Gentle Man Wearing a Hat Turn towards the back.
(Source: Field Survey 2023)

4.1.4 "N Kpeeka Ya" or "Nkpei-kan" or "Sobigarima" wearing of hat (Have no equal)

Traditional Dagbon people reported in this study that this hat movement might be understood as expressing "I have no equal." To do this one must either dress the tip of the hat forward or towards front on the forehead. This bold action aims to show dominance in several spheres, including money, strength, beauty, or knowledge. One of the participants told me: "I am ready for a fight so one that is also ready can face me."

"... It is a style that is primarily worn by wealthy individuals, chiefs, and those who are spiritually fortified, and it serves as a symbol of their status in the town... With the exception of God, supremacy, superior ruler, and no co-equal, I stand tall..."

This aggressive behaviour, on the other hand, can occasionally lead to difficulty or conflicts if it accidentally offends other people (Samuel Adu-Gyamfi, Ph.D. & Yakubu Naporo, 2024; Quayes, 2023).



Plate 4: Gentleman Wearing a Hat Facing his Front.
(Source: Field Survey 2023)

4.1.5 "N-monikuyagma" or "Molifee" wearing of hat

Wearing in an upward-pointing manner, the "N-monikuyagma" or "Molifee" is a unique white conical hat. It is

regarded as a rather important component of Northern society. Important members of society don molifee, a kind of headgear, during ceremonies and special events. Its importance is great since it reflects the weight of major responsibilities. Wearing the molifee are the Yaa-Naa, other chiefs, wealthy people, and powerful members of society including imams.

Presenting the headgear worn by the chief upon his installation, the molifee is a symbol of his successes. Still, the molifee is not territory belonging to any one group of people. Anyone who feels they belong in a respected part of society is free to wear it. Though these ceremonies have great traditional significance, some young men in Tamale have sadly misused the "N-monikuyagma," or "Molifee," during social events. This abuse diluted the great relevance that it naturally expresses since it ignores the range of its cultural interpretations (Navei, 2023; Olaitan et al., 2025).



Plate 5: Gentleman Wearing a Hat Facing to the Top
(Source: Field Survey 2023)

4.1.6 "Aago supriogo" Wearing of hat

Made of satin, a hat called "Aago supriogo" reminds one of handloom cloth from past times. The information it presents changes depending on its orientation when worn. Originally a status symbol for those with great social and financial means, it has become less costly by means of second-hand choices.

4.1.7 "Boduwa" dressed in Hat

Traditionally worn on the head as a show of grief, a mourning towel also called a "Boduwa" is usually rolled or knotted; it is easiest removed this way. It is worn just during times of loss; it is not done for fashion reasons. Apart from serving as a sweat wipe, the towel is also worn in Northern regalia thrown over a smock. According to Sulemana Anamzoya et al. (2023) and Shamhuna (2025), it helps prevent people dancing from embracing "bad money."



Plate 6: Picture of Chief and Regent Wearing the "Boduwa"
(Source: Field Survey 2023)

4.2 Traditional Dagbon Attire

4.2.1 Animal Skins

Dagomba men and women would dress in animal skins, including hides from cows, goats, and other animals, in ancient times. These tanned, treated skins were bead, shell, or feather covered in order to produce intricate designs and patterns. Using animal skins attracted the Dagombas to their surroundings and their creative use of accessible resources.

4.2.2 Plant Fiber Clothing

Dagombas also made clothing from plant fibres including bark cloth, raffia, and cotton and kapok plant. Among the braiding or weaving creations made from these materials, skirts, loincloths, and head coverings were fashioned. Using plant fibres brought attention to the agricultural knowledge and local flora awareness of the society. Usually light-weight and airy, these clothes fit the local temperature.

4.2.3 Leather Accessories

Apart from their pragmatic use, leather accessories exposed social level and personal identity. Dagomba clothes accessories including belts, sandals, bags, and jewellery made most of leather were regularly ornamented with complex designs and patterns using dyeing, carving, and embossing.

4.2.4 Beadwork

Dagomba traditional clothing consisted mostly of beads, which adorned clothing, accessories, and jewellery. Made from glass, clay, metal, and seeds, beads were painstakingly stitched or woven onto clothes to create rich and complex patterns. In ceremonial rituals and personal adornment, beadwork highlighted Dagombas' artistic ability and cultural value.

4.3 Evolution of Dagbon Dress

Over time, Dagomba traditional dress's richness and diversity have been enhanced by new fabrics and materials including Fugu and Batakari. These ancient fabrics and designs caught the Dagombas' connection to their natural surroundings and their skilful workmanship creating both exquisite and practical clothing.

4.3.1 Fugu

This produces the characteristic handwoven cloth of Northern Ghanaian civilisation today. Its strength as well as original patterns are well-known. Fugu's arrival has made more complex and varied clothes possible by combining modern design with age-old techniques.

