

## ***Dagu*<sup>1</sup>: Its Nature, Attributes and Reporting Praxis**

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**Abstract:** *The Afar people are the largest pastoral society in East Africa living across three neighboring countries - Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti. They have a giant traditional news network called Dagu. In most parts of the world, it is the news that goes to the target audience through channels of mass media. In the case of the Afar society, it is the person who goes to the news because every adult Afar is culturally expected to serve as a traditional newsman. The principal purpose of this study was to investigate the nature, characteristics and reporting praxis of this traditional news network so as to tap into Dagu's latent communication potential. The research follows a comparative analysis. To gather the necessary data, an in-depth interview was used. The analysis and interpretation of the data disclosed that Dagu, as opposed to mass media, is a highly interactive and multi-way communication network, which serves the Afar society equally. The findings of the study also revealed that the Afars have unflagging enthusiasm to obtain fresh information, and regardless of being a traditional newsman, they have remarkable journalistic skills. Every Afar is a moving news medium. The study thus maintains that Dagu has more similarity to journalistic practices than to models of mass communication flows.*

**Keywords:** *Dagu, Afar, traditional network, traditional communication, news*

### **Introduction**

Many rural areas of Africa contain "...a rich communication environment that predates modern electronic media by many, many years" (FAO, 2009). Ethiopia is home to more than 80 ethnic groups, and it is rich in diverse cultures where some of its ethnic groups have an established traditional form of communication network. Such communication environments or traditional communication systems can have a far-reaching effect

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virtually on the whole process of communication within a given society.

The Afar society, living in one of the nine regional states of Ethiopia and located in the northeastern part of the country, is a very good example here. The Afar people have an established traditional communication network called *Dagu*. *Dagu* is the largest “wireless”, so to say, traditional news network in the Horn of Africa that connects the Afars living across three neighboring countries – Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti. As a result, Afars, who are Muslims and speakers of a Cushitic language, have a cross-border nationality (Bryden, 1996).

Mainly based on word of mouth, the Afar society has been using *Dagu*'s network, which “is a highly developed traditional system of information management” (Chege et al., 2004, p. 29). In most parts of the world, news is communicated through mass media – radio, television, newspaper and the Internet. Usually through these channels, the news goes to its target audience. In the Afar society, however, the reverse is true. It is the Afars that go to the news and it is *Dagu* - word of mouth - that communicates the news. As Morell (2005, para. 3) writes:

It is through *Dagu* that they [Afar] learn of any newcomers to their desert realm, of the conditions of water holes and grazing lands, of missing camels and caravans. They learn of weddings and funerals, of new alliances and betrayals, of the latest battles fought, and the conditions of the trail ahead.

Due to its growing popularity especially among local mass media in the country, *Dagu* has managed to attract the interests of many people - from development researchers to communication experts, from journalists to ordinary people. Besides, recent studies on the Afar society make a remarkable reference to *Dagu* by considering it not only as a good source of information that serves the Afar people but also as a communication system that has a latent potential as a means of development (see Kelemework, 2011; Chege et al., 2004). Though there were only very few links on the Internet that contained information related to *Dagu*, for example before 2008, within the last three years many texts on various topics (health, pastoralism, education, water services, etc.) making a reference to the traditional news network (*Dagu*) have

been uploaded to the Internet. Nonetheless, several publicities and references have been made about *Dagu* while it is not yet seriously studied and documented. Despite the fact that *Dagu* has been there among the Afars since time immemorial, it is not yet duly studied. According to Morell (2005, para. 3), *Dagu* “is a weighty subject, something to be pondered and assessed”. That is, the nature and attributes of *Dagu* as a news reporting praxis and the similarities and differences *Dagu* has to modern media systems have not yet been fully explored. Therefore, this study investigated the nature and characteristics of the traditional news network and its reporting praxis. Moreover, it explored *Dagu*’s similarities to and differences from modern media news reporting praxis and models of mass communication flows.

## **Method**

Much is not known about *Dagu*’s attributes and reporting praxis. Since it is not yet well-documented, *Dagu*’s ‘rules’ and the way it operates as well as its importance, trends and threats are not clear. This study is thus an exploratory research, whose main focus is the discovery of ideas and insights (Kothari, 2008, p. 36). Since the main purpose of the research was to provide insights into the unique traditional communication network known as *Dagu*, three key informants, who were ethnically Afar, well-educated and politically prominent in the Afar Regional State, were purposely selected. It was their rich experience that put them in a better position to know not only how *Dagu* operates and its ‘rules’ but also to delineate its importance, trends, and traits. To reduce any bias that may stem from the informants’ role in the Afar society (since all were politically prominent figures), a second year undergraduate student in journalism and communications at Bahir Dar University was also included as key informant and was interviewed in Bahir Dar town. The three key informants’ interviews were conducted in Samara, the capital city of the Afar Regional State. A semi-structured interview was employed to obtain data from the key informants.

## Unpacking *Dagu*

Since relaying an account of current information is obligatory for Afars, especially every adult is expected to have at least one story to relate, or the minimum is that he or she is searching for it. Afars never move but bearing the news. They have unflagging enthusiasm to obtain news and information and to “pass along recitations of all they have seen and heard” (Morell, 2005, para. 3).

When the majority of the world is virtually dependent upon journalists to know about the happenings around them and the globe at large, the Afars rely on each other as any adult is a traditional newsman. In the Afars’ domain reporting is not a monopoly of radio, TV or in short of journalists. Rather every Afar is a reporter. “When two *Afar* people [sic] meet, they sit down and spend some time... discussing the major economic, social and political events that took place recently in their respective localities” (Kelemework, 2011, p. 426).

