Journal Homepage: -www.journalijar.com

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)

Article DOI:10.21474/IJAR01/24526
DOI URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/24526

RESEARCH ARTICLE

STATUS FIGURES IN THE LIWAGA OF THE NAABA YADEGA TROUPE OF KADIOGO: AN ETHNOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF MOTTOS AND SOCIAL COHESION AMONG THE MOOSE OF BURKINA FASO

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Manuscript Info

Manuscript History
Received: 08 September 2026
Final Accepted: 10 October 2026
Published: November 2026

Key words:-
Liwaga; Moose; Naaba Yadega Troupe; status groups; mottos (zabyʋya); ethnolinguistics.

Abstract

In moaga society in Burkina Faso, traditional musical art is not mere entertainment; it constitutes a mirror of socio-political structures. In Yatenga, liwaga stands out as a musical and choreographic genre privileged for poetic and historical enunciation. In an urban migratory context, the Naaba Yadega troupe of Kadiogo perpetuates this tradition whilst reactivating, in its oral creations, the memory of status hierarchie s and occupational groups. This article analyses the ways in which this troupe's liwaga songs pay tribute to status groups through the formulaic art of mottos (zabyʋya). These groups are the blacksmiths (sãaba), the war chiefs (tãsɔbanba), the mask bearers (wando) and the masters of the word (yʋʋmba/ benda).Adopting an ethnolinguistic and sociocritical approach applied to a corpus of songs transcribed and translated from moore, the study demonstrates that the evocation of these groups does not reflect a hierarchy of exclusion. Rather, it stems from a logic of symbolic and ritual complementarity that is indispensable to the regulation of tensions and the consolidation of social cohesion. Liwaga thus emerges as a memorial device that reconciles rootedness in identity with the renewal of communal values.

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Introduction:-

Pre-colonial African societies developed modes of organisation in which the political order was closely bound up with the functional division of labour and with distinct ritual prerogatives (Fortes, 1949; Izard, 1985). Within the Moogo (the cultural and geopolitical sphere of the Moose of Burkina Faso), the social structure is the product of a complex historical sedimentation combining the conquering power of the horsemen (nakomse, holders of the naam) and the autochthonous populations who are the custodians of the earth and mask cults (tengbiise, nyonyose) (Dim Delobsom, 1932; Ki-Zerbo, 1978). Within this age-old equilibrium, corporate and status groups (which the literature has often designated by the contested term ‘castes’) occupy a pivotal position: blacksmiths (sãaba), warriors (tãsɔbanba), and masters of the word and drummers (yʋʋmba, benda, luse).Oral literature, the primary vehicle of the moaga worldview, records this organisation in the form of narratives, proverbs (yelm-buna) and, in particular, mottos of honour and war (zabyʋya) (Kouraogo, 2012; Sanou, 2000). Among the choreographic and musical manifestations in which this poetics of memory finds expression, liwaga holds a major position. A dance of

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rejoicing, challenge and celebration originating in the kingdom of Yatenga (founded by Naaba Yadega), liwaga is driven by the pounding of armpit drums (luse), the virtuosity of the soloists and the vigorous interplay between dancers and singers (Sissao, 2002).

Transplanted to the province of Kadiogo (the central region around Ouagadougou) through internal migratory flows, the Naaba Yadega troupe of Kadiogo constitutes a remarkable vantage point from which to observe the survival and reinvention of the oral traditions of the north. Far from abandoning its original repertoire, this ensemble mobilises the densest verbal forms of moore to celebrate traditional status figures. A key question therefore arises: how do the poetic and musical creations of the Naaba Yadega troupe reinvest the mottos and prerogatives of these status groups, and what function does this artistic invocation fulfil in social regulation and the preservation of collective identity?
This article advances the hypothesis that the enunciation of status mottos within liwaga does not seek to fix a hierarchy of domination, but operates instead as a symbolic device of mutual recognition. By celebrating in turn the magico-technical power of the blacksmith, the protective valour of the warrior, the sacred inviolability of the mask and the mediating art of the master of the word, the liwaga song reaffirms an organic complementarity that is necessary for concord and for the cohesion of the community.To test this hypothesis, our analysis unfolds in three complementary stages. It first sets out the methodological and epistemological framework, grounded in ethnolinguistics as applied to moaga music. It then examines the poetic occurrences of the four principal status figures identified in the troupe's corpus. Finally, it offers a critical discussion of the sociocultural functions, the metaphors of power and the contemporary resonances of this oratorical art.