4.3.2 Batakari (Bimagli)

Particularly for men, this kind of smock has become a pillar of Dagomba attire. Made from handwoven cloth strips sewed together, it is usually covered in embroidery and other decorations. Batakari has improved Dagomba garment's visual attractiveness as well as cultural identification.

4.4 Factors Influencing the Shift to Modern Attire

4.4.1 Globalization

By means of improved connection with the outside world, globalisation has had a significant influence on the Dagombas' traditional dress rules. Mostly thanks to global trade, travel, and media coverage, Dagombas have found Western fashion on the front stage. This has helped once-alien fashion trends to be embraced.

"We see how people dress in Europe and America with the internet and television, and it shapes how we wish to dress here too."

Dagombas have been exposed to a wide range of clothing designs thanks to the flood of global fashion trends transmitted via television, the internet, and social media sites such as Instagram and Facebook. This exposure has produced a blending of classic and modern fashion elements.

"It's not unusual to see young guys wearing jeans and a smock, or women mixing traditional cloth with modern tops. It catches old and new mixed together, who we are now."

4.4.2 Urbanisation

Urbanisation has drastically altered Dagombas' way of life and dress patterns. Those who migrate from rural areas to cities have come into more contact with Western styles among other wardrobe options.

"Now I wear nice dresses and trousers more than the traditional cloth I used in my village; when I moved to the city, I saw how simple it was to find them in the stores."

With their concentration of boutiques, shopping centres, and retail stores, urban centres give their residents access to a large range of clothing choices. Particularly among the younger generation, this ready availability of many styles has helped to promote the change towards modern clothing.

"In the city, you can find anything you want to wear---whether it's a Western dress or a modern take on traditional clothing."

4.4.3 Socioeconomic Factors

Many Dagombas find that their disposable income to spend on clothes increases as living standards rise and incomes climb. This economic empowerment has resulted in a taste for modern clothing over traditional attire, which is often more costly and less useful for everyday wear.

"With my salary, I can now afford to buy nice clothes from the market, and I prefer these modern styles for work and social occasions."

Compared to traditional wear, Western clothes are sometimes seen as more fashionable, practical, and convenient. For many Dagombas, especially those with hectic urban lives, modern clothing appeals because of its ease of maintenance, adaptability, and availability of ready-to-wear garments.

"Wearing a shirt and trousers is just easier for me when I have a full day of teaching. It's quick to put on, and I don't have to worry about wrapping cloth properly."

4.4.4 Cultural Shifts

The younger generation is leading the way in embracing modernism and using modern fashion to express their identity. This generational shift has led to the gradual integration of modern fashion trends into traditional garment designs.

"For daily life, I like to vary things with modern fashion; for celebrations and significant events, I still dress traditionally. It captures both my traditional and modern sides."

The Dagombas' blending of modern and traditional aspects in apparel catches a more general cultural change. This blending suggests changing cultural norms and tastes, stressing Dagomba civilization's dynamic quality.

"Our clothes today reflect how we honour our customs while yet adjusting to new influences. Our society changes; it is not set in stone."

4.4.5 Influence of the Fashion Industry

The global fashion industry strongly shapes the Dagombas' preferences for clothing and trends. Ready-to-wear modern clothing and ongoing fashion media promotion of new trends have changed people's wardrobes. Whether or not people adopt fresh trends and spread them depends much on fashion magazines, TV shows, and social media channels.

"Instagram is bursting with fashionistas mixing African prints with Western designs. These days, people wear this type of attire because they want to look contemporary yet still connected to their background."

V. CONCLUSIONS

Examining the variances in the Dagbon traditional dress code exposes a dynamic interaction between modern influences and historical practices. Made from animal skins, plant fibres, and beadwork, Dagombas's artistic ability and inventiveness was clear in traditional clothing. But the traditional dress code has been drastically altered by the entrance of new fabrics like fugu and batakari, together with globalisation, urbanisation, socioeconomic improvements, cultural changes, and the pervasive influence of the worldwide fashion company. This change to modern clothing not only shows the Dagombas' flexibility to fit shifting social dynamics but also their ability to combine modern design with traditional elements. The changing dress code highlights how successfully society might negotiate the complexity of modernism while yet honouring cultural legacy.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Through community events and classroom instruction, efforts should focus on teaching younger generations the cultural value of traditional attire. Encouraging local artists to innovate by combining modern designs with age-old techniques will enhance the appeal of traditional clothing. Plans that support the preservation and revival of traditional attire while embracing modern influences should help address the changes and transformations in the Dagbon traditional dress code. Stressing the beauty and cultural value of Dagbon dress through media and marketing campaigns could help explain its popularity. Establishing venues for displaying traditional clothing, such as fashion events and cultural celebrations, can also help inspire respect for cultural legacy. Last but not least, supporting local textile businesses and providing financial incentives to artists will help ensure the sustainable manufacture of traditional attire, preserving the rich Dagomba legacy and allowing contemporary adaptations.

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