



Transformation of the Dagbon Traditional Dress Code: Cultural, Religious, and Economic Perspectives

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Abstract: This study examined the factors that have influenced the transformation of the Dagbon traditional dress code from cultural, religious, technological, and economic perspectives. The research adopted a qualitative design and collected data through semi-structured interviews, observation, and photographic documentation within the Dagbon Traditional Area of Northern Ghana. A total of 33 participants comprising elders, artisans, tailors, and young adults were purposively selected to provide diverse generational insights. Findings revealed that Islamic influence, particularly during the reign of Naa Ziaginaa, introduced modesty norms, gender differentiation, and religious symbolism into traditional attire. Modernisation and globalisation contributed to changes in colours, fabrics, sewing techniques, and garment styles, leading to hybrid forms that blend tradition with contemporary fashion. The study also found that transformation of the dress code has generated economic opportunities through trade, tourism, and diaspora markets, while simultaneously creating financial pressures linked to social expectations. Despite these changes, traditional attire remains a strong marker of identity and cultural continuity. The study concludes that the Dagbon dress code reflects ongoing negotiation between preservation and adaptation within a changing socio-cultural environment.

Key Words: Dagbon, traditional dress, dress transformation, Islam, modernisation, cultural identity

1. INTRODUCTION:

The dress code of the Dagbon people has undergone deep changes over time because of religious, cultural, economic, and technological forces. Traditional attire once reflected purely local customs rooted in history, identity, and social structure. Islamic influence altered these customs by introducing new clothing norms that reflect religious values and modesty (Oguamanam & Yeboah-Appiah, 2024). Modern technology and global fashion trends have changed how garments are made, the colours used, and the styles that are considered acceptable. Economic activities related to dress have also expanded the role of traditional clothing in local and global markets. These dynamics show that Dagbon dress codes are not static cultural artefacts; they are living practices responding to internal and external pressures. Islam has shaped the Dagbon dress code because it came with new symbols, meanings, and social expectations. The reign of Islamic leaders such as Naa Ziaginaa marked a turning point in how people dressed, as religion became linked with identity and social morality (Von Hesse, 2023). Many Dagomba adopted Islamic attire while blending it with older styles, creating hybrid forms that signal both faith and heritage. Islamic scholars and community leaders encouraged these changes as they participated in ceremonies and everyday life (Yuyu yusriani, 2025). This influence is evident in clothing styles used for weddings, naming rites, and funerals, showing that the dress code became a marker of religious identity as much as cultural belonging.

Modernisation has added new materials, colours, and production methods to the Dagbon traditional dress code. Advances in sewing technology changed how garments are made, shifting from hand-stitched to machine-made attire. This change made production faster and allowed for new designs that were not possible before (Agwuele, 2024). Exposure to global fashion trends introduced fresh colours and patterns absent in earlier times. These developments expanded the aesthetic range of Dagbon attire while challenging older norms, demonstrating that technology and global



interaction have become major forces shaping dress. Economic forces have also transformed how traditional attire functions within Dagbon society. Demand for smocks and other garments has grown, creating income for weavers, tailors, and traders. The sale of traditional clothing to diaspora communities and across regions has turned dress into a source of livelihood (Shamhuna, 2025). Tourism linked to cultural festivals and heritage sites has increased interest in traditional attire. These economic benefits motivate local producers to innovate and adapt their products for broader markets; thus, dress is now both a cultural signifier and an economic commodity.

Social norms and pressures continue to shape how individuals engage with the dress code. Expectations to wear certain clothes for status, respect, or prestige influence personal and family decisions. In some cases, this creates financial strain on individuals who feel compelled to own multiple outfits for different occasions (Bobie, 2025). Dress choices can signal social class, age group, or community role. These pressures reflect broader social dynamics in Dagbon society where external influence and traditional norms intersect, demonstrating that transformation of dress codes involves more than fashion — it involves status and social relations. The interaction of religion, modernisation, and economy makes the transformation of the Dagbon dress code a complex cultural process. The traditional clothing of Dagbon is not disappearing, but it is changing in ways that reflect new values, technologies, and economic realities. Preservation efforts are needed to ensure that younger generations understand the historical meaning of these garments even as they adapt to new influences (Stahn, 2023). The purpose of this study was to examine the cultural, religious, technological, and economic factors that have influenced the transformation of the Dagbon traditional dress code.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

