

Indigenous Institutions and Bio-cultural Resources



CENTRE FOR INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Tanchera, Upper West, Ghana

Introduction to Tanchera



Irrigation dam in Tanchera

Tanchera, meaning literally “in between mountains”, is located between two mountains in the Lawra District of the Upper West Region, Ghana. It lies on a hilly area, 10 km south-east of Lawra (district capital) and 3 km west of Babile (popular market town). The community has a large amount of land, and therefore, Tanchera is divided into 10 sections.

Traditional institutions, within the community, form the dominate governance struc-

ture play a major role in creating unity between community members, retaining cultural heritage and identity as well as maintaining customary laws and practices. Laws and practices have been passed down for generations through oral traditions.

This document explores the major traditional institutions and bio-cultural resources within the community of Tanchera including its clan system, traditional governance system and how it was established, traditional leadership (spiritual, women, and youth) as well as the accountability mechanisms of these institutions. A section also explains its local festivals and other organized groups within the community

(farming, dancing, singing and many others). The final section is on the community’s religious practices and how this relates to its natural environment as well as a brief discussion on traditional medicine within Tanchera.

This document can be used as a background for traditional practices and organizations within the community.

Tanchera Clan System

The indigenous people of Tanchera are Dagaaba and speak Dagaare. The Dagaaba are from north-west of Ghana and are classified as Mole-Dagbane people. However, many people recognize that they belong to different paternal clan

groups, including: Waale, Kuwere/Tagrayire, Zaghe, Kpiele, Pur-yile, Kpanyagle, and Bekoune. Clan group members tend to stay together in the same section. The clan system is a unifying force that holds the community together, not a divisive

force in the community. Therefore, there is a cordial relationship between the clan groups which is relevant to conflict resolution in the community. However, inter-marriage between some clan groups is prohibited.

Special points of interest:

- ESTABLISHMENT OF CURRENT TRADITIONAL GOVERNANCE SYSTEM
- TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP WITHIN THE COMMUNITY
- TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS
- TANCHERA’S RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND HOW IT RELATES TO NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

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Traditional Governance System



Regent chief and elders during a community meeting

“IN LINE WITH CUSTOM, A WHITE COCK WAS PRESENTED TO THE WHITE MAN AS A SYMBOL OF PEACE”

In Tanchera, like so many other communities, chieftaincy constitutes the hub of traditional system of governance. Key informant sessions revealed that the Tingan Sob (Tindaana) was the head and ruler of the community prior to colonization. The colonial masters introduced the chieftaincy institution into this community, therefore it an alien institution.

The following is an oral narration by people of Tanchera during an open forum

“The white man came on horseback from the direction

of Lawra, now the district capital, to the community one faithful day. He asked to meet the leader of the community and Kal came. At that time the leader of the community was the Tingan sob. Unfortunately for him, the Tingan sob was in-disposed. The white man left word with a senior community members promising to be back to meet the Tingan sob on another day. On his return, the Tingan sob was suspicious of the white man and so went into hiding to combat readiness. In line with custom, he directed that a white cock be

presented to the white man as a symbol of peace. The white man upon arrival was told the Tingan sob was unavailable the second time. So he asked of any other person who had enormous influence in the community and could mobilize the people. The people he spoke to identified Debka as having such attributes. The white man sent for Debka and appointed him chief of Tanchara who would rule over the community. Niber, Debka’s son succeeded him then Waale. Since that time, only men have been chiefs.”

