

**Marriage, Power and Performativity:
Theorising Gender Relations in Rural Northern Ghana**

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Abstract

Most studies on gendered relations of power in Ghana have focused on formal and policy issues such as gender parity in education and political representation.

Where attention has been paid to marriage relations, it has often been fragmentary, centering on, for instance, male spousal violence or inheritance patterns, rather than targeting holistically the socio-cultural dynamics that engender and reproduce unequal power relations and violence against women.

This study directly addresses this deficit. This thesis develops a poststructuralist feminist framework to analyse the rules and expectations of normative gendered behaviour in Ghanaian marriage practices. I pay particular attention to how such gendered norms within this exogamous society are accepted, re-enacted, and/or challenged. Theories of gender performativity have been mainly employed to address relations of heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy and the violence they exact on non-heterosexual subjectivities in European and North American contexts. I deploy these theories to make sense of heterosexual marriage relations in Ghana. I explore Dagaaba norms regarding femininities and masculinities and the violence that they engender for women in marriage.

I employed a feminist ethnographic methodology to study the daily life and ritual performances in a Dagaaba village called Serekpere, north-west Ghana. This thesis illustrates that theories of gender performativity resonate profoundly with Dagaaba marriage practices, as well as with their conceptions of femininity: the Dagaaba notion of femininity is contingent upon discursive practices and the performance of gender-segregated roles within marriage. More specifically, I argue that femininity in this context can be understood as forming a continuum, namely: 'ideal woman', 'woman' and 'beyond woman'. On the basis of my analysis, I contend that women within Dagaaba marriage arrangements exercise agency and resistance in complex ways despite unambiguously representing themselves in public acts and discourses as vulnerable victims of male, exogamous and supernatural forces and violence.

Dedication

To the memory of Grace, my late mother, for all the sacrifices she made so that I could have an education, and to Michelle, my daughter, for the difficulties she has had to endure because mum has been studying abroad.

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God, Great is thy Faithfulness indeed!

List of Acronyms

ASA	Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth
BSA	British Sociological Association
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CPP	Convention People's Party
UGCC	United Gold Coast Convention
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
NRGP	Northern Rural Growth Programme
IMF	International Monetary Fund
SAPs	structural adjustment programmes
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
USA	United States of America

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Chapter 1. Performative Gender and Power Relations in Marriage

Amiina k'o ko ma 'Scheming to kill me'

Duorima: *A miina k'o ku ma, a wala neη pie huη paa te γω yee, amiina k'o ko ma.*

Group: *A miina k'o ku ma a wala neη pie huη paa te γω, a miina k'o ku ma.*

Duorima: *N yele ya ka hu miina k'o hu ko ma a wala neη pie hu n de gaa te γω yee, a miina k'o ku ma.*

Group: *A miina k'o ku ma a wala neη pie huη paa te γω yee, amiina k'o ku ma.*

Duorima: Scheming to kill me, how much at all did you pay [as bride wealth] and you are trying to kill me.

Group: Scheming to kill me, how much did you pay and you are trying to kill me.

Duorima: I say you are scheming to kill me, how much did you pay and you are trying to kill me.

Group: Scheming to kill me, how much did you pay and you are trying to kill me.

Dogebo daare 'Day of delivery'

Dakorama: *N πωγaa ηa dogebo daare fo baη la doge ηnadi?*

Dakorama: *N πωγaa ηa dogebo daare fo baη la doge ηnadi?*

Group: *Fo gaa beeson, fo gaa beeson, ndeeme gaa beeson ka n πωγaa leε fo bangyiraa saare.*

Dakorama: *Ndeeme, n πωγaa ηa dogebo daare fo baη la doge ηnadi?*

Group: *Fo gaa beeson, fogaa beeson, ndeeme gaa beeson ka n πωγaa leε fo bangyiraa saare.*

Dakorama: *Πρωγaa ηa dogebo daare fobaη la wolo ηnapohima?*

Group: *Fo gaa beeson, fogaa beeson, ndeeme gaa beeson ka ηρωγaa leε fo bangyiraa saare.*

Dakorama: Do you know how I suffered on the day I was delivered of my daughter?

Dakorama: Do you know how I suffered on the day I was delivered of my daughter?

Group: Greetings! Greetings! Greetings, my son-in-law, for turning my daughter into a toilet broom.

Dakorama: My son-in-law, do you know how I suffered on the day I was delivered of my daughter?

Group: Greetings! Greetings! My son-in-law, greetings for turning my daughter into a toilet broom.

Dakorama: Do you know how I sweated on the day I was delivered of my daughter?

Group: Greetings! Greetings! My son-in-law, greetings for turning my daughter into a toilet broom.

The above are two of the many songs I tape-recorded amongst the women I worked with in women-only support groups during my ethnographic fieldwork in Serekpere, a settlement in north-west Ghana¹. These verses, sung by the women I worked with, were recorded separately at two funeral ceremonies in Sombo and Papu (about 7km and 11km away from Serekpere, respectively). In these forums, the women divide up the performance tasks based on the expertise and talents of the members present. The best singers and drummers lead the singing and drumming aspects; using sticks and empty plastic containers, they drum and, together with the rest of the women (who also clap), they sing, yell and dance. The women dramatise, express and reiterate, most often in exaggerated terms, their lived experience of marital relations and violence in ways that resonate profoundly with performative accounts of gender (Butler, 1990, 1993a). All of the songs I observed were political in the sense that they targeted one gendered ill or another and, indeed, broader male-dominant social institutions in Serekpere. Often, the women sang and acted out scenes about an abuser husband, or a wicked mother-in-law or co-wife, in such a hyperbolic and scornful manner that it drew attention to the performative working of power in marriage, in ways that challenged the injustices inherent in Dagaaba cultural practices.

By deploying these songs collectively, and on occasion individually, in such an exaggerated and repetitive manner at different funeral ceremonies and also during farm work, the women I worked with highlight graphically, and also relieve, male spousal violence and the subjugation of women. The re-iterative and vivid expressions and the drama that attends them demonstrate collective experience and the exercise of agency in settings that are supportive for the

¹ These are women's groups in each part of Serekpere that offer support to their members in the form of contributing money to help them to buy food and ritual items required for funeral ceremonies. Note that as an exogamous settlement, where marriage from within is forbidden, almost all of the women in marriage come from other settlements. I discuss the activities of the groups in detail in Chapter 7.

women. These women's forums allow performative practices that may be constrained within other settings, for instance in 'the marriage space'. 'The marriage space' is my term for the complexly intertwined webs of relations and actors that characterise Dagaaba² marriage arrangements, and a concept to which I return to in Chapter 4. Drawing inspiration from Judith Butler's (1993b:17) notion of performativity as the repetitive 'power of discourse to produce that which it names' and, indeed, theories of performativity of gender more broadly, I will be arguing that it is important to understand singing in this context as a particular performative practice that re-enacts and also reconstitutes gendered violence and subordination in parodic terms. Also, songs and drama within these groups can be understood as agentic and resistant practices. I will argue that these women-only groups and the practices within them—singing, dramatising and repeating in hyperbolic terms—constitute resources that are effective in enabling the women to express deep, sometimes pent-up, sentiments that they might not otherwise be able to. Thus, to understand the workings and implications of power, violence and resistance within marriage in this Dagaaba context is to adopt theoretical perspectives that enable us to capture these complex gendered processes and practices. Theories of gender performativity offer enormous potential in this regard and they are useful for analysing marriage and gender relations more broadly in rural Ghana. In this way, we can understand the workings and implications of power by relying not only on what people say and do in everyday practices but also on the affects they express, and how they express them, through songs and other forms of bodily performance within the less-threatening space of these women-only gatherings.

Both of the songs presented above draw attention to the realities of women's lived experiences within marriage in Dagaaba communities and to how gender relations and violence are collectively and repeatedly dramatised, echoed and renegotiated. The first song targets an abusive husband and its central message is that he has not paid 'enough' bride wealth for the wife and

² 'Dagaaba' is a term used to refer to a range of ethnic identities that share cultural and linguistic affinities in north-west Ghana.

yet is 'scheming' to kill her. When I asked some of the group members who were standing close to me, as they drummed, sang, danced and made bodily gestures, to explain the song's import to me, they said: 'the person [husband], he wants to kill you; he has not paid anything to your fathers, and yet, he is trying to kill you. You have not done anything [wrong] but he is disturbing you; he wants you to die and leave your children'. In other words, the husband is abusing the woman in ways that could lead to her death even though he has not paid all, or an adequate amount, of the bride wealth for her. Some of them, in fact, said 'he has not paid anything at all', and this exaggeration, reducing the marriage payment to not paying 'anything at all', is a strategy to devalue the payment because of the violence and repression it engenders against women. Both the song and the explanation given by the women raise troubling questions regarding marital relations and violence: is it acceptable for a man to kill his wife once he has paid the bride price in its entirety? How much is enough to give a man the right to scheme and kill his wife?

At once, this song, the expressions (reiterative and collective) and the explanations given to me about the song draw our attention to the main themes addressed in this thesis. Specifically, I am referring to the significant role of marriage and exogamous³ practices more generally in engendering and normalising violence against women, but also to the salience of interpreting these relations through a performative framework so that we can understand Dagaaba power relations and their implications for violence, agency and resistance practices. During my fieldwork, both women and men were almost unanimous in asserting that no amount of cowrie shells, which Dagaaba use as marriage payment, was enough to 'buy' a bride (see figure 6 for an image of cowrie shells). If this is the case, and if everyone in that context understands it as such, why does the performance suggest that a man can scheme and kill his wife once he has paid an adequate amount of bride

³ Exogamy is a marriage pattern that requires that individuals marry outside of their natal clans. In many Dagaaba exogamous societies, this arrangement implies that upon marriage women relocate to live in the husband's settlement or another space provided by his agnatic kin (see Nukunya, 2003). I return to the rationale for this in the context of Serepere in Chapter 4.

wealth? A performative reading of this act may be to interpret it as the women parodying the terms of their injury and victimisation in order to expose, ridicule and, potentially, subvert them. In other words, perhaps by singing about and dramatising male violence against women in this parodic manner, the women also draw attention to its harrowing nature and impact.

The second song addresses an abusive son-in-law; a visiting mother challenges him and bemoans the incessant abuse and denigration of her beloved daughter. The metaphor the women I worked with deploy in this song is that of a toilet cleaning broom or brush, and this is to demonstrate the repeated degradation the woman in marriage is subjected to. The women performed and recounted the pain and suffering of labour and childbirth within the context of this study, where most births, particularly in the past, were carried out at home under the supervision of untrained elderly women. Thus, Dakorama (c68)⁴ and all the women at this funeral celebration re-enacted and relived the pain they underwent whilst giving birth. The son-in-law, who has denigrated his wife, treating her as though she was less than human, is apparently oblivious to the pain and suffering of the mother-in-law. Therefore, in this performance he is being informed about it, and also informed that the woman he degrades is another person's treasure. In the context of rural north-west Ghana, in the midst of the constraints the mother-in-law finds herself under as a woman, and given that mothers have a limited say in regard to the marriage of their daughters, it seems that singing presents her with an opportunity to challenge her daughter's abuser. Perhaps this endeavour contains the hope that the questions will function as an appeal to the abusive husband to cease his behaviour.

I have chosen to begin this thesis with these two vignettes as a way to introduce the pervasive nature and the near banality of violence in marriage in rural north-west Ghana and, indeed, in the country as a whole. The songs also show the performative manner in which the violent practices are expressed,

⁴ In this study 'c' stands for circa and I use this to approximate the age of my research participants, as accurate dates of birth were mostly unavailable.

normalised, contested and re-appropriated in ways that reinforce and/or challenge dominant power structures and, thus, enrich our understanding of the workings of power, agency and resistance in Serekpere. Thus, by interpreting performatively these marriage practices, and gendered relations more widely, I seek to move beyond the normative expressions of marital relations and delve more deeply into how these norms are reconstituted and deployed to reinforce and/or disrupt gendered oppression amongst Dagaaba.

This study is an in-depth exploration of gendered relations of power within marriage in rural north-west Ghana, based on 12 months of ethnographic observation conducted in one Dagaaba settlement known as Serekpere. The thesis draws on poststructuralist theories of gender performativity as the main analytical framework and on feminist ethnographic research epistemologies to interpret deep-seated cultural norms and assumptions that govern daily life, marriage, and gender relations in general in Serekpere. This framework is necessary and compelling for various reasons. In the context of this study, marriage practices and relations are constituted and reproduced in multifaceted ways and through a series of discursive and embodied practices that elude rationalist accounts. Also, daily and ritual life amongst Dagaaba, as in other cultural groups discussed in the anthropological literature on witchcraft, is deeply influenced by events occurring in the supernatural world (see Evans-Pritchard, 1976; Ashforth, 2005; Geschiere, 2013). Every incident, good or bad, in daily life is believed to be influenced by mystical forces, namely the pervasive belief in the power of the gods, magic and witchcraft. Sickness, death and even crop failure are presumed by Dagaaba to be the result of punishment by the ancestors or ‘missiles’⁵ sent by evil people to cause harm. Thus, the issues of marriage and gendered power relations are complexly intertwined with the belief in supernatural forces. These forces are ‘elusive’ in character, as Peter Geschiere (2013) describes them, and they defy simplistic explanations. However, an understanding of the manner in which belief in these forces is reiteratively reproduced and sustained, and also

⁵ Dagaaba believe that some witches possess *soɔ marifa*—a witchcraft gun with which they shoot their victims.

of how it affects gendered practices, is central to appreciating marital relations and the working of power and agency amongst Dagaaba. Thus, a performative lens that allows for multiple accounts and interpretations of reality, and an ethnographic approach that enables deep immersion in the daily life of my study participants together form a useful framework for interpreting and understanding the workings of these diverse gendered and mystical power forms and relations.

Furthermore, despite many years of adherence to liberal feminist principles in Ghana and promoting policies and advocating for equality of opportunities for the sexes and gender mainstreaming, there has only been minimal success in transforming normative assumptions about gender relations and roles.

Unbalanced gendered relations of power pervade both public and private spheres throughout the nation, including, of course, in the institution of marriage. The implications of unequal power relations within exogamous marriage arrangements in patrilineal settlements in northern Ghana⁶ appear more extensive when compared with marriage arrangements in matrilineal societies⁷. This is because exogamous marriage patterns require that, upon marriage, women relocate to live in the husband's settlement. Thus, women find themselves within settings that, normatively, have provisions for protecting their interests in marriage but do not, in most cases, guarantee them. Also, exogamous rural settlements and their arrangements permit close interaction between women (mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, co-wives and sisters-in-law), but there are far-reaching implications for specific women who are subordinates in these relations. These include various forms of violence by women against women in marriage, neglect, denial of both food

⁶ Property and authority are passed on to male members of the family through the male line in patrilineal societies (see Nukunya, 2003). By northern Ghana I am referring to the three regions of the north, namely the Upper West, Upper East and Northern Regions. The rest of the country, from the middle belt downwards, including the Brong Ahafo and Ashanti Regions, make up southern Ghana. Despite this simplistic demarcation, it is important to note that Ghana is a culturally diverse country, with wide-ranging differences within and across geographic regions.

⁷ See Chikwenye Ogunyemi (1996) on gender relations amongst the matrilineal Akan of Ghana and Fulani of Senegal and on how women are supposedly powerful in those societies (see also Bleek, 1976). Indeed, I had initially intended to conduct a comparative ethnography of patrilineal and matrilineal practices but I dropped this comparative element in favour of a detailed study in a single patrilineal settlement due to time and resource constraints.

and sex and, indeed, threats to withdraw access to children, and these despicable acts are normalised as part of marital life. I argue in this study that the persistence of these ills may be attributable to the lack of attention to the systemic and structural institutions and practices that engender them. There is a need, therefore, for a critical approach that has the explanatory power to examine and analyse the deep-seated structural factors and assumptions that create these sorts of gendered practices.

Feminist poststructuralist philosophies and epistemologies, including theories of performative gender, that theorise identities, subjectivities and power relations as constituted by iterative repetitions of gender norms and other discursive practices, present us with opportunities to understand the relations of power in Serekpere that are encapsulated in the songs and other practices. They also offer the tools necessary to explore opportunities for resistance and transformation without resorting to simplistic and binary notions of power and agency (Butler, 1990, 1993a, 2004b; Weedon, 1997). A performative framework enables me to explore the manner in which gendered power relations are constituted through diverse discursive and embodied practices, including songs and beliefs in mystical forces, and how these are re-appropriated to challenge violence against, and the subordination of, women. Specifically, the salience of interpreting gendered relations in marriage through a performative framework lies in its ability to address the multifaceted relations and workings of power at play in this study, whilst at the same time questioning and challenging reductive assumptions about them. For instance, my analysis uncovers the workings of power, agency and resistance in ways that challenge everyday notions and assumption (by both women and men) that women are repressed, comparable to ‘slaves’ bought with cowrie shells, and thus lacking agency within Dagaaba contexts.

In considering the performative constitution of gender, embodied practices, marriage and power relations in general, this study explores how we can better understand the problems of marital violence and the subjection of

women within exogamous marriage settings⁸. In doing so, I focus on how Dagaaba cultural norms and expectations regarding marriage are performatively constituted, that is, how they are formed and repeated and how they congeal over time. I also examine the way in which notions of femininities and masculinities are constructed and performed, and the implications of performing these gendered norms in a manner that consolidates and/or deviates from them. I explore in detail the customary assumptions and beliefs that inform the pervasive marginalisation of women in this setting and the ways in which these norms are idealised, re-enacted and/or destabilised. The main questions I explore in the thesis are, firstly: how is gender performed within exogamous marriage arrangements and how do such practices reflect and (re)constitute unequal gendered power relations? Secondly, what are the implications of these performative practices and dynamics for critically interpreting and addressing gender relations in rural northern Ghana? In exploring these issues, I seek to address the following sub-questions: in what ways might women challenge and/or consolidate gender norms in their marriages and what kind of resistance might they face in doing so? What are the implications of various embodied performances for feminist theorising of gender, agency and resistance? And finally, what is the significance of performative gender theories for an understanding of Dagaaba gender relations?

Speaking from the Margins: Research Motivation and Significance

It is 23 February 2012, in Ghana. I am leading a module with about 35 students entitled 'Introduction to Gender and Development' at the Wa Campus of the University for Development Studies in the Upper West Region of Ghana. Today, we are exploring basic concepts, including sex/gender, sexism, gender equality and equity, gender mainstreaming and affirmative action. The students are very excited about these concepts. But some of the

⁸ In the context of this study, marital violence includes various acts of violence exacted on the woman in marriage by such actors within the marriage space including the husband, mother-in-law, father in-law, sisters in-law and brothers in-law amongst others. I distinguish this from violence on the part of husband towards wives by referring to the latter as 'spousal violence' or 'male partner violence'.

male students comment that women cannot be equal to men because we are not as intelligent as they are and they make reference to the greatest physicists and scientists, who are all male. I try to explain to them how women's knowledge and innovations have been rendered invisible by male-dominant Western institutions and epistemologies. I cite a few examples, including the groundbreaking work of Rosalind Franklin on deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA), which was at first unacknowledged and overshadowed by James Watson and Francis Crick. An animated male student puts his hand up and, when I give him the chance to speak, he says: 'Madam, I can explain, I think I am better than you because I can beat you up'. To bolster his claim, he further states that if we were to hoe, manually, he would outperform me. This was an opportunity for me to explain further the potential dangers of such essentialist and violent notions regarding femininities and masculinities.

It is 13 June 2013, in Newcastle. I am walking with a male Ghanaian-born university lecturer. We are discussing politics back home; our economy is deteriorating and members of the main opposition party are blaming the government for failing to deliver on their manifesto promise. An outspoken female Member of Parliament is one of those calling on our president to resign. My companion informs me: 'that woman is a disgrace to womanhood'. This sounds like a broken record to me because I have heard it too many times from my Frafra and Dagaaba families and relations, on media platforms and in informal conversations in Ghana. I ask him: 'what about the men who are also criticising the government'? But he continues: 'she is a bad influence on young Ghanaian women. She is too arrogant'. I ask him why the male politicians are not subjected to this level of derision for similar or even stronger views. I draw on the vilification that female, but not male ministers of state, face. He explains that since there are fewer women in politics, they cannot afford to make mistakes because they then ruin the chances of other women.

Another Ghanaian-born male university lecturer, on a different day in Newcastle, expresses similar disdain towards this female Member of Parliament and towards women in general, in spite of the fact that he is

talking to me, a Ghanaian woman. He explains to me that women are generally weak and are second to men because they were created from the rib of a man and that even the Bible makes it clear that ‘a man is the head of the woman’. He asks me: ‘are you disputing what is in the Bible’? I attempt to explain that the problem with Christianity is its inability to divest itself of the patriarchal culture and histories that formed it. These three vignettes demonstrate the normalised disrespect that most Ghanaian women encounter on a daily basis. My male interlocutors above are emblematic of many Ghanaian men (and some women too) in the opinions they are expressing. These three incidents differ in the sense that they occur in two different locations, Wa and Newcastle, and one is with a first-year undergraduate student whilst the other two are university teachers, who both have PhDs. Yet the bottom line is that they are in unison in regard to their degradation of Ghanaian women. I chose to begin this subsection with these experiences to show that these are important issues and that they need to be investigated. My experience, and indeed, the pervasiveness of such views throughout Ghana, is fundamentally central to my motivation to undertake this study. Also, these encounters and the experience of female leaders demonstrate that the issues of unbalanced power relations, and the subjugation of and violence against women, not only occur among poor and uneducated women in rural areas of Ghana but in fact permeate the entire Ghanaian society.

The primary impetus for this study stems from the need to challenge the subjugation of and violence against women in Dagaaba settlements and throughout exogamous societies in northern Ghana. I focus my attention on marriage and the home because, as my analysis in the following chapters shows, amongst Dagaaba, the institution of marriage, together with the marriage payment and relocation of residence during marriage, is central in producing gendered identities, particularly for women. Thus, to understand the denigration of and violation against women in this context is to start from the making of their positionalities and identities through marriage practices. Yet there is a dearth of literature on women’s experience of marriage in these societies that could help us understand their situation. My motivation is also influenced by my lived experience (and the experiences of many Ghanaian

women)—both professional and personal—and my frustrations with our gendered cultural norms and expectations. In the public arena, Ghanaian women who are strong-willed, including assertive female politicians, are regularly vilified and stigmatised. Male politicians and leaders who fail in their line of duty as ministers and in other public designations are not often subjected to the same scrutiny and stigma as female ones; the social expectations for comportment are much higher for women. This is captured in the vignettes above; the woman ‘cannot afford’ to make mistakes. On a personal note, the motivation for this study derives from my identities as Frafra by birth and Dagao (singular for Dagaaba) by marriage and, secondly, from my beliefs as a feminist—my own positionality⁹. My Frafra and Dagao identities have enabled me to experience the cultures of both ethnic groupings in unique ways that may not be available to a researcher privy to only Dagaaba societies or without any prior knowledge of either grouping. In both Frafra and Dagaaba settlements, I have observed horrifying forms of violence exacted on women in marriage at various intervals and on different scales. I have always asked questions regarding the contradictions (including the different standards for treating, judging and punishing women, men, boys and girls) in these cultures.

Related to this, my positionality as an academic feminist and activist has meant that, throughout my career, I have challenged and continue to challenge these and many other injustices in both Dagaaba and Frafra cultural settings and, indeed, in most marriage practices in northern Ghana. In my roles as an activist and a teacher I have faced varied challenges, including being referred to as a *pog gando*, a stigmatised term used to refer to women perceived as strong-willed, which I examine in detail in Chapter 6. I have also been disrespected in various ways within the academy due to my gender. For example, as I recounted in the first vignette above, my male first-year undergraduate student, in an attempt to justify his superiority over me as a woman, explained that he was better than I was because he could beat me up.

⁹ *Farefare*, popularly known as Frafra, is my ethnic identity; it is an umbrella term for people who speak similar dialects in the Upper East Region of Ghana. Frafra and Dagaaba, as Sean Hawkins observes, share ‘...a large degree of cultural and social affinity’ (2002:9).

That he had such a belief was not surprising to me because it only reflected how not only he but all of us from the northern part of Ghana have been socialised to see men as superior to women. What was shocking was the boldness with which he articulated this view and the setting in which he did it. In my role as an activist, such as in facilitating training programmes with traditional leaders in Wa on mainstreaming gender into a wide range of programmes, including education access and combating gender-based violence at grassroots level, male interlocutors have sometimes expressed pity for my husband (without knowing him) because he is married to a woman they consider assertive. The Ghanaian Constitution (1992) provides for equality of the sexes and prohibits discrimination based on gender. But why are women, throughout Ghanaian society—in both public and private—so marginalised? What does it mean for us (Ghanaian women, educated and uneducated, rural and urban) to live, and speak from, this position of marginality? Are the constitutional provisions ‘empty words’ uttered over the airwaves, as one of my research participants informed me regarding gendered relations and property inheritance¹⁰? What deep-seated cultural assumptions and norms inform this subjugation of women? Violence against women has been normalised as part of the daily experience of marital life for women (Ofei-Aboagye, 1994; Coker-Appiah and Cusack, 1999). How can the violence and repression that these (essentialist) notions engender and exercise over women be understood and, in turn, challenged?

As I started reflecting on these questions about northern Ghanaian cultural practices, I realised that a starting point for understanding the situation of women and the power relations that engender particular positions for us in these contexts is a careful unpacking of the gendered norms and expectations within the ‘private’ sphere of the home as a primary unit of socialisation. Initial searches revealed a scarcity of research on this subject matter and this study is, therefore, my effort to address this situation. The lack of theoretical

¹⁰ When I asked Erasong (c68), a male sectional leader, about national laws on inheritance and women’s rights, he remarked: ‘as for these issues, they are just empty words uttered over air and therefore cannot be the basis for anything at the community level. What works here is what our forefathers have put in place’.

accounts of gender relations and exogamous marriage practices in Ghana is worrying if we consider that a significant amount of anthropological research has been conducted there, in particular on Dagaaba settlements¹¹. Although some of these studies have paid attention to issues affecting women, their primary focus is on history, political systems and Dagaaba's encounter with colonialism and missionary activities (Goody, 1969; McCoy, 1988; Behrends, 2002; Hawkins, 2002). They pay little attention to gendered power relations and institutions and the role they play in creating subordinate identities for woman and in producing violence against women.

Kojo Yelapaala (1983), a Dagao professor of law based in the United States, for instance, focuses on the political structures of the so-called stateless Dagaaba societies and the (imperial) processes through which they became 'centralised'. Yelapaala challenges notions by earlier Western anthropologists studying in Dagaaba societies that Dagaaba settlements were stateless. Instead, Yelapaala argues that the construction of the notion of statelessness was a weapon deployed by the colonial administrators to subdue the Dagaaba people (see also Hawkins, 2002). A more extensive collection is the work of Anthony Naaeke (2009), a Dagao professor of communication arts also based in the United States, entitled: *Critical Essays on Dagaaba Rhetoric*. This collection offers rhetorical analysis of various aspects of Dagaaba cultural practices, including cultural narratives and the manner in which their beliefs and values are reproduced through ritual performance. Naaeke also discusses Dagaaba marriage practices, but his analysis is weakened by a lack of depth and nuance, as well as by an absence of any primary sources to support his claims, particularly on marriage practices. He does however engage usefully with issues on gendered power relations and violence against women, examining women's relative subordinate position in Dagaaba societies and how violence against women has been taken for granted in Dagaaba settlements. This analysis leads him to suggest that women need to speak up against violence in order to overcome it. Whilst Naaeke acknowledges the

¹¹ See, for example, Jack Goody (1967, 1969), Kojo Yelapaala (1983, 1992), Emmanuel Yiridoe (1995), Anthony Naaeke (2006), Remigius McCoy (1988), Andrea Behrends (2002), Hawkins (2002), Richard Kuba and Carola Lentz (2002) Yeshanew Gheneti (2007).

role of pervasive beliefs in mystical forces in preventing women from openly discussing or challenging violence against them, he nonetheless proposes that this is necessary for the socio-economic well-being of the people in the Dagaaba settlements. But as I demonstrate in my empirical analysis in the chapters to follow, from the perspective of the majority of the women I worked with, only ill-advised women would risk the significant consequences such actions might engender for themselves or their children—including their lives.

For his part, in *Great Things Happened* (1988), Remigius McCoy, a Catholic priest, focuses on the spread of Catholicism and the miracles of the Christian God. These include the ‘miracle’ rains in the 1930s, that is, when McCoy prayed to God for rains on behalf of desperate farmers whose crops were at risk of wilting in some Dagaaba settlements. He also draws our attention to such horrifying violence as banishing or killing women perceived to be witches, as well as practices of forced marriage and payment of bride wealth. But McCoy does not pursue the structural factors that authorised these despicable acts against the women. In other words, why were men not banished or killed on the basis of similar accusations? In order to understand the situation of women in northern Ghana, the structural factors that reproduce subordinate positions and identities for women and enable despicable modes of violence against them within marriage require careful and sustained attention¹². Thus, my study seeks to address these previous limitations and weaknesses by addressing gender issues critically and in depth.

Furthermore, research on gendered relations in Ghana has tended to focus on formal issues such as gender equality in politics and education. In terms of marital relations, the approach has been fragmentary, concentrating on specific aspects such as gender-based violence and income-generating

¹² For his part, Emmanuel Yiridoe (1995) draws our attention to the uniqueness and also resilience of cowrie use among Dagaaba in the face of the significant efforts by both colonial and postcolonial administrations to render it less relevant to the Ghanaian society. This resilience is attributable to the seminal role of cowrie use in marriage and ritual practices in Dagaaba social life.

activities, instead of examining holistically the structural and socio-cultural dynamics that engender and reproduce these unequal power relations and violence against women¹³. However, a detailed analysis of the deep-rooted causal factors is crucial to effectively challenge the violation and subjugation of women. Thus, this study seeks to develop an in-depth understanding of the particular situation of women in rural north-west Ghana and of how the violence associated with marriage practices is reproduced and can therefore be addressed. In doing this, it is important to acknowledge that the interpretation I render of the lived experiences of the women I worked with is filtered through my social location and experiences, as I have discussed above. Therefore, I wish to emphasise from the start that I am not a ‘disinterested knower’. Indeed, there is no disinterested knower; knowledge is always partial and ‘bear[s] the marks of [its] ... maker’, as Beverley Skeggs observes (1997:20, 27).

Understanding Marriage Performativity: A Feminist Poststructuralist Approach

In this study, I develop a feminist poststructuralist theoretical approach to inform my analysis. The framework draws on critical assumptions of theories of performative gender and combines these with perspectives from postcolonial African feminisms. My hope is that, this framework will enable me to make sense of the complexities and contradictions associated with social life amongst Dagaaba in general, and with marriage relations and practices in particular. Furthermore, it will permit me to explore means of undermining the violence that these things engender for women. Theories of gender performativity are mainly deployed to analyse heteropatriarchal and heteronormative assumptions and practices and the violence they exact on normatively non-conforming subjectivities, as well as to undermine compulsory heterosexuality (Butler, 1990, 1999, 2004b; Halberstam, 1998; Blencowe, 2013). What is unique about my approach in this study is that I am employing these theories to help us understand principally heterosexual

¹³ See Rosemarie Ofei-Aboagye (1994), Abena Dolfhyne (1991), Dorcas Coker-Appiah and Kathy Cusack (1999).

relations and, in particular, heterosexual marriage norms in rural northern Ghana. One of the critical contributions to feminist theory by Judith Butler, widely considered the founding theorist of gender performativity, is the notion that gender (and embodied identities in general) are performatively constituted. According to Butler (1990, 1993a, 2004b), gender identity is constituted by the ritualised repetitions of past gender norms that solidify over time to give an impression of a stable and coherent identity. Drawing on a wide range of theories, including psychoanalysis, poststructuralism and feminism, Butler shows sex and gender identities, subjectivities and embodiments (sex/gender itself) to be formed by a sustained reiteration of the regulatory norms that govern gender performance in society. In her view, the repetition of these past norms congeals over time to give us a semblance of substance. She writes: ‘...the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence’ (1999:33). Drag is one of the metaphors Butler deploys to demonstrate that gender identity is a phantasm. Drawing inspiration from Esther Newton’s (1972) *Mother Camp*, Butler argues that drag can, in particular contexts, effectively subvert naturalised notions of gender as an inner core. In relation to Newton’s understanding of drag as a ‘double inversion’, Butler maintains that ‘... drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity’ (1999:174). In other words, drag demonstrates gender’s imitative character by mimicking it in hyperbolic terms. Thus, for Butler, drag performance can effectively expose gender identity as an artifice and the ‘dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance’ (1999:175). Most fundamentally, drag works as a metaphor for Butler to show that, in a sense, all gender is drag—all gender identities and subjectivities are performed—we are, from this perspective, all in drag.

My study is based in the context of rural northern Ghana, where heterosexual marriage is the norm (indeed, arguably, a requirement). The dynamics that engender violence against women diverge greatly from those in the European and North American contexts that Butler writes within and about. For

instance, Dagaaba settlements are located within the postcolonial context of Ghana, which has been subject to a series of crippling neo-colonial policies and interventions since it gained independence in 1957. These interventions include various structural adjustment programmes, to which I return shortly. On a daily basis, Dagaaba women struggle with pervasive poverty, hunger and inadequate necessities of life. They also have to contend with patriarchal structures and institutions, with their concomitant male-dominance and violence against, and subordination of, women, as my opening vignettes demonstrate. Nonetheless, it is important to underscore that the concepts of gender performativity, and also of power and agency, are critical for a reading of these practices of oppression and violence and the way in which they are re-appropriated and challenged in order to more fully understand them. As I show in the following chapters, Butler's notion of gendered identities as performatively constituted reverberates profoundly with Dagaaba peoples.

I will illustrate that the notion of femininity in Dagaaba settlements is constituted through discursive practices and the performance of sex-segregated roles within and outside the home. To be specific, I argue that femininity amongst Dagaaba can be seen as constituted along a continuum, ranging from 'ideal woman' through 'woman' to 'beyond woman'. Although the last category is a stigmatised one, used to marginalise wilful women—and I demonstrate that it is the male-centric institutions' most effective tool—I explore how it can be redeployed, in ways similar to queer re-appropriation, as theorised in Butler's work and in other forms of queer and feminist praxis (Halberstam, 1998, 2011). However, I also consider how 'Western' theories of gender performativity appear to privilege expressive and overt forms of embodied performance, agency and resistance, for instance 'hyperbolic repetition' and drag, which are the metaphors Butler employs to support her claim that gender is an artifice. I argue that constraints associated with exogamous marriage arrangements, as well as the pervasiveness of widespread beliefs in the power of mystical entities, act as major limitations to this expressive and 'action biased' (Madhok, 2013:107) account of agency and resistance in the context of northern Ghana, and many other 'non-Western' milieus. As such, I combine theories of performative gender with

postcolonial and African feminisms that pay careful attention to the specific situation of ‘African women’ in order to help us understand the workings of power and possibilities for resistance in Ghana¹⁴. On the basis of my analysis of Dagaaba marriage practices, I examine these questions of ‘cultural translation’ and the implications of theories of gender performativity as they travel from an urban Euro-North American milieu to a rural northern Ghanaian context.

As part of fleshing out the above, I develop theoretical accounts of marital violence, agency and resistance within the context of Dagaaba, where the pervasiveness of beliefs in mysticism complicates our understanding of these practices. Specifically, I draw on Michel Foucault’s (1978, 1982) work on power and resistance. Notably, my analysis in this study is informed by Foucault’s highly influential notion of power and agency as productive, permeating networks of relations rather than being concentrated in people or authorities and deployed to repress others. I illustrate that both Foucault’s (1978, 1982) and Butler’s (1990, 1997a, 2004b) analyses of power as productive and performative reverberate with Dagaaba marriage practices. Power is exercised by all actors within ‘the marriage space’ in multifaceted ways, although the women I worked with frequently refer to themselves as dupes of Dagaaba marriage practices. Also, Foucault underscores the imbrications between power, agency and resistance, and whilst I deploy his perspectives on these, based on the analysis of my fieldwork data, I also complicate his renditions by exploring an exercise of agency that is not geared towards resistance. As mentioned above, Dagaaba daily and ritual lives are permeated with beliefs in mystical beings and forces, such as the ancestors¹⁵, witchcraft and *juju* (magic), and I contend that the pervasiveness of such beliefs has implications for agentic practices.

¹⁴ I use the phrase ‘African women’ conscious of the wide diversity, as well as the different historical and political antecedents, of African societies and African women. In my analysis I call attention to the problematic (essentialist) lumping of all women in Africa together.

¹⁵ The gods and the ancestors are believed to be the spirits of deceased male lineage members (see Chapter 5 for a detailed explanation of this).

Additionally, I draw on the sociological and anthropological works of James Scott (1985, 1990), Lila Abu-Lughod (1985, 1990), Saba Mahmood (2005) and Sumi Madhok (2013) to analyse the complex intersections of agency, power and resistance. These theorists, who are based in North America and Europe, carry out research in societies in the global South. They provide theoretical insights into the diffuse forms of agentic and resistance practices that are enabled by these contexts but which may sit uncomfortably with dominant Western assumptions. For instance, Mahmood (2005) exposes the problematics in theorising, including feminist poststructuralism, that tether agency to resistance. Based on her ethnography amongst the women of the mosque movement in Egypt, she presents an exercise of agency that may be seen by feminists as further reinforcing women's subordination. For her part, Madhok (2013) challenges the pervasiveness of overt ways of expressing agency in contemporary Western feminist theorising. She calls our attention to the risk of 'misdescription', exaggerating or missing agency where it is exercised, in contexts such as India, if speech practices are not taken into consideration. I build on these insights, but also diverge from them in the sense that I draw attention to how the constraints associated with the aforementioned paranormal forces render not only overt embodied practices but also speech practices in Dagaaba contexts problematic. The pervasiveness of these power forms also renders gender relations and understanding gendered power more complex.

In regards to mysticism in Africa, I draw on the anthropologist Edward Evans-Pritchard's ([1932]1976) classic work amongst Azande of south Sudan and Geschiere's (1997, 2013) study of Maka of south-east Cameroon. These and many other writers I engage with tend to collapse the complex mystical world of African societies into a broad rubric of 'witchcraft beliefs'. However, this rather capacious conception of witchcraft risks rendering invisible other forms of supernatural power. I differ from these writers in drawing attention to equally important forces such as the power of the gods and *juju* (magical power) in this Dagaaba context. I demonstrate that these forces are crucial determinants of the agentic and resistance practices that are authorised in this context. Furthermore, I draw on Emerson Dobash and

Russell Dobash (1979) and Michael Johnson (1995, 2008) on spousal/marital violence. These works are seminal to theoretical discourses on marital violence, as they highlight the relations of power in which domestic violence emerges and takes place in the United Kingdom and the United States, where the researchers were based. In the context of my study, due to a concatenation of networks of relations, including ‘spirits’, parents-in-law, co-wives, brothers and sisters-in-law and aunts and uncles, I extend discourses on marital violence explored by Dobash and Johnson by calling for the need to pay attention to these webs. In the chapters that follow, this study will draw attention to the specific and disadvantaged position women occupy in exogamous marriage arrangements and the violence these practices and this residential pattern produce for women. I also intend that the exercise of agency and resistance, and how power works in general, in the midst of these constraints and what such extreme beliefs in witchcraft and accusations render, socially, will become clear.

As mentioned earlier, my approach to this research is rooted in feminist poststructuralist and ethnographic epistemologies, conducted through participant observation. This approach recognises women’s experience as the basis for producing legitimate knowledge. Although it encourages collaboration with women in the research process (Harding, 1987; Skeggs, 1997), I articulate the difficulties of applying these principles in contexts such as Serepere. Participant observation allowed me to be immersed in the social worlds of my research participants and for these to be documented in detailed fieldnotes. Along with participant observation, I conducted and tape-recorded 10 in-depth interviews with Dagaaba gender activists and academics. I also held a community forum to draw my fieldwork to a close. I return to the epistemological and methodological issues of this study in detail in Chapter 3.

My study is novel in the manner in which I deploy theories of performativity to understand gender and marriage relations in this cultural context. It is thus a ‘cultural translation’. Based on my empirical analysis, I argue that theories of performative gender will benefit immensely by shifting their emphasis slightly from visible expressions such as dressing and bounded acts, to pay

more attention to the role of sex-segregated activities in the marriage space and in community-wide activities, as well as to the role of the pervasiveness of beliefs in mystical forces in sculpting gendered practices and identities. If feminist theorising in contexts such as the Dagaaba's is to avoid the sorts of Western-centric and neo-colonial misdescription and romanticisation that Abu-Lughod, Mahmood and Madhok draw our attention to in other cultural locales, it is imperative to broaden our focus to include the complex workings of paranormal forms of power in complicating power relations, and agentic and resistance practices in contexts such as Serekpere where it is relevant to do so.

Situating the Research and its Participants

In this section, I examine the geographical and political-economic background to this study, to situate my analysis in the current state of affairs in the postcolonial context of Ghana, and of Dagaaba settlements in particular. These locations—the regional, district and, indeed, national boundaries—are social constructs instituted to serve specific political interests (of colonial and postcolonial political administrations and dominant ethnicities). The context and its setting are central to the processes I am exploring in this study, that is, the kinds of practices, identities and relations that are performatively produced are enabled and constrained by the contextual factors. Ghana, known as the Gold Coast until independence from Britain in 1957, is a tropical country located along the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa (see map of Ghana in Figure 1). To the north, Ghana shares a border with Burkina Faso, to the east with Togo and to the west with Côte d'Ivoire, and to the south it is bounded by the Gulf of Guinea. The total land area of Ghana is 238,253km. According to the Ghana Statistical Service (2012), Ghana's population is 24,658,823. There are four main ecological zones in the country: the southern savanna, and the forest, transitional and northern savanna belts (Assimeng, 1999). Situated within a tropical continental climate, various parts of Ghana experience variations in weather conditions throughout the year (see Assimeng, 1999; Hawkins, 2002).

A favourably distributed rainfall pattern combines with vast arable lands and a rich natural resource endowment to serve as a major pull factor that attracts people from the northern part of Ghana to the south to undertake farm activities (see Hawkins, 2002). However, this is only one of the pull factors; Western-style education, which started in the south in the 16th century, only began in the 20th century in northern Ghana (Graham, 1971). Successive colonial rulers, notably the British, later intentionally slowed the pace of educational and other infrastructural development in the north so that they could transport (male) northerners to the plantations and mining sites in the south to undertake manual work (see Thomas, 1974; Drucker-Brown, 1993; Hawkins, 2002). Whilst the colonial government neglected to develop the north, ‘northern labor was essential to mining, the export crop economy, the army, and menial urban occupations’ (Thomas, 1974:427). In this process, the northern people were constituted by the colonial administrators as uncivilised and violent, and these misconceptions have been reinforced and perpetuated by southern-dominated postcolonial governments¹⁶. This colonial scheme, continued by most postcolonial local administrations, of deliberately delaying development in the northern part of Ghana has had a significant and negative impact on the pace of educational and infrastructural development throughout the north, which remains today. Specifically, there is a skewed distribution of infrastructure and services between the south and the north, and this is aggravated by the fact that the north is less endowed with natural resources. For decades, the three regions of the north have been the poorest in Ghana, according to nationwide surveys¹⁷.

A Ghana Statistical Service report (2014) estimates that up to 54 per cent of the extreme poor live in the northern regions of Ghana, although this area only constitutes 17.2 per cent of Ghana’s population. The league table of poverty incidence¹⁸ compiled by the Ghana Statistical Service (2015) shows,

¹⁶ To justify the atrocities exacted on Dagaaba, and also on Frafra, who at first did not cooperate, it was necessary for the British colonial administrators to create an image of them as ‘backward’, ‘primitive’ and violent (Hawkins, 2002:6), and these notions live on in the southern part of Ghana, many decades after colonialism.

¹⁷ See reports on this since the 1990s (Ghana Statistical Service, 2000, 2014; Government of Ghana, 2003).

¹⁸ This is the number of cases of poverty in a population within a particular period.

graphically, the disproportionate concentration of poverty in the northern part of the country. For instance, 16 out of the 20 poorest districts are located in this area, with a shocking nine in the Upper West Region. Following from this, the Upper West Region, within which the Dagaaba people are located, remains the most deprived; it is the poorest, and indeed, least developed in terms of both monetary and non-monetary indicators (Ghana Statistical Service, 2010). On a whole, it is estimated that eight out of 10 residents of the Upper West Region live below the poverty line of \$1.25 per day. Also, the incidence of poverty in 2006 was higher in the Upper West Region, estimated at 87.9 per cent compared with the national average of 28.5 per cent. In 2013, the regional rate declined to 70.7 per cent, which is still the highest in Ghana followed by the Northern Region with an incidence of 50.4 per cent. The Greater Accra Region, where the national capital is located, has the least incidence rate of poverty of 5.6 per cent. Similarly, the maternal mortality rates, particularly in rural areas in the Upper West Region and including in settlements such as Serepere, is high, estimated at 90.7 per cent compared with the national rate of 57 per cent (Ghana Statistical Service, 2010). The situation is not very different for other indicators such as access to quality health care and employment opportunities. This worrying situation of endemic deprivation reflects the skewed distribution of national resources throughout Ghana. This situation, the endemic poverty and general deprivation, has led to a sustained and perennial out-migration of men and women to the south. People from Dagaaba settlements are amongst those who travel to the interior settlements in the forests regions and to the mines and big cities in southern Ghana, mainly to undertake farm activities and menial jobs. Thus, as I show in my discussion, temporarily migrating to the south is a major part of Dagaaba life for both women and men (see also Naaeke, 2009).

The social and cultural consequences of these political discourses and the situation they have created for northerners and Dagaaba settlements are far-reaching. First of all, this has meant persistent discrimination against people of northern descent regarding access to certain white-collar jobs and higher education. In the context of my study, the most devastating consequences of out-migration are the risks it exposes married women and teenage girls to. For

instance, the women regularly travel to unknown destinations and in the process are exposed to risks that include ritual murder—believed to be pervasive in the southern part of Ghana¹⁹—and rape. Yet a married Dagao woman who has sex (and rape, in this context, is considered ‘having sex’) with a man other than her husband is at risk of attracting *mooro* (a perceived adultery-related sickness) unless she confesses and is purified when she returns to the village. Many of the adultery issues and subsequent purifications that I was informed of were those of women who returned from the south. Some of the men I worked with informed me that once a woman ‘spoils’, they are unwilling to stay married to her, even if she is purified. Thus, migration poses a significant threat to marriage relations and, indeed, to lives in Dagaaba settlements.

Dagaaba, Nadowli-Kaleo District and Serekpere: Discursive borders and identities

‘Dagaaba’ is an identity category used to designate a range of ethnic communities that are part of a broader Dagaare (an umbrella term for several similar dialects) speaking people²⁰. These ethnicities are similar in their dialects and cultural norms and practices, but also have wide-ranging diversities in marriage practices and rituals²¹. In Ghana, Dagaaba are located in the north-western part; other Dagaaba settlements are in the southern part of Burkina Faso. Dagaare, the language (along with Gurune, one of the dialects of the Frafra people, and many other languages), belongs to the Mole-Dagbani group, which is one of the Gur, Niger-Congo languages²² (Goody, 1967; Bodo, 1997). Dagaaba and their neighbours have complex identity categorisations, mainly due to the variations as one moves from one Dagao

¹⁹ The women I worked with often explained to me how they had narrowly escaped supposed ritual murders and how people from the settlement and its environs had gone missing or were found dead in bushes in the forest regions.

²⁰ Following Sharon Hutchinson’s (1996) suggestion in *Nuer Dilemmas* that the use of ‘the’ is a bit of a relic of functionalist ethnography, part of the repertoire of fixing bounded ethnic identities, I use ‘Dagaaba’ instead of ‘the Dagaaba’ throughout this study.

²¹ For instance, marriage payments of Dagara of further north include cows whereas the people of Serekpere and the surrounding settlements pay only in cowries (see Goody, 1969).

²² The Niger-Congo languages constitute the largest language family in Africa. See also Encyclopaedia Britannica Online available at: <http://www.britannica.com/topic/Gur-languages> (Accessed: 02/03/2016).

settlement to another. This has been further compounded by the distortions and misinterpretations of colonial administrators and Western anthropologists in their efforts to ‘fix’ and ‘harmonise’ these complexities. Like with other Mole-Dagbani ethnicities, for instance Frafra, controversies have surrounded the appropriateness of terms used to designate these disparate peoples, most of whom self-identify after their settlements (for instance, Kaleobe, people from Kaleo and Serekperee, people from Serekpere²³). For my purpose in this study, I will only briefly discuss the constitution of identities in this context to give a sense of the people amongst whom I studied and to delineate the boundaries of my research.

The British colonial rulers used the terms ‘Lobi’ and ‘Dagarti’, both of which are considered pejorative and are rejected by the people so named (see Bodomo, 1997; Hawkins, 2002; Kuba and Lentz, 2002). The eminent British anthropologist Jack Goody acknowledges his frustrations with these colonial renditions that attempted to ‘fix’ otherwise complex identities. Goody himself, whilst acknowledging that the ethnonyms are non-existent, ‘invents’ his own neologisms. These are ‘LoDagaba’, ‘Lo (*Lɔɔr, Loba*)’ and ‘Dagaa (Dagari, Dagaba)’, which are the names the people employ to refer to themselves and their neighbours (1967:17). He writes: ‘[t]he people I call the LoDagaba live in the north-west corner of the Gold Coast [Ghana] and across the Black Volta in French West Africa (Haute Volta) [Burkina Faso]. They are known to the French authorities as Dagari and the English as the Lobi’ (Goody, 1957:75). Goody’s own ethnonyms, however, have served to further perpetuate this confusion. Richard Kuba and Carola Lentz (2002) contend that the people around Wa, Nadowli and Jirapa constitute Dagaaba whilst those further north, around Nandom, Lawra and parts of Burkina Faso, make up Dagara. Yet, there are vast cultural and religious diversities amongst these groupings (see map of the Upper West Region in figure 2).

I find Adams Bodomo’s (1997) classification of northern, central and southern Dagaaba more useful. The northern Dagaaba include Nandom, Lawra and their surrounding settlements; the central Dagaaba are made up of

²³ Goody (1967) does acknowledge this.

Jirapa, Nadowli and their environs, and this includes Serekpere, as it comes under Nadowli administratively. The southern Dagaaba include Kaleo and Wa and their surrounding settlements. This is another simplistic and crude delineation and, indeed, including Wa people, who are different in many respects from Dagaaba, in the southern category, as Bodomo does, has been described by Hawkins as an ‘inverted linguistic imperialism’ (2002:30, note 6). Nonetheless, this categorisation allows us to attend to individual settlements, how they self-identify and their specific practices, avoiding such a vague imperial imposition as ‘LoDagaa’. Thus my accounts of the practices, and my use of the term Dagaaba, refer to the people of Serekpere and the adjoining settlements, central Dagaaba and, to a lesser extent, southern Dagaaba²⁴. This specification is important, given that some of the variation as one moves from one geographical location (and, indeed, one settlement) to another is remarkable. For example, ‘LoWiili’, another ethnonym created by A. Duncan-Johnstone (1918:428) and further deployed by Goody (1967) to designate some congeries on the Dagaare-speaking spectrum, have a complex mix of matrilineal and patrilineal inheritance systems. Goody (1967:60) writes: ‘the LoWiili live at the point at which the matrilineal and patrilineal systems of inheriting movable property meet’. To this effect, my ethnography is the first in-depth study in Serekpere and the surrounding settlements. Previously, the ethnographic gaze, both colonial and postcolonial, and the general research interest, seemed to be concentrated on the northern Dagaaba and Lawra and the surrounding settlements (Goody, 1957, 1967, 1969; Behrends, 2002; Hawkins, 2002).

Serekpere, the site of my ethnographic fieldwork, is situated within the Nadowli-Kaleo District of the Upper West Region of Ghana (see Serekpere on the map of Nadowli-Kaleo District in figure 3). The Upper West Region has an estimated population of 702,110, and it is predominantly rural, with up to 84 per cent of its inhabitants living in rural areas (Ghana Statistical Service, 2013). The entire

²⁴ However, my southern category will exclude Wa, as the people of this area do not identify as Dagaaba but as Waala.

Figure 1: Geographical and political map of Ghana



This map was extracted from <http://www.ezilon.com/maps/africa/ghana-maps.html> (Accessed: 08/02/2016).

Nadowli-Kaleo District, with a population of 94,388, is classified as rural according to the Ghana Statistical Service (2012). Serepere is about 8km from Nadowli, the district capital and about 35km from Wa, the regional

capital. The Upper West Region is the last of the ten administrative regions in Ghana, created in 1983 out of the then Upper Region. It is the most deprived region, with up to 88 per cent of households considered as being poor (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014).

Subsistence-level rain-fed agriculture is the mainstay of Dagaaba, employing the majority of people. Therefore, most livelihoods depend on the vagaries of the rains. With increased climate variability in recent years, poverty and hunger have been on the increase. Furthermore, literacy levels are very low in the Upper West Region. For instance, in 2010, literacy, defined by the Ghana Statistical Service as the ability to read in any language with an understanding, was 49.5 per cent, which was lower than the national average of 74 per cent (2012, 2013). In rural areas such as Serekpere, the situation is even more pronounced. For instance, at the time of my fieldwork, there was no woman, married into Serekpere or a community member, aged 35 or over who could read or write, although there were a few literate men. In many of the multicultural urban settlements of Ghana, the dominance of cultural norms and practices such as privileging males in property inheritance and sex-segregated gender roles is waning because of the immense influence of modern judicial systems of administration and cross-cultural interaction. By contrast, throughout rural Ghana, and in areas like Serekpere, this change is much slower. As my discussion in the following chapters will show, customary norms appear almost unchanged in the rural settlements. However, the reason for this is not difficult to understand, inasmuch as it is in the interest of the male gatekeepers to police the norms that privilege them.

Political History of Ghana

European contact with Ghana, starting with trade (specifically with the Portuguese), dates back to 1471 (Buah, 1980; Assimeng, 1999). What may be described as a scramble between European powers, notably the Dutch, Danish, British and Swedish, for Ghana's land and rich mineral resources (including gold, diamonds and metal ores) took place over the following

centuries, and by 1874 the Gold Coast had become a British colony, whilst Ashanti and the northern territories came under British colonial rule in 1901 (Buah, 1980; Gifford, 2004). In addition to mineral resources, the emergence of the cocoa industry, with Ghana having become the world's leading exporter by 1911, provided a further impetus for socio-economic development (Green, 1988). In 1947, an emerging group of merchants led by Joseph Boakye Danquah came together and founded the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC). The group fought for self-rule, with Kwame Nkrumah—Ghana's first president and a pan Africanist—as its general secretary. But due to ideological differences, Nkrumah left the UGCC and formed the Convention People's Party (CPP) (Gifford, 2004). In 1951 Nkrumah was elected Leader of Government Business (but as part of a British colonial administration), and became the first Prime Minister of Ghana in 1952. Nkrumah's CPP won two subsequent elections in 1954 and 1956, and on 6 March 1957, Ghana gained independence from Britain, becoming the first colonised sub-Saharan African country to do so. On 1 July 1960, the country gained the status of a republic, ending several decades of British colonial rule (Buah, 1980). Since independence, the country has experienced a chequered history of four successful coups d'état (24 February 1966, 1 January 1972, 4 June 1979 and 31 December 1981 [see Gifford, 2004]). The first of these saw the overthrow of Ghana's first president, a visionary leader who sought to form alliances not only with other African countries but also throughout the global South. Since the return to civilian rule in 1992, however, there has been steady democratic governance, making Ghana one of the most stable and peaceful countries in Africa.

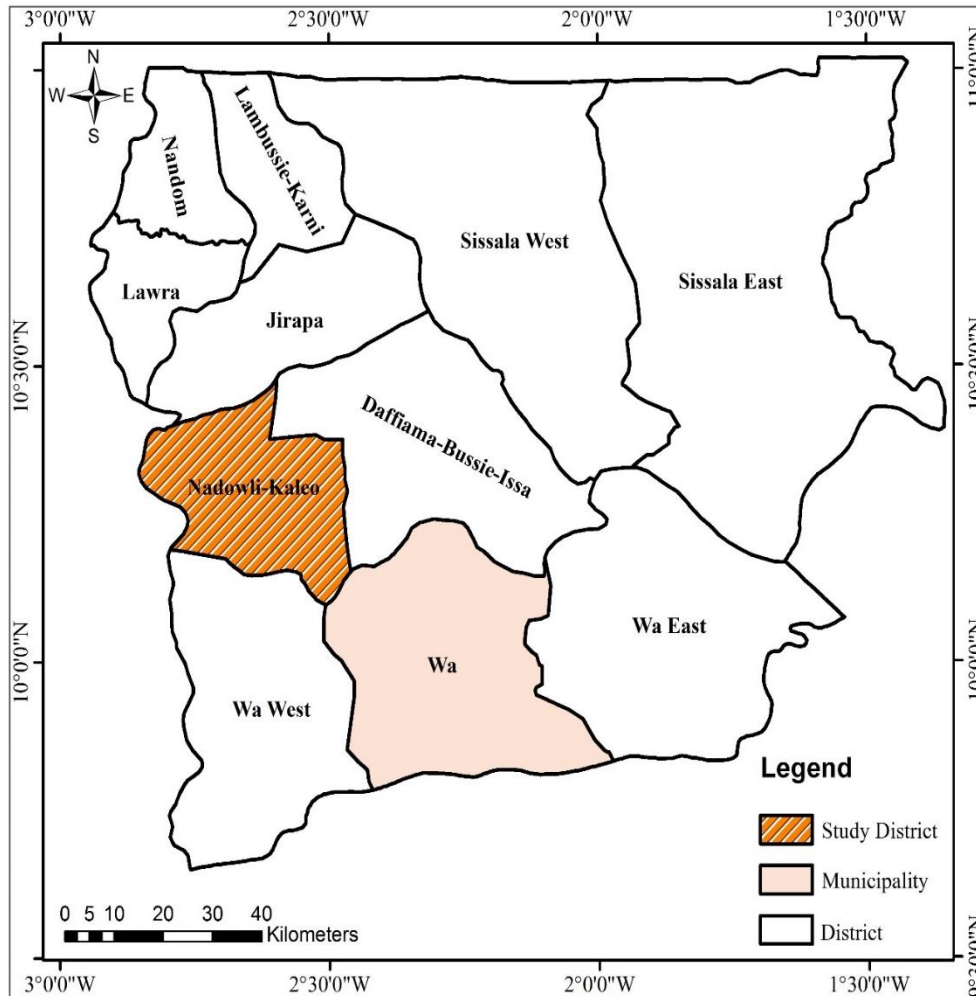
Since independence, successive governments (civilian and military) have had to contend with numerous pernicious International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank conditionalities, notable amongst which are the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) introduced in the 1980s. The SAPs were introduced in that decade in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa to help restructure their struggling economies, which had been hit by both internal and external shocks. In the case of Ghana, a sustained fall in world prices of agricultural produce, notably cocoa, a rise in oil prices, and prolonged drought

and widespread bush fires in the forest regions, coupled with years of economic mismanagement and corruption by both civilian and military rulers culminated in economic stagnation. This situation was further exacerbated by the repatriation of more than a million Ghanaians from neighbouring Nigeria in 1983.

As a way out, the Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC) government turned to the World Bank and the IMF to help salvage the country, and SAPs, along with comprehensive reform policies, were introduced in Ghana in 1983/4 (Green, 1988; Gifford, 2004). The SAPs saw an increase in aid from Western donors, culminating in the construction of road and electricity infrastructure in major towns. As Gifford observes, by the close of the 1980s, Western donors and institutions were touting Ghana's SAPs as a success story. Nonetheless, evidence of the adverse effects of these pernicious policies on countries, and on women in particular, has abounded (for Ghana, see Naylor, 1999; Gifford, 2004). In Ghana, SAPs produced unprecedented levels of public sector retrenchment in a bid to ensure efficiency and reduce government spending on public sector wages along with the divestment of parastatal organisations. The SAPs also led to the erosion of many social protection policies, and subsidised health and educational packages were replaced with full payment for these services. Furthermore, subsidies on food, agricultural inputs and petroleum were removed. These crude and sometimes inhumane measures have had damaging and far-reaching implications for Ghanaian women in particular. The retrenchment exercise targeted lower-grade employees such as cleaners, typists and labourers, jobs that had largely been carried out by women. Poverty levels increased, the health user fee led to consequences such as the detention of people in health facilities because they were unable to defray the costs of treatment, many pregnant women delivering at home under the supervision of untrained women, and school pupils being chased out of school for unpaid fees. Men, withdrawn from formal sector employment, now had to compete with women in the informal sector of trade, which was hitherto a women's realm. Women as mothers and primary caregivers throughout Ghana bore the brunt; they had to work longer

hours to make up for dwindling household incomes (see Jonah, 1989; Naylor, 1999).

Figure 2: Geographical and administrative map of the Upper West Region of Ghana



In addition to the above, the combined effect of socio-cultural stereotypes and an apparent lack of commitment to improving the situation of women (as a historically excluded segment of Ghanaian society) beyond lip service and political rhetoric has seen an abysmal lack of presence and involvement of women in almost all spheres of Ghanaian social life, including in politics, public office, private business enterprise and education. For instance, as of 2014, women occupy only 11 per cent of the parliamentary seats in Ghana²⁵.

²⁵ See World Bank: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS> (Accessed: 05/07/2016).

Efforts by women's wings of the main political parties to convince male members to introduce affirmative action are often met with resistance. Part of the effect of these efforts, it appears, is the subjugation of women and various forms of abuse and violence against them in both public and private spheres, as well as the normalisation of these across the country.