2.1 Conceptual Review:

2.1.1 Concept of Dress and Cultural Identity:

Dress is widely recognised as a visible expression of cultural identity, social belonging, and symbolic communication within society. Scholars define dress as body modifications and supplements that communicate social meaning and group affiliation (Imoh, 2024). Clothing operates as a cultural text that signals ethnicity, status, gender, and authority (Dei, 2024). In many African societies, traditional attire embodies history, political structure, and collective memory (Shanunu & Alhassan, 2023). Dress therefore functions not only as protection for the body but also as a repository of cultural knowledge and symbolic capital. Changes in dress often reflect broader transformations in social values and identity negotiation (Silas-Ufelle & Ntagu, 2025). Within Dagbon, garments such as the smock signify chieftaincy, lineage, and cultural continuity, reinforcing the idea that attire is embedded in social institutions.

2.1.2 Concept of Religion and Dress Transformation:

Religion shapes moral codes, social conduct, and expectations regarding bodily presentation. Religious dress prescriptions regulate modesty, gender differentiation, and symbolic representation (Dade, 2023). Islamic dress codes in particular emphasise bodily coverage and humility, influencing garment length, layering, and head coverings (Nimoh et al., 2024). Studies show that the spread of Islam in African societies led to hybrid dress forms that combine local textiles with Islamic aesthetics (Oguamanam & Yeboah-Appiah, 2024). Von Hesse (2023) argues that religious attire often becomes a marker of piety and collective belonging. In contexts where Islam interacts with indigenous belief systems, dress transformation tends to involve adaptation rather than total replacement (Mensah et al., 2025). This conceptual framework explains how Islamic influence contributes to reshaping traditional dress codes while preserving core cultural elements.

2.1.3 Concept of Modernisation and Globalisation:

Modernisation refers to technological advancement, industrial production, and social restructuring that alter traditional lifestyles. Globalisation involves transnational flows of goods, media, and fashion trends that reshape local consumption patterns (Stahn, 2023). Scholars note that clothing is one of the most visible domains where global and local influences intersect (Hansen, 2004). Access to sewing machines, synthetic dyes, and imported fabrics has transformed production processes in many African textile industries (Ofori et al., 2025). Thorne (2024) observes that technological innovation increases efficiency while enabling stylistic experimentation. Exposure to global fashion through media further accelerates hybridisation of traditional attire (Baataar, 2023). These processes explain the introduction of new colours, patterns, and sewing styles in traditional Dagbon garments.

2.1.4 Concept of Dress as Cultural Capital and Economic Resource

Dress functions as cultural capital that can generate both symbolic recognition and economic returns. Pul (2024) explains that cultural products acquire value when recognised as legitimate expressions of heritage. Traditional attire often becomes commodified within tourism, festivals, and diaspora markets (Yuyu yusriani, 2025). Cultural industries



research demonstrates that heritage-based products can stimulate local employment and entrepreneurship (McConnell et al., 2024). In African contexts, indigenous textiles such as kente and smocks have gained national and international markets (Pul, 2024). At the same time, maintaining culturally appropriate dress may impose financial obligations on households (Baataar, 2023). This perspective frames dress transformation as both an economic opportunity and a site of social pressure.

2.2 Empirical Review:

Empirical studies across West Africa confirm that religion significantly influences dress transformation. Research in Northern Nigeria found that Islamic reform movements reshaped public dress norms toward increased modesty while retaining indigenous fabrics (Agwuele, 2024). Studies in Senegal reported that Islamic leadership influenced ceremonial attire and reinforced gender-specific clothing distinctions (Thorne, 2024). In Ghana, evidence indicates that Islamic education and clerical authority contributed to the adoption of modest garments integrated with traditional textiles (Dei, 2024). Empirical findings consistently show that religious authority often initiates visible changes in dress practices. These studies support the argument that Islamic influence in Dagbon likely contributed to hybrid forms of attire, with religion emerging as a structured force shaping clothing norms and identity.