Chieftaincy Succession Process

In Tanchara chieftaincy succession rests within the Nayir (the chief’s house) and is strictly by inheritance. Elders of the Chief’s House in consultation with the Tingan sob are responsible for selecting a suitable candidate for enskinment as next chief. The selection of the next candidate for succession to the skin follows the following process:

Elders of the chief’s house, in consultation with the Tingan sob, select a reagent during the funeral of the late chief. Then the elders and Tingan sob, select one candidate from among possible qualified candidates. This candidate is presented to the community, especially the sectional heads for consideration

and approval. The decision of the elders is supreme although sectional heads can advise. If the community, through sub-chiefs, endorses the candidate, he is presented to the Tingan sob who in turns presents the chief to the ancestors of the community, which seals the selection process. The Paramount chief of the Lawra Paramacy is then invited to install or ‘enskin” the selected candidate as chief. The chief thereafter then resumes his role as ruler of the community and takes over from the reagent that would have been holding the fort. In some instances, the reagent is the selected candidate for enskinment so that there is no

need for handing over. In line with custom, a cow is presented to the paramount chief who presides over the enskinment process.

In selecting a suitable candidate for succession, there are criteria to be considered. The criteria relate to the qualities of the person, and not wealth. These include: honesty, discipline, leadership skills and marital status (must be married). The chief of Tanchara owes allegiance to the Lawra Naa, who is the Paramount Chief of the Lawra Traditional Area.



Yaayin Niber, current Tanchera regent for chief

Tanchera, Upper West, Ghana

Narration from Zingyire, oldest man in Tanchera

“The white man came from the direction of Lawra, now district capital on foot to the community one fateful day and said he had come to install a chief. He asked who the leader of the community was, and was told Kal from Karo (a Some from the Waale clan). He asked to meet him and Kal came. The white man announced that he had come to develop the place and asked who is “the best farmer”. Kal said Dombil from Dangne (a Some from the Waale clan). So they called Dombil, who came and the white man gave him the Naalo (chieftaincy).

Debka (a Some from the Waale clan) was a clansman, from both maternal and paternal lines of Dombil, who lived near the main road in Tanchara. Debka proposed to Dombil for him to hand over the Naalo to him since he lived near the main road and was in a better position to spot foreigners on arrival. Dombil agreed and handed over the Naalo to Debka.

Then Kal became the headman to Depka in Tanchara. Debka intended the Naalo to be passed down to his son Niber but the colonial gover-

nor proposed it should be given to Saser who was of great support to Debka during his reign. But Saser upon consultation with Niber agreed that the Naalo be passed down to Niber against the insistence of the colonial governor. After Debka died the Naalo was passed down to his son, Niber.

During Niber’s reign, Biirfo Naa, who was the paramount chief, said that the Naalo will remain in that house and it should not move anywhere else. Also, the next Naalo must be literate. After Niber died, the Tanchara people agreed that the Naalo should go to Waale who was a son/nephew of Niber, a son of Pingon. But the Koro people objected to the choice of Waale because they said he was a wicked man. So Saser (also known as Tien) who was the Koro headman and a bosom friend of Niber also disagreed with the choice of Waale and said that he would rather be chief if they insisted on Waale as the choice. There were several stages of litigation. It is alleged that, Waale took some drinks to influence the biirfo Naa’s decision to his favour

which the Biirfo Naa did. But when they, (Biirfo Naa, Lawra Naa, and the white men) came to do the installation, the Koro People still resisted. So the matter was later taken to the colonial governor who posed the following question to the two of them, “if you have a leader who is working closely with an assistant, day and night, and the leader dies, who takes over the job?” Indirectly, the colonial governor using logic, ruled in favour of Saser/Tien.

The Lawra Naa on his part used the relationship between him and Saser to do the mediation. He invited the two parties to Lawra in the company of witnesses and explained that, since according to the books the Naalo cannot move from Tanchara, Saser should allow Waale to be chief while he remains as the elder to support in the development of the place. Waale was also told to accept the Naalo on condition that he paid allegiance to Saser. While Waale was still ruling, Saser died. So after Waale, it was passed on to Depaalo, the son of Niber, a literate.

“IF YOU HAVE A LEADER WHO IS WORKING CLOSELY WITH AN ASSISTANT, DAY AND NIGHT, AND THE LEADER DIES, WHO TAKES OVER THE JOB?”