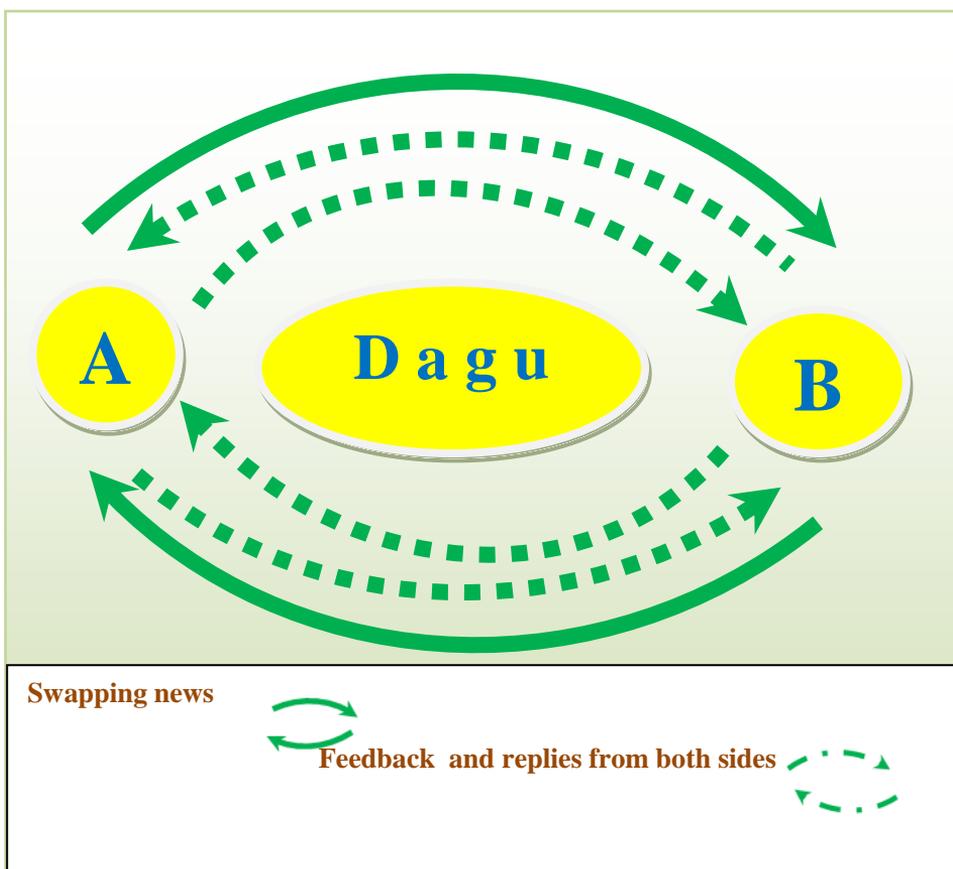
With regard to its meaning, *Dagu* can take a narrow as well as a more broad meaning. When someone says “Do you have *Dagu*?” he or she is asking whether the person has new information. In this case, *Dagu* means information or news. According to the key informants, *Dagu* “is information; it is the exchange of news and a narration of events”.

When the ritual of *Dagu* is conducted, it goes through stages and takes a broader meaning. When two or more Afars meet, including those travelling in opposite directions, they first exchange Islamic greetings, (i.e. ‘assalamu alaykum’ [‘Peace be upon you!’]), which is accompanied by handshakes and hand kisses. After having sat down together, if they do not know each other, they briefly introduce their names and localities and to which clan they belong. After the very brief introduction, they proceed to the news session. Then, let’s say **A** asks **B** for news. If **B** has more than one story, he will narrate all of them to **A** consecutively. While **B** narrates, **A** must listen attentively without any interruption. **A** can only utter some sounds like *ihii* or *hayyee* as signals to the narrator that he is listening attentively. Then, it will be **A**’s turn to raise some questions for clarity, attribution,

verification or any other inquiry that is related to the news if he has. **B** will give clarification for questions that are raised by **A**. Now the onus is on **A** to relate all the news he has. If **B** has any questions for clarity, attribution or verification, he will start asking questions when the narration is over. Then, it will be the duty of **A** to give explanation. Thus, this whole news exchanging process or ritual is also called *Dagu* (see Figure below).

Afars painstakingly swap news. The enthusiasm they have to obtain news and information together with the accountability attached to *Dagu*, i.e. accountability for what one reports or relays, makes *Dagu* a highly interactive traditional communication system. *Dagu* can, therefore, be defined as a highly interactive traditional network for the exchange of fresh information and news as well as narration of events among the adult members of Afar society where everyone is accountable for what he or she passes along.

*Dagu* is the process of passing as well as receiving information or news about what two or more individuals have seen or heard. It is a news medium that serves all members of the society virtually equally regardless of their social status. However, it is worth noting that women play fewer roles than men simply because they “are relatively lesser in rate of mobility compared to men” (Gulilat, 2006, p. 75).



*Dagu in diagram* (source: author)

As the Afars are predominantly pastoralists, they at least seasonally move from one place to another as one Afar woman confirmed to Morell (2005, para. 25): “We are the people who move... From the beginning that has been our way.” Since the Afar Triangle is hot and dry, with an average annual rainfall of less than 200 mm in some areas, and summer temperatures exceeding 48°C, large tracts of the region are virtually uninhabitable by those who are not acclimatized (Bryden, 1996). In order to move to grazing places, to make seasonal migration, to proceed with the caravan, to fetch water, etc., they need to make decisions which demand the availability of adequate and precise information. Afars need factual information almost for every activity in their life. They cannot live without *Dagu* as one of their proverbs depicts “*Dagu dina nekela daga medina*” (You should not sleep before you hear any news). If a caravan is seen by villagers and paths do not cross, somebody will definitely go

out from the settlement to obtain *Dagu* or the news (Parker, 1971).