Empirical evidence also links modernisation and globalisation to changes in traditional garment production. Studies on Ghanaian textile industries show that machine sewing and synthetic dyes expanded colour variation and reduced production time (Imoh, 2024). Research in East Africa documented shifts from hand-woven attire to commercially tailored garments due to urbanisation and market demand (Maiangwa & Essombe, 2023). Youth fashion studies in West Africa reveal a growing preference for hybrid styles that combine traditional fabrics with contemporary cuts (Shanunu & Alhassan, 2023). Cultural tourism research indicates that traditional clothing is increasingly redesigned to appeal to international consumers (Stahn, 2023). However, empirical findings also highlight financial strain caused by social expectations tied to ceremonial dressing (Oguamanam & Yeboah-Appiah, 2024). Together, these studies provide evidence that religious, technological, and economic forces collectively drive transformation of traditional dress systems.

3. METHODOLOGY:

The study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the factors influencing the transformation of the Dagbon traditional dress code. A qualitative approach was appropriate because it enabled an in-depth understanding of cultural meanings, religious influences, and social dynamics embedded in dress practices. The design allowed the researcher to capture lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations from participants within their natural setting. This approach aligns with cultural and ethnographic studies that focus on social meanings attached to material culture. The study emphasised descriptive and interpretive analysis to explain how dress codes have evolved over time, ensuring that findings reflected participants' voices and contextual realities. The research was conducted in the Dagbon Traditional Area in Northern Ghana, a historically significant area as the seat of Dagbon culture, chieftaincy, and Islamic influence. It hosts a diverse population including traditional leaders, Islamic scholars, artisans, traders, and youth. The region is known for its traditional smock production and ceremonial attire. The choice of this area provided access to participants with knowledge of both historical and contemporary dress practices, strengthening contextual validity. The target population included traditional authorities, Islamic scholars, smock weavers, tailors, fashion designers, traders, and young adults. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with relevant knowledge and experience, while snowball sampling helped identify additional participants through referrals. A total of 33 participants were interviewed. Table 1 below presents a summary of participant demographics.

Table 1: Summary of Study Participants

Participant Category	Number	Gender	Selection Method
Elders / Traditional Leaders	12	Mixed	Purposive
Artisans and Tailors	8	Mixed	Purposive
Young Adults (Contemporary Fashion)	13	Mixed	Snowball
Total	33	—	—

Source: Field Survey (2023/2025)



Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, direct observation, and photographic documentation. Interviews allowed participants to explain historical changes, religious influences, and economic impacts on dress codes. The semi-structured format ensured flexibility while maintaining focus on research objectives. Observations were conducted during social events such as weddings, naming ceremonies, funerals, and festivals. Photographs of garments, sewing techniques, and accessories were taken to support visual analysis, and field notes were recorded to capture non-verbal expressions and environmental details. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. Interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim and coded according to emerging themes related to religion, modernisation, gender norms, economic impact, and cultural preservation. Codes were grouped into broader categories that aligned with the study objectives. Observational data and photographic evidence were used to triangulate interview findings, enhancing credibility and ensuring that conclusions were grounded in empirical evidence. Ethical approval was obtained before data collection commenced. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, informed consent was secured, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout.

4. FINDINGS / RESULTS:

4.1 Influence of Islam on the Dagbon Dress Code:

Islam has played a significant role in shaping the Dagbon dress code, with its influence becoming particularly notable during the era of Naa Ziaginaa, an Islamic king. This period marked the beginning of substantial changes in traditional Dagbon attire. The transformation can be seen in the adoption of Islamic customs and dress styles by the Dagomba people. One respondent highlighted the clear distinction within the community's attire influenced by Islamic customs:

"Islam has come, so we have Dagomba Muslims whose dress code is different from our ordinary Dagombas and we have to accept it as our dress code."