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Spiritual Leadership



Donkura, Tancher
Tingan sob

The Tingan sob is the overall Spiritual Leader and perhaps one of the oldest indigenous institutions of the community. The Tingan sob play a very critical roles in the management of land and land resources including sacred groves. As in many other communities, prior to colonization, the Tingan sob was not only spiritual leader, but the overall leader. Indeed, this is a reflection of the African World view of how spirituality takes a center stage in life. Succession to the office

of Tingan sob is strictly by inheritance among house members of the Tingan Yir (house of the tingan). Choice of an appropriate candidate for succession however, is by soothsaying; the decision rests with the Gods. Indeed, the process is to enable Gods to choose who they want.

The relationship between the chief and the Tingan sob is spiritual. The Tingan sob is spiritual leader of the community but the Chief is the political leader. In their rela-

tionship, the Tingan sob exercises power over the chief on spiritual matters. The working relationship between the Tingan sob and chief is therefore one of mutual support for each other in working towards the total well being of the community. The indigenous people describe the relationship between the Tingan sob and chief in following terms: "The chief is the son of the Tingan sob but they support each other in their work".

TINGAN SOB
PLAYS A CRITICAL
ROLE IN THE
COMMUNITY OF
MANAGING
LAND
RESOURCES,
INCLUDING
SACRED GROVES

Traditional Woman Leaders

The Pognaa is the traditional women leader. In the past, this position was part of the institutional traditional authority in Tanchara. The chief gave women the option to choose their own leader for outdoor into office. The

institution of Pognaa however, was not maintained and it has become a lost institution/tradition of the community. Currently, there are efforts to re-introduce this institution. The Pognaa was responsible for leading women

and mobilizing them for development purposes and was the link voice between the chief and the women of the community.

Youth Leadership

The office of Polenaa (youth chief) is part of the institutional set up of the Chief of Tanchara. The Polenaa is usually appointed by the chief and elders and provides the link between the youth and the chief on matters relating to development. The institution of Polenaa is still existent in Tanchara and efforts are being made towards decentralizing the institution to sectional levels.

Accountability of Traditional Authority

In Tanchara, Traditional Authority accountability is built primarily into the recruitment process of leaders. Good leader quality becomes the yardstick for measuring the appropriateness of candidates for traditional offices. These qualities include: honesty, discipline, and leadership skills. The current chief was a leader of sanitation task force who has a perfect leadership role record. Since leaders are not easily changed in traditional systems, elders, the Tingansob and experienced elderly

women critically screen candidates aspiring for traditional offices prior to selection.

Another level accountability is a mechanism to check on any abuse or irresponsibility of office. In the event that a traditional leader violates serious norms of the community, the Tingandem, king-makers and elders will sit in council to determine the fate of the traditional leader - removing or retaining him. However, such situation has never occurred.



Pognaa and other women
during a community meeting

Tanchera, Upper West, Ghana

Indigenous Organizations

Festivals

The Kobine Festival is the dominant festival in the Lawra Traditional Area of which Tanchera is an integral part, however, the people of Tanchera only participate as observers and are not active participants. There are two other annual festivals: Doro and Bagr.

Doro festival was started by neighbouring communities such as Selbir, Donkor, and Bekye before. Today, the Doro festival is annually cele-

brated; starting in early October to late November, in the harvest season. It is a thanksgiving festival that provides the opportunity for people to sacrifice and thank the Gods for successful farming season and the continuous protection of their cherished traditions.

The Bagr festival is a year-long celebration that occurs annually in Tanchera. According to the narration, it originated from the ancestors

and is celebrated between March and March of the following year. It is an initiation festival where it initiates young men and women into adulthood. During the year, the candidates are selected and taught on the history, norms and values of the community. The significance of the festival lies in the prosperity it brings to the community. It is usually a home-coming period where relations return home to celebrate with Bagr



Dancing and xylophone group at 2010 Kobine Festival, Lawra Traditional Area

Naakpenbir

The Naakpenbir are an indigenous organization made up of a few elderly people who are knowledgeable and have wisdom from life experiences. In most cases, they constitute the council of elders for the chief. In traditional

circles, they are known as the community protectors. Their sole responsibility is to protect the community from any eminent danger and play the role of exchequers on power holders to prevent abuse of power. They also ensure that

customary laws are followed. In Tanchera, there are 10 Naakpenbir groups and are said to have worked hard towards maintaining peace in the community.

