



# HISTORY TRENDS OF DAGBON TRADITIONAL DRESS CODE

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**Abstract:** This study examines transformational trends in Dagbon traditional dress codes from 1800 to 2024, focusing on historical progression, material change, and symbolic continuity. It investigates how Dagbon clothing practices evolved across pre-colonial, colonial, post-colonial, and contemporary periods while retaining core cultural meanings. A qualitative descriptive design was employed, with data collected through semi-structured interviews with 33 participants, comprising 12 elders, 8 artisans and traditional tailors, and 15 young adults in contemporary fashion, complemented by field observation, photographic documentation, and archival sources. Thematic content analysis identified patterns across historical phases. Findings reveal that early nineteenth-century attire consisted of minimal coverings from animal hides and plant fibers. From the late nineteenth century, structured garments including kpalayincho, piito, amoosi, smocks, and handwoven cotton wrappers emerged, reflecting technological advancement and social differentiation. The twentieth century reinforced ceremonial symbolism and hierarchical expression through fugu and inner smocks. In the twenty-first century, traditional garments increasingly merge with modern tailoring and global fashion influences. The study concludes that Dagbon dress demonstrates adaptive continuity, functioning as both material cultures shaped by economic change and a symbolic system sustaining identity and social meaning.

**Index Terms** - Dagbon, traditional dress, clothing transformation, material culture, symbolic meaning

## I. INTRODUCTION

The traditional dress codes of the Dagbon people in northern Ghana encapsulate centuries of cultural expression, social hierarchy, and identity formation. Clothing in Dagbon society has never been merely functional; it communicates values, status, and cosmological beliefs embedded within daily life and ceremonial rites (Shamhuna, 2025). From minimal coverings in the early 1800s to the complex blended fashions of the early twenty-first century, the evolution of attire reflects shifting historical, economic, and cultural dynamics. Historical and ethnographic records indicate that dress patterns among Dagombas responded to internal innovations, interactions with neighbouring societies, and broader socio-political forces, including colonialism and globalisation (Anthonio, 2025; Yuyu Yusriani, 2025). These changes underscore the importance of clothing as both a symbolic system and a material practice that mediates continuity and change.

The trajectory of Dagbon dress codes aligns with broader patterns of African dress transformation. Scholars note that traditional apparel often transitions from localised materials and symbolic functions toward hybrid forms integrating external influences over time (Oguamanam & Yeboah-Appiah, 2024). In Ghana, colonial-era introduction of European textiles altered indigenous clothing practices, as communities adapted new forms while retaining cultural motifs (Stahn, 2023). In Dagbon, this involved the gradual incorporation of tailored garments, imported fabrics, and embroidered smocks alongside enduring indigenous textiles such as fugu and tan'manli, reflecting adaptive cultural resilience.

The influence of Islam also interacted with dress practices in Dagbon, promoting expectations of modesty and body coverage while sometimes generating tension with ritual symbolism rooted in longstanding

cultural norms (Yuyu Yusriani, 2025). Youth culture and media exposure have further accelerated transformation, as younger generations creatively blend traditional motifs with contemporary styles and global aesthetics (Anthonio, 2025; Stahn, 2023). This study therefore examines transformational trends in Dagbon traditional dress codes from 1800 to 2024, mapping shifts in materials, garment styles, and symbolic meanings to illuminate how Dagbon society negotiates cultural continuity and adaptation across two centuries.

## II. CONCEPTS OF THE STUDY

### 2.1 *Traditional Dress*

Traditional dress refers to clothing, adornments, and accessories that carry cultural, social, and symbolic meaning within a community (Atuguba & Young, 2023). Among the Dagbon people, traditional dress includes smocks, hats, skirts, loincloths, beads, and headgear, each communicating social status, gender roles, ceremonial functions, and identity (Muzingili et al., 2025). Traditional attire is not only functional but also symbolic, conveying messages of humility, strength, wealth, or spiritual authority, depending on the garment's style and orientation (Yen, 2024).