Theoretical framework, methodology and generic grounding of liwaga:-
Understanding status figures in liwaga requires an interdisciplinary approach attentive to the symbolic values of orality. This first section lays the epistemological and methodological foundations of our research. It defines the contribution of ethnolinguistics as applied to African cultural studies, describes the artistic morphology of the liwaga genre, and then sets out the criteria for sampling and processing the sung corpus of the Naaba Yadega troupe of Kadiogo

Ethnolinguistics and African cultural studies: thinking about speech in context:-
The approach adopted falls within ethnolinguistics and African cultural studies, whose epistemological foundations call for African cultural productions to be approached on the basis of their own semantic categories and contexts of enunciation (Bazié & Sanou, 2019; Calame-Griaule, 1965). According to Geneviève Calame-Griaule (1965), speech in the traditional African setting is not a mere instrument of denotative communication; it is an active force, endowed with materiality and with transformative power over the visible and invisible worlds.

Applied to the sung corpus, ethnolinguistics makes it possible to decode the formulaic art of the zabyʊya (sing. zabyʊːre). The zabyʊːre is no ordinary nickname. It is a war name, honorific name or regnal name acquired by an individual, a lineage or a corporate group, which condenses, in allusive, metaphorical and often elliptical form, a historical trajectory, a challenge thrown down to adversity or a pact concluded with supernatural powers (Sanou, 2019; Tiendrébéogo, 1963).

The liwaga: morphology, rhythm and choreographic enunciation:-
The term liwaga refers at once to a rhythm, a style of song and a choreography originating in Yatenga. In its overall configuration, the liwaga ensemble combines armpit drums (luse, sing. lunga), a variable-tension instrument capable of reproducing the tones of the moore language (talking drum), cylindrical drums and idiophones (rattles, and jingles worn on the dancers' ankles).

The gestural repertoire of liwaga demands great physical vigour. The dancers, holding a fly whisk or a scarf, adopt a forward-leaning posture, pound the ground with their heels at a frenetic pace and impart a vigorous shaking to the pelvic region and the shoulders, miming in turn martial pride, seductive display and endurance in tilling the soil. The song, intoned by a lead soloist (yʊʊm-gʊlgo or yʊʊma) and taken up in chorus by the chorus singers and dancers (reem-damba), is the site par excellence into which apostrophes, maxims and praises addressed to lineages and tutelary figures are woven.

Constitution of the corpus and profile of the Naaba Yadega troupe of Kadiogo:-
The corpus analysed was collected during live performances and recordings made in Ouagadougou between 2022 and 2024. The Naaba Yadega troupe of Kadiogo, although based in the administrative capital, claims through its very name a spiritual and historical filiation with Yatenga and its founding sovereign, Naaba Yadega. This urban

implantation does not dissolve the heritage. On the contrary, it compels the artists to intensify their memorial references in order to assert their distinctiveness in Ouagadougou's musical arena.

The textual corpus consists of five (05) core songs, rigorously transcribed according to the standard orthography of moore and translated into French with care taken to render the semantic depth of the poetic turns of phrase.The field recordings made between 2022 and 2024 are held by the authors in the archives of the Laboratoire Littératures, Arts, Espaces et Sociétés (LLAES) at Université Joseph KI-ZERBO. They are available on reasonable request to researchers wishing to verify the transcriptions or to replicate the analysis.