The other fascinating feature of *Dagu* is that it can be conducted between two persons who have fallen out over a certain issue and they have not even spoken to each other. When they meet, one of them might say, “The issue between you and me will be settled through mediation [according to Afar’s customary law] beneath a tree at a time which is ordained by Allah. Now tell me what you have seen on your way”. Thus, they will swap.

According to the respondents in this study, *Dagu* exists at least for three main reasons. These are to take preventive actions against any threat, to take full advantage of something, and to share experiences and knowledge.

To begin with the first one, the delay or absence of seasonal rain, the looming conflict with rival ethnic groups, the possibility of revenge attacks and livestock raids, the drying up of waterholes, the breaking out of human or livestock diseases, etc. are the major factors that can easily disrupt the Afars’ life. As pastoralists, they lead the most vulnerable life. As Abdulkirim (2004, p.) notices, “Not only do many pastoral groups belong to the most marginal and poorest parts of the society, they have also to eke out a living in some of the most variable and unstable environments in the world.” Hence, in order to take preventive measures against any possible sources of danger or harm to the Afar community and its properties, accurate information is extremely important. Though it is commonly said that *information is knowledge*, in the case of Afar society, information is more valuable than knowledge as long as securing factual information is often a matter of life-and-death. In that inhospitable desert area, information deserves a very high value to the extent that the bad news can even be considered as good tidings as long as it serves as a means to ensure safety and save lives. For Afars who cannot live without *Dagu*, information always comes first. Then, water and camel follow as the next most important things. The information or *Dagu* that is needed by Afars first and foremost is information about hostile movements of rivals. Afar borders with four major ethnic groups, namely Tigre, Oromo, Issa, and Amhara. For a long time, there have been conflicts between Afars and their neighbors due to

competition over land and pastoral resources which have been aggravated by “development interventions and land policies” (Getachew, 2001, p. 46).

Performing *Dagu*'s ritual is an obligatory task for every adult Afar who is culturally compelled to serve as a traditional newsman. If someone deliberately conceals any *Dagu* especially when it is related to an enemy's movement or about the availability of a waterhole, he will be held responsible. For instance, if two people are killed because a passerby they met had not told them in their *Dagu* that an enemy was approaching the place where they were going to, it will be considered as though he killed them. It is also interesting to note that identifying a person who conceals the crucial information will be traced through *Dagu* itself since the evidence is already there in the network of *Dagu* which reports as well as records (in the minds of people) who met whom, where and when. In this regard, mention should also be made about the Afars' long memory. If the mass media keep their recorded material in various forms such as on computers, tapes and disks, the Afars store important stories or *Dagu* in their memories. Their memories are their file servers. It is true that “When people have no other means of storing information and knowledge, they develop an excellent memory” (FAO, 2008).

In what sounds almost opposite to the first one is the second reason. Meaning, if the former is about the bad news, the latter is definitely about the good news. That is, Afars employ *Dagu* in order to obtain glad tidings about the availability of pastures and waterholes, the distribution of aid from government, etc. As seasonal migration in search of adequate pasture and water is an unavoidable task for the Afar pastoralists, *Dagu* plays an irreplaceable role. The Afars normally swap well detailed information. An informant who is talking about, for example, an area of pasture he saw while coming across from a certain place, is expected to provide adequate and precise account of the pasture area: For how long, with how many herds of goats, camels and/or cattle the pasture can be sufficient; whether there is any waterhole; for how long it can be used, etc.

The third and last one refers to *Dagu*'s crucial role in helping Afars in coping with their inhospitable place where new

experience and knowledge, which can help to deal successfully with difficulties, have to be shared among the society. *Dagu* is thus the channel that helps to disseminate and share new experiences and knowledge. New knowledge, experience or skill gained by someone or group of people somewhere in the Afar Triangle (whether in Djibouti, Eritrea or Ethiopia) is soon reported and shared to others via *Dagu*. If, say, someone was sick and got healed by a certain herb for the first time, this is definitely *Dagu* through which Afars share this new knowledge or experience.

### **Major Attributes and Reporting Praxis of *Dagu***

When narrowly defined, as already stated, *Dagu* is a report about current events or recent information. In short, it is news. News that is disseminated through a network, whether the network is a modern or traditional one, demands to have a certain type of reporting praxis. Thus, it might not be surprising to conceive of *Dagu* as having reporting praxis. What is astonishing perhaps is that there are remarkable similarities between *Dagu* and the way news is produced and narrated in the mass media such as radio. It should also be noted that it is, among their other qualities, the Afar's remarkable journalistic skill that puts the *Dagu* praxis on a par with that of the modern mass media. Therefore, a concise mention of some attributes of the *Dagu* praxis would be illuminating. The attributes range from *Dagu*'s interest in the odd and the peculiar, in answering WH questions to its very yardstick of stories. Other qualities of the praxis also include its emphasis on trustworthiness and accuracy, multi-way communication, etc.

To begin with *Dagu*'s interest in the odd and the peculiar, one might confidently say that *Dagu* is not about the deaths of a chicken or the slaughter of a goat as it is also true for news in the mainstream media. *Dagu* includes something odd and peculiar. As one of the key informants pointed up, when mice eat a cat, it is *Dagu* (as it might also be big news for the mainstream media). To the contrary, when a cat eats a mouse it will not be *Dagu*. In other words, something very obvious and banal or that which is done frequently is not part of *Dagu*.