Setting the Legal Context: Customary and Constitutional Marriage Laws

The various forms of violation against and subjugation of women, in both private and public spheres, occur within Ghana's legal framework. I examine the legal framework briefly here and juxtapose it with the customary norms that are pervasive in Ghanaian contexts to show the dominant presence of the latter and the way in which they affect women's experience of marriage. Ghana has signed, without reservations, international instruments for promoting gender equality and for prohibiting discrimination and violence based on a person's gender. These instruments include the United Nations (UN) 1948 Declaration of Human Rights, the 1981 African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women—Beijing Platform for Action. For instance, the CEDAW entreats member states to undertake to transform and eliminate cultural norms and institutions that oppress women, as well as to grant women and men equal entitlements before the law. The African Charter has similar provisions, aimed at according women civil rights similar to those enjoyed by men and working towards eliminating all forms of discrimination against women, as well as protecting their rights. Internally, Ghana has legal provisions for protecting women's welfare within marriage. The 1992 Constitution of Ghana guarantees the equality of all persons irrespective of their gender and criminalises gender-based discrimination.

These national and international legal frameworks should ideally provide protection for women within all social arenas, including within marriage. Nonetheless, they appear to have limited significance outside of the major cities in Ghana. In rural settlements like Serekpere, local customary norms

and practices instead hold sway. Although these norms are not necessarily ‘anti-women’, they tend to permit, if not perpetuate, the violation of women’s rights (see Cantalupo et al, 2006). Nancy Cantalupo et al (2006) highlight the major constraints on realising the effective implementation of the legal instruments for promoting women’s rights and fighting violence against women throughout Ghana. These include deep-rooted cultural beliefs that domestic violence is a ‘family matter’ and should be dealt with outside the state legal system. Other constraints are the lack of commitment from the staff of the police, the judiciary and other state organisations such as the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice to work towards effectively addressing violence against women.

In Dagaaba settlements, customarily women are expected to protect the marital family rather than publicise any private disputes internal to the family and, as such, domestic violence is rarely discussed, let alone reported. Normatively, customary laws have provisions for ensuring that a woman in marriage is protected from abuse and that her needs are catered for by her new family. However, this does not always happen in reality. On the contrary, the same customary laws are invoked to exercise and justify violent acts against the woman in marriage. To this end, although customary norms and practices in Dagaaba societies are not necessarily anti-women, they often reflect and serve male interests (see Dolphyne, 1991; Banda, 2003). Thus, following the African Women’s Report (United Nations and Economic Commission for Africa, 2009), it makes sense to argue that problematic cultural norms and practices are major impediments to the full realisation of women’s rights and the eradication of gender-based violence in the settlements of northern Ghana.

In this chapter, I have discussed background issues pertaining to the performative constitution of power, gender, violence, agency and resistance in marriage. I have argued that unequal power relations pervade all public spheres of Ghanaian society, including in the academy and national politics, and the so-called private sphere of the institution of marriage is no exception. Women are marginalised and degraded in all of these spaces. However, the marriage space and the dynamics within it, which condition gendered

relations and violence, have received little attention. Although there are several academic studies on Dagaare-speaking people, many of them have, as I have argued, focused on Dagaaba culture in general, with less emphasis on the gender dimensions of these cultural practices and their role in violence against women in marriage. These inequalities and the marginalisation of and violence against women that they engender have been normalised as part of daily life in Ghanaian contexts, as the opening vignette regarding marriage payment suggests. My theoretical framework, mentioned above, will enable me to explore in detail the discursive practices that work performatively to constitute social relations and different identity positions for women and men. It also allows us to analyse and explain violence against women, and interrogate the often-unchallenged structural mechanisms and discourses that underpin it. In the process, the complexities of power relations in marriage in this rural Ghanaian context that engender and reinforce the inequalities can be effectively understood and challenged. Most importantly, it enables me to explore these multifaceted relations whilst eschewing totalising assumptions regarding agency and resistance practices because of their exclusionary and repressive tendencies. This will create a deeper understanding of the situation of women in Dagaaba societies.

Organisation of the Thesis

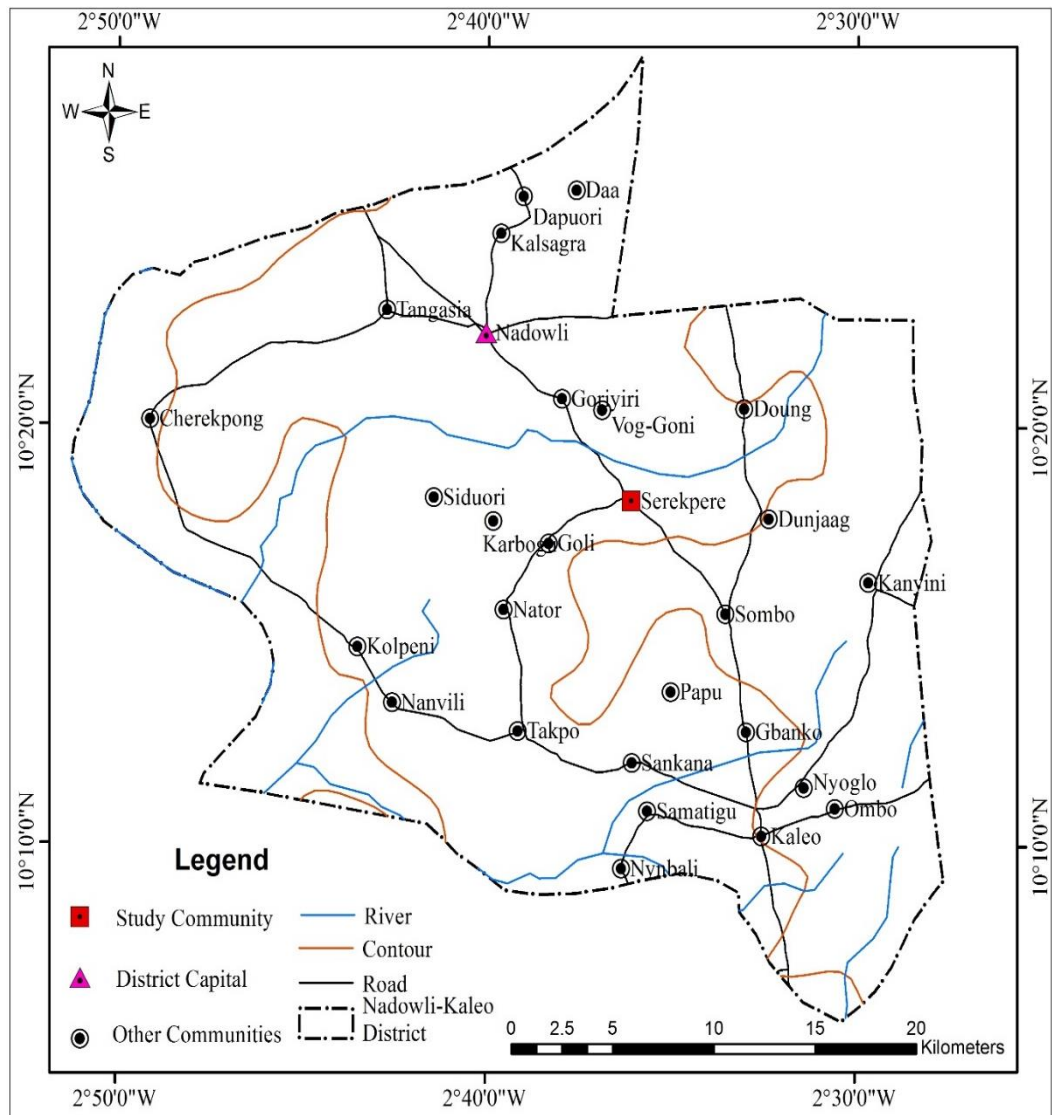
This thesis is comprised of eight chapters, including four that draw directly on my empirical research. In Chapter 2, I outline the theoretical framework for this study. Specifically, I flesh out the integrated gender performativity framework by bringing together critical accounts of gender performativity with insights from postcolonial African feminisms. Chapter 3 outlines my research epistemology and methodology. I draw together poststructuralist theoretical assumptions and combine these with feminist and ethnographic epistemologies to develop a research methodology that is consistent with this study's theoretical framework. In Chapter 4, I discuss the ethnographic context of Dagaaba marriage processes, including the rituals and purpose of marriage. I also examine the gender-segregated roles assigned to women and men within the marriage space.

The themes constituting the focus of the subsequent chapters will be shown, through analysis in Chapter 4, to emerge from the practices and relations within the marriage space, and also from wider community relations. Chapter 5 discusses some of the emerging themes, such as power (female, male, witchcraft, *juju* and ancestral), marital violence and the exercise of agency within this prevalently mystical context of Dagaaba. I demonstrate that the beliefs in these forms of power structure social life amongst Dagaaba. In this chapter, I pay particular attention to woman-to- woman violence within the Dagaaba context, where mothers-in-law, daughters-in-law and co-wives have a very close relationship, cooking and working together. I also discuss the ways in which the omnipresence of the beliefs in mysticism complicate the overt modes of agentic practice that have characterised feminist accounts of agency.

In Chapter 6, I extend my discussion of power relations and agency in marriage by focusing on Dagaaba notions of femininities. This is central to my study's main questions. I do this by translating Butler's theory of performativity into the context of exogamous marriage. In this chapter, I demonstrate how Dagaaba notions of femininity reverberate with the theories of performative gender. Nevertheless, I show how different the standards and values are within this rural north-western Ghanaian context and the implications of this. Moreover, I draw on the re-appropriation of homosexuality as a queer and abject identity to examine an identity category known as *pog gandao*—'woman who is more than a man'. I examine how such an interpellation works as the oppressor's most powerful weapon against wilful women, and the dangers associated with it. I explore ways to reclaim this stigmatised identity for feminist politics.

In Chapter 7, my final empirical analysis chapter, I continue my analysis of power relations in marriage by focusing on resistance practices as exercised

Figure 3: Geographical Map of Nadowli-Kaleo District, Upper West Region



by the women I worked with, that is, on how Dagaaba women resist and subvert gendered subordination and violence within the constraints they find themselves under. In this chapter, I draw attention to the problematics associated with expressive strategies of resistance in this context due to the threat of mystical harm. In the midst of all the power forms—female, male, ancestral and witchcraft—I demonstrate in this chapter that Dagaaba women are not helpless victims; they exercise resistance in complex ways. In my Conclusions, I return to the main thematics of this study, and discuss the implications of my findings for theorising power, gender, violence, agency and resistance.

Chapter 2. Performativity, Power and Agency in Marriage

This study explores gendered relations of power within Dagaaba exogamous marriage arrangements in Serekpere, located in rural north-west Ghana. In this chapter, I explore the literature that is key to understanding the cultural assumptions and practices of Dagaaba as well as that which translates and critiques Western-centric academic discourses and theories on gender and performativity. I critically examine the two main bodies of literature that I bring together in this thesis, namely poststructuralist theories of gender performativity, power and agency and theoretical discussions of postcoloniality and African feminisms. In addition to my empirical findings, I enrich and interrogate feminist and other critical theories of gendered power, agency and performativity, examining the potentialities and limitations of these frameworks in non-Western, rural Ghana.

My analysis in this chapter engages with poststructuralist feminist theories on performativity, power, violence, agency and resistance, relying primarily on the work of the philosopher and critical gender theorist Judith Butler. The study is located within the postcolonial context of Ghana and, as such, the lives of its participants, both women and men, are continually affected not only by colonial legacies but also by current neo-colonial politics and policies (see Young, 2003; Rajan and Park, 2005; Ashcroft et al, 1995). Thus, discourses of post/colonialism and gendered relations in formally decolonised settings are pertinent to this study, and, as such, I focus specifically on the contributions of postcolonial and African feminisms. I start this chapter by considering these contributions. I also identify the salience of, as well as the problematics associated with, African feminist analyses, some of which, in an effort to challenge exclusionist theorising about African women, inadvertently reinstall other exclusions. I then move on to the concept of ‘gender performativity’, which draws on Butler (1990, 1993a). I begin this section by discussing Michel Foucault’s and Butler’s ideas of power as productive. I show that notions of power as discursively constructed resonate with the power forms I examine in Dagaaba communities and marriage relations. I also demonstrate the relevance and limitations of Butler’s notion of gender as

performative—discursively constituted through reiteration of past gender norms—in the Ghanaian context. Furthermore, I examine the limitations of the expressive articulations of agency and subversion that emerge from her work. Specifically, as discussed earlier on, social life amongst Dagaaba is deeply rooted in beliefs in supernatural forces. Thus, in translating these critical Euro-American theories, as well as drawing interconnections between them and the situation of Dagaaba marriage, I am confronted, first of all, with the pervasiveness of beliefs in witchcraft, *juju*—magical power—and the power of the gods and ancestors which are part of normal expectations of daily life amongst my research participants. Secondly, this study is faced with nested relationships involving a wide range of actors that play crucial roles in the success or otherwise of a marriage. I refer to this concatenation of relations and actors as ‘the marriage space’. The mystical and male power forms and institutions, as well as the marriage relations, impinge on constructions of femininities and masculinities, and on resistance and agentic practices amongst Dagaaba. In the final section, I draw on the African feminisms and gender performativity theories to develop an integrated theoretical framework that is context-sensitive and enables me to examine and interpret these gendered marriage relations and practices, based on the strengths of these perspectives.

Postcoloniality and Postcolonial Feminisms

This study does not tackle directly the legacies and effects of colonialism as they relate to contemporary gender relations in Africa. Nonetheless, as it is located within Ghana, a former British colony, my research participants have been and continue to be affected in diverse ways by the aftermath of colonialism as well as by the contemporary dynamics of neo-colonialism²⁶. The concept of postcolonialism has gained significant currency in academic writing. However, it defies a clear-cut definition. This is because, like

²⁶ Neo-colonialism was coined by Kwame Nkrumah (1965), Ghana’s first president. Nkrumah decries how global economic systems have been structured to facilitate the exploitation of former colonies. Thus, despite being enormously endowed with natural resources, these former colonies are impoverished through what he calls neo-colonialism—imperialism at its peak, ‘perhaps its most dangerous stage’.

feminism, it is made up of a multiplicity of viewpoints, which, as Robert Young (2003:7) notes, ‘... are juxtaposed against one another, on occasion contradictorily’. There are debates as to whether the prefix ‘post’ signals a historical period or something else. Some critics use ‘postcolonialism’ to refer to a temporal marker of the process of decolonisation of formerly colonised states and distinguish it from the political ideology of ‘postcolonialism’. For Françoise Lionnet, however, postcolonialism is ‘more than the static periodization that the “post-” implies’ (1995:4). According to her, it is more useful to account for postcolonialism based on the ‘postcontact’ period, as this enables us to challenge colonialism’s ‘ideology of domination’. Similarly, according to Kate Manzo (2013:330), ‘postcolonialism’ is not coterminous with “European decolonisation”. This is because the world only becomes postcolonial in this sense on the basis of the assumption that the unbalanced international power relations and exploitation that characterised colonialism ceased with formal decolonisation. Following these perspectives, postcolonialism is understood in this study to refer to the commencement of colonialism itself, and not only its aftermath²⁷.

Postcolonialism is thus a commitment to struggles against imperial powers and the exploitation of former colonies starting from the onslaught of colonialism. It is about continuities and discontinuities of exploitation as well as relations between imperial powers and formally decolonised countries. In this sense, postcolonialism is not a marker of history, referring to a period after colonialism; rather, it is a critical political philosophy focused on challenging the neo-colonial practices of domination, marginalisation and oppression in their diverse forms and by different perpetrators, including multinational corporations and local elites in decolonised countries such as Ghana. Whilst the struggle for liberation came to an end with European decolonisation, the effects of colonialism continue unabated in rather complex ways through global capitalism and conditionalities (Young, 2003). Decolonisation also signalled a shift in power control from British colonial

²⁷ See Homi Bhabha (1994), Leela Gandhi (1998), Bill Ashcroft et al (1995) and Martin Japtok (2003).

rulers and their patriarchal systems and structures to local elitist male leaders, indeed, *kleptocrats* as Anne McClintock (1995) has described them. The liberation of women, and their specific needs and interests, were not necessarily better served in these independent states. Consequently, as many postcolonial and African feminist scholars have highlighted, struggles against women's oppression and subordination continue.

A combination of the aforementioned factors, along with local androcentric customary norms and practices that marginalise women, has meant that the 'postcolonial woman' faces a double burden. As McClintock explains, in postcolonial states such as Ghana, poverty is feminised and women are still subordinated and oppressed in many ways. In addition, women and men do not enjoy equal rights and equal access to resources. This situation leads McClintock to assert that women and men live postcoloniality differently, and this resonates significantly with the Ghanaian situation. By this I am referring to, firstly, the starkly unequal power relations between women and men in both the private and public spheres; secondly, the low levels of representation of women in politics and the lack of political will demonstrated by the male-dominant political parties and political administrators to work towards bridging this gap, beyond political rhetoric and exploiting the situation for their selfish gains; and, finally, the pervasiveness of poverty amongst women, particularly single women who are heads of families (Women's Manifesto for Ghana, 2004).

Postcolonial feminism, sometimes referred to as 'third world feminism', is thus concerned with challenging dominant patriarchal ideologies. In the context of Ghana, and specifically Dagaaba, this includes challenging cultural beliefs and practices that perceive female bodies as subordinate to male ones and allow, normalise and even promote violence, as well as discriminate against women on the basis of their gender. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and Youme Park (2005:53) write of postcolonial feminism as 'an exploration of and at the intersections of colonialism and neocolonialism with gender, nation, class,

race, and sexualities in the different contexts of women's lives, their subjectivities, work, sexuality, and rights' (2005:93). The multiple struggles of women in postcolonial contexts means that challenging western imperialism and feminist theorising along with mis/representations of third world women is centre stage in postcolonial feminism. It concerns itself with addressing local (inherited) androcentric administrations (governments, both local and national) and policies as well as the inequalities and injustices engendered by socio-cultural norms, which women encounter on a daily basis (Young, 2003; Rajan and Park, 2005). Postcolonial feminism is also committed to working towards empowering women and negotiating equality for them within African settings such as Ghana.

Given these commitments, feminist postcolonial theories are particularly important to the framework of analysis I am developing in this chapter. Specifically, my study is concerned with translating, but also challenging, North American and Euro-centric theories of performativity on their apparent neglect of the plight of women in contexts such as that of Serekpere. I also draw attention to the local cultural and patriarchal norms, as well as to the modern state institutions, that repress women in Ghanaian societies. My study is geared towards undermining these oppressive structures, as well as empowering women for change. Finally, whilst acknowledging the need for African feminist scholars to theorise social life, I challenge totalising ideas regarding femininities and women's situation across the widely diverse African continent, as well as debates that privilege material needs over structural factors (notably sexism) that engender and tightly police the subjugation of women. It is to these debates on African feminisms that I now turn my attention.

African feminisms

African feminisms can, in some way, be considered part of postcolonial feminisms. Nonetheless, they are also distinctive in particular ways; that is to say, they are centred in the global South. I draw on these accounts to examine

conceptions of femininities as I understand them amongst Dagaaba. Since the 1980s, African feminist scholars have joined feminists of colour in North America, Europe and throughout the global South in the charge against the white Western imperialism that has characterised dominant feminist theorising in this period²⁸. The othering, misrepresentation and elision of African women's experiences pervasive in mainstream, Western feminist discourses has been roundly critiqued in these analyses. As Ifi Amadiume, a Nigerian poet and anthropologist, puts it, African women's objection to Western feminists '... includes the imposition of concepts, proposals for political solutions and terms of relationship' (1987:8). Most women of Africa, these theorists argue, still grapple with 'bread and butter' issues, live in war-ravaged communities and have to contend with harsh international economic policies and practices that have a local impact²⁹. African feminists have thus sought to theorise African versions of feminism based on African women's lived experiences and struggles. From this perspective, the task for us as African feminists is to engage in theorising that pays attention to the combined effect of neo-colonial and patriarchal structures and institutions, as well as to Western feminists' stereotypical notions and representations of the 'African woman' in our respective societies. We also need to challenge local economic systems and institutions that oppress women and further perpetuate gendered inequalities (Amadiume, 1987; Code, 2000; Rajan and Park, 2005). Finally, feminism in African contexts requires activism and theorising that bring to the fore, as well as challenge, the contradictions in cultural norms and practices, including the different standards for evaluating, and the normative expectations of women and men, and also work towards reducing gendered power imbalances and injustices in African contexts, which is exactly the task undertaken in this study.

The period from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s can be said to represent a key decade of feminist theorising in Africa. Consider, for example,

²⁸ See Ifi Amadiume (1987) and Obioma Nnaemeka (2003).

²⁹ Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie (1994, 1994), Gwendolyn Mikell (1997), Desiree Lewis (2001) Chandra Mohanty (1988) and Nnaemeka (2003).

Chikwenye Ogunyemi's (1985) womanism, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie's (1994) Stiwanism (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) and Catherine Obianuju Acholonu's (1995) Motherism. This turn to African models of feminism emerged from an increasing disaffection with mainstream, Western-centric feminism because it was making assumptions unsuited to the needs of women in African settings. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994:225), a Nigerian poet and feminist, summarises the debates on African versions of feminism:

feminism need not be opposition to men... women need not neglect their biological roles... motherhood is idealized and claimed as a strength by African women ... the total configuration of the conditions of women should be addressed rather than obsessing with sexual issues... certain aspects of women's reproductive rights take priority over others... women's conditions in Africa need to be addressed in the context of the total production and reproduction of their society and the scenario involves men and children

The main concern of African women scholars is theorising that is sensitive to our contexts and cultures. I will return to the problems some of these views pose for feminists theorising in Africa, for instance their romanticisation of motherhood, later on in this chapter. Firstly, however, I examine some of the specific theoretical perspectives that emerged in the mid-1980s to 1990s.

Ogundipe-Leslie proposes 'Stiwanism', which seeks to draw our attention to how African women are in the struggle against poverty, wars and Western imperialism together with their men, and to how there is thus a need for a partnership between the sexes in this struggle. African women's activism, from this perspective, should be geared towards equality, liberation and transformation for women and men. As she observes, "'STIWA" is about the inclusion of African women in the contemporary social and political transformation of Africa' (1994:230). Ogundipe-Leslie argues, and rightly so, that, unlike feminism, this approach is less likely to meet resistance from African men. She is also careful not to be read as 'anti-men' and explains that the bane of the African woman is not individual men, but rather the totality of the structures and institutions that permit women's subordination and repression. But the difficulties are glaring. If men find STIWA acceptable, it is precisely because it does not threaten the status quo. In the existing context

of differential gendered power relations between women and men, any politics of inclusion has the grave potential of masking the specific needs and interests of women. It is therefore important to recognise that any feminist or women-centred agenda, irrespective of its name, should place women at its *core* rather than just *include* them. This perspective and, indeed, many other similar assumptions are not without negative repercussions for feminist activism. For instance, there are campaigns advocating engaging boys and men in preventing and eradicating violence and gendered subordination, such as MenEngage³⁰. This is a commendable move, as the task of fighting violence against women and promoting gender equality is huge and requires community-wide participation. But this development is potentially dangerous if attention and resources are diverted from women-centred organisations. This is because, from my experience as a gender activist interacting with male gender activists, what some of them do at the professional level is at variance with how they relate to female colleagues and female family members. It seems that many of these men (and some women too) see gender activism merely as their ‘bread and butter’, rather than as a commitment to changing women’s lives. Any diversion of attention away from women-centred and women-managed organisations, particularly in Ghanaian and similar contexts, is likely to threaten women’s empowerment endeavours. To this effect, any agenda of inclusion needs to critically consider the constraints it may produce on women’s empowerment within the context of unequal power relations.

For her part, Cathrine Acholonu (1995), also a Nigerian feminist, advocates Motherism. She argues that ‘Africa’s alternative to feminism is MOTHERISM and Motherism denotes motherhood, nature and nurture’ (1995:110 original emphasis; see also Hudson-Weems, 2004). For Acholonu, these features constitute ‘the essence of African womanhood’ (1995:110). In other words, mothering—both social and biological—and nurturing are, from this perspective, what define womanhood and femininity in African contexts.

³⁰ MenEngage is a global network that advocates the support of men in promoting gender equality. See MenEngage and their activities at: <http://menengage.org/> (Accessed: 05/04/2016).

Gwendolyn Mikell (1997:4) seems to corroborate this view when she writes of the evolving African feminism as ‘distinctly heterosexual’ and ‘pro-natal’. Ogunyemi (1985) prefers the term ‘African womanism’, which takes into account the multiple struggles of the ‘African woman’ against poverty, wars, local male-dominant institutions and illiteracy, in addition to the legacies of colonialism, neo-colonial policies and Western imperialism. She also emphasises the importance of motherhood and family, as well as of involving men in gender theorising and activism. Of womanism in relation to feminism, Ogunyemi writes: ‘[i]f the ultimate aim of radical feminism is a separatist, idyllic existence away from the hullabaloo of the men’s world, the ultimate aim of womanism is the unity of blacks everywhere under the enlightened control of men and women’ (1985:71). Like the other theorists, Ogunyemi demonstrates that the struggles of African and black women differ from those of white women and, indeed, she accuses the latter of complicity in black slaves’ predicaments. Thus, black women and men are in these struggles together. Womanism, according to her:

celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom. It concerns itself as much with the black sexual power tussle as with the world power structure that subjugates blacks. Its ideal is for black unity where every black person has a modicum of power and so can be a ‘brother’ or a ‘sister’ or a ‘father’ or a ‘mother’ to the other (1985:72).

Ogunyemi (1985) carefully illustrates the implications of womanism, including not hurting other women and, indeed, this offers some potential scope for dealing with what I describe in this study as woman-to-woman violence (violence visited upon women by other women in powerful positions within the marriage space). Some other African scholars (including Mary Kolawale, 2002) have espoused womanism as representing African women’s realities.

Three issues however require consideration here. To start with, black emancipation and empowerment is commendable but a feminist agenda has to prioritise women’s issues irrespective of the context. What Ogunyemi refers to as ‘enlightened control of men and women’ might actually be control by

men, as I have indicated above in regard to STIWA, inasmuch as power imbalances pervade African settings. Related to this, that African women and men are in the struggle against poverty and for survival together does not suggest that women can always count on men for support. Secondly, Ogunyemi's view of sexuality is worrying. Within the contexts of African societies where sexualities beyond heteronormativity are often considered abominable and punishable, and it is very dangerous to be openly 'out', sexuality becomes difficult to assume/perceive. Finally, she juxtaposes womanism and feminism and sees a black writer as embracing the former and a white one the latter. This is part of Ogunyemi's efforts to draw our attention to the realities of women in African contexts. But setting womanism and feminism in an antithetical relationship seems counterproductive, as bell hooks (1989:181-182) tells us:

I hear black women academics laying claim to the term 'womanist' while rejecting 'feminist.' I do not think Alice Walker intended this term to deflect from feminist commitment, yet this is often how it is evoked. Walker defines womanist as black feminist or feminist of color. When I hear black women using the term womanist, it is in opposition to the term feminist; it is viewed as constituting something separate from feminist politics shaped by white women³¹.

In this sense, hooks' call for feminists of colour to separate feminism from white women in order to fight sexism and patriarchy is apposite. But this makes only partial sense because it may be difficult to entirely separate feminism from its Western roots. However, it is crucial for feminist theorists, including African scholars, to not shift their focus from the main task of challenging male-dominant institutions and practices over the role they play in subordinating women and creating violence against women, and on to subsuming women's issues under the rubric of empowering all black or African people.

Furthermore, for Oyeronke Oyěwùmí, also a Nigerian feminist theorist, gender as an identity category is less useful in African contexts. In her acclaimed monograph, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of*

³¹ See also Phillips (2006).

Western Gender Discourses (1997), Oyěwùmí claims that gender is a colonial importation transposed onto a genderless Oyo-Yoruba (of south-west Nigeria) society. According to her, the Western gender debate is premised on the biological attributes of the sexes and this is less useful to an understanding of Yoruba societies. Oyěwùmí (1997:ix) further observes that the ‘woman’ question, which is ‘foundational to western gender discourse’, was non-existent amongst Yoruba during the pre-contact period. From her perspective, unlike many Western languages, including English, the Yoruba language is not marked by gender. Also, anatomical sex is not the basis on which Yoruba societies are organised. Indeed, seniority in terms of relative age, rather than gender and sex, was the basis for structuring social life amongst Yoruba in the pre-colonial era (1997:xii). This analysis leads Oyěwùmí to claim that the concept of gender is not useful for understanding Yoruba and many other African cultures. Oyěwùmí’s claims have been critiqued variously for privileging seniority and failing to account for other axes of inequality, including how intersections of gender, class, slavery and sex affected women in Yoruba societies in the past (see Manicom and Oyěwùmí, 2001; Bakare-Yusuf, 2004; Apusigah, 2008). Oyěwùmí appears to ignore feminist debates and controversies concerning the sex/gender binary and the category of woman, as well as the potential for exclusion that such reductionist assumptions engender for differently positioned women and men in Western contexts (see Richardson, 2015). Also, as I discuss below, following Butler’s analysis of performativity, the social construction of gender means that it is constructed differently across different contexts. Thus, it seems unproductive to begin to debate how relevant or otherwise gender categories are to a particular society. A more useful approach is to focus on context-specific modes of gender construction and their implications for women’s and men’s lives. In relation to the view that feminism is a Western imposition on African contexts, Ogundipe-Leslie, whilst refuting this, rightly points out that the focus should be on the forms of feminism in Africa because African cultures and women ‘have [always had] avenues and strategies for correcting gender imbalances and injustice’ that affect women (1994:223). Similarly, it seems that the appropriate question with respect to gender (understood as socially

constructed in this sense) is what context-specific constructions exist in African societies, a key issue I explore in this study.

Oyěwùmí (2002:2) has also argued that the concept of the nuclear family—‘a gendered family par excellence’—may be less useful in terms of understanding traditional family systems in many African settings, given that our set-ups are more encompassing. Thus, a degree of attention to the extended family system, particularly in the West African sub-region, is central to an understanding of gendered power relations³². Nevertheless, in the context of exogamous settlements in northern Ghana, the extended family system is no less gendered and male-dominant than the nuclear family; indeed, it may be more so, as I demonstrate in my empirical analysis. Oyěwùmí further observes: ‘[i]t is not surprising that the notion of womanhood that emerges from European and North American feminism, which is rooted in the nuclear family, is the concept of wife’ (2002:2). She quotes Miriam Johnson’s (1988:40) assertion that ‘the marriage relationship tends to be the core adult solidary relationship and as such makes the very definition of woman become that of wife’ to critique the reduction of ‘woman’ to ‘wife’. Again, the specific situation of Dagaaba has profound resonance with this notion of the woman as wife inasmuch as womanhood is closely tethered to marital status. In this sense, it is important that African theorists ground our theorising in context-specific issues in order to avoid totalising and imperialising claims similar to those we challenge.

Discussion in this subsection has drawn attention to prominent discourses of gender and feminism in Africa. African feminists have sought to delineate the issues of relevance to women in Africa; most of us find ourselves within unacceptable levels of deprivation and are surrounded by patriarchal norms, colonial legacies and ineffective state legal instruments. Furthermore, many women in Africa live in contexts in which they have to confront unfavourable neo-colonial international policies that strip us of social protection packages.

³² It is, in fact, in recognition of the pertinence of the extended family system to Dagaaba social life that I develop the idea of the ‘marriage space’ around it.

It is apposite that these theorists seek to draw on these lived experiences and struggles in order to theorise what femininities and feminism mean to us. Emerging from these debates is the claim that reproduction, heterosexuality and nurturing are central to conceptualising femininities and theorising feminism in Africa. Also, collaboration with African men is crucial if the task of liberating and empowering women (and indeed, men) is to be achieved. Moreover, self-definition is important because by failing to self-define we have been misdefined and by failing to speak we have been misrepresented, with the consequence that our lived experiences are distorted and misjudged in many respects³³. Thus, the efforts to fashion African notions of femininity and feminism, and to distinguish them from North American and Euro-centric accounts, are imperative. Nonetheless, some of the accounts appear to have plunged us into the gendered stereotypes that characterise the socially constructed versus biologically determined debates³⁴. The claims regarding mothering—biological or social—risk excluding large constituencies of African women who may not fit into these narrow categorisations. As Toril Moi notes, mothering, nature and nurturing are instituted by the paternal law, which reinforces the gender stereotypes that feminism is concerned with dislodging. Thus, these restrictive accounts as well as problems of presumed heterosexuality (heteronormativity) and how this intersects with normative gender ideals, are potentially oppressive for feminine subjects who do not identify with this ‘mother earth’ role³⁵ (Moi, 1989:124). Given the wide-ranging differences within and across societies in the African continent, I argue that theorising needs to be open enough to allow for diversity. It is to address these failings that I find a feminist poststructuralist framework

³³ See Thiam (1986) and Hudson-Weems (2004), respectively, on the need for women of colour to speak, and to define ourselves.

³⁴ In the 1960s and 1970s, a wide range of literature on feminist theorising, in an attempt to counter the ‘biology is destiny’ debate (under which various forms of psychologically constructed inequalities and prejudices were thought to have their roots in the biological traits of the sexes), presents gender as a social construct. These conventional notions of sex and gender have often perceived sex as biologically determined and gender as socially constructed normative expectations of the sexes (Nicholson, 1994; West and Zimmerman, 1987; Moi, 1989; Butler, 1999, 2011).

³⁵ See also Butler’s (1995:49) view that not all women are mothers and, even for those who are, it is ‘not necessarily their rallying point in politicization in feminism’.

appealing, and, in what follows, I seek to examine gender performativity theories and their relevance to this study.

Gender and Performativity

Theories of performativity of gender are theories of power and agency, topics I explore in relationship to resistance in this study. Contemporary academic writing on power, agency and resistance have demonstrated the imbrications amongst them at the same time as questioning the binary pairings of power and resistance and agency and resistance³⁶. Michel Foucault is the key contemporary social theorist whose ideas have been influential in critical accounts of power and I explore some of his theoretical perspectives here. Conventionally, power has been thought of as that which institutions, individuals or groups *possess* and deploy to *repress* and dominate other subjects in less powerful positions. In this way, power is seen as an external force that allows its holders (individuals or state institutions) to produce certain expected outcomes in other subjects (Babcock et al, 1993). This unidimensional notion of power premised on repression fails to fully account for the workings of power, given that repression is not all that power does (Foucault, 1978, 1982; Butler, 1997a). Indeed, this perspective is what Foucault terms ‘a wholly negative, narrow, skeletal conception of power’ (1980:119). Foucault (1978, 1980) challenges this received notion of power as negative in terms of repressing and prohibiting individuals’ acts and autonomy and instead develops a poststructuralist approach to understanding power, as unstable and contingent on social interactions. He sees power not simply as ‘an imposition of the will of one individual on another, or one group on another’, but rather ‘as a set of relations and strategies dispersed throughout a society and enacted at every moment of interaction’ (Mills, 2003:30). In Foucault’s words, ‘Power is everywhere... because it comes from everywhere’ (1978:93). In this regard, power is not only concentrated in people in authority, but circulates throughout networks of relations. It is

³⁶ (See Foucault, 1978, 1980; Abu-Lughod, 1990; Butler, 1997a; Mahmood, 2005; Madhok et al, 2013).

engendered in these interrelations and derives its force from its reiteration, repeated deployment and diffused character (see Mills, 2003; Richardson, 2015). Foucault also defines power as the exercise of ‘a set of actions upon other actions’ (1982:789). What he implies, it appears, is, firstly, that power does not act on the individual per se, but on his/her actions and, secondly, that the individual upon whose actions the power acts is agentic rather than a passive victim of power.

Butler conceptualises power in a similar sense, as ‘the convergence or interarticulation of relations of regulations, domination, constitution’; furthermore, it is not unidirectional, but reiteratively constituted (2011:184). From this perspective, power is not an external force that represses the subject; rather, it forms the subject it appears to repress (Butler, 1997a). Butler, however, acknowledges the conventional notion of power as an external force that represses, when she observes that this is ‘a fair description of part of what power does’ (1997a:2). In Foucault’s (1982) terms, there is no fundamental or universal power, and power as power has no ontological status; the exercise of power exists only when it is put to use. As such, power is not only repressive but also productive—it authorises certain forms of agency and resistance rather than ‘only curtailing freedom and constraining individuals’ (Mills, 2003:36). It is performative, in that the repetition or re-enactment of power in interactions is what gives rise to it, but also sustains it, like other performatives³⁷ (Butler, 1990, 1993a, Mills, 2003), that is to say, power is constituted in the process of its formation and is consolidated by its repeated invocation, rather than being a stable subject or force residing in the *powerful* and being used to press down the *powerless*³⁸. I return to both Foucault and Butler on power, agency and resistance in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, but I wish to point out here that their views have profound resonance with the

³⁷ According to the speech act theory, performatives are forms of speech that enact that which they name (Austin, 1975), that is, in their uttering, these statements ‘also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power’ (Butler, 1993b:17).

³⁸ This notion of power as performative is illustrated by Butler’s (2011) analogy of the judge’s citational practice. The judge (and this is a masculine subject) decrees, cites or reiterates prior norms or the law, and the power of his utterance resides in the invocation of the law rather than in a pre-existing authority. Thus, power in this sense gets its binding force from citational practices and not from an external or transcendental authority. In other words, the judge has no power prior to the invocation of the law.

workings of power, as well as the diffuse and complex forms of agency and resistance, that I analyse in this study. As I will show, power is exercised by both women and men within the marriage space, despite the fact that in public speech and actions women often appeal to their powerless and vulnerable situation within Dagaaba marriage arrangements. Crucial to my ethnography, besides these physical and structural forms of power, is the belief in the existence of supernatural forms, which include the power of the gods, witchcraft and *juju*, and I explore these in detail in Chapter 5. Now, I expand on gender performativity theories.

In a manner that unsettles conventional notions of sex and gender, poststructuralist theorists of performativity have drawn attention to the problematics associated with the simplistic assumptions that underpin some feminist theorising. As the most prominent scholar in this area, Butler (1990, 1993a, 2004b), along with like-minded theorists, has sought to expose weaknesses in the reification of gender and sex identities³⁹. For theorists of performativity, the distinction between sex and gender is more complex than received notions posit. Throughout her oeuvre, Butler is mostly concerned with drawing our attention to the problematics associated with notions of identity categories as fixed, that is, notions of sex and gender as stable and the implications of these conceptions for gender dissident subjectivities. She takes issue with received descriptions of femininity and masculinity as ‘expressive attributes of “male” and “female”’ (1999:23), because of the injuries such notions exact on marginal subjectivities such as women, lesbians, gay men and queer people. Focusing on so-called dissident gender identities, including drag, intersex, transsexual and transgender, Butler demonstrates the discursive and performative character of gender and sex. In doing so, she draws inspiration from the works of Foucault (1977, 1978), Simone de Beauvoir (1973) and Monique Wittig (1980, 1982, 1993), as well as that of the feminist biologist, Anne Fausto-Sterling (1989), amongst others. Butler effectively exposes the weaknesses in formulations of gender as cultural construction and

³⁹ See also West and Zimmerman, 1987; Halberstam, 1998; Blencowe, 2013; Richardson, 2015.

sex as biologically determined, as well as in the binary pairing of these categories. Butler's writings, particularly those I examine here, thus represent a powerful 'denaturalisation' endeavour.

According to Foucault (1978), both sexuality and sex are created by juridical power structures and relations to serve the purposes of heterosexuality and procreation, as well as that of economic production. Thus, for him, as well as for Butler (1999), a genealogical analysis of sex and gender will reveal both categories as discursively produced by dominant power structures in society to serve the interests of compulsory heterosexuality. The differences between sex and gender may thus not be necessary at all, as sex will be shown to be gender already (that is, to be as socially constructed as gender), Butler (1999) explains. Even if sex can be divided into two groups, it does not follow, in Butler's view, that feminine identity only accrues to females; likewise, masculine identity does not only accrue to males. If gender is constructed, what this means is that it is possible to construct it in a variety of ways, ways that question the fixed nature of the categories 'man' and 'woman'. Thus, there can be masculine females and feminine males, transgendered subjectivities, and multiple other gender identifications and subjectivities, that is to say, it is possible to have anatomical males who exhibit and/or identify with attributes conventionally considered feminine and anatomical females with traits conventionally thought of as masculine (see Halberstam, 1998). But naturalising and maintaining the 'heterosexual matrix', that is, a perceived conformity amongst sex, gender and desire, is in the interest of society's hegemonic institutions (1999:9). Thus, as Butler argues, the 'regulatory norms of "sex" work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body's sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative' (2011:xii). To this effect, according to Butler (2011:xii), although bodies may be understood as 'fully material', materiality would be reformulated as the most productive consequence of power. This implies that the matter of the body, sex and sexual differences are discursively

constituted. Hence, gender cannot be interpreted ‘as a cultural construct which is imposed upon the surface of matter ... or its given sex’⁴⁰. She writes:

When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one (1999:10 original emphasis).

In the context of this study, it makes sense, following Butler, to conceive of both gender and sex as discursive constructs and indeed to understand gender and sex as intertwined and non-separable. I will demonstrate that this notion of multiply constructed genders reverberates with Dagaaba notions of femininity, suggesting that femininity can be considered as constituting a continuum, ranging from the ‘ideal woman’ through ‘woman’ to a ‘beyond woman’ category.

As I have noted earlier, one of Butler’s main contributions to feminist and queer theory is her idea of gender as performative. According to her, gender identity is constituted by the discursive practices that are said to be its effects. This construction is achieved through repetition or re-citation of past gender norms that congeal with time to give an appearance of concrete and fixed identity (1988, 1999, 2011). In theorising performativity, Butler draws inspiration from John Austin’s (1975) theory of performance in *How to Do Things With Words*, Jacques Derrida’s (1988:18) notion of performativity as ‘iterable utterance’ (cited in Butler, 1993b:18), and Jacques Lacan’s (1977) theory of every act as repetition of prior acts. Based on this, she argues that gender ‘proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be ... gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed’ (1999:33). To view gender as performative, for Butler, is to demonstrate that ‘what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body’ (1999:xv). Furthermore, concerning agency and subjectivity, Friedrich Nietzsche observes that

⁴⁰ To contend that bodies are constructed, Butler (2011) notes, is not to say that they are fully constructed. The point is that it is through this construction that bodies come into being and acquire meaning.

(1969:45): ‘there is no “being” behind doing, effecting, becoming; “the doer” is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything’. Butler extends this notion in a feminist reformulation, contending that, ‘[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results’ (1999:33). For Butler, crucial to forming gender identities are the acts performed and not the individual who does the performing. In the absence of the acts that constitute gender identities, there is no gendered self. However, because we are compelled to perform a gender at all times by repeating past gendered norms, it is not an avoidable, individual or wilful act (Butler, 1993b, 1999, 2011). Importantly, though, as a masquerade, gender performance can approximate prescribed gender norms or differ from them. Thus, gender can be done in ways that do not reinforce the power structures or even in ways that fail altogether. The power of performativity of gender as a subversive strategy lies in this feature, namely the possibility of repeating differently to bring about social change.

It is important to underscore that Butler (1993a:24) distinguishes performativity, which is more philosophical and refers to the reiteration of past gender norms or acts to constitute identity categories, from performance, a theatrical notion—‘bounded “acts”’ that suggest some form of rehearsed ‘doing’. Performance presupposes a conscious pre-existing and wilful subject who takes on rehearsed and volitional acts (Butler, 2011). By contrast, although the notion of performativity intimates rehearsal of the acts through socialisation (1988), the subject has no choice but to perform her or his gender because there is no existence outside the gendered space. As Butler puts it:

[...] performance as bounded ‘act’ is distinguished from performativity insofar as the latter consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer’s ‘will’ or ‘choice’.... [original emphasis] (1993b:24).

In Butler's terms, as we engage in diverse corporeal acts, in the ways in which we dress, move and otherwise present ourselves to society, we construct our gender identities, and by repeating the gender norms we reinforce gender meaning, to give gender the appearance of a substantive entity. There are rules governing these acts; thus, appropriate performances attract rewards whilst inappropriate performances attract sanctions (1988, 1999).

Consequently, the acts are not entirely individual. In this study, I demonstrate how transgressive behaviours in the heterosexual marriage context engender a range of shaming interpellations as well as physical violence for the subjects who fail to embody Dagaaba gender norms.

Butler (1993b:22) also draws attention to the link between using language *performatively* and *performing* gender norms, with her example of the interpellation of a baby into a gender position with the utterance 'it's a girl', at birth. According to her, this performative subjectivates the baby, which prior to this is referred to as 'it' (2011:xviii), into a gender. The primary construction of gender is thus performed by the institutions, discourses and practices that govern society. The subject so formed is, however, required to reiterate the norms that bring her into existence in order to continue to enjoy legitimacy (1993b). This (speech) performative awaits a performative ceremony pronouncing her a wife and the man, a husband. The theory thus combines both theatrical and speech act performances and it is this character that makes it relevant to this study. As I will discuss in Chapter 6, within the context of Dagaaba marriage, not only are home management tasks and farm-related work divided along sex lines, but the way in which one performs them plays an important role in consolidating one's gender, or not.

From my discussion in this section, we can see how normative assumptions of gender and sex are unsettled by Butler's radical reformulation of both feminism and poststructuralism. The aim of Butler's project is to dislodge the naturalised categories of sex and gender and, for her, transgressive gender identities have the potential to subvert these naturalised categories.

Importantly, in recognition of the relevance of cultural, socio-political and

historical particularities, Butler calls for the ‘cultural translation’ of theories. For instance, she observes: ‘no assertion of universality takes place apart from a cultural norm, and, given the array of contesting norms that constitute the international field, no assertion can be made without at once requiring a cultural translation’ (2000:35). In light of this, my effort in this thesis is concerned with translating the theories of gender performativity into the context of Dagaaba heterosexual marriage relations. That is to say, I will apply the assumptions of the theory to Dagaaba cultural norms regarding marriage and gender identities. In this task, I am challenged by Dagaaba cultural practices and pervasive beliefs in witchcraft, to extend the frame, and I discuss below the implications of these theories and their limitations in the context of this study.

Following Butler, one of my aims in this study is to move towards undermining the subordination of marginal identities, to ‘counter the violence performed by gender norms’ (1999:xxiv). In this respect, Butler’s work has a great deal to offer this thesis. Most profoundly, she aims to subvert compulsory heterosexuality and open up possibilities for a much greater range of ‘liveable lives’. In this vein, Butler seeks an extension of recognition to bodies that are denied legitimacy because they are considered aberrant. By exposing both gender and sex as performative, and produced and regulated by heterosexual norms, Butler (1999, 2011) effectively exposes dominant assumptions premised on the naturalness of sex. My study, however, though not unconcerned with subverting normative ideas of compulsory heterosexuality, works instead within a deeply patriarchal and heteronormative context to examine how rules of acceptable or ‘normal’ behaviour in heterosexual marriages are re-enacted, consolidated and/or challenged⁴¹. As such, my analysis in the chapters that follow will concentrate on heterosexual marriage.

⁴¹ I am not suggesting that the contexts for which Butler theorises are not patriarchal and heteronormative. The point I seek to underscore is that this study is located within a cultural milieu in which anything short of heteronormativity appears unthinkable.

Gender Performativity and its Limits in an African Context

In this section, I consider some of the problematic theoretical assumptions of gender performativity in contexts other than the theories' European and North American origins. But first, I examine some of the critiques of these theories made within Western contexts. Butler's approach and theoretical assumptions as well as her dense prose have been the subjects of much criticism. Notable amongst which include the work of Seyla Benhabib (1995), Nancy Fraser (1995), Jay Prosser (1998), Martha Nussbaum (1999), Moya Lloyd (2007) and Gill Jagger (2008). The criticisms have included readings of Butler that interpret her as theorising gender as the fabrication of the actor's will. In this vein, Butler has been accused of describing gender as a theatrical performance with the implication that actors can freely choose which gender to don on a particular moment (Butler, 1993a; Benhabib, 1995; Prosser, 1998; Jagger, 2008). Other critiques have positioned Butler as announcing the 'death' of the subject of feminism and also reducing 'real' life experiences and challenges to discourse. These readings arise from Butler's claims that gendered subjectivities and identities are performatively constructed, that is, created through a ritualised repetition of social norms. Thus, from the perspective of these critiques, Butler's project risks undoing the gains made by the women's movement in seeking voice and representation for different segments of marginalised women. This is because politics requires a strong foundation (i.e. 'woman') in order to be effective, some critics argue (Benhabib, 1995; Fraser, 1995; Butler, 1995, 1999; see also Jagger, 2008). For instance, Benhabib is concerned with the implications of dispensing with 'the subject of feminism' for our capacity to engage with issues of agency, resistance and social transformation (see also Jagger, 2008). In some ways, this is contradictory to the critique above in the sense that, on the one hand Butler is being accused of announcing the death of the subject. On the other hand, the subject is theorised, according to the critics, as a choosing entity. Butler however disagrees with both of these views (see Butler, 1993b, 1995, 1999).

To deconstruct an identity category, for instance ‘woman’ or ‘queer’, Butler explains, is not to announce the death of the subject. Instead, it means liberating the subject of gender from fixed positions, due to the risk of excluding certain individuals who may not qualify for representation by the set criteria, and to open it up so as to make the category more inclusive. In relation to the category of queer, Butler (1993b:20) explains that ‘[t]he political deconstruction of “queer” ought not to paralyze the use of such terms, but, ideally, to extend its range, to make us consider at what expense and for what purposes the terms are used, and through what relations of power such categories have been wrought’. Thus, in this view, dislodging the category of identity from its stable position is not inherently depoliticising; rather it is productive for feminist politics; it is democratising. Similarly, Butler (1993b:21) describes as ‘misapprehension’ interpretations that read her as conceiving gender in voluntarist terms—as a ‘choice’, or ‘willful act’. This is because the gendered subject is authorised, constrained and also exceeded by the norms and social practices that regulate it - and thus cannot be seen as a ‘freely’ choosing subject (1993b, 1999).

For her part, Fraser (1995) takes issue with Butler (and also Benhabib, 1995) for what she refers to as ‘false antithesis’: Butler’s framing of poststructuralist assumptions within feminist discourse as oppositional to critical theory. Instead, Fraser seeks to find a middle ground, drawing together the strengths of poststructuralism and critical theory, which according to her is more useful to the feminist project. She also critiques Butler’s anti-humanist approach for privileging ‘linguistic metaphors’ which she argues are too abstract and removed from everyday gendered practices and usage (Fraser, 1995:67)⁴². On Butler’s anti-essentialist notion of the category of woman as undesignatable⁴³, Fraser argues that to designate it as such is already to define it, but also to mystify it unnecessarily. Fraser’s review of some of Butler’s propositions,

⁴² Fraser critiques Butler for valorising resignification, that is, change for its own sake as well as for focusing on what she refers to as the normative rather than the ontological. She also accuses Butler for substituting “critique” for “resignification” and she writes: ““resignification” is not an adequate substitute for “critique” since it surrenders the normative moment’ (1995:69).

⁴³ That is to say that, according to Butler, the term ‘woman’ cannot be defined.

including those concerned with identity and subjectivity, leads her to conclude that Butler's analysis has yielded 'a series of antitheses: identity verses difference, subjectivation verses reciprocity, dereification verses normative critique and deconstruction verses construction' (1995:71). Thus, for Fraser, in Butler's attempts to deconstruct identity categories and subjectivity due to the violence that reductive notions regarding these engender, she has inadvertently framed these in terms similar to those she expressly disapproves of. In Fraser's views, these 'false antithesis' are needless; what is more productive is to frame these concepts in ways that do not reify their differences unnecessarily but rather draw on their similarities. This, she believes is more useful to feminist endeavours.

Relatedly, Nussbaum draws our attention to the need for feminist theorising to focus on generating ideas that can bring about social change in women's lives in areas such as domestic violence and poverty. Drawing on the trope of the Indian woman as an oppressed victim of male and sexual violence as well as poverty, she points to the difficulty strategies premised on performative parody encounter in poverty stricken contexts. According to Nussbaum, approaches focused on poking fun at 'real' difficulties instead of offering effective and practical ways in which women who find themselves in disadvantaged positions can resolve them are of limited usefulness to feminist politics⁴⁴. Nussbaum also criticises the taken-for-grantedness in Butler's prose, that is, appropriating complex theories and concepts without regard for the need to explain these to her audience (see also Fraser, 1995). But Nussbaum's analysis has in turn been critiqued for its imperialising undertones (see Kapur, 2001). Ratna Kapur argues, for instance, that Nussbaum appropriates the Indian women's lived experience, and assumes, inappropriately, what is significant to Indian feminist movement(s) given that this is such a widely diverse country. Kapur also questions Nussbaum's motive in looking to India in search of cases for illustration whilst American societies are not devoid of marginalised and impoverished peoples. From my

⁴⁴ Interestingly, a similar allegation has been levelled against Nussbaum and I return to this in the next section drawing on Obioma Nnaemeka (2003).

perspective, Nussbaum also appears to misread Butler at times and perhaps this has been necessary to shore up her claims. For instance, she accuses Butler of being fascinated ‘with drag and cross-dressing as paradigms of feminist resistance’ (1999, part iv). But Butler has clearly explained these as metaphors she deploys, indeed, she notes that ‘[i]t would be a mistake to take [drag] as the paradigm of subversive action’ (1999:xxii). I return to this point in the next section.

Jay Prosser (1998:36-37), however, makes a similar point, arguing that Butler ‘presents the transgendered subject as the concrete example that “brings into relief” this performativity of gender’ (citing Butler 1990:31). Prosser also critiques Butler for what he terms as inadvertently equating transgender with gender performativity as well as for suggesting in *Gender Trouble* that the former is subversive, that is to say that, transgender identities necessarily challenge normative notions of gender. But as Prosser also acknowledges, Butler has clarified that drag, transsexual and transgender do *not* represent paradigms of subversion; these are only deployed as metaphors to explain wider processes of subversion⁴⁵ with respect to normative assumptions regarding minority identities⁴⁶ (see also Jagger, 2008).

Perhaps most significantly, Prosser rejects Butler’s notion of gender as performative. For him, ‘there are transgendered trajectories, in particular *transsexual* trajectories, that aspire to that which this [performativity] scheme devalues. Namely, there are transsexuals who seek very pointedly to be nonperformative, to be constative, quite simply, to *be*’ (1998:32 original emphasis). In other words, there are transsexual people who simply aspire to be ‘real’ or ‘natural’ wo/men rather than represent/expose gender as a fiction in order to subvert it as the notion of gender performativity implies. But

⁴⁵ See preface of the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble* as well as ‘Critically Queer’ (Butler, 1993b). Indeed, Butler encourages her interlocutors to fashion contextual strategies of subversion in recognition of the fact that theorising has to be located within a specific context in order to be meaningful and productive (1993a, 1999, 2000).

⁴⁶ As Prosser points out, this misreading may have been occasioned by the manner in which Butler emphasises drag as a key example in *Gender Trouble*. She writes: ‘[i]n imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency’ 1999:175, original emphasis).

again, Butler recognises this, for instance, in her reading of the documentary *Paris is Burning*, where she draws our attention to transgendered performances that re-idealise rather than subvert societal norms. It is also important to note that, in her more recent work, Butler has sought to clarify and refine her theoretical propositions. For instance, in the preface to *Gender Trouble* (1999), as in ‘Critically Queer’ (1993b) and *Undoing Gender* (2004b), Butler defends and clarifies the need to theorise agency, subjectivities and identities as performative and also as contingent upon discursive practices rather than as pre-cultural categories. She explains that by theorising these categories as open-ended, it may be possible to accommodate so-called dissident practices, thereby eliminating any risks of excluding certain bodies considered as unrepresentable within the normative frame (1995, 1999).

Now I turn my attention to the limitations of Butler’s theories in contexts in the global South. Firstly, I consider the implications of both success and failure to approximate gender norms. For Butler, the moment in which drag is able to pass in imitating gender instantiates gender as fictive, that is, by effectively approximating gender norms, drag shows gender to be an artifice. Yet failure to materialise the gender norms also shows that, as a phantasm, gender is always bound to fail (1993a, 1999, 2011). Thus, as mentioned above, Butler argues that drag can subvert received notions of gender as an inner essence. For instance, of gender, she writes that the ““original”” is ‘a failed effort to “copy” a phantasmatic ideal that cannot be copied without failure’ (Butler, 1999:201, note 56, see also Jagger). Saba Mahmood, a socio-cultural anthropologist, examines the religious practices of the Egyptian women’s mosque movement. In applying the theory of performativity of gender to the formation of the subjects of piety, Mahmood draws out some resonance between Butler’s performatively constructed subjects and her research subjects. For Mahmood (2005:163), the subjects of piety are formed by repeating Islamic norms, as stipulated in the Quran and its related repertoire, and this repetition constitutes virtuous selves. In this regard, the virtues function as performatives, enacting the subjects they name.

According to Mahmood however, the actions that precede and exceed the performances, as well as the standards for measuring failure and success in the piety movement, are at variance with those in Butler's model of performativity. For instance, in Mahmood's case, success in embodying the norms of piety 'does not put the structure that governs its normativity at risk but rather consolidates it' (2005:164). Also, amongst the mosque participants, failure to successfully perform a virtue is taken to reflect 'an inadequately formed self, one in which the interiority and exteriority of the person are improperly aligned' (2005:164). This failure, according to Mahmood, is a call for the failed subject of piety to take measures to resolve it so as to move towards fully embodying the religious norms. For Mahmood, then, actions proceeding failure amongst the mosque participants are geared towards overcoming the failure, whereas in Butler's work, drag queens (for example) may concentrate on better imitating the gender ideals. Thus, Mahmood's ethnography is a case in which Butler's assumption regarding the implications of success or failure to embody gendered norms do not hold. In a similar vein, I will show in Chapter 6 that success in emulating Dagaaba normative practices propels women, even if they never get there, towards an ideal position, the *pogminga*. Also, failure to approximate norms is taken to mean a failure on the part of the female subject and/or a lack of appropriate training. Moreover, this failure to effectively approximate the gender norms automatically functions in a performative manner to install the failed subject in the realm of 'beyond woman'. In this case, both failure and success do not appear to reinforce gender's illusory character. Thus, both Mahmood's study and this one are instances where the assumptions regarding the implications of failure and success, as Butler theorises them, are constrained.

To provide another pertinent example, Butler (1999:153) describes Monique Wittig's radical call for 'lesbianising' the world and destroying the category of woman as a way out of the violence of compulsory heterosexuality as 'imperialist', as it would render invisible the experiences of heterosexual women. She writes: '[b]y refusing the category of women, Wittig's lesbian-feminism appears to cut off any kind of solidarity with heterosexual women

and implicitly to assume that lesbianism is the logically or politically necessary consequence of feminism' (1999:162). To consider the necessity of building solidarity with heterosexual women, it seems, implies an acknowledgement of their struggle within the framework of heterosexuality. Nonetheless, Butler's performative accounts and strategies appear to give little attention, first of all, to minority sexualities outside the global North and, secondly, to the experiences of women in heterosexual relationships. By this I am referring to how heteropatriarchal norms oppress women in heterosexual relations—and this has in many instances been normalised—and how women trapped in this matrix of power can and do subvert such violence. In Chapter 6, I return to the limitations of 'parodic proliferation' (1999:176) as a means for subverting gendered violence where physical violence in contexts like that of Dagaaba and Ghana as a whole is concerned. This is particularly necessary given the perils dissident subjectivities, both straight and non-straight, face on daily basis in their bid to live⁴⁷.

Butler provides a complex and useful framework for understanding the discursive constitution of sex and gender and for denaturalising these categories in ways that can address gendered and sexualised inequalities more broadly. What falls outside the scope of her work is power and violence in heterosexual relations and fights against hunger, disease and armed conflict, which are realities for many African, including Dagaaba, women and remain vital to African feminisms. In addition, there is little opportunity to address within her approach the struggles against international capitalist institutions and their role in further impoverishing vulnerable women. For Butler, and the majority of the subjectivities in the contexts for which she writes, our struggles are not issues to worry about. It is in recognition of our specific

⁴⁷ For instance, in Ghana, minority sexualities necessarily have to mask their identities in order to survive. Even Butler's (2011) reading of Jennie Livingstone's (1990) *Paris is Burning*, a documentary about drag ball culture, reveals the precariousness of such a strategy. The failure of Venus Xtravaganza, a transgendered woman, to completely pass as 'a woman' exposes her to homophobic violence, which apparently causes her death (see also Prosser, 1998). Prosser rejects Butler's interpretation of Venus' death as being motivated by homophobia; it is rather 'transphobic', 'Venus's murder is not fear of the same or the other but fear of bodily crossing, of the movement in between sameness and difference' (1998:47). Thus, it is her failure to pass as a woman that apparently leads to her death.

challenges as African women in regard to the aforementioned issues that some theorists and activists privilege ‘bread and butter’ issues over sexism, as discussed above. In this sense, Ogunjide-Leslie’s (1994:110) call for the modification of feminist theorising in African contexts ‘to reflect our realities and our set priorities’ is apposite.

