

On the cultures of Japan and Burkina Faso: What do *Bonten* and *Gùrɔ* tell us?

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1. Introduction

❖ The purpose:

to examine two cultural practices in Japan and Burkina Faso to uncover their similarities and differences.

❖ Previous studies:

- Japan and Africa have no historical and cultural similarities or convergence points due to their geographic distance (e.g. Lumumba-Kasongo 2010, Cornelissen 2004, and Spyke 1997).
- "The connection between Japan and Africa has to be examined as a politically motivated phenomenon" (Lumumba-Kasongo 2010: 52).
- Cornelissen (2004): the connection between Japan and Africa is founded through aid for Africa's development.

1. Introduction

❖ The paper shows a cultural product, called *Gùrɔ*, in the Dagara community of Burkina Faso that seems similar to the Japanese cultural product, referred to as *Bonten*, *Bonden*, *Onbei* depending on the Prefecture.



❖ To minimize the idea of the cultural distance between Japan and African countries.

❖ Study is based on interviews in Japan and Burkina Faso.

2. The definition of the key terms

2.1. Culture

- The definition of the term culture is too broad as it captures many aspects of society (e.g. Falola 2003, Fanon 1963, Ingold 1994, Whiten 2011).
- The culture of Japan is described as consisting of the Japanese history, **folk beliefs** and **customs including daily practices and religious beliefs**, social organization (including marriage and the family system), school and education, Art (e.g. **Architecture and Handicrafts**, Martial Arts, Literature, storytelling, the notion of beauty, etc.), entertainment (Music, Dance), and **the festivals that exist throughout the country** (Naoki 2001).

2. The definition of the key terms

- African cultures can be defined as the set of values, **beliefs, multiples practices**, aesthetic forms (e.g. **Architecture, Handicrafts**), systems of communication (verbal and nonverbal languages), institutions of society (e.g. social organization including laws and principles, marriage), **variety of experiences that capture Africans' way of living**, metaphors that express their political ideas, and the ideology that bring about political and economic changes within the African society (Falola 2003).
- Even **nature** is included in the definition of African culture (cf. Falola 2003).
- ❖ The majority of writings about African cultures have treated them as other, highlighting their differences from the Western cultures and, in many cases, casting these differences as deficiencies.
- ❖ All the non-imported African cultural values and practices are always associated with a negative connotation.

2. The definition of the key terms

2.2. *Bonten*

- *Bonten* is a 3- to 4-meter ceremonial wand with a mane of white paper streamers that is used by peasants in Japan.
- decorated colorfully with the animal symbol of the year (e.g. the rat, ox, tiger, dragon, snake, horse, monkey, cock, dog, or board), animal symbols used in the traditional East Asian calendar.

Figure 1: The illustration of Bonten



Source: Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository

2. The definition of the key terms

❖ The purpose of *Bonten*:

- ✓ Used during cultural ceremonies throughout Japan.
- ✓ Used to drive away insects, illness, and evil from farms and pray for a prosperous year and luck, peace, etc. It is also considered to be a sacred symbol of masculinity.
- ✓ The origin of *Bonten* is said to be unclear → maybe from India.
- ✓ Although the primary goal of using *Bonten* is to pray (or thank) *kami* for a good harvest, it is no longer the case in contemporary Japanese society.

2. The definition of the key terms

- difficult to define the Japanese festivals or ceremonies during which the *kami* "god" is worshiped because there is not only one god the Japanese people worship and the purposes of the festival or ceremony can be numerous.
- The term "*Bonten*" in secular contexts such as taking oaths and in social movements in traditional Japan:
 - ✓ It is recorded that in many medieval oaths (*kishōnon*), some Japanese people would swear as follows:

"If I violate this pledge, may the punishments of *Bonten* and *Taishakuten* of the *kami* of the Provinces and especially of the guardian *kami* of this *shōen* be visited upon this body of mine" (Kuroda1993: 23).

2. The definition of the key terms

2.3. Gùrɔ

- ❖ *Gùrɔ* can be defined as a sacred hunchbacked doll-like object made with clay used by farmers in the Dagara community.
- ❖ Used to drive away insects, bad spirits, and any destroyer from fields (rice fields, core fields, *etc.*) and increase productivity.
- ❖ Also used as a watchdog of one's propriety that is likely to be stolen (e.g. mango trees with ripe mangoes, corns, peanuts, tomatoes, *etc.* that are ready to be harvested).

Figure 2: The illustration of Gùrɔ



Source: Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository

2. The definition of the key terms

- *Gùrɔ* is like a trap. It can punish any person with bad intentions around a place where it is placed.
- Through *Gùrɔ*, people can make promises, swear, and ask for the improvement of their business, the protection of their family from diseases or any misfortune, the prosperity of all their family members, safe childbirth, etc.
- The origin of *Gùrɔ* is said to be unknown. ➡ This cultural ritual was first practiced in the place that is known as northern Ghana today, where the Dagara people first settled down and spread around West Africa.