In most cases, *Dagu* has to answer the important questions (what, when, where, who, why and how, i.e. the five WH questions in journalistic jargon), which are employed as main tools by journalists in reporting a news story (Maeseneer, 1989; Neal & Brown, 2009).

In addition, *Dagu* is narrated almost in the same way the conventional news is written or read. Journalistic news writing often follows logical order (opposed to chronological order) by bringing the most important part of the event first, and then the next important, especially when they report straight news (Maeseneer, 1989; Neal & Brown, 2009). Similarly, *Dagu* provides the most vital information at the beginning and then goes to the next important.

Another remarkable attribute of *Dagu* is that it can be every type of information - social, political or economic - as long as it is a narration of a new event that has significance in Afars' life. This is somehow similar to news value criteria, to speak in journalistic jargon. A radio, for example, broadcasts a news item as long as the story is significant to the majority of the listeners or it adds something of interest to the listeners' knowledge. *Dagu*, thus, as much as it has got the curiosity for something new and fresh, it also puts emphasis on the sequence of stories. This means *Dagu* demands of the participants to decide which story has to be narrated first in the event that an Afar has two or more stories, say a good and a bad news: the most important or the less important one, the most recent or the old one? A fresh story which has more impact on the lives of the majority of the Afar people will definitely be narrated first, and then the next most important, then the next... This is almost the same to the way the broadcast media order their stories – from the most to the least important.

What is more, as it is commonly true of the mass media, *Dagu* too pays great attention to the trustworthiness of a story. Reliability of *Dagu* is usually secured through attribution. That is, if a narrator is not an eyewitness, he or she must disclose the source of information, which normally goes back to two chains of narration. It should be noted that citation in *Dagu* includes the person's name, clan and locality. *Dagu* is taken as most reliable if it is related by three different persons. An Afar proverb very well

sums this up: “A false account can be true as long as it is testified by three persons”. On the other hand, when there is inconsistency on factual information within the same story that is related by two or more individuals, the story is regarded as unreliable. However, it will not be abandoned. Verifying and establishing its truthfulness will rather be the next job. The responsibility thus rests on the shoulders of both the one who has discovered the inconsistency and of everybody who has heard the news later.

As the mass media often give high emphasis to accuracy, Afars also place in their *Dagu* a high, if not a higher, accuracy. Based on the information obtained, pastoralists may make major decisions such as to move to a new place. For instance, if the new place is not safe to stay or has not enough water for a given time, the consequence will be catastrophic. That is why the Afars in their proverb say, “Don’t tell lies in *Dagu* as lies should not be told to a dying person”. If any disaster happens due to inaccuracies, the informant will be held responsible for the deaths of persons and of herds.

Although Afars are sensitive to reliability and accuracy, their unflagging enthusiasm for news, however, never prevents them from receiving *Dagu* even when it comes from a pathological liar, except that it will be treated with great caution. But it should be noted that *Dagu* related by a liar is relayed with remark to indicate that the source is not dependable. The remedy for such type of *Dagu* includes fact checking and a probing process that puts the narration under scrutiny to get to the first source of the information. If somebody deliberately passes untrue account or lies, he or she will be held responsible and punished according to Afars’ customary law, whose punitive measure may extend to ostracizing the liar.

In the foregoing discussion, some basic differences between *Dagu* and mass media have been fairly unfolded. Thus, one might already have noted that their difference lies in their very respective nature. Mass media are a one-way communication where a newscaster tries to communicate its distant audiences who are virtually passive recipients (Mefalopulos, 2008). Further, in the landscape of the mass media, first, there is no guarantee whether the message actually reaches the audience; second, there

is virtually no immediate feedback. Thus, again no guarantee whether the message is clearly understood by the intended audience. Third, the communication is not often between equals since the sender “has more prestige, power, resources, expertise and authority than the receiver” (McQuail, 1994, p. 37). As opposed to mass media, Afar fellows swap stories in a face-to-face situation because *Dagu* is an oral medium at inter-personal communication level. As it has been mentioned earlier, the persistent enthusiasm that the Afars have to obtain news and information and the accountability they attach to it make *Dagu* highly interactive. Apart from this, in the arena of *Dagu*, there is a guarantee for the messages to reach and be understood clearly as well as to acquire immediate feedback from both sides.

The other most important feature of *Dagu* is that, unlike the mainstream media, message flows from and to both directions making its praxis a multi-way communication (see the diagram above). Mass media follow a giver-taker pattern (Jemal, 2011) simply because the mass media are the givers while audiences are sheer receivers since the message flows only from one direction – the media. But in the sphere of *Dagu*, the Afar traditional newsman is both a giver and taker at the same time, i.e. as one relays, he or she obtains. Moreover, *Dagu* paves the way for effective communication, for the communication is often between pastoralists who are equals (same traditional, cultural and even economic backgrounds), giving *Dagu* pragmatic and ethical edge. As Melkote and Vallath note, “Communication on a coequal basis is ethically correct and practically more relevant and useful” (1994, p. 315).

Yet another feature of *Dagu* is concerned with the treatment of rumors and distortions by the Afars. When a journalist encounters a rumor, what does he have to do? Neal and Brown (2009, p. 251) advise, “Trace the rumor backward until you find a person who actually has the information”. Or, the journalist has to drop the ‘story’ altogether. But this is not the case with *Dagu*. Unlike the mass media, rumors, distortions and overstatements have an ample chance of appearing in the *Dagu* network as stories because there is no reporter who is employed and responsible for verifying or crosschecking before relaying the news. The reason is that a great deal of pressure to relay uncross-checked accounts

can also come from the unflinching enthusiasm the Afars have for *Dagu*.