This adaptation generates a new, mixed identity by combining Islamic and conventional dress codes. The arrival of Islamic scholars and their absorption into Dagbon society enhanced these developments further as communities learning Arabic and adopting new religious practices grew. One participant noted the historical significance of an Islamic king:

"The Dagbon way of dressing started to change under the reign of Islamic king Naa Ziaginaa. His religious and fashion choices attracted some Dagombas in, who then began to follow him; this was how the dress code developed."

This quotation emphasises the first shift towards Islamic attire, stressing the influence of powerful leaders in developing cultural norms. According to Eicher and Sumberg (1995), clothing in non-Western cultures frequently adapts to religious norms and global interactions. The integration of different cultural and religious practices led to a diverse and evolving dress code in Dagbon. Islamic scholars played a crucial role in community life, including in social and religious ceremonies, which also influenced dress codes:

"Some of them [Islamic scholars] were made imams to some communities and they were partaking in social activities like weddings, naming ceremonies, funerals; hence the influence of the dress code."

Hansen (2004) highlights how religious dress codes can signify identity, belonging, and social status within a community. Islam's impact extended beyond just the dress code, affecting various aspects of Dagbon culture, including traditional ceremonies and social practices. This integration of Islamic customs is also seen in the changes in funeral performances and dress designs:

"Especially our traditional funeral performance, when you look at the smocks, there are changes with regards to the weaving and sewing. There are now designers who helped in adding beauty to the smocks, especially the neck of the smocks instead of using a machine or needles for the designing and weaving of the necks and arms of the smocks."

Another respondent discussed the role of Hausa traders and Islamic scholars in influencing local dress codes:

"The dress code was influenced by the Islam group during the era of Naa Zanjina. The Hausa people who were traders and Muslims at the same time came to Dagbon with their dress code, and since they were part of the Dagbon community, they influenced the dress code of the indigenes."

Islamic practices also influenced the use of religious texts and symbols in clothing. The incorporation of Quranic verses in garments, instead of traditional talismans, reflected a blend of spiritual beliefs with traditional dress practices:

"The Islamic group would write Quranic verses on some of their dresses instead of talisman over it, but it all serves fortifying purposes."



Levine (2013) observes that the adoption of Islamic dress codes often reflects broader social, political, and economic influences. Religious events including weddings, celebrations, and naming ceremonies have also greatly influenced Dagbon's dress customs:

"Their dress code was shaped by weddings, Muslim holidays, naming ceremonies and other social events."

This integration shows how religious activities have become a part of the cultural fabric, influencing the attire people choose for different social environments.

4.2 Gender Differentiation and Social Norms

Gender-specific dress norms were introduced and reinforced through Islamic influence. Originally adopted during the reign of Naa Zanjina, this practice had a lasting impact on Dagbon women's attire:

"It was Naa Zanjina who prepared widows to remarry after the death of their husbands and also brought waist beads to Dagbon ladies to differentiate men from women."

This transformation emphasises how closely religion shapes gender-specific clothing worn in society. Islam has had both positive and negative effects on the Dagbon dress code. Positively, Islam supports modesty and social cohesiveness as well as respect for leaders and elderly people. One respondent stated:

"Islam generates both good and bad consequences. The good thing is that it brings people together and teaches them about God's work and wardrobe choices covering the entire body."

Adoption of Islamic dress rules, however, has also resulted in some challenges to conventional wisdom:

"Islam also teaches young people to be helpful to one another and to value leaders and elders. The negative impact is that sometimes when the academics observe a Dagbomba man dressed in traditional attire, they fail to identify him as one of them and a lot of Islamic sermons oppose some of the traditional practices."

As Bobie (2025) points out, dress rules can be markers of gender, status, and identity. Dagbon's use of waist beads and other gender-specific decorations reflects customs in other African nations where jewellery and clothing help to define social roles and identities (Kusi et al., 2025). The interaction of religious and conventional dress rules emphasises the fluid character of cultural practices and the ongoing negotiation of identity (Oguamanam & Yeboah-Appiah, 2024).

