

Chapter 7

Dipo and the Adolescent Krobo Girl: Redemption of a Contested Puberty Rite for Contemporary Sexual Health Education

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary Christian/secular/social trends and beliefs about religion, the rights of women, and the privacy of their bodies have been used to challenge the Dangme people of Ghana's continued adherence to the Dipo puberty rite. Without judging the Dipo rite but focusing on its intended value systems, this research argues that contemporary societal problems can harness the beneficial qualities of various traditional rituals to help solve specific societal issues. This chapter sets out to explore how the value systems of a contested puberty rite like the Dangme people's Dipo can help address sexual health issues prevalent in the Dangme communities. This chapter discusses how repurposing of Dipo's existing educational platform and value systems can contribute to the eradication or reduction of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) such as the Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS) epidemic among members of the Dangme tribes.

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INTRODUCTION

The Dangme people's *dipo* and the Bragro of the Ashanti in Ghana, are the two most prominent and well-preserved traditional puberty initiation rites for girls in Ghana (Osei-Adu, n.d.). In most African communities, there are three initiation rites, child-naming, puberty, and marriage. While child-naming and marriage involve both men and women, *dipo* and Bragro is strictly a female initiation rite. According to Brown (2018), a female initiation rite "consists of one or more prescribed ceremonial events that are mandatory for all girls in a given society" (p. 838). A female adolescent qualifies for *dipo* rite after her first menstruation and is supposed to be a virgin at the time of the rite's performance (A Safe Hands for Mothers, 2017 & B. D. Amoatey and N. Kaney, personal communication, October 15, 2014).

The Dangmes comprise Ada, Ningo, Krobo, and the Shai tribes found in the south-eastern parts of Greater Accra and south-western portion of the eastern regions. Even though all the Dangme tribes perform *dipo*, there are minute differences in the way the rite is performed from one group to another. There are also many similarities in the way the ritual is performed and its overall significance as an essential cultural initiation rite used to transition adolescents from childhood into womanhood. Besides its role as a transitional rite, the value systems of *dipo* also aims at preventing sexual promiscuity and premarital sex among adolescents before they participate in the ritual. A virginity/pregnancy qualification is one of the central tenets of the rite. A candidate's failure of her test is considered a severe taboo that is punishable by banishment from the tribe.

Christian religious beliefs and secular and social recognition of the rights of women and the privacy to their bodies have challenged the Dangme people's continued adherence and performance of this well-known puberty rite. Christians, especially those of the evangelical and pentecostal traditions, have cast *dipo* as immoral (because *dipo* candidates expose their bodies to public gaze) and heathen (because of the animist rituals incorporated into the rite) and therefore, dissuade their followers from participating in it. According to these Christian traditions, adherence to *dipo* reaffirms the individual's and their families' belief in 'other gods' besides the Christian God (Teyegaga, 1985, & Oklemeh, 2010). Christian converts are expected to reject heathenism and commit themselves to their newfound belief in Jesus Christ (Akande, 1988), and therefore, performing and or participating in the *dipo* puberty rite runs counter to the tenets of the Christian life.

Contemporary Ghanaian society also frowns on performing *dipo* puberty rite because the candidates are paraded, almost naked, throughout their communities. This exposure of the candidates' bodies is viewed by contemporary society and women's advocacy groups as a backward and outdated culture that publicly shames young girls while bringing ridicule from their male peers. Despite these contemporaneous

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