When a rumor, a distortion or an overstatement appears in the network, however, it will be treated with great caution. The one who acquires rumors tries his/her utmost to verify. If he or she ends up without success, nonetheless, he or she does not hold it back but rather passes it with a remark: "I have heard this and that. But, it seems rumor for the reason that... Please try to verify it further". The recipient also passes the story by making the same remark. The story will circulate in the network carrying the same remark. Thus, the verification task becomes an assignment for everybody until the truth is revealed.

It is also interesting to mention the degree of freedom, so to say, that *Dagu* grants those involved in the process. That is, *Dagu* gives room for the traditional newsman to make comments whenever he thinks that something goes wrong in the story that reaches him/her. If one believes that the news is exaggerated or has some distortions, for example, he or she will pass it by adding a remark: "Mr. A told me this and that. But I don't think that it is correct. It seems that there is some exaggeration because of this and that". In the sphere of the mass media, however, a journalist should restrain from making any comment as he or she "should report only the facts and other people's opinions" (Maeseneer, 1989, p. 34).

It must also be noted that because Afars grow up in an environment where *Dagu* is the central part of their life, everyone is skilled to report news from his/her upbringing without going to school of journalism. *Dagu* thus serves as a traditional institution through which every Afar learns how to conduct *Dagu*, i.e. how to do probing and cross-checking information, how to make verification. In short, *Dagu* is the way to gather information and to report it to the fellow Afars who also in turn know how to tell a story in an organized way and without leaving any important question unanswered.

One might say that the Afars are experts on observing and making a mental note of their surroundings in detail. When one is asked, say, to recount the things that befell him on his journey from

place **A** to **B**, the person furnishes the inquirer with accounts at utmost accuracy and detail. Needless to say, correct reporting is an art which must be acquired by the men especially (Parker, 1971). In order to do this, Afars use their sense organs efficiently so much so that it would be no exaggeration to say that they use their ears as tape recorder to retain information they orally receive and their eyes as camera to capture and retain accounts of things they witness. But, it goes without saying that in the realm of mass media, especially today in the digital age, journalists are equipped with audio and video electronic equipment for the retention of information.

What is more, unlike in broadcast or print media, in *Dagu*, there is no producer or editor with authority to kill stories or otherwise, to make alterations and deletions or deny the public access to certain information (Cirino, 1973). That is why a piece of news smoothly enters the *Dagu* network as soon as it happens or unfolds. One has to be cautious here though. That is, although we may not speak of censorship, there surely is some form of editing. For, as noted before, corrections, crosschecking and verifications are performed orally while the story is relayed. However, editing in *Dagu* is not to kill stories or deny the Afar people access to certain information rather to make stories complete and inform the Afars with accurate information. Understandably, as the news is alive until it reaches the last person who does not yet hear about the event, there will be several editing in the course of its journey.

It is not as such arguable that the mass media are often used to set the agenda. The mass media report an event not only because it is significant and fulfills the news value criteria, but also because the media make selection, which is usually made based on the news agenda and the time or space available (DeFleur & Dennis, 1991, p. 419). As long as information in the mass media is subject to a deliberate selection or omission based on the agenda of a proprietor, the agenda-setting role of the media often opens the door for manipulation (Jemal, 2011). The three key informants in this study, however, insisted that *Dagu* is subject to neither agenda setting nor manipulation. In other words, new information is not subject to deliberate selection or omission. If an event is significant and the Afar fellow witnesses it or obtains the news from a radio or even a non-Afar, he or she will certainly purvey it

to the *Dagu*'s network. They also claimed that no one can manipulate it, for instance, by purveying biased information that may help them to safeguard their personal interest or advantage. The fourth informant, however, believed that *Dagu* can be used to set an agenda.

Another remarkable feature of *Dagu* is that it normally spreads very fast and would reach lots of people in a day's time. In fact, the pace of its circulation depends on the significance of the news. Hence, the spread of *Dagu*'s circulation can often show how a certain news item is most significant and reliable. Conceivably, the more important the item is, the faster it goes and reaches many people. In some cases, chances are that a news item already relayed by someone might come back to him/herself especially when the story is very important. As noted earlier, the frequent movement that characterizes the Afars' way of life and their exceptional enthusiasm for news is one of the fundamental factors in the attribute of *Dagu* as a swift news network as far as its circulation is concerned. It should also be noted that the very means by which news travels can also play a determining role in the circulation of *Dagu*, which spreads faster when relayed by cameleer than by one who travels on foot. For example, *Dagu* on a significant event that has happened in Djibouti will reach Awash town (one of the Afar zones) probably within a week or 10 days traveling more than 700 km by caravans after caravans. According to informants, it is also common that *Dagu* runs from Fentale Mountain (Afar Region) up to the Red Sea (Eritrea) and vice versa. By the standard of modern mass media, which have the edge on the pace of news in reaching out their audiences simultaneously, *Dagu* clearly lacks pace in news circulation for the obvious reasons stated above. But, for a traditional system unaided by hi-tech, the above qualities that the *Dagu* network possesses do demonstrate the creativity and determination of the Afars in information exchange.

Still another quality of *Dagu* is concerned with purveying. In the mainstream media network (broadcast or print), the purveyors of information are often the journalists. Thus, their employer, i.e. proprietor of the media, has the right to decide which news has to reach people. In short, censorship can be exercised (Harrison, 2006). But in *Dagu*, any Afar can purvey fresh information to the

network at anytime and there is no control of information or censorship. Even a non-Afar, for example, a person from Amhara or Tigre ethnic group can do this assuming that he speaks Afar or the Afar, whom he meets, speak Amharic or Tigrigna language. Young children, who are not allowed to participate in *Dagu*'s ritual, would purvey information to adults if they witness an event. Eyewitnesses, travelers, caravans, strangers and radio listeners can be considered as the major purveyors of *Dagu*. In addition, it is worth mentioning that radio serves to supply *Dagu*'s network not only with national but also world news that interests the Afar people. One of the informants mentioned the news about Israeli/Palestinian conflict as a good example. Hence, *Dagu* has much more similarity to the new media, especially the Internet. Anyone who has an Internet access can post new information that he has witnessed or obtained from another source. In this regard, it is far better to claim *Dagu* as the Afar's cyberspace than contrasting it with radio or TV.