Furthermore, in the context of my research it is necessary to take into account the extent to which the performance of gender occurs within a cultural frame in which mystical forces are understood to be pervasively at work in everyday life. This is what I describe in this study as ‘mystical insecurities’—fear of negative repercussions from supernatural powers such as the gods, *juju* persons and witchcraft. These beliefs and the sense of insecurity they provoke make expressive modes, such as dressing and parodic exaggerations as ways of undermining gendered subordination and violence, extremely difficult. For instance, consider Butler’s privileged social positioning as an acclaimed Western philosopher and theorist⁴⁸ and the role this plays in shaping her analysis. On occasion, Butler recounts how she *humiliates* and *intimidates* her potential attackers. She narrates how she ‘humiliated’ her working-class male hotel attendant for addressing her as ‘mister madam mister madam’ in London⁴⁹. But in contexts outside the global North, and for less privileged subjects, open affirmations and resistance are potentially life-threatening. Indeed, most of the women I worked with thought it would take an *unwise* woman to defy both the risk of punishment—physical and mystical—associated with overt ways of exercising agency and the attending stigma, including being called a wilful woman. Consequently, few, if any, culturally literate women will risk their life or risk losing their children in the sort of hyperbolic acts Butler draws our attention to. In my empirical analysis, I demonstrate the supposed negative consequences that some of my research participants are believed to have experienced as a result of exercising agency and resistance overtly. To argue that these expressive strategies have their

⁴⁸ See also Nussbaum (1999).

⁴⁹ Butler – The Difference of Philosophy (2015) Notes on Impressions and Responsiveness. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WecaTBx64p0> (Accessed: 02/07/2016).

limitations in Dagaaba contexts, however, is not to say that agency and resistance are not exercised in ways that unsettle (or not) the violence towards, stigmatisation of and subordination of women. It is, rather, to suggest that agency and resistance practices have to be sensitive to the limiting factors that surround Dagaaba women. In this respect, in Chapter 7 I explore strategies for undermining violence against and the subjection of women that are appropriate to the exogamous contexts of Dagaaba.

African Gender Performativity: Towards an Integrated Framework

In this concluding section, I bring together the key strands of the chapter to outline the crucial elements of an integrated framework comprised of my analysis of gender performativity and African and postcolonial feminist debates. As I have discussed, accounts by postcolonial and African feminist theorists have sought to correct the perceived imperialist tendencies in some Western views concerning African women. This endeavour has been useful in giving us some visibility; their accounts highlight African women's specific struggles with unacceptable levels of deprivation and violence engendered by socio-cultural and patriarchal local and international institutions and practices. However, as I have illustrated above, some of these accounts do not escape the totalising charges they lay against Western feminists, as they tend to base their analyses on specific African cultures and yet make sweeping generalisations about a widely diverse continent. For instance, Oyěwùmí (1997, 2011) recognises that the meaning of theories changes as they transcend geographic boundaries and cultural diversities in African contexts. Nonetheless, she appears to use her anthropological and lived experiences of Oyo-Yoruba (and a few selected cases across Africa, including in Ghana) as a basis from which to theorise gender as a Western issue and thus a colonial legacy in Africa (see, especially, 2002). Also, whilst theorising that is sensitive to our contexts and cultural values is necessary, the emphasis on motherhood and heterosexuality as the basis for feminism is worrying as it is potentially exclusionary and oppressive to African women who may not identify with or value these attributes.

In terms of theories of gender performativity, my analysis points to how the main tenets of gender identities, power, agency and resistance as performative resonate in the contexts of Dagaaba. Specifically, notions of power as discursive have salience with Dagaaba marriage practices, as power is not concentrated in the male gods or only in men but is exercised by all actors within the marriage space. Furthermore, Butler's take on the implications of failure to approximate gender norms has been shown to make sense in this context. However, limiting exogamous marriage arrangements, in addition to the implications of widespread beliefs in the powers of mystical beings, constitutes a major constraint on the expressive and 'action-biased' (Madhok, 2013:107) theorising of agency and resistance that characterise theories of gender performativity. In order to eschew similar totalising tendencies, whilst at the same time addressing the specific issues of power and gendered relations and the 'bread and butter' issues Dagaaba and most women in rural Ghana grapple with on a daily basis, we require a framework that integrates the assumptions of gender performativity theories with those of postcolonial and African feminisms.

The African gender performativity approach, which will guide my analysis throughout this study, is anti-reductionist, whilst at the same time addressing the lived experiences of women within heterosexual marriage practices in rural northern Ghana. It will draw out the strengths of both the theories of gender performativity and African and postcolonial feminisms. In the process, each set of theories will compensate for the shortcomings of the other in that context. Specifically, this framework will theorise marriage, power, femininities and masculinities, as well as agency and resistance amongst Dagaaba, as performative, that is to say, contingent upon various discursive practices, norms and institutions within Dagaaba contexts. This way of theorising will permit me to attend to the multiply interconnected processes and practices involved in constructing a marriage within Dagaaba settlements. Furthermore, it will allow us to understand how different forms of femininities and masculinities are constructed and constrained in this Dagaaba context.

Importantly, this framework will pay attention to the specific situation and challenges of Dagaaba women in exogamous marriage arrangements. These issues include the challenges women face in terms of female, male, ancestral and other mystical power forms, marital violence, and perennial hunger and a lack of appropriate social welfare packages to provide the basic necessities of life for the poor. Furthermore, the challenges include harsh international and neo-colonial conditionalities from Western governments and Western-dominant international institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF. These institutions and their neoliberal policies ensure that vulnerable and peasant women live under very dehumanising conditions. Indeed, it is in recognition of these multiple challenges faced by the postcolonial, or rather, neo-colonial, African woman that some African feminist activists and academics argue that gender equality is of no use to a starving woman. Following Beata Lipman's assertion that '[r]acism is a more urgent matter than sexism' in South Africa, in an interview during 'The Feminist Book Fair, West Africa' (1984:1263), Ogunyemi (1985:67) suggests that 'hunger, poverty, or backwardness' are more urgent issues for the majority of the third world than sexism. She asks: [w]hat after all is the value of sexual equality in a ghetto?' (1985:68) Thus, for these theorists, practical gender needs, which in the context of my study include food, healthcare services and basic protective equipment against the hazards of subsistence farming, are more crucial to gender debates and activism in these poverty-stricken African contexts. After all, the women in rural Ghana are in this dehumanising situation with the men. In fact, this makes sense, even if only partly, given that without the basic necessities of life survival itself is under threat⁵⁰. Nonetheless, focusing merely on these bread and butter issues without giving critical attention to the systemic factors that engender unequal gender relations and violence against women is unlikely to lead to any significant improvement in living conditions, let alone in the social position of women.

⁵⁰ For instance, during my fieldwork four women from Serepere were bitten by snakes at different times of the year on farms or in the bushes whilst looking for wild vegetables and shea nuts (see figure 4 for a woman returning barefoot from the farm with shea nuts and without any protective clothing). In addition, once when I was on a farm with a group of women, one of them killed a snake near to where we had sat for our lunch. Also, on farms and in the bushes, women, mostly unarmed, are exposed to 'evil beings', which are physical and perceived as paranormal.

In other words, without addressing the structural factors—social institutional norms and practices—that perpetuate women’s subordination, measures addressing practical gender needs are less likely to succeed. To this end, abstract and complex theorising does not become irrelevant to the lived experiences of women in rural Ghanaian and, indeed, West African contexts⁵¹. What is critical is that this theorising integrates but also informs the practical and material needs of the women, and this is what I am concerned with in this study.



Figure 4: Woman of Serepere carrying fresh shea nuts

⁵¹ Nnaemeka (2003:358) recounts the disillusion of female African participants at a conference, with what she describes as ‘irrelevant discourses and empty theorizing’. The disillusioned participants were instead interested in practical strategies for ameliorating the suffering of the majority of African women.

Chapter 3. Doing Feminist Ethnography amongst Dagaaba

In this chapter, I flesh out the epistemological and methodological underpinnings of my thesis. This study is based on a detailed examination of the daily lives of Dagaaba women and men. I explore the cultural norms and expectations that are present in Dagaaba ritual practices and the ways in which they are reproduced, re-enacted and re-appropriated to idealise or undermine the subordination of, and violence against, women. The main methods I relied on to achieve this were participant observation, listening to and talking with women and men about their own accounts of their lived experiences in a variety of everyday contexts. This enabled me to develop an in-depth and multifaceted understanding of the performative workings of gendered power relations, including the pervasive violence and subordination faced by women in this northern Ghanaian cultural setting. My approach has also permitted me to explore gendered performances and context-sensitive strategies for undermining violence against women. To achieve this, I employed a feminist poststructuralist ethnographic framework, relying on participant observation, detailed fieldnotes and conversations.

I begin this chapter by outlining the epistemological and ethnographic approaches developed for this study and the implications of applying these to my fieldwork. I also examine the processes involved in selecting and gaining access to accommodation in Serekpere. I will reflect on my own positionality and subjectivity and on how they shaped my fieldwork opportunities and experiences. I discuss the processes involved in gaining access to the people who participated in my research and in negotiating access with gatekeepers of ritual practices. I examine my exit from Serekpere and the processes of data analysis and writing-up. Finally, I consider ethical issues as they emerged during this study, how I resolved and addressed them, and their implications for research in similar contexts.

Feminist Poststructuralist Epistemology

Traditionally, male-centric standards and assumptions have been the basis for determining what counts as legitimate knowledge production (see Harding, 1987; Haraway, 1988; Skeggs, 1994). Feminist epistemologies or ‘feminist ways of knowing’, however, problematise this normalisation of the male as the universal knower and claims of impartiality of knowledge production (Letherby, 2007:20). Feminists also challenge the lack of recognition of the social context and the gender of the researcher, and the denigration of female knowledge. They often expose inherent weakness and bias in more traditional social science epistemologies⁵². Feminist researchers recognise that the researcher’s own attributes—personal, historical and professional—play a crucial role in shaping knowledge production processes. They consider women’s ways of knowing, women’s experiences and women’s knowledge as legitimate and as needing attention within scholarly research (Harding, 1987; Stacey, 1988; Haraway, 1988).

Critiquing totalising and decontextualised perspectives on knowledge production, Donna Haraway has argued that ‘only partial perspectives promise objective vision’ (1988:583). For her, feminist objectivity is contextual and located, as well as mediated and accountable (in the sense of being responsible for what we say as researchers). Partiality rather than universality should thus be the basis for knowledge claims, she argues. In this sense, feminist objectivity enables the production of knowledge that is situated and openly acknowledges the political nature of research. For instance, the framing of my research questions, the analytical process of choosing which conversations to include in my data analysis and the kind of interpretations I give to my participants’ accounts of their lived experiences in the following chapters inescapably reflect my interest, beliefs and worldviews. To this effect, reflexivity, or a critical consideration of the ways in which the researcher’s positioning in the research affects it, is crucial to feminist research (Chiseri-Strater, 1996).

⁵² See Harding (1987), Alcoff and Potter (1993), Haraway (2003) and Letherby (2007).

In a parallel fashion, feminist poststructuralists draw on the principles and assumptions of poststructuralism regarding discourse, knowledge and subjectivity to understand gendered relations of power. They challenge the foundationalist, totalising assumptions and masculinist theories of knowledge production (see Butler, 1990, 1995; Weedon, 1997). Poststructuralist feminism represents ‘a mode of knowledge production which uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and identify areas and strategies for change’ (Weedon, 1997:40). In this sense, like other forms of feminism, poststructuralist feminist research is political; it is about transforming social institutions. Poststructuralist feminists, including theorists of gender performativity, challenge the binary constitution of identities such as ‘woman’ and ‘man’ as a given. They also challenge essentialised notions of power, agency and resistance. Instead, they perceive these categories as contingent upon discursive practices⁵³. Theories of gender performativity in particular, thus allow us to analyse and understand power relations, processes of identification and systems of knowledge, without resorting to reductionist assumptions. In the context of this study, working through this approach has been crucial in helping me come to a deeper understanding of the complexly intertwined webs of power relations that pervade Dagaaba marriage practices.

In view of the above framing, my approach in this study is concerned with what feminist poststructuralists take to be a legitimate basis for knowledge production. It takes identity categories and power relations amongst the Dagaaba I worked with to be performative, contingent upon discursive practices and ritualised repetitions of past gender norms in that society. In other words, gender relations are reproduced, sustained and constrained by the reiterative power of discourse to constitute and constrain that which it names (Foucault, 1978, 1982; Butler, 1990, 1993a). This research approach is critical of naturalising notions of gender identities and of reifying unbalanced power relations. Thus, it permits me to explore the central thematics in this study without resorting to reductive notions of power, femininities and

⁵³ See Butler (1995, 1999), Ortner (1995), Weedon (1997) and Randall (2010).

masculinities, agency and resistance. In this manner, the risks of excluding certain identity categories and practices, and of making value judgements and simplistic binary couplings of the powerful and the powerless, of agents and victims, in the research process are avoided.

Specifically, in conducting my research, this frame permitted me to examine in detail the complex workings of power in marriage relations and the performative constitution of gender identities amongst Dagaaba, whilst at the same time interrogating totalising assumptions and claims regarding Dagaaba cultural practices. This contingent approach to knowledge production also meant I could develop an open-ended perspective towards my research participants' lived experiences and gendered performances without falling prey to simplistic assumptions or imposing my own Frafra and Western-influenced beliefs on Dagaaba norms.

In turn, this study is significantly mediated by my social position as a feminist studying in the UK and by my ethnic identities—Frafra (by birth), and Dagaaba (by marriage). Being reflexive about them, as I seek to be throughout this study, helps to better contextualise what I came to learn and how I came to learn it. In Chapter 1 for instance, I discussed the frustrations I felt whilst growing up within Frafra societies which, just like Dagaaba ones, have a sheer disregard for women. Furthermore, working within male-dominant academic and activist environments and experiencing the scorn in which women are held made me begin to question how women are treated in both public and private, as well as the lag between state legal institutions working towards equality of the sexes and the realities of stark inequalities on the ground. The contradictions (different requirements for women and men) inherent in these cultural settings have generated far-reaching consequences for women in both public and private spheres. As I discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, this situation is my primary motivation for this study. Also, my task is to draw attention to the situation of women in the so-called private space of the home, and to the violence engendered by customary marriage practices, including how to dislodge them. It is in these

ways that this study has been shaped by contextual issues and mediated by my life experiences.

Identities and the research relationships

In regard to conducting my fieldwork, my multiple identities and markers worked to facilitate access in most cases, but in a few they hindered it. For instance, on sacred rituals such as adultery rites (these are rituals performed to ‘cleansed’ a married woman who has sex with a man other than her husband), the main gatekeepers, mostly male, refused to explain the ritual to me, much less permit me to participate in it, as I am a Frafra person and a woman. When I asked one of them, Kabayo, a *tendaana* (c74) and a married man with one wife, about adultery purification rites in a conversation, he denied me access to this information, explaining:

That one, because you are not one of us we can’t reveal it to you. If you were one of us and you went and committed adultery and came back, we would show you [how the cleansing was done]. But because of the fact that government has asked you to come here and ask about them, we won’t tell you today, we won’t tell you tomorrow!

I thought that by pushing further I might get lucky, and thus asked about the rituals performed when old men die, but he was blunt: ‘...we don’t say certain things to strangers; you are a stranger’. This was the first time I was clearly reminded of my outsider status. But I thought that the presence of a local translator might have hampered my access to this information. Besides, after the first six months of my stay in Serekpere, some of my research participants informed me that they had been cautioned by Musa (c68), a member of the settlement, to be careful with me because I was a spy sent by the government to investigate their cultural practices. When I had been in the settlement much longer and the rumours of me being a government spy were fading away I decided to conduct a follow-up discussion with Kabayo, this time alone, on a rainy evening inside his single room by his kraal. After nearly an hour discussing and clarifying my findings with him, I introduced the topic of purifying an adulterer. But he insisted: ‘since you are not our wife to “spoil” and be purified you cannot know what we do; it is not something we can

discuss'. This was the case with most of the male gatekeepers, although the majority were not as categorical as Kabayo. Many of them, instead, employed evasive laughter, pauses and sighs and, when pushed further, were diplomatic in explaining that these were sacred issues that could not be discussed with me.

The message from these male gatekeepers was simple: I was not one of them. But, actually, not even a wife or a daughter would ordinarily be let into the secrets of the rituals, except the adulterer (and only women are categorised as 'adulterers') who acquires the knowledge through personal experience, or rather through humiliation. Thus, it became clear to me that gender was a limiting factor in some cases in regard to what information I could access. This is because Dagaaba, both women and men, believe that women are like children and cannot be trusted with secrets. It appears that most of the male research participants doubted my ability, as a woman, to keep sensitive information to myself, despite the fact that I emphasised the confidential nature of our interactions time and again. In this sense, my ethnicity, gender and age worked together to hinder my access to certain information from these powerfully positioned men.

Conversely, my identity as a Dagaaba woman and as a mother appears to have drawn me closer to the women in Serekpere and to have facilitated access to sensitive and emotional information. Common ground for discussions with the women often included pregnancy and childbirth experiences. Furthermore, my host, Mmabile (c58) separated from her husband, saw me as her daughter and sponsored my access to many individuals and ritual sites. Nonetheless, she attempted to moderate my interactions by warning me against certain people if she saw me talking with them. At funeral ceremonies outside the settlement, she would insist that I stay with her throughout the day. These were her efforts to protect me (and herself by association) from 'evil' people who could harm me, as she often explained. It took some time and tact to be able to break away from this maternal control and concern so as to get on with my fieldwork. My age (similar to that of her first daughter) in addition to my other identity markers permitted me to build this bond with both Mmabile and

most of the women I came to know in Serekpere. However, in some instances, my hopes that a woman would open up to me were not realised. For instance, Oliviana, a woman in a polygynous marriage and with whom I had built a strong relationship, employed in a conversation with me impersonal pronouns and often spoke about cultural ideals rather than lived realities. This, I believe, was her strategy for avoiding discussing her marital life, a topic which is extremely sensitive because she shares a husband with her younger sister⁵⁴.

All these channels of access and points of closure influenced by my gender, age and ethnicities undoubtedly affected the kind of data my fieldwork produced. But working within a feminist poststructuralist framework also permitted me to be aware of these contradictions. It also allowed me to observe and analyse the performative constitution of gender identities and roles, power relations and agentic practices. In this way, as Butler (1995) notes, the category of women is not perceived of as the oppressed or the oppressor, and power is not concentrated in only the patriarchy but is exercised by all actors in the marriage. Agency is not attributed to subjects prior to the articulations of the discursive practices that produce it, including in the process of negotiating research relationships. Furthermore, although I deploy local notions of femininities in my work, I also challenge essentialist characterisations that risk excluding feminine subjects who do not qualify for representation on the basis of the set criteria. Feminist ethnographic research, as poststructuralist, is a partial and situated account of the behaviours, attitudes, lived experiences and values of the researched, and to this issue I now turn.

Doing Feminist Ethnography

Ethnography involves intensive fieldwork, immersing the self in the social world of research participants in order to understand it, to build a sense of 'being there' and to be able to render a 'thick description' of what is being

⁵⁴ It appears Oliviana was afraid that if our conversation reached the hearing of her sister or husband, their delicate relationship might become further strained.

observed (Geertz, 1973; see also Ortner, 1995; Fetterman, 1998). It is concerned with the detailed ‘study of a culture that includes behaviour, interactions, language and artefacts’ (Bloor and Wood, 2006:69). The self, as David Walsh (2004:228 original emphasis) suggests, ‘*is the primary research instrument*’ in ethnography (see also Ortner, 1995). Things can either go well or terribly wrong depending on how the ethnographic self is presented to the subjects. In addition to this key resource of the self, there are three concepts that are crucial to ethnography, and these are naturalism, relativism and participation. Naturalism means studying people and their activities within their own setting (Walsh, 2004). Relativism in this sense implies allowing meaning to emerge from the setting and eschewing or minimising any tendencies to impose external values on the study, thereby avoiding ethnocentrism (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Finally, the researcher, the participant observer, participates in all relevant activities that ‘are opened’ to her. Ethnography is therefore more than ‘just a set of methods’; it involves ‘a particular mode of looking, listening, and thinking about social phenomena’ (2007:230). It is also immersive, ‘being embedded in the action and context of a social setting’ over a long period of time (Guest et al, 2012:76). Despite concerns regarding reliability and generalisability in ethnographic research, as Michael Bloor and Fiona Wood (2006:73) note, ethnography may be the only method capable of shedding light on certain social interactions that may ‘remain hidden by other methods’. In sum, ethnography is concerned with focused, in-depth study of the lived experiences of a group of people including both ordinary every day and unusual occurrences.

Kathleen DeWalt and Billie DeWalt (2010:1) describe participant observation as ‘a method in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture’. They acknowledge implicitly that other tools such as interviews and oral accounts may be used with participant observation. However, as to whether a researcher or an outsider can actually participate fully in the participants’ lives or truly understand them from ‘within’ is a contentious issue. For James Spradley (1980:13), the participant observer remains ‘inevitably, an

“outsider””. Nonetheless, participant observation can be understood as existing along a continuum, with varying degree of participating and observing. Two concerns in relation to participating and observing are that an emphasis on observation might limit opportunities to participate in the local context and that a focus on participation might run the risk of losing the focus on the study (Walsh, 2004). Conscious of these concerns, during my fieldwork I constantly worked towards striking a balance between observing and participating (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) so that I could gain a deeper understanding of the setting and the cultural practices, describe them, and eventually analyse them.

Based on John Lofland’s (1971) proposal that the ethnographer takes on the persona of an ‘acceptable incompetent’ (cited in Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:79), and building on what the joking relationship, discussed below, permitted me to do socially, it was convenient for me to play the role of a ‘naïve’ young Frafra woman. This role enabled me to interrogate ordinary, common-sense in/actions of the people I came to know and spend time with. My curiosity, inquisitiveness and ignorance were most often pardoned because I was not a cultural member by birth. For this very reason, I was not afraid to ask seemingly absurd and insensitive questions, even if they sent groups of women, men, boys and girls into uncontrollable laughter. This proved fruitful in helping me develop a deeper understanding of the cultural forms of meaning at work. I participated in almost every activity I had the opportunity to. These included *pito* brewing (locally brewed alcoholic drink) and manually whisking shea butter, a physically demanding task⁵⁵. Other activities ranged from trekking along lonely paths to distant farms and into the bushes in search of wild vegetables, to burning charcoal and picking shea nuts early in the morning. These trips were undertaken at the risk of snakes bites, scorpion stings and meeting dangerous and/or mentally deranged people (or

⁵⁵ For instance, after the daunting task of whisking shea butter one afternoon, I entered in my field diary: ‘at the risk of being perceived as lazy, I managed to complete my task. Whilst my lack of skill in beating the butter was obvious and elicited much laughter, my crude style proved more useful as my paste was whiter than my partner’s and the whiter the paste, the more the butter to be extracted’ (Fieldnotes, September 2013).

ghosts) along the way⁵⁶. My regular participation in these activities established me as a ‘normal’ Dagaao woman and in turn helped improve my relationships with the women and men I was working with.

The issues of gendered power and control, sexuality and domestic violence under consideration in this study are very sensitive and intimate topics in Dagaaba lives. They are rarely discussed openly. My research would, therefore, have generated fairly superficial data had I only conducted interviews. Even with participant observation, it was only after my first six months of residing in Serekpere that I began to gain access to in-depth information, particularly on key topics such as witchcraft accusations, counter-accusations and manifestations, domestic violence and the subtle forms that agentic and resistance practices assume. For instance, David (c64), one of my key informants, confided in me about cheating on his wife in the 10th month of my stay in the community. Consider this excerpt from my field diary:

David kept on saying he wouldn’t marry two wives because women are like the gods, if you sacrifice to one and not the other there will be problems in the house, but he would ‘steal’. I thought this was a joke but he was serious; he goes to Nadowli to look for casual sexual partners, ‘frees’ himself and comes back. This is because his wife won’t have sex with him anymore as she is in menopause (Fieldnotes, June 2014).

Intimate information such as this was crucial in helping to contextualise agentic practices exercised by women amongst Dagaaba as well as to challenge the women’s public representations of themselves as vulnerable victims of patriarchal and exogamous norms. Along with many other similar cases, the observed deeds of Gbankoma, David’s wife, juxtaposed with this and other revelations by her husband, are crucial to understanding how power, gender and agency work in this Dagaaba settlement.

⁵⁶ Once when I was working on Gbankoma’s farm, a man armed with sharp machetes and a hoe appeared before me as I was sitting under a shea tree separating the ground nuts from the roots. Gbankoma was a little way away from me, but in the same field, uprooting more plants. I was even more scared when, after I called to her to come, she in turn started shouting to her husband—further away from us—to come. Our potential attacker fortunately turned and ran. But this is a common experience for the women I worked with.

The role of the ethnographer as a participant observer is not without difficulties. Particularly challenging and exhausting for me was walking several kilometres, sometimes up to 10km, there and back to go to farms to work and to attend funerals. It was also challenging to find a balance between spending time at the settlement's centre in *pito* and *koose*⁵⁷ sheds and under trees to chat, attending funerals and finding time to record fieldnotes and keep up to date with my reading. The boreholes, which are water collection points, were another useful source of data; it was at a borehole that an interesting gendered performance ensued between two teenagers, which I discuss in Chapter 6⁵⁸. But it was persevering with activities such as these that is both the challenge and reward of ethnography, and which made for rich and complex fieldwork data on which I draw in this thesis.

Feminist ethnography

Feminist ethnography combines key elements of feminism and ethnography such as empathy, egalitarianism and experience with participant observation to study issues concerning women (Clifford, 1986; Stacey, 1988; Skeggs, 2001). Thus, ethnography and feminism have a common ground in feminist ethnography (Strathern, 1987). Feminist ethnography offers prospects for nuanced, balanced and experiential research, as well as reciprocity and partnership between the researched and the researcher (Harding, 1987; Stacey, 1988; Skeggs, 2001). But like any social research relationship, it is power laden, and the inequalities imply that there is also the potential for exploitation and breaches of confidentiality, wittingly or otherwise (Stacey, 1988)—dilemmas that ethnographers need to be attuned to and wary of. Specifically, despite claims of feminist research—and particularly feminist ethnography—involving an ‘egalitarian research process, full collaboration, and even multiple authorship’, it does not escape the danger of manipulating and betraying participants by exposing them to risks, not only during the fieldwork period but in unanticipated ways into the future (Stacey, 1988:25).

⁵⁷ *Koose* is bean cake.

⁵⁸ Water collection is customarily the women's chore, thus at these boreholes, mostly in the mornings and the evenings, women queued to collect water for domestic use.

Also, the end product, the piece of written ethnography, involves an exertion of authorial privilege by the researcher who decides, amongst other things, what gets written about and published, and this can be exclusionary. Thus, as observed by Judith Stacey (1988:23), ‘elements of inequality, exploitation, and even betrayal are endemic to ethnography’ despite the best of intentions. In this sense, claims of egalitarianism and partnership may be difficult to sustain in many instances.

Consider my encounter with Pereemabile (c52), whose frustration and anger with the contradictions regarding Dagaaba norms on adultery and the different standards for measuring women and men can be seen in the opening vignette for Chapter 7. Pereemabile could not trust anyone, including her family members, with the secrets of her past. But she did disclose them to me, a researcher and a confidante, sharing with me her disillusion regarding the gods and adultery. Pereemabile’s anger and frustration have become fascinating ethnographic material, churned out in the ‘ethnographic mill’, as Stacey observes⁵⁹. In the context of this study, due to a combination of endemic poverty and low levels of formal education, the research participants are potentially even more vulnerable. For instance, despite my efforts to explain and conduct myself in a culturally appropriate manner, the women believed that because of my exposure to city life and education we were not equal. Some of the women would rather forfeit their farm work than allow me to accompany them to the farms. This is because they thought farm work was not befitting of my status. In this regard, within contexts such as this study’s, where the research participants are particularly marginalised, the power

⁵⁹ Stacey (1988:23) writes: ‘[t]he lives, loves, and tragedies that fieldwork informants share with a researcher are ultimately data, grist for the ethnographic mill, a mill that has a truly grinding power’. This is a dilemma many other anthropologists have noted. For instance, Kathleen DeWalt and Billie DeWalt (2010:214) have observed that if research participants ‘were always consciously aware of our activities as ethnographers, the information we acquire would be less rich’. This often presented me with a moral dilemma too. Although I frequently reminded my research participants that I was a researcher, perhaps some of them would not have shared their intimate secrets with me if they had thought about these being written down. My responsibility here in this thesis is to always bear in mind my indebtedness to them and always strive to both represent them truthfully and to bear their interests and perspectives always at the forefront of my authorial decisions.

imbalances as well as feminist ideals of partnership and collaboration need critical attention in order to minimise the risk of exploitation.

In this section, I have examined the feminist poststructuralist and ethnographic approach used for this study. The framework draws on assumptions of poststructuralist theories that challenge metanarratives on their essentialist and exclusionary tendencies and combines this with feminist ethnographic epistemologies that acknowledge the partiality of knowledge, and perceive women's experiences and research as legitimate knowledge. It perceives power, agency and identity categories as performatively constituted. In this sense, I seek to avoid simplistic interpretations of the complex narratives and lived experiences of my study participants. Also, this approach permits me to draw attention to women's experiences and knowledge that have been rendered invisible and silent in Dagaaba contexts, whilst laying bare my vested interest and the effects of my personal biography on the study. Thus, feminist poststructuralist methodologies are distinctive in their contingent and open-ended approach to understanding power relations so as to transform them. In combining feminist poststructuralist assumptions with ethnographic ones, as I do in this study, the complexities of power that characterise gender and marriage relations can be effectively understood.

Selecting the Study Site: Serekpere

I initially planned to site my fieldwork at Nakore, about 5km from Wa, the capital of the Upper West Region, but I abandoned it in favour of Serekpere. I chose Nakore because of its close proximity to Wa, and this would have facilitated access to the Internet and other services, as well as an easy exit in case of any negative eventualities. However, a closer examination of Nakore via advice from my Dagaaba acquaintances and a visit to Nakore itself revealed its unsuitability as a research locale for examining Dagaaba marriage practices. This is because its inhabitants are Waala—the people of Wa and its environs—and, correspondingly, Muslim, rather than people who observe customary marriage as the dominant form of marriage practice. Whilst I was

still searching for a more appropriate study site, an opportunity to choose Serekpere presented itself. On 3 August 2013, when newly returned to Ghana to conduct my fieldwork, I accompanied a friend of mine who was studying a poverty reduction programme, the Northern Rural Growth Programme (NRGP), to Serekpere⁶⁰. The community-based farmer group members we went to visit were very friendly, and welcomed me, my husband and my daughter. Furthermore, a cursory look at the layout of the community gave me a good first impression of Serekpere as a fieldwork site.

Serekpere is a roadside settlement and hence accessible by both bus and private car. It is also close to the district capital, Nadowli. Yet it is at some distance from other settlements, and this promised some level of homogeneity in terms of ethnic identities, which I thought was necessary for an in-depth understanding of the shared cultural practices of a specific Dagaaba group. This is not to say there is no diversity amongst the women and men I worked with. The point is, however, that basing this study in an urban settlement with multiple ethnicities would have made it very challenging, if not impossible, for me to be immersed in Dagaaba social life. Also, Serekpere has an estimated population of 1,119, which is small relative to that of most of the neighbouring settlements (for instance, Goli, 5km away, has a population of 1,600) and this meant that I could easily seek opportunities to interact with most members of the settlement over time (Ghana Statistical Service, 2010). I return to a discussion of the layout of Serekpere shortly.

After the group meeting in August 2013 drew to a close, members of the group, upon realising that I was Frafra, started teasing me. They referred to me as a 'slave' who had been given proper status by marriage (and this is part of the joking relationship between Frafra and Dagaaba; see Goody, 1967). In his study amongst 'Lowiili', Jack Goody (1967) discusses the joking relationship between a man and his maternal uncles, between grandparents

⁶⁰ Basically, the NRGF plays a facilitating role in bringing agriculture extension officers, financial institutions, suppliers and produce buyers into close contact with farmers for the purpose of equipping them with technical know-how and best practices, credit facilities and marketing avenues for their farm produce.

and grandchildren, and between brothers and sisters-in-law. Susan Drucker-Brown (1993) also examines the joking relationship between grandparents and grandchildren amongst Mamprusi of northern Ghana. But here I am referring to inter-ethnic joking relationships and, in Ghana, the Frafra and Dagaaba one has gained nationwide popularity. Its origins are not known but there are folktales regarding a relationship between two brothers that became strained over stolen dog meat⁶¹. Such a relationship permits people from the two ethnic groups to tease each other wherever they meet. Often, members of the two ethnic groups argue that they are the other's chief/queen or that they are more beautiful or smarter than them. In many instances, this relationship is useful in breaking down social barriers. Returning to my encounter with the NRGP group members, I, in turn, teasingly insisted that I had come to the Dagaaba settlements to bring civilisation as the queen of Dagaaba. At this point, my researcher friend and my husband joined the group in rebutting my claims and I was alone as the only Frafra in the midst of Dagaaba. We exchanged a few more jokes. The Frafra-Dagaaba joking relationship that I always knew would influence my fieldwork was already at play and, indeed, this identity was my greatest asset in terms of the success of my fieldwork. As I mentioned above, it allowed me to build networks, and to transgress boundaries, in many cases easily and without retribution.

At this point, I took advantage of the friendly atmosphere in the meeting to ask questions about the community's social and political organisation; who the leaders were and what the group members thought of my studying in the community. For their part, the group members were happy with my idea and encouraged me to come, pledging their full support. The leadership of the group later facilitated and sponsored my entry into the community and assisted in finding suitable accommodation for me. I went back to my house in Wa and returned to Serekpere with my friend two days later, this time to the farms of two members of the group, and after two hours of touring the farms, together with the group members, we returned to the community centre where we further discussed my fieldwork plans. The group members assured

⁶¹ See analysis in Joseph Wegru (2000).

me that they were looking for suitable accommodation for me. To contextualise the rest of my discussion about the selection process I now examine briefly the layout of the settlement.

The layout of Serekpere

Serekpere is a rural agricultural settlement located along the Nadowli-Wa main road. On the outskirts of the settlement, there are a number of dispersed houses, interlaced with fields of crops. Towards the centre of the settlement, the houses are much closer to one another. Customarily, families, often descendants of a common patrilineal ancestor, live together in large units within a house. Each house is sub-divided into many units known as *zaga* ('compounds') and these belong to brothers, fathers, sons, uncles and nephews. The houses are mostly built of mud, with a few, particularly towards the centre of the settlement and along the main road, constructed in modern Ghanaian architectural style and of cement blocks or mud bricks. Within a typical house, the overall head of the family, who is normally the oldest man, has his own *zaga*, which contains his wives and children and perhaps their children and wives too. There are also the *zaga* of his brothers and paternal cousins and nephews, who may also have their own families. Cooking and eating arrangements are organised along the lines of this living arrangement. Customarily, a man's wives and daughters-in-law work together on his family farm and also cook and eat together. Many of the modern houses also rent out rooms to government workers, mainly teachers, who are posted to the settlement's daycare, primary or junior high schools from elsewhere. For instance, the house I lived in whilst in Serekpere, was a modern house, made from mud; it contained the owner's estranged first wife with her daughter and granddaughter and his paternal nephew with his two wives and their children. Also renting in the house was a daycare assistant, her husband and their daughter. Each of these three families constituted a separate unit.

Animal rearing, a major source of income for members of the settlement, is on a free-range basis, with the animals allowed to roam every nook and

cranny of the settlement. An exception is during the farm season when the animals are kept under intensive supervision to prevent the destruction of crop fields. Besides farming and animal rearing, moonlighting activities in Serekpere include the sale of provisions. At the time of my fieldwork, there were about seven provision shops of different sizes in the settlement, where a wide range of items were sold, including fuel (lamp oil, petrol and diesel), batteries, prepaid mobile phone cards, footwear, canned food, confectionery, toiletries, agricultural chemicals, fertilisers and drugs. There were also five drinking bars attached to shops, with another one that sold only hard liquor. An interesting feature of the shops, which are the biggest businesses in the settlement, is that they are all owned by men.

Also, on market days and at the settlement's centre, men sell both raw and cooked meat, with the latter mostly served and eaten on bare tables with powdered pepper and salt. By contrast, women dominate the sale of cooked food, such as *kooko* and *kenkey* (a Ghanaian porridge and meal respectively), *pito* and soup ingredients⁶², mainly at the centre and on market days (which fall on every sixth day). On each market day there are normally two or three women who fry and sell *koose* whilst a woman comes from Wa to sell second-hand and new clothing. Furthermore, on a daily basis there are three or four *pito* sellers, with the number increasing on market days. *Pito* is the commonest commodity in the community; a few women sell it at home whilst most of them send it to the market place (see figure 5 for *pito* on display at the market).

Serekpere has been connected to the national electricity grid since the late 1990s but only a few of the individual houses, particularly those close to the roadside, are connected to it. Mobile phone usage is not widespread but it is much more common amongst the young people. An Internet service is available through one or other of the mobile phone service providers (MTN

⁶² These include tomatoes, pepper, onions, dried herrings, shea butter, *dawadawa*, and seasonal vegetables such as beans, pumpkin and cassava leaves and, occasionally, grains such as corn, millet and sorghum.

Ghana, Vodafone Ghana and Airtel Ghana, amongst others), albeit with very unreliable coverage. There is no health facility in the settlement and the nearest one, a CHPS—Community-based Health Planning and Services—compound is located in Goli, which is mentioned above. Thus, members of the settlement travel to Nadowli, the district capital, for healthcare services and to Goli only for the treatment of minor conditions.



Figure 5: Pots of brewed pito in a basin, for sale at the market

Returning to the selection of accommodation, by mid-August I had found a suitable compound and host family in Serekpere, at commercial rates. This house was in a relatively poor condition compared with another that the NRGF group members negotiated for me. The house was built of mud and did not appear to have been maintained regularly. The iron sheet roofs leaked each time it rained and burrowing animals, such as mice, had bored holes through the walls and the roofs to the outside. But I deemed this house more

appropriate than the other because, as stated above, it housed the first wife of the house owner and his nephew, a polygynous man married to two sisters, who was its caretaker. In contrast, the first accommodation I was introduced to, although a newly completed house built of cement blocks, was a lonely and deserted room attached to the outside of the house and located on the outskirts of the settlement. Looking back, the accommodation choice I made was a good one, as it enabled me to access people's lives and experiences in ways that would have been hampered had I been living in a lonely outside room. Located near the market centre, the house I lived in was directly adjacent to a major path to the market that was used by most of the people in that segment of the settlement. Nevertheless, the house I refused was in a much better condition.

Indeed, I had numerous sleepless nights at my accommodation, caused by ant and mosquito bites, and mice and wall geckos climbing over me and falling onto me from the exposed roof joints as I lay on the sleeping mattress on the floor each night. Also, crickets and other insects made an unbearable noise, mostly in the middle of quiet nights. These challenges and privation could have been avoided, or at least minimised, had I stayed in the other accommodation. Having fulfilled all the requirements, including providing bottles of gin at the request of the house owner for sacrifice to the gods and ancestors to allow my presence, as well as to protect me, in the settlement, all was set for me to start my fieldwork⁶³. On 9 September 2013, I set off to Serekpere to begin my ethnography, with mixed feelings. I was scared about what to expect; where was I going to start from and was I going to be successful? My biggest fears were whether I was going to come back alive and healthy, because of the pervasiveness of beliefs and perceptions in Ghana regarding the use of mystical powers to kill people in Dagaaba settlements and also because of hygiene issues.

⁶³ This sacrifice was a private ritual performed before my husband and me by the house owner's elder brother.

Despite preparing and equipping myself with sophisticated literature on conducting participant observation and feminist research, when I woke up on the first day of my fieldwork, I did not know where to start. I decided to take a walk through the community market, but it was almost empty and, as a result, I returned to the house and stayed there. The day dragged on until night and, at night, as I sat with the caretaker and his two wives and their children, everyone went quiet. After almost an hour with no interaction beyond talking to the children, I decided to go to my room. An initial communication barrier with the women in the compound, mainly because they did not know me or what to expect from me, was broken when I quickly learned the cultural norms about food amongst the women and adjusted my behaviour accordingly. On the second day, I observed that the women in all three households in the compound exchange bowls of cooked food. Subsequently, I immediately travelled (by bus) back to my house in Wa and collected extra cooking pots and bowls and bought more rice, corn flour and soup ingredients to enable me to cook in large quantities so as to share with the women in the house. I also bought three big loafs of bread as gifts for all the households to share. From the third day onwards, I served each household each time I prepared food. These gestures established me as someone who was well brought up and this opened doors for me, as this entry in my fieldnotes shows:

Mmabile was seated on a mat in the compound close to her room and eating ... she called: '[Constance], come' ... When I got there, she explained to me that she wanted to suggest that I should not bother to serve food to the rest of them because it would be too much of a burden for me. But I explained to her that I was happy to share and assured her that I did not feel pressured to do so ... I informed her that I saw the children in the compound as my children and younger siblings, adding that had I started having babies early, my first born could have been as old as Octavia, her granddaughter who was nine. To this, Mmabile replied: 'you are the same age as her mother and I see you as my daughter' (Fieldnotes, September 2013).

Here, my awareness of the cultural context was very important. Although she was asking me not to bother giving them food, I knew from my Frafra upbringing and as a Dagao woman that a well-brought-up woman is one who shares food, particularly with children who are not her own. This shows that

she cares about the children of other women in the house. In this sense, by regarding the children in the house as either mine or my younger siblings, I reassured my host that I was a 'good guest', as she often said to my sponsors, the NRGP members. Following this encounter, Mmabile, who commands a lot of influence in her section of the settlement, became my main sponsor in funeral rites and group farm activities. Meanwhile, my introduction at the community's Catholic church by the catechist (a lay person who teaches in the church) on the first Sunday I went there to worship was the beginning of my rapport building with both women and men in the church. As part of this introduction, the catechist entreated the women to visit me and give me vegetables and, as if by design, on the third day a church member who became what I would describe as my number one female confidante brought me vegetables for free. Other church members followed suit with more vegetables and *pito*. Two of the women in the church became my close advisers in their respective sections of the settlement.

But, even though they had agreed in principle to teach me Dagaaba cultural practices, it was still difficult for Mmabile and all the other women to allow me to go with them to their farms. For close on two weeks, the women came up with various reasons to prevent me from going. But, gradually, Mmabile allowed me on to her farm, with only the two of us working; whilst harvesting beans out there, removed from any eavesdropping, she began to discuss her life story with me. I then realised how being alone with a woman away from the settlement could facilitate access to sensitive and personal information⁶⁴. Once I got to know this, I endeavoured to travel with women by accompanying them to farms, funerals and markets in other settlements. This proved to be the most effective way to gain an understanding of the lives of both participants and other community members, and also of local politics and power relations.

⁶⁴ As there are many family units within one house, it is easy for neighbours to eavesdrop on conversations and, fearing that their secrets might leak out, the women did not discuss personal issues whilst we were in the village, even if we were alone.

Gaining Access and Informed Consent

The issues of gaining access and seeking permission from local gatekeepers to conduct participant observation do not come to an end by gaining entry into the study site. My acceptance and sponsorship by the NRG members was a step towards gaining access to the community. However, I was conscious that the position of the gatekeepers, including the leadership of the group, could affect my access to research participants as I was intending to focus on ordinary women and men. Thus, once entry into the settlement was granted, I committed my time to negotiating access with ordinary women and tried to recruit participants independently from the NRG members. As a woman, I was also concerned about how the main gatekeepers'—the *tendaana*, household heads and husbands—attitudes towards and perceptions of me would affect the success of the fieldwork. I was aware of concerns with “the expert” and the “critic” views of the ethnographer (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:60), whereby the researcher is perceived as either an expert who has all the necessary ideas for solving problems or as a critic of cultural practices. Although I was equipped with this caution and constantly explained my role as a researcher, as I mentioned earlier, I was misunderstood by some to be a government spy. It was crucial for me to manage these expectations as well as to explain my agenda, as this is central to the success of the research. I succeeded in my fieldwork because I was able to manage these and many more expectations effectively, even when they conflicted with my beliefs as a feminist. For instance, due to the risk of being perceived as ‘anti-marriage’ in the settlement, when women asked my opinion on how to deal with marital abuse rather than weigh in, I often sought their own views, by asking: ‘what do you want to do about the situation?’ Whilst the majority of the women said they did not know what to do, a few of them who said they knew what to do thought it was a waste of resources to seek help from the police.

Prior to my fieldwork, as a result of the sensitive nature of the issues under study I had imagined that the gatekeepers might seek to disrupt my data collection. But, as it turned out, they did not impede my access to marginalised and vulnerable members of the settlement; what the male leaders

of the settlement did do was to attempt, without much success, to cover up realities on the ground. For instance, at the community forum to draw the fieldwork to a close they insisted that there were systems in the settlement that catered for women who were abused or neglected by their husbands. These patriarchs apparently underestimated how much I had come to know about the settlement. Whilst all the women present were quiet during the forum, when I asked some of them later they disagreed with these public statements made by the male leaders. In this regard, the importance of 'being there' to an understanding of the issues cannot be overemphasised. It is what gave me the chance to build relationships of trust with many women who, in turn, shared their daily lives and stories with me, lives and stories that amply demonstrate how much those male leaders' accounts screened out.

And yet, the relationships I forged with many Serekpere women were not straightforward. Whilst most of them identified with me as a woman, mother, daughter and wife, they often referred to my privileged position as an educated woman who does not have to face the challenges they encounter on a daily basis, including the hazards of working on farms without protective clothing and thus being exposed to snake bites and other beings (ghosts and mad men). As previously mentioned, our shared identities, as mothers and as Dagaaba women, were not always enough to bridge all the barriers, an issue that has been highlighted by other feminist ethnographers (see Riessman, 1987). My complex positioning as privileged and yet in some sense powerless, as in my relationship with Mmabile above, meant that I had to be careful about my demeanour and general approach to this research, including the way I dressed. Even though dressing like the women I worked with (wearing African prints most of the time) did not make me an insider, it proved useful, as it elicited acceptance and commendation, mostly from the older women. Often times, I easily passed as a woman of Serekpere to visitors coming to the settlement, mainly due to my style of dress and form of comportment.

It is interesting to observe that whilst my Frafra identity was mostly invoked to crack jokes with me, I was otherwise identified by the people I worked

with as *Daga-pɔge*, a Daga woman or as *Kaleobe pɔge*, Kaleo people's wife⁶⁵. There was situational fluidity in how these identities were assigned to me by my research participants. In many instances, they assured me that I was one of them because of my identities, yet it was not difficult for them to remind me under certain circumstances that I was a stranger, as discussed above. In this study, I claim no insider status, but nor am I a complete outsider; my position is a unique blend of both. What is important in regards to my research is that these multiple identities and statuses facilitated access in ways that may not be available to foreigners or even to non-community-based Dagaaba people. I believe that the access I achieved—and the consequent success of my fieldwork—largely depended on these markers; they made me enough of an insider to warrant trust and cooperation and enough of an outsider to be forgiven for my cultural blunders. Like Saba Mahmood (2005) in her study of the Egyptian women's mosque movement, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, for me to see and observe what I did in Serepere had this study been conducted in my own village of Beo, in the Frafra area. For instance, I would not have been able to ask certain questions because I would have been expected to know the answers, and it would have been much more challenging to stand back from the 'known' to examine it.

A more challenging task was getting access to research participants' activities and participating in their daily activities with them. This is a familiar challenge for ethnographers, as Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, 2007) point out. In the context of this study, women spend most of their time working on the farms and in the bush in search of productive resources and food. This means that most of the time they are not at home, and this makes access even more challenging. A starting point was to ask women whether I could follow them to the farms and the bush. This strategy proved very effective in helping me build rapport and gain access to the women. Gaining access to male participants was more challenging, given that sex segregation in everyday life is deeply marked amongst Dagaaba. But, again, the 'joking relationship' was

⁶⁵ Kaleo is my marital settlement, about 23km from Serepere.

very useful in this regard. Thus, as a ‘queen’, it was possible to bridge barriers and create the rapport needed for the success of the study. My participant observation and initial analytical ideas were all recorded daily in a field diary. In the following section, I discuss how I recorded my fieldnotes.

Keeping a field diary and recording fieldnotes

Recording fieldnotes is a major component of, and a commitment involved in, conducting ethnographic research. In fact, DeWalt and DeWalt (2010) argue that observations are only considered as data if they are recorded in a way that enables further analysis. Keeping a field diary and recording fieldnotes helped me to keep track of all that was happening around me as I carried out my research, as well as to evaluate my analytic themes as they emerged. Initially, I wrote copious notes describing the setting, the actors and their moods as expressed in verbal and non-verbal communications, along with my own activities, including how I spent each hour of the day, before reflecting on the day’s events. With time, as the fieldwork progressed and issues of significance to me started emerging, note-taking became more focused and less time consuming. I also reviewed my fieldnotes periodically, noting follow-up issues that emerged and were either puzzling or of particular relevance. To reduce suspicion of me in the predominantly illiterate population, I wrote my notes in the privacy of my room at night or in the morning. In addition to daily participant observation and fieldnote-taking, conversations with women and men ranging in age from 17 to 90, and in a wide range of positions in the village, ranging from school pupils to community leaders, and single, married, separated and widowed constituted a useful source of data. In all of this I was guided by the performative constitution of the gender norms, roles and relations, paying attention to the way in which they are repetitively constituted, acted out in different spaces and by diverse actors. Also, this approach meant that in my investigation I paid keen attention to any apertures that were available within this cultural set-up to overturn the dominant assumptions that marginalise minorities, notably women in marriage.

Conversations and tape-recording

According to Walsh, mentioned above, for certain aspects of a study, in-depth interviewing is the most productive way to gather data. In the context of this study, informal conversations were significant in contextualising and shedding light on the contradictions of the everyday and ritual performances that I observed and participated in. Conversations thus served to complement the participant observation. The conversations and probing were particularly useful in this study towards the latter stages of the fieldwork when local systems of meaning and the dynamics that shape gender relations and power were becoming more evident through observation, which in turn meant I could ask more informed and culturally relevant questions. At each stage, informed consent was obtained in either verbal audio-recording or written form⁶⁶. It is customary amongst Dagaaba to provide *pito* for guests and loved ones. In keeping with this custom, most of my research participants, including those who did not have the money to do so, often offered to buy *pito* for me after a prolonged conversation or visit to their homes. But, being culturally aware of this, I often bought pots of *pito* for them instead. In some instances, we moved to the settlement's market where I bought many pots for us and other community members to share. Where the option of buying *pito* or moving to the market was not possible, I offered the participants ₪1.00 (£0.20) for 'water'. This was usually well received and it endeared me to my research participants.

Initially I selected participants for detailed conversations based on their biography as told to me by them or other members of the settlement. But later, some community members requested to participate in the study and I obliged out of politeness. Despite my efforts to explain the aim of my research, the people I studied amongst thought that by getting involved they would not be left out of any future interventions. Without knowing how events would unfold in the field, I decided to start interacting more closely with my

⁶⁶ As most of my research participants could neither read nor write, in most cases I had to record verbal consents. For those who were literate, I gave them informed consent forms and information sheets to read (prepared in the English language) and, where necessary, I explained the content before they signed the forms prior to each interaction.

research participants towards the end of the second quarter. I also considered this necessary because I feared my fledgling relationship with my main female sponsor, Mmabile, could soon become strained as she was becoming overly protective of me. As it turned out, my relationships improved with time and many people thought it was a privilege to be part of the study. Thus, I had some members of the settlement, both women and men, who I did not see reason to talk to confront me and ask if they were not worthy of my time. In order not to hurt their feelings, which could in turn endanger my study, I had in-depth discussions with almost all those who approached me in this way. It is important to note, however, that the majority of these conversations were indeed very useful in shedding light on the issues of interest to this study. For instance, Takpoma, an abused woman discussed at length in Chapter 7, belongs to this category. Secondly, I found that the discussions provided some of the participants with a forum in which to express deep-seated frustrations that they perhaps had never spoken about before.

Given the sensitivity of the topics we were discussing, if any participant became upset, I ensured that no research participant was left in an emotionally unstable state by calming them and encouraging them that all was not lost. I usually referred the women to the family structures to seek redress, which was the most culturally appropriate move to take even though I did not believe in the ability of these male-centric institutions to serve the women with justice. Conversations with my research participants, in this regard, was a therapeutic exercise for the participants. Indeed, many of the participants expressed gratitude for the chance to tell their life stories. To complement the community-based participant observation and fieldnotes collected in Serekpere, I conducted in-depth interviews (n=10) with feminists, academics, activists and representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and with academy-based Dagaaba. These interviews were done in Wa and Accra. Given the importance of these other actors in the field of women's studies and women's rights in Ghana, I determined that these were important counter-narratives to explore in parallel with the fieldwork in the rural village of Serekpere. Indeed, discussions with this group have been useful in helping

contextualise my empirical findings, although I do not directly refer to most of them in my analysis.

Translating, transcribing, storage and retrieval of data

The formal interviews, and also some of the informal conversations, were tape-recorded with the consent of my research participants. I started transcribing my interviews whilst I was still in the field, which permitted me to be reflexive and engaged with material as the fieldwork progressed and to include those reflections in further data collection stages. In addition, I spent the first three months after my fieldwork completing the transcription and updating the analysis I had summarised in the quarterly field reports (see explanation below). I found that transcribing my interviews myself proved useful in helping me become deeply immersed in the data. As with any other research involving multiple languages (Gurune, which is my native language, Dagaare and English, for the writing of this study), I have grappled with many challenges relating to translation. Sometimes it has been difficult to find English equivalents for words in these complex Ghanaian languages without losing any meaning in the process. In this sense, the study is arguably partially constrained, as some of the meaning is lost in translation. As a Dagaare woman (by marriage), I did not need translation from the outset to engage informally with members of the community. However, initially I relied on a research assistant to translate my questions during detailed conversations as my Dagaare at this stage was not advanced. My research assistant, however, absconded from the settlement in May 2014 after spending money belonging to one of the four village savings groups. This caused a great scandal, but fortunately, by then, my knowledge of and confidence in speaking Dagaare had greatly improved and I was able to comfortably interact with my research participants without assistance. In my efforts to minimise errors and loss of meaning due to translation and interpretation, and also to retain all the possible nuances, I have consulted widely with scholars of Dagaare studies and with my Dagaaba family members and friends whenever I have not been entirely confident of the connotation or tone of a word or

phrase. In the process, I have often crosschecked these sources with each other.

Data Analysis and Writing-up

Data analysis in ethnography is an 'iterative process' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:158). In this study, the analysis of my data was an ongoing process, feeding back into the research as the fieldwork continued to develop. I started taking notes in field diaries, observing and reflecting on the themes and patterns as they emerged. I read through my daily field notes regularly as a way to continue to reflect on the emerging issues as well as to ensure that I was on course in addressing my research questions. I was deeply immersed in the daily lives of my research participants and this afforded me the opportunity to understand and generate the emerging patterns and themes. I frequently reviewed my field data and observational conversations and often wrote analytical comments in the margins, noting surprises and recurring themes in everyday conversations among the women and men I worked with. At the end of the first quarter I wrote a field report for discussion with my supervisors. In doing this I read closely through my fieldnotes, recorded in a word document, paying attention to and identifying new themes. At this point, the issues of importance to my participants were starting to become clearer. I began highlighting the emerging themes, including the social organisation of the settlement, social norms, values and practices in general as well as the contradictory normative expectations for women and men, polygyny and the constraints within which women exercise power, agency and resistance. I also began to reflect critically on the analogies and metaphors that were being used by different actors in this cultural setting to construct lived experiences (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). I began to assign labels to concepts and ideas that were emerging in the data in my analytical notes. These formed the basis for writing the first quarterly report, mentioned above. The insights emerging from the analysis of my participant observation data in the first quarter served in turn as the basis for focusing and refining my participant observation and for asking further questions. In these later periods of field research, data gathering was more focused, concentrating on

the emerging issues and the interconnections between them. For the rest of the three quarters, I began to analyse my participant observation data in greater depth. This process was useful in helping me identify issues for follow up throughout my fieldwork.

Formal analysis began when I completed my fieldwork. Aside from the themes and patterns generated during the preliminary analysis, I read through all my participant observation data, and using the highlighting function in word, I highlighted the recurring themes (see Ryan and Bernard, 2003; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). This permitted me to gain a deeper understanding of the data, and drawing the emerging themes out, which I could then compare to the earlier ones examined in the field reports. At this point the main themes were becoming evident and once I identified these, I began to sift through the data, adding brief annotated notes. I wrote the emerging themes on 'post it' note pads and pasted these on the wall, paying attention to how they related to each other and the patterns that were emerging. Consistent with this study's research questions and theoretical framework, in addition to what was often described to me as important during the fieldwork, I took an analytical decision to focus on the themes related to power structures and gendered inequalities and local conceptions of femininities at this stage, as my discussion in the following chapters will show. I grouped related indexes together to form overarching themes and labelled these appropriately⁶⁷. In the final stage, I conducted a thematic analysis, drawing out the interrelationships between the various concepts and themes that emerged from my analysis and identifying linkages to my research questions and the theoretical framing at this stage. Under each of the main (and also sub-) themes, I copied and pasted from my data some of the most relevant quotes and narratives, referencing appropriately so that I could easily trace the source. During the writing up stage, to which I return shortly, the themes and the quotes were useful in helping me structure the chapters and also in tracing similar texts by simply using key word search function in

⁶⁷ In fact, Gery Ryan and Russell Bernard (2003:85) identify the tasks involved in qualitative data analysis as: '(1) discovering themes and subthemes, (2) winnowing themes to a manageable few (i.e., deciding which themes are important in any project), (3) building hierarchies of themes or code books, and (4) linking themes into theoretical models'.

the fieldnotes and in the quarterly report folders.

Ethnographic writing-up is geared towards transforming one's experience and understanding of the social world into ethnographic text, a text that demonstrates relationships and patterns between the data and the relevant theories. 'Writing up' an ethnography is as demanding as doing ethnography. It requires a wide range of skills and techniques, drawing from such fields as 'literary theory, rhetoric,' and 'text linguistics' amongst others, and not only the 'research methods'⁶⁸ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:191). The task of writing is even more challenging for me, as a non-native English speaker writing in English. Reading ethnographic texts has been useful in helping me to overcome some of these challenges, as well as to acquire the art of writing ethnography. As previously discussed, the themes I generated in the data-analysis process formed the basis for organising this study into chapters and sub-themes in my writing-up. In organising the themes and chapters, I am guided by the need for logical interconnections and structural relations amongst them as well as by how each theme and chapter contributes to answering my study's question. My writing-up has relied mainly on feminist poststructuralist assumptions and philosophies, notably performative gender theories. To be informed by the principles of these theories means to pay attention to subjectivity, identities, agency and resistance as reiteratively constituted by discursive practices. This frame enables me to analyse, interrogate and explore ways to deploy dominant perspectives and discourses on gendered power relations in a manner that expose the weaknesses and contradictions inherent in them so as to destabilise them and challenge the violence they exact on normatively non-conforming subjects in this Dagaaba context.

⁶⁸ Skeggs (1994) underscores the problematics of the academic requirement to write ethnography in a language that is inaccessible to ordinary research participants. This excludes from the reading audience the participants for whom and about whom the feminist researcher writes and to whom she hopes to give voice. In the case of Serekpere, none of my female research participants can read or write English and this makes the risk of exclusion greater.

Leaving the Field

There comes a moment when the fieldwork needs to draw to a close. This is often necessitated by saturation or time constraints (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Leaving Serekpere presented me with mixed feelings: I had built very strong ties, trust and great rapport with many members of the settlement in the last quarter of my stay. Most people were becoming more open to me; three reasons seem to account for this. First of all, my conduct of buying *pito* for my research participants endeared me to many and earned me admiration as a respectful woman. Secondly, my research participants informed me that by not missing any funeral ceremonies outside the settlement, I showed compassion for their loss. Thirdly, it seems members of the settlement also sympathised with me after Albert, my research assistant, absconded with the money of members of a savings group, having initially lied to the group members that I had borrowed the money and would replace it once I had travelled to Wa. This came as a deep shock to me. My automatic response was to tell Mmabile, who was the first to inform me of what Albert had done, how much I had paid him and supported him. Like wild fire, this news spread the length and breadth of the settlement. This news earned me the status of a 'philanthropist' and my popularity soared. In fact, almost every member of the settlement I met on my way to the market or to a farm after that expressed sympathy for me. I was perceived as someone who had been tricked and unjustly wronged. Also, sponsoring the access to health services and education, including university, of anyone who asked for my help enhanced my relationships with members of the settlement⁶⁹. On the downside, once my generosity became known, at times I was seen by some as an easy source of money for a wide range of endeavours. Looking back, I could have managed and reacted to my shock about Albert better, that is, without divulging the details of the financial support I had given him. This in turn would have lessened the amount of request for financial help I had to deal with after this disclosure.

⁶⁹ It is important to observe that, in all these endeavours, I was committed to my beliefs as a feminist, and thus against exploitation, as well as working to empower women and men.

As part of introducing my study and seeking permission to carry it out in Serekpere, I informed the participants when I planned for the study to come to an end. As the time of the research was drawing to a close, I frequently reminded most of them that I would soon be leaving the settlement. This was to manage expectations and lessen any shock at the point of my exit. Prior to my departure, I held a community forum. In order to have a productive discussion, and in consultation with my key informants, I invited 25 people (men and women, young and old, traditional leaders, youth leaders and women leaders, single, married and widowed) mindful that in the farm season many people might not make it, whilst a few might turn up uninvited. As it turned out, 22 participants came to the forum. I used this as an opportunity to thank the community for the great support and hospitality I had enjoyed throughout the period I lived there. I also reassured the members present that all the information shared with me would be treated with the utmost confidentiality. I apologised if anyone thought I was too intrusive or rude in the questions I asked and in my (Frafra) jokes. This was also an opportunity for me to validate my research findings. The members present affirmed most of my findings and interpretations, whilst elaborating on them. I also informed the group of my next line of action, the ‘writing-up’ of the thesis, and that the results of the study might be disseminated through publications in academic journals and the media. I asked for feedback about the study and my conduct in general, but the members instead expressed appreciation for my studying amongst them. Two of the community’s male elders who were present thanked the gods and ancestors in turn for protecting me and prayed for their protection and guidance for my career. I used the days after the forum to gather feedback on it from my close confidants, to complete my last detailed and follow up conversations, and to tend to my networks and friendships so that it would be possible both to stay in touch and also, possibly, to return to do further work with the community in the future.