### 2.2 *Symbolism in Clothing*

Symbolism in clothing refers to the use of garments or accessories to convey social, spiritual, or political messages without spoken words (Chitando et al., 2024). In Dagbon, hat orientation, color choice, and textile patterns function as symbols of hierarchy, personality traits, and social relations. Folding a hat to the left or right may signify humility or strength, while specific smocks or beadwork indicate ceremonial roles or social rank (Mensah et al., 2024; Stahn, 2023).

### 2.3 *Evolution of Dress*

Dress evolution refers to the changes in clothing styles, materials, and functions over time in response to social, economic, religious, and environmental factors (Imoh, 2024). In Dagbon, the progression from loincloths and animal skins in the 1800s to smocks, fugu, batakari, and hybrid modern designs demonstrates adaptation to trade, urbanization, globalization, and technological advancements (Atuguba & Young, 2023).

### 2.4 *Material Culture*

Material culture encompasses the tangible objects, fabrics, and accessories that communities produce, use, and imbue with meaning (Muzingili et al., 2025). In Dagbon, materials such as kapok, cotton, plant fibers, and beads serve both utilitarian and symbolic purposes. The availability, accessibility, and production techniques of these materials influence clothing style, ornamentation, and social significance (Shamhuna, 2025).

### 2.5 *Modern Influences*

Modern influences refer to the integration of contemporary styles, fabrics, and global fashion trends into traditional dress systems (Yuyu Yusriani, 2025). Among the Dagombas, younger generations increasingly mix traditional smocks and fabrics with Western-style clothing, such as jackets, pleated skirts, and blouses, to create hybrid attire (Mensah et al., 2024).

### 2.6 *Dress as Cultural Identity*

Dress functions as a marker of cultural identity, providing a visible representation of community values, history, and social belonging (Atuguba & Young, 2023). In Dagbon, clothing communicates membership, generational differences, and social hierarchy while sustaining cultural memory. Through ceremonies, festivals, and daily wear, traditional attire reinforces collective identity even amid modernization and globalization (Yen, 2024).

### 2.7 *Theoretical Framework*

This study is anchored in Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Materialism. Symbolic Interactionism posits that individuals create and interpret meaning through social interactions using symbols, including clothing (Simpson & Harisch, 2025). In Dagbon, hat orientation, textile choice, and garment form function as symbolic cues within social encounters. Cultural Materialism emphasizes the material and ecological conditions that shape cultural practices, including technology, economy, and environment (Appiah-Thompson et al., 2024). The shift from locally sourced animal skins and kapok fibers to handwoven and imported textiles reflects material changes driven by economic exchange and technological access. Combining these perspectives allows analysis of dress as both a communicative system and material practice embedded in economic and ecological contexts.

### 2.8 Empirical Review

Empirical studies in Ghana and broader African contexts document dynamic processes of dress change and cultural adaptation. Revers Leigh (2023) examined symbolic expressions in Northern Ghanaian attire and found that hat orientation, textile patterns, and garment form communicate distinct social messages related to respect, hierarchy, and personality. Appiah-Thompson et al. (2024) documented the ceremonial significance of traditional Dagbon textiles such as tan'manjli and fugu, highlighting concerns about symbolic dilution from the misuse of sacred garments in contemporary contexts. Muzingili et al. (2025) argue that colonial encounters introduced new textiles and tailoring practices, altering indigenous dress patterns through intercultural exchange. Imoh (2024) observed that Islamic teachings in northern Ghana encourage modesty that intersects with traditional dress practices, resulting in negotiated dress codes honoring both religious and cultural values.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design to examine transformational trends in Dagbon traditional dress codes from 1800 to 2024. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables in-depth exploration of historical patterns, cultural meanings, and social interpretations associated with clothing (Oguamanam & Yeboah-Appiah, 2024). The research was conducted in Tamale and surrounding towns in the Northern Region of Ghana, which are culturally central to the Dagbon kingdom.