Obviously, in remote areas, the amount of *Dagu* diminishes substantially as the accessibility of purveyors, which is directly related to the availability of infrastructure, decreases. As a result, those living in remote areas seem to have a relatively raging thirst for *Dagu* since access for news and information, especially about the outside world is very limited. One of the informants confirms that it is evident that the people in such isolated areas show much enthusiasm for newcomers and give a warm reception simply because these persons are regarded as a gateway to acquire the otherwise inaccessible information and news. The very few pastoralists and semi-pastoralists that are settled adjacent to a highway or urban areas have better access to *Dagu* than those who are living in remote areas. Hence, as a transportation system gets improved, the exchange of *Dagu* flows faster.

The other notable characteristic of *Dagu* is related with its freshness. In the sphere of broadcast media, a news story goes arguably stale almost as soon as it is aired. But this is not the case for *Dagu*. A news story is considered as fresh and circulates within *Dagu*'s network as long as there are some people who have never heard of it. Therefore, regardless of the time of its occurrence, *Dagu* can remain alive for days, months or even in some cases for a year. What one of the informants of the current

study said sums this point up: "A book is still new for you as long as you do not yet read it." Freshness essentially brings the notion of time into play. In this connection, it is worth mentioning that most non-Afars, often the highlanders, commonly believe that *Dagu* is time-consuming. According to their view, *Dagu* is there simply because the Afars, as they are pastoralists, have plenty of time at their disposal to indulge in excessive talk. Kassim (1982, p. 125) comments, "their [Afars'] *loquaciousness* and *their greed for news* are proverbial" (emphasis added). Some consider *Dagu* as a means used by Afars to kill time. As opposed to the comments, which seem to have an ethnocentric undertone, the key informants of this research insisted that *Dagu* is rather timesaving as its ritual has plenty of flexibility, on the one hand, it is used by the Afar society as a means to ensure security and to take full advantages of good opportunities in the unfriendly desert, on the other.

To make this point more clear, it is important to closely look at how *Dagu* is timesaving. When two or more Afars meet while traveling, for instance, they swap *Dagu* on the spot beneath a bush or a tree, reciting all what they have seen or heard. If at least one of them is in hurry, still they should swap *Dagu*, but as briefly as possible focusing only on the highlights of the most important stories they have - just similar to 'the main stories' or 'headline of the stories' in the broadcast media. When the place is at home, because there is enough time, the ritual can take several hours. *Dagu* is normally conducted at the time of a coffee ceremony after food has been served. In such situation, the news stories can include background information and the number of news items will also increase as news stories that have a secondary importance in other places may also have a chance to be narrated. On the completion of *Dagu*'s ritual, Afars make supplication: "May Allah increase the good tidings and stop the bad things which we heard there and keep us away from them." In short, *Dagu*'s ritual may take few minutes or hours depending upon mainly three factors: the place (where it is performed), the number of stories to be related and the actual time available.

Moreover, *Dagu*'s ritual has an established method to share news between members of a group or family so as to save time by avoiding repetition. For instance, if an Afar (A) meets a group of

seven people in a village, the group will be represented by the elder one (**B**). Then, **A** and **B** will swap the news in front of the group. Thus, **A** does not need to perform the ritual with other members of the group because the ‘representative’ has already related all the stories that the group members have. Hence, he will conduct *Dagu* only once, i.e. with **B**. If, for example, **B** does not yet conduct *Dagu* with person **C** in the group because he joined the group late, **B** will advise **A** to conduct one more *Dagu* with **C** since he does not yet have any news from him. Due to this, **A** needs to perform the ritual only with **C**. Even on this occasion, **A** does not need to narrate his stories because all members of the group (including **C**) have already heard while he performed the ritual with **A**. By the same token, **C** does not need to relate his news to the group as they already heard him while he was narrating to **A**. Given that **A** as well as the members of the group have ample time, **A** is likely to hold *Dagu* with almost all members of the group since this is taken as a mark of respect. If two Afars meet again at a waterhole or oasis after full 12 months, each of them has to give an account of every important happening they saw and heard in the course of the past year. Though they do not have an appointment to meet at that or any other place, both of them recite the main happenings of the year chronologically one by one, moving smoothly from one story to the other. The events may include marriages, births, deaths, conflicts, etc. In such conditions, *Dagu* may take an hour.

Many Afars believe that the purpose of *Dagu* is to serve the Afar society as a purveyor of information about recent events. But the ultimate goal of *Dagu* is to enable the Afar people to make informed decision. Depending on the quality of *Dagu* obtained, in terms such as of its trustworthiness, the Afars may make some discussion, usually on an individual or family level, to make a decision. For instance, a pastoralist family may decide to move to another place or to stay depending on the news it has obtained about the availability of water and pasture in the new place. “...They learn about what has changed in a changeable land, and in the world at large, and from all this they pick a course of action. Those who pay closest attention to the news, they say, may go on to survive, Inshallah—God willing” (Morrell, 2005, p. 37). Nonetheless, in most cases *Dagu* is unlikely to lead members of the society to make discussions and decisions, especially at

community level unless somebody takes the initiative to prompt discussion among members of a community. In such cases, the clan-leader or in his absence an elderly person can preside over the meeting.

