

# Cultural Concept of Gays and Lesbians Among the Dagara People of West Africa

**Ron Simmons, Ph.D.**

President/CEO

Us Helping Us, People Into Living, Inc.

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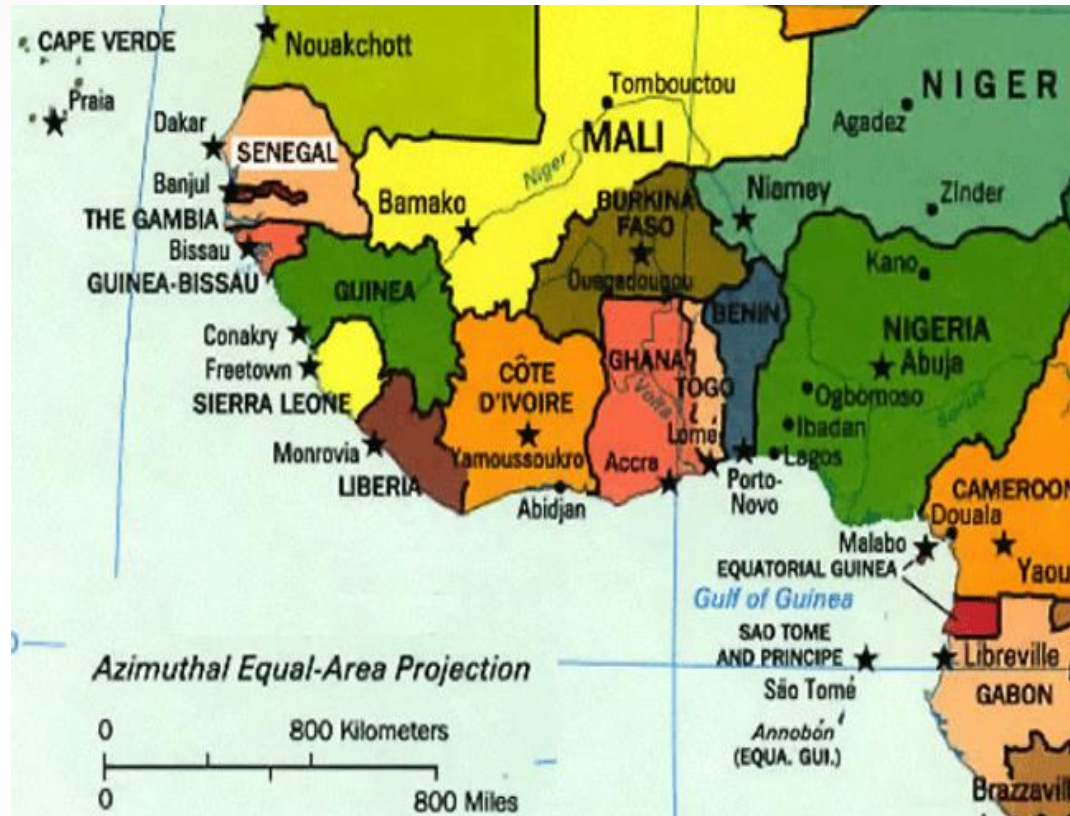
*Cultural Concepts of Gays & Lesbians Among the Dagara People of West Africa*

- ✦ Historically Black same sex attracted men have searched for an authentic self-definition to definite themselves for themselves.
- ✦ Yet despite different self-definitions, some Black same sex attracted men emulate and advocate a heterosexist male model of masculinity that can be limiting in its possibilities.

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- ✦ As African descendants, we can rightfully look to our African cultural heritage for possible models for self-definition.
- ✦ I suggest the culture of the Dagara people of West Africa as described in the writings of Malidoma Some' and his ex-wife Sobonfu, in her book:
- ✦ **The Spirit of Intimacy: Ancient African Teachings in the Ways of Relationships** (New York City: Quill/HarperCollins, 2002).

## *Cultural Concepts of Gays & Lesbians Among the Dagara People of West Africa*



The Dagara people reside in West Africa in Burkina Faso and the northern parts of Ghana, Togo and the Cote D'Ivoire.

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- The Dagara indigenous culture has a philosophy of life that might resonate in Black communities and among Black gay/SGL men.
- Particularly their concepts of:
  - **Spirit and Community**
  - **Life's Purpose**
  - **Sex and Intimacy**
  - **Role of same sex attracted men and women**

## **Spirit and Community**

"In our tradition, each of us is seen as a spirit who has taken the form of a human in order to carry out a purpose.

"Community is the spirit... whereby people come together in order to fulfill a specific purpose, to help others fulfill their purpose, and to take care of one another. The goal of community is to make sure that each member of the community is heard and is properly giving the gifts he has brought to this world..."

## **Sex**

"The Dagara people do not have a specific word for sex. We express the concept of sex in terms of journeying or traveling with someone. You don't want to have sex with that person; you want to go somewhere. And usually that place is not known by you or by your partner."

## **Intimacy**

"When people recognize that they are spirit in a human body and that other people are spirits, they begin to understand that our bodies are sacred and that sexuality is far more than a means of pleasure; it is a sacred act. They look at other people differently, seeing the body not as a source of physical attraction but as a shrine."

"[In Dagara culture] ...a couple's intimacy is not about the pursuit of pleasure. It is the pursuit of a kind of power that only spirit can give in a sacred context."



## **Intimacy**

"In a culture where sexuality is not honored as sacred, to fully embrace one's sexuality means to work against the grain. Shame, self-consciousness, and self-doubt are always lingering around, ready to knock on the door of the psyche. Many people find it so frightening that they live in denial of their sexuality."

## **Role of Gays and Lesbians**

"...Among the Dagara people, gender has very little to do with anatomy. It is purely energetic... a male who is physically male can vibrate female energy, and vice versa. That is where the real gender is...

"The whole notion of 'gay' does not exist in the indigenous world. That does not mean that there are not people there who feel the way that certain people feel in this culture..."

## **Role of Gays and Lesbians**

The gay person is looked at primarily as a 'gatekeeper'.."

"Any person who is at this link between this world and the other world experiences a state of vibrational consciousness which is far higher, and far different, from the one that a normal person would experience. This is what makes a gay person gay..."

...So to then limit gay people to simple sexual orientation is really the worst harm that can be done to a person.

Malidoma Some' interview with Bert Huff, "Gays: Guardians of the Gates" in M.E.N. Magazine, September 1993.

## **Gatekeepers**

“The words ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ do not exist in the village, but there is the word ‘gatekeepers’. Gatekeepers are people who live a life at the edge between two worlds – the world of the village and the world of spirit...”

“The gatekeepers stand on the threshold of the gender line. They are mediators between the two genders. They make sure that there is peace and balance between women and men... Gatekeepers do not take sides. They simply act as ‘the sword of truth and integrity’.”

## **Gatekeepers**

"[I]n the village a person doesn't become a gatekeeper out of a desire for power or even because of sexual orientation. No. Gatekeeping is part of one's life purpose... and developed through rigorous initiatory training to ensure that the power is not misused."

"A gatekeeper is responsible for a whole village, a whole tribe. Gatekeeping is not a game."

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*Contact Information:*

**Ron Simmons, Ph.D.**

202 446-1100

**ronsimmmonsphd@yahoo.com**