3. The differences and the similarities between *Gūrō* and *Bonten*

3.1. DIFFERENCES

Physical representation and the way the ceremony is organized

- *Gūrō* is represented as a hunchbacked doll-like object with a human-like face.
- Placed in farms at the beginning of the raining season by only one individual and is left there until the end of the harvest. The ritual is less festive as commoners (i.e. non-initiated people) cannot attend it.
- *Bonten* is a 3- to 4-meter wand with a mane of white paper streamers.
- The ceremony involves young initiated people racing to pull out a paper streamer and bring it home in order to receive the protection of their family and their business. *Bonten* ritual, as well as many other cultural ceremonies, is more festive and is opened to non-initiated Japanese and foreigners.

3. The differences and the similarities between *Gùrɔ* and *Bonten*

3.2. SIMILARITIES: The philosophy and objectives behind the event

Gùrɔ

- Used by farmers to drive away insects, bad spirits, and destroyers from their fields and pray for a good harvest, prosperity, peace and safety, and happiness for the family and the entire community, to thank the “gods” for their protection and blessing.
- can be used to make promises or to take an oath.

Bonten

- Used by farmers to drive away insects, bad spirits, and destroyers from their fields and pray for a good harvest, prosperity, peace and safety, and happiness for the family and the entire community, to thank the “gods” for their protection and blessing.
- can be used to make promises or to take an oath.

3. The differences and the similarities between *Gùrɔ* and *Bonten*

3.2. SIMILARITIES: The philosophy and objectives behind the event

Gùrɔ

- used at the beginning and the end of the agricultural activities.
- cannot be touched by non-initiated people.
- Cannot be touched by women.

Bonten

- used at the beginning of rice planting and the end of the rice harvest.
- cannot be touched by non-initiated people.
- Originally, it could not be touched by women.

4. The implication of the similarities between *Gũrɔ* and *Bonten*

❖ two possible explications for the existence of these similarities:

- 1) a mere coincidence (Farmers in Burkina Faso and those in Japan have the same beliefs by chance.)
 - one could think that it is because Burkina Faso and Japan were (or are) agrarian societies. This would imply that in all agrarian societies, people have the same beliefs.
 - Problems: How do we explain other cultural similarities? **Example:**
 - i. the mask festivals in Burkina Faso (Sanou 2007 and Millogo 2007) and the Nahamage Festival of Japan (see Foster 2013 and Guichard et al. 2013).
 - ii. the Japanese concept of *yorishiro*, a Shinto term used to refer to an object that attracts and houses divine spirits (Swan 2011). The Burkinabe cultures are founded based on the same concept.

4. The implication of the similarities between *Gùrɔ* and *Bonten*

- 2) The two cultures are descended from a single ancestral culture (Based on Cheikh Anta Diop's line of research)

How?

- Some theories of cultural evolution argue that the similarities observed among cultures may be an indication that those cultures are descended from a single ancestral culture (Boyd et al. 1997).
- The differences between *Gùrɔ* and *Bonten*, especially their physical representation, may be the results of cultural evolution.



The representation, the naming, and the celebration of *Bonten* may have changed through time as one of the effects of the national development of Japan. ➡ **Any piece of evidence for this assumption?**

4. The implication of the similarities between *Gūro* and *Bonten*

- ❖ *Dogū*, a doll-like object made with clay in the Jōmon period of prehistoric Japan is very similar to *Gūro*.
- it is reported that *Dogū* may have been used for religious and magical purposes in the Jōmon period.
- ✓ They may have been created with certain wishes or prayers in mind (e.g. Abundant harvests, fertility, safe childbirth, freedom from misfortune) (Tsuji 2012).

Figure 3: *Dogū*



Source: Sannai Maruyama Site, Aomori Prefecture

4. The implication of the similarities between *Gùrɔ* and *Bonten*

- ❖ the houses of the Jomon people and those in traditional West African societies:
- ✓ Archaeological excavations at the Sannai Maruyama Site in Aomori Prefecture reveal that the Jomon people lived in pit houses. The roofs were made with straw and pillars which were used to support the roofs.
- ❖ Similar architecture is found in traditional West African societies.

Figure 4: The house of the Jomon period



Source: Sannai Maruyama Site, Aomori Prefecture

Figure 5: The house of the Fulani ethnic group in West Africa



Source: Musée du Houét

5. Conclusion

- ❖ What is the ancestral culture that gave rise to *Gùrɔ* and *Bonten* as well as the other similar cultural practices?

- Although no region in the African continent is mentioned in the literature as a possible origin of the Jomon people and the Yayoi people, the cultural similarities observed between (ancient)Japan and Africa strongly suggest that Africa should be in the list of the possible primary regions from which they entered Japan.
- ❖ This comparative study gives an opportunity and direction for comparative cultural studies between Japan and West African countries, especially Burkina Faso.
- contribute to the development of the *Afrasian Studies* field.
- facilitate cultural exchanges between the Japanese and Burkinabe and contribute to strengthening the African-Japanese connectivity to accelerate Africa's development, discussed in the seventh Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD7).

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