Finally, it would be illuminating to dwell a little on *Dagu* vis-à-vis the trend of urbanization. The few urbanized areas (only 7.8 % of the Afar population is urbanized, CSA, 2010) have relatively better infrastructure including transportation and communication systems such as telephone. The systems certainly smooth the path to the swift circulation of *Dagu*. Furthermore, urbanized Afar communities, especially those who consume the media technology (radio listeners or TV viewers) can play a positive role by purveying the rural *Dagu*, particularly to obtain news and information related to the activities of the regional and federal governments, and the external world at large. Thus, the development and expansion of urbanization can play a role to enhance *Dagu*.

On the other hand, the development and expansion of urbanization can be taken as potential source of threat for *Dagu*. That is, as the Afar society gets increasingly urbanized, the clan bond is likely to be loose, and customary laws, which are the mainstay of *Dagu*'s accuracy and reliability, could become unenforceable and be replaced by civil laws. This will ultimately expose *Dagu* for taint by subjecting it to exaggeration, fabrication and embellishments, which are considered by the researcher's key informants as some of the inevitable consequences of urbanization. Thus, as urbanization expands, *Dagu* might gradually lose its credibility and its very existence could also be threatened.

### ***Dagu* vs. Models of Mass Communication Flows**

Based on the data gathered from the key informants about *Dagu*, the following similarities and differences between models of mass communication flows and *Dagu* have been identified. Needless to say, *Dagu* entirely depends on an oral medium because it is disseminated by word of mouth. After the message is sent from mass media, the two models of mass communication, i.e. two-

step<sup>3</sup> and multi-step<sup>4</sup> flow of mass communication (Rogers, 1973) are totally based on the word of mouth. Thus, they use oral medium. Second, both *Dagu* and the two models of mass communication, i.e. two-step and multi-step flow of mass communication (Rogers, 1973), are highly dependent on interpersonal communication. Except one-step<sup>5</sup> flow of mass communication, which depends entirely on media-audience relationship, their existence and most importantly their success is highly attached to the availability and, more importantly, to the effective use of interpersonal communication.

However, they have some major differences as well. The first difference lies in the verticality vs. horizontality of the flow of information. In all the three models of mass communication (Rogers, 1973), source of information or message is virtually the mass media. The models only vary in the number of steps that are important before the message reaches its target audience or the actual receivers. Hence, verticality or top-down approach is inherent within the three models. Even in the diffusion approach, which can encompass more and more personal communication, “[t]he structure of communication process remains didactic” (Inagaki, 2007, p.11). Those who have access to political power and authority, such as opinion leaders, disseminate information which they themselves often received from mass media to the people who are found in the bottom part of the ladder. Thus, the

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<sup>3</sup> *Two-Step Flow of Mass Communication*: “The idea is that messages flow from mass media to influential persons in the society, i.e. opinion leaders, and from these opinion leaders to the less active but wider sections of the population” (Rogers, 1973, p. 293). The people who have better access to mass media and who are more literate to understand media texts are in a position to explain the contents of the mass media to other people around them.

<sup>4</sup> *Multi-Step Flow of Mass Communication*: This model does not specify the number of steps in the relaying process, nor does it require the message to originate from a source through mass media channels. The model suggests “a variable number of relays in the communication flow from a source to a large audience” (Rogers, 1973, p. 296). Some people will acquire the message directly via channels from the source, “while others may be several times removed from the message’s origin” (Rogers, 1973, p. 296).

<sup>5</sup> *One-Step Flow of Mass Communication*: “According to this model, mass media have the power to communicate their audience directly. The audience is directly exposed to the media and is expected to be affected by the message” (Rogers, 1973, p. 295). The point is that there is no room for anyone to influence the effect of the message either horizontally (such as a friend, a family member, etc.) or vertically (such as somebody mediated between journalists and the audience).

message which carries the intended influence originates from the top or above and flows downwards to the people, and often not in the other way round. The communication process follows a vertical approach where message is produced and send by experts and professionals to the audience (Jemal, 2011). On the contrary, *Dagu* is a communication process which is almost totally dominated by horizontal interaction, where swapping news is inescapable and everybody has equal chance to the extent that he can purvey *Dagu*'s network with news. New ideas, skills, techniques, etc. can come from any direction – from above or below, from any person – from a fellow Afar, a clan leader or an official. This enables *Dagu* to have diverse sources of information.

Another key difference is observed in light of who plays indispensable role in the communication flow in mainstream media and in *Dagu*, i.e. opinion leaders and ordinary people respectively. In the case of two- or multi-step flow of communication, there are always opinion leaders that are the most essential part of the communication flow. The mainstream media have to target them. In other words, the existence of either two- or multi-step flow of communication is entirely dependent on the existence of opinion leaders. But this is not the case with *Dagu* since almost all members of the Afar society are essential part of the communication flow or *Dagu*. Ordinary people have played more or less similar roles for the dissemination of *Dagu*. There is no opinion leader in *Dagu* that functions as an interpreter of the message. Or the chance to interpret is equal for any Afar that passes *Dagu* as long as he or she is prompted by the other fellow.