4.3 Influence of Modernisation and Technology on the Dagbon Dress Code

Modernisation has fundamentally changed various disciplines including traditional dress. One respondent observed: "Chiefs choose to ride in cars although they used to ride horses; their halls used to be roofed in thatch but now zinc is used." The role of layered garments as markers of status has also evolved, with people wearing three or four inner smocks before wearing the bigger smock, while chiefs may wear four inner smocks before wearing a gown on top. The fortified smock known as 'gbagino,' worn by warriors, represents one of the older forms of symbolic dress in Dagbon culture. This attire continues to hold ceremonial significance. The inscription of Quranic verses on garments in place of traditional talismans further illustrates how dress carries both protective and spiritual meaning, blending old and new practices.

4.3.1 Introduction of New Colours

Modernisation has brought about one significant change: the introduction of fresh colours and materials into classic attire. Dagbon garments had a limited colour spectrum in past times. Among the respondents, one noted:

"In the past, the few colours available were black, red, white, 'boonga,' 'kpaankobgu'. Other colours have lately changed Dagbon's dress code's appearance from the traditional ones."

The classic smock (bingmaa) now looks and feels different with more colours like pink, green, and yellow added to Dagbon attire. Another respondent confirmed: "There has been an introduction of other colours in the bingmaa (smock) such as yellow, green, and pink, which originally were white, black, blue, and red." Von Hesse (2023) discusses how the advent of new materials greatly affects traditional dress, encouraging a mix of old and modern that enhances cultural expression.

A notable cultural convention governs hat and smock colour coordination among Dagomba men. No typical Dagomba man will wear a hat of the same colour as his smock, a convention that contrasts with non-Dagomba men who are not bound by this rule.



4.3.2 Changes in Sewing Techniques and Styles:

Modernisation has also affected the techniques and styles used in making traditional Dagbon garments. Traditional hand-sewn methods have increasingly been replaced by machine sewing, leading to new styles and designs. One respondent explained:

"The smock has now been sewn with too many gatherings unlike the olden day sewing; some has now also been sewn short which they now call it jeans top. It is also now sewn by machine instead of the hand sewn."

This shift to machine sewing reflects broader technological advancements and the influence of global fashion trends. The ability to produce garments more efficiently has led to a variety of new styles, such as shorter smocks referred to as 'jeans tops.' Mensah et al. (2025) highlights the significance of technological advancements in altering traditional dress codes, where modern techniques offer both efficiency and new aesthetic possibilities. Economic factors, including the cost of materials, have also driven changes in traditional styles:

"But because of the cost of materials and change of style of sewing, those things have changed. In some years to come Dagbon dress code is likely to change more, especially forms and patterns of sewing, but one cannot predict."

4.3.3 Cultural Implications of Modernisation

Although modernisation has changed the Dagbon dress code significantly, it has also sparked discussions on cultural preservation and identity. Stahn (2023) points out that traditional dress often serves as a storehouse of cultural identity even as it adapts to fit new influences. Younger generations' adoption of contemporary fashion has raised concerns about the preservation of traditional dress codes:

"Today, Dagbon young people dress differently from the Dagbon dress policy; some dresses are not accepted by Dagomba customs and tradition."

Notwithstanding these changes, there are active campaigns to preserve traditional dress codes using social media:

"If only the message is well packaged, the social media is also a venue that might help promote traditional dress code."

Both Imoh (2024) and Dei (2024) emphasise the importance of modern media in preserving and enhancing cultural legacy. Changes in traditional attire extend to footwear as well. Historically, Dagombas wore leather sandals called prizokuli, which later evolved into long shoes (mughiri) for specific roles such as horse riders and chiefs. Thorne (2024) notes that adaptation of traditional dress to new functional and aesthetic criteria is a common response to changing social and technological surroundings. The blending of old and modern creates a dynamic cultural scene whereby traditional practices are constantly evolving to reflect the society's adaptation to global influences.