Kotaa

The Kotaa groups are forms of self-help indigenous groups. These youth groups are formed for farming purposes, as they help individual

members to cultivate their farms by planting, weeding and harvesting. The rationale is "more hands, less work" by taking advantage of group

work to benefit all members, instead of doing it individually. They also undertake non-farm activities.

Singing and Dancing Groups

There are number of indigenous singing and dancing groups, including Doro and Bagbine. They sing and dance during festive occasions, merry making ceremonies, and during funerals. Their entertaining role gained them popularity and fosters social cohesion in the community. The number of groups is unknown as membership is drawn from the various sec-

tions in Tanchera. They play an important role in naming and shunning wrong doers, while praising worthy sons and daughters.

Drumming and Xylophonist groups play very important roles in maintaining culture and promoting the development of the community. The Xylophonists are known locally as Gobr and they have a professional group of xylo-

phonist players in the community. Competition among them facilitates skill development but sometimes breeds unhealthy competitions in which people might go to any length to emerge as the best Gobr. Their activities are pronounced during funeral rites, and marriage ceremonies. Closely associated with the Gobr are the praise-Singers who usually play

a leading role in funeral rites celebrations, where they sing dirges.

THE DOGO

FESTIVAL PROVIDES AN OPPORTUNITY FOR PEOPLE TO SACRIFICE AND THANK THE GODS FOR SUCCESSFUL FARMING SEASON

Indigenous Institutions and Bio-cultural Resources

Indigenous Organizations



Women's group community meeting

Women's Groups

The proliferation of women groups as is the case in many communities has also been a phenomenon experienced in Tanchara. There are a number of women groups in

Tanchara, including: Matara women's association, Sunta – Nunta, Kpangyagna, Mothers club and Dugu mieribe. In most of the cases, the group's formation is for social and

economic purpose, where women come together to explore the benefits of group synergy to enhance their social and economic development of their families.

Additional Groups

There are number of other groups, including: Pole (male youth), Pogserere (female youth), Dankyin Mieribe (youth builders), Gardeners Association, Tanchara Youth and Development Association (TYDA), Zabarama (immigrant group from the Republic of Niger), Nak-

panbe (hunters).

These are mostly social, professional or economic groups. They promote the interest and welfare of their members, but most importantly contribute to the development of Tanchara community in diverse ways. It is important

to observe that such local organizations do have utility in the development process of the community. It is important to realise how they can be revitalized and their capacities built to play a more proactive role in the development process.

“WOMEN COME TOGETHER TO EXPLORE THE BENEFITS OF GROUP SYNERGY TO ENHANCE THEIR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Traditional Organizations Accountability Systems

Accountability is built into the process of recruiting leaders of organizations, as each group have their modalities and criteria for selecting a leader. Honesty, discipline, leadership skills, among others, forms the basis for selecting a leader. It is not easy to change a leader unless a crime has been committed.

Various indigenous groups also have mechanisms to ad-

dress challenges/issues within the group. Dialogue is often used. When an unresolved issue gets out of hand, the matter is referred to the Counsel of the Chief for guidance. So far, dialogue and having an audience with the chief and his elders have never failed to adequately deal with problems, and therefore very reliable. Members own their organiza-

tions and accountability is established through regular meetings. Each indigenous group has a Secretary (taking down minutes), a treasurer (keeping money) and a leader or chairman (supervising their activities). At each meeting accounts are rendered and facts and figures are represented for cross-examination by its members.