The two also differ in the way communication is effected. One-step flow of mass communication is a one-way communication as long as the message directly goes to the listeners and no way for immediate feedback. On the other hand, two-step and multi-step flow of mass communication are two-way communication simply because after the message reaches opinion leaders, 'followers' have a chance to enquire about some points that are not clear or even to discuss the importance of adopting some innovations with opinion leaders. Thus, the chance for domination of the communication sphere, though two-way, is likely to be high as the message or the knowledge comes from one direction – from

media to opinion leader, then from opinion leader to ordinary people. The media elite (officials, experts, journalists) have more knowledge than opinion leaders while opinion leader have more knowledge than ordinary persons. Though message flows based on two- or multi-steps and there is a two-way communication, the flow of information or knowledge follows virtually one-way. Those who have the knowledge would be in a better position to dictate, as one is the *giver* (opinion leader) while the other is the *taker* (that is 'the less active sections of the population' (Lazarsfeld cited in Rogers, 1973, p. 293). Thus, it may not be arguable to say that those who have better knowledge (first the media elite, then opinion leaders) would dominate the communication environment. On the contrary, with regard to *Dagu*, information or knowledge is not limited to one-way flow. Unlike two-step or multi-step flow model, knowledge flows from both directions when the two traditional newsmen perform *Dagu*'s ritual. Owing to this, *Dagu* allows not only a two-way but also a multi-way flow of information – one receives as he or she relays. This means the Afar newsman is both a *giver* and *taker* at the same time, which is the most important advantage of multi-way communication.

It is also interesting to note that in the case of all the models (one, two- and multi-step flow) of mass communication, media are the sole source of information, which in turn makes information and knowledge virtually the sole monopoly of the educated elite. The educated elite are the sender (*giver*) while the unlettered part of the society is the receiver (*taker*). What is true in information-flow theory is likely to be true here. "Elites and authorities are justified in trying to disseminate certain forms of information, and average people will be better off if they receive and learn it" (Baran & Davis, 2006, p. 173). On the contrary, in the sphere of *Dagu*, information and knowledge are no one's monopoly. Any Afar who has acquired a new information or knowledge has to relay it to the fellow Afar. As soon as something happened or any new knowledge is obtained, it will be immediately shared by members of the society. According to the Afar's customary law, concealing any *Dagu* (information or news) is a punishable act. Thus, this helps the society to make information and knowledge under communal possession.

Moreover, as all the three models of mass communication are dominated by a one-way flow, message originates solely from a single outlet – the mass media. The difference between the multi-step and two-step models is that, in multi-step model (diffusion model) the message that comes from the only source – the media – might need to pass through several steps before it reaches its target audience. Put simply, an impecunious rural farmer who is looking for current information has to tune in to his radio (if he has one), or visit the opinion leader who is also virtually dependent on a mass media outlet. But this is not the case in the sphere of *Dagu*. An impecunious pastoralist, who is looking for current information, can search it in multi-outlets, almost from everyone in the village – herdsman, clan leader, caravan, traveler, stranger, etc. *Dagu* (Information, news and knowledge) finds its way to the network from almost every angle of life – from the pastoral to the highly appointed, from the ordinary Afar to the clan leader. Reports regarding new events are purveyed to *Dagu* network at anytime by anyone who is there while they are unfolding, and are disseminated through various outlets.

Yet another difference can be noted in terms of relaying vs. influencing. This means, with regard to two- or multi-step models, a message flows from the mass media to opinion leaders and then from opinion leaders to their respective followers. The duty of opinion leaders is, therefore, not only to disseminate media messages, but also to spread influence (Rogers, 1973). Media message is relayed among people who have everyday contact and whose influence they are most likely to be under. Thus, the principal emphasis, both in the two- and multi-step models, is given to the influence that can be effected by opinion leaders after a message is disseminated. Due to this, the main focus is on the decision that can be made by the followers after their frequent contact with their respective opinion leaders. In the sphere of *Dagu*, however, individuals' interaction is not limited to or based on intimacy, everyday contact or closeness. *Dagu* has a very broad social base since swapping new information is an obligatory task for members of the Afar society. Further, *Dagu* is highly attached to the swift dissemination (relaying) of recent information rather than to the decision (influencing) based on the information acquired. Usually decision-making is left for individuals or families.

Finally, opinion leadership “is casually exercised, sometimes unwitting and unbeknown... it is the almost invisible, certainly inconspicuous, form of leadership at the person-to-person level of ordinary, intimate, informal, everyday contact” (Katz & Lazarsfeld cited in Rogers, 1973, p. 296-297). In contrast, *Dagu* is highly visible and very conspicuous since it is purposely performed as ritual. *Dagu* is the central part of Afars’ life, which is deliberately practiced in a culturally binding environment where customary law serves as its guardian.

## **Conclusion**

This study has found that the Afar people have a well-developed oral culture where a word-of-mouth plays the most important role in connecting, informing and educating especially about accounts of current events. Every adult Afar is a traditional newsman while every witness is a reporter. Moreover, all adult Afars play an equal role in purveying *Dagu*’s network. Thus, news stories are swapped between fellow Afars, who are often coequals, in an interactive way (multi-way). It has also been uncovered in this study that *Dagu* never gets stale as long as there are some people who do not yet hear the news and that *Dagu* is virtually dominated by horizontal interaction in that news originates from diverse sources, from ordinary Afar to power holders. Pastoralists are the most essential part of the communication flow that is entirely dependent on ordinary people. When the Afars swap the news, information flows to all directions. This shows that *Dagu* allows a multi-way flow of information – one receives as he relays, which ensures that information and knowledge are not only under communal possession but also disseminated through multi-outlets by almost every Afar. Another remarkable feature is that the main purpose of *Dagu* is swapping news, relaying it as fast as possible, which makes *Dagu* very conspicuous since it is purposely performed as ritual. It is the contention of this article that *Dagu* has many similarities with journalistic practices than it has with models of mass communication flows. Finally, this study cautions the fact that the development of urbanization is double-edged in that it enhances the swift dissemination of *Dagu* while it is a potential source of threat for *Dagu*.

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