Using purposive sampling, 33 participants were selected for their relevant expertise and lived experience (Sulemana Anamzoya et al., 2023), including 12 elders, 8 artisans and tailors, and 15 young adults engaged in contemporary fashion. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, field observations, photography, and archival research involving historical records, ethnographies, and oral histories. This multi-method approach provided triangulation, enhancing credibility and validity (Yuyu Yusriani, 2025). Collected data were analysed through thematic content analysis, with interview transcripts, photographs, and archival materials systematically coded to identify recurring patterns related to men's and women's clothing, headgear, ceremonial attire, and material culture (Simpson & Harisch, 2025). Ethical considerations were carefully observed: community and institutional approvals were secured, participants provided informed consent, and cultural sensitivity was maintained during all fieldwork.

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Changes in the Dagbon Traditional Dress Codes

The Dagbon traditional dress code has evolved dramatically over the past two centuries. This section examines these changes by breaking down the period from 1800 to 2024 into decades, focusing on garment types worn by the people of Dagbon. According to historical records and oral traditions, in the 13th century, the Dagomba people wore loincloths made of cotton or animal hides. By the 15th century, the Akan people of southern Ghana were wearing kente cloth. During the colonial period (1844–1957), European-style clothing was introduced. The concept of wearing clothes varied across cultures and regions; in some societies, clothing served ceremonial or symbolic purposes rather than everyday modesty.

#### *Early Dagbon Attire (1800–1849)*

In the early 1800s, both men and women reportedly wore minimal clothing, with some communities using animal hides, loincloths, or simple adornments. Field respondents described this period as one in which "Dagombas used to be naked," emphasising that clothing was primarily functional or ceremonial rather than everyday attire (Field Survey, 2023). This aligns with Pul (2024), who documented that early northern Ghanaian communities used locally available materials for modesty, protection, and ritual purposes.



*Plate 1: Boy and Girl Portraying Nakedness. Source: Field Survey 2023*

#### *1850–1869: Woven Garments and Bead Adornments*

Men wore a triangular-shaped cloth called “kpalanyirichoo,” made from woven kapok yarns, which covered their private parts and left their backs exposed. Women traditionally wore beads known as “yari” or “coffee” to cover their private parts and add beauty. These beads also served to differentiate women from men. The material was cut and the edges tied with ropes for waist fastening; the remaining hanging rope was called “kpalan zuya” or “kpalan mihi.” Formerly, during battles, these ropes were used to tie fighters together to prevent cowards from fleeing.



*Plate 2: Display of Coffee and Yeri (Bead). Source: Field Survey 2023*

Kapok was tweezed into yarns and woven into a thin warp fabric. Strips were stitched together to form a triangular-shaped cloth called kpalayincho, which covered the private parts of the male. Others also use clothes to represent it by tying it to the back and front and are mostly used on children.



*Plate 3: Display of Kpalayincho. Source: Field Survey 2023**1870–1899: Piito, Amoosi, and Structured Garments*

Men wore a type of pant called piito (kpalanbandili), which was loose at the thighs and had a rope as casing for fastenings. Women wore amoosi, made from a piece of red or any colour of cloth used to cover the female front and back by tying a string or bead around the waist.

*Plate 4: Display of Kpalanbandili. Source: Field Survey 2023**Plate 5: Display of Amoosi. Source: Field Survey 2023**1880–1909: Jinjam and Women's Piito*

From 1880 to 1909, the jinjam emerged — a short-like garment, very loose below the knee, with patched pockets at both sides of its side seam and elastic or fabric stripe casing at the waist. Women of this period wore piito with elastic at both the thigh and waist.



*Plate 6: Display of Jinjam and Piito (Culottes or Shorts). Source: Field Survey 2023*

#### *1910–1929: The Monkuru Skirt*

The monkuru was a type of skirt worn by Dagbon women from the waist to below knee level, with patched pockets at both sides of the seam or at the front, mostly sewn with woven cotton or kapok fabric. Market women tied a string on their waist below the skirt as a place of storage for money. The monkuru covered the private parts of women while leaving the upper body exposed, as there were no blouses during this period.