Ethical Issues

As I indicated earlier, ethnography entails prolonged participation in the lives of the study participants. In this sense, it represents ‘... an intrusion and

intervention into a system of relationships' (Stacey, 1988:23). As a result of this, ethical issues such as informed consent, exploitation, risk of harm, confidentiality, integrity and implications for future research are a prime concern and thus require critical scrutiny (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Throughout my fieldwork, I was guided by the ethical codes of conduct prescribed by the British Sociological Association (BSA) and the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth (ASA). According to the BSA and the ASA, ethical obligations to the research participants and the host community supersede the goal of generating new knowledge. Following from this, my responsibility as a researcher has been to carefully assess any potential harm to either my participants or the study community, as well as to devise measures to mitigate harm should it occur.

On protecting participants from harm, Bloor and Wood (2006:68), following ethical guidelines issued by the BSA and the ASA, suggest that this includes: 'secure data storage, removal of identifiers, amendments to biological details and the use of pseudonyms'. My field data has been held with the utmost confidentiality; both oral and written materials have been safeguarded from any third party access. Furthermore, I have used pseudonyms to refer to my research participants so as to protect their identities and minimise the risk of exposure, whilst the electronic devices I used to store my data are all protected by security codes, known only to me. At all times during this study, I have been cautious of the potential danger to my research participants of any information they shared with me being leaked. For instance, in the context of Serekpere, where belief in supernatural power is pervasive, any leakage of information regarding which members of the settlement are perceived as witches and *juju* holders and have used their powers to harm others has the potential to throw the entire settlement into turmoil. I have omitted from my analysis any information I consider too sensitive to discuss, or as having the potential to cause harm. A major potential source of harm, despite all the measures I have put in place, is what Bloor and Wood (2006:68) refer to as 'deductive disclosure', that is, a situation in which an audience is able to attribute certain views to certain individuals. In the context of Serekpere, where people know other people's life histories, it may be easy for people

within the settlement to trace certain narratives to the research participants concerned. To forestall the occurrence of this, I have often removed some of the biographical details where they entail a risk of exposure.

A major ethical dilemma I faced during my fieldwork was to listen to women recount the violence they encounter in marriage, sometimes amidst tears, without at least pointing them towards appropriate legal resources. This really challenged my belief that no woman should have to endure abuse. On the one hand I wished to assist these women in seeking help but, on the other, I was acutely aware of my role as a researcher and of the need to eschew any actions that would predispose me as a threat to the stability of marriages in the settlement, or which could endanger the prospect of getting to the root causes of these problems. To resolve this dilemma, I often asked the victims of marital violence for their opinions on how to address the abuse, and whilst some thought they had to put up with it, others said that if they knew how to get help they would pursue it regardless of the consequences. In many instances I left these issues unresolved, due to the aforementioned constraints. But this worrying situation of women not knowing how to get help reflects the failure of the state to create an effective awareness of the resources available for dealing with marital violence at the grassroots.

Negotiating consent, as the ASA ethical guidelines (2011), but also Hammersley and Atkinson (1997), rightly put it, is a process rather than a one-off task. Thus, continually, consent was sought as and when necessary. At the beginning of the study, I introduced myself to the main gatekeepers, including the *tendaana* and heads of household, by visiting each house in the settlement. In terms of my research participants, I ensured 'informed consent' by conducting participant observation only with people who gave their express consent, verbally or in written form. This normally followed a reading/translation and explanation of the participant information sheet. Consent was also negotiated for the use of data in publications in the future. Whilst no monetary incentive was offered in return for data, this study was steered by the principle of 'fair return for assistance' (ASA 2011:5). As mentioned above, in line with Dagaaba cultural norms, I often bought, or

gave €1.00 (£0.20) to each research participant to buy, *pito*. Finally, the claims to knowledge I make are guided by modesty and by responsibility to the people I worked with. In spite of my positionality as Frafra and Dagao by birth and marriage respectively, and as a feminist scholar and an activist, as discussed above, I am able to maintain ‘professional and scholarly integrity’ (ASA, 2011:9), integrity in the sense of not ‘bracketing’ these markers but openly acknowledging that they influence this study.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have discussed epistemological and methodological issues as they relate to my research and fieldwork. This study is located within a feminist poststructuralist epistemological framework, specifically, that of ethnography. This framework draws on poststructuralist and feminist theoretical assumptions regarding knowledge production. Both of these fields of enquiry recognise that knowledge production processes are political and value-based. Feminist epistemologies value women’s experiences as the basis for producing legitimate knowledge. For its part, feminist poststructuralism problematises grand narratives and assumptions about knowledge production processes and views identities and power relations as contingent upon discursive practices. Working within a poststructuralist frame requires an open recognition that the researcher-researched relationship is power laden and, in this study, this has meant acknowledging that my positionality is crucial to the research process. In this regard, I have demonstrated both how my multiple identities as Frafra, Dagao, a mother and a feminist played a central role in shaping the knowledge production process and how they affected my access in different ways throughout my fieldwork.

This framework has enabled me to explore the intricacies of the gendered power relations that characterise Dagaaba daily life. It has been effective in giving visibility and voice to women’s experiences; nonetheless, its potential for exploitation is also great, as I have discussed. This situation, the potential for exploitation, raises questions regarding some of the principles of feminist

research, discussed above. This is because in this subsistence agricultural settlement, research participants are highly vulnerable, a vulnerability caused by harsh climatic conditions and their attendant poor crop yields from the rain-fed agriculture, and by inhumane national and international policies that have local effects. For instance, despite all my efforts to bridge the barriers created by my privileged position as an educated woman working in a higher education institution, the women I worked with could not see me as their equal. My privileged position loomed large. Furthermore, although most of the women I worked with cooperated with the study immensely, from conversations, it seems there were motives other than that of helping to produce knowledge. Some of them often said they wanted to participate so as not to be left out of any possible material benefit in the future. Thus, I have argued that in contexts like Serepere in which the research participants are marginalised, the unequal power relations and the feminist principles that suggest partnership and collaboration require critical attention so as to eliminate the risk of exploitation.

The Frafra-Dagaaba joking relationship was a particularly useful asset throughout my fieldwork. It helped me to bridge barriers, especially with male participants in the sex-segregated Dagaaba settlements, and facilitated access in ways that would otherwise not have been possible. This relationship, in combination with my other markers mentioned here, was the most productive resource in terms of contributing to the success of my fieldwork. The joking relationship meant that I could easily be forgiven for making mistakes or transgressing acceptable boundaries. For instance, I often entered the *pkeezaga*, the room for the dead, where sacred rituals are performed before corpses are buried, without open disapproval or perceived mystical punishment. By contrast, sometimes the joking relationship permitted my research participants to evade sensitive questions by deflecting them back with such utterances as, ‘only a silly Frafra would ask such a question’, and to exert some control and power within the research dynamic. Furthermore, as a result of my awareness of the privileged position I occupied in relation to most of my study participants in terms of class, I was careful with the jokes I told and with how I responded to those of community members. This was

crucial in order not to endanger the research process by causing offence. Thus, I have argued that the joking relationship has great potential for breaking down barriers, facilitating access and building rapport and, therefore, in contexts with similar arrangements researchers might wish to exploit it to the benefit of the research process. Nonetheless, it must be used conscientiously if the research relationships are not to be hurt or jeopardised.

Chapter 4. Marriage Practices and ‘the Marriage Space’: Setting the Ethnographic Context

Marriage is a very important social institution amongst Dagaaba and their neighbours. According to my research participants, marriage is the basis for extending Dagaaba’s patrilineal family lines and for sustaining them. Marriage is the means through which the status of individuals who are born into the families attains legitimacy. Consequently, any member of the family who is born outside a legitimate marriage is called *sensembie*, that is, a child begotten outside of marriage. Such a child has limited rights, for instance a male child cannot become a *tendaana*⁷⁰. This study examines gendered relations of power in contemporary marriage and their implications for theorising gender performativity and violence against women within what I describe as ‘the marriage space’, that is, the spatial setting and the complex webs of relations within which a marriage is performed and explained. I also examine the exercise of agency, including the resistance to and subversion of gender norms that subordinate women within the context of Dagaaba marriage. I focus on marriage as the unit of analysis because the range of performative practices that construct gender and identities amongst Dagaaba occur, for the most part, within marriage and within the marriage space. This, in turns means that examining marriage practices and relations can help us better understand the performative working of power and the role the practices and relations play in re/producing and sustaining gendered subordination and violence against women.

This is the first of four chapters in which I discuss my research findings. Together, this chapter and the following ones examine themes that are central to the aim of this thesis: to explore the implications of Dagaaba’s ways of

⁷⁰ However, Sean Hawkins (2002), claim that marriage was not part of Dagaaba people’s lives until they had contact with the outside world. Hawkins criticises both Myer Fortes (1937) and Jack Goody (1962), who studied ‘LoDagaa’ and Tallensi (of north-east Ghana) respectively, for applying the Western concept of marriage to social systems in which it does not make sense.

doing gender in marriage for theorising gender and power relations. As I have previously outlined, this will be done by drawing on poststructuralist theories of performative gender, relying on the work of Judith Butler and on other critical theories of power and agency. As previously discussed in Chapter 2, the context of Dagaaba is different from the European and North American settings where the theories of gender performativity originated. This difference in context is crucial here because, as I suggest below, Dagaaba ways of doing gender are very much bound up with a gendered division of domestic, community and farm-related roles. What is taken to mean in/appropriate femininities and masculinities is very much dependent on the performances of such tasks, and thus varies from dominant Western notions. For the most part, critical theories of performativity of gender have focused on gender roles and gender identities—gender expression/presentation and how subjectivities self-identify respectively (Butler, 1986, 1988, 1999, 2004b, 2011). Gender is thus theorised as contingent upon discursive practices; it is an effect rather than a cause, which is both enabled and constrained by the ritualised re-citation of past norms. Based on this understanding, some feminist theorists have challenged simplistic notions that argue for conformity between sex, gender and sexuality—the heterosexual matrix—and compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980; Butler, 1990, 1993a). Also, the theories appear to be mainly concerned with sexual violence, especially against minority genders and sexualities. Thus, the examples of strategies for subversion, including drag, are apposite in that context. By contrast, my study's primary concern is the troubling heterosexual marital violence in the dominantly heteropatriarchal and rural agricultural setting of Dagaaba, a context where productive and domestic roles are, largely, carried out manually. I have already outlined my critical contributions to theories of performative gender within such a pervasively mystical context, with repercussions for overt subversive acts.

Specifically, this chapter firstly provides insights into the context of, and the practices constituting, marriage amongst Dagaaba, on which the more analytical chapters to follow are based. It explores the way in which Dagaaba

understand the concept of marriage. Secondly, it examines the practices, which, I argue, function performatively to construct Dagaaba marriage. Finally, I examine the dynamics and actors within the marriage space whose in/actions have implications for women's status and their experiences of marriage and agency. The chapter is divided into three parts. In the first two sections I discuss Dagaaba notions and practices of marriage, and in the third section I examine the space within which all the practices and relations occur.

In this chapter I will make a number of critical contributions to discourses on marriage and identity. I argue that marriage amongst Dagaaba constitutes a multi-stage performative process, formed by a series of practices and performances at different stages rather than a one-off event. The procedures, rituals and practices carried out before and during the marriage work in a performative fashion to create Dagaaba marriage. Also, I draw attention to what I term 'the marriage space', as mentioned above. Crucially, the Dagaaba notion of family entails much more than a nuclear family of wife, husband and children (see Kpiebaya, 1991), as such, I adopt the phrase 'marriage space' in my discussion to signal the multiplicity of actors and the multiply interconnected relationships and dynamics that contour and inform marital relations within the Dagaaba context. This incorporates the norms and the range of social actors and relations that shape the marriage experience, the cultural expectations of Dagaaba exogamous marriage, and the physical space (i.e. the household) within which all these complex relations and actions occur. The marriage practices and multiple relations built into such a marriage space work to create what I describe in this study as 'ambiguous identities' for women. By ambiguous identity, I refer to the lived reality of women in Dagaaba societies who belong fully to neither their natal nor marital families due to the specific marriage and residential arrangements. This identity and status have implications for women's exercise of agency and resistance. Finally, I argue that amidst the constraints of ambiguous identities, violence and male dominance, the aperture necessary for the exercise of agency and the performance of resistance can be located. This situation thus complicates the supposed powerlessness of women articulated by both my female and male research participants.

Dagaaba Conceptions of Marriage

Amongst Dagaaba, as amongst most ethnicities in Ghana, marriage is a process that involves the families of both the bride and the groom and, indeed, the two communities from which they come (see Dolphyne, 1991; Kpiebaya, 1991; Ofei-Aboagye, 1994). It is not just a discrete or legally binding covenant executed by a state-empowered legal institution, as pertains elsewhere. Furthermore, marriage is not an ‘agreement of man and woman to live with each other’, as Hawkins (2002:233) suggests. A woman is instead said to marry the entire family and community of the groom. In a conversation, one of my research participants, Kabayo (c74), a *tendaana*, notes that ‘if a woman marries into this community, her husband only owns her vagina; she belongs to the entire settlement’⁷¹. Kabayo’s point of view, a view held by most of my research participants, both women and men, helps us begin to see how the marriage practices function to create women’s bodies as chattel owned by men. But what is worthy of note here is that the family and community are stakeholders in each marriage union. In other words, there are more actors involved in forming a marriage than just the couple in question. I explore the role of these multiple actors in *sustaining* and/or *straining* the marriage below, in the section on the marriage space.

The work of Jack Goody (1957, 1967, 1969) amongst ‘LoDagaa’ and ‘Lowiili’, that of Esther Goody (1973) amongst Gonja and that of Ulrike Wanitzek (1998) amongst Balsa, as well as my own lived experience of Frafra cultural norms, form the framework for analysis here. All of these ethnic groupings are located within northern Ghana, and are all part of the Mole-Dagbani group (discussed in Chapter 1). Consequently, there are similarities that enable comparison. Nonetheless, due to cultural particularities, some forms of comparison may be problematic. For instance, the level of autonomy in relation to choosing and changing husbands, reported by Goody (1973), Wanitzek (1998) and Hawkins (2002) in relation to Gonja,

⁷¹ In line with good ethnographical practice, all the names of my research participants and those of the natal settlements of the women I worked with are pseudonyms.

Bulsa and 'LoDagaa' respectively, appears to be of restricted applicability amongst the people of Serekpere and the surrounding villages. Indeed, my research participants frown upon what Hawkins (2002:243) refers to as 'latitude' to choose when and with whom to be, a view that represents the female Dagaao as though she was unconstrained by the social institutions and discourses that authorise her subjectivity. For her part, Wanitzek writes: '... not only do wives take the initiative to leave and choose other husbands on their own, but other women in the family, such as a woman's mother or, in certain cases her elder sister or her father's sister, have a major say in the initial choice of a husband for her' (1998:120). The women in the studies cited here not only have a say but a major one at that, but this is unlikely amongst the Dagaaba I worked with, as, customarily, male members of the family arrange marriages for the women.

The Dagaare words for marriage are *kul taa* and *di taa*, literally meaning to 'go to each other' and to 'pick/take each other' respectively. These phrases appear to suggest some form of partnership between the man and woman at the centre of the marriage, although my fieldwork data indicates that there are often unequal relations in terms of power to make decisions about productive resources, and rights and privileges within marriages. In fact, in relation to usage, a man is said to 'pick/take a wife', *di pɔge*, whilst a woman is said to 'go to a husband', *kul serɛ*⁷². While these specific usages of the terms reflect asymmetries, they also appear to signal the fact that the woman is traditionally the one who joins the man in his settlement. Thus, this already discursively signals the making of the woman's outsider position in marriage. In Serekpere and its environs, marriage between first settlers of the community is forbidden. Intra-community marriage is a taboo in Serekpere because two of the sections⁷³, Nagale and Nayiri, are said to have descended from twin brothers, and there is close proximity with Muori and Kyelori, the other two sections. But marriage between members of these four sections and

⁷²See also Hawkins regarding the 'LoDagaa', although I disagree with him that because there is no single word for marriage what existed prior to contact with the outside world was not marriage but rather a conjugal practice.

⁷³ Serekpere is sub-divided into four units.

settlers from the neighbouring communities is permissible. Thus, the widely practised form of marriage is exogamy, namely, marriage outside one's lineage and settlement. I discuss exogamous practices in Serekpere below, but first I wish to consider the purpose of marriage amongst Dagaaba as described to me by my research participants.

The Purpose of Marriage amongst Dagaaba

Procreation and continuation of the family lineage, as well as labour for farm work in the labour-intensive Dagaaba settlements, appear to be the primary purposes and functions of marriage given in everyday discourse. In a conversation, Nombale (c52), observed: 'Dagaaba don't marry because of sex; they marry because of procreation... every man must leave a child and every woman must leave a child [at death]. That is the Dagaaba context of marriage'. Indeed, in everyday conversation it was not uncommon to hear the men justify the need to marry young widows on the basis that they could still bear children. Similarly, women who did not have children or who survived their children were said to be of no use. Children are believed to be a gift from god; consequently, any woman who is not lucky enough to receive this blessing is not able to have any. Duorima (c80), one of my research participants, informed me that she was grateful to god for giving her four children. She added: 'look at Natorma, [also (c80)], did she ever have a child? When her husband died, his brother thought he did not know how to do [copulate] and so he married her. But he also tried in vain'. According to Duorima, a barren woman, is worthless. For her part, Oliviana explained that 'a barren woman may be insulted, but that is god's doing and not her making'. For a barren man, upon his death, the *logi* ritual that arms a man to fight his way into *dapaarewie*, the ancestral world, is not performed. This means that he cannot become an ancestor. Furthermore, in a subsistence agricultural settlement, having children, particularly sons, offers security by way of farm labour during old age. Thus, the importance of having children within Dagaaba marriage and society practically and ideologically cannot be overemphasised.

Furthermore, in labour-intensive agrarian settlements such as Serekpere, where tasks, including farm-related ones, are divided along gender lines, a man is believed to farm effectively only if he is married. Regarding why most men in the community appear to marry early compared with, for instance, urban Ghanaian men, who generally do not marry until they are in their late 20s or 30s, Silvanus (c28), a junior high school graduate who has been married since 2006, explained in a conversation: ‘well, here, as soon as you complete school, your family will advise you to marry and start your own farm so that you can start a family’. What another research participant, Kwesi (c48), with three wives, said, in an attempt to demonstrate that he is a good husband, also evidences this: according to him, he bought all the main ritual items (including goats, fowl and grains) that were required to perform the final funeral rites of the mother of two of his wives (who are sisters). Kwesi told me: ‘but of what use is a woman? As long as they do farm work for you, you have to be good to them’. For Kwesi therefore, the value of a woman is in working, and specifically in labouring on the husband’s farm. The views of both Silvanus and Kwesi underscore the point made here about Dagaaba marriage; it is not only for procreation purpose but also to enable effective farm work by the man.

Indeed, the Dagaare concept of woman, *pɔge*, which I examine in detail in Chapter 6, literally means ‘to cover’, or ‘to cover up’ according to some participants. Nombale explains that ‘the woman in marriage is thus seen as the man’s cover: a shield from shame, danger and difficulties, as well as a helper on the farm’. This view exists in spite of the fact that the woman is thought of as being ‘of no use’ and without value, not only by Kwesi but by many other men, and as a slave and weak. The role of marriage in dividing domestic tasks amongst Dagaaba has been summarised by Gregory Kpiebaya (1991:3), a Dagao Catholic bishop. He writes: ‘[m]arriage to the man in Dagao implies an alliance with a woman so that she can carry out those domestic chores and menial tasks that a man should not do; and for the woman, it is to start her own home... and to have offspring’. Although this has been expressed by Kpiebaya as though something grievous will befall the man *should he do* domestic chores, it does point to the fact that, amongst

Dagaaba, marriage is not primarily for the purpose of regulating ‘sexual activity’ (Outhwaite, 1981:1). Procreation and economic activities seem to be central.

As my discussion so far suggests, marriage is understood by many Dagaaba as the foundation of their social structure. It is a means of sustaining the patrilineage, as well as being an economic structure. Marriage also offers the individual social status and, for women, it affords a legitimate space within which to operate. Women and men who are unable to marry or sustain a marriage are thought of as having bad fate, *dumpulma*, and in most cases, sacrifices are required to appease the gods so as to rid them of it. Addressing the challenges of an unmarried Dagaaba woman, Oliviana (c41), explained that such a woman is often thought of as lacking good character and the patience required for a successful marriage. Her status as an unmarried woman becomes a reference point for any misunderstanding between her and other family or community members; she occupies an ‘unauthorised’ space. She is often asked to marry instead of staying in the natal house and causing trouble. From my analysis in this subsection, the crucial place of marriage in Dagaaba daily life begins to emerge. In the following section, I turn to the practices that form marriage in light of the above considerations.

Customary Marriage Practices

The range of practices performed to constitute a Dagaaba marriage includes the procedure of asking for a woman’s hand in marriage, and all the processes, starting from the introduction of the prospective bride and groom through to the courtship and abduction and the marriage payment and sacrifices that consummate the marriage. Amongst Dagaaba, as in most parts of rural Ghana, customary marriage is the most common type, despite the exposure to Islam and the dominant influence of Christianity. By customary marriage, I refer to a marriage union based on rules and social norms specific to a particular settlement, that of the prospective bride. Although there are differences in customary rules across Dagaaba settlements, customary marriage practices tend to be similar amongst the people of Serekpere and their immediate

neighbours. Furthermore, most women married to Serekpere men come from the neighbouring communities and most of the young women from Serekpere are married to men from the nearby villages. This, my research participants explained, is because prior to increased access to modern means of transport, women were often encouraged to marry near the home settlement so that visits between the two settlements in times of funerals or ailments would be easier. Below, I argue that marriage amongst Dagaaba is a multi-stage process that works performatively to create various identity positions for women.

The Dagaaba marriage process can be divided roughly into three stages: firstly, introduction to the potential bride/groom and their family; secondly, background investigations by the families of both the bride and the groom; and, thirdly, formal courtship leading to *pogbiele* (accompanying the bride to the marital settlement) or abduction⁷⁴. In the case of abduction, there are the new wife celebrations, *pɔge paale die* and *pɔge paale diekpe*. The *pogbiele* and *pɔge paale die* have been stopped by the leaders of the settlement since the 1980s and the early 2000s respectively. Nonetheless, I have chosen to discuss the past practices along with the current ones because, for most of my research participants, marriage was through one or other of the old procedures. Thus, these processes are what have shaped their identities and status.

I now turn to what is involved in the introduction process. A Dagaaba man can get a wife in many different ways⁷⁵. Firstly, it can be done through the betrothal of young women and girls to families for marriage in the future, when they are of an age to create family ties and friendships. A man who visits another settlement and meets the birth of a baby girl or sees a young woman there can register an intention to marry her when she comes of age⁷⁶. This kind of marriage is mostly facilitated by a kin member rather than the

⁷⁴ Although Hawkins refers to betrothal, abduction and courtship as ‘three distinct types of strategies’ for getting a wife, I suggest in this study that these strategies are not distinct, but are part of a process: what I refer to as a multi-stage performative process (Hawkins, 2002:233).

⁷⁵ Customarily, it is the duty of a man and his kinsmen to look for a wife for him.

⁷⁶ This depends on when the girl matures physically.

man himself. Secondly, any woman married to a man in another settlement who visits her natal family and meets the birth of a baby girl there is offered the baby. At maturity, the young woman belongs to her, and she decides whether to give her to her own husband or to another male member of her marital settlement. In the case of betrothal, a girl's identity at a tender age may already be associated with her prospective affinal family/settlement. In the past, such a girl had a limited say when she grew up since her marital path had been agreed upon even before she had become aware of her environment. One of my participants, Esi (c29), had run away after a year from a forced marriage formed on the basis of this arrangement before marrying a man from Serekpere.

A third way a marriage (process) may be initiated is a situation in which married women facilitate marriages between their husbands/kin and young woman from their kin groups. The woman who facilitates this form of marriage is like an ambassador, and is known as the *dendeo*⁷⁷. Her task is to get as many women as possible from her natal settlement to marry into her marital settlement so as to build support for herself in case of bereavement or other misfortune. Canvassing this support is particularly important because, amongst Dagaaba, women from one community married into to another—known as *pɔɔya-taaba*—are a woman's pillars of support, in terms of sustaining her emotionally by keeping her company and preparing food for her guests during bereavement. Fourthly, a prospective husband may initiate a relationship with a woman whilst attending a funeral or visiting a market in another village. At funeral grounds, some men, but also women, dance to attract the attention of the opposite sex. This becomes a way of initiating a conversation with the woman before his kin group gets involved in the marriage procedures, which I discuss shortly. A more common way of marriage I observed in Serekpere is when a married woman brings a young

⁷⁷ The *dendeo*'s role is twofold: any woman married into another village and who facilitates a marriage between her husband or any other man and a girl from her natal settlement, is the girl's *dendeo*. Also, a man from a woman's husband's village, normally one whose mother or other relation is from a particular settlement, and who acts as a liaison between the two marriage parties—the woman's and the man's families—is also a *dendeo*. The male *dendeo* plays a very important role in settling disputes in the marriage and in funeral rituals when the woman or her husband dies.

girl (a sister or a cousin) into the community to assist with house and farm-related work. In most cases, upon the girl's maturity the female relative gives her to her own husband or her brother-in-law to marry. In this way, the female relation can inform her kinsmen before the man's family makes a formal visit to the girl's settlement (see also Kpiebaya, 1991). If all the parties involved agree, the girl goes back to her natal settlement before the prospective husband's kin group initiates the formal process. The list of marriage arrangement practices discussed here is not exhaustive, but most of my study participants got married through these processes. Since the early 2000s however, most of the young men have looked for wives for themselves⁷⁸, by bringing women they meet at the market or at funeral grounds in another settlement home as wives. The steps taken to consummate the marriage are still followed, but the meticulous background investigations, to which I now turn, are rendered redundant by this shortcut.

Before a man's kin informs a woman's kin of an intention to marry her, traditionally they conduct thorough background investigations. This involves asking women from their settlement who are married into the prospective bride's settlement, or other kin members in her settlement, about the character of the prospective bride—primarily whether she is respectful and hardworking. If they are satisfied with their findings they take the next step, of introducing their intention to the woman's kin group. In turn, from the moment a prospective bride's family is informed of an interest in marrying her, they commence their own investigations. Their interest is in, amongst other things, whether the prospective groom's family is free of certain mental illnesses and curses. They are also interested in whether the family is capable of providing food for their daughter and her future children. Finally, they may also investigate the temperament of the man and of the men in his family—whether they are calm and respectful. This is to ensure that the marital family will not batter the bride often. This background investigation represents the family's way of protecting its female members from risk of harm. If the

⁷⁸My study participants attribute this turn of affairs to the influence of outside cultures and the media.

woman's family are also satisfied with their findings, they accept gifts from the groom's family and formal courtship begins. This, I suggest, is the first stage of the marriage process, that is, the commencement of procedures culminating in marriage. The next is formal courtship.

Customarily, in the early days of courtship amongst Dagaaba, male members of the groom's kin but not the groom himself undertake visits to the prospective bride's settlement. In a similar vein, in the bride's settlement the initial negotiation is with her agnatic kin. Prior to the visits, the groom's family send messages about their intention. The bride or her mother then brews *pito*, which the men will buy when they arrive for her kin members and the women in the family. When the man's kin group is convinced that the woman's family is in support of their proposal, they then inform him about it. At this stage, the prospective groom and his friends make a visit to the prospective bride's settlement to see her (sometimes for the first time). During this visit, the most eloquent of the man's friends talks to the woman, to try to convince her to marry him. This is particularly important because there may be many men from different settlements trying to win a woman for marriage. Also, due to the competition, any party that feels disadvantaged may fight other men physically to prove their masculinity, use *juju* to 'hypnotise' the woman into following them home, or abduct her.

In some instances, all the procedures, including any sacrifices required to free the woman from any *dumpulma* that might prevent conception or sustained marriage, are performed before the prospective bride is accompanied to the marital settlement. It is instructive to observe that the young woman and her mother have a limited say regarding who and when to marry. According to many of my older research participants, in some instances a prospective bride was informed only a day or two before she was taken to her marital family. However, due to the level of reverence most girls had for the male members of their families, they tended to comply. By contrast, a Gonja bride was summoned and asked three times if she wanted to marry a groom before the marriage cola and 12 shillings—acceptance of which legitimates the marriage—were accepted (Goody, 1973). Besides, if her parents arranged the

marriage, a Gonja bride was free to reject it. Thus, we can begin to see the varying degrees of agency in marital choices between the settlements under consideration here. In the following section, I discuss the procedure for the accompaniment or abduction of a bride to the marital settlement.

Accompanying and Abduction

A group of women from the bride's family accompanied her from her natal settlement to that of her husband. Men, usually from the groom's family, who would have come in the morning to hoe for the bride's family in the farm season or to build rooms in the off-farm season, accompanied the group. The men then provided protection for the women as they walked, amidst singing and dancing. The women carried cooking items, normally solicited in the community for the bride earlier on. At the bride's marital settlement, the women would often stay with her for up to three days, to give her moral support as she acclimatised to her new environment. The marital settlement is expected to be the bride's home, and yet she never fully belongs here. According to the participants, the *pogbiele* was practised hand-in-hand with abduction practices, but it faded out in the late 1980s to early 1990s. This was because, according to Erasong (c68), a sectional head, some of the women, who were clearly more experienced than the brides were, advised them to run away if they thought the family was poor. Consequently, the men decided that if the women did not accompany a bride they would not be in a position to advise her to escape. *Pogbiele* thus made way for abduction, which is still practised, though in ways different from in the past.

A man and his friends may abduct a bride, that is, intercept her and take her by force on her way to or from the market, the stream or a funeral. No amount of crying or resistance will save her. Neither can her brothers or cousins, because it is in their own interest not to incur the wrath of the abductors by intervening; otherwise, they may encounter the same kind of resistance if they visit the abductors' settlement for a similar purpose. The violence associated with abduction is not only psychological, with young women tending to live in perpetual fear, not knowing what to expect if they walk alone, it is also

physical. According to my research participants, some of the groom's friends might beat the girl if she resisted fiercely. Daama (c48), a widow, was forcefully and violently taken out of her father's house, and her captors broke the door to the room she lived in, whilst her mother nearly received a slap from them for attempting to prevent her capture.

By contrast, Daama's father appeared unperturbed by the violence of the rowdy abductors. She explains: 'I was crying at the top of my voice and when my mother came out and tried to rescue me, his [the husband's] elder brother raised his hand to hit my mother My father said he was happy to marry me out and if I came back to Daa he would curse me; I had to be [married] because I was not a man to continue to stay in his house'. Daama's experience points to the constraints on women in relation to decisions regarding marriage—women's lack of autonomy and power with respect to who they or their daughters marry, and through which processes—and also to the impermanence of their status as members of the natal family. This is because, according to my participants, although the woman is considered to be the builder of the family, she does not own the children and hence has no control over decisions regarding their lives. In fact, from the perspective of the women I worked with, marriage arrangements for their daughters are sometimes finalised before the mothers are informed. Some mothers are never informed about the plans at all, although they are expected to prepare food for the prospective husbands when they visit⁷⁹. By contrast, amongst Balsa of north-east, mentioned earlier, a young woman's mother is an instrumental figure in the marriage process, and thus a prospective suitor, during the courtship, must ask her permission to marry her daughter, and the marriage negotiations do not commence until the prospective bride and her mother have accepted the suitor's proposal (Wanitzek, 1998). A few of my research participants, however, did report that the male members of their families sought their express consent regarding the marriage arrangements. The new

⁷⁹ This situation was common amongst widows.

bride, violently uprooted from her natal settlement, is then confined to the *pog paala die* (bride's room) in her new settlement⁸⁰.

Pɔge paala die and pɔge paala diepke, new wife's celebration

An abducted bride is first accommodated in the *pog paala die*. This used to be a room in each clan attached to a house designated for this purpose. The bride lived in the room for a period ranging from one to three weeks and, whilst there, was given special treatment. Women from her husband's section contributed clothing in the form of African prints, scarfs and accessories for her to adorn herself with each time she went out, mainly to a *pito* selling house. Thus, each day she was expected to be in her best outfit. Women from her husband's family prepared tasty meals for her whilst she was in the room. The new wife was normally given a guide, *pog paala zen ngorɔ*, a young woman who watched over and followed her everywhere she went, offering her any assistance she needed but, more importantly, preventing her from escaping from the settlement. According to my research participants, new wives who were taken by force often wanted to run away. For some of the new wives, it was fun to attempt to escape or to actually escape back home and for the husband's kinsmen to follow them. According to some participants, they still entertained ideas of escaping after the *pog paala die* but were convinced by either their mother-in-law or other older women in the marital house to stay. Thus, although women may not have much influence in bringing a bride, they play an important role in her staying in or leaving the marriage.

At the end of the bride's stay in the *pɔge paala die*, a celebration was offered to usher her into the husband's family. This was called *pɔge paala diepke*, new wife's home/house entry. The ceremony, open to the public, took place in the groom's house and was often characterised by drinking, feasting, drumming and dancing. The most interesting aspect of the ceremony for this study is the stage at which the bride is taken through a questioning process. I

⁸⁰ Many research participants, however, narrated with nostalgia their experience of the *pog paala die*, saying it was a time to be pampered, and to not work.

focus on this aspect here because the questions asked, only to the bride and not the groom, form part of the making of the identity of the married Dagao woman. Also, these questions appear to demarcate, even before entry into the marital space, the roles expected of her, albeit tacitly. Amongst other things, the bride is asked: will you submit to your husband's authority, will you wash his farm clothing and will you allow him to have sex with you? To all the questions, the woman answers in the affirmative. This is because the bride knows the culturally appropriate answers to give. It may be said that this answering in the affirmative is express acceptance of a relationship of servitude and docility, as the questions appear to hail the woman in marriage into a position of servitude and powerlessness. They may also serve as reference points, with the audience as witnesses in case the woman reneges on her promises. It is interesting to note, however, that views varied regarding how women are expected to relate, and how they actually do relate, to these promises. Some of my research participants, females and males, considered this segment as just part of the entertainment provided during the evening's celebration and that no woman was held accountable on the basis of these responses if she reneged on her supposed duties. Thus, what is promised does not necessarily conform to what happens in practice.

Other participants nonetheless argued that entering into a marriage already puts a woman in a powerless position, since she leaves her father's house for another person's. Thus, she must perform the duties that are normatively assigned to her. For these participants, relocating their place of residence to a husband's settlement and the payment of cowrie shells (discussed below) are the bane of the Dagao woman. These practices, they argue, already place a woman in an oppressed and disadvantaged position relative to the man and his kin. Indeed, Gienema (c38), whose husband had abandoned her in Serekpere for his second wife in Techiman, in the Brong Ahafo Region, informed me that unless a woman is aware of her helpless state and humbles herself, she cannot live with a husband or his family. From this, the role of the marriage practices in constructing a subordinate and apparently powerless position for women begins to emerge. However, I shall return to the contradictions of the

supposed powerlessness of Dagaaba women in marriage and the complex ways in which they exercise power, agency and resistance in Chapters 5 and 7. What I wish to point out here is that each of these stages is a step forward in forming a marriage union.

At the ceremony, the bride chooses *sene*—a male friend—and *kyena*—a female one— normally understood to be ‘respectable’ people, to become her companions. These two companions of the marriage, but particularly the *sene*, becomes the first port of call in the event of any problems between the couple. Thus, although they may not be members of the family, they are actors in the marriage space. Returning to the ceremony, at the end of the feast, the bride is ushered into her husband’s house—her new home; a home she only belongs to partly, because she is an outsider. However, she first stays with her mother-in-law or another older woman in the house, who educates her about the specific rules for women in the family and about sex. This normally takes between a few weeks and a year. In this period, the head of the family also consults the gods and performs any sacrifices required for a peaceful and blessed marriage. When all the rituals have been performed and both the bride and groom have been counselled, *seŋ nuo*, a mat/bed fowl, is killed before the bride joins her husband in his room.

According to the research participants, and borne out by observations during my fieldwork, many young men now meet women at funeral grounds. Some of them, using *juju*, ostensibly buy *pito* for the women and convince or ‘hypnotise’ them to follow them home as wives without any regard for formal courtship or background investigations. Whereas at the point of taking a bride by force some young men’s intentions may be well-meaning, even though the approach is culturally inappropriate (but not unapproved), some of them are thought to use this as a ploy to exploit the young women sexually. For the period of my study in the settlement, four young men brought women into the community as wives. Of these girls, only one stayed until I left the research site. The other three left Serekpere within a month or two of their arrival.

Thus, although the issue of abduction may have receded in recent years, it is nonetheless still being practised. According to most of the elderly participants, the current frequent breakdown of marriages in the community is a result of the lack of due diligence in the marriage process in recent times. The practice of *pog paala die*, the new wife's room, was also stopped in the early 1990s because of issues relating to promiscuous behaviour⁸¹ and economic hardship. A resilient aspect of Dagaaba marriage, even if it has also seen modification in terms of the amount of cowrie shells involved, is the marriage payment, to which I now turn. I discuss the marriage payment because, if a single practice was cited as the source of Dagaaba women's challenges, it was often this payment. According to some research participants, it represents a purchase of the women like 'slaves'.

The Marriage Payment

Jack Goody and Stanley Tambiah (1973) describe bride wealth as that which is passed by the groom's family to the bride's family, as opposed to dowry, which is wealth passed from parents to a daughter or to a daughter and her husband. The former is what exists in Dagaaba communities (see Kpiebaya, 1991; Behrends, 2002). Amongst Dagaaba, *libipele* (cowrie shells), fowl, tobacco and cola nuts are the items that make up the bride wealth. There is no fixed amount offered as bride price—different modalities govern different communities—but in Serekpere and the neighbouring settlements, an average of 1,000 cowries is currently accepted as bride wealth, compared with 20,000 and over in the 1990s and earlier. This reduction aims to make marriage accessible to men in the context of increasing hardship and scarcity of resources due to poor crop yields attributable to the erratic rainfall pattern in recent years. Before the cowries are transferred to the bride's kinsmen, the groom's kin take a sample of them, usually 20, into the *kpeezaga*⁸² and offer sacrifices to the ancestors, dedicating the marriage to them and praying for the

⁸¹ One of my research participants is said to have 'defiled' a fellow kinsman's bride whilst she was still in the room, which sparked agitations that led to the stopping of the practice.

⁸² The *kpeezaga* is a room where corpses are normally laid and sacrifices are offered before the public performance of mourning begins.

protection of and blessings for the bride and groom. This, I suggest, is the penultimate stage in the marriage process.

According to the participants, this sacrifice forbids a woman, once married, from sleeping with another man. It bonds the bride sexually to the groom and, upon his death, she can be inherited by his kinsmen. Any woman who sleeps with a man other than her husband thus becomes guilty of adultery, *saanbo*, literally meaning ‘spoiling’, and thus requires ‘cleansing’. She is cleansed of the ‘contagion’ only if she confesses, otherwise she and/or her husband risks contracting *mooro*, a swelling (of the body) leading to death. Poreku Dery⁸³ refers to this dedication sacrifice as ‘ratification of the slavery of the woman’ (2013:11). Also for him, marriage payment is the source of women’s oppression and enslavement and thus to abolish it would be to give women control over their bodies and lives. Dery contends that free marriage (marrying women without any payment) is the way out of the shackles of bride price. Nevertheless, the issue of bride price occupies a complex and contradictory position amongst Dagaaba. For instance, whilst women easily attribute their vulnerable position to it, of all the women and men I worked with in the community none of them supported the idea of free marriage. This, they argue, is because the payment brings honour and legitimacy to the women and their children. Following the dedication sacrifice, and in the company of the male *dendeo*, marriage liaison, the man’s family carries the cowries to the woman’s kinsmen.

⁸³ The late Peter Cardinal Poreku Dery was a Dagaao priest in the Catholic Church.



Figure 6: Cowrie shells in a sack ready to be taken to Papu for marriage payment

Whilst taking delivery of the payment, male members of the bride's family pay attention to the specific amount brought. This is important because, in case of divorce, they must return the cowries to the man's family. Yet, any children in the marriage belong to the man because they are the products of a legitimate marriage. Indeed, once a woman leaves a marriage and enters into another marriage, she has no relationship with any children from the previous marriage. As such, upon her death, these children have no ritual obligations to her. Within the Dagaaba contexts, funeral rites are arguably the most important social function, attracting relations and loved ones from all over the country. Well-performed funeral rites remain the subject matter of discussion for a long time, whilst ill-performed ones are shamed. Women with no male children frequently worry about who will take the responsibility of providing the items for the rituals, as the case of Kwesi's mother-in-law above

highlights. This, I argue, partly constitutes an impediment to women leaving marriages even in the face of life-threatening violence. One of the cases I analyse in Chapter 7 in relation to the use of songs and bodily acts as subversive strategies is that of Takpoma (c47), a frequently battered wife. Defying all the warnings by both women and men that her acts could get her into trouble, she sings and dramatises the reason why she is still in the marriage: her children. According to her, she would rather die than leave her children behind.

The marriage payment completes the marriage process. The woman now becomes a legitimate member of the marital family; women whose marriages have not been paid for are not considered properly married (see also Behrends, 2002). Subsequently, control over and protection of the woman is transferred from her agnatic kin to her husband's kin. Indeed, the marriage payment is what gives the groom and his kinsmen customary rights over the bride; the bride and her labour, including reproduction, are all secured by the marriage payment. Thus, the bride has no control over the products of her labour on the farm because they are the proceeds of the man's hoe, *a dɔɔ kunkure boma*. Dagaaba believe that a woman who takes part of the farm produce without her husband's permission risks punishment by the gods. This arrangement, the transfer of control and authority over women, has negative implications for women's agency; women are required to obtain permission from their 'owners' in all instances before taking any major decision or action. Those who do not comply with this normative requirement are thought of as behaving as though they *owned* themselves, submitting to no man's authority. These are the *pog gandaba* (plural for *pog gandao*). Nevertheless, the bride does not belong fully to her new family. This is because she is a family member but from without; her membership is not through blood and descent relations and so her loyalty to the family cannot be trusted since she might one day leave. She is, however, the *des pɔge*, the woman of the house/home; she is in charge of day-to-day management as well as the funeral ritual performances that are done by women in the community.

Both the women and the men I worked with articulated the symbolic gesture of the bride wealth as a token to strengthen the bonds between the two families. In fact, according to most of the men, one can never complete the marriage payment. This is because it is a bargaining process and even when a bride's kinsmen agree to her prospective husband's proposal of the amount of cowries to pay for her, and accept it, they still remind him of the balance. This, according to the research participants, is to emphasise the point that no amount of cowries can buy a bride; she is worth much more than any amount of money. In addition, the symbolic function of the marriage payment abounds in the literature (see Radcliffe-Brown and Forde, 1987; Kpiebaya; 1991). As Kpiebaya (1991:11) observes, the payment is not an 'outright purchase' of the bride, since her family retains the right to take her away from an abusive marriage. In addition to this, the bride does not lose all her rights in her natal settlement because of her transfer to the husband's family; older daughters have ritual roles to play during funeral rites, preparing ritual meals for the children and widows of deceased men and performing the widowhood rituals (see figure 7⁸⁴). Nonetheless, in everyday discourse, it was common to hear women and men say that women are purchased, and thus are comparable to slaves, *yeme*, with limited autonomy. Indeed, for some men, any woman who is not prepared to submit to their authority must leave their house; it is his house, not hers, and so he is in charge. Thus, we can see the role of the marriage payment and of the virilocal residential pattern in creating women's identities and position, and in constraining their autonomy in many respects.

Dagaaba marriage can thus be understood as a developing process rather than as a one-off event (see Radcliffe-Brown and Forde, 1987); it can also be seen as performatively constructed over a period, given the felicitous conditions of shared agreement and transfers (of bride wealth and the bride) between the two families. I argue here that this process fashions out another identity, an

⁸⁴ The first group of women are daughters of Serekpere, who are married into other settlements. They have come to cook the ritual meals for the children and widows of a deceased male member of the settlement. The second group is made up of daughters of Doung, a nearby settlement, who are married into Serekpere. They are cooking the ritual meals for the children of a deceased woman who was from Doung.

ambiguous one with its own dynamics, for Dagaaba women. Reading Claude Levi-Strauss, Butler (1999:50) comments, '[t]he woman in marriage qualifies not as an identity, but only as a relational term that both distinguishes and binds the various clans to a common but internally differentiated patrilineal identity'. In the context of this study, we can see this becoming evident: the bonds between the patri-clans and the making of the woman's ambiguous identity. This identity continues to undergo changes over time, as a young woman becomes a wife and then a grand/mother. However, Dagaaba marriage is not performative in the sense of pronouncements made by a state-sanctioned institution or a minister of god, as in the case of 'I now pronounce you husband and wife', John Austin's (1975) classic example of performatives. It is a multi-stage performance, with each step



Figure 7: Daughters and wives of Serekpere, cooking ritual meals during final funeral rites

advancing the process. Consequently, any scholarship that sets out to look for events that would publicly pronounce bride and groom as husband and wife for a marriage to be seen as valid might miss the whole concept of marriage, not only amongst Dagaaba but in most parts of northern Ghana. Thus, it is not

surprising that, regarding Balsa, Wanitzek (1998:135) claims that '[i]t is not possible to identify any one of these steps as the decisive event in the formation of marriage'. Suffice it to say that Balsa themselves know when a marriage is valid. This is when the *akaayai/akayale*, which is customarily 4 pesewa (less than £0.01), is paid to the bride's family. Wanitzek does underscore the importance of this payment, but she does not acknowledge that it is what establishes a Balsa marriage. Wanitzek continues: [r]ituals, presents, visits, etc. lead to a union which in the course of the process develops into something considered a marital union' (1998:136). From this quote, Wanitzek's biases as an outsider are clear: Balsa marriage is not formed like a Western one. In a similar vein, Hawkins contends of 'LoDagaa' that 'conjugal relations were far from being a cumulative process. On the contrary, they were characterized by a noncumulative cycle of negotiations'. For him, the '[n]egotiations obscured any process and perpetuated considerable uncertainty' (2002:241). The broader issue here, I suggest, is how some Western researchers have re/presented the people they study, measuring these northern Ghanaian practices by their own western-centric notions of marriage. Regarding the perspectives of both Wanitzek and Hawkins, I propose that an outsider who does not pay attention to the complex processes leading to the marriage payment and beyond might miss what makes the marriage valid. As such, what they describe as distinct practices are, I suggest, a cumulative process.

Marriage amongst Dagaaba therefore, I propose, is constituted by several processes and practices, with each successful step contributing towards an end: the moment a marriage is legitimated. To theorise marriage as a multi-stage performative process rather than as a singular event is to take into consideration the complexities and the series of discursive practices that are involved in constructing it in this Dagaaba context. Furthermore, as I have discussed above, the practices and processes that form a marriage have implications for gender relations and identities, and for agentic and resistance practices in marriage. In other words, Dagaaba marriage practices, the

payment of cowrie shells and the patrilocal⁸⁵ residential patterns play crucial roles in facilitating the formation of a privileged position for men as ‘true’ members of the settlement (as one research participant put it) and of ambiguous identities for women. These arrangements also combine with other factors, including relations amongst the actors within the marriage space, to engender violence and, as discussion here intimates, a seemingly powerless position for women. I now turn to the final part of this chapter on ‘the marriage space’: the space within which the complex relations of power occur.

The Performative Constitution of the ‘Marriage Space’

The unfolding issues of violence associated with exogamous marriage and the influence of male and perceived ancestral power, the making of women’s ambiguous identities and status in marriage, and the constraints on agentic practices all occur within what I call the ‘marriage space’. Space is understood here as both socially constructed, and as a physical entity; it is intrinsically intertwined with forms of sociality and with relationships⁸⁶ (Lefebvre, 1991). I choose to focus here on this nexus of relationality instead of only on the married couple in order to draw attention to the multiplicity of actors and dynamics that shape and inform relations in Dagaaba marriage, and the meaning of that space to the actors. Within the marriage space, women (who are themselves differently positioned) appear consistently disadvantaged.

Space is often described in the literature as abstract and detached from everyday life, but comes to have meaning when transformed into place. According to Kent Ryden (1993:37), ‘[s]pace is geography viewed from a distance, coolly pondered and figured out, calmly waiting to have meaning assigned to it’. Space thus ‘becomes place’ ‘when it acquires depth’ (1993:38), he contends. In this thesis however, I find useful Henri Lefebvre’s

⁸⁵ A situation in which a woman leaves her natal settlement to live with her husband in either the man’s settlement or another space provided by him.

⁸⁶ See Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1992) and Tim Cresswell (2009).

conceptualisation of space as not just a ‘passive locus of social relations’ (1991:11), but also as socially produced⁸⁷. In other words, space is not perceived as a mute area or a repository; it is seen as discursively constructed and permeated by the networks of social relations that constitute it. According to Lefebvre, the social space is made up of ‘*the social relations of reproduction*’, and this refers to the ‘bio-physiological relations between the sexes and between age groups, along with the specific organization of the family’. In addition, socially produced space is comprised of ‘*the relations of production*’, which include the ‘division of labour and its organization in the form of hierarchical social function’ (1991:32 original emphasis). Lefebvre’s theorisation of space resonates strongly with my understanding of the marriage space inasmuch as the latter encapsulates nested webs of relations and a sex- and age-based distribution of tasks within the home and the family.

More generally, in this study I am interested in the relations and the roles within the marriage space and in how they are distributed, as well as the interactions amongst the various multiple actors (including other supposedly paranormal ‘actors’) within the marriage space and the way in which these affect the marriage itself. I draw on space and then connect it to marriage—not only a union of the couple in question, but a multiply interconnected set of relationships of all the actors in the physical space of the household and beyond—in the phrase ‘the marriage space’. The concept of the marriage space, however, departs from Lefebvre in the sense that its focus is specifically marital rather than on family relations more widely. This understanding of space is crucial for making sense of the marriage setting and the practices and the relations within it.

Drawing on notions of space as socially produced—and taking inspiration from Butler’s (1990, 1993a) theory of performativity as the repetitive power of discourse to create that which it names—I argue that the marriage space is a performative construct, produced over time by the ritualised re-iteration of

⁸⁷ See also Yi-Fu Tuan (1979), John Agnew (1987) and Cresswell, 2004 (2009).

several discursive practices and processes by many actors. The marriage space does not exist prior to the practices and processes that constitute it. Thus, the marriage space and an individual's experience of it, and within it, are not stable or fixed; they are constantly shifting and being renegotiated. Framing the marriage space as performative permits me to draw attention to how the socially constructed notion of space helps us understand Dagaaba marriage relations, gendered power and the making of women's ambiguous identities within marriage. The experiences of the actors within the marriage space differ, for both women and men, depending on myriad factors, including age, dis/ability and economic standing.

I examine my notion of the marriage space in relation to the normative and actual roles of the actors within it. First of all, the marriage space refers to the home, the physical space of the household. The physical space is important because it is within this that the marriage relations are re/produced. Secondly, it refers to the multifaceted networks of marital and social relations acted out within that setting and finally, the actors (that exceed a simple married 'couple') involved in constituting a Dagaao marriage, and in sustaining or constraining it. In order to develop a better understanding of the nested webs of relations and the performative workings of power within marriage, I argue that it is productive to analyse the dynamics, practices and division of labour through the concept of the marriage space. The webs of relations constituting the marriage space include all the actors, such as a woman in marriage, her husband, co-wives, parents-in-law, sisters and brothers-in-law and all the children within the marriage, in addition to the husband's uncles and aunts and cousins. These actors, and a woman's relationships with them, are crucial to the success or otherwise of a marriage.

Also within this space and actively involved in each marriage union are other entities perceived to be paranormal—the gods/ancestors—and witches and *juju* holders. By analysing the dynamics and the actors within this space, I intend to uncover the performative relations of power in Dagaaba marriage

practices. All actors within this space exercise power in multidimensional ways, and I return to this shortly. It is within this space, particularly, but also outside of it, at funeral grounds, that power relations—agency, violence and resistance—are all reproduced. The actors and their roles in consolidating and/or straining the marriage relation will emerge here.

I now turn my attention to the actors within the marriage space and their roles. The range of actors under consideration here includes the overall head of the family or clan; the mother and father-in-law; the husband and wife or wives; brothers and sisters and cousins of the husband; uncles and aunts of the husband; co-wives; and children and step-children. In relation to these actors, and also to distant relatives, a Dagao woman in marriage is a wife and thus has uxorial duties towards them; these are not sexual though. The duties include cooking and washing for, especially, the male members. The actors' sense of attachment to the physical space differs depending on whether the occupation is a transitory one, as in the case of daughters, and to some extent wives, or permanent, as in the case of the male members. In a similar vein, the sense of belonging to this space can be said to vary amongst these actors: there are the legitimate and the illegitimate occupants, those 'in place' and those 'out of place' (Cresswell, 2009:5). The men, and to some extent wives, are perceived as belonging to that space more than daughters are, because daughters are expected to marry elsewhere. These actors and the network of relations within this space play important roles in a marriage. I now turn to the role of the actors within that space and how they engender marital violence.

Head of family/clan

At the apex of the relational structure in the marriage space is the head of the family, who is in charge of the wellbeing of his immediate family. However, above him is the head of the clan, normally the oldest man in the particular clan of the community. He oversees all issues within his section, including arbitrating on allegations of bewitchment, consulting the gods and performing

any general sacrifices believed to be required for good health. In addition, he liaises with other heads of clans to take decisions regarding performing sacrifices at the community's shrines (which are small groves thought to house some of the gods of the settlement, Dakubo⁸⁸ and the farm gods). His role in individual marriages, except those of his immediate family, is minimal; he is expected to intervene if the head of the family fails to resolve marital disputes. Since seniority is much revered amongst Dagaaba, age is an important factor in who heads the family, but it also depends on who is next in the line of succession. The head of the family is the custodian of the cowries brought as marriage payments for brides in the family and he is in charge of the family resources, including cattle, sheep and goats. His responsibility is to find wives for men in the family who are without wives, drawing on the resources. During an informal conversation in the settlement's market place, men who had just returned from paying bride wealth in Papu revealed to me that any head of family who sells the cowries for personal use risks dying within a week. According to Erasong, a sectional leader, a man who wants to spend the marriage payment has to use part of the proceeds to buy fowl and to offer sacrifice to the gods. In this way, the gods appear complicit in or are forgiving of this unapproved use of the payment.

The head of the family is also in charge of resolving any issues between the married couple, including calling to order a man who does not live up to the expectation of providing food for, or sleeping with, a particular wife. He also performs sacrifices on the farm at the start of the planting season to pray for the ancestors' protection from evil, snakebites and accidents, and to ask for good yields. At the end of the farm season, he offers thanksgiving sacrifices to the gods for their protection throughout the season. According to my research participants, these sacrifices are what bring punishment to any woman who takes farm produce without permission from her husband or head of family. If a man's father is dead and there is no immediate uncle, he

⁸⁸ The most powerful god of Serekpere, Dakubo, is located outside the settlement, in the fields. Dakubo is the overall arbiter in disputes and allegations regarding witchcraft and in theft cases.

becomes the head of his family. In this case, he is in charge of all the sacrifices required and the decisions within the house, including appropriating the farm resources. This involves sharing the grain amongst the women and deciding on the sale of the produce. On sharing the farm produce, some of my female participants explained that the men normally favour their second or last wife, by giving them more food and paying little or no attention to the first wife, even though she might have also worked on the farm. There are a few key points we can take from these arrangements in regards to the marriage space. First of all, discussion here points to the responsibility of the male head of the family in forming a marriage union; he is the ultimate manager of the marriage space. He is expected to be a selfless leader, who takes decisions in the interest of his followers. Within that space, the other actors' relationship to him is one of reverence for his authority and 'wisdom'. Secondly, the role of the supposed power of the gods in structuring daily and ritual life amongst Dagaaba is emerging.

Waning influence of the head of the family

According to some of my research participants, in the past the head of the family was highly regarded and respected. Consequently, any stubborn man he called to order listened to him and marriages rarely went sour. This is because most of the men were also scared that the head might use *juju* to harm them if they disobeyed. However, if all his efforts to resolve marital problems failed, he took over the responsibility of providing food and shelter for the neglected women. Thus, there was rarely any need to involve state legal agencies like the police or the then social welfare department in marital conflicts. It is within this context that a woman, abused within the marriage space, is expected to show the family structures respect by not going 'public'. Yet, according to most of the women I worked with, the current generation of family heads is no better than the young men in the way they treat women. As a result, the women feel they cannot rely on them for fair arbitration of marital disputes. In fact, some of the vignettes I analyse in this study, which have been extracted from conversations with the male leaders of the settlement, evidence this, in the way in which their views suggest the

normalisation of marital violence (see Chapter 5 especially). In addition, some of the family heads have taken to excessive alcoholism, thus losing the respect that past ones commanded.

For their part, the young men of today hardly pay attention to the ‘wise’ counsel of the elders. For instance, one of the community members, Azingsung (c29), beat his wife until she passed out. A co-wife of Azingsung’s mother informed me in a conversation that when his mother went to stop the fight, he threatened to slash her with the machete he had used to inflict wounds on his wife if she did not leave the scene. When, as custom demands, the *dendeo* went to warn him against it, Azingsung threatened to slash his throat if he did not leave his house. Despite the lack of regard by abusive men—not only Azingsung—for the procedures laid down for resolving marital violence, the women are still expected to adhere to the now dysfunctional family institutions. The consequence of this is that any woman who defies the norm by speaking up attracts stigmatisation as *pog gandao* or ‘witch’ for exposing the family to potential harm from evil people instead of protecting or covering the family up, as the notion of *poge* suggests. This stigmatisation in turn, it is believed, exposes the woman to harm from mystical forces. The role of the father-in-law in the everyday life of the women I worked with is minimal, as they do not have much to do with him. This minimal level of interaction occurs because they are expected to respect him—only taking orders from him. In contrast, a Dagao woman in marriage interacts constantly with her mother-in-law and co-wives, an element of the marriage space to which I now turn my attention.

Mother-in-law, daughter(s)-in-law and co-wives relations

In a contemporary Serekpere household, the mother-in-law, *deema*, literally meaning ‘mother of the house’, and the daughter-in-law, *deepoge*, ‘woman of the house’, perform home management tasks. Customarily, the *deema* is the overall manager of the home. If she is physically active, she goes to the farm

together with her daughters-in-law to sow seeds and harvest the crops⁸⁹. She may assist her daughters-in-law in conveying the produce home, manually. In addition, she may burn charcoal and/or harvest wild vegetables for sale to generate a personal income in the off-farm season, or sow a small personal rice field in the farm season. The *deema* is in charge of selling the family farm produce, though she is accountable to the male head of the family, even if he is her son. Within the household, her role includes appropriating proceeds from *pito*, mostly brewed by her daughter(s)-in-law. In turn, it is her responsibility to provide money to purchase soup ingredients. The daughter-in-law, the *deεpoge*, just like her mother-in-law, takes part in the farm work and in carting the produce home. She is in charge of processing the farm produce for storage. The daughter-in-law is also in charge of preparing *zɔnkoɔ*, which is the name given to the main meal that is taken to the farm to feed the workers because most of the farms are far from the settlement and thus not near to sources of food. According to my research participants, both women and men, any woman who delays with the *zɔnkoɔ* may be beaten on the farm and observers will understand why this is happening. During my fieldwork, it was common for women to say they were running late with the *zɔnkoɔ* and were at risk of being beaten on the farm, or to caution other women that any delay could elicit such a beating.

Within the household, it is the woman's duty to fetch water from the community's boreholes and streams for domestic use. She is in charge of cooking for the entire family, and of serving the male members and her mother-in-law. She is also in charge of cleaning the house and washing for her husband and his parents and brothers. Whilst childcare is the collective responsibility of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, in the evening, when the latter returns from the farm with other members of the family, she is in charge of warming water for everyone to bathe. She also prepares the evening meal. One of my research participants, Daama, explaining how good she was to her mother-in-law, who she once caught gossiping about her with her junior co-

⁸⁹ Mothers-in-law who are not strong enough stay at home looking after young children whilst their daughters-in-law go to farm.

wife, said: ‘... I asked her how I was maltreating her, because when I married into this family, I used to put water in the bathroom for you to bathe and prepare food and serve it to you to eat. I have never looked for you to cook or sweep the compound ...’. Daama here sums up the duty of a daughter-in-law to a mother-in-law, but, as the mother-in-law has formed an alliance with the junior co-wife, Maria, she now cooks. Daama continues: ‘but now she does all these things; at the moment where is she [Maria]? Since the farm season started, she [the mother-in-law] has been preparing *zɔnkoɔ*’. Both women, now widowed, have to fend for themselves. As a result, Maria, Daama’s co-wife, had left for the south to look for menial work to earn an income to support herself and her children. In these quotes, both a daughter-in-law who carries out her duties to her mother-in-law (in Daama’s case) and one who does not, an absentee daughter-in-law (in the case of Maria), can be seen. The specific forms of violence within these relationships and between the women (which I examine in the next chapter) are related to resource use, and depend on who wields power. According to my research participants, some mothers-in-law are supportive, helping with the daughters-in-law’s ‘double day’ schedule, and encouraging them to stay in the marriage in the midst of spousal violence. In contrast, others stoke the fire to engender violence against her, leading to her ill-treatment, including being beaten by her husband.