Leaders of Sectional Women Association for Conservation Agriculture



Tanchera, Upper West, Ghana

Religion and Sacred Groves for Spiritual Development

Religion

The people of Tanchera predominantly practice Traditional African Religion, an indigenous religion that may be referred to as Bagri, part of the Sankomno culture. In this practice, various kinds of spiritual leaders such as Bagburbe, Titigle and Nimenyerbe, who can forecast the

future, generally lead in traditional worship practices. These spiritual leaders play various functions: offering sacrifices on behalf of clients; forecast the future for clients and advise appropriately; and offer sacrifices for the spiritual protection and guidance of clients. Fowls, water

and alcoholic beverages are commonly used for sacrifices and worshipping.

There are additional but minority religious faiths that are practiced in Tanchera. These religions include Christianity, specifically Catholicism, Deeper Life Christian denomination, and Islam.



Traditional Healers in Tanchera during the opening celebration of the CHIPS compound

Traditional Religion and Sacred Groves

In the practice of traditional religion, sacred groves (Tingan Tuu as called by indigenes), are traditionally protected patches of forest within the community. These are designated abodes of either the ancestors or community Gods. Sacred groves are considered very important in the lives and existence of the people in the community. They are managed by the Tingan sob, the spiritual

leader of the community, which justifies their importance. They serve as points of worship and sacrifices for seeking spiritual protection and well-being of the community, particularly in times of need and emergency. Nobody irrespective of religious affiliation is allowed to cut a sacred grove or go near it, except the Tingan sob. It is generally prohibited for people, except the Tingan sob, to

undertake any form of human activity in any of these groves. It is not common to even find adventurous children wandering in these groves because of how they are socialized from childhood to respect their sacredness.

In Tanchera there are approximately 50 sacred groves, the largest which is called Balige (ndigenes) and is located at Koro Peri.

“THE PEOPLE OF TANCHERA PREDOMINANTLY PRACTICE TRADITIONAL AFRICAN RELIGION

Traditional Medicine

The institution of traditional medicine in Tanchera is probably as old as the community. In the practice of traditional medicine, herbalist and bonesetters utilize local herbal plants to make herbal preparations for the treatment of various kinds of diseases. There is even a traditional bone setting centre that is operated by local experts. In Tanchera, traditional medical is practiced through lines of specialization, where various houses have their areas of specialization in disease treatment. See Table for a sample of some houses and the diseases they treat.

House Name	Specialization	House Name	Specialization
Tanchera Naa yir	snake bite	Kuresuur yir	lobir
Dekayir	nyuo baalu	Kal yir	siba (bilhazia), lumps, migraine
Tapiryir	masuur	La yir	bone setters, mansuur tii
Bombaaryir	Convulsions (gyime), lumps (kpaur)	Latir yir	takyir kpee
Naa-iboyir	lambogr tii	Tura yir	kpera (hip pain)
Nober Naa yir	lambir, coughing	Sobie yir	snake bite
Donkura yir	lobir tii, mansuur, joint pains	Zingyire yir	vains, massage
Suom yir	boils, anthrax	Deka yirr	lob bir, puo baalu, eyes
Vuo yir	kpaur, cough	Naun der yir	gure (TB), piles

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The Centre for Indigenous Knowledge and Organizational Development (CIKOD) is a non-profit organization registered in 2003 under the Ghana Companies Code. Our purpose is to transform indigenous institutions and local groups into vibrant grassroots civil society organizations that would enhance participation of rural communities in their own development processes. CIKOD aims to facilitate dialogue on the role of indigenous knowledge and institutions in modern day community development and empowerment.

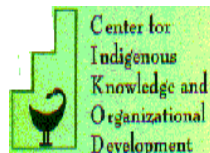
We work in Upper West and Brang Ahafo regions with a head office base in Accra.

Our Vision

Our vision is that of a society, where the rural poor, the marginalized and rural women have voice and contribute pro-actively to equitable and sustainable community development.

Our Mission

The mission is to contribute to the transformation of indigenous institutions and organizations of rural communities into vibrant grassroots civil society organizations that will enhance the participation of rural people in their own development processes.



Our logo, which is the Sankofa bird, represents 'learning from our roots in order to move forward', while the shape surrounding the bird shows step by step components of a development process