*Plate 6b: Display of Monkuru (Skirt). Source: Field Survey 2023*

#### *1930–1949: Chinchin Manli and Tan'manli Wrappers*

Women wore chinchin manli or tan'manli, woven cotton cloth in two pieces. Dagomba women wore the cloth without a blouse: one cloth around the waist and the other over the upper body, sometimes covering the breast.



*Plate 7: Display of Women Wearing Chinchini. Source: dk.pinterest.com*

*1950–1969: Inner Smocks and Ceremonial Dress*

This period introduced the inner wear smock, known in Hausa as “Yensichi/Dansichi” and in Dagbomba as “Biɲmagboggi,” with the armed version called “Biɲmabogiri.” Some chiefs’ wives wore cloths to chest level with shaved heads and headgear, a dress code associated with specific chieftaincy positions. Dagbon does not prescribe a formal dress code for queen mothers or chiefs’ wives more broadly.



*Plate 8: Display of Chief and Elders Wearing Bijmaa and Bijmabogiri. Source: Field Survey 2023*

*1970–1989: Tan’maɲli and Natural Dyes*

Tan’maɲli, a whitish-yellowish woven fabric made from kapok or raw cotton twisted into yarn, remained the primary textile of this period. This fabric was traditionally the first used for burial. It was dyed into other colours by soaking roots and stems of plants to obtain natural pigments, reflecting the community’s ecological knowledge and material resourcefulness.



*Plate 9: Display of Original Tan’maɲli. Source: Field Survey 2023*

*1990–1999: Fugu and Ceremonial Smocks*

The name for Dagbon cloth is called binmaɲli, chinchin maɲli, or tan’maɲli. The original traditional colours were kpankɔ̀bkɔ̀bgu (guinea fowl patterned), ago, black and white (boonsabinli), white and red (boonzee), and blue (nuguso), sewn into the dress form known as the smock or fugu.





*Plate 10: Plain White, Black and White, Blue and White, Red and White, Kpankobgu Fugu. Source: Field Survey 2023*

#### *2000–2009: Chinchini and Islamic Influence*

The early twenty-first century introduced chinchini cloth into widespread use. The influence of Islam had both positive and negative effects. Positively, Islamic teaching encouraged community gathering, respect for elders, and dress that covered the whole body. Some Islamic scholars questioned the compatibility of traditional dress with religious identity, and certain sermons preached against traditional cultural activities. Burial dress codes remained important, with distinctions between attire for commoners and for chiefs.



*Plate 11: Display of a Lady Wearing Tan-ηmali Chinchini with Blouse. Source: Field Survey 2023*

#### *2010–2019: Slit and Kaba*



*Plate 12: Display of a Lady Wearing a Slit and Kaba. Source: Field Survey 2023*

### 2020–2024: Contemporary Hybridity

The most recent decades have seen introduction of varied colours, increased fabric gathering for fullness, slit and kaba styles, pleated dresses, jackets, coats, and the blending of various fabrics to create enhanced styles. Younger generations combine traditional smocks and tan'manli with blouses, headgear, and globally influenced fashion elements.



Plate 13: Display of Ladies Wearing Tan-ɲmali Chinchini with Blouses and Headgear. Source: Field Survey 2023

### Men's Contemporary Dress Code



Plate 14: Display of Men's Contemporary Dress. Source: Field Survey 2023

## V. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS IN RELATION TO LITERATURE

The findings show that early nineteenth-century Dagbon attire consisted of minimal body coverings made from locally available materials such as animal hides, plant fibres, and beads, supporting earlier ethnographic documentation of northern Ghanaian dress practices that emphasised ecological adaptation in precolonial societies (Imoh, 2024). The reliance on indigenous materials confirms arguments within cultural materialism that material conditions influence clothing structure and use (Pul, 2024). Even minimal attire carried social meaning related to gender and modesty, aligning with Oguamanam and

Yeboah-Appiah's (2024) assertion that African dress systems operate as communicative cultural codes rather than simple body coverings.