Also, within the marriage space, are a woman’s husband’s unmarried sisters, nieces and cousins. Customarily, the sisters-in-law are to be treated like the woman’s husband. As a result, the woman is expected to perform wifely duties for them, such as fetching water for their use and cooking. Within Dagaaba culture, where unmarried women are not accorded much regard and have no place in the natal family, this category of actors has limited agency in most cases within the marriage space. Nonetheless, they sometimes provoke or even beat the woman in marriage. Although all of the women I worked with have felt out of place at one time or another, it does seem that women are at much more of a disadvantage in their natal families than in marriage. Thus, it is not surprising that women prefer to live in the marital settlement in the face of challenges, rather than return to their natal settlement. In all the

relations, however, the woman in marriage is the outsider, as all of the other players have blood relationships.

Having said this, it may not be appropriate, not only of Dagaaba, but of any ethnic group in northern Ghana, to suggest that the woman in marriage ‘... remains all her life as mobile as everything in the house which is not dug into the earth’, as Barbara Hagaman wrote of the so-called ‘LoBirifor’ (1977:137 quoted in Hawkins, 2002). In relation to unmarried women within that space, a married woman has more power and legitimacy: the marriage space is hers; she is the woman of the house. Thus, I suggest that three layers of belonging can be discerned from the case of the Dagaaba I lived with. The first layer of belonging coincides with living within the marriage space. Thus, the men and women, both wives and daughters, all belong in this space. At a second level is belonging to this space on the basis of blood ties, with the men and the unmarried women in the natal family claiming legitimacy and sense of belonging within the marriage space. In this regard, sometimes daughters are entrusted with family secrets that wives are not privy to. This is because the loyalty of wives cannot be guaranteed, as their ties with the family may be severed if the marriage ends. The final level of belonging to emerge from my analysis here, I suggest, is belonging by blood ties and by being male. This category of belonging appears to be the ultimate one, imbued with all the rights and privileges—to property and leadership—to live within the space eternally, and, to an extent, to determine who qualifies to also occupy that space. Following from the above, belonging in Dagaaba settings can be understood as forming a range, with some occupants (namely men) at the core and in charge of the space, and others (married women) on a kind of borderline, whilst some others (daughters) occupy the margins of the marriage space, with much more limited autonomy.

In this subsection I have examined the concept of the marriage space. The marriage space refers to the setting where the marriage relations are performed, the locale, as well as a complex network of marital relations performed within that setting. I have argued that the network of actors and the

roles they perform within this space are crucial to consolidating and/or straining the marriage relation. Also, the marriage space and the performance within it are crucial to the constructions of gender identities. That is to say that the performance of reproductive roles, including home management and farm-related activities, and a woman's relations with the other actors in 'the marriage space' are central to constructing her identities in marriage. In other words, whether the woman in marriage is perceived as 'a woman', *poge* or 'an ideal woman', *pogminga*, or stigmatised as 'more than a man' *pog gandao*, depends on the performance of the roles discussed above. The women who perform these roles according to the normative expectations and thus consolidate the norms, are rewarded with such designations as *poge* or *pogminga*, whilst those who subvert these norms by performing the roles differently or interrogating the power structures are stigmatised as *pog gandaba*. I examine the ways in which gender identities are constituted amongst Dagaaba more closely in Chapter 6, focusing on the aforementioned roles and concepts of the un/feminine.

Conclusions

The significance of Dagaaba marriage and the practices and processes involved in forming it have been examined in this chapter. I have also discussed my concept of 'the marriage space', which refers to the multi-faceted networks of relations, in addition to the physical space of the home, that constitute and constrain marital practices. Discussion here shows the formation of a Dagaaba marriage. It is a multi-stage performative process, sometimes lasting for up to a year, and it involves many actors and procedures, unlike a Western civil marriage. This process, I have argued, is central to the constitution of women's identities in Dagaaba societies. In addition, exogamous and patrilineal arrangements require that women relocate to their husbands' settlements upon marriage, and this has implications for women's status in both natal and marital families: they are soon-to-leave members of the former and, yet, never fully belong to the latter.

Thus, the first issue emerging here is how exogamous practices and patrilineality work to construct ambiguous identity positions for women.

Furthermore, in both natal and marital families, women are under the control and protection of male members. Consequently, women's ability to exercise agency is constrained from the start by male power. The dominant presence of male power in the marriage space has implications for decision-making regarding farm produce and inheritance. Although both women and men tend the farms, the produce belongs to the men, and thus, any woman who takes a portion without the permission of either her husband or the head of her marital family runs the risk of attracting mystical punishment. Thus, the perceived power of the gods in inflicting violence and restricting women's actions, to which I return in more detail in the next chapter, is also emerging from my analysis in this chapter. The constraints imposed on women by the exogamous marriage set-up can be better appreciated if we consider that both the women and the men I worked with thought that within the current marriage practices, with men paying bride wealth for women, and women leaving their natal settlement and its support and joining the husbands', there can be no equal power relations. Finally, discussions in this chapter reveal a less commonly discussed form of violence: violence inflicted by women on women. From my analysis above, it may seem that there is no opportunity for the exercise of agency and of resistance to gendered violence amongst Dagaaba. Nonetheless, in the following three chapters, in which I analyse the issues emerging from this chapter, I demonstrate how despite this, Dagaaba women can and do exercise power, agency and resistance in complex ways.

Chapter 5. Performing Power in Marriage

Both the violence associated with exogamous marriage and the mystical consequences for Dagaaba subjectivities considered as non-conforming to societal norms occur within multiply interrelated sets of power relations. These include, 1) the mystical power of the gods/ancestors; 2) witches and *juju* holders and 3) male, and to some extent female, power. In this chapter, I analyse how these forms of power work within ‘the marriage space’ at three levels⁹⁰. Firstly, I consider how the actors within that space—male, female and paranormal—deploy power to exercise violence against women; secondly, I analyse the various power forms that constrain women’s agentic practices; and, finally, I turn my attention to how women’s agency is performed in complex ways within the context of violence and power. It is the pervasiveness of power in its various forms in the marriage relationship that gives rise to the themes under consideration in this chapter and, more generally, in this thesis.

Gendered and Mystical Power

In Chapter 2, I examined contemporary notions of power as productive, drawing primarily on the works of Michel Foucault (1978, 1980) and Judith Butler (1997a). To briefly recap, Foucault challenges received notions of power as negative, in terms of repressing and prohibiting individuals’ acts and autonomy. Instead, he adopts a poststructuralist approach to understanding power, by theorising it as contingent upon social interactions and thus inherently unstable. According to him, if all power did was to repress less powerful subjects, no one would take it seriously (1978, 1980). For Foucault, ‘[p]ower is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations’ (1978:94). In this sense, power dynamics are much more complex. Following Foucault, Butler (1997a) also theorises power as performative, that is, produced through

⁹⁰ ‘The marriage space’, discussed in Chapter 4, is my designation for the nested webs of relations involved in a marriage within Dagaaba settlements.

discursive processes. According to these theorists, power circulates through networks, rather than being concentrated in one point. These notions of power, and the way in which agency and resistance are imbricated in it, have profound resonance with the forms of power and the diffuse and complex forms of agency and resistance I analyse in this chapter.

Whilst juridical and state institutional forms of power are not the main focus here, they help us to understand the workings of power in a new light, one that challenges normative understandings. In relation to the formation of the subject, Butler (1997a, 2011) has noted that power is the condition for the very existence of the gendered subject, that is to say, it produces and sustains the subject. In this case, it makes sense not to see power as an external force that acts on the subject but rather as articulated in the process of interaction. Also, if agency is internal rather than external to power, power, agency and the subject are intricately linked. Thus, it is useful to argue that power cannot be said to exist outside the subject it forms or the agency it authorises. Bringing the notion of power and agency as performatively constituted to this study then, it can be useful to think of power as not merely concentrated in or exercised by the male-centric institutions in order to repress and dominate women in marriage. Power pervades the network of relations that constitute the marriage space, and is exercised by all the actors within it. As I show below, amidst the constraints that weigh heavily on the women, in addition to their appeal to a lack of power, they do exercise agency and power—even if it is not coterminous with male power—in complex ways.

Besides these physical forms of power, crucial to my ethnography is the perceived existence of supernatural forces, which include the power of the gods/ancestors, witchcraft, and *juju*—magic. These paranormal entities are perceived to be transcendental and are at work in the daily life of Dagaaba. In the context of Dagaaba, these mystical power forms, to a large extent, are perceived as epistemological and ontological truths. This may not be comfortable for a non-Dagaaba, and indeed non-Ghanaian audience, but which within a Dagaaba worldview are matter of fact elements of everyday

life. In this sense, to theorise power in Dagaaba contexts as productive is to argue that power may be exercised by both the wo/men and the gods partly due to resistance (which is itself deployment of power), for instance, by rebelling against the gods in the case of mystical powers or undermining male authority in marital violence. Yet, the men and the ancestors appear to occupy a privileged position and hold sway over women even prior to entry into the interactional process that engenders power⁹¹. By this I am referring to, firstly, the difficulty of humans exercising power over paranormal entities, because such acts—rebellion for instance—can only invite punishment for the mortals. In other words, comportment in Dagaaba settings is scrutinised by mystical beings and untoward behaviour may be punished by illness or death. Secondly, I have in mind the exercise of power that is unprovoked by resistance, that is, power exercised to reinforce authority even in the apparent absence of threats to such authority. Consider the case of a daughter-in-law who deliberately starves a mother-in-law because she has power and control over productive resources (and I return to this in more detail shortly), or the exercise of male power in which a perceived witch is lynched during her trial even as she confesses her baleful deeds. Related to this, Foucault (1982) contends that we can only construe a power relationship as such if the person acted upon reacts in a way that brings about transformation. But if agentic practice by the subordinate in power relations is the condition for a power relationship to be recognised as such, I suggest that many power relations in the context of this study will go unrecognised. The peculiar situation of this study thus means that combining Foucault and Butler's notions of power as fluid with conventional and transcendental notions of power as an abstract force is useful in understanding the specific form of gendered and supernatural power relations I discuss here.

In line with these framing themes, the chapter is organised into three sections. The first part discusses violence within Dagaaba marriage, paying particular attention to violence amongst women and violence understood to be exacted

⁹¹ I can see that this view may pose a problem, in that it attributes agency to actors prior to their entry into discourse but, as I argued in Chapter 4, some players within the marriage space are more advantaged than others.

by mystical forces. The second section examines the power forms that are the driving force behind violence against women. I did not anticipate from the start that discourses on the mystical world of Dagaaba would become central to this study, but no sooner had I started my fieldwork than the reality dawned on me, that the complex ways in which women exercise agency and resistance amongst Dagaaba could be effectively understood only if the mystical context within which they live was taken into consideration, so pervasive is it in daily life. In the final section, I develop an account of agency in Dagaaba marriage based on the complex ways in which this was exercised amongst the women I worked with. Analysis in this chapter is informed by theories of power, violence, witchcraft and agency. On violence, I draw on Emerson Dobash and Russell Dobash (1979), Michael Johnson (1995, 2008) and discourses on gender-based violence in Ghana. In relation to a better understanding of the mystical powers, I rely on anthropological works, including Edward Evans-Pritchard's ([1932]1976) classic work amongst Azande of south Sudan and those of Peter Geschiere (1997, 2013) in Makaland of south-east Cameroon. On agency, I draw on contemporary discourses on the subject matter in the global South, including the works of Lila Abu-Lughod (1990), Saba Mahmood (2005) and Sumi Madhok (2013), all of whom are anthropologists based in North America or Europe who write about the global South. Discussion here draws attention to woman-to-woman violence, but also to the need to pay attention to a broader scope of actors in theorising marital violence beyond the spouses. The point I seek to make here is that woman-to-woman violence can be as deleterious as male spousal violence—if not more so—and yet it has not received adequate attention in studies on marital violence in Ghana. Given my discussion of the marriage space however in Chapter 4, and the range of actors involved, I am able to open the frame beyond 'the couple'. Furthermore, analysis will show that although mystical forces are one of the key factors that combine with male power to regulate women's exercise of agency, the role of the supernatural in discussions of power, women's subordination and agency has rarely received academic attention.

Violence in Exogamous Marriage

[...] let's say I want to marry her and she refuses and yet she is flirting outside, it is proper that I force myself on her. If I did that, would she flirt again?... once you sleep with her, that is it; if she goes to another man you would charge him *ayifiere*⁹² to purify her otherwise she would get *mooro*⁹³... she wouldn't dare, if I went to the court I would say it is true, she is my late brother's wife and yes, I raped her. Now, you give me back my bride price and let her not step foot in my house. You know, there are other women roaming about, have I raped any of them [laughs]? (Kabayo, c74)

This opinion was expressed by a community leader in a conversation with me in relation to forced widowhood marriage—marrying a widow by forcibly sleeping with her. In this quote, Kabayo expresses the idea of possession, that a man is in charge of his late brother's widow and thus can trespass her body without sanctions, because any legal sanction would attract a counter sanction in the form of dismissal from the marital home. If a remarried widow seeks sexual pleasures elsewhere, she risks being punished by the gods in the form of attracting *mooro*. Thus the combined effect of male power and the supposed power of the gods can be seen to be at work—exercising control over women. The significance of this view is further appreciated if we consider that the speaker, Kabayo, is a leader—a *tendaana*—customarily in charge of the community and charged with protecting both women and men. From this viewpoint it may be difficult for the women to count on him for support in the case of forced widowhood marriage. I have chosen to begin this section with this quote to signal the combined role of male power and the virilocal residential pattern in engendering violence against women. Secondly, I seek to draw attention to the supernatural dimension of marital violence and the apparent conspiracy by men and gods against women in the form of *mooro*, in order to demonstrate the complexity of the issue of violence and power within Dagaaba marriage.

⁹² Money required for adultery purification rites.

⁹³ A perceived mystical sickness linked to adultery.

Theorising violence in marriage

Globally, studies on violence against women in various forms, including intimate partner abuse and wife/partner battering, have abounded since an upsurge in interest in the topic in the 1970s. Within the home, the discourses have often focused on intimate partner relationships such as marriage and cohabitation⁹⁴. As a result of this focus, theorising has often concentrated on the couple, eliding the network of relations that engender violence against women in marriage, particularly in contexts like Serekpere where complex webs of relations characterise marriage. Straus and Gelles have written extensively on the issue of partner violence in the USA⁹⁵, and in the UK, a ground-breaking text of its time was Emerson Dobash and Russell Dobash's (1979) *Violence against Wives*. These studies have focused on male-to-female and female-to-male violence reported in national surveys, police reports, shelter/refuge records and the media. For most of them, based as they are on data from the global North, this focus on the marital partners is understandable, since the main actors in a marriage in those societies are the couple.

In Ghana, marital/partner violence has also been widely researched⁹⁶, highlighting the significance and pervasiveness of violence against women in this context. It is estimated that one in three Ghanaian women has suffered some form of physical male violence (Appiah and Cusack, 1999). This could actually be an underestimate given that majority of women do not report their experience of violence, a point I return to shortly. Yet, most of these studies concentrate on husband-to-wife or male partner violence in recognition of the fact that the majority of cases of violence against women involve male partners (Cantalupo et al, 2006). In her study of wife beating, Rosemary Ofei-Aboagye (1994a:925), a Ghanaian woman who studied in Canada, reported that: '[p]eople do not talk about wife beating in Ghana because it seems an

⁹⁴ See Demie Kurz (1989), Johnson (1995, 2008), Tjaden and Thoennes (2000) and Watts and Zimmerman (2002).

⁹⁵ See Gelles (1985, 1997), Gelles and Straus (1986), Straus et al (1980) and Straus and Gelles (1986).

⁹⁶ See Ofei-Aboagye (1994), Coker-Appiah and Cusack (1999), Susanna Osam (2004) and Cantalupo et al, (2006).

acceptable part of the social mores of the community'. She argues that: '[d]omestic violence can no longer be accepted as an occupational hazard of marriage in Ghana. It is time to address and eradicate it' (1994a:937). Nonetheless, domestic violence continues to pervade the Ghanaian society two decades later. Aside from Ofei-Aboagye (1994a; 1994b), many other studies on gender-based violence in Ghana have drawn attention to the horrors of domestic violence, focusing mainly on male spousal violence against women⁹⁷. Amongst these, a comprehensive study, and one that has been instrumental in activities culminating into the passage of the Domestic Violence Act 732 in 2007, is a collection edited by Dorcas Coker-Appiah and Kathy Cusack (1999). The essays in the collection are based on a nationwide survey of various forms of violence—physical, psychological and resource-related—against women and children throughout Ghana. What is disturbing in this report is not only the pervasiveness of male spousal violence but its normalisation by duty bearers such as queen mothers,⁹⁸ educationalists and social workers. Having said this, and despite the scope of their study, Coker-Appiah and Cusack do not pay attention to another prevalent form of violence, namely that which is exercised by women against other women. However, this is an important gap and requires careful attention, particularly in Dagaaba settlements, given that woman-to-woman violence is pervasive and has consequences for women's experience of marriage.

A recent comprehensive study on the problem of domestic violence in Ghana is the report jointly produced by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Ghana Statistical Services (GSS) and associates (2016). This report examines the incidence of, attitudes towards, and consequences of domestic violence in Ghana. It also discusses the effectiveness of the institutional structures such as the Domestic Violence and Victims Support Unit (DOVVSU) of the Ghana

⁹⁷ See Pappoe and Ardayfio-Schandorf (1998), Appiah-Coker (1999), Prah (1999), Ardayfio-Schandorf (2005), Amoakohene (2004), Osam (2004) and Adu-Gyemfi (2014).

⁹⁸ Customarily, queen mothers have been part of traditional political systems in matrilineal societies in Ghana. In those societies, the queen mother, who is in charge of installing the chief, is often the latter's mother, sister or aunt. Aside from advising the chief in consultation with the members of the council of elders, the queen mother has responsibility for the women within her settlement.

Police Service working in the area of violence against women and men. It argues that, in 2015, about 28 per cent of women experienced domestic violence of various sorts in Ghana. Also emerging from this report is the normalisation of violence against women by both women and men. For instance, according to the report, 23.1 per cent of the women interviewed thought wife beating was acceptable whilst 13.8 per cent of the men held this view. This situation leads the authors to project that domestic violence in Ghana may persist as a result of socio-cultural practices that hold women responsible for male violence against them.

In line with national statistics, in the context of the Upper West Region, including in Dagaaba settlements such as Serekpere, male spousal violence against women is pervasive. Representative statistics on the incidence (the number of women abused within a given period) as well as the prevalence (the number of women who have suffered from domestic violence) of domestic violence are unavailable for the region. However, in order to give a sense of the situation of male spousal violence against women, I rely on statistics from DOVVSU of the Ghana Police Service in the Upper West Region (2016). According to the DOVVSU, in 2015, the total number of reported cases of male spousal violence against women was 167. This figure increased to 230 in 2016. It is instructive to note that these figures represent a substantial understatement of the situation of violence against women in the Upper West Region as most instances of violation against women go unreported⁹⁹. Furthermore, not only does male spousal violence against women pervade Dagaaba settlements. In addition to this, there is a toxic combination of socio-cultural factors and exogamous marriage arrangements (whereby women live with men in a dwelling space provided by the men) in a cultural context where widespread beliefs in supposed paranormal consequences have meant that male violence against women is normalised. What is emerging from my discussion here is that the existing discourses on

⁹⁹ For instance, in a study by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Ghana Statistical Services (GSS) and associates (2016), it is estimated that only 35 per cent of the women who experienced violence made attempts to seek for help from an individual or an institution.

spousal violence have tended to focus on male spousal violence against women. The focus on male spousal violence is surely attributable to its pervasiveness as well as to the publicity it attracts in public discourses in Ghana. However, given the multifaceted webs of relations that characterise marriages in Ghanaian societies, this elision risks obscuring an important component of marital violence, namely female-to-female violence. I return to this in more detail later on.

I examine theories of couple violence even as I acknowledge that the contexts of the theories—the USA, the UK and Canada—vary markedly from the rural northern Ghanaian contexts of my study. Notwithstanding this, the accounts provide insights into the nature of intimate partner violence upon which I have built my empirical analysis. But first I wish to define violence against women, and the definition in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is useful in this regard. CEDAW (1992) defines violence against women as ‘any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life’. This definition is attractive because of its open-ended categorisation of the perpetrators of violence against women. In this study, gender-based violence includes violence understood as being exercised by paranormal forces against women.

Two main sociological theories of partner violence have been identified as being the family violence and the feminist perspectives (Straus et al, 1980; Kurz, 1989; Johnson, 1995). According to the family violence perspectives, wife abuse occurs as part of a series of categories of violence, including child abuse and sibling abuse, that happen within the family unit (Straus et al, 1980; Straus and Gelles, 1986). For Straus and Gelles, all family members are potential perpetrators, as well as victims, of violence, that is to say that women are as likely to initiate violence as men and, therefore, there is no

significant gender asymmetry regarding perpetrators and sufferers of violence (Straus et al, 1980; Johnson, 1995). But the feminist perspectives disagree with this view. The proponents contend that gendered inequalities and power relations between women and men are at the core of spousal violence (Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Kurz, 1989). Thus, women bear the brunt of partner violence. For advocates of this approach, male violence towards women is one means of exercising control over women (Kurz, 1989; Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Johnson, 1995), and they fear that claims such as gender neutrality in spousal violence will serve to limit the possibility of ending violence against women. Within this tradition, the Power and Control Wheel developed by Ellen Pence and Michael Paymar (1993, cited in Johnson, 1995, 2008) provides a graphic representation of the strategies a violent male partner may deploy to exercise control over a female one. The perpetrator employs various forms of abuse, such as denying women access to productive resources, threatening to take their children away and humiliating them. Although the main focus of my analysis here is not male perpetrators, the exemplars I discuss have some resonance with this approach.

The polarisation (on the one hand, males as the prime perpetrators of spousal violence and, on the other, both women and men as equal abusers) that has characterised the feminist and family violence traditions may be needless. Michael Johnson (1995, 2008) draws our attention to the fact that these theorists are engaging two ostensibly non-overlapping issues. Johnson proposes that instead of researchers from the two traditions reading the other as having misunderstood the issues and the perpetrators of domestic violence, it is better to consider that they are concerned with different kinds of intimate partner violence (1995). Based on this, he suggests two forms of couple violence: patriarchal terrorism and common couple violence. According to him, patriarchal terrorism emanates from a patriarchal tradition, and is a situation where husbands use a range of tactics, including physical violence and 'economic subordination' as weapons to control their wives (1995:287). This is the form of violence the feminist theorists are concerned with, Johnson (2008) argues. The common couple violence, Johnson notes, has less to do with patriarchal values and the gender of the perpetrator; violence erupts from

either gender occasionally as a result of conflict. He later on expands couple violence to include intimate terrorism, violent resistance, situational couple violence and mutual violent control (2008). The differences between these depend on who initiates the violence, who is on the receiving end, the frequency, and the motives, that is, whether violence erupts sporadically or is part of a scheme to dominate and control a partner.

These theories shed light on an issue previously considered private—husband violence towards wives. Nonetheless, in contexts outside the global North, particularly in contexts like the Dagaaba's, marital relations are part of a broad network of family relations as I have demonstrated in Chapter 4. Without paying attention to the other actors in that web, it is difficult to fully grasp the nature of violence against women within marriage. Thus, I extend my attention here to violence amongst women within the marriage space. This is not to minimise the harmful effects of male spousal violence in the male-dominant Dagaaba settlements, but to draw attention to an equally worrying aspect of violence against women in marriage, which has been ignored in the discourses on violence. I refer to this form of violence as 'woman-to-woman'. By woman-to-woman, used interchangeably with female-to-female violence, I refer to acts of violence—psychological, economic and physical—visited by women in position of power and authority on women in relatively less powerful positions in the marriage space. This is violence initiated and/or perpetrated by women against women. Female-to-female violence appears to pervade the entire Ghanaian society, in public life and in the domestic space of the home. But my focus here is the latter and such a way of theorising is enabled by the specific arrangement of Dagaaba exogamous marriage. That is to say, specific units of analysis in this regard are violence engendered by relations involving mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, as well as co-wives and other female members of the marital family. A second form of violence under consideration is a mystical one—that of the androcentric gods against women.

Woman-to-woman violence

In this section, I examine marital violence as I encountered it in Serekpere. I focus here mainly on female-to-female violence because it has not received sufficient attention in academic discourses on domestic violence in Ghana. During my fieldwork, this form of violence was not uncommon. Indeed, quite the opposite: it was regularly discussed and even joked about in everyday conversations on farms or whilst travelling with local women to funeral or market in another settlement¹⁰⁰. But since this form of violence tends to be more psychological than physical it was not common to observe it first-hand. Consider this entry from my fieldnotes as Albert (c37), one of my research participants, and I discussed the exploitation of women by other women in position of power: ‘concerning income generating activities, he informed me that the woman [Vero] brews *pito* but “the *pito* and its proceeds belong to her mother-in-law, she [Vero] is like a maid servant to her mother-in-law”’. This was a damaging situation for Vero. I return to Vero’s experience of violence exacted by her mother law-in shortly, but I wish to underscore here that her situation was not an isolated one. Many of the women I worked with, both young and old, often described (sometimes unsolicited) their experience of violence at the hands of their mothers in-law, co-wives and sisters in-law sometimes amidst tears either in the past or at the time of this study¹⁰¹.

Nevertheless, male spousal violence against women remained a major source of potential danger to many of the women I worked with. As discussed earlier, male violence against women is pervasive as a part of marital life in Dagaaba settlements, the Upper West Region and throughout Ghana society (see Coker-Appiah and Cusack, 1999; Cantalupo et al, 2006). Throughout my stay in Serekpere, discussion of male spousal violence and the way in which it has been normalised was common. As I discuss below, women often admonished each other against certain utterances or practices that might elicit

¹⁰⁰ A commonly used phrase of *deema sogla*, evil mother-in-law was often evoked as women joked about this form of violence.

¹⁰¹ These often included depriving the women of food, and even access to the kitchen to prepare food, access to the husband and also to productive resources such as shea nuts and the locus beans.

beatings from their husbands. At the village's market place, it was not uncommon for women to say they risked being beaten when they arrived home if they reduced prices of grains belonging to their husbands or male heads of the affinal family that they were selling. A view that underscores the extreme forms of gendered violence and torture, and which also echoes the views expressed in the reports I refer to here was expressed by Mbabile, a male head of a section. Mbabile explained:

In the past our fathers used to drive women out of the marital settlement; they could tie a woman on a log and call her fathers [male members of the natal family] to come and see and if they didn't come early enough by the time they arrived she would have been pushed together with the log into a deep pit and she would die. Yet there would be no problem. They could even open up a woman's legs and tie them apart and then put grains into her vagina for fowls to eat and nothing would happen. But with the arrival of modern Ghana, today women now have so much power; more than the men and they are now showing off [laughs] (conversation with Mbabile c78).

The quote above depicts the horrors of male violence against women. This excerpt speaks to women's new position as powerful, *having* more power than the men who marry and bring them into the settlement and thus 'own' them. Most men attributed the source of this perceived power to the new state of Ghana, with its modern legal institutions outlawing the killing of women as human beings. But for the state to prohibit the killing of women even if they are suspected of being witches or of using paranormal powers to cause harm within the marriage space is interpreted by some as granting women too much power. This protection of women's right to life seems to frustrate and challenge male authority, which hitherto could be exercised to decimate the lives of women without any sanctions: not even the natal family (males) would be bothered as the quote from Mbabile suggests. The banality of male violence against women looms large in this vignette.

During my ethnographic fieldwork I observed three instances of male (physical) violence against women, that is, where men beat their wives, and I examine these briefly. In one of these incidents, Martin (c45), a polygynous man with three wives, did not only beat his first wife but actually attempted to

throw her, together with a baby in her arms, into a pot of boiling shea nuts¹⁰². This violence was instigated by the woman's refusal to allow Martin to sell a goat that belonged to her. Interestingly, as Martin often beats his wife without provocation, on this occasion, some of the young men in his family who witnessed the violence, particularly him dragging the woman (with the child in her arms) to the boiling pot, in turn beat him. Also, Azingsung (c29), married with one wife, frequently beat his wife and, on this occasion, she passed out after he cut her with a machete, leaving a deep wound in her skull. In a third incident, Zunuong (c40), married with one wife, beat his wife at least three times during the time of my stay in the settlement¹⁰³. Aside from these physical forms of violence, I often witnessed, and was also told about, countless instances of verbal abuse and threats to kill women or eject them from the marital home and denial of food and sex during my fieldwork.

In one disturbing situation that shook nearly the entire settlement, a man gave a poisonous substance meant for killing mice to his wife after a quarrel ensued between them. As the woman, Biilima (c32), was angered to her limits by his previous oppressive behaviours, she threatened to kill herself and her unborn baby in addition to her two daughters. And, as if to facilitate this process, her husband, a shop keeper in the settlement, gave her the substance. This looming misfortune was only averted when one of the older women within the house realised that Biilima had hidden something under a stone and wrestled her for it. She then discovered the poison and took it away. For Biilima, this threatened extermination of herself and her children was to bring some relief to her husband who had abandoned her and their children for his girlfriend in another section of the settlement¹⁰⁴. This is an extreme example, and the violence between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law rarely reached such exceptional levels of violence. Despite this observation, in one situation

¹⁰² Although I first heard this through the grapevine, Martin confessed this to me in a conversation, unsolicited, justifying this violent behaviour by claiming that his wife frequently gets drunk and neglects the baby.

¹⁰³ During the third beating, as the woman ran for help amidst crying, she blamed her *dendeo*, the male marriage liaison, discussed in Chapter 4, for convincing her to marry into this normalised beating.

¹⁰⁴ Note that although intracommunity marriage is forbidden, members of different segments of the settlement are permitted to befriend each other.

a pot of boiling water aimed by a mother-in-law at a daughter-in-law following a quarrel accidentally splashed on the latter's toddler in her arms, badly scalding his chest and chin.

The relationship between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law depends on the power balance—on who occupies the more privileged position in relation to productive resources and on how she exercises this power to gain control and domination over the other. This is not different from other reports on power and violence¹⁰⁵. The locus of the violence that characterises this relationship is primarily home management and economic activities.

Customarily, amongst Dagaaba, a mother-in-law, *deema*, is the overall manager of the home. She is in charge of appropriating the proceeds from the sale of *pito*, mostly brewed by the daughter(s)-in-law, and of processing soup ingredients. Whereas some mothers-in-law sometimes grant daughters-in-law permission to brew *pito* for themselves so that they can generate personal income, others do no such 'favours'. Some daughters-in-law thus undertake the labour of brewing *pito* without any personal benefit. Beyond this direct exploitation of women in marriage, my fieldwork revealed instances of mothers-in-law who incited their sons to beat their daughters-in-law. By virtue of her relation as the mother of the daughter-in-law's husband, the mother-in-law tends to be relatively more privileged. In most of the cases I observed, mothers-in-law thus appeared to wield more power and influence, and some of them deployed these to the disadvantage of their daughters-in-law. I examine Vero's experience of marital violence, provoked by her mother-in-law and carried out by her husband, in order to create an understanding of this form of violence and of the complicity of women in violence against women.

Vero (c26) is a first wife who was violently abducted by her husband (assisted by his friends) in 2006 on her way to the southern part of Ghana to seek work. According to her, she suffered frequent beatings by her husband, incited by

¹⁰⁵ For instance, Straus et al (1980) found that the victim of violence in a North American family depends on whether the woman or the man is the dominant one in the relationship.

her mother-in-law. On one occasion, when she was pregnant, Vero's husband rushed up to her as she was cooking in the kitchen and pushed her head into a pot of boiling soup. This attack was prompted by the fact that she had no longer been able to ignore her mother-in-law's verbal abuse and had retaliated against her. According to Vero, she had only been rescued on this occasion by customers drinking *pito* in their compound. Vero's husband, who was not amused by his wife's 'disrespect' for his mother, intervened. In this case, physical violence on the part of her husband was a tool used to force Vero into compliance with her mother-in-law. Vero shared with me that if she had someone to fight for her, she would report her husband to the police, even though she envisaged that this could lead to her dismissal from the marital home: 'he will ask me to go away but the beating will at least come to a stop'. However, she did not want to leave her children behind. The dilemma here is obvious: although Vero does not want to leave her children behind, she thinks the beating will end only if the police get involved. Reading Vero's vulnerability, her mother-in-law and husband pounce on her limitations. Vero is thus controlled, using the constraints imposed on her by exogamous marriage arrangements in Serekpere, which mean that her natal family is not nearby and therefore cannot offer support. She was not the only daughter-in-law enduring abuse within the marital space. Some young wives who could not cope with the combined abuse of their husbands and mothers, brothers and sisters-in-law did indeed flee the marital home.

In the intimate terrorism form of violence, Johnson (2008) sees male spousal violence as part of a systemic patriarchal violence employed to exercise domination and control over a wife or as an expression of anger by the husband. Whereas in Vero's case the number of actors and the frequency of abuse may not qualify it as intimate terrorism, it does seem that violence is employed to silence her, and also to express disapproval of her 'insubordination' to, or disrespect of, her mother-in-law. Her mother-in-law may regularly verbally abuse her, stripping her of her dignity before their customers, but Vero has no right to talk back; to respond is to invite a beating from the mother-in-law's ally, Vero's husband. What right has a mother-in-law to verbally abuse and embarrass a daughter-in-law publicly but expect her

to remain silent? None, but for the power that exogamous practices vest in her and her son. Specifically, I am referring to exogamy's arrangement that requires a woman in marriage to leave her natal family and its support to join her marital family. The latter is supposed to support her, but she cannot always count on this. Thus, Vero's staying in the marital space without battering is subject to her submitting not only to her husband but also his mother.

The apparent vulnerability of young women in marriage comes out clearly in what Vero says in relation to her mother-in-law's temperament. She told me: 'my mother-in-law is too quick tempered; she has no patience, even if you did something good for her, she would still insult you; if there were people [customers] in the house she would still insult you. But I have been advised [by other community members] to have patience in dealing with her because of my children'. She adds: 'I have really suffered a lot of beatings ... At the least provocation she would insult me and my family members back home and if I could not take it any longer, I would retaliate and then her son would beat me up [laughs wryly]. But now if she starts insulting me, I just walk away from her'. Vero has thus developed a reflective strategy for dealing with the violence, accommodating and avoiding the conditions—responding to insults with insults—that have the potential to engender injury for her. In the Power and Control Wheel developed by Pence and Paymar, and mentioned above, we see how an abuser may use the threat of taking a woman's children away from her as a means of control. In the case of Vero, the rules of Dagaaba exogamous marriage are clear. Upon leaving the marriage, the children belong to the husband. Vero's retaliation—responding to insults with insults—is the cause of her beating. It makes sense here to see power as being exercised due to resistance, but we also see how the mother-in-law and her son deploy power against the young wife, and this evidences my position that some actors may be more privileged in power relations than others. Yet Vero's attitude provides some prospects for dealing with marital violence. By avoiding the conditions that create fertile grounds for violence, Vero effectively frees herself from the shackles of battering. Nonetheless, she is not an acquiescent dupe of the combined power of mother and son. In this

encounter she exercises agency, if sometimes with, and at other times without, resistance as its motive. As both ‘accommodators’ and ‘resistors’, women exercise agency (Meyers, 2000, cited in Madhok, 2013:104). Thus, in choosing to accommodate verbal abuse and humiliation even in the presence of their *pito* customers, Vero exercises agency.

Vero’s mother-in-law and most mothers-in-law in similar situations appear to wield a considerable amount of power and control, deploying these to the disadvantage of their daughters-in-law. But not all mothers-in-law are that powerful; some suffer emotional and economic abuse and are denied food at the hands of their daughters-in-law. This is the case where the power and productive resources are controlled by the daughter-in-law. This form of abuse, in addition to those exacted by women thought of as legitimate wives on widows, and even on other ‘authentic’ co-wives in less powerful situations, seems to represent the way in which women dominate and control the marriage space. It may also be interpreted as subversion of the arrangement of living and eating together as mother and daughter-in-law in this exogamous society or as undermining Dagaaba polygyny¹⁰⁶. For instance, the daughter-in-law or co-wife is aware that to resist these arrangements outright is to risk attracting name-calling and mystical harm. Thus rather than not allowing a husband to marry another wife, she employs denial of access to productive resources by a co-wife as a way of protesting against polygyny. In a similar vein, a daughter-in-law who expresses disinterest in cooking for her mother-in-law risks the same sort of stigma. Consequently, a woman denying

¹⁰⁶ Customarily, polygyny, a practice where by a man marries more than one wife, is the common form of marriage arrangement in northern Ghana, and Dagaaba people are not an exception (see Nukunya, 2003). In fact, according to the Ghana Statistical Service (2010), about 37 per cent of women in the Upper West Region are in a polygynous marriage. Although there are no statistics available on polygyny rates in the study area, according to the women and men I worked with, in the past, farm work used to be undertaken on large-scale basis and as a result of this men used to marry many wives so as to get more helping hands on the farm. In some instances, women enlisted other relations to marry their husbands in order to lend them support with farm work. Indeed, most of my older research participants (60 years and above), particularly the women, who all had co-wives, either in the past or during my fieldwork, discussed with nostalgia the level of cooperation and unity that existed between them. By contrast, while many younger men still articulated reasons for marrying more than one wife, most of the young women in polygynous marriages decried the practice and sometimes the neglect of particular women and their children. The dominance of polygyny could be said to be waning as few of the younger men (40 years and below) during my fieldwork had more than one wife.

her mother-in-law access to food is to announce to her that the resources belong to her husband and not to the mother-in-law. In this sense, we see subversion of both the normative arrangements of sharing a husband and productive resources, and of communal living and eating together in this exogamous society. Although individual women bear the brunt of this form of resource-related violence, it seems that the exercise of power is targeting institutionalised norms rather than being due to the actions of the repressed. This again exposes the difficulty of Foucault's theory that the exercise of power can only be recognised as such if, firstly, the victim acts continually and, secondly, that the action leads to transformation. Here we see female power exercised against other females without open provocation.

I also wish to touch on violence understood as being exacted by mystical forces and male gatekeepers of Dagaaba cultural practices against women. Dagaaba believe that the ancestors and the gods have power to watch over the living, protecting them from evil, whilst at the same time having the power to punish those who break the society's norms. In these roles, the androcentric gods appear to favour the men, their 'sons', over the women, the 'outsiders'. For instance, in relation to widowhood taboos and adultery, a disproportionate burden to prove fidelity and loyalty to the marriage lies with women. The violence associated with ancestral power, as described to me by my research participants, can be traced to sacrifices offered to the ancestors before marriage payments are made (see analysis in Chapter 4). The sacrifices place constraints on the sexuality of a woman in marriage; if she slept with another man, she would have to confess in order to go through the humiliation of a purification rite, otherwise she might fall ill or even die. However, there are no similar requirements for men, as no price is paid for a man during marriage. As previously mentioned, Poreku Dery describes the sacrifices performed prior to marriage payments as what sanctions women's 'slavery' in Dagaaba settlements. This is in recognition of the shackles they place on the women in marriage. This section's opening vignette also points to the difficulties women encounter in relation to adultery; they are at the mercy of the power of ancestors and men. A man can take a widow by force and make her his wife, and if she sleeps with another man she is guilty of adultery,

requiring purification. In this sense, it can be argued that the gods are thought of as being in collusion with the men, against the women.

The particular situation of violence recounted here differs from that in the reports from within and outside of Ghana discussed above. This is because these forms of violence emanate from the complex interrelationships and mystical forces of Dagaaba settlements and this is consistent with my notion of the marriage space as a concatenation of multiple networks of relations. Firstly, whilst the husband-to-wife violence I observed was very much physical and widespread, woman-to-woman violence appeared emotional, psychological and economic. Secondly, discussion here shows that power is not only wielded by men and used against women; it permeates the network of relations that characterise marriage. Power is also deployed by women against women. Women can be perpetrators of violence and not just victims, and female power, like male power, can be harmful in its workings. Finally, whilst some forms of female power may be exercised to assert authority and control over other females, it can be argued that some of it is deployed to subvert normative institutions and arrangements. I argue that, to be able to understand marital violence amongst Dagaaba and similar exogamous groups, attention needs to be paid not only to couple violence but also to woman-to-woman, as well as perceived spirits-to women, violence, and the network of relations within the marriage space.

Witchcraft, *Juju* and Power of the Gods

A number of anthropological studies across Africa document the extent of discourses on witchcraft, magic and supernatural beliefs, a concern that dates back to the classic work of Evans-Pritchard ([1937] 1976) amongst Azande of Sudan. Recent studies on witchcraft and the mystical in Africa have tended to focus on their contemporary character, widening the scope to accommodate their urban and modern technologically-inclined and mediated new forms¹⁰⁷.

¹⁰⁷ See Geschiere (1997), Ciekawy and Geschiere (1998), Comaroff and Comaroff (1993, 1999), Bonhomme (2012) and Geschiere (2013).

Witchcraft and *juju* 'are no longer regarded solely as a traditional heritage, but rather as inherently modern phenomena', notes Julien Bonhomme (2012:210). The modern technologically driven forms that contemporary witchcraft beliefs assume have become the basis for researchers to challenge modernity's assumptions of witchcraft as 'primitive' and associated with backwardness (Ciekawy and Geschiere, 1998; Moore and Sanders, 2003). A key leitmotif in the discourses on the modernity of witchcraft in Africa has been witchcraft's increasing dominance and influence in almost every facet of life in the face of modernisation despite earlier assumptions that witchcraft beliefs and practices would decrease with 'modernity'. As such, witchcraft and supernatural beliefs remain forces to reckon with at the rural level, and discourses on witchcraft in both rural and urban Ghana abound.

In Ghana, ethnographic accounts of witchcraft date back to the works of Meyer Fortes (1937) amongst Tallensi of the north-east and those of Jack Goody (1957, 1962, 1967) amongst 'LoDagaa' in the north-west. Other studies include those of Esther Goody (1973) in central Gonja, also in the north, and of Drucker-Brown (1975, 1993) amongst Mamprusi of the north-east. Van der Geest (1997), and under the pseudonym Wolf Bleek in 1976, studied amongst Kwahu in the south-east. These studies provide in-depth accounts of kinship relations, including witchcraft belief and accusations in these areas dating back over a substantial period of time. Other studies focus on Pentecostalism and beliefs in mystical powers in Ghana, as well as on the tension between them¹⁰⁸ (Meyer, 1995, 1999; Onyinah, 2002¹⁰⁹). For instance, Drucker-Brown (1993) provides detailed accounts of changing perspectives of witchcraft amongst Mamprusi, which resonate with beliefs in the occult held by Dagaaba and Frafra, other Mole-Dagbani groups¹¹⁰. She underscores the increasing dominance of the belief in witchcraft, as well as its commercialisation (in terms of transporting victims in the form of animals

¹⁰⁸ These studies draw attention to Pentecostalism's focus on fighting witchcraft and mystical forces viewed as satanic, and also to how this emphasis serves to popularise beliefs in the occult.

¹⁰⁹ For studies that draw attention to power relations and the destructive valence of the occult see Goody (1973), Drucker-Brown (1975, 1993) and Geest (1976, 1997).

¹¹⁰ For instance, there are similarities with regards to witchcraft being passed along the mother's line and the addiction to the consumption of human flesh.

and smoked meat to the south) in the 1990s. In addition to attesting to the widespread nature of such beliefs, these northern Ghanaian-based studies also draw our attention to the role of ancestral and magic-related influence and powers, even though they do not engage in a sustained discussion of them.

My analysis does not provide a detailed examination of witchcraft practice and theory in northern Ghana or of the modernity of witchcraft. Instead, I am concerned with the lived experiences of village-based witchcraft amongst Dagaaba and how it combines with other power forms—magic, ancestral and male—to complicate the exercise of agency and resistance within marriages. In other words, I wish to develop a context for the complex account of power, agency and resistance I am framing in this study and for how the pervasiveness of the belief in these forces inspires fear. I also examine the consequences the forces engender for normatively non-conforming subjectivities. I argue that an understanding of the workings of these supernatural power forms is critical to effectively appreciate power and gender relations and, indeed, social life amongst Dagaaba. Therefore, my interest is not in witchcraft and mystical power per se. I examine some cases of misfortune attributed to mystical forces in Serekpere to show how daily life in the settlement is inherently linked with machinations in the supernatural realm. This will help to contextualise my argument that certain forms of agency and resistance, and not others, are authorised in such contexts and that there is a need to extend attention beyond expressive forms of agency and resistance. I also distinguish witchcraft from other mystical power forms, a distinction most theorists appear to overlook. Goody (1967) talks about earth shrines, ancestors and sacrificial rituals and how, for instance, the desecration of a shrine can lead to a whole lineage perishing if expropriation rituals are not performed. Similarly, Drucker-Brown reports that in the past death and misfortune was mainly attributed to ancestors and magic rather than to witchcraft. But neither of them engages in any detailed discussion of ancestral and magic forces.

Evans-Pritchard (1976:226) describes witchcraft as ‘a supposed psychic emanation from witchcraft-substance which is believed to cause injury to

health and property'. Witches do not carry out rites or cast spells: 'witchcraft is a psychic act', he claims (1976:1). In a similar vein, Maka of south-east Cameroon perceive of witchcraft as 'a nasty creature living in someone's belly which gives its owner... special powers' (Geschiere, 2013:4). The ideas of psychic emanation and witchcraft-substance (which, according to Drucker-Brown, 1993, resonate with Mamprusi witchcraft from the past), appear less relevant to the Dagaaba conception of witchcraft, as I discuss below. Also, the emphasis of these theorists appears to be on the destructive use of witchcraft, downplaying its constructive aspects. For instance, Diane Ciekawy and Peter Geschiere (1998:5) contend that, '... it is the basic interest of the witch to betray his or her victims to outsiders'. Although Geschiere (2013:4) himself does acknowledge the constructive use of witchcraft for healing and for accumulating wealth and power, he nonetheless lays emphasis on the 'betraying and cannibalising' valence of the occult—witchcraft's 'basic instinct' is to do evil, he contends. Esther Goody (1973) offers another notion of witchcraft premised on maleficence. Writing about Gonja, also of northern Ghana, Goody notes: [t]he ability to control mystical forces and direct these against enemies is associated by the Gonja with the power to change shape, and to fly through the night, as well as the hunger for human souls... (1973:3).

But witchcraft is not only destructive; it can be productive as Foucault (1978, 1982) notes of power. Witches use their craft to protect their loved ones too. Sometimes witches have suffered negative consequences in place of exposing loved ones to supernatural harm. Thus, views of witchcraft as destructive or as the 'dark side of kinship' (Geschiere, 1997:11) appear to underplay this. Indeed, having cited cases of productive use of witchcraft, including amongst Ewe of south-east Ghana, Geschiere (2013:67) nonetheless insists, quoting van Binsbergen (2001), that 'everywhere the merciless logic seems to prevail that witches have to go on sacrificing their kin'. This logic is certainly not universal as it appears to ignore the complex situations in which witches sometimes find themselves, as noted above. The point I wish to underscore is that witchcraft is not all about loss or misfortune. Beyond the protection it provides, witchcraft has been cited as the source of success, including making

it possible for people to travel to Europe and North America for greener pastures. Consequently, whereas the majority of academic analysis of witchcraft discourses tend to concentrate on its baleful influence, it may be useful to pay more attention to its productive use.

The three supernatural forces of witchcraft, *juju* or magic and ancestral powers are of interest to this study. These mystical forces appear to structure and censor social actions amongst Dagaaba in every way. They defy straightforward definitions, and are sometimes conflated and/or misinterpreted. Geschiere (2013:110) refers to the supernatural as a ‘marshy field’ that cannot be straitjacketed. This is because, he argues, and rightly so, that given the elusive nature of these crafts, their machinations, even in the presence of the ethnographer, may go unnoticed. Based on the complexities that characterise this subject, Geschiere (2013) has eschewed any attempts to delineate the various power forms into specific groups in the face of criticism of his earlier (1997) work¹¹¹. Instead, he suggests ‘occult forces’ as the translation of *djambe* (Maka term for witchcraft) which, according to him, ‘leaves open the question whether the force is used for evil for or for good’ (Geschiere, 1997:14). But this presents another difficulty, and Geschiere acknowledges this: Maka themselves translate *djembe* as witchcraft. The Ghanaian and specifically northern Ghana context of my study varies greatly from that of Geschiere. In Serekpere, witchcraft is often distinguished from other mystical power forms. As such, no one culturally literate would take this study seriously if I were to collapse these forces together under the general rubric of witchcraft or occult practices. Given this, despite the complexity of the terrain (which is partly because these forces are shrouded in secrecy), I discuss these power forms based on my ethnographic fieldwork.

¹¹¹ I do not wish to belabour this point since Geschiere himself notes the criticism of his lack of distinction between magic and witchcraft. Geschiere explains that the notion of witchcraft amongst his Maka research participants is much more fluid, stretching over ‘a wide array of expressions of the occult’ (2013:74). This may be understood, but the problematics arise when he makes comparisons with other regions of Africa (as in the case of Ewe of Ghana), whose notions of the occult appear to be at variance with those of his Maka participants.

Dagaaba conceptions of mysticism and witchcraft

As discussed previously, amongst Dagaaba, social life is profoundly influenced by events occurring in the mystical world, and this is similar to what Evans-Pritchard reports of Azande. According to him, beliefs regarding witchcraft are so omnipresent that they ‘are on the surface’ of Azande life. But witchcraft and events in the mystical world amongst Dagaaba appear much subtler than those Evans-Pritchard describes amongst Azande people. For instance, it is not possible to tell that a Dagao is a witch from their red eyes, as Evans-Pritchard reports of Azande. Witchcraft amongst Dagaaba seems to become established with time and age; as the witches grow, their exploits come into the limelight¹¹². In light of the omnipresence of mystical power amongst Dagaaba, I agree with Adam Ashforth (2005:xiii) that we cannot ‘understand life in Africa without understanding witchcraft and the related aspects of spiritual insecurity’. By ‘spiritual insecurity’, Ashforth is referring to ‘the dangers, doubts, and fears arising from the sense of being exposed to invisible evil forces’ (2005:1) that wind their way through everyday life. Following this, I suggest that the workings of power, agency and resistance amongst Dagaaba can be appreciated effectively only if we recognise the pervasiveness of these forces and the insecurities, what I describe as ‘mystical insecurities’, and fears they engender.

Dagaaba witchcraft, *soɔlong*, relies principally on supernatural power that targets the life-force or soul of its victims. According to some of my research participants, witchcraft is a kind of force that allows its holders, witches, *soɔba*, to do a wide range of things (including turning into animals, flying, killing people, as well as protecting their loved ones against harm). In a discussion, Ziembra (c41), a cured witch (a witch whose supernatural power has been ‘deactivated’ by ritual performance), explains: ‘witchcraft is a form of supernatural power that allows people to do mystical things’. Whilst some *soɔba* are believed to have inherent powers, others are said to have animate

¹¹² But this association of witchcraft with age is the basis for some researchers’ and activists’ argument that accusations of witchcraft target vulnerable persons such as old women and the poor (Drucker-Brown, 1993).

things, like pythons and vampires, hidden in their rooms. These are the sources of their power, which they invoke in order to change form and fly in glowing light (like Azande and Frafra) to attend secret nocturnal séances with other members of their covens. Amongst Dagaaba, witchcraft is believed to be *matrilateral*—transferred by a woman to her children—unlike Azande where Evans-Pritchard reports that it is hereditary—passed by men to sons and women to daughters. Amongst Azande, for one kin member to be accused of witchcraft means that members of his (or her) entire clan are witches. However, amongst Dagaaba it is not uncommon for only some of a woman’s children to inherit/‘seek out’ witchcraft.

Dagaaba notions of witchcraft are closely associated with proximity. Dagaaba believe that each member of a coven acts as a sponsor in his/her family. In this regard, not only are witches from within one’s family the ‘most dangerous kind’ (Geschiere, 2013:xvi), but for witchcraft to succeed there must be some ties, either through marriage or blood. An Akan—of southern Ghana—aphorism captures this vividly as: ‘the insect that will bite you is from within your cloth’. This signals the close proximity of witches or evil persons to their victims. Thus, witchcraft is closely bound with the marriage space and the actors may be vulnerable to attacks due to this proximity. Given that witchcraft is closely bound with the marriage space, I argue that it is the fear of the unknown and the vulnerability this produces that creates the mystical insecurity. Everyone within this space is a potential suspect, and lives then appear to be somewhat dependant on these ‘anonymous others’, as Butler (2004a:xii) contends of injury and in relation to the threat of terrorism and the precariousness of life¹¹³. This situation of insecurity breeds suspicion and, thus, the caution in everyday life is to tread carefully so as not to incur the wrath of any evil person in the family. ‘No one knows what is in the eyes of another person’, is a common maxim throughout Ghana. This aphorism signals the level of uncertainty that characterises the ontology of mystical

¹¹³ In *Precarious Life*, influenced by the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the USA, Butler underscores the fact that our lives depend on other people we may not know.

powers. This insecurity and fear regulate the conduct of Dagaaba women and men in their everyday interactions and, thus, affect agentic practices.

Dagaaba categorise witches into *soɔpiele*, white witch and *soɔsoglaa*, black witch, literally, but I will refer to them as good and evil, respectively. According to my research participants, the beneficent witch may use his/her power constructively to protect his/her family from any ‘missiles’ directed at them by evil people. This category of white witches is in constant tension with the second group, the maleficent ones. The malefic witches use their power to destroy people by snatching their life-forces or stifling their progress. This anti-social use of witchcraft may arise from enmity or jealousy of a person’s talent or resources. These are the ‘hungry for human souls’ that Goody notes. Yet, in most cases, they protect their own children from other evil people, even at the risk of harm to themselves, and this is what Geschiere (2013:67) calls the ‘witch-as-a-martyr’ notion.

Amongst Dagaaba not all mystical endeavours are reducible to witchcraft. Although Evans-Pritchard acknowledges that some misfortune and death is attributable to magic or to the breaking of taboos, such as committing adultery, the ultimate cause of most deaths in his case appears to be witchcraft. He writes: ‘[t]he child, and the man, developed fever, and leprosy, because a taboo was broken. The breach of a taboo was the cause of their sickness, but the sickness would not have killed them i[f] witchcraft had not also been operative’ (1976:28). From this, it appears that the power to kill stems from only witchcraft. But the power of the gods and *juju* are as dangerous as witchcraft amongst Dagaaba. Certain male individuals who achieve enviable records and lead blameless lives before dying ‘normal’ deaths are usually deified—made into divine beings. Their achievements may range from setting farming or hunting records to exhibiting bravery and ‘masculinity’ in relation to warfare. These individuals become ancestors who are supposedly imbued with certain powers. Their support is enlisted in almost every facet of life—for good health, an accident-free farm season, a good harvest and prosperous marriage. The ancestors may sometimes ‘invite’

(a euphemism for killing) certain disobedient individuals to the ancestral world to answer for certain mis/deeds¹¹⁴.

It does seem that the ancestors only exact punishment on their subjects when the latter break a norm or neglect to fulfil a task. In this sense, Foucault's assertion that power is exercised due to opposition makes sense; without the in/actions considered as disobedience, the gods may not strike their victims. Similarly, magicians, people with medicine—*tii*—are also believed by Dagaaba to have the power not only to injure but to kill others. Magic power is considered particularly dangerous, as it strikes irrespective of family ties. Unlike witchcraft, it does not need an insider sponsor to be able to injure its victims; its missiles can be shot from any range. Thus, in daily life women and men tread carefully, as the same mystical insecurities bound with witchcraft characterise the exercise of agency in relation to magic and ancestral power. These Dagaaba beliefs regarding mystical forces that I have examined in this subsection permit me to fully contextualise the cultural setting in which I worked. I have argued that these power forms are closely bound up with the marriage space and thus engender mystical insecurities for everyone in it. The beliefs and the insecurities associated with these forces have implications for agentic and resistance practices, as I discuss below.

The case of Richard (c39), a supposed witch married to one woman, sheds further light on the nature of the witchcraft I encountered in Serepere and also on the dangers of conventional modes of agency, even if exercised by men¹¹⁵. Richard's mother absconded from Serepere in late 1980s after having confessed to bewitching and killing children in her marital family. Richard is reported by members of his family to have summoned the elders of his family to warn Gaadeoma (c66), a widow also perceived to be a witch, against her attempts to kill him. Gaadeoma beat up another witch, Bisungma

¹¹⁴ See Goody and Drucker-Brown, discussed above.

¹¹⁵ I employ the case of a man here as an illustration as none of the women I worked with self-identified as witches, unlike Richard who boasted often of his powers. Also, aside from the narratives I gathered, at no point in my study was a woman courageous enough to exercise her agency in the manner Richard did.

(c71), as the latter refused to offer her most productive son to their coven. According to the women, Richard was the only person in his family bold enough to take Bisungma to the hospital after the incident. As a result of his action of care towards Bisungma, according to him, at night, Gaadeoma repeatedly sent strong male witches to catch him. The elders in his family passed the warning on to Gaadeoma. Subsequently, Richard boasted that the attempts on his life had ceased.

The kind gesture of taking the helpless Bisungma to hospital is what attracts the displeasure of Gaadeoma. Consequently, she sends male ‘soldiers’ after Richard to catch his soul for being so daring as to challenge her wish to harm Bisungma. Gaadeoma does this knowing that Richard is a witch, hence she sends apparently more powerful, or rather stronger, witches than herself after him. It is this risk of incurring the wrath of evil people that, as I argue below, renders overt ways of agency dangerous amongst Dagaaba. Without this power, Richard might have been injured or killed before the elders of his family had realised what the cause was. It is also interesting to note again how the mystical world is deeply gendered—Gaadeoma sends *strong male* witches after Richard. We see the dangers that even men (privileged members of Dagaaba societies) are exposed to for transgressing the norms. During my fieldwork no woman was daring enough to exercise physical agency in this way, due to an awareness of the dangers it could engender, and also because of their disadvantaged position.

Discussion in this section draws attention to the Dagaaba understanding of mysticism. Dagaaba settlements are saturated with beliefs in the paranormal; there is no aspect of Dagaaba life that is devoid of this. Consequently, as I have argued, we can only understand Dagaaba life properly if we simultaneously consider the mystical. Mystical forces in Dagaaba societies can be deployed to good or evil ends. To this effect, they both converge with and diverge from Foucault and Butler’s notion of power as productive, pervading nodes of relations rather than just as a repressive force. That is to say, mystical power is not only baleful and used for nefarious activities; it can be used to engender success or ward off malicious intention and protect loved

ones. In this case it is productive. Yet it is not a power that is available to everyone; it is accessible to an initiated few—the ancestors, witches and *juju* holders. This power may also be deployed by its holders in a unidirectional manner to protect, harm or punish others. To a Dagaaba, supernatural power forms are self-evident; they constitute the undercurrent of every event in life. To react to marital violence in a certain manner is to risk incurring the wrath of the gods or of evil people close by who may cause harm. Consequently, as the women frequently explained to me, only unwise women exercise ‘action biased’ agency within this context (Madhok, 2013:107). In the following section, I examine agentic practices in Dagaaba settlements.

Performing Agency in a Mystical Context

Contemporary theoretical discourses on agency—the capacity to make reflective choices and exercise in/action, individually or collectively—have sought to underscore the exercise of agency not only by feminine subjects in the global North but also their counterparts in the South (Mahmood, 2005; Madhok et al, 2013). It is not acceptable to perceive of women from the developing world as oppressed victims of patriarchy, male violence and backward cultural norms whilst their Northern counterparts are seen as liberated and agential (Mohanty, 1988; Butler, 1999; Madhok et al, 2013). Seeing these as cautionary tales, I seek to demonstrate the complex ways in which power, agency and resistance are intertwined, and are exercised by women in Dagaaba settlements. My analysis will demonstrate that ‘... agency is always exercised within constraints’ (Madhok et al, 2013:7; see also Foucault, 1980; Butler, 1997a). In this sense, the presence of power or agency does not preclude oppression and resistance and, indeed, the reverse also holds (Butler, 1999, 2011; Mahmood, 2005; Madhok, et al, 2013).

Dagaaba contexts permit the exercise of agency in ways that are dissimilar to the conventional overt modes of agency that have preoccupied much of feminist theorising. For instance, in relation to the Awlad ‘Ali Bedouin amongst whom she studied, Abu-Lughod notes: ‘[m]others sometimes

successfully block marriages their daughters do not want, even though fathers or other male guardians are supposed to have control' (1990:43). This is unlikely to occur in most Dagaaba settlements due to the supernatural insecurities discussed above. Indeed, it may take an 'unwise' woman (because they disobey the norms, knowing that the consequences can be dire), particularly a mother, to risk her life in this way, as Pogzie (c52), a widow and mother of five girls, shared with me. According to her, since her husband died in the early 1990s she has single-handedly raised her daughters but she has never been given any share of the bride price, or even been informed about the formal visits of any of the girls' prospective suitors. But as someone who is culturally aware, she has never questioned the male elders of her marital family about this. This is because, if she did, she might expose herself and her daughters to mystical harm by evil persons within the family. I argue that, within the context of Dagaaba, and indeed in most parts of Africa where the belief in supernatural powers is pervasive, any discourse on women's agency that does not pay attention to their role in determining the form that agency assumes runs the risk of misdescribing it (Madhok, 2013). This misdescription, Madhok explains, ranges from 'an overemphasis of subordination and silencing of agency to the overplaying of episodes of resistance and hence overemphasis of autonomy' (2013:104), that is, to either attribute agency where there is none or to miss it altogether where it is exercised. In my analysis here, the challenge, like that of other theorists of agency in the global South, is how to negotiate the subtlety of the agentic practices I encountered without romanticising or downplaying them.