5. DISCUSSION:

The findings of this study reveal that the Dagbon dress code has been shaped by a confluence of Islamic influence, modernisation, and socio-economic pressures. Islamic integration, particularly during the era of Naa Ziaginaa, introduced modesty norms and gender differentiation that redefined bodily presentation in Dagbon society. This aligns with Von Hesse (2023) and Oguamanam & Yeboah-Appiah (2024), who argue that religion functions as a structured force that reshapes cultural practices. The hybrid attire that emerged, blending indigenous textiles with Islamic garment styles — reflects a negotiated identity that preserves heritage while accommodating religious expectations.

Modernisation has diversified the colour palette, materials, and construction techniques of traditional garments. The shift from hand-sewn to machine-sewn smocks, and the introduction of new colours such as pink, yellow, and green, illustrate how technology expands aesthetic possibilities. As Mensah et al. (2025) and Thorne (2024) note, technological innovation does not erase tradition but transforms it, producing hybrid forms that carry historical significance in new aesthetic packages. The persistence of cultural conventions, such as the rule against wearing hats matching smock colours — confirms that even as forms change, cultural grammar endures.

Economically, traditional attire has become both a livelihood and a social obligation. The commercialisation of smocks for diaspora and tourism markets demonstrates how cultural products generate income. However, the pressure to conform to dress expectations for social occasions creates financial burden, particularly for lower-income households. This dual economic role, as opportunity and obligation, suggests that economic transformation of dress is not uniformly positive. Targeted support for artisans and policy attention to the economic dimensions of cultural dressing are therefore warranted.



8. CONCLUSION:

Inspired by both Islam and modernisation, the Dagbon dress code has undergone significant changes reflecting the region's capacity to adapt to cultural, religious, and technological changes while preserving its historical background. During the period of Naa Ziaginaa, Islamic customs introduced a mix of traditional and Islamic clothes, including fresh elements such as Islamic garments and accessories. This transforming journey saw Dagbon clothing's acceptance of Islamic dress rules accentuate modesty and religious relevance. Islamic scholars and their attendance in religious and social events helped to entwine these customs into the fabric of Dagbon civilisation. Apart from financial obligations related to changing fashion, this integration also proved challenging for traditionalists and those adopting modern approaches.

Technical developments and modernisation have simultaneously affected the Dagbon dress code by bringing fresh colours, materials, and manufacturing techniques that have changed conventional clothing. The shift from hand-sewn to machine-sewn clothes reflects broader social and economic changes. Modern designs and globalisation have enriched Dagbon clothing, producing a dynamic cultural scene in which traditional practices adapt to outside pressure. However, this modernisation has spurred debates on cultural preservation regarding the acceptance of contemporary dress forms by the younger generation. Notwithstanding these difficulties, initiatives supporting and safeguarding traditional dress codes using contemporary channels like social media show a proactive attitude that ensures old customs remain relevant and valued by future generations.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS:

While appreciating the advantages of Islamic influence and modernisation, Dagbon's rich cultural legacy must be preserved. This approach should prioritise educational activities stressing the historical and cultural relevance of traditional Dagbon attire through school programmes, community seminars, and public exhibitions. By inspiring a better knowledge and respect of traditional dress standards among the younger generation, these projects will help guarantee the cultural knowledge transmission.

Encouragement of mutual respect and understanding also depends on setting venues for communication among religious scholars, traditional leaders, fashion designers, and community members. Such discussions help promote a balanced approach to cultural preservation by addressing the integration of Islamic practices and modern influences with conventional wisdom. Presenting traditional Dagbon clothing on modern venues using tools such as social media will draw more people and increase respect for culture. Apart from increasing tourism and financial possibilities for nearby weavers and artisans, this campaign can create worldwide interest.

Efforts should be made to document and preserve the contributions made to Dagbon dress codes by modernisation and Islamic inspirations through written records, photographs, and oral histories. This will guarantee that future generations have a whole knowledge of their cultural background. Through educational programmes, dialogue facilitation, modern platform leveraging, and preservation of historical records, the rich tapestry of Dagbon's dress code can be kept and celebrated in its full diversity, ensuring that Dagbon's cultural identity remains vivid and strong.

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