The transition between 1850 and 1899 toward garments such as kpalayincho, piito, and amoosi reflects increasing textile sophistication and social differentiation (Mensah et al., 2024). Dress began to encode clearer markers of gender and social hierarchy, reinforcing Imoh's (2024) position that clothing functions as a symbolic system through which societies communicate status and roles. The emergence of handwoven cotton wrappers, jinjam garments, and tan'manli in the early twentieth century reflects expanded trade networks and colonial contact, supporting integration rather than replacement of traditional forms (Atuguba & Young, 2023).

Late twentieth-century adoption of inner smocks such as Biɲmagbogii and increased use of fugu further illustrate symbolic reinforcement of hierarchy and authority. Studies on northern Ghanaian attire confirm that garment layering and textile choice communicate leadership, respect, and ceremonial function (Appiah-Thompson et al., 2024). Anthonio (2025) similarly argues that traditional garments retain ritual legitimacy despite stylistic evolution.

Contemporary transformations between 2000 and 2024 reveal increased blending of traditional garments with modern tailoring and global fashion elements, supporting arguments that globalisation encourages hybrid dress practices shaped by media exposure and urbanisation (Simpson & Harisch, 2025). Adaptation occurs primarily in everyday wear, whereas ritual attire remains relatively stable, aligning with symbolic interactionism (Pul, 2024). Cultural materialism accounts for how textile availability, trade, and technology influenced garment complexity, while symbolic interactionism clarifies how social meanings persist across generations (Yuyu Yusriani, 2025; Adolph, 2016).

## VI. CONCLUSION

This study examined transformational trends in Dagbon traditional dress codes from 1800 to 2024 and established that clothing in Dagbon has undergone continuous yet structured change. The findings reveal a clear movement from minimal body coverings made from locally available materials to more complex, symbolically rich, and socially differentiated garments over time. Early dress practices reflected ecological adaptation and functional necessity, yet simultaneously communicated identity and gender roles. Over time, locally woven textiles, smocks, wrappers, and beadwork emerged as dominant forms of cultural expression.

The nineteenth century marked a gradual transition from kpalayincho and bead adornments to more structured garments like piito and amoosi. The early twentieth century introduced cotton-based wrappers and expanded trade networks. The mid-to-late twentieth century brought greater stratification, with garments such as Biɲmagbogii, Biɲmabogiri, tan'manli, and fugu reinforcing social hierarchy, authority, and ceremonial identity. Colonial and post-colonial influences introduced tailored garments and imported textiles, reshaping rather than erasing tradition.

The twenty-first century is characterised by increasing hybridity as contemporary styles blend traditional smocks and wrappers with modern tailoring, globally influenced fabrics, and urban aesthetics. Traditional attire retains central importance in festivals, funerals, chieftaincy events, and religious gatherings, confirming that modernisation has altered form more than meaning. The study affirms the relevance of symbolic interactionism and cultural materialism: Dagbon dress operates simultaneously as a symbolic system encoding identity and as material culture shaped by economic and environmental forces, sustaining cultural essence across two centuries of change.

## VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Efforts should focus on cultural education to ensure younger generations understand the historical and symbolic significance of Dagbon traditional attire. Schools, community centres, and cultural institutions can incorporate programmes teaching the meanings behind garments, hats, and accessories. Support for local artisans is equally crucial; weavers, tailors, and beadwork specialists should receive financial incentives, training, and access to broader markets.

Innovation in design should be encouraged to integrate traditional fabrics and motifs with contemporary styles. Cultural events and exhibitions, including festivals, fashion shows, and museum displays, can cultivate community pride and reinforce awareness of Dagbon dress. Media promotion through television, social media, and publications should further highlight the beauty, history, and cultural meaning of Dagbon attire. Finally, government and cultural organisations should formulate policies to protect and preserve traditional textile heritage through documentation of historical garments and support for indigenous industries.

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