To help establish my analytical frame, I examine three discourses on agency in the global South. I have chosen to concentrate on these texts as they are concerned with issues similar to the ones I analyse in this study. For instance, they address diffuse but innovative agentic and resistance practices amongst women¹¹⁶. The main thesis of Abu-Lughod (1990) is the need to pay attention

¹¹⁶ Although none of these studies is in sub-Saharan Africa, where mysticism is omnipresent, they present similarities with the Dagaaba contexts regarding the empowerment of certain forms of agency and not others.

to particular forms that resistance assumes as a way of identifying the specific workings of power it targets. Resistance should be read as a way of diagnosing power rather than as a consequence of the ineffectiveness of power or human freedom, she proposes. She contends that the latter runs the risk of eliding certain ways in which power works. This view is consistent with Foucault's call to take 'the forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point' in understanding power relations (1982:780). Abu-Lughod analyses the Awlad 'Ali Bedouin women's changing socio-economic situation and the complex, but diffused, forms that agency and resistance assume. These include strategies and discourses employed to resist forced marriage and male control, and the specific operations of power, such as male dominance, that these subversive acts target. As I mentioned earlier, based on the complex modes of resistance amongst the Bedouin women, she asks: 'how might we develop theories that give these women credit for resisting in a variety of creative ways the power of those who control so much of their lives, without either misattributing to them forms of consciousness or politics that are not part of their experience—something like a feminist consciousness or feminist politics...?' (1990:47) Abu-Lughod's focus helps us to better situate and understand agency such as that exercised by the Dagaaba women I worked with without mis/attributing feminist consciousness to their actions or misrecognising agency as they practise it. This appears challenging, given the diffuse manner in which women in contexts like the Dagaaba's perform agency. Agentic practices amongst Dagaaba women could be easily missed if women's views of themselves as powerless, slaves and *ninbaala*—weak—are taken uncritically. But if we appreciate that the mystical insecurities inherent in that context require the women to not assert themselves, we can better understand the form of agency they do perform.

In a similar vein, Saba Mahmood (2005) takes issue with liberal humanist, but also poststructuralist feminist, suppositions that tether agency to resistance and social transformation. Mahmood's study of the women's piety movement, part of the Islamist revival movement in Cairo, Egypt, reveals the exercise of agency as not necessarily geared towards resistance. Thus, Mahmood questions the binary pairing of agency and resistance that is pervasive in

Butler's (1990) *Gender Trouble*. She argues instead for an unstable and contingent construction of agency, which enables the viewing of appearances that may seem to represent passivity as agency. She also questions the tendency to insert agency where there is none, particularly in relation to feminist research in the global South (where hitherto women have been represented as lacking agency). One such study that Mahmood takes issue with is Janice Boddy's (1989) study of the *zār* cult. The *zār* cult is predominantly a women's spirit possession and exorcism cult that combines spirit mediums with Islamic idioms to heal perceived possessed women in Sudan (Boddy, 1989; Mahmood, 2005). Having underscored the ambivalent character of Boddy's subjects—'sometimes repressed' and at other times active agents of feminist consciousness—Mahmood writes: '[w]hen women's actions seem to reinscribe what appear to be "instruments of their own oppression", the social analyst can point to moments of disruption of, and articulation of points of opposition to, male authority... however unintended these may be ...' (2005:7-8). She provides analytical insights into the exercise of agency that is geared not towards undermining male authority or resisting female subordination, but towards consolidating prescribed religious norms and achieving greater piety.

The women religious teachers, from different socio-economic backgrounds, lead teaching sessions on Islamic codes of practice that are attended by women. Also, the teachers re/interpret the Quran and other religious repertoire in ways that challenge conventional norms, for instance, those of women not being allowed to lead prayer sessions or women attending teaching sessions against the wishes of their husbands. The women also practise modes of bodily performance, including veiling and modesty in dressing, as ways of approximating Islamic ideals of piety geared towards realising god's plan for them and self-realisation, rather than as challenging patriarchal norms. 'The women in Mahmood's ethnography emerge as agentic because of their ability to direct themselves towards seeking a flawless emulation of the laid down norms of piety', writes Madhok (2013:108). In this sense, it is the capacity for reflective action that matters and not necessarily the resisting of male dominance. In a similar fashion, I seek to demonstrate that the women I

worked with are agentic. In doing so, I am, however, guided by the concerns of romanticising agency and resistance and of reading feminist consciousness into ordinary acts.

Additionally, Madhok seeks to make some modifications to current discourses on agency, particularly in the global South. The main thrust of her argument is that in developing world contexts, accounts of agency should not be limited to ‘the ability to act freely or “open” resistance to the oppressor as a sign of agency and autonomy’. Madhok is instead in favour of a ‘non-insistence’ on ‘free action’. She argues that ‘action biased’ practices should not necessarily constitute evidence of agency (2013:107) and, thus, proposes a shift of focus from action to speech practices in theorising agency in the global South.

Drawing on her ethnography in rural Rajasthan, she illustrates how agency is practised in speech by the *sathins*—development workers. For Madhok, there is a risk of misdescribing agency if the pervasiveness of action bias in conventional agency accounts remains unchallenged. Based on her fieldwork, she argues that if political representation is a marker of agency amongst the *sathins*, they could easily be regarded as lacking ‘political agency’ (2013:113). But Madhok shows the exercise of agency by analysing the case of a *sathin* who was coerced into abandoning her intention to contest a reserved local government seat for women. In reaching this decision, she considered carefully the consequences of ignoring the call to abandon her plans—the opinion leaders would make her work difficult. This *sathin* emerges as agentic because her withdrawal is based on a critical consideration of the repercussion of ignoring the order for her to step down. Nevertheless, Madhok’s agents, like Mahmood’s, may sit uncomfortably within conventional analyses of agency in feminist discourses.

If attention is not given to the speech practices that give rise to this form of agency, it might be missed and, as such, calling attention to them is apt. However, speech practices can also constitute action even if Madhok claims not to ascribe ‘any form of action-related properties’ in their speech (2013:116). For instance, Butler underscores the theatrical dimension of speech and notes that, ‘speech itself is a bodily act’ (1999:xxv). Thus a

distinction between them (if necessary at all) has also to indicate their imbrication. In the context of my study, although speech practices reveal agency, the dangers associated with them cannot be overemphasised. The discourses on agency explored here draw attention to forms of agency that conventional thoughts do not capture; acts that could easily be regarded as lacking agency have been shown as agentic. This kind of keen attention is necessary for an understanding of agentic practices in the global South. Nonetheless, mysticism as a factor that affects agency, particularly in most African contexts, remains unaccounted for. In order to minimise the kind of misdescriptions noted above, we need to consider the form of agentic practices that are enabled by such pervasively supernatural contexts. Thus, I develop an account of agency that takes into consideration the challenges associated with exogamous marriage, such as women's ambiguous identities—not fully belonging to either marital or natal families—in addition to the male and mystical power forms that permeate Dagaaba settlements. The examples I turn to below encapsulate the complex and diffused forms in which most of the women I worked with exercise agency as described to me and also as I observed it.

My earliest encounter with the complex ways in which my study participants exercise agency and their expressed appeal to a powerless—*ninbaala*—weak position was when I first sought suitable accommodation in Serekpere. The first case I present here is an encounter with Adwoama (c58), who lives in her estranged husband's compound. She farms for herself and is to a great extent independent. She is assertive and, consequently, stigmatised as a *pog gandoa*, a wilful woman. She is feared by members of her section for her assertiveness. Despite this power and independence, when I went into her compound seeking a place to live, she claimed she could not tell me whether there was a vacant room in the house. 'I am like a Fulani man tending cattle', she told me¹¹⁷. Adwoama's assertion suggests that she was in charge of cleaning and maintaining the house but not of decisions regarding tenancy. In

¹¹⁷ Fulani are a nomadic ethnic group who sometimes come to Ghana from Burkina Faso and other neighbouring countries to graze their cattle or to tend cattle belonging to Ghanaians in farm settlements.

everyday speech, she referred to herself and other women as *yeme*—slaves. She often explained to me that the women in marriage have been bought with cowries to serve the men and reproduce children to continue family lineages. In this sense, we see how housework and the *yeme* notion are tied up in women's position due to exogamous marriage practices. However, as our relationship blossomed, it soon became clear to me that she was not as powerless and vulnerable a victim of exogamous marriage as her statements suggest. Adwoama exercised power and agency in her family and, as I mentioned above, she is feared by both the male and female members of her marital family.

But Adwoama's response to my questions regarding her earlier assertion of being just a shepherd still points to the constraints within which she practices her agency. According to her, she would be endangering her life and that of her children by exposing them to witchcraft and *juju* if she was to assert her rights regarding the house. As to whether the androcentric institutions employ this as a ruse to put fear into women so that they relinquish their entitlements she exclaims: 'What? It does happen! ... everywhere it happens; if you are not lucky you and your entire family [children] will die. [The husband's family] would say "You think you are smart and have taken over your husband's property, ignoring his family"'. Although we see the constraints posed by supernatural powers, agency is also evident. By this I am referring to Adwoama's reflective decision to tread cautiously so as not to attract any negative attention from evil people in the inner core of the family. Despite the supernatural insecurities, Adwoama has managed to inspire a considerable level of fear amongst the males in her marital family. Nonetheless, her open actions and speech practices point to *ninbaala* and *yeme* status. In this case, therefore, giving attention to speech practices, as Madhok proposes, is not enough to understand the mode of agency practised. It is a careful analysis of the in/actions and an understanding of the mystical forces and their potential to harm non-conforming subjectivities that can help us understand this mode of agency. This is necessary if agency as practised not only by Adwoama but by all the women I worked with, is not to risk being silenced based on the face value of speech or action-biased practices.

A second example from Gbankoma's (c60) case draws attention to the ambivalence of gendered power. Gbankoma lives with her husband and children, and does most of the farm work in her household. Yet her husband mis/appropriates the proceeds and sometimes she has to find alternative means to provide food for the family. Her attempt to hoe separately so that she could manage the produce was rejected by her husband. He verbally abuses her and threatens to slash her throat frequently. On several mornings I ran into a distraught Gbankoma bemoaning the sheer abuse and deprivation her husband subjects her to. As to why she is still in the marriage, Gbankoma explained that she could not leave her children behind; she would rather die than go without her children. Like Adwoama, on many occasions Gbankoma alluded to the concept of a woman in marriage as *ninbaala*, without control over her body or her labour. Once she remarked: 'what say has a woman concerning when to have sex; is the thing [vagina] for her? If the owner [husband] wants it what else can she do but give it out?' Nonetheless, a serendipitous discussion with her husband saw him reveal to me that for at least the past five years she has refused to engage in any sexual relationship with him. According to him, she claims that if she does she will get a bloated stomach and die as a menopausal woman. Rather than prevailing upon her, as her views appear to suggest, her husband has found alternative ways of fulfilling his desires (see details in Chapter 3). Gbankoma's husband divulged this information to me unsolicited and, as the belief that if a menopausal woman has sex she will get a bloated stomach and die is pervasive in Dagaaba settlements, I have no cause to doubt him. Gbankoma, like many other women in the settlement, is not as powerless as she claims. Being culturally aware that women are expected to be less powerful than and submissive to men, the women I worked with often present themselves as powerless and vulnerable to male and ancestral power, to avoid attracting the wrath of evil people in the marriage space, including the ancestors. Even where Gbankoma appears vulnerable and victimised by exogamous and male power (i.e. regarding farm-related issues), she still exercises her agency—reflexive choice—by continuing to work on her husband's farm and not fleeing from the marriage in the face of dangerous threats by her husband.

From the analysis presented here, the complex situation of power/lessness and agency that characterises Dagaaba marriage relations can be seen. This complex situation, which is as a result of the constraints within which agency is exercised, was characteristic of the manner in which Dagaaba women practice agency and subversion more broadly. Although statements of seeming powerlessness by Dagaaba women cannot be taken wholesale, they should also not be dismissed as mere rhetoric. What characterises these marriage relations are the contradictions of power—the women are powerful in some sense but are also constrained. The form of agentic practice revealed here is subtle, combining both speech and action in ways that are sensitive to the context. But, during my fieldwork, I also encountered open speech practices that were perceived to have given rise to harmful consequences, including mental derangement. This was the case of Nzoma (c68), a widow. According to the women in her family, when Nzoma's husband died in the mid-1980s she was left to fend for her children all by herself. In the late 2000s when her last daughter got married, her late husband's kin wanted to charge her prospective son-in-law a high bride price. Nzoma expressed her disapproval of this, since she had raised her children all alone. Her mental health deteriorated shortly after this encounter and is believed to have been caused by her late husband's kin for her being 'unwise', that is, defying the norm of not meddling in bride wealth issues as a woman. In this regard, there is a difficulty relating to speech practices or to assuming the position of the speaking subject rather than to open resistance only. To ignore the difficulties that speech practices can create is to risk consequences that can extend beyond one's imagination.

Read through the conventional lens of agency accounts that emphasise overt actions, the exemplars I have analysed here could easily qualify as lacking agency/structure; the women could be seen as living in the world of their oppressors. But if the in/actions are read within the constraints (normative expectations and supernatural powers) and if we shift our attention from action bias, as Madhok proposes, we can see how agency is actually at work. Power is exercised not only by the men or the androcentric gods, but also by the women. Yet the women are in a less advantageous position due to the

specific arrangement of exogamous marriage. In some sense, the way in which power works here has some resonance with James Scott (1990). According to Scott (who I return to in Chapter 7), in power relations both the powerful and the apparently powerless are somehow limited, but they are also engaged in some kind of deception. Outwardly, both groups put on appropriate performances but in private it is a different ball game; the supposedly powerful have fears whilst the powerless ridicule their dominators. Scott (1990:xii) writes: '[e]very subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a "hidden transcript"¹¹⁸ that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant'. In the first two cases presented in this section, we see how women's 'hidden transcripts'—their private actions—reveal agentic practices whilst their public performances, though not necessarily deceptive, can be misleading if taken at face value. Their public declarations, or transcript as Scott (1990) notes, are of lacking power—*yeme* and *ninbaala*—whereas in private they assert power and agency in dynamic ways. Indeed, as Scott observes, the public transcript alone is limited in helping us understand the workings of power and the interactions between the superordinate and the subordinate. It is the "full transcript" (1985:284), a combination of both the public and private acts and discourses, that will enable a better understanding of the exercise of agency.

Conclusions

Discussion in this chapter has focused on the workings of power in various ways, firstly, on how it is deployed by various actors within the marriage space to exercise violence on women, secondly, on how fe/male power, in addition to mystical power, pervades daily life amongst Dagaaba and, finally, on the form of agency authorised in that context. Different forms of violence have been shown to have a pernicious effect on women within the marriage space. Given the range of actors and dynamics that characterise marital violence in that space, in a sense the notion of power as performatively constituted (Foucault, 1982; Mills, 2003; Butler, 2011) does make sense.

¹¹⁸ Scott explains the transcript as the utterances, practices and acts of the actors.

Power is not simply concentrated in men or the gods and deployed against women; it permeates the webs of relations that constitute the marriage space. Indeed, as I argued above, if the subjects are formed by power and if agency is inherent to power, there is no subject who does not exercise power and agency. Yet, it does seem in this context that the men and the androcentric gods occupy some privileged power positions by being male and transcendental respectively. I have also demonstrated how the fear of supernatural powers—mystical insecurities—sculpt daily life. My analysis demonstrates that there can be dire consequences, including mental illness and death for both feminine and masculine subjectivities, for stepping out of the normative.

On spousal violence, theoretical discourses have often focused on the male-to-female and female-to-male forms. Given the enormity of male spousal violence I observed in Serekpere, my study, despite the differences in context and methodology, adds to the numerous criticisms of Straus and Gelles' (1986:470) finding that 'women are about as violent within the family as men' (see Kurz, 1989; Johnson, 2008). Also, in my study physical violence has been minimal in the violence amongst women. Secondly, and more importantly, I have argued that as a result of the nested webs of relations that characterise marriage in Dagaaba and similar contexts, female-to-female violence requires critical attention if we are to understand marital violence in these contexts. Finally, in relation to agentic practices amongst the women I worked with, I have shown how both constraints posed by beliefs in supernatural forces and the exogamous marriage arrangement serve as limiting factors. In order to avoid the kind of misdescriptions that Madhok draws our attention to, I argue that in theorising agency in Dagaaba and similar contexts, the role of the aforementioned factors in constraining its exercise require critical attention.

Chapter 6. Performing Femininity in Marriage

All over the world women are expected to act ‘feminine’, though what this is taken to mean differs across cultures and time. However, what appears to cut through discourses on this subject across contexts is how femininity is constituted by the regulatory norms of society, and in the interest of dominant institutions, including patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality¹¹⁹. For instance, Gayle Rubin argues that ‘individuals are engendered in order that marriage be guaranteed’ (1975:180). Thus, for these theorists, femininity is produced and policed to shore up heterosexuality and procreation. This chapter takes the discussion on gender, power relations and agency further by developing an account of Dagaaba notions of femininity. This is achieved by building on analyses in the previous empirical chapters, where I demonstrated the role of Dagaaba exogamous marriage practices in assigning women subordinate positions and creating ambiguous identities. Women within exogamous societies leave their natal kin group and join the husband and his kin. Following from this marriage arrangement, women’s identities are ambiguous, as they belong fully to neither the natal nor the marital families, and it is this position that I argue is so central to the making of women’s subordinate position in Dagaaba settlements. I have also shown in the previous chapters the nature of the violence associated with Dagaaba marriage arrangements and the various power forms and constraints that characterise the marriage space. As in previous chapters, I employ the phrase ‘marriage space’ to denote the physical space of the home and the complexly intertwined networks of relations involving all the actors within that space (see Chapter 4). These networks of relations and power forms complicate the exercise of agency and gender performance. Analyses in the chapter will be informed by the African gender performativity framework I have developed for this study. The framework draws on poststructuralist theories of gender performativity based on discourses on power, gender and agency by such

¹¹⁹ In fact, Rosalind Gill and Christiana Scharff (2011:2) observe that ‘femininity [is] a tightly policed set of practices, dispositions and performances’. See Gayle Rubin (1975), Michel Foucault (1978), Monique Wittig (1980, 1982), Toril Moi (1989), Helene Cixous (1986) and Judith Butler (1999, 2011).

theorists as Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, as well as on debates about postcolonial and African feminisms. Specifically, this chapter focuses on fleshing out my research participants' understandings of in/appropriate ways of performing femininity amongst Dagaaba. This is achieved through examining the regulatory powers—the cultural norms, practices and discourses—that form, sanction and sustain gender identities. In particular, I focus on Dagaaba conceptions of womanhood as expressed in the local concepts of *poge* 'woman', *pogminga* 'ideal woman' and *pog gandao*, 'woman who is more than a man'. Amongst Dagaaba, performing sex-segregated roles within the household, farm and community plays a significant part in sculpting gender identities (see Chapter 4 in the section on the 'marriage space' for a detail discussion of the roles normatively assigned to women and men). Dagaaba notions of femininity and masculinity are closely bound with how in/appropriately these tasks are performed. Thus, although physical appearance and bodily gestures, which appear to be a key focus of Butler and most Western theorists of femininities¹²⁰ are crucial to the gender that Dagaaba women assume, they appear to take a back stage role in Dagaaba constructions of gender identities¹²¹. For instance, whether a female Dagaaba is said to be a *poge*, *pogminga* or *pog gandao* depends on how she is perceived by the evaluators of her conduct in relation to the way she performs the normatively assigned roles (such as tending the farms, making *pito* and managing the home). Thus I examine these normative roles as well as the rewards and sanctions attached to 'doing' them im/properly. This will shed light on context-specific ideas of the un/feminine and on their implications for theorising gender and performativity.

¹²⁰ (See, for example, Halberstam, 1998 and the collection edited by Gill and Scharff, 2011, including Tyler, 2011).

¹²¹ As my analysis below shows, Butler's theorising of gender and subversion is very much premised on sexuality and appearance, eliding home management tasks, which are also gendered in the contexts she writes for, even if they are not coterminous with contexts like that of the Dagaaba (see also Paechter, 2006).

In Chapter 2, I discussed Butler's oeuvre in detail as it relates to this study. I also examined the limitations of some of her assumptions concerning the political potential of performativity of gender in the contexts of northern rural Ghana, and of Ghana and sub-Saharan Africa at large. In that chapter, I developed an account of how Butler's notions of gender and associated identity categories as performative constructs help me make sense of Dagaaba conceptions of the un/feminine. This chapter comprises two sections. In the first, I examine Dagaaba conceptions of femininity. Reading the criteria for attaining the status of a *pogminga*, this study critiques Andrea Behrends' (2002) designation of the *pogminga* as a proper woman. The *pogminga* appears, rather, to be an ideal—something to aspire to. It appears virtually unattainable and, indeed, this is to be expected, as Butler notes. According to Butler (1999), since gender is an imitation of an original, which is itself an illusion, it is always bound to fail. I return to this theory of gender and failure in discussing the implications of the failure to approximate gender norms amongst the women I worked with, building on Saba Mahmood's (2005) study of gender and agency in the piety movement in Egypt.

I subject the abject image of the *pog gandao*, the wilful woman, to a performative analysis in the second section. Drawing inspiration from the re-appropriation and redeployment of queer abjection for the subversion of homophobia and the violence of compulsory heterosexuality, I demonstrate how such naming or shaming into the position of a *pog gandao* serves to hamper initiatives by enterprising and talented women in the pervasively mystical context of Dagaaba. To become a *pog gandao*, it appears, is even to lose one's status in normative gender presentation as a woman; it means to transcend into a realm beyond the masculine. But this *transcendence* is not enviable due to its potential to expose the subject in question to perceived supernatural harm. Furthermore, I explore ways of reclaiming this abject image as a site for undermining female subordination and empowering women for greater social change. Finally, returning to the performativity of gender framework in the conclusion, I explore the extent to which it has been useful in helping us understand Dagaaba conceptions of femininity, as well as

the boundaries of the theory. I also examine the implications of my study for theories of gender in contexts like that of the Dagaaba and beyond.

Furthermore, as I discussed in Chapter 2, both this study and Butler's work are aimed, amongst other things, at subverting the subjection of minority identities and the violence that normative gender assumptions engender for them (1999). Butler seeks to overthrow compulsory heterosexuality as well as to seek the extension of recognition for bodies that are abjected and thus denied legitimacy in normative cultural frames. My study, working within a deeply heteropatriarchal setting, examines how the norms that regulate gender are re-idealised and/or subverted. To this effect, I concentrate my analysis on heterosexual marriage and the categories of the 'feminine' and 'masculine' and, indeed, on what I refer to as the 'beyond woman'—the *pog gandao*¹²². Closely related to the above, I show in this chapter that Butler's notion of gender identities as performative resonates greatly with Dagaaba constructions of femininity as expressed in *poge*, *pogminga* and *pog gandao*. These concepts are very unstable, and a woman may be hailed into one or the other category depending on the specific context and on the judge of her gendered performance. In the following section, I examine Dagaaba conceptions of femininities.

Conceptions of Womanhood

I haven't come across anybody pointing out any woman as a *pogminga* yet. Do you know what we do over here? If someone says my wife is a *pogminga* maybe the man uses the woman like a slave. And even with all that he wouldn't call her a *pogminga*; we don't have them here (Simon, c64, a polygynous man with three wives).

In a way that sits uncomfortably with poststructuralist theories of gender performativity (in which the aim is to challenge compulsory heterosexuality

¹²² This is not to say there is a third gender category, instead, I want to argue that femininity amongst Dagaaba can be understood as constituting a continuum—the ideal woman, the woman and the beyond woman.

because of the violence it exercises on gender dissonant subjectivities), I start this section by observing that Dagaaba ideals of womanhood and femininity appear to be premised on heterosexual marriage. By this I mean that the basic qualification for being admitted into womanhood *is* marriage. To be a woman means to be married, and married to a man. An unmarried female, irrespective of her age, does not customarily get addressed as a woman, as a *pɔge*. When referring to unmarried females or those in their natal settlements, the term *pɔɔyaa*—daughter or girl—is preferred. Indeed, on many occasions my ethnic identity as Frafra generated discussion amongst my research participants. My research participants who referred to me as a ‘Frafra woman’ were often quickly corrected, by those who were more culturally aware, that I was a ‘Frafra girl’ or ‘daughter of Frafra people’ and a ‘Dagao woman’ (because I am married to a Dagao man). Similarly, Behrends (2002:233), who I mentioned earlier, notes that the proper woman ‘has to be properly married’. So, at the very outset we see the central role of heterosexual marriage in forming gender identity in this particular cultural setting.

The Dagaaba conception of ‘woman’—‘pɔge’

Butler’s notion of gender identity as ‘an *effect* of discursive practices’ makes no better sense in any context than amongst Dagaaba (1999:24 original emphasis). As I mentioned earlier, amongst Dagaaba, femininity appears to lie along a range from woman, through ideal woman to beyond woman. Marriage, which I have argued in Chapter 4 constitutes a multi-stage process, functions performatively to fashion out the gender identity of women in Dagaaba societies. This is not to say that the gender identity of Dagaaba children is not created in advance for them, as Paula Ebron (1997) suggests. In an effort to draw a distinction between gendering in West Africa and the global North¹²³, Ebron (2007:177) claims that:

[i]n many places in West Africa, gender is not something that newborns are fully equipped with. The making of women and men is formally performed through age-grade systems that usher children into

¹²³ This comparison in itself is a troubling generalisation.

women and men. Prior to the formal event, children are often viewed as unmarked in any significant way.

Ebron draws inspiration from Butler, yet she does not appear to take into consideration Butler's view that everyone is her gender from the start—that is from the moment they are brought into the domain of culture at birth (1986, 1999, 2011). Secondly, as an illusion, no one can fully embody or be 'fully equipped' with gender. Furthermore, within Dagaaba contexts, and indeed throughout Ghana, this assertion may prove difficult to sustain. Although I argue here that marriage works performatively to produce womanhood, I also would assert that Dagaaba are gendered from the onset. This is because the moment girls are 'brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender' (Butler, 2011:xvii)—'it's a girl' (Butler, 1993b:22)—they are hailed into a gender. According to Butler, this 'naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm' (Butler, 2011:xvii). Subsequently, this interpellation is repeated at various stages throughout her lifetime, to either consolidate or undermine her gender identity (Butler, 1993b, 2011). The norms produce, sustain and regulate her gender identity.

Amongst Dagaaba, following the naming of a girl are a series of performative practices, beginning with dressing and bodily comportments during meals¹²⁴. A young female Dagaaba also performs certain normative tasks such as serving fathers, brothers and uncles at meals, fetching water for them to bathe, and helping her mother as she prepares meals. Some of the girls I encountered in Serekpere started these roles as early as between the ages of four and six. Girls are even expected to assist any man or boy who is performing a 'feminine' role. I witnessed an encounter between Linda (17) and Richmond (19), two apparently unrelated members of Serekpere, at one of the community's boreholes¹²⁵. When I arrived at the borehole to fetch water,

¹²⁴ Customarily, in terms of seating for instance, boys are expected to criss-cross their legs whereas girls should straighten them, or cross one over the other carefully so as not to reveal their undergarments.

¹²⁵ Linda originally comes from Nator, a neighbouring settlement, whilst Richmond is from Serekpere.

Richmond was washing his clothes. Linda arrived shortly afterwards with a basin to fetch water. First, Linda watched from a distance, and smiled intermittently before getting closer to Richmond to assist him with the washing. When I later asked Linda in a conversation why she went to Richmond's aid, she explained: 'if there is a girl, a boy should not wash'. Linda has been socialised to know that it is not culturally appropriate for boys to wash their own clothes, hence her rendering assistance to Richmond. This form of gendered socialisation and action is geared towards preparing the Dagao girl simultaneously for marriage and for entry into womanhood. It may be misleading to think of initiation rites as being what hail individuals into a gender amongst Dagaaba or in West African contexts. Females are gendered at birth, with specific normative expectations as they grow, yet they do not gain automatic entry into womanhood: they have to earn it. Any girl who performs such culturally assigned roles well is commended as being well brought up, and it seems she is on her way to *becoming* a woman. In contrast, any girl who veers from these norms is chastised by both male and female adult members of her family and, indeed, of the settlement. This account resonates with Butler's (1988, 1999) theory of sanctions and rewards for performing gender in/appropriately. The Dagao girl awaits marriage, as I mentioned above, to attain womanhood. If marriage never arrives she may wait as a girl forever.

The Dagaare term for woman is *pɔge* and this is a performative category, created, regulated and constrained by discursive practices (Butler, 2011). According to some of my research participants, *pɔge* means 'cover up' or 'to cover' the man—*dɔɔ*. In the words of one research participant, Nombale (c52), '*pɔge* simply means the back cover of the man ... with the man alone things may not work well so he needs a woman behind him'. Although most research participants could not corroborate this view, Mwinyele (c58), an academy-based respondent, speculated: 'it does make some sense; that the man may feel empty; that he would need a cover; he would need a companion. Whilst he is away [at war] she is taking care of businesses... and even in [his] presence, deficiencies... may be overturned by the efficiencies of the woman...'. Thus, the woman is the backbone and the shield of the

husband and the family, even as she is seen as an outsider. This notion of the woman as a man's cover resonates with Dagaaba notions that the man is expected to take the lead in farm work with the woman following suit. For instance, the man is expected to till the land and the woman to then sow the seeds—'a dɔɔ kuoro ka a pɔge tuuru'. Furthermore, the woman (wife and mother), is expected to cover the man from supernatural harm and shame, rather than expose him to evil persons. Consequently, it becomes easy to understand why an abused woman is expected to maintain silence rather than expose her husband or members of his family to the risk of perceived mystical harm.

According to Butler (1999:xi), 'one is a woman... to the extent that one functions as one within the dominant heterosexual frame and to call the frame into question is perhaps to lose something of one's sense of place in gender'. Functioning within the heterosexual framework means to be gender-conforming. But in Dagaaba societies, functioning within the heterosexual frame is not enough to achieve the status of womanhood; the requirements are much more complex. To be a woman, not only amongst Dagaaba but in many ethnic groups in Ghana, including Frafra, means to have certain virtues. To be a woman means to be humble and to not speak when men speak, and to work tirelessly both on the labour-intensive Dagaaba farms and within the household, without complaining about fatigue (see also Behrends). A woman caters for all the children in the house, including those of her co-wife, without discrimination or complaints. This conception of womanhood plays safely into essentialist accounts with the risk of marginalising and excluding subjectivities that do not conform to its standards, as discussed in Chapter 2. In that chapter I underscored the fact that emphasis on pro-natal, mothering, nurturing and survivalists struggles as the basis for theorising femininity and feminism in Africa (Acholonu, 1995; Mikell, 1997) is potentially oppressive and exclusionary to women who do not identify with these attributes. Nonetheless, analysis here underscores the point that the category of person held by the term 'woman' is not entirely negative or constituted by 'lack' (Butler, 1999:14) in Dagaaba contexts. Even without the qualifier *real* or *proper* in, for instance, the English language, the term woman is marked as

positive. For example, on many occasions Adwoama (c58), one of my research participants, claimed that if someone was looking for a woman who qualified as a woman, they had to come to her section of the settlement. For her, women in the other sections did not qualify as women. In this sense not every female is a woman in the cultural sense.

At a national level, women from opposing political parties in Ghana have often taken to the media to question their female political adversaries' status as women. In this regard, we can see how the category of woman is an embodiment of positive attributes. This Dagaaba, and more generally Ghanaian, notion of the category of woman as already positively marked thus calls into question conceptions of woman as fundamentally negative and constituted by lack. According to some existentialist and psychoanalytic feminists, for instance Monique Wittig (1980), Simone de Beauvoir and Helene Cixous, woman constitutes a lack, against which the masculine gender is differentiated. Indeed, Toril Moi (1989:127) notes: 'as Cixous has shown, femininity is defined as lack, negativity, absence of meaning, irrationality, chaos, darkness—in short, as non-Being'. Moreover, Butler observes that, '[f]or Beauvoir, women are the negative of men, the lack against which masculine identity differentiates itself' (Butler, 1999:14). Rather than being constituted by an absence, negativity or 'lack', the category of woman is complementary to masculine identity, making up for the shortcomings of the man amongst Dagaaba.

The Dagaaba conception of 'ideal woman'— 'pogminga'

Closely related to the notion of *poge* is the concept of *pogminga*. Behrends (2002) is one of the main scholarly sources on the notion of *pogminga*, although her account is based on Dagara, further to the north of the country. Behrends' article draws attention to the tensions that elite Dagara women have to negotiate between their status as professionals, as assertive and confident women in managerial positions, and their gender identities as 'proper women' with the attendant humility and passivity, when dealing with

Dagara men in the national city, Accra. She reports that in dealing with these men in public, the professional women revert to Dagara normative values of humility and subservience so as not to lose their place as proper women. Behrends draws heavily on accounts of urbanised and (highly) educated women who interpret the concept through their perspectives and exposure. However, the views of the *pogminga* that inform the discussion here are those of ordinary rural women and men, the majority of whom are without any formal education.

Pogminga is the conjunction of *pɔge*, woman and *minga*, proper, good or original, and this translation may have informed Behrends' choice of 'proper woman' as the English equivalent. She explains: '... I prefer to employ the terms "proper" or "respectable" since the English term "ideal" has strong connotations of "unattainable" or "impossible"' (Behrends, 2002:252, note 4). Indeed, this is the basis for my opting for the term 'ideal' rather than 'proper' or 'good'. As noted in relation to the concept of *pɔge*, to be a woman is already to be proper, good and/or respectable. The *pogminga* then is a step above the *pɔge*, and from this section's opening quote it appears that the *pogminga* status is unattainable in the same way as other 'ideal' categories. Behrends' own analysis also points to this. For instance, she observes, 'to the women the term implies struggling for a desired status...' (Behrends, 2002:252, note 4). As such, I argue that the *pogminga* is an illusionary identity category. For instance, asking my research participants for examples of individual women who qualify as *pogminne* (plural for *pogminga*) most often elicited laughter and counter questions as to whether there were any *pogminne* alive. The identity of the *pogminga* may be better understood as a becoming that never really materialises, as Butler (1986:35) explains regarding Simone de Beauvoir's (1973:301) famous assertion that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'. For Butler (1999:43), this means that woman is a 'term in process'. It is my understanding that the word 'ideal', underscoring the near impossibility of realising the status of the *pogminga*, is more appropriate.

The major components of the concept of *pogminga*, as described to me by my study participants, are character- and gender role-related. Other attributes include having in one's possession items required for performing funeral and other rituals (such as *bombo*¹²⁶, *dawadawa*¹²⁷, shea butter and traditional brooms and mats) and being a man's preferred wife (the latter has no role in identity formation). As described and imagined, a *pogminga* is a source of inspiration to other women, uniting, and resolving conflicts between, the women within the marriage space. She is a mother to all the young women, young men and children within that space. She is patient, never showing her anger by talking back in a harsh tone; rather, she accommodates everything. She submits to the authority of her husband and all male members of her marital family no matter what their age; she never challenges men or speaks in their presence. A *pogminga*, even if she suffers physical abuse, does not open up to other community members¹²⁸. A *pogminga* is hardworking, yet she does not 'steal' farm produce from the house, even if she is denied food. Rather, if her husband does not provide her with foodstuffs she works hard to provide food for the family. She caters to the needs of her husband's guests, finding ways to provide food for a poor husband's guests and thereby shielding him from shame. She stays in the marriage no matter what happens. Consider the excerpt below from my field note concerning a funeral mass for a deceased woman, Paulina, before her interment in Doung, about 6km from Serekpere:

[...] the priest pontificated: 'our sister whose life we celebrate here today was a *pogminga*. She stayed in the marriage despite all the threats to her life, to a point of death. She stayed because of her children and today we celebrate her.' The priest condemned women who easily abandon their children because their husbands don't take care of them ... 'God made the woman as the man's helper and a helper she should be', he said (January, 2014).

¹²⁶ *Bombo* is a wild tuber crop; its flour is used in most Dagaaba rituals.

¹²⁷ *Dawadawa* is a soup ingredient made from locust beans.

¹²⁸ Albert, a research participant informed me that Takpoma (c45), a battered wife, might qualify as a *pogminga*. His reason was that, although her husband frequently beats her she never talks about it to anyone. I return to Takpoma in Chapter 7, where she finally vents her anger and frustration on a women-friendly setting.

This sermon, in addition to the many Christian sermons I tape-recorded during my fieldwork, appears to reflect the role of the church in reinforcing women's subordination and gendered violence. However, it also corroborates my participants' accounts of who a *pogminga* is: a woman who survives and endures against all costs—a self-sacrificing figure.

In the larger settlement, a *pogminga* is a mother to everyone. She respects, and is well respected by, other community members. She is never seen arguing with them. Where men discuss issues she keeps her distance, only listening, and doing as expected of her without questioning the men. The character of the *pogminga* is unparalleled. Consider the view of Michael, one of my research participants, who described his late mother as a *pogminga*. He explained to me:

my mother ... could brew *pito* and make pottery. Anytime she made the pots, people would come and exchange animals for them. So she had a lot of property, even cows¹²⁹. But, of course, they were for my father. Each time a man wanted to marry within the family or even outside the family and was struggling to pay the bride wealth, my father would use some of the woman's [Michael's mother] resources to pay for him.

For Michael, it is a given that a woman's resources belong to her husband. Although this passage could be dismissed as nostalgia on the part of Michael towards his deceased mother, it does reveal what he, and most of my research participants, take to constitute a *pogminga*. Despite this, perhaps other assessors unrelated to his late mother might not consider her as such, as the opening quote suggests. Also, in a conversation with me, Silvanus (c28 and married to one woman) described an incident involving a woman he considered a *pogminga*:

... this woman can even beat her husband but she allows the man to beat her. And even on one occasion, she was about three to four months pregnant, when the man beat her and this affected her ribs. But when she went to the hospital and was asked about this, she said that she fell [laughs].

¹²⁹ Customarily cows are supposed to be kept by men.

A violent situation with the potential to harm the life not only of a woman but also the foetus she is carrying elicits commendation and laughter¹³⁰. That is a *pogminga*! A *pogminga* is thus a ‘Being’ for others—husband, children and community. To qualify as a *pogminga* is to be *altruistic* or even to lose or compromise one’s sense of independence.

Given this characterisation of what is expected of the *pogminga*, to become a *pogminga* within Dagaaba marriage appears almost impossible. Entry into this category is more tightly policed than entry into any other category discussed here. For instance, Rosema (c56), a widow, informed me in a conversation: ‘... I can’t think of any *pogminga* here. The one you would say is a *pogminga*, if you see her deeds, you would be shocked’. Thus the *pogminga* has to be perfect or near perfect. What is worthy of note is that the concept of *pogminga* is value-based. According to Dakorama (c68), any woman can be either a *pogminga* or a *pog ganda* depending on her relationship to the individual judging her. In this case, we see how tenuous Dagaaba constructions of ideal femininity are (Butler, 1993a, 1999). For anyone to assume the position of an ideal woman or a woman, she has to meet the criteria, and this has the potential to marginalise those who fall outside of them (see analysis in Chapter 2).

I have argued above that the *pogminga* is virtually unattainable; nonetheless, it is so very present. This is because, as I have shown in my discussion, it serves the interest of the dominant institutions and individuals and it is thus in their interest to continue to uphold its (impossible) standards and to use them to evaluate women. This reverberates with feminist notions that femininity, with its attendant attributes of ‘sweetness, modesty, subservience, humility’ (Moi, 1989:123), is instituted by male-centric institutions in the service of male interest. For Butler (1999:xii) the gender norms that regulate femininity are often ‘policed precisely in the service of shoring up heterosexual hegemony’. Interestingly, most of the perspectives on *pogminga* discussed

¹³⁰ This view was not only held by Silvanus but also by most of the men and also the older women I worked with.

here are men's. This is not because women were not asked for their views, but because most of them were less eager than the men to do so, whilst the men were vociferous in articulating their views on what counts as *feminine*. Nevertheless, the perspectives of the women are no less restrictive (see Rosema's view above). Indeed, as one of my research participants, Rev. Bayour, noted, Dagaaba women are socialised into a certain gender with corresponding roles. Consequently, the women themselves are concerned that they might lose their gender identities if they relinquish certain roles. In this case, performing femininity appears to be fulfilling for the women and to not have the opportunity to do this, or to mis-perform, is to risk becoming unfeminine.

The *poge* and *pogminga* categories represent appropriate femininities in Dagaaba settlements. Thus, these categories are used to describe women who conform to the Dagaaba normative expectations, that is, by performing gender in ways that consolidate them, they are hailed into the subject position of *poge*, with *pogminga* being almost unachievable. These are women who do not interrogate the violence and subordination of exogamous marriage practices; hence, they are rewarded with positive designations. To do otherwise, to fail to approximate these norms, to 'disturb' this 'order', as Julia Kristeva (1982:4) suggests of the abject, or to re/claim the position of a speaking subject, is to risk losing one's status in the normative gender presentation, or rather, more appropriately, is to transcend into a 'beyond woman' category. In this sense, femininity can be understood as forming a continuum. At one end is the *pogminga*, the ideal woman, followed by the *poge*, which appears to be positively marked and requires marriage as its basic qualification, and at the other end is the *pog gando*, a stigmatised and marginalised identity. I have argued that the *pogminga* category is virtually unattainable, just like other ideal categories. But, because approximating its requirements serves the interest of dominant groups in society, it is ever-present as a constant foil against which women are measured (and measure each other).

According to Butler, gender is always bound to fail and this failure reinforces gender's illusionary character, whilst the successful imitation of its norms demonstrates gender as fiction. Either way, gender is shown to be an artifice. But in her study of the piety movement in Egypt, Saba Mahmood shows that failure to approximate the religious ideals stipulated in the Quran and other religious repertoire by female subjects is interpreted differently. The female subjects of the piety movement see this as a failure on their part to fully embody Islamic ideals rather than the religious norms governing their practices. Within the context of my study, failure to embody gender norms has two implications. First of all, the female Dagaaba is vilified for lacking 'proper' training. Perhaps her mother failed to teach her how to be/come a woman in marriage. Secondly, the failure to approximate the ideal gender norms and the vilification work in a performative manner to create an identity category, and that is the *pog gandao*. This stigmatised identity, to which I now turn, has the potential to cause linguistic, physical and mystical harm to a woman in marriage.

The abjection of 'the wilful woman'—'pog gandao'

[Naming as *pog gandao*] actually kills [...] women's initiatives. In the communities, once a woman is tagged *pog gandao*, then she just coils back into her shell and so the initiatives that she was bringing along all just die because of the stigma (Diana, 34¹³¹).

I subject Dagaaba conceptions of the *pog gandao*, which I argue constitutes both a queered and an abjected identity within this context, to a performative analysis in this section. The *pog gandao* is a stigmatised term used to refer to women who are thought of as being more than men in their deeds. Drawing on Butler's (1999, 2011) notion of performativity as the repetitive power of discourse to produce that which it names, I argue that the *pog gandao* is a performative category¹³². By naming, within the appropriate context, performatives hail the individual they name into a subject position. That is to say, they form subject positions for individuals. In this sense, speech

¹³¹ Diana is a gender activist who works with a local NGO based in Wa.

¹³² See also Carolyn Pedwell (2011) on analogies as performatives.

functions to create subject positions and gender identities (Althusser, 1972; Butler, 2011). ‘The power of discourse to produce that which it names is thus essentially linked with the question of performativity’, observes Butler (1993b:17). My interest in the abject and the queer is centred mainly on (queer) heterosexuality, that is, heterosexual subjects who perform gender in ways that are transgressive to societal norms. Queerness is not necessarily defined in opposition to heterosexuality; it is, instead, counter- normative (see Thomas, 2000). For instance, Andrew Parker describes queerness as ‘a non-gender-specific rubric that defines itself diacritically not against heterosexuality but against the normative’ (Parker, 1994 in Thomas, 2000: 34, note 2). From this perspective, queerness is ‘a posture of opposition than a simple statement about sexuality’ (Kauffman in Thomas, 2000:12). This differs from the dominant discourses in that, for most theorists, ‘queering’ is about minority sexualities (see for instance Butler, 1999, 2011; Halberstam, 2011). In Serekpere, ‘queer’ subjectivities identify as gender conforming and thus at first appear to be culturally intelligible. Nonetheless, because they traverse the borders of intelligibility, they are repudiated, stripped of their femininity, as it were, queered and abjected. Such stigmatised interpellation as a *pog ganda* hails particular female Dagaaba who are believed by their evaluators to be non-conforming to Dagaaba gender norms into specific subject positions. To be stigmatised as a *pog ganda* within the marriage space, or at a funeral or in other public spaces, is to be at once called into a degraded and an unfeminine identity position. This abjecting interpellation derives its force, like other performatives, from the re-citation of past norms, such that it echoes past derogatory designations (Butler, 1993b, 2011).

Abjection means ‘to cast off, away, or out’ (Butler 1993a:243, note 2). Julia Kristeva writes of the abject as ‘something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us’ (1982:4). The abject in this sense is a part of us that is perceived as disgusting and thus repudiated (Kristeva, 1982). The abject is not ‘an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it an ob-jest, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing

in a systematic quest of desire' (1982:1). Instead, the abject is that which is 'radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses' (1982:2). Kristeva offers repudiating the maternal body, food loathing and the corpse as examples of the abject. Kristeva's theory of the abject is essentially a phenomenological one. That is to say that she accounts for abjection in terms of bodily experiences¹³³. This is less relevant to the form of abjection I am fleshing out here, and indeed, Imogen Tyler (2009) cautions that an uncritical appropriation of Kristeva's version of abjection has the potential risk of reproducing, instead of challenging, the repudiation of the maternal body. But the point I take from Kristeva, as from Butler, as discussed below, is the notions of repudiation and marginalisation that attend abjection. This helps us to understand how strong-willed and assertive Dagaaba women are degraded and stigmatised. Similar to Kristeva, Butler (1999:169) refers to the abject as 'that which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, literally rendered "Other"'. From these psychoanalytical and phenomenological conceptions of the abject, Butler theorises the abjection and repudiation of homosexuality as the founding conditions of sex and gender identities and identifications¹³⁴. According to her, the assumption of sex and the formation of subject positions within the heterosexual frame requires repudiation and abjection of certain beings who are not considered 'subjects'. Thus, the abject constitutes 'those "unlivable" and "uninhabitable" zones of social life' (1993a:xiii). The 'exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of the abject beings, those who are not yet "subjects", but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject' (1993a:xiii). According to Butler, 'the abjection of homosexuality' is thus the necessary condition for the formation of the heterosexual subjects' sex and gender identities (1993a: 74).

Writing about abjection, Tyler (2009:87) explains it as not only a degrading process, but also the subjective experience of that process. In this regard,

¹³³ See also Tyler (2009).

¹³⁴ The psychoanalytic notion of identification as 'the process by which one comes to identify with someone or something... the object that has been lost... through introjection or incorporation' is central to Butler's account of the homosexual abject (Salih, 2002:53).

abjection includes repulsive reactions, hate speech and physical violence, as well as the ‘social experience’ of these actions. Butler’s accounts graphically show the horrors associated with this social experience of abjection (see Butler, 1997b, 1999, 2004b). Following Butler and Tyler, I suggest that the marginalisation of assertive women into the position of *pog gandao* constitutes abjection. This is because the *pog gandao* attracts stigma and violence that are, as it were, similar to those of the figure of the homosexual they outline. The kinds of stigma and violence I refer to here include name-calling and perceived supernatural attacks and I elaborate on these below. As Kristeva (1982:4) notes, the abject ‘...disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules.’ Similarly, as I show below, the *pog gandao* traverses acceptable practices and standards.

Historically, the term ‘queer’ has been used as a pejorative designation for (minority) sexualities that deviate from the heterosexual matrix¹³⁵. *The Century Dictionary* ([1889]1914) refers to queer as ‘[a]ppearing, behaving, or feeling otherwise than is usual or normal’. My appropriation of queer is based on this notion of non-conformity. Queering has been the source of linguistic, physical and emotional violence towards minority sexualities across many cultures (see Stanley, 1991; Butler, 1993a). It would later on be mobilised and re-appropriated by diverse actors, including Queer Nation, ACT UP, drag queens and many non-heterosexual platforms as a site for activism, politics and theorising, all geared towards undermining the violence of compulsory heterosexuality (Butler, 1993b, 2011; Blencowe, 2013). Butler asserts:

The term ‘queer’ has operated as one linguistic practice whose purpose has been the shaming of the subject it names or, rather, the producing of a subject *through* that shaming interpellation. ‘Queer’ derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult (1993b:18 original emphasis).

Queering thus functions performatively to produce and constrain the subject it names. In a similar vein, the *pog gandao* designation produces its subject ‘...*through* that shaming interpellation’ and this brings linguistic, physical

¹³⁵ See Butler (1986, 1999, 2011), Mary McDonald (2002) and Claire Blencowe, 2013).

and perceived mystical tortures to the subject so formed. The *pog gandao* thus fits into the categorisation of the abject and the queer; she is a gender bender. Indeed, she is not even a ‘masculine’ woman or a ‘phallicized “dyke”’ (Butler, 1993a:61); she is beyond the masculine. This is because to become a *pog gandao* is to transcend into a realm that is even beyond the masculine category. Yet this is not a desirable achievement due to the cultural and mystical repercussions that attend this ‘ascension’. In what follows, I examine the making of a *pog gandao*, the adverse effects of such stigmatisation and ways of reclaiming this abjection as a site for empowering women for greater change.

Pog gandao stands for *poge*, ‘woman’ and *gandao*, ‘more than a man’. *Pog gandao* is a hyperbolic designation used to describe strong-willed and assertive women. These strong-willed women perform their gender in ways that are thought to exceed what is normatively expected of women. A *pog gandao* thus traverses the boundaries of acceptable norms discussed in relation to *pogminga*, and to shame her into compliance with the norms is to designate her in such exaggerated terms. According to the women and men I worked with, a *pog gandao* submits to no man’s authority. She conducts herself as though she ‘owns herself’¹³⁶. For most of my research participants, the word ‘control’ was crucial in defining a *pog gandao*; she is one who, instead of being controlled, is independent and/or controls her husband. Citing examples of *pog gandaba*, Silvanus (c28), informed me in a conversation: ‘you know the woman [Afua] is now a politician and gets money. So she believes no man can control her anymore ...if she says this, that is what would happen. Although she is living in the house of a man, she has taken the authority of the man’. Because Afua insists on making her own decisions, she is perceived to have usurped the man’s authority. Clearly, to be assertive and hardworking is to pose threats to the status quo of dominant male authority and control. Therefore, to contain the woman, or rather to curtail her prowess, is to shame her into yielding her dexterities and supposed insubordination.

¹³⁶ As the men pay bride wealth for the women during marriage, it is expected that they are her new owners.

This shaming takes the form of associating her with the almost impossible in that context; a category that transcends her gender, but also transcends the gender of men. Diana, a gender activist in Wa, explained the *pog gandao* concept to me in an interview:

It is generally a term used to describe women who want to go out of the norm; if a woman was assertive they would refer to her as a *pog gandao*. And if a woman was able to beat her husband she would also be tagged a *pog gandao*. But, generally, women who will not take the continuous intimidation and want to break out of that circle of subordination are usually tagged *pog gandaba*.

This marginalisation, it appears, is employed as a strategy to mask the oppressors' own vulnerability to threats of emasculation by the wilful woman's dexterity. Consequently, the way to curb this assertiveness and prowess and the threats they pose to masculine authority is to shame the women into giving up their abilities and hard work. The *pog gandao* designation, echoes with the 'queering' and abjection of 'the homosexual' as discussed by Butler. In both instances the subject is queered, derided and even injured, physically and/or linguistically, because s/he transgresses the normative gendered subject.

Jacobma (c72) is a widow, stigmatised as a *pog gandao*. In a conversation she explained to me:

[...] because a situation would have gone bad but you didn't allow that to happen, they would insult you, that is the meaning of *gandao* [more than a man]. Otherwise you have no bows and arrows; neither do you have a machete, axing people. But because you are strong... or maybe you should have suffered disgrace but since you haven't, you are then more than a man, which is my flagship insult here... if there is a problem I don't run to people for help ...before you realise it, I would have salvaged the situation ...am I not a *gandao*? ... meaning you should resign yourself to fate and be crying everywhere ...or even, begging beans and guinea corn all over the place [to feed your children], but you do none of those ... aren't you a *gandao*? ... if you got a little misunderstanding with anyone, they would say you are a *gandao*.... in the community, who doesn't respect people. You don't have regard for men, otherwise you wouldn't solve your own problems

Jacobma's experience makes an interesting case for my analysis because her 'obstinance' is believed to have engendered dire repercussions. First of all,

when her husband died in the late 1970s, she was not prepared to marry any of his kin men¹³⁷; instead she preferred to live in her marital settlement as a single woman. This, according to her, caused a tempest in the settlement and, unable to convince her to yield, or rather *shame* her into yielding, her stubbornness, the elders of the settlement summoned her agnatic kin to impress upon her that she must follow the norm, and not set a bad precedent in the settlement. Her refusing to remarry would, the elders feared, show future widows that resisting widowhood marriage was possible. According to her, as the pressures began to mount from both her natal and marital families, she bowed to it, by marrying her late husband's cousin.

Secondly, Jacobma gave birth to 11 children. But, of these, six have died under a variety of inexplicable circumstances, according to both her and other research participants. Such inexplicable deaths of a woman's children, Dagaaba believe, can be caused by the mystical power of witches and *juju* holders in the marital family who may wish to hurt the *pog gandao* for her stubbornness. This is also to drum into her that a woman is incapable of providing supernatural protection for her children; she needs a man. Jacobma's biography and perspectives thus offer interesting insights, which are necessary for understanding the making of and the situation of the *pog gandao*. In the conversation from which the above extract was taken, Jacobma revealed to me her anger, sadness and suicidal thoughts over the loss of the most productive of her children.

In the case of Adwoama¹³⁸, discussed below, in 2012 a snake entered her room as she was sleeping and bit her. According to her, as orthodox medicine failed, her natal family turned to the supernatural, and the gods revealed that the snake was sent by a community member to eliminate her for farming 'like a man'¹³⁹. Thus, for working hard, 'like a man', Adwoama deserved to die. According to her, but for the intervention of her natal settlement she would

¹³⁷ Amongst Dagaaba, a widow is normatively expected to marry one of her late husband's younger brothers or cousins so as to continue to live in the house legitimately.

¹³⁸ Adwoama is thought of by members of Serepere as a *pog gandao* par excellence.

¹³⁹ In Serepere, where men cultivate, on average, less than four acres, cultivating six acres, as Adwoama did, definitely raises eyebrows.

have died. During my fieldwork, whilst the wound was visibly healed, the ‘snake’ bike had left Adwoama unable to farm productively as the pain occasionally return. From these exemplars, we see the physical and perceived mystical injuries that being stigmatised as *pog gando* may engender.

The ignominy and dangers of being abjected into the unenviable status of a *pog gando* is thought to be so dire that, of all the women I worked with, not one of them welcomed such a designation. But this is to be expected, as Kristeva notes: no one wants to be abject. Indeed, because of a fear of such naming, talented women have often given up the idea of venturing into any activities that have the potential to expose them to fame. We can better understand the dangers of this abjection if we consider that the spectre of the *pog gando* haunts the daughters of any woman so named, even in their marital settlements. Their identities are those of a *pog gando*, and so are the identities of their daughters. This stigmatisation then becomes a whole cycle, spanning generations, with the consequence that prospects for marriage might be limited. To put this in perspective, consider an encounter I witnessed between Adwoama and her daughter, Matilda (19). Adwoama was scolding Matilda who returned to the settlement after she had left for her boyfriend’s settlement without Adwoama’s permission. As she nagged her daughter at the top of her voice about her conduct, Adwoama added: ‘the stigma any daughter of mine should attract is to be called a *pog gando*’s daughter and not to be called a promiscuous woman’s daughter. I am a *pog gando* but not a useless woman!’ Adwoama interprets Matilda’s going to her boyfriend’s settlement for a number of days as being ‘promiscuous’ and ‘useless’. Indeed, many women of Adwoama’s generation will find this sort of behaviour repulsive. Thus, for Adwoama, she can account for the stigma of being shamed as a *pog gando*, which she has accepted, somewhat angrily and sarcastically, but not of promiscuity.

This affirmation, but also repudiation, shows us the far-reaching consequences of the stigma attached to being called a *pog gando*. It may also be seen as Adwoama linguistically performing resistance to such a shaming designation. But, importantly, there are prospects in Adwoama’s assertion for

re-appropriating this concept for empowering women. To be a *pog gandao* is not to be useless and this resonates, as it were, with the view of Erasong (c68), a male sectional leader at a community forum organised to bring my fieldwork to an end. Erasong observed: ‘we do not talk badly about the *pog gandao*, although her deeds indicate that she is one. This is because one day she may use her character to solve a problem in the family for everyone to see that she is indeed a *pog gandao*. The *pog gandao* can be of use’. From these two views we see that, despite the stigma, the *pog gandao* notion suggests productivity. I return to this shortly, but now I draw my discussion on *poge*, *pogminga* and *pog gandao* to a close.

The contradiction found in Dagaaba cultures that value hard work is noteworthy, that is, the Dagaaba normative expectations of hard work from the *poge/pogminga* on the one hand, and the shaming of the hardworking and strong-willed woman on the other. The values traditionally thought of as admirable are abjected in the case of the *pog gandao* and then become the basis for various sorts of linguistic violence with the potential for mystical and physical injuries. It seems the issue with the *pog gandao* is not her hard work or talents; the independence of her mind and decisions are the source of threats to male authority. As Diana’s quote above suggests, such negative interpellations work to frustrate women’s initiatives, thereby serving as barrier to women fully exploring their potentials and mobilising for social transformation. By potentials, and in the context of Serekpere, I am referring to women who have no formal education whatsoever and yet are endowed with unparalleled abilities to mobilise and to spearhead the kind of innovative initiatives that are required to bring about greater improvement for themselves and their families. But women mobilising for change is imperative, as in many Dagaaba settlements they have become the main breadwinners.

In the face of increased climate variability and its attendant crop failure, women often have to look for alternative means of providing food for their families, through such economic activities as the tedious and laborious tasks of charcoal burning and of picking shea nuts and *dawadawa* seeds for sale, or for processing into butter and *dawadawa*, respectively, for sale (see a woman

burning charcoal in figure 8). Also, following on from this crop failure, Dagaaba men often migrate to interior villages in the forest regions of southern Ghana to do menial work in the off-farm season. Thus, the importance of harnessing Dagaaba women's potentials for greater change cannot be overestimated. Despite this, strong-willed and talented women are often stigmatised and, through fear, not only of losing their 'proper gender' (Butler, 1993b:27) but of the perceived mystical consequences, most of these women give up their efforts and their struggle to make changes in their lives and communities. In this sense, I argue that the shaming interpellation works as a counter to self-realisation and to greater social change. Notwithstanding these constraints, I suggest that there are potentials for exploiting this marginalised identity category to empower Dagaaba women and, in the final section of this chapter, I explore these opportunities.



Figure 8: Woman of Serepere burning charcoal

Redeploying the abject image of the pog gandao

‘Queer’, as a term for stigmatising, deriding and injuring those individuals who are gender nonconforming, has been reclaimed, and redeployed to a site for positive action and affirmation, as well as progressive politics (Butler, 1999, 2011; Blencowe, 2013). In relation to undermining the violence of compulsory heterosexuality for instance, Butler (1993b:23) writes:

Paradoxically, but also with great promise, the subject who is ‘queered’ into public discourse through homophobic interpellations of various kinds *takes up or cites* that very term as the discursive basis for an opposition. This kind of citation will emerge as *theatrical* to the extent that it *mimes and renders hyperbolic* the discursive convention that it also *reverses*. The hyperbolic gesture is crucial to the exposure of the homophobic ‘law’ which can no longer control the terms of its own abjecting strategies [original emphasis].

In Butler’s terms, parodic and hyperbolic imitation of the very terms that engender injury and violence is crucial, that is, performing gender norms in ways that exaggerate them thereby throwing into relief notions of gender as an interior reality. This is necessary to reveal gender as a masquerade and to expose the fragility of the norms that govern it, and this revealing and exposing is important for undermining the violence against gender different subjectivities. The moment drag passes as such reinforces gender as imitable and thus raises questions regarding accounts that naturalise gender. Indeed, not only has Butler engaged theorising as a strategy for subverting the violence of compulsory heterosexuality; she performs resistance publicly by affirming the terms that marginalise normatively non-conforming subjectivities. In an interview, Butler recounts how she intimidates her potential intimidator by asserting her gender identity¹⁴⁰. Her theories and activism are enabled by the context; the context makes it possible to ‘shock’ her assailant (see another example and analysis of Butler’s privileged positioning in Chapter 2). But in contexts outside Europe and North America, and specifically in contexts like Ghana, with dire consequences for dissident behaviours, as I turn to shortly, such replication and proliferation of injury or harassment, the expressive mode of exercising agency and subversion is

¹⁴⁰ See Butler in an interview entitled ‘Your Behavior Creates Your Gender’ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bo7o2LYATDc> (Accessed: 06/06/2014).

critically constrained. In Ghana for instance, for the homosexual, to dare to affirm her/his identity like Butler does is to literally sign her death warrant. Imagine that if suspicion of individuals' non-conforming sexuality alone is enough to elicit lynching, open disclosure or affirmation, not to mention 'hyperbolic repetition', is potentially suicidal¹⁴¹.

In the case of the *pog gandao*, the injuries attached to the stigma are not only physical or emotional; they are also understood to be mystical. As a result of the pervasiveness of the belief in supernatural power forms and their role in shaping agency, as discussed in Chapter 5, activism and theorising that privilege action-biased modes of resistance, as Sumi Madhok (2013) notes, may be constrained. This is not to suggest that the parodic proliferation of drag is without challenges. I am critically aware of the horrendous violence exacted on gender dissonant identities. Nonetheless, I wish to underscore the theory's limitations in a context that is different in many respects from its North American contexts. For instance, the woman marginalised as *pog gandao* may not readily affirm, 'I am a *pog gandao*' or, like Queer Nation, say, 'We're Here/We're Queer/Get Used to It' (quoted in Stanley, 1991). Diana puts this aptly: 'it is going to be quite difficult to get women willing to kind of repeat ... to be able to find a woman to go out there and say "if you call me a *pog gandao* I will do things to show that I am a *pog gandao*", is going to be really difficult'. This difficulty stems from the negative repercussions associated with such action-biased exercise of agency and subversion.

Despite the limitations observed above, I explore ways to redeploy the *pog gandao* concept for progressive use. If to be *pog gandao* is to be wilful, hardworking, self-sufficient and a talented singer¹⁴², if it is to have the ability to salvage situations within the marital family, as Erasing's quote above notes, then I suggest that there is usefulness in being a *pog gandao*. If these

¹⁴¹ In Ghana, in recent times, several men suspected to be gay have been threatened and/or lynched by angry mobs in Accra. See: <http://www.gaystarnews.com/article/muslim-youths-lynch-gay-man-ghana-and-are-still-hunting-his-lover270514> (Accessed: 06/01/2014).

¹⁴² In Serekpere, most of the women described to me as *pog gandaba* are talented singers capable of singing Dagaaba dirges and praise songs.

attributes are the basis for female subjects failing to pass as women, a feminist perspective might, for a start, be to encourage the '[p]ractice of more failure' (motto of the LTTR collective quoted in Halberstam, 2011:24). There is certainly an opportunity to celebrate this abject identity and redeploy it as an empowering and liberatory site. One way to enhance the possibilities of redeploying the concept might be for women stigmatised as *pog gandaba* to affirm and appropriate it in their everyday lives. For instance, in spite of the repercussions discussed above, in her anger and disgust at her daughter's 'promiscuity', Adwoama affirms, or rather re-echoes, that she is a *pog gandao* and not a useless woman. A performative analysis of this might be to read it as repetition of the terms of her injury as a way of undermining them. Indeed, regarding the homosexual queer and other marginalised identities, Butler (1993b:20) suggests: '[l]aying claim to such terms in reverse will be necessary to refute homophobic deployments of the terms in law, public policy, on the street, in "private" life'. Similarly, if even a few of the women stigmatised as *pog gandaba* lay claim to it in positive sense, it might become less effective as a means of injury over time. Furthermore, it might be useful to emphasis and project the wilful woman image, embracing the shaming designations as well, as an attitude required for effective mobilisation for community development, particularly in Dagaaba contexts. But this is not to suggest that these attributes should become the 'essence' of Dagaaba womanhood. As I argued in Chapter 2, I am critically aware of the potential of such reductive theorising to marginalise female subjects who do not embody such strong-willed attributes and/or take pride in being *feminine*. What I am seeking to underscore here is that such positive features should not be the basis for disarming and/or injuring women who embody them.

Closely related to the above, in order to open up possibilities (Butler, 1999) by way of opening up what counts as femininity, it may be productive for Dagaaba gender scholars and activists to pay attention to the marginalising, exclusionary and threatening power of reductive notions of femininity as reflected in *poge* and *pogminga*. That is to say, to how the pressure to approximate the gender ideals is subordinating, not to mention the fatal

consequences for the so-called failed subject. Thus, rather than aspiring to fully embody the norms, which is a Sisyphean task as I have shown, drawing inspiration from Butler, Dagaaba women can perhaps begin to assess critically the norms, and whose interest embodying them serves. Such endeavours elsewhere have unmasked the male-centric institutions and interests with which societal norms are vested¹⁴³. This awareness may yield or accommodate non-normative femininities, a necessary step towards empowering women for greater social change at the local level.

Finally, the case of Daniel, a so-called *doo na poge*, ‘man like a woman’, in Serekpere, has lessons for the abjected women. Throughout my stay in the settlement, a junior high school pupil, Daniel (c18), was often cited as an example of a *doo na poge*. This is because Daniel performs tasks customarily assigned to females, such as washing clothing, fetching water with basins, and cooking. On occasion, Daniel is marginalised for behaving ‘like a girl’. Regarding his peers who tease him, Daniel informed me in a conversation: ‘I always tell them to mind their own businesses’. This is his way of deflecting the stigma of abjection and containing the pressure to conform to Dagaaba normative expectations for men instead of bowing to it. Similarly, as feminist theorists and activists working in Dagaaba and similar settings, it might be productive for us to encourage Dagaaba women at the grassroots to deflect or discount the stigmatisation. But it is important to acknowledge that the challenges faced by a teenage male member of the settlement such as Daniel, are different from those of a woman in marriage (an ‘outsider’), as he enjoys not only male, but ethnicity-related, privileges. Nonetheless, Diana agrees with this strategy of overlooking the stigma attached to the *pog gandao* identity. According to her, ‘it is possible to encourage the women to come to an understanding that whether you are stigmatised as a *pog gandao* or not, once you are convinced of the steps you are taking, it is better to go ahead. Of course, not all of them will turn around quickly but I believe that if the encouragement can continue the few women who will take the lead will show

¹⁴³ (See Moi, 1989; Wittig, 1982, 1993; Butler, 1999, 2011).

the way'. This has some potential for overcoming the stigma of the abjection. As Diana notes, if a few women manage to overcome the fears associated with mystical insecurities, others may follow suit.

A potential challenge lies in the power of the regulatory norms to install worldviews into the oppressed. For instance, reading Foucault on regulation and subjection, Butler (2004b:41) notes: 'regulatory power not only acts upon a pre-existing subject but also shapes and forms that subject'. Thus, the regulatory norms and the male-centric institutions work in the oppressed to create a certain desired self and to lose it might seem like losing one's life¹⁴⁴. In this sense, repudiating or deflecting the ideal identities produced for women may be a challenging task. Also, in relation to 'the homosexual', Butler argues that s/he does not necessarily have the 'signifying power' that is available to 'the heterosexual' to effectively abject the latter (Butler, 2011:75). In a similar vein, the *pog ganda* is critically constrained by the regulatory powers with regard to effectively repudiating ideal femininities. Nonetheless, the redeployment is a crucial starting point if Dagaaba women are ever going to be able to assume the position of 'authoritative speaking subjects' (Wittig, 1993 cited in Butler, 1999:147) and speak in ways that matter, but also disrupt reductive notions of femininity because of their potentiality for harm. I have explored ways to re-appropriate the abjected category of the *pog ganda* as a site for feminist politics, empowering women for social change. Despite the constraints in regard to male and perceived supernatural power, as well as women's specific position in exogamous marriage arrangements (as 'outsiders'), I have argued that this deployment endeavour is possible, even if very challenging.

¹⁴⁴ Whereas the *pog ganda* risks being stigmatised by both women and men, it is apparent, from my participant observation data, they were in actual fact stigmatised more by men, who often articulated their views on this subject matter vociferously. Furthermore, only men appeared to be imbued with the authority to 'judge' women's gendered presentation and conduct in everyday discourses and in public places such as funeral grounds. Where women judged other women as *pogandoba*, it was through the grapevine and this was not very common.

Conclusions

Overall, this chapter sheds light on the complex nature of femininity amongst the Dagaaba I worked with, which diverges significantly from dominant Western notions and values attached to femininities. Specifically, I have demonstrated that conceptions of femininity in Dagaaba settlements are premised on performing gender-segregated roles within the marriage space, in community-wide tasks and in farm-related work, which are all divided along gender lines. By paying attention to how female Dagaaba perform these roles, I have shown gender identity in that context to be contingent on the acts, the setting, and the evaluators of the acts. In this regard, theories of gender performativity reverberate immensely with the Dagaaba conception of femininity. For instance, whether a female Dagaaba is hailed into the position of an ideal woman, a woman or is stigmatised into a beyond woman category depends on the context, how she performs the normative roles assigned to her and the judge(s) of her gendered performances¹⁴⁵. Success in embodying the gender norms, I have argued, functions performatively to install ideal gender identity, the *pogminga*, for female subjects. But, following Butler's (1999, 2011) notion that ideal gender norms are bound to fail, I have shown this category to be virtually unattainable.

The gendered performances under consideration here are distinct from those of Butler, and those that most other theorists of femininity in the global North are focusing on. Dominant notions of femininities currently appear to be tethered to visible and expressive forms such as dressing, bodies and gestures. Thus, it makes sense for theorists like Butler and Esther Newton (1972) to argue that drag and cross-dressing can fully subvert the gender binary and throw into relief notions of gender as an inner core. However, in the absence of such cross-dressing and, for instance, passing as queer, which appear to reflect Western, industrialised and even urban norms of gender and queer

¹⁴⁵ As with the notion of *pogandao*, the men were more eager and excited about discussing what counts as in/appropriate femininities.

subversion, this metaphor may become difficult to sustain as my material from Serekpere shows. For instance, as discussed earlier, according to Butler (1999, 2011) gender is always bound to fail, and indeed ought to fail. This failure to fully embody the gender norms goes on to reinforce gender as a phantasm. Yet, success on the part of drag to approximate gender norms also reinforces claims of gender as fiction. But this theory of failure to approximate the ideal gender norms has different implications for contexts like the Dagaaba's. In relation to Dagaaba women, failure to approximate the ideal norms of marriage may be interpreted as resistance in the sense of Judith Halberstam's theory of 'shadow feminism'. Halberstam (2011:4) describes 'shadow feminism' as not 'becoming, being, and doing but of shady, murky modes of undoing, un-becoming, and violating'. Thus, failure in the Dagaaba context both violates the ideal norms and threatens their sustenance. But for the people of Serekpere, this failure also means that the female has not been properly trained and, in rare cases, women have been returned to their natal families to learn how to perform marriage properly. Also, this failure to effectively approximate the gender norms automatically functions in a performative manner to create a beyond woman identity category for the female subject.

Thus, in this case neither failure nor success appears to instantiate gender's illusionary character. The difficulty here appears to be Butler's narrow focus on desire and dressing. As Carrie Paechter (2006:257) rightly observes: '[t]his seems to exclude much of what is stereotypically considered to be feminine. Such desire is surely of limited forms of femininity such as those parodied and performed by drag queens'. Nonetheless, if we shift our focus away from drag, but consider gender 'as radically independent of sex' (Butler, 1999:10) and as performative, that is, produced by the 'reiterative power of discourse' to form and constrain that which it names (Butler, 1993a:xii), then we can see the illusionary character of Dagaaba gender identities. The possibility of a Dagaao woman being hailed into different identity positions by different actors and at different times, and of a man being seen as 'man like a woman', means it is possible for a man to be like a woman, and perhaps vice versa. Thus, in view of the centrality of sex-segregated roles in constructing gender identities

amongst Dagaaba, it may be useful for contemporary theorising of gender and performativity in such contexts to extend the focus from the expressive modes to capture the non-expressive ones. By paying attention to sex-segregated roles within the marriage space and in community life, gender identities as constructed by Dagaaba and similar settlements may be better understood.

I have also demonstrated that the category of woman in Serekpere is positively marked. Thus, to be a woman means to be proper and good already. In this sense, existential and psychoanalytic conceptions of womanhood as ‘negative’ and constituted by ‘lack’, against which the masculine gender realises himself, appear limited in Dagaaba and Ghanaian contexts. Dagaaba ideals of womanhood, as I understood them, are complementary, making up for the shortfalls of the man. Failure to embody the gender ideals, which qualifies females for a place in the gender presentation, is a threat to femininity. Thus, a female Dagaaba who is not able to approximate the norms runs the risk of losing her gender, but also, is automatically shamed into a category beyond normative genders—*pog gandao*. Based on my analysis, I argue that femininity amongst Dagaaba can be understood as forming a continuum, ranging from the ideal woman, through woman to beyond woman—*pogminga*, *poge* and *pog gandao* respectively.

Finally, I have illustrated that the *pog gandao* is an exaggerated and stigmatised identity category used to refer to strong-willed Dagaaba women. This hyperbolic abject identity has far-reaching consequences for the failed subject, including sometimes even death. As a designation for wilful women, one might expect it to be embraced by anyone so named. But it is abhorred for its potential to engender harm for the subjects it forms through the shaming interpellations. Consequently, the women who are queered often yield their efforts to make a difference. In this sense, I argue that this stigmatising interpellation functions as a counter to change. The shaming interpellation appears to be the oppressors’ most effective strategy against wilful women. Gender activists like Diana, as a result of the social and cultural capital

available to them—formal education and working for a reputable local private organisation—are able, even if with some difficulties, to wish such shaming designations away and continue to focus on the labour of activism and of building women’s capacity for politics and social change in the male-dominant northern Ghanaian settings. Like the homosexual, who over time has come to embrace this abjection positively, it might take some time and effort for Dagaaba women whose identities are formed through such stigmatised designations to assert and affirm this identity. Thus, any redeployment endeavour has to be gradual.

My analysis has also drawn out the similarities and dissonances between the *pog gandao* and the homosexual queer. Both identities are queered and abjected because they expose the fragility of the norms governing gender. Thus to contain them is to shame them into particular degrading identities—‘uninhabitable’ zones, as Butler (1993a) notes. For both concepts, these shaming interpellations have not been without dire consequences, including linguistic and physical injuries. For the homosexual subject, to fail to conform to the norms is also to risk being pathologised and to face calls for medical ‘corrections’, so as to be normalised (Butler, 1993a). As Dagaaba life is inherently woven with beliefs in the supernatural, the *pog gandao* for her part risks not only physical and linguistic but mystical harm. Mystical harm, as I have demonstrated, serves as a major threat that prevents females who are stigmatised as *pog gandaba* from affirming this designation as a way to undermine the stigma or reclaim it for politics. Nevertheless, I have shown that, there are possibilities to reclaim this abject identity for women’s empowerment.

Chapter 7. Performing Resistance in Marriage

[...] I don't agree with them! Both the men and women were pretending. Why should only the woman be blamed for infidelity? Where were the elders when he [her husband] beat me up, he chased me outside, threw me on a heap of sand resulting in a twisted foot [pointing to her foot]? He chased me with two children away even threatening to kill them so that I'll have no reason to come back here. He was here [in the settlement] enjoying sex with his [second] wife. Why should a man chase a woman away for almost twenty years and maintain his [other] wife, fucking her but expecting the woman to go and close her thighs? I will also fuck and fuck again [pointing to her pudendum]! Damn the gods, damn *moro*! (Fieldnotes, July 2014)

The above excerpt captures powerful sentiments that challenge dominant forms of power, including the power of males and of the androcentric gods. The sentiments also reflect the violence, repression and control these power forms exercise over women's sexuality and very being. The woman speaking, Pereemabile, who was separated from her husband although they lived in the same house, was violently driven out of her marital home in the 1990s (according to her and corroborated by other members of the settlement), with her husband threatening to kill their two children so that she would have no reason to return to the marital settlement. Pereemabile's beating and subsequent ejection were provoked by her refusal to give an African cloth (bought by her husband) to her junior co-wife. According to Pereemabile, all of this—the denial of food, frequent beatings and the violent removal—took place within the marital space. The elders, her husband's father and mother (and the gods) all looked on, unconcerned. Ostensibly, these actors reneged on their normative responsibility to call her husband to order.

My encounter with Pereemabile took place a day after the community forum I held to draw my fieldwork to a close. As Pereemabile was one of my key informants, I had gone to her house to seek her views regarding the forum on the previous night. She was pounding *dawadawa* outside her compound when I picked up a pestle and joined her in the process. As we pounded, we talked about the processes involved in making *dawadawa*, but then I asked for her

impression of the forum and she snapped and the tone of her voice changed. Her anger was visibly present as she articulated her frustration regarding the contradictions surrounding adultery and the machinations of the gods. In a culture where sexuality is rarely discussed, I was surprised to hear her say she would ‘fuck’, and her pointing to her pudendum shocked me. Pereemabile’s frustration and anger was a reaction to the dominant view expressed at the forum the night before that no matter what a man does to his wife she has no right to have sex with another man, even if she is outside the marital settlement. According to most of the women and men present at the forum, including Pereemabile’s estranged husband (who, indeed, articulated his views on this matter very strongly, as though the forum was an opportunity to tell Pereemabile off), if a woman is evicted from the marriage by her husband she should either remarry or no longer have sex. I return to this later, but I have chosen to begin the chapter with Pereemabile’s words because of the insights they offer into the issues of domination (including mystical domination), agency and resistance. These themes are central to this chapter and to the thesis as a whole.

In this final empirical chapter, I examine context-specific practices of resistance, that is, strategies that are apposite to Dagaaba marriage life. Since I have already examined the nature of power and domination in that context, this chapter focuses mainly on resistance practices. My analysis here aims to demonstrate that in spite of the violence associated with exogamous marriage, the ambiguous identities women inhabit and the seemingly insurmountable constraints, including mystical power forms, that Dagaaba women find themselves under, they exercise resistance in ways that defy straightforward explanations. By their acts of resistance, these women demonstrate that it is possible to challenge marital violence and gendered subordination despite the potential risks. The strategies I analyse are distinctive in the sense that, besides targeting male power, which is the focus of most of the discourses on gender and resistance (see Abu-Lughod, 1985, 1990; Seymour, 2006), they are exercised within a context in which the belief in mystical forces such as *juju*, witchcraft and the gods is pervasive. The supposed pervasiveness of

these supernatural powers leads to what I have described in this study as ‘mystical insecurities’, the uncertainties that are associated with the belief that by being in the limelight one may be exposed to supernatural forces within the marriage space or in the wider community. The forms of resistance practices performed, and thus under consideration in this study, are, above all, sensitive to that context, and as such do not often engender repercussions that could upset the network of relations that constitute the marriage space. The relevance of this endeavour—my focus on the complex nature of the resistance acts performed—can be better understood if we consider that in public discourse and acts Dagaaba women often refer to themselves as powerless and weak, and thus as unable to fight marital violence. They often attribute this vulnerability to the specific arrangement of exogamous marriage practices, which requires that upon marriage a woman move to live with her husband and his agnatic kin. A Dagaaba woman in marriage is therefore seen, to some extent, as an outsider in the midst of people who may not necessarily be her advocates in times of need. Thus, in daily life, the woman in marriage has to be conscious of this vulnerability. Given these framing issues, my analysis will draw attention to the complex, ambivalent and context-specific nature of resistance exercised by Dagaaba women, that is, how the women protect their interests in marriage within the context of the aforementioned constraints. This will facilitate a better understanding of resistance practices in this and similar contexts, since no such literature exists, despite the overwhelmingly large number of studies on resistance. Also, I argue that overt forms of resistance to marital violence and to the subjugation of women, which are privileged in the academic discourses on agency and resistance, are critically constrained by their potential to endanger women’s lives. Finally, I will draw attention to how interpretations of mystical power constrain resistance practices amongst Dagaaba. Based on this, I will propose that critical attention be paid to the belief in supernatural factors because of both the active role these factors play in de/authorising certain forms of resistance and the supposed punishment they exact on women who exercise resistance overtly.

This chapter is made up of two interrelated parts. In the first section, I discuss discourses and theories of resistance. This is done by drawing on key theorists of resistance studies, including Michel Foucault (1978, 1980) and Judith Butler (1997a, 1999, 2011). I also draw on James Scott's (1985, 1990) perspectives on peasants' resistance. On gendered power and resistance, I draw on Lila Abu-Lughod (1986, 1990) and Susan Seymour's (2006) critique of selected ethnographic studies on resistance. In the second section, I examine context-specific strategies for challenging gendered violence and subordination, as I experienced them in Serekpere. These are the dynamic ways the women I worked with cope with, undermine and/or resist power structures—mystical, male spousal, co-wife, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law—that dominate their lives. The strategies under consideration here are mostly individual as opposed to large collective rebellions and demonstrations. Just as resistance studies amongst other subaltern groups have noted, the strategies I examine here are fragmented and diffuse due to the constraints within which they are exercised and the risk of punishment that more organised and overt practices may engender¹⁴⁶.

Theorising Resistance in Dagaaba Settings

Over the past decades, there has been a great deal of academic interest in the concept of resistance ever since Foucault's founding work on power. Thus, Foucault's (1972, 1978, 1980) oeuvre has been seminal to a range of critical discourses and debates concerning domination and resistance. In Chapter 5, I examined both Foucault's and Butler's fluid notions of power; rather than being understood as an external force that acts hierarchically on or represses subordinate individuals, power is understood as engendered in interactional processes. It also permeates the networks of relations within which domination, agency and resistance occur. I demonstrated a profound resonance between this notion of power as fluid and the particular forms of power salient in Dagaaba exogamous settlements. I have argued that power pervades the various nodes and relationships within the marriage space and,

¹⁴⁶ See also Scott (1985, 1990) and Abu-Lughod (1986, 1990).

thus, it is inappropriate to consider women as powerless. In the midst of male and ancestral power and the seeming powerlessness of the women, resistance and subversion are exercised in diverse ways.

Indeed, according to Foucault, Butler and their interlocutors, resistance and subversion are possible within the context of constraints and violence. For Butler (1999:119), however, '[i]f subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself'. Foucault, meanwhile, claims that: '[w]here there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power' (1978:95-96). Foucault's view indicates how resistance and power are co-implicated in one another. Furthermore, as Abu-Lughod (1990:42) aptly notes, Foucault's landmark notion also means that 'where there is resistance, there is power'. Finally, if power and resistance are intertwined, and if '[p]ower is everywhere' (Foucault, 1978:93) then, intuitively, resistance, too, is everywhere. Thus, the exercise of power may elicit resistance, and resistance in itself deploys power, which may lead to further use of power by the superordinate to punish the subordinate.

Foucault's focus appears to be on large-scale institutional and impersonal forms of domination, through such modern institutions as the judiciary, medical establishments, prisons, educational set-ups and capitalism (1977, 1978; see also Scott, 1990). In contrast, I focus on seemingly banal, everyday practices; nonetheless, Foucault's theorising on resistance and power is crucial to our understanding of the multifaceted interrelationship between power and resistance, and it allows me to examine the complexities involved in the resistance practices of the women I worked with. Following Foucault, there has been a proliferation of resistance studies. Of particular interest to this chapter are the theorists who focus on everyday forms of resistance¹⁴⁷.

¹⁴⁷ These include ordinary, common strategies practised by the 'weak' and aimed at challenging power structures and systems of domination (Scott, 1985), a notion inspired by Foucault's work (1978, 1972).

For instance, James Scott (1985, 1990), a political scientist, explores the more covert and everyday small-scale acts of resistance that may appear non-threatening but in the long run are more effective than open confrontation in bringing about change. Resistance has also been drawn on to understand gendered power relations, subordination and violence, in particular in the global South¹⁴⁸.

Within the context of this intense interest in resistance studies, feminist theorists have critiqued the tendency of some researchers to read resistance and subversion into otherwise mundane practices¹⁴⁹. Indeed, Abu-Lughod (1990:41) observes that: '[d]espite the theoretical sophistication of many anthropological and historical studies of everyday resistance, there remains a tendency to romanticize it'. She explains this as reading 'all forms of resistance as signs of the ineffectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated' (1990:42). Similarly, Scott argues that: '[i]t would be a grave mistake ... to overly romanticize the "weapons of the weak"' (1985:29). Scott (1990) identifies the weapons of the weak as including everyday resistance acts, infrapolitics and hidden transcripts, key concepts I will return to shortly. In view of these concerns, in this chapter I explore the ways in which my research participants exercise resistance and subvert or cope with marital violence. In doing so, however, I am wary of the risks of exaggerating acts of resistance or rendering invisible those that are more elusive.

Resistance has proved difficult to pin down, despite the burgeoning interest in this subject matter since studies on peasant insurgency in the 1960s (Abu-Lughod, 1990). Resistance is often popularly associated with the physical activities of organised movements, including marches and violent revolts that oppose a dominant power (Scott, 1985; Hollander and Einwohner, 2004). Academic theorists, however, for instance, Scott (1985) and Abu-Lughod

¹⁴⁸ See Abu-Lughod (1985, 1986, 1990), Gillian Hart (1991) and Gloria Raheja and Ann Gold (1994).

¹⁴⁹ See Abu-Lughod (1990) and Mahmoud (2005).

(1990), draw our attention to smaller-scale acts, such as pilfering, foot-dragging and gossip, as acts of resistance. Resistance acts may be collective or individual and they appear to range from silence and questioning of the status quo to open confrontation (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004). For instance, according to Jean Profitt (1996:25) resistance entails ‘active efforts to oppose, fight, and refuse to cooperate with or submit to... abusive behaviour and... control’ (see also in Hollander and Einwohner, 2004). As Jocelyn Hollander and Rachel Einwohner (2004:538) usefully point out, action, that is, ‘active behaviour whether verbal, cognitive, or physical’ and opposition appear to be core to most perspectives on resistance.

Aside from the above, issues of consciousness, intention and outcome appear to attract considerable attention in the discourses on resistance. For example, describing resistance, Seymour (2006:305-306) writes: ‘[i]n a context of differential power relationships, resistance refers to intentional, and hence conscious, acts of defiance or opposition by a subordinate individual or group of individuals against a superior individual or set of individuals’. In this view, resistance is exercised by the less privileged in power relations and is both conscious and intentional. Perhaps almost every social action is motivated by an intention, but intentionality is not fully under our control, and I return to this later. As Vinthagen and Johansson (2013:20, quoting Weitz, 2001:670) note, the task for resistance theorists is ‘to move away from the focus on consciousness and intention, and instead “try to assess the nature of the act itself”’. This may include whether the act targets superior power structures. Following Michel de Certeau (1984), Vinthagen and Johansson argue that ‘it is the resistance act, the agency itself or *the way of acting* that counts’. They also suggest that ‘no particular effect or outcome should be mandatory; only the *potential* of undermining power... Resistance is a particular kind of act, not an intent or effect...’ (2013:18 original emphasis). In this sense, whilst intent is relevant to understanding motives, it is not crucial to understanding resistance. Seymour, like many contemporary theorists of resistance and agency, appears to privilege dramatic acts of defiance whilst downplaying speech and non-dramatic endeavours. But resistance need not be constituted

only by such overt acts; silences and sometimes even inactions may be used to challenge dominant individuals and systems. For instance, Sharon Pickering (2000:73) reports how women in Northern Ireland ‘remained completely silent in defiance of the security forces’ that raided their homes and privacy. She observes: ‘[o]ften in their role as providers [the women] would attempt to carry on normal life whilst their homes were being pulled apart. Asserting normalcy was seen by many woman as a direct act of defiance...’ (2000:66). In this sense, silence acts as the means of defying institutional power.

In contexts such as that of northern Ghana, it seems useful to consider silences and even in/actions. This is because in informal interactions silence may be used to indicate disagreement or lack of approval. Yet I share Dorothy Roberts’ (1999:929) concern about the difficulties in distinguishing between ‘silencing from oppression and silence as resistance to oppression’ and the potential of the repressed to inadvertently participate in their own marginalisation by keeping silent. By silence, I am not referring to silence imposed by repression but to silence deliberately deployed in the spirit of defiance. Drawing inspiration from the discussion here, I consider resistance within the context of Dagaaba marriage as any action—overt or covert, inaction, including silences that are deployed as a means of challenging and/or protesting against gendered violence and discrimination and/or are aimed at bringing about change to the status quo. This notion of resistance enables me to attend to the complex and subtle forms of resistance women in contexts such as Serekpere perform. As discussed earlier, due to the constraints, especially the mystical ones and the male power, with their potential to cause harm, and the challenges of the exogamous marriage arrangement, to focus on overt actions in this rural northern Ghanaian context is to miss most of what constitutes resistance there. In view of this, my discussion in this chapter will reveal the need to pay attention to the supernatural forces and the other constraints examined here in theorising resistance in Dagaaba and similar contexts.

Since Foucault's insightful accounts of hegemony, domination and resistance have been influential in contemporary discourses on resistance, I approach the works of the theorists I draw on here from the point of view of their engagement with Foucault. Scott (1990) acknowledges that he does not openly engage with contemporary discourses on domination and resistance because such an endeavour would interrupt the flow of his analysis and render his work inaccessible to his target audience. Nevertheless, he states that his work is implicitly influenced by and, indeed, dialogues with theorists of domination and resistance, including Foucault. Scott further notes that, although Foucault acknowledges the imbrication between the impersonal and the personal forms of domination (the impersonal may be controlled by the personal), he emphasises the former, whereas his own focus is on the latter—individual forms of domination (1990). He writes: '[m]y analysis departs from Foucault in that I am largely concerned with structures of *personal* domination, such as serfdom and slavery, rather than with the impersonal, "scientific", disciplinary forms of the modern state that preoccupy him. More important, I am interested in how these idealizations of domination are thwarted by practical forms of resistance' (1990:62, note 31 original emphasis). Scott (1985, 1989, 1990) therefore pays attention to these small, personal forms of resistance and this focus appeals to this study. Below, I examine briefly Scott's theories on resistance.

In *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), Scott focuses on everyday forms of resistance deployed by the 'weak', specifically peasants (engaged in transplanting, threshing and reaping rice), which are aimed at challenging the power and domination of superordinate groups and individuals—rice field owners. He describes these acts of defiance as '... the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups [including]: foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage...' (1985:29). Scott (1985:29) further explains that these strategies: '... typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms. To understand these commonplace forms of resistance is to understand what much of the peasantry does "between revolts" to defend its interests as best it

can'. These elusive strategies of resistance are deployed in recognition of the consequences that open confrontation with the power structures and individuals in powerful positions may engender. To this end, these peasant strategies of resistance have much resonance with Dagaaba women's own strategies, and Scott's everyday forms of resistance can contribute immensely to an understanding of resistance practices amongst Dagaaba women. This is because, as a result of all the forces at work (mystical, male and patriarchal), the women often avoid both open confrontation with not only their husbands but other members of their marital families and acts that will expose them to the limelight. The women's typical strategies of everyday resistance often included avoidance such as walking away from a potential violent situation, silence, dissimulation and pretence in the sense of talking about and presenting themselves as powerless in the public. Another common strategy was singing about their predicaments in exogamous and polygynous marriage arrangements during the performance of a house chore such as grinding grains, cooking or cleaning the house.

In *Domination and the Art of Resistance*, Scott (1990) further examines the relationship between hegemonic power structures and subaltern—serf, peasant, colonised and slave—resistance, in a bid to shed more light on class relations and power¹⁵⁰. Scott does this by examining both the public and private speech and acts of dominant and subordinate groups. The latter he refers to as the 'hidden transcript' and the former as the 'public transcript' (1990:x). According to Scott, in the power relationship both dominant and subordinate groups put on different performances in the private and public spheres. In the public arena, the powerful often dissemble and overdramatise mastery and dominance whilst the less powerful feign subservience and deference. In private, the supposed powerful entertain fears regarding their subordinates and how best to keep them under control whilst the subordinates

¹⁵⁰ *Domination and the Art of Resistance* varies from *Weapons of the Weak* in its decontextualised approach and its consequently broader scope, including its focus on slave resistance. Scott believes that cross-cultural approaches can be productive in shedding light on similar practices in different areas but, at the same time, he underscores the importance of contextualising theoretical analyses.

exercise their agency in different ways, including by imitating and gossiping about the dominant ones. In short, both the powerful and the weak adopt masks in their public performances. For Scott, therefore, reading both the hidden and the public transcripts—‘the full transcript’—is crucial to understanding power relationships between the dominant and the dominated (1985:284, see also 1990). For my purpose in this chapter, Scott’s theory of hidden and public transcripts requires analytical attention. This is because, as a result of the pervasiveness of the various power forms that the women I worked with come up against, critical attention to what they do and say (or do not say) in private and public is crucial to a better understanding of resistance practices in that context. Although Scott’s analyses generally resonate with the issues of interest to this chapter, there are marked differences in that his focus on the subaltern includes serfs and slaves. In the case of marital violence in exogamous settlements, the subordinates—the women—are in much closer contact with their repressors (because they live together) and, thus, resistance practices might require more tact. In this sense, the strategies used for subversion have to be more strategic, so as to not upset the entire marriage space.

The situation of women in relation to male power and domination has not received much attention in Scott’s work. Paying some attention to the different layers of power—male, both peasants and rice owners, and political (partisan)—and how they affect women would have been useful in illuminating women’s experience of domination and resistance in that context. Scott has also been criticised for emphasising class solidarity and neglecting other intersecting issues (gender, for instance) as well as for rendering peasant women invisible (see Hart, 1991). Regarding supernatural powers, Scott points out that some rice was stolen and then mysteriously returned to the owners, and also that some of the theft ceased when farm owners visited medicine men and then informed their peers of the identity of the suspected thieves (1985). Scott does not, however, pursue how this belief in medicine men affects peasant resistance practices and power relations in that context. In my study, in addition to a focus on women as a subordinate group, I draw

attention to the way in which the belief in mystical power further complicates resistance practices amongst Dagaaba women. My analysis throughout this study, demonstrate how significant the belief in the pervasiveness of supernatural powers is in the daily life of Dagaaba. In the next section, I turn to a number of feminist discourses on power and resistance.

For a more productive analysis and understanding of the workings of power, Foucault (1982:780) has suggested that, ‘...we should investigate the forms of resistance and attempts made to dissociate these relations’. Abu-Lughod (1990) takes this further by developing a theory of resistance as an analytic of power, that is, investigating resistance as a means of identifying and understanding the mechanisms of power. She suggests that resistance be interpreted as a diagnostic of power in order to gain a better understanding of power relations in contexts like the Bedouin’s, because otherwise we risk missing or overemphasising power and resistance. She observes: ‘studying the various forms of resistance will allow us to get at the ways in which intersecting and often conflicting structures of power work together’ (1990:42). Following this insight, in relation to the strategies of subversion and resistance I examine, I attempt to identify the specific form(s) of power such strategies target. On Foucault’s perceptive notion of the ubiquity of power and resistance, Abu-Lughod argues that rather than investigating resistance as the result of the ineffectiveness of power, there is a lot to learn about power by concentrating on resistance. In *Veiled Sentiments* (1986), Abu-Lughod examines everyday forms of resistance amongst the Awlad ‘Ali Bedouin women of Egypt. She does this by examining *ghinnawas*, poems/songs that express in intimate circles sentiments and vulnerability that are dissimulated by a discourse of bravery and independence in ordinary public speech. I return to *Veiled Sentiments* in detail when I examine Dagaaba women’s deployment of songs and drama as subversive strategies and means of resisting marital violence.

Seymour’s approach is a review of selected ethnographic studies on resistance. Seymour takes issues with what she refers to as the ‘broad

theorising' of Foucault and others, who focus on large-scale activities without paying attention to actors' motives and intentions (2006:304). Focusing on three cases, Seymour critiques resistance studies, particularly ethnographic ones, for eliding psychological theories. Anthropological accounts of resistance, Seymour argues, stand to benefit a lot from psychological theories. The works under consideration by Seymour are *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline* (1987) by Aihwa Ong, *Listen to the Heron's Words* (1994) by Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold and *Invitations to Love* (2001) by Laura Ahearn. Seymour's contention is that these accounts tend to 'misdescribe' resistance because they have not anchored their analysis in relevant psychological theories (Madhok, 2013:104). Based on her notion of resistance as conscious defiance, Seymour argues that resistance can be better understood if interpreted within relevant psychological frameworks.

The aspect of Seymour's analysis that is of interest to me is her critique of *Listen to the Heron's Words* (1994) by Raheja and Gold because I analyse songs and drama in this chapter as part of Dagaaba women's subversive strategies. Seymour articulates several reasons why the songs and stories in Raheja and Gold (1994) are rather anti-subversive, contrary to the authors' notion that they constitute resistance practices. The performance of this genre is part of annual Hindu festivals and thus lacks the kind of personalised expression that characterises Bedouin poems or the performance I examine in the next section. Thus, according to Seymour, the songs and narratives performed by the women are 'highly ritualized' and do not 'involve overt acts of opposition to the patriarchal family system in which women are embedded'; they 'are not so threatening to the family patriarchy that they need to be suppressed'. To this end, she argues that they do not constitute resistance. But the inconsistencies in Seymour's accounts are noteworthy. For instance, she writes that '[w]omen's songs and stories are, however, filled with material that *does not conform* to the North Indian cultural stereotype of the quietly obedient, nurturing, and modest wife and mother' (2006:309 my emphasis). Seymour does not see *not conforming* to the societal norms as resistance. Furthermore, although she sees women's songs as critiquing the

male-centric family system in that context, she believes that they do not amount to resistance because they do not yield change or threaten to overthrow patriarchy. Thus, they constitute only ‘... a potential form of resistance’ (2006:309). However, resistance practices, as I discussed above, can be subtler and more ambivalent than this. If we understand resistance not only as open defiance but as acts that challenge the status quo, it becomes immaterial whether the acts can overthrow male domination or yield change¹⁵¹. In this regard, it makes sense to see not only Takpoma’s performance and Dagaaba women’s songs but also Pereemabile’s action—adultery, when she was chased away from the marital home—as subverting the norms governing Dagaaba marriage practices. This can be better appreciated if we consider that, due to the negative repercussions that attend overt forms of resistance in the context of Dagaaba marriage, the most culturally appropriate strategies for challenging the violence and contradictions of that society appear to be small acts of defiance, silences and avoidance. In this sense, any observer who sets out to look for only dramatic acts of resistance risks missing the subtle, and perhaps more common, strategies. The local strategies of resistance, to which I now turn, highlight the need to pay attention to contexts and to the important role of the belief in mystical forces in resistance practices and discourses.

Context-sensitive Resistance Practices

In Chapter 6, I argued that a failure to approximate Dagaaba gendered norms may be read as a means of undermining the reductive notions of femininity in that context that have the potential to cause injury to women. In this section, I examine some of the numerous strategies the women I worked with deploy to subvert marital violence. In doing this, I wish to demonstrate that resistance is exercised in numerous ways in spite of the constraints discussed earlier. The strategies range from individual small acts of defiance to collective action on

¹⁵¹ For instance, consider Lynn Carr’s (1998:543) view of resistance as ‘engaging in behaviors despite opposition’ (see also in Hollander and Einwohner, 2004).

farms, at funeral grounds and within the marital space¹⁵². The strategies include drama and songs performed in women-friendly spaces at funeral grounds and on farms by women's groups ('*nuori yen*'), temporarily fleeing from the marital space to go to southern Ghana to undertake menial jobs and employing 'odd' strategies such as keeping containers filled with urine and employing deceit as means of refusing forced widowhood marriage. What follows is an account of what Dagaaba women do to counter and/or cope with violence.

Subversive songs and embodied performance

The use of songs and drama as subversive strategies has been widely documented in ethnographic studies (see Abu-Lughod, 1985, 1990; Raheja and Gold, 1994). Abu-Lughod (1985, 1986, 1990) is one scholar whose work sheds considerable light on the use of songs and poetry by both women and men to express sentiments regarding the loss of loved ones and various forms of neglect and maltreatment amongst Awlad 'Ali Bedouin. In both *Veiled Sentiments* (1986) and 'The Romance of Resistance' (1990), Abu-Lughod, like Scott, examines everyday forms of resistance in an Awlad 'Ali Bedouin settlement, but this time the focus is on women. She does this by examining *ghinnawas*, short poems/songs that are personalised and express a variety of sentiments in intimate circles and public discourse. Through these songs, Bedouin men and women express, to their intimate ones, their deep sentiments of loss, hurt and weakness. By contrast, in non-intimate discourse they deploy varied strategies, including anger, denial and dissimulation, to mask their hurt and weaknesses. This, Abu-Lughod explains, is because displaying personal feelings in such a context is interpreted as attachment and as a symbol of dependence, while discourses of bravery, autonomy and independence are the marks of social status. In this way, as Abu-Lughod notes, the self is presented in two ways: 'as invulnerable and independent

¹⁵² Indeed, these are what Scott (1990:19) refers to as the 'infrapolitics of subordinate groups', that is, 'a wide variety of low-profile forms of resistance that dare not speak in their own name'.

from others, and as vulnerable to the effects of others¹⁵³, in public and private spheres respectively (1985:251).

There appears to be much resonance between Abu-Lughod's discourses and Scott's transcripts, with social actors presenting dissimulated performances in public whilst their inner sentiments are expressed in more private realms. However, the situation of Dagaaba women appears to have an inverse relationship, specifically to what Abu-Lughod presents. Here I am referring to the women's public discourse of vulnerability and powerlessness whilst in private they assert power and exercise resistance in various ways. This is attributable to the mystical insecurities that are closely associated with the marriage space. Therefore, any woman who is seen to be strongly asserting herself or resisting dominant power structures in the public eye is understood to be vulnerable to supernatural attacks. Dissimulation in this context is, therefore, a survival strategy.

According to Abu-Lughod (1990:46), songs and poems are 'the most important of the subversive discourses in Bedouin society'. She shows how women employ them to challenge arranged marriages to male cousins and older men. Similarly, amongst Dagaaba, poetry and songs are a major means of challenging various gender asymmetries and social ills. The songs and poems are performed at different stages of Dagaaba funeral and farm activities as a means of expressing personal and/or collective sentiments and experiences. In relation to gendered domination in the pervasively mystical context of Dagaaba, songs and drama appear to be a major strategy of subversion. The songs and drama and the performances that accompany them draw attention to the inconsistencies and controversies of marriage and gendered power relations in Dagaaba societies. In analysing songs and drama, I wish to reiterate, as I discussed in Chapter 1, that they constitute specific forms of performative practices that draw our attention, through hyperbolic bodily acts, and in repetitive terms, to the violence associated with

¹⁵³ The former is what Abu-Lughod refers to as a 'discourse of honor' (1985:251).

exogamous marriage practices and thus expose and challenge them in ways that might otherwise not be possible.

Let us now consider Dagaaba women's songs and drama. They mainly centre on the following: husbands who beat up their wives; polygynous men who discriminate against particular wives; and wicked mothers-in-law. I want to argue that, because of the constraints placed on women's agency within Dagaaba exogamous marriages by the male-centric institutions and the fear of mystical repercussions, these drama groups offer women spaces in which to openly discuss their shared plight of marital violence and neglect in Dagaaba settlements¹⁵⁴. I have chosen to analyse here only one of the Dagaaba songs (I examine others in other chapters). I have selected one that was performed at a funeral because funerals are relatively organised forums; although the songs are not selected prior to the performances, the funeral performances themselves are planned well ahead of time. In addition, the space provided enables interesting bodily and subversive performative practices to be carried out, which provide useful insights into the issues of power relations in marriage. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that songs performed on farms and by individual women while doing domestic chores are equally important in subverting marital violence, if not more so. One of the prolific composers and singers I encountered in Serekpere, Adwoama, informed me that one day her estranged husband stopped verbally abusing her because she threatened to compose a song about him. Also, it is important to underscore here that the primary purpose of these performances is to provide entertainment to enliven the funeral celebrations. Yet, their political component—the lashing out at broader power structures—needs recognition.

These women-only drama groups are based in each of the four sections of the settlement, and offer support in the form of performing at funerals in the natal settlements of its members. As discussed in Chapter 4, funeral celebrations occupy a central place in Dagaaba social life. Thus, travelling to a woman's

¹⁵⁴ See Scott's (1990:xi) notion of '... sequestered settings where, in principle, a shared critique of domination may develop'.

natal settlement to mourn with her in times of loss of a family member is of great importance. According to the women, this shows that the woman in question is respected in her marital settlement. In terms of membership, all married women within each segment of Serekpere belong to the drama group there. They are required to attend meetings, which are held occasionally; otherwise, in the event of bereavement, the group will not offer her any support. Whilst, normatively, leadership of the group is taken by the oldest women in the section, some young women with leadership abilities form part of the leadership in some of the sections. At the time of my fieldwork, each woman contributed ₦0.50 (about £0.10) as monthly membership dues. In the event of bereavement, the group, in turn, donates ₦100.00 (about £20.00) to support the bereaved woman. This money assists her in providing food and drink for the group and for other mourners from the marital settlement who go with her to mourn in the natal village.

The bereaved woman gives the group gallons of *pito* (see figure 5) and *akpeteshie* (locally distilled gin). Ostensibly dazed from the alcohol consumption, and spurred on by the friendly setting, these women sing, dance and perform songs in ways that reflect and challenge the everyday battles of their marital lives. The performances on these settings seem to ignore any consequences for the women¹⁵⁵. The particular forum in which I recorded this song was a thanksgiving church service in another settlement, Papu. It was a memorial service for the late mother of one of my research participants who comes from Papu and is married to a man from Serekpere. I have chosen this song and forum because, first of all, the accompanying drama and performances were unique in the way they were personalised, in the use of the (thin) body to dramatise experiences of marital violence and in the disclaimers these enactments engendered. Secondly, the encounter revealed the influence of male power even in a supposed women-only space, which

¹⁵⁵ Indeed, in relation to Gerald Mullin's (1972) view on subordinate groups behaving out of context when intoxicated, Scott (1990:41) notes: 'as if alcohol loosened slightly the normal inhibitions against aggressive talk, thereby allowing a portion of the hidden transcript to find its way onto the stage' in a socially permissible way.

makes for compelling analysis in this study. The song is entitled ‘Persistent nagging’.

Song 3: *Nɔyaaron yelɛ* ‘Persistent nagging’

Billima: *Nɔyaaron yelɛ ka maŋ boora ka n yi*

Group (chorus): *Nɔyaaron yelɛ ka maŋ boora ka n yi*

Billima: *N nayinyee, n nayinyee kyɛ kyere fo pɔge meŋa na*

(Chorus)

Billima: *N nayinyee, dɔɔ le n nayinyee, kyɛ kyere a pɔge meŋa na*

(Chorus)

Takpoma [suddenly interrupts Billima and starts singing]: *A biire yelɛ; a biire yelɛ maŋzeŋ a ŋmeena yaa*

(Chorus)

Takpoma: *Ka n nakpiŋ yee, nakpiŋ yee kyɛ meŋnye a zaa*

(Chorus)

[...] Takpoma: *A biire yelɛ maŋ zeng le o ninbon*

(Chorus)

Takpoma: *Ka n nakpiŋ yee, n nakpiŋ yee kyɛ meŋ na nysle la a zaa*

Natorma [another member of the group, moves closer to Takpoma and sings/warns]: *ba kaara boŋ kyɛ eng naŋ yiele*

Takpoma [continues]: *A biire yelɛ maŋzeŋ ŋmeena ni ngaa [...]*

Group: (Chorus)

Natorma *ho nuori ŋga. ho nuori ŋga na eng fo yela*

Takpoma: *n waabo naaŋ, n waabo naaŋ, n meŋ da taala engɛ [...]*

Billima: I want to leave because of persistent nagging

Group: (chorus) I want to leave because of persistent nagging

Billima: I will go; I will go and leave your preferred wife

(Chorus)

Billima: I will go, young man, I will go and leave the preferred wife

(Chorus)

Takpoma: [suddenly interrupts Billima and starts singing] Because of the children, it is because of the children that I am still here and emaciating

(Chorus)

Takpoma: If I will die, I will die but I will see it all

(Chorus)

[...] Takpoma: It is because of the children that I am still here and have become worthless

(Chorus)

Takpoma: Even if I will die, I will die but I will say it all

Natorma: [another member of the group, moves closer to Takpoma and sings/warns] I am looking at you and yet you are still going deep

Takpoma: [continues] It is because of the children that I have shrunk like this [...]

Group: (Chorus)

Natorma: Your mouth, your mouth will put you into trouble

Takpoma: This [thin body] is not my normal size, this is not my normal size; I too had some flesh [...]

This expressive and sentimental mode of enacting lived experience is crucial to this study in many respects. Firstly, the song and drama performed on this, and many similar, settings reflect the personal feelings of the women who take turns as lead vocalist. Thus, the performances are somewhat spontaneous rather than rehearsed. Secondly, Takpoma (c45) has been cited as someone who may qualify as a *pogminga*, as I discussed in Chapter 6. This is because, although it is an open secret that her husband frequently beats her, she does not complain to other family or community members about her predicament but rather, looking very frail and emaciated, undertakes the labour of manual farming and charcoal burning to feed her energetic husband and children. In a discussion, prior to this performance, she explained to me that her extremely thin body shape was due to the challenges and the food deprivation she was subjected to by her husband. Each time her husband beats her, she informed me that: ‘... I just cry and then clean my tears and let it go because of my children’. Takpoma does not discuss her predicament with other people because she thinks no one can rescue her. This apparently friendly setting—the women-only space—therefore presents her, and all the women who appropriate it, with an avenue to voice her repressed frustration and anger.

Through this performance, Takpoma is rendering public her ‘hidden transcript’ and the bile she can no longer swallow is expressed in it. Perhaps Takpoma might have rehearsed/harboured these thoughts throughout the years she has endured abuse in the marriage, but she has never mustered the courage to voice them in public. Takpoma decided to speak out, and indeed, could not have cared less about the consequences thereafter. She notes, in the singing, ‘even if I will die, I will die but I will say it all’ and then she goes on, despite the potentially adverse repercussions. What was particularly moving was the way she displayed her extremely thin body in the performance to

make her point that it was time she spoke up. For Dagaaba women, marital abuses are issues one does not often get the privilege to discuss due to the cultural proscriptions that debar women from openly talking about them. Thus, this particular performative practice corroborates notions of everyday forms of resistance as contingent; the performance was engendered by the context and what we see in this performance is its spontaneous character.

Takpoma's performance, and indeed Dagaaba women's songs and drama more generally, may appear unthreatening inasmuch as they do not openly overthrow male dominance. Nonetheless, they are clearly threatening to male power. For instance, as Takpoma continued singing and dancing, not only was she warned by some members of the group to refrain from mentioning the sort of intimate issues she was singing about and dramatising, but some women sought to dissociate themselves from the line that the performance was taking, out of fear of incurring the wrath of her husband. By these acts—warning Takpoma and dissociating themselves from her performance—it could be argued that some of the women were encouraging a cover-up or accommodation of marital violence. But their action was out of fear of the possible consequences when they returned to Serekpere. Also noteworthy is the open confrontation by Dakorah (c45), a polygynous man and a member of Takpoma's section of Serekpere. As I was tape-recording the performative practice, all of a sudden, Dakorah, who was watching it, marched over to me and said, 'Madam, don't record this!' I asked him, 'but why not?' and he explained to me, 'that is not good to go into the recorder'. Before I could ask another question, he rushed up to Takpoma, who was displaying her thin body in front of us, and warned her to put a stop to the performance. He shouted to Takpoma, 'you shut your mouth up!' For Dakorah and some of the women, this was too personal and too 'private' to be discussed in public, much less to be preserved in a recording. Dakorah, therefore, sought to prevent Takpoma from producing this sentimental performance, and me from recording it. But for the male and exogamous privilege bestowed on him, Dakorah had no authority to intrude upon this women's space in the way he did. From his response that it was not good to sing about these issues, it is unclear whether Dakorah's intervention was to save Takpoma from getting into trouble or to

protect male interest, or both. In any case, his intrusion, and also the other women's dissociation from Takpoma's performance, only point to the pervasiveness of male power even in an apparently feminine space. Whilst Takpoma's abuser, her husband, was not present, her message, which was addressed to him, appeared to target the broader institution of exogamous marriage and the difficulties women find themselves in—having to endure all sorts of abuse and hardship for the sake and welfare of their children.

This form of resistance has similarities with, yet diverges significantly from, the situation of slave and peasant resistance that Scott (1990) and Abu-Lughod (1986, 1990) examine. First is the case of Aggy, 'a normally taciturn' slave, who, after witnessing her master unjustifiably beat her daughter pours out her vision of a day of guns and the shedding of the masters' blood (Livermore, 1889 quoted in Scott, 1990:5). Yet, like Takpoma, Aggy expresses her anger and frustration as a hidden transcript to a governess rather than to her oppressor. This is in recognition of the punishment she might engender if she expressed her feelings before her abuser. Furthermore, drawing on Mrs Rachel Poyser, a character in George Eliot's (1981) *Adam Bede*, Scott draws our attention to what he calls the result of 'consciousness of oppression' (1990:5). Mrs Poyser and her husband, Mr Martin Poyser, were tenants of Squire Donnithorne. When she could no longer contain the resentment they had harboured for many years, Mrs Poyser dared to speak out. She expressed her views, and apparently those of others, along with the scorn in which the Squires were held. Mrs Poyser could not have cared less about the consequences her explosion might have engendered when she decided to speak up, even if this was death, and Takpoma claims to have felt the same.

Nevertheless, the contexts and acts also differ in important ways. For instance, Mrs Poyser's spilling out of her pent-up sentiments, Scott argues, following Eliot, has 'consequences for consciousness of domination', that is, for the subjugated acquiring awareness (1990:9). Scott explains that Eliot's 'claim is that the necessity of "acting a mask" in the presence of power produces, almost by the strain engendered by its inauthenticity, a

countervailing pressure that cannot be contained indefinitely'. Without doubt, domination in the context of Dagaaba marriage may lead to uncontainable tension, but how this is expressed differs. In that context, due to the aforementioned constraints of male and mystical power, such open opposition as Mrs Poyser's is less likely to occur. Indeed, as I discussed in relation to agency in Chapter 5, it may take an *unwise* Dagaaba woman to exercise this form of courageous resistance. For instance, although Takpoma may have rehearsed her words for decades, it is almost certain that she would not have dared to act in the manner she did if her husband had been present, out of the fear that she might be beaten when she got home. By dissociating themselves from her performance, the other women did not, in fact, rule out a feeling of uneasiness about news getting back to her husband. Thus, although Scott's (1990) decontextualised approach to understanding domination and resistance is insightful, a context like that of the Dagaaba permits different ways of expressing this pent-up awareness of oppression.

The context of my study varies from that of Abu-Lughod's ethnography inasmuch as the belief in the pervasiveness of supernatural powers in Dagaaba settlements is a key factor in determining which acts are permissible in both public and private. For instance, what Abu-Lughod terms 'discourses of honour' may be read as conceit, and thus as inappropriate amongst Dagaaba. Such action would be interpreted as showing off in a context that prizes public demonstration of humility and modesty, and this interpretation would have the potential to endanger women's lives. If the public show of independence and pride constitutes discourses of honour amongst Bedouin, the exhibition of vulnerability and weakness appears to be the mark of honour and humility for Dagaaba, particularly for the women. To this effect, I refer to this as 'discourses of humility'. It is the valorisation of these qualities amongst Dagaaba that renders overt forms of resistance particularly inappropriate.

From my analysis, the performance I present above, in addition to the others I discuss throughout this study, may not be 'so threatening' to male authority (Seymour, 2006:309), but they are threatening enough to warrant curtailment

and disclaimants. It is, thus, not surprising that Dakorah arrogates to himself the authority and role of the censor. Opposition or its absence, as Seymour argues, is not relevant here; instead, what is crucial is that the acts target a form of dominant power—in this case male power. The difficulty with Seymour's accounts appears to stem from two sources: her restricted focus on her definition of resistance as premised on consciousness and oppositional acts, and her focus on overt forms of resistance. For instance, she notes: 'according to my definition, Ahearn's ethnography, alone amongst the three I have discussed, is filled with evidence of resistance—for example, intentional challenges by Junigau youths to parentally arranged marriages' (2006:313). But as I noted earlier, resistance need not necessarily be constituted by open acts or acts that lead to change. Resistance is also about interrogating dominant institutions and power relations, even if fleetingly. This can be better understood if we consider that in the context of this study women risk punishment by people who possess supernatural forces if they exercise overt forms of resistance. Thus, it may be useful to see resistance as forming a spectrum, ranging from dramatic to non-dramatic acts (see also Scott, 1989; Vinthagen and Johansson, 2013). To this end, there is a lot to learn from Scott's accounts of peasant resistance. Peasants' resistance practices, as Scott (1985) shows, include less-threatening passive acts, such as avoidance and withdrawal—'clandestine and anonymous resistance' to overt acts (1985:271). The further strategies I examine below were not as popular and dramatic as the songs; nonetheless, they also count in their own ways.

Resisting forced widowhood marriage: sobs, 'pots of urine' and dissimulation

Dagaaba women's resistance practices are also directed at forced widowhood marriage. Customarily, amongst Dagaaba, a woman who loses her husband is required to marry one of his younger brothers or agnatic cousins in order to continue to live legitimately in the marital family. Normatively, the second husband has responsibility for the spiritual needs and sustenance of the widow and her children. Although some of the widows willingly remarry, others are forced to do so, as addressed in my discussion in Chapter 5. Throughout my

fieldwork, most of the women, including those still in their first marriages, often lamented their lack of say in who marries them after the death of their original husbands. For instance, on one occasion, Dakorah (c45) said to his two wives: ‘do you think when I die my brothers will leave you to waste? They will inherit you’. As if in unison, both women were quiet and the grimace on their faces seemed to express their fear of this unknown future.

Indeed, in a serendipitous conversation with Dakorah and Gaadeoma (c66), they both informed me that it was only persistent crying that saved the latter from being forcibly married to the former. First of all, I asked whether Gaadeoma had married again when her husband died in the late 1980s, and Dakorah explained: ‘no, [Gaadeoma’s late husband] was my brother and ... I wanted to marry her but she refused; she cried bitterly [laughs]. She used to cry, yet my father encouraged me to get serious and marry her’. Given the age difference between them, I thought this was another Frafra-Dagaaba joke. But corroborating this, Gaadeoma said: ‘yes it is true. Even because of it [once] I refused to eat food’. When I sought to understand why she vehemently protested, since widowhood marriage is a norm amongst Dagaaba, Gaadeoma first asked me: ‘but why shouldn’t I? When I came here his mother was carrying his pregnancy and I saw that before you were born ... So how can I look on and even help your mother to deliver you and then after my husband dies you would marry me?’ For Gaadeoma, ‘crying bitterly’—alluded to by both of them—each time the issue of Dakorah marrying her was brought up worked to liberate her from a marriage she did not approve of. But in other cases this strategy has not worked or has been deemed inappropriate. This is because it is forbidden, and punishable by death or sickness by the ancestors, for a widow to cry for help if a man makes his way into her room to have sex with her. Also, even if she cries, no one is expected to go to her aid because that too is a taboo punishable by the gods. For instance, according to some of the widows I worked with, they had to let the men have sex with them although initially they did not want to marry them. But Gaadeoma’s cries prevented Dakorah from even going near her room and thus worked to save her from forced widowhood marriage. Rather than overtly opposing male power by openly asserting her disgust with the very idea of marrying a man

young enough to be her son, Gaadeoma chose to play the vulnerable widow—a low-profile strategy.

In *Weapons of the Weak*, Scott demonstrates how the potential negative consequences of open opposition limit action. It seems Gaadeoma read that, as an apparently vulnerable widow, openly opposing the idea of marrying Dakorah would not inure to her benefit. Thus, like the peasants in Scott who resort to feigned ignorance or false compliance, Gaadeoma resorted to an even weaker weapon—bitter cries. Specifically, on resisting forced marriage, Abu-Lughod reports how a Bedouin matriarch recounted the strategies she deployed to refuse an arranged marriage to her first cousin. Rather than openly opposing her father, Abu-Lughod discusses how the woman resorted to crying, going to secluded places and even pouring a mixture meant for painting her prospective home on herself. The sobs and screams, in addition to the other actions, liberated the subject in Abu-Lughod's ethnography. Similarly, in the case of Gaadeoma, playing helpless and avoiding open resistance worked effectively to free her of a forced marriage she strongly resented. What runs through these strategies is that they all oppose power structures but indirectly, in recognition of the fact that direct resistance may produce far-reaching consequences.

In a manner that questions the supposed vulnerability and powerlessness of widows in Dagaaba settlements, Kaleoma (c55), a widow for the second time, employed unconventional strategies to ward off the men who had intentions to forcibly marry her, that is, by first having sex with her by force. Kaleoma often kept a container filled with her own urine in readiness to pour on any man who attempted to sneak into her room at night. Also, the men in her section frequently gossiped that she kicked any man who got near her door. I first heard about these radical strategies through the grapevine. Subsequently, Kaleoma herself talked about them when I joined her and other women of Kaleo descent to prepare food for the guests who had come from Kaleo to mourn with Maria, from the same settlement, during the funeral rites of her

late husband. Consider the extract below from my fieldnotes concerning our interactions as we were cooking in Maria's compound.

[...] the women teased Maria about marrying again but she said she wouldn't ... The women, however, said there was no way she, together with her senior co-wife, Daama, would escape because the men would force themselves on them... I asked Kaleoma why she did not marry again after the passing of her second husband and yet thought others should marry. According to her ... there were many attempts by the men to marry her but she declined... She used to fill a chamber pot with urine, using it to scare away the men. Three days ago I overheard Oliviana informing Adwoama that Yahaya and another man were saying 'as for Kaleoma she kicks any man who goes near her room with her feet' ... Takpoma then said, yesterday, in the midst of the crowd [at the funeral ground], that Jacob just reached out and held Maria in a suggestive manner. At this point Maria interjected that she doesn't want an unexpected guest at night and so she deceives each of the men into thinking that she will marry him so as not to attract negative attention (April 2014).

In a conversation with Kaleoma, I asked about this 'pot of urine strategy' and, laughing, she explained to me: 'that was when I first became a widow and many men were disturbing me, so I would normally fill my chamber pot and keep it in readiness to splash it on them'. Reacting to the gossip making waves in the settlement that her current strategy against forced widowhood marriage was to kick any potential husband, she exclaimed: 'ah, shouldn't I kick, how can I marry again like this? I won't agree anymore! ...I have suffered enough'. Kaleoma's unconventional resistance strategies appear to have worked effectively¹⁵⁶. Since it is a taboo to cry for help once the prospective husband or rapist gains access into the widow's room or body, by preventing entry into her premises, Kaleoma has freed herself from forced widowhood marriage. The fact that she is still single shows that the strategy has worked¹⁵⁷. It also indicates that it is possible to resist forced widowhood

¹⁵⁶ She explained that she has never kicked anyone, but the men have read between the lines and know that she will not countenance anyone. In this sense, it appears that silence rather than kicking is Kaleoma's current strategy of resistance.

¹⁵⁷ It is important to note that single widowhood was uncommon in this settlement. The pressure to remarry after the death of one's husband was however higher for women in their child-bearing years and for first time widows, that is to say, widows who have lost their first time husbands. The point, as was often told to me, is that the second time widow—a widow whose remarried husband is dead, has already followed tradition, *lesere* by remarrying after the death of her first/original husband. Consider for instance the challenges Jacobma, discussed in Chapter 6, faced when she initially resisted widowhood marriage.

marriage and still be alive, contrary to the dominant view expressed by the women that resistance meant inviting mystical attacks on the widow and her children.

Regarding Maria, notice that she did not protest openly about Jacob's non-verbal overtures or harassment, or those of other men. Instead, she puts on a simulated performance—she acts in ways that mean that the men do not know that she does not want to marry any of them. This is because she wants to avoid any intrusion into her room at night or mystical attacks on herself or her children. In Maria's case, deceit and feigned interest in the men appear to be the most effective strategies. Based on the cases I have discussed here, it is important to emphasise that in the face of the fear of mystical repercussions and ejection from the marital house, some widows have found ways to resist forced widowhood marriage. However, majority of the widows are afraid of the perceived supernatural consequences that attend resisting it, and thus bow to the pressure from the marital family to remarry.

My material here has addressed three strategies the women I worked with adopt to resist forced widowhood marriage. These are the 'bitter cries' of Gaadeoma, the relatively more expressive and radical strategies of urine keeping and 'kicking' by Kaleoma and the deceit tactics of Maria. At the time of my fieldwork, these strategies appeared to have been working well and all three widows were single. The effectiveness of the strategy adopted, however, depends on the attitude of the male members of the marital family. For instance, Maria and Daama were each given an ultimatum only six months after the final funeral rites of their husband. Sampson (c39), a member of their marital family, informed me in a telephone conversation I had with him in January 2015 after I had returned to Newcastle that Maria and Daama had been given an ultimatum to choose husbands from among their late husband's kin or to be on their own. In other words, no male member of their marital family would be responsible for their spiritual needs and those of their children. This injunction, or rather threat, predisposes the two widows to mystical attacks. According to the women I worked with, evil people in the family may kill or inflict injury on any widow or her children using mystical

powers if she disregards such an order, reinforcing the notion to the widow that she needs a man to take care of her. Returning to the literature, if we pay attention to dramatic acts, perhaps these infrapolitics, to use Scott's term, cannot be read as resistance. But if we extend our attention to small acts, as theorised by both Scott and Abu-Lughod, and consider that overt acts might yield highly negative repercussions, including mystical ones, whilst at the same time producing limited results, as Scott (1985) explained regarding the peasants, these strategies can be better understood. They are all aimed at outwitting male and ancestral power as well as forced widowhood marriage. To this end, widows are not completely vulnerable or helpless within the constraints of exogamous marriage; it is possible to resist forced marriage with careful planning and tactics just like in any other subaltern group.

Temporarily fleeing to the south

Besides the aforementioned strategies, Dagaaba women's means of subverting marital violence also take the form of their temporarily leaving the marital settlement, as if to informally take a break from the marriage. This strategy, which was highly significant, dominated discourses on marital neglect and violence amongst the women I worked with¹⁵⁸. According to the women, the sharing of productive resources, mainly farm produce, is one of the major sources of contention between husbands and wives or co-wives. In some instances, women undertake the labour of farming and yet do not benefit from the farm proceeds, whilst some polygynous men favour some women to the disadvantage of others. In this regard, since the women do not want to leave the marriage because they may lose access to their children in that marriage, a useful way out, according to most of the women, is to travel temporarily to the southern part of Ghana and undertake menial jobs to earn an income. Once the woman returns to the settlement with her own income, she may start a petty trade and/or hoe separately, relying on hired labour. In

¹⁵⁸ Generally, travelling to the south to undertake farm activities and menial work so as to earn an income is a common practice in rural Dagaaba settlements as I mentioned in Chapter 1. This is due to the harsh climatic conditions within which Dagaaba live and the concomitant crop failure that this often generates. Aside from this, mostly, neglected wives and single mothers frequently embarked on these travels as the vignette below illustrates.

most cases, the abuse and violence then subside or cease completely. For instance, consider the narrative of Kayinima (c42), a widow for the second time, regarding her ordeal in her second marriage¹⁵⁹. In a conversation, she told me:

[...] after farming, his [Kayinima's second husband's] mother used to take the beans to the market to sell and buy food, and when she came she would give the food to my senior co-wife, leaving me with nothing... and each time she cooked the food, she would put small food in a small bowl for me and two of my children. Anytime I talk about this I feel like crying and because of that I don't usually like to talk about it. The food was not enough and so, at a point, I grew very lean and people used to ask if I was sick... since my [first] husband had died, but also because of my children, I couldn't leave the marriage. I was just there suffering. I used to travel to the hills in Prestea [a mining town in the south] and climb them just to work and get money. That is how I used to suffer until God opened a way for me and I got small money to come home and start a trade. When I started trading, they were no longer maltreating me and I had two more children before he died.

In this case, working to earn an income functioned to free Kayinima from the shackles of discrimination and neglect. In everyday conversations, women who suffered abuse from their husbands, mothers-in-law or co-wives in the marriage space were often advised by their peers and kin to travel to the south for a temporary change and to earn an income in order to undertake an economic activity when they returned to the settlement. In this way, they can fend for themselves.

Aihwa Ong (1987), demonstrates how engaging in paid factory work served to give women a voice in decision-making regarding their marital partners and also threatened both male authority and honour in rural Malay settlements. In the case of Kayinima there is no evidence that her acquisition of an income was a threat to male authority but, in some instances, as I have discussed in relation to the *pog ganda* notion, it does pose a threat to some men. For Kayinima and the women I worked with, firstly, temporarily evading the conditions that produce violence by fleeing the marital space

¹⁵⁹ Indeed, all but one of the widows I worked with frequently decried the sheer lack of duty of care by the second husbands to them and their children from both the previous and the current marriages.

brings some relief. In this sense, temporarily fleeing the marriage space is one significant way of dealing with marital violence in the context of Dagaaba settlements. Secondly, earning an income to trade with works well in that it provides the women with productive resources, thereby liberating them from marital violence and discrimination. Temporarily fleeing the marital space targets both male and female power within that space. For instance, according to Kayinima, her husband had looked on as she suffered from a lack of adequate food from her mother-in-law and her co-wife, even though she worked on the family farm. Indeed, she also informed me that prior to acquiring her own resources, her husband rarely ‘entered her room’—had sex with her. But this changed when she returned to the settlement with her productive resources. Kayinima also effectively undermined female violence and power. By handing over the foodstuffs to her senior co-wife, knowing that Kayinima would not be sufficiently catered for, her mother-in-law might have been in league with the co-wife. This strategy appears to have similarities with Scott’s accounts of peasant resistance, albeit in part. He observes that: “‘exit’ rather than ‘voice’ had come to characterize the traditional and preferred response to oppression in Malay society’ (1985:245). In the case of Dagaaba marriage, as I have shown here, temporary exit combined with the acquisition of personal resources represents one way to destabilise violence within the marriage space.

As I note above, the effectiveness of the strategy and the repercussion it engenders both depend on the family dynamics, that is, whether the male members are very domineering or whether they permit some form of autonomy by the women. For instance, consider the predicament of Anastasia (c42). When Anastasia’s first husband died, she married Tungsong (c58) and Tungsong, who frequently beats his first wife, extended this routine to Anastasia. As Anastasia could no longer endure the neglect and abuse, she decided to flee to the south for respite and to earn some income. This was against Tungsong’s will; he forbids his wives to travel to the south. According to Tina (c50), Tungsong is believed to have used *juju* power to inflict Anastasia with swollen limbs to prevent her from going to the south. Sensing

that her life was in danger, Anastasia ran away to her father's house in Nator. In March 2014, when I met Anastasia, who had returned to Serekpere to collect her belongings, she was yet to fully recover physically from the mystical affliction. This is one situation in which the mystical repercussion, not of an action but of a planned one, comes to the fore. It is the fear of repercussions, such as the one Anastasia faced, that prevents most women from exercising overt resistance, or covert resistance for that matter. Temporarily fleeing of some women to the South to work, therefore, is a highly significant strategy of resistance in this context.

Closely related to this is Pereemabile's case in the opening vignette, to which I now return. Despite damning the gods and *mooro*, it is instructive to note that Pereemabile did not break the rules and taboos that prohibit an adulterer from entering the *kpeezaga* until she was 'purified' when she finally returned to settle in the community in the mid-2000s. She might defy the mystical powers in her actions and ask questions about their machinations and biases, but she is nonetheless scared of their power and its consequences. The point I seek to underscore here is the enormity of the fear of mystical powers and the way in which this affects resistance practices in this context. Pereemabile's anger and frustration, expressed as a hidden transcript in Scott's sense, was vented only in front of me, a (younger than her) female researcher who is relatively less threatening than members of the settlement at the forum. At the forum where she could have looked straight into the eyes of her abusive husband and the elders of the settlement and directed her questions and disagreement at them, she remained quiet. However, Pereemabile's silence was far from acquiescence in the dominant view. The silence, as she later explained to me, was because she did not want to expose her past deeds to everyone. To defend women who commit adultery, according to her, was to reveal indirectly her own adultery to the forum and this would then become a reference point if she got into a fight with anyone. Related to this, she did not want to attract the attention of any evil person present at the forum who might use *juju* or witchcraft to harm her mystically. Thus, the silence of Pereemabile and of all the women who on occasion choose it in place of open protest

reflects the enormity of the power and the constraints that women come up against in Dagaaba settlements.

It is unclear what Pereemabile sought to achieve by exploding with anger when I asked about her impression of the forum. But this is not peculiar to this study; resistance theorists have underscored the difficulties in reading the intent of resistant acts and I return to this shortly (see Scott, 1985; Hollander and Einwohner, 2004). But what is clear is that I offered her an avenue to express herself; a rare one at that, since she did not want other women in the settlement to know about her past deeds. Seymour might argue that this is ‘anti-subversive’. However, it makes sense to see Pereemabile’s acts, her disagreements with the dominant power forms—male and of the gods—her committing adultery and her explosions, in short her ‘hidden transcript’, as resistance. This is because acts do not necessarily have to be recognised by the target to be read as resistance. As Hollander and Einwohner (2004:541) rightly point out, ‘Scott’s “everyday” resistance is not recognized by targets but is apparent to culturally aware observers’. Thus, although some resistance theorists may not read Pereemabile’s explosions as resistant acts, on the basis that they do not openly oppose the dominant androcentric norms, which appear to be geared towards protecting only male interests, I argue that they most certainly are. This is because they challenge dominant power structures, even if not overtly.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have examined strategies deployed by Dagaaba women to challenge their subjugation and overthrow various forms of violence within the marriage space. The main task of this chapter has been to demonstrate that resistance is exercised in compelling ways in the face of the constraints (discussed above) and violence associated with exogamous marriage. As a result of the limits, the strategies Dagaaba women deploy, which I have analysed here, are fragmentary and diffuse and could easily go unnoticed. My analysis has revealed the complex relationship between power and resistance

amongst Dagaaba; power is not only exercised by the men and the gods to repress women; women both exercise power and resist it in complex ways, despite their public declarations of powerlessness and their presenting themselves as ‘slaves’. Consequently, it would be a mistake to take the women’s open appeal to helplessness regarding marital violence at face value as Foucault’s and Butler’s notions of power as productive and performative are also at work here.

Furthermore, I have demonstrated how resistance is exercised, with varying degrees of effectiveness, in this context. What runs through all the practices examined in this chapter is that they constitute what Scott (1990) has referred to as ‘infrapolitics’, disguised and unobtrusive. Like in other subordinate and subaltern groups, overt forms of resistance have been shown to have limited usefulness amidst the constraints, and given the negative repercussions that such actions may engender. To concentrate only on public utterances is to miss most of what Dagaaba women do to protect themselves in marriage. Therefore, Scott’s theory of ‘full transcript’—a combination of the hidden and public transcripts—provides an insight into understanding the haphazard forms of resistance Dagaaba women perform. What the forms of resistance I have examined here draw our attention to is the enormity of the challenges and the forces of the power forms that the women face and which they attempt to subvert and/or cope with. In this sense, my analysis makes important contributions to the discourses on resistance in two key ways. Firstly, it draws attention to the specific situation of exogamous marriage and the constraints it places on women’s exercise of resistance to domination and violence as non-lineage members. Hence, to understand resistance practices in that context is to fully recognise the constraints of this marriage arrangement. Secondly, mystical power is a crucial factor in determining resistance practices inasmuch as the beliefs in various paranormal forces and in their abilities to punish women who are in the public eye are pervasive.

The forms of resistance practices discussed here might not openly challenge male power, as Seymour argues. They have, nonetheless, proved to be the most appropriate and effective ones, given the negative consequences and punishment that attend the dramatic exercise of resistance. As Scott (1990:x) observes, the subaltern dwell in ‘power-laden situations in which a misplaced gesture or a misspoken word can have terrible consequences’. Similarly, Dagaaba women are fully mindful of the constraints surrounding them and the potential of any ‘misperformance’ to endanger not only their lives, but their children’s too. Thus the way in which they protest against violence has to be context-sensitive. Furthermore, it must be noted that these strategies do not necessarily constitute model examples of what works in that context. But the point is that they appear to have worked within the specific situations under consideration, albeit with varying degree of success. These strategies replicated by other actors and within different families, even within the same settlement, might have different implications. To this effect, I suggest that in accounting for the resistance of gendered violence in marriage within societies like the Dagaaba’s, attention needs to be given to the culture and to the context-specific power forms, in this case the mystical and male ones, because of their role in constraining resistant acts. Also, attention should be given to the context-specific acts that might undermine and/or subvert violence associated with exogamous marriage practices, given that different family dynamics might de/authorise different forms of resistant acts.

In addition, I argue that an act does not have to yield immediate change to amount to resistance. This is particularly crucial if we consider that resistance acts may fail to achieve their intended outcome(s). I have argued that issues of intentionality and consciousness, which some theorists, for instance Seymour, appear to privilege, and which lead to too much emphasis on dramatic resistance, should not be the main criterion for reading resistance. What is crucial is not the intent or the outcome but whether the acts target a power structure of a sort. This is because it is difficult to read intention (see Scott, 1985). Indeed, in thinking about this it may be useful to invoke Butler’s (1999) view regarding the problem of intentionality in relation to the

performative constitution of gender identity. In Chapter 2, I discussed Butler's reformulation of Nietzsche's theory of the subject and agency. According to Nietzsche, what is crucial is the act performed and not the agent or the intention behind it. Butler extends this theory to the formation of gender identities, arguing that there is no ontological presence preceding the articulation of the acts that give rise to the gendered self. Thus, what is important in theorising gender identity is the act and not the subject behind the deeds. Similarly, in terms of resistance it is crucial to recognise that the resistant practice itself and not the 'doer' or the intention is relevant. This is because we do not have full intentionality behind the acts we perform; we do not stand outside discourse and thus cannot conceive of intentionality as if it was ever-present and fully under our control. Resistance, like agency, is not a volitional act.

Conclusions: Theorising the Complexities of Gendered Power and Performance in a Mystical Context

Ka dɔɔ nwa yele ka nyi 'If a man says I should leave'

Duorima: *Dɔɔ le nwa yeli ka n yi ɔ de n engban na wa eng maa*
Ka dɔɔ zing kpaa nwa yeli ka n yi ɔ de n engban na wa eng
maa

Group: *N beri yoree yoree engban na wa eng maa*
N polibo daare enbgan na wa eng maa

Duorima: *Bindan pkagla nwa yeli ka n yi ɔ de engban na wa*
eng maa

N beri yoree yoree engban na wa eng maa

Group: *N beri yoro yoro engban na wa eng maa*

Duorima: If a young man says I should leave [his house], he should restore my youthful skin

If an idle man says I should leave, he should restore my youthful skin

Group: Put back my youthful breast

Restore the skin of my youthfulness

Duorima: If compacted faeces says I should leave; he should restore my youthful skin

Put back my youthful breast

Group: Put back my youthful breast

Songs and drama performed repetitively, both individually and collectively, represent a major way in which the women I worked with express their deep sentiments, exercise agency and challenge male dominance and female subjugation in Serekpere, as I have discussed throughout this thesis. The song presented above was recorded in one of the women's support groups I worked with during my fieldwork, at a funeral celebration in Nator, 20km from Serekpere. Similar to the examples started with in opening of the thesis, within these groups, the women deploy such strategies as drama and hyperbolic reiteration to express the realities of their lived experiences of marriage and power relations. These practices are constituted, performed and parodied in such ways that show the performative workings of power in the androcentric institution of marriage within the Dagaaba context. They challenge the norms that govern gendered practices and the degradation of women amongst Dagaaba. In the process, the complex workings and relations of power within marriage, including what is expressed in speech practices and

what is repetitively performed and deployed in exaggerated terms to counter pervasive violence, become evident. Thus, by paying attention to women's performative practices and combining these with an analysis of normative roles and other ritualised acts, I have sought to grapple with and represent the complexities involved in power relations and agentic and resistance practices in this pervasively mystical context.

The main thrust of the above song is that a husband wants to dismiss a wife after many years of marriage, several deliveries of children and countless hours of work on the family farm. In this, as in the other performative practices discussed in this thesis, the women drummed, sang, danced, displayed their bodies and, on this occasion, gestured to show that their appearances had changed from when they first got married. Explaining this song to me, some of the women, mostly the older ones, asked rhetorically: 'when I came to marry was I like this? The man wants you to leave his house but where should I go now?' In these disapprovingly derogatory performances, and in reducing the husband to compacted faecal matter, as they do, the women express their frustration with the apparent exploitation inherent in Dagaaba marriage arrangements. The exploitation I am referring to includes capturing a woman to marry her (as in Vero's case, discussed in Chapter 5), appropriating her labour and feeling at will to dismiss her from the marriage, without her children.

Thus, in these performative practices the women refuse to be victims of heteropatriarchy, that is, to have their youthfulness, its radiance, reproduction and labour, exploited and then be dismissed in the twilight of their lives when marriage prospects, in a context where marriage is closely linked to the ability to bear children, are limited. As a way to challenge the attempts by an abuser husband to dispense with her so easily, not only does the woman deride him, she also asks for the impossible—to have her premarital looks restored. In other words, since the abuser husband cannot restore her youthful beauty and attractiveness, she will not leave the marriage. The performative acts that

ensued in this forum resonate profoundly with the women's utterances in everyday speech that they will not go away and leave their children. There is an interesting divergence between these performative practices and the second vignette in the opening chapter of this thesis. If the son-in-law has reduced the daughter to toilet cleaning items, as the song there informs us, the abusive husband who seeks to dismiss the wife from the marital space is nothing but faecal matter. The fact that these women can perform resistance in this manner and, indeed, in everyday speech, raises questions about their expressed views that they are powerless within exogamous marriage arrangements. Thus, the performative practices as expressed in this vignette and the others examined in this research are useful in helping us understand the contradictions and complexities of power and gender relations in this Dagaaba setting.

I have decided to start this concluding chapter with this song and the performative practice that accompanies it because they encapsulate, and thus provide compelling insights into, many of the key intersecting themes and issues that my thesis addresses. These themes include women's songs and drama in these women-only groups as performative practices, violence against women, the degradation of women and the ambiguities that characterise women's agency and resistance practices within the marriage space. In this study, I have coined the phrase 'the marriage space' to designate a multifaceted network of relations involving numerous actors and perceived mystical beings that form, sustain and also constrain each and every Dagao marriage union. Songs and parodic practices in this context thus demonstrate the complexities involved in power and gender relations (powerful, powerless and in-between these) in this Dagaaba setting, and this may complicate our understanding of agentic and resistance practices. The manner in which the songs are sung, dramatised and exaggerated reveal the male-centric institutions and norms governing marriage practices in this context, and the violence that they engender for the women in marriage in order to challenge them.

As I discussed in Chapter 1, the original impetus for this study stemmed from the need to challenge the subjugation of and violence against women in societies in northern Ghana¹⁶⁰. To be able to achieve this, I have focused on interpreting gendered relations of power in marriage through a performative theoretical framework. This is because, as I discussed in Chapter 4, Dagaaba marriage practices are central to the formation of identities, particularly women's. Thus, a starting point for understanding the issues of violence and the denigration of women who try to disrupt the normative expectations, is a careful excavation of marriage practices. However, there is lack of theoretical accounts of women's lived experiences of the power dynamics within marriage in these settlements. This situation is particularly unsettling because a significant amount of research has been conducted in Dagaaba settlements, earning them the title 'minor ethnographic celebrities' (Hawkins, 2002:6), but women's voices and perspectives are marked by their absence from the literature.

In order to develop a detailed understanding of gendered power relations in this context, including the subjugation of women, the violence that exogamous marriage practices engender and how to combat it, I employed poststructuralist theories of gender performativity and combined these with feminist ethnographic techniques. A performative framework allowed me to explore my research questions whilst eschewing the naturalised and totalising notions of gender and the workings of power. Instead, it views identity categories and power relations as performatively constituted—formed through the ritualised reiterations of gendered norms and discursive practices that solidify over time to give an appearance of fixed identities (Butler, 1990, 1993a). This approach has permitted me to explore agentic and resistance practices in marriage in ways that may not otherwise be possible within a liberal humanist framework. Performative gender theories pay attention to the way in which norms, identities and subjectivities are repetitively constructed, enacted and re-appropriated, as well as the specific interests that

¹⁶⁰ It is important to note that Serekpere and its surrounding settlements, to a large extent, are typical of exogamous settings in northern Ghana in many respects.

approximating such ideal norms serves. By paying attention to the subtleties of the workings of power, the theories expose the weaknesses of the norms that govern gender performance in society and reveal how to effectively undermine their marginalising potential. These poststructuralist assumptions have been combined with postcolonial African feminist debates to study the daily and ritual lives of Dagaaba women in Serekpere.

In this chapter, I return to the main thematic of this study, namely the performative workings of power, and gendered and embodied practices within marriage. I also consider the implications of applying theories of performativity to understanding agency and resistance practices in Dagaaba settlements. Furthermore, I examine the overall arguments of this study and its critical contributions to existing debates on gendered power relations in Africa and transnationally. In line with these framing issues, this chapter is organised into two interrelated parts. In the first section, I discuss the key findings to emerge from this study, and secondly, I examine my critical contributions to performative and other critical gender theories and the implications of my findings to these theories.

Performative Marriage, Gendered Identities and Agency

I have drawn on theories of gender performativity and postcolonial African feminisms to develop an integrated framework I call ‘African gender performativity’. This approach relies greatly on Judith Butler’s theory of gender and identities in general as performative, that is, constituted by the reiterative power of discourse to create and also constrain that which it names. Through analysis of findings from my participant observation fieldwork data, I have demonstrated profound resonance between the theories of performativity of gender and Dagaaba constructions of gender identities, power relations and resistance practices and the workings of mystical forces. The key assumptions, particularly the constitution of (gender) identities through the repetition of past norms and the possibility to repeat differently, and in hyperbolic terms to re-idealise or reveal the weaknesses of dominant

institutions within society, have been very instructive in helping make sense of the subtleties of gendered performance and power relations.

This framework has been especially useful in that, because of the constraints associated with marriage practices in this context, if attention is not paid to the intricacies of power relations, only a superficial understanding and analysis of these will be possible. By deploying the assumptions of performative gender theories, I have been able to effectively observe and analyse the manner in which gender norms are reconstituted, re-enacted, idealised and also re-appropriated to challenge marital violence and the subordination of women. Furthermore, by interpreting songs and drama and the hyperbolic repetition that accompanies them through this framework, I gained deeper insights into agentic and resistance practices that might otherwise have been difficult to access. The potential difficulty stems from the constraints under which women in Dagaaba settings find themselves. Based on the critical insights I was able to gain, I have explored context-specific modes of understanding femininities that both resonate with and diverge significantly from performative gender theories, and I return to this shortly. Furthermore, drawing insights from the theories' re-appropriation principles, for instance, of 'queer' marginalisation, I have examined strategies for redeploing a local concept known as *pog ganda* that is used to stigmatise, and thus engender potentially fatal consequences for, strong-willed women for feminist politics and women's organising for greater change.

I differ from performative gender theories, however, inasmuch as I draw attention to the difficulties associated with narrowly focusing on sexuality and dressing in theorising gender identities as tenuous, as most theorists of performative gender do. As I discuss in this thesis, such norms are less useful in the rural northern Ghanaian context of this study. Based on evidence from my ethnographic fieldwork, I suggest that performative gender theories in contexts such as the Dagaaba's will benefit enormously from taking into consideration other performative practices within the marriage space and in community-wide activities. These practices include the reiterative

performance of songs and drama, sex-segregated roles and other local value systems, such as the pervasive belief in mystical forces, which are central to the gender identities that women assume. Furthermore, my study challenges some of the contemporary dominant Western notions and debates on agency and resistance that are premised on overt practices—speech and action. This manner of theorising is constrained because, as I have discussed throughout this thesis, in Dagaaba contexts a belief in mystical forces is prevalent, and structures virtually every social action. Anyone, man or woman, who is in the limelight is at risk of attack by ‘evil’ people from the inner core of the family who may use their mystical power to harm her or him. Expressive ways of exercising agency have been shown to be critically constrained due to this risk of harm, particularly in Chapter 5.

In turn, although this study’s focus has been on a rural, non-Western, Dagaaba context, Western and transnational theorists of performative gender may benefit from taking note of key lessons that have emerged here. According to Butler, and as I have discussed throughout this thesis, drag can subvert dominant notions of gender as an inner core. My ethnographic analysis of heteronormative marriage practices and the (tenuous) constructions of gender identities demonstrates that heterosexual practices can also reveal gender’s phantasmatic character. This is to say that it is not only drag or gender non-conforming practices have the potential to expose gender as fictive. By paying critical attention to heteronormative practices in this setting, my study has illustrated the ways in which conduct coded as normative in the Ghanaian setting can also reveal the illusionary character of gender identity. Thus, heteronormative practices can also throw into relief notions of gender as natural and fixed. Related to this, the notion of the marriage space, to which I return shortly, has a great deal to offer theories of gender performativity and critical sociology more generally. For instance, by theorising the marriage space as a performative category, I have pointed to the need to look beyond the heterosexual couple to understand the workings of marriage relations and agentic practices. Whilst this is particularly relevant in Dagaaba context it also has salience in Western and transnational contexts,

because it allows us to explore complex gendered power relations in ways that a narrow focus on the marriage partners may foreclose. Finally, as I have discussed previously, this study has engaged throughout in practices of ‘cultural translation’, that is to say, translating the Euro- and North American-centric theories of performativity of gender into language and concepts with resonance within a rural, northern Ghanaian context. Butler (1999; 2000) entreats her interlocutors to translate theories of performativity of gender into specific contexts in recognition of the fact that different settings may authorise different performative practices. Thus, this study has been an attempt to build on this call by examining specifically Daagaba marriage practices in Ghana, a non-Western context. By so doing, I have sought to ‘decolonise’ these dominant Western theories of performativity and this has meant interrogating and critiquing, as well as drawing out points of resonance among, these theories.

Furthermore, I have also relied on feminist debates about the challenges of ‘the African woman’ (even as I critique simplistic notions of femininities in the widely diverse contexts of Africa) with material and sustenance issues. African and postcolonial feminist theorists writing about the specific situation of African women have drawn our attention to the multiple burdens we grapple with¹⁶¹. These burdens include pernicious neo-colonial and liberal policies that ensure that welfare interventions are scrapped, unacceptable levels of poverty and hunger, local male-dominant public structures and institutions and negative socio-cultural norms and practices that permit violence against women to occur. Despite these challenges and many others (including armed conflict) that African women contend with, and the contra notions that emphasise them (see Ogunyemi, 1985), I have argued in this study that complex theorising is not irrelevant to African women’s situation (see Chapter 2). Instead, theorising in African contexts should be informed by and, in turn, inform policies and interventions that are geared towards resolving the so-called bread and butter issues. In Chapter 2, I argued that

¹⁶¹ See Ogunyemi-Leslie (1994), McClintock (1995), Mikell, 1997 (Lewis (2001) and Nnaemeka (2003).

without paying critical attention to the institutions, norms and practices that engender and perpetuate women's subordination, measures seeking to address practical gender needs (such as micro-credit loans) are less likely to achieve reasonable results. Thus it is not surprising that despite many years of activism, such as in providing micro-credit facilities for women, unequal gendered relations pervade contexts in Africa. To this effect, my approach to interpreting Dagaaba lived experiences—the African gender performativity—has been anti-essentialist, whilst at the same time addressing the struggles of women in the postcolonial and poverty-stricken rural contexts of Dagaaba and, indeed, of the whole of northern Ghana.

Performative marriage, ambiguous identities and female-to-female violence

In Chapter 4, I discussed the importance of marriage in Dagaaba social life, and I underscored the fact that it is the basis for organising family units and economic activities. Marriage amongst Dagaaba is a complex process constructed over a period of time, and is comprised of multiple actors and a series of discursive practices and norms, as well as the relocation (in the case of a woman) to the marital settlement. 'The marriage space', and its usefulness as an analytical category for understanding Dagaaba marriage practices as performative, is one of the achievements of my study. In terms of the marriage process itself, I have demonstrated that each successful step, from introducing the prospective bride and groom to the former joining the latter, contributes towards an end, namely, the moment a marriage is legitimated. Consequently, I have argued that marriage amongst Dagaaba can be understood as a multi-stage performative process. To perceive of Dagaaba marriage as a multi-stage process is to recognise that the various procedures and practices are cumulative in contributing towards the moment when marriage is completed. This diverges greatly from Western notions of marriage, which focus mainly on the couples in question in civil ceremonies. To this effect, it is not surprising that Western researchers studying Dagaaba and similar cultures in northern Ghana, including Ulrike Wanitzek (1998) amongst Bulsa in the Upper East Region and Sean Hawkins (2002:232) amongst 'LoDagaa', contend that what pertained to these ethnic groups prior

to the onslaught of British colonialism were ‘conjugal unions’ and practices, and not ‘marriages’. But it seems that this reading is the result of misunderstanding the context of and the complex processes involved in constructing a Dagaaba marriage, as I discussed in Chapter 4.

Also, drawing on the notions of *di pɔge*, ‘pick/take a wife’, and *kul sere* ‘go to a husband’, part of Hawkins’ claim is that there is no Dagaaba word denoting marriage. But whilst Hawkins’s project critiques colonial and postcolonial writers of Dagaaba cultural practices for transposing Western values on to these cultures, it seems Hawkins’ own positionality as a Western researcher stands in his way of recognising that different standards and values pertain to Dagaaba marriage practices than to Western civil and elaborate wedding ceremonies. Marriage occupies an important place in Dagaaba social life; it is not ‘only the agreement of man and woman to live with each other’ as Hawkins (2002:233) claims. It is a complex process involving many actors and discursive processes and, indeed, the two settlements involved. The Dagaaba I worked with would interpret a view such as Hawkins’ as an affront to the honour of marriage, as well as a lack of appreciation of the meticulous and multifaceted processes, procedures and sacrifices that are involved in constructing a marriage union. Indeed, it is because of the centrality of marriage practices and their role in sculpting women’s identities and in the subjugation of and violence against women, that my research has focused on fleshing them out. In other words, the processes and discursive practices involved in forming Dagaaba marriage unions have consequences for power relations, agency and resistance acts amongst actors within the marriage space, as I show below.

Following from the specific arrangement of Dagaaba marriage practices and the patrilocal residential pattern, my analysis shows that Dagaaba women occupy ambiguous identity positions. Normatively, Dagaaba marriage practices require that upon marriage women leave their natal families and join their husbands in the latter’s settlement. Also, the men and their families pay

bride wealth to the family of a woman upon marriage. This marriage payment and residential pattern have implications for women's identities, position and relative power (although note that this power has 'improved' by the time one becomes a mother-in law and, thus, there is a generational aspect, too) in both natal and marital families. In the former, a young Dagao woman is frequently reminded of her temporary status; she belongs elsewhere, and that is in her marital settlement. In the marital family, although the woman is a major pillar of continuity (through childbirth, childcare, home management and farm work), she is perceived as an outsider. The woman in marriage is seen as being purchased for reproduction and productivity purposes, and thus comparable to a slave. She is not a lineage member and thus her ties to the family may come to an end if the marriage is dissolved; her privileges are also limited. As the opening discussion reveals, she may have her body, labour and reproduction exploited and be dismissed from the marriage. This situation of the Dagao woman in marriage is what I describe as ambiguous, in that women inhabit an uncertain identity position because they belong fully to neither the natal nor the marital family. This ambiguous identity position that women occupy has implications for women's welfare in marriage, and their agentic and resistance practices.

Related to the above, as a result of the concatenation of relations and actors that are involved in a marriage, apart from male spousal violence, which remains the most damaging form, what also emerges from my study is what I term 'woman-to-woman violence'. This violence is understood as being exacted or instigated by one female on another. Yet, as my analysis has shown, there is a lack of theoretical attention given to woman-to-woman, used interchangeably in this study with female-to-female, violence. Academic discussions of marital/spousal violence have often paid attention only to man-to-woman and woman-to-man violence (see Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Straus and Gelles 1986). For these and many other Western-centric theorists, this focus is understandable and appropriate, as the main actors in a marriage in Western societies are the couple in question. However, in the context of Ghana, the same lack of theoretical attention to female-to-female violence is

present in contemporary debates on this subject matter (see Coker-Appiah and Cusack, 1999; Cantalupo et al, 2006) and the elision of woman-to-woman violence in theoretical discussions is worrying, as within Ghanaian contexts this form of violence is pervasive in rural and urban, and private and public spaces.

As I discussed in Chapter 5, depending on the power balance, some women who occupy disadvantaged positions suffer various forms of violence, including denial of access to productive resources such as shea nuts, a major source of income for women in Dagaaba settlements, and to a husband in the case of a co-wife. To be able to understand marital violence in exogamous marriage arrangements fully enough to challenge it, I argue that there is a need to take into consideration the wider network of actors involved in a marriage. We also need to pay attention not only to violence between the couple in marriage, but also to woman-to-woman and perceived spirits-to-woman violence. The role of the spirits, particularly the androcentric gods, in exercising violence against women can be better understood if we consider that both the women and men I worked with explained that the gods often support the men, their 'sons'. Thus, to understand the scope of the marital violence Dagaaba women experience is to take into consideration these networks and the multiple actors in a marriage.

Mysticism: the underlining substrate of the everyday and ritual performance

As my analysis has shown, Dagaaba settlements are permeated by beliefs in supernatural forces such as the power of the gods or ancestors, witchcraft and *juju*/magic. Thus, daily life and ritual practices that are performed as part of funeral and marriage ceremonies are deeply affected by the pervasiveness of these paranormal forces. It is important to underscore that mysticism is a performative construct; its reality is constituted by the discourses and beliefs in it and their repeated invocation. The ways in which these forces and the beliefs in them are reproduced represent major factors that affect social

interactions and relations amongst Dagaaba. Most of the debates on mysticism in Africa have lumped all these forces together as ‘witchcraft’ (see discussion in Chapter 5). Despite criticism of his earlier works, Peter Geschiere (2013) has defended this lumping together; he argues that the paranormal world of Africa is a slippery terrain that eludes straightjacket categorisations. Indeed, I agree with Geschiere on the difficulties involved in delineating these forces into constituent parts. But in order not to overemphasise the importance of witchcraft, whilst silencing the workings of ancestral and *juju* forms of power, which might be even more pervasive in these contexts, I have attempted to separate these forces even as I acknowledge the complications involved in such an endeavour.

Conventionally, every Dagaao family is believed to be under the protection of their deceased ancestors. Thus, sacrifices in the form of libations are periodically offered to the ancestors to thank them for their protection and to pray for their support. Such occasions include marriage, the beginning of the farm season and the end of the harvest. The ancestors might cause a misfortune, in the form of killing someone or inflicting them with an incurable disease, as a way to show their rage when such sacrificing is neglected or a taboo is broken (such as a woman committing adultery). These are the main roles of the gods, as I understood them to be in Serekpere. Dagaaba also believe that certain individuals have witchcraft power, a force that enables them to do things that ordinarily might not be possible. This power is believed to circulate mainly amongst the mother’s kin such that the children of a perceived female witch are also thought to be witches and consequently feared. Finally, in Dagaaba settlements, the workings of and beliefs in *juju* might be even more prevalent than witchcraft. According to one of my research participants, Sampson (c39), almost every Dagaao man has one form of *juju* or another for protecting his household—himself, his wives and his children. This is aside from the general mystical protection the head of a family is expected to provide. Separating the powers in this way, rather than masking some of them under a rather extensive notion of witchcraft, we can understand the various mystical power forms that are perceived to

characterise social life amongst Dagaaba. These forms of power and their perceived abilities to cause harm to women and men who are in the public eye or who transgress cultural norms, and the mystical insecurities (fears and worries) they engender act as major social control measures within the marriage space and in community-wide relations. To this effect, they are important constraining factors on agentic and resistance practices amongst Dagaaba.

Multivalent and contingent femininities

Dagaaba conceptions of femininity—socially defined norms, attributes and behaviours associated with being a woman—appear to be premised on performing gender-segregated roles within the marriage space, and in community-wide and farm-related work (see Chapter 4). These spaces are all divided along gender lines, as mentioned above. What is meant by ‘femininity’ in Dagaaba societies diverges from notions of femininities in urban settlements in Ghana and in industrialised Western contexts. Whether a female Dagaao is hailed into an ‘ideal woman’ or a ‘woman’, or is stigmatised as a *pog gando*, ‘beyond a man’ depends on the context, how she performs the normative roles assigned to her and the judge(s) of her gendered performance (Althusser, 1972). Femininity in this context is contingent upon normative and discursive practices, and multiple femininities are possible. Consequently, I have argued that femininity in Dagaaba settlements can be understood as constituting a spectrum ranging from ideal woman through woman to beyond woman. To theorise femininity as contingent in this context is to open up possibilities for different ways of embodying it as well as for challenging its norms for their marginalising potential. This also means that unanticipated ways of casting gendered identities can be accommodated. Furthermore, I have argued that in Ghana, and within Dagaaba societies, the notion of womanhood is positively marked. To be a woman is already to be good, and it is to play a complementary role to the husband, making up for the deficiencies of the man. A *pogminga*, an ‘ideal woman’, as I have shown, is a virtually unrealisable category, just as other ideal categories are (Butler, 1999,

2011). But discourses on it are omnipresent, as shoring it up serves the interests of dominant (male) groups in society. As discussed in Chapter 6, attaining its ideals serve the interests of everyone within the marriage space, except the women in question.

The *pog gandao*—the beyond woman—is an abjected and a queered category, which has the potential to attract not only stigma but also mystical punishment for the subjects it forms by a shaming interpellation. I have argued that the risk of being called *pog gandao* is the androcentric institutions' most productive weapon, in that it deflates strong-willed and hardworking women because, out of a deep-seated fear of such stigmatisation and the attendant mystical consequences, they often shun endeavours that have the potential to predispose them to such designations. Women who are making a difference in the lives of their families and settlements (by actively mobilising other women to work for change or working hard on their personal farms) often abandon the work once they are marginalised as *pog gandaba* (plural). Relying on theories of abjection and queer re-appropriation (Kristeva, 1982; Butler, 1990, 1993a), I have explored ways to re-appropriate this marginalised identity category for feminist politics. The strategies I have suggested include projecting it (particularly the wilful woman aspect) as a positive identity category and highlighting the repressive and exclusionary potential of the ideal category. It is important to underscore that I am not suggesting this as the essence of femininity. Indeed, such a suggestion would be as oppressive as the ideal category. My argument is that the positive attributes and talents of particular women should not be the basis for their victimisation. Despite the constraints, including the mystical fears and insecurities, in addition to male power, I argue in this study that this re-appropriation is possible, even if it has to be gradual. Now I turn to the implications of my findings for theorising gender.

In terms of the theories of gender performativity, I have argued that the 'parodic proliferation' of gender norms and drag or transgender, which are the metaphors Butler (1990, 1993a, 2004b) deploys to explain her theory of gender as illusory, are less useful in Ghana, particularly in the rural north

of the country. I discussed the dangers associated with such overt agentic and resistance practices in Chapters 5 and 6 and the repercussions normatively non-conforming subjectivities face in both rural and urban settlements. As discussed in Chapter 6, the problematics appear to stem from Butler's limited focus on sexuality and visual presentation of the self. However, if we shift our attention away from drag and its visible expressions (for instance, cross-dressing) that are associated with the theories of gender performativity, and yet perceive of gender as not dependent on sex, and as performative, then we can see the phantasmatic character of Dagaaba gender identities. The fact that a single Dagaao woman can be considered 'an ideal' woman or stigmatised as 'beyond woman' within different discursive contexts shows that there is no 'true' or 'inner core' to gender identity.

Consider Dakorama's perspective, discussed in Chapter 6. According to Dakorama, depending on the evaluator and a woman's relationship to her or him, she may be hailed as a *pogminga* or shamed as a *pog gandao*. In sum, in this northern Ghanaian context, the way in which sex-segregated roles within the marriage space and in community-wide practices are performed are crucial to the constitution of gender identities for women. Secondly, the subjects' relationship to other actors within that space, and whether they are perceived as good wives, is crucial to the gender identities that they are hailed into. Finally, the pervasiveness of the belief in mystical forces in this context and in their abilities to harm any woman who is in the limelight renders action-oriented acts perilous for women and thus theorising premised on them problematic. These contextual factors have significant implications for theorising the performative constitution of gender identities in this rural northern Ghanaian context. Theorising in this and similar contexts needs to extend its focus beyond the visible and the expressive, such as dressing, 'hyperbolic repetition' and sexuality. By extending analytical attention to these sex-segregated roles, the role of multiple actors and the prevalence of beliefs in supernatural forces, performative gender identities as constituted by Dagaaba and in exogamous settlements may be much more effectively understood.

Productive power, performative agency and resistance in marriage

In relation to power my argument in this study is that in these Dagaaba settlements power can be understood as performative, produced in its articulation by the reiteration of discursive practices. This is because, amongst Dagaaba, power pervades the nodes of relations constituting ‘the marriage space’. As such, power is exercised not only by the androcentric gods and men to exact violence on women. Instead, power is exercised by all the actors—women and men and paranormal beings—in complex ways. We can effectively understand the complexities involved if we consider that, despite asserting power, women also frequently present themselves in public discourse as ‘powerless victims’ of male and ancestral forces and of exogamous marriage arrangements. Thus, power relations are more complex than what a simple binary notion of power as something deployed hierarchically to repress the less powerful would allow for. In this regard, I have argued that both Michel Foucault’s and Judith Butler’s perceptive notions of power as performative reverberate profoundly with Dagaaba marriage practices. In this study, following Lila Abu-Lughod’s (1985:251) notion of the ‘discourse of honor’, which refers to the way both Awlad ‘Ali Bedouin women and men put on dissimulated acts of pride and independence to mask their hurt and weaknesses in the public arena, whilst expressing their vulnerability in the private sphere, I describe this as a ‘discourse of humility’. This dissimulation—the public display of vulnerability—represents a discourse of humility because Dagaaba people are modest in expressing themselves: humility is much revered but also critical for survival. This masked performance is also crucial for peaceful existence within the marriage space. Indeed, as I have explained throughout this study, this dissimulation is necessary due to the risk of mystical harm that expressive acts may engender for women.

Furthermore, in the midst of the constraints a Dagaaba woman in marriage encounters, including occupying an ambiguous identity position, male and mystical power forms, and the insecurities and fear that emanate from the latter, I argue that agency and resistance are exercised by Dagaaba women in

quite complex ways. Following Foucault, Butler and Sumi Madhok et al, I argued that agentic and resistance practices occur within constraints. However, what the constraints I have outlined here imply is that agentic and resistance practices have to be appropriate and suited to the context. As such, overt modes of exercising resistance and agency, which characterise most of feminist theorising on agency and resistance, are of limited usefulness in this context. This is because such practices are likely to engender dire consequences for a woman in marriage.

Madhok (2013) draws our attention to the limitations of overt forms of resistance and agentic practices. She suggests that in contexts in the global South, where negative repercussions of ‘misperformance’ of gendered norms are more serious, speech practices should be taken into consideration in accounting for agency. This, Madhok (2013:107) argues, is crucial in order to avoid what she has described as the risk of ‘misdescription’, either missing agency where it is practised or inscribing it where there is none. But in the analysis of my ethnographic data, I have shown the dangers not only of actions but of speech practices too. For instance, consider the case of Nzoma discussed in Chapter 5. She is a mentally ill widow who is believed to have been inflicted with madness for challenging her late husband’s kin who charged her daughter’s prospective husband a high bride price. Based on my analysis of the dangers of both speech and action, I propose that in contexts like Serepere, accounts of agency and resistance practices need to pay particular attention to supernatural power forms and the role they play in de/authorising certain forms of gendered performances. This is crucial in order to effectively understand agentic practices and to avoid the sort of misdescriptions Madhok warns us about.

Specifically, in regard to resistance, in Chapter 7, I discussed the context-sensitive strategies and practices that the women I worked with deploy to challenge subordination and overthrow various forms of violence and injustice within the marriage space. In that chapter, my analysis reveals how

resistance is performed, with varying degrees of effectiveness, in Dagaaba contexts. As a result of the aforementioned constraints (relating to mysticism, male-centric institutions and exogamous marriage arrangements), most of the forms of resistance practices I have examined constitute what James Scott (1990) describes as ‘infrapolitics’. These are low-profile and disguised acts of resistance, including the use of songs within women-friendly settings and temporarily fleeing the marital space. In this context, to pay attention to only public speech and actions is to miss most of what Dagaaba women do to challenge or cope with violence and abuse in marriage. Thus, Scott’s theory of ‘full transcript’—a combination of the hidden and public transcripts—and an appreciation of the mystical context within which resistance is practised are crucial to understanding the forms it assumes amongst Dagaaba women.

Furthermore, the particular strategies of resistance I discuss in Chapter 7 may not, as some resistance theorists, for instance Susan Seymour (2006), argue, openly challenge male power. However, they are appropriate and effective strategies in Serekpere given the negative consequences and the punishment that attend the dramatic exercise of resistance. My research participants, like the peasants Scott worked with in South East Asia (1990), are fully mindful of the constraints surrounding them and the potentiality of any ‘misperformance’ to endanger their lives and those of their children. Thus, their resistance practices have to be tactical in order not to spark off negative ripple effects. As I argued in Chapter 7, these do not necessarily constitute model examples of appropriate strategies for resisting marital violence and subordination. What is crucial is that they appear to have worked in the specific instances under consideration. If replicated elsewhere, they may well produce different results. In this sense, I suggest that theorising resistance to marital violence within Dagaaba and similar societies requires critical attention to cultural and context-specific forms of power—in this case the mystical and male ones—because of their role in constraining acts of resistance. In addition, attention should be given to contextual acts that might undermine and/or subvert violence associated with exogamous marriage practices, given that family dynamics may de/authorise different forms of resistant practices. My

discussion here has focused on the multiple and productive power forms that are at work within a Dagaao marriage. These forces are complex in their workings, and are deployed by numerous actors in dynamic ways within the marriage space.

‘Slaves’, ‘*Ninbaala*’ and Heroines: Dagaaba Women’s Complex Positioning in Marriage

The analysis of my fieldwork data has provided compelling insights into the complex nexus of identities, power relations and discursive practices amongst Dagaaba in rural north-western Ghana. Firstly, women are generally perceived by both women and men as powerless dupes of exogamous marriage practices and androcentric institutions, purchased for the purpose of procreation and for their labour on the labour-intensive peasant settlements of Dagaaba. Thus, they have no rights over the produce of their labour, the children they bear or even their bodies and sexualities. A woman is under the control and ‘protection’ of the male head of the marital family. Both Dagaaba women and men acknowledge this position—*yeme* (‘slave’) and *ninbaala* (‘weak person’)—of the woman in marriage. As the women often explained to me, ‘if you were not a *ninbaala* you would not leave your father’s house and come to another person’s house’, and ‘unless a woman recognises her *ninbaala* position and humbles herself she will not be able to live with a husband and his family’. A woman’s continued existence and her entitlements within the marriage space depends on the male members of her marital family. Read superficially, this situation points to Dagaaba women as lacking power and agency to act or to resist gendered violence and subordination and, indeed, this makes sense if we consider that in public speech and practice women regularly represent themselves as weak, with a commonplace phrase being *pɔge yeŋ nin baala na* (‘as for a woman, she is a weak person’).

Interestingly, however, as I have discussed throughout this study, Dagaaba women are not simply powerless victims of heteropatriarchy and dupes of exogamous practices; they exercise power, agency and resistance in ways that

challenge the *ninbaala* and slave notions presented here. A woman in marriage is also a heroine, I argue; she is either the *deema* ('mother of the house') or *deεpɔge* ('woman of the house'). In these capacities, a woman in marriage is in charge of managing the home and, depending on the family dynamics, other women too. I discussed the manner in which women in privileged positions exercise power over other women in Chapter 5. In this sense, she is also a leader, even as her leadership authority is not coterminous with that of the male leader(s) within the marriage space. I have demonstrated agentic and resistance practices that defy the constraints discussed earlier, further complicating the notions of women as victims of male and mystical power. These include the case of Gbankoma and her husband in Chapters 3 and 5, in terms of sexuality, the radical strategies of Kaleoma in Chapter 7 for resisting forced widowhood marriage, and songs and the performative practices that accompany them. These contradictory positions of women and the gendered performances they enable, and constrain, are crucial for understanding power relations in marriage.

I have also argued that there is dissimulation—the outward demonstration of vulnerability and the private exercise of power, agency and resistance—and this represents the women's way of being sensitive to the pervasively mystical contexts of Dagaaba. For the majority of the women I worked with, this disguised performance is the only way to continue to live safely, without attracting male (and even female) violence or the wrath of 'evil people' who may use their supernatural powers to harm the woman in marriage or her children. To understand these complexities effectively, I have explored the discursive constitution of gender, power, agency and resistance in this context.

Finally, my analysis of Dagaaba marriage practices, gendered relations, cultural norms and mystical forces through a performative framework has permitted me to uncover complex workings of power that otherwise might be difficult to comprehend. Although Dagaaba women within marriage unequivocally represent themselves in public acts and discourse as victims of

male, exogamous and supernatural forces and violence, they also simultaneously exercise power, agency and resistance in various ways. Therefore, to understand gendered relations of power and women's agentic and resistance practices in Dagaaba and similar settings is to give some consideration to the various performative practices, including songs and drama, within the marriage space and on public forums, particularly the activities of the women-only groups and the perceived machinations of mystical forces in this context. In this way, both the hidden and the public gendered practices that are necessary for an effective understanding of the performative relations that constitute gender identities and determine agency and resistance can be effectively theorised.

In the first place, this thesis emerged from my desire to understand and challenge the persistent degradation and marginalisation of women in Ghanaian societies, and in particular in northern Ghanaian settings. I began the project with my frustrations as both a Frafra and a Dagaaba, and as a feminist activist and academic, and, indeed, that of many Ghanaian women, within the androcentric cultures of the northern part of the country and their denigration of women. Thus to an extent, this thesis is also autobiographical. But by paying critical attention to marriage and general exogamous practices, and by interpreting these through a performative framework, I have sought to develop an in-depth analysis of the situation of women and the making of subordinate positions for us in northern Ghana. The situation of women that I refer to here, and as I have examined in this study, includes their disadvantaged position in both public and private spheres, the making of women's ambiguous identities, and the near banality and normalisation of violence against them within such a marriage arrangement. Specifically, in relation to Dagaaba (and also Frafra) societies, two of the main factors accounting for the subjugation of women—and to have emerged from my analysis—are the exogamous marriage arrangement itself and the payment of bride wealth at marriage. Thus, for women to move from this position of marginality and to speak and live in ways that matter, and to eschew marital

violence, is for the marriage payment to be abolished, as some Dagaaba gender activists and scholars have argued (see, for example, Dery, 2013).

Yet, the women and men I worked with were almost unanimous in their views against any endeavours geared towards abolishing these practices because of the ‘dishonour’ any such move would bring to the institution of marriage. This situation of Dagaaba women, in particular, who bear the brunt of the oppression and normalised violence that exogamous marriage practices engender, has been frustrating for some feminist activists working in Dagaaba settlements. For instance, in a conversation with a group of women who vehemently opposed the idea of abolishing the marriage payment, a feminist activist, the group’s founder and sponsor, lamented: ‘do you know that you women are responsible for women’s suffering? ... we Dagaaba women don’t want change ... unfortunately you are dealing with people like them who cannot really go beyond their noses to appreciate and mobilise’. Despite this rather depressing note, my endeavour in this study sought to help us understand the ways in which the marginalisation of women and the violence in marriage are/can be undermined in this rural northern Ghanaian setting without undoing the institution of marriage itself or the practices that endear it to Dagaaba women and men. On a personal note, this research process has been crucial in helping me come to a deeper understanding of the complexly intertwined webs of power relations that sculpt my social positioning and affect my lived experiences as both a Frafra and a Dagao woman, and how these identity positions affect my other social locations as an academic feminist and activist.

Future Research

In sum, my ethnography is distinctive in firstly its critical feminist approach to studying power relations in Dagaaba marriage and secondly by a native ethnographer in this context. I have sought throughout to draw attention to power relations in ways that explore and interrogate simplistic assumptions (such as women as the oppressed victims of heteropatriarchy and Dagaaba

exogamous marriage practices) regarding gendered performances in rural northern Ghana. Nonetheless, this study is far from being an exhaustive account of the gendered relations of power that characterise marriage within Ghana, and Dagaaba settlements in particular. As Clifford Geertz (1973:29) rightly points out, '[c]ultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete' and this thesis is not an exception. In this regard, I would like to briefly touch on some of the crucial issues that my study does not address directly or that I have had to omit from my discussions for lack of space.

Firstly, motherhood is an important aspect of Dagaaba culture, and indeed, most Ghanaian women's lives. According to some of the women I worked with, a Dagaaba woman who has no biological children is stigmatised as worthless. Thus, it would be productive for future research to explore in detail women's experiences of motherhood, the challenges of women with and without children, how the former are marginalised within the marriage space and the role of motherhood in shaping gender identities. Although, as discussed in Chapter 6, the woman in marriage is normatively expected to be a mother to all the children within that space, and in turn, the boys are expected to provide for her sustenance at old age, from my field observations, women without biological children, particularly in later life, encounter more challenges relative to those with children. Paying closer attention to motherhood and how it is experienced, socially and biologically, may help further shed light on our understanding of the performative constitution of gender identities among Dagaaba. This will help further throw light on the dynamics and women's positioning within the marriage space.

Secondly, according to existing literature and popular assumptions, within matrilineal societies, including those of southern Ghana, women occupy a more privileged position and are more independent relative to their counterparts in northern patrilineal settlements (Bleek, 1976; see also Ogunyemi, 1997). This is because in matrilineal settlements residential patterns are *matrilocal*, meaning that, customarily, upon marriage, a man joins his wife in a dwelling place provided by the woman's maternal kin. The

maternal uncle has responsibility for the woman and her children, and this, it is believed, is because the male members are certain that the woman and her children are their blood relations¹⁶². That is to say, unlike patrilineal societies, power, authority and property inheritance in matrilineal settlements are passed to the male members of the matrilineage, for instance, to a mother's brother or a sister's son. In this sense, it is often argued that women's needs are better catered for in those societies since the woman in marriage is an 'insider' unlike her counterpart from the patrilineal settlements. In his study of the matrilineal Akan of Kwahu, Wolf Bleek (1976:540), citing earlier researchers of Akan societies such as Robert Rattray (1923) and George Foster (1972) claims that '[o]utward male domination is often a cloak to cover the lack of real power and female subservience is often pretended and could be described as "sop-behaviour"'. If Bleek's claim is anything to go by, it is interesting that although the dynamics in these societies vary markedly from those of patrilineal ones, the public transcripts are similar. I am referring particularly to the reversed gendered performance by women, that is, outwardly dissimulating acts of subservience. It would be productive for future research to focus on an in-depth examination of gendered relations of power and gendered performances in the matrilineal settlements of southern Ghana. This will enable a detailed understanding of the performative workings of gendered power in those societies.

Thirdly, Bleek discusses in detail issues of witchcraft beliefs and accusations within intimate family relations. Exploring the workings of gendered power, agentic and resistance practices and to examine to what extent and in what contexts witchcraft and mystical forces are pervasive would greatly help expand our understanding of these. Such insights can be juxtaposed with those emerging from this study and would together facilitate a richer, fuller account of women's situation in marriage in rural Ghana. As well, it could serve as a useful resource for a renewed and more sensitive policy-making

¹⁶² These are unlike the children of the man and his wife since he may not be in a position to ascertain that these are truly his offspring and thus his blood relations. Thus, it is often said that he might be suffering to cater for people who are not his biological children (see Nukunya, 2003).

and advocacy work, ones that are informed by the experiences of women in both matrilineal and patrilineal societies in Ghana.

Glossary

<i>Akaayai/akayale</i>	Amongst the Bulsa, transfer of money to a bride's family to announce her whereabouts/marriage
<i>Beere</i>	Brother
<i>Bipoge/pogyaa</i>	Daughter
<i>Doo</i>	Man
<i>Dendeo</i>	A woman married into another village who goes back to bring a woman for marriage to her husband or his relation. Also, a man from a woman's husband's village who acts as a liaison between the two marriage parties
<i>Deedo</i>	Father-in-law
<i>Deema</i>	Mother-in-law
<i>Die</i>	Room/home
<i>Kpeezaga</i>	'Room of the dead'. A room usually designated for keeping corpses temporarily for mourning
<i>Kpeema</i>	Sister
<i>kul taa/di taa</i>	Marriage
<i>Libipeele</i>	Cowries
<i>Ma</i>	Mother
<i>Mooro</i>	Sickness as a result of a wife's infidelity
<i>Pogya-taaba</i>	Daughters/women from the same settlement
<i>Poge</i>	Woman
<i>Poge yey nin baala na</i>	A woman is weak
<i>Poge yey yeme na</i>	A woman is a slave
<i>Pog gandao/pog gandaba</i>	A wilful woman/plural
<i>Pogminga</i>	An ideal woman
<i>Pog paala zen ngoro</i>	Bride's guide
<i>Sensembie</i>	Illegitimate child
<i>Sooba</i>	Witch
<i>Soolong</i>	Witchcraft
<i>Soopiele</i>	White witch
<i>Soosoglaa</i>	Black witch
<i>Tendaana</i>	A male community leader in charge of spiritual issues
<i>Tii</i>	A generic term for medicine and supernatural forces other than witchcraft

Appendices

Appendix A:

Observational guide

Issues to be observed include the following:

Generally, the local context: that is, the setting, the activities and any performative practices and events going on. Specifically, attention will be paid to the following:

- ❖ Gender and social relations and roles, gestures and physical behaviour, including who does (or does not do) what and who relates with who.
- ❖ Physical appearance in terms of gender, age, mode of dressing. In this regard issues of note will include: how dressing reveals social status and religious affiliations and any other issues of interest.
- ❖ Cultural expressions in terms of art, cultural practices such as widowhood rites, taboos and totems, belief systems, marriage ceremonies, christenings, festivals and dance, among others. In this regard, who performs what role and any acts of subversion will be of interest.
- ❖ Decision-making issues, that is, who makes decisions within and outside the household and who controls productive resources.
- ❖ Community-organising activities. Who performs what role in respect of community development initiatives and social functions? Also which people have the greater influence on community activities will be of interest.
- ❖ Any social meanings attached to the physical environment: natural and built.

Appendix B:

Interview guide for state organisations and civil society organisations

involved gender activism

Activities

1. What is the nature of your work? Advocacy, empowerment and/ or enforcement of gender related laws? Explain.
2. What constitutes your target communities and groups?
3. Could you specify the kind of programmes/projects you undertake?
4. Have you experienced successes in your advocacy work?
5. Can you tell me about them?

Gender Relations and Equality

1. What is your understanding of the following concepts?
 - Gender mainstreaming
 - Gender equality and equity
 - Feminism?
2. How relevant are each of these concepts to your work?
3. What would it mean for there to be 'equal' relations between the genders – does this mean treating everyone 'equally or not'? Explain.
4. Is it necessary to have gender parity in marriage and society at large? If yes, what will it take to achieve gender equality? If no why?
5. What factors militate against achieving gender equality in Ghana?
6. How can they be resolved?
7. What are the causes of domestic violence in marriage?
8. How can these be addressed?
9. What are the challenges women face in marriage?

Challenges

10. What challenges do you face in relation to your work in respect of the following?
 - Human resources and logistics;
 - Attitude of the general populace;
 - Socio-cultural and religious factors and any other.
11. How can these challenges be redressed?

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