The formulaic art of mottos: an analysis of status figures in the songs:-

Moaga orality finds in the zabyʊːre (motto) its most concentrated and most sovereign expression. Within the musical texture of liwaga, the invocation of heraldic formulae is not a matter of mere aesthetic convention. It activates lineage memories and reinvests specific ritual functions. Analysis of the corpus reveals the recurrence of four principal status figures of traditional society, the study of which brings to light their material attributes, identity metaphors and regulatory powers. These are: the blacksmiths (sãaba), the war chiefs (tãsɔbanba), the mask initiates (wando) and the masters of the word (yʊʊmba / benda).

The blacksmiths (sãaba): masters of fire, iron and the earth:-

In moaga cosmogony, the blacksmith (sãaba, sing. sãaba) occupies an ambivalent position, imbued at once with fascination and dread (Izard, 1985; Le Moal, 1980). He is not a mere metalworking artisan. He handles ore extracted from the bowels of the earth (tẽnga) and tames fire (pelle), two eminently sacred elements. Holder of a power reputed to be formidable, he alone is authorised to intervene in cases of violent, unusual or impure deaths (hanging, drowning, lightning, unburied bodies), acting as a ritual purifier.In the creations of the Naaba Yadega troupe, the blacksmith is celebrated through the heraldic patronymics associated with him: Bamogo, Gansonré, Konkobo, Kinda.

Example 1: Evocation of the soloist Rasmané Gambo and the patronymic Gansonré (Song 5):-

Mooré:-

M na pʊʊsa a Rasmane Gãmbɔ,
Gãmb-sãrg nɔ̃om sêoogo,
Rʊ-nɔ̃og n na bãng tẽnga.

English:-

I shall go and greet Rasmané Gambo,
The wild duck is pleasant in the rainy season,
The ostrich will come to know the land.

Ethnolinguistic commentary:-

This passage pays tribute to Rasmané Gambo (bearer of the name Gansonré), a great voice of the troupe now deceased. The animal analogy (gãmb-sãrga, the rainy-season duck, and rʊ-nɔ̃ogo, the ostrich) evokes speed, bearing and the capacity to withstand the trials of the territory. In the case of the blacksmith, the motto attests to a power that adapts to the seasons and braves hostile spaces without perishing.

Example 2: The primordial forge and the ancestry of the Bamogo (Song 5):-

Moore:-

Beogooo m na goma sãaba yele,
Sãab yaaba baa-mɔɔg kõ baag kuum ye.
Bãmb kudu n gãnɛg n na deems beogo,
Sãab yi kɔkɔ n tuud mɔɔgɔ,
N ti kud kuur ti b kõog tẽnga.
Sãaba keta reem n wã la ?

English:-

Tomorrow at dawn, I shall speak of the blacksmiths' affair (sãaba),
The ancestor of the blacksmiths, who spreads like the savannah, shall not wrest himself from death.
It is their sleeping forge that will make the morrow better.
The blacksmith sets out at daybreak and enters the bush,

To forge the hoe (daba) with which the earth is scraped.
Are the blacksmiths still caught up in the fervour of the feast?

Ethnolinguistic commentary:-
The text seals the vital dependence of agrarian society on the corporation of iron. Without the hoe (kuuri) forged on the anvil (kudu), there is no tilling of the land and no subsistence. The metaphorical formula 'sãab yaaba baa-mɔɔg kõ baag kuum ye' recalls the inescapability of the human condition: however formidable the power of the ancestral blacksmith, he cannot triumph over death. This tragic reminder humanises the demiurge of fire and inscribes his office within the universal cosmic order.

The warrior and army chief (tãsɔba): the shield and bravery:-
The tãsɔba (pl. tãsɔbanba, common patronymic Tapsoba) embodies the military command of the moaga state. In the kingdoms of Ouagadougou and Yatenga, the war chief did not sit at the royal court. He often resided on the borders of the territory, ready to repel invasion or to lead an offensive (Dim Delobsom, 1932; Izard, 1985). His motto extols boundless fearlessness, contempt for rest and the deadly handling of arrows (pɛɛma).

Example 3: The martial fury and intransigence of the Tãsɔba (Song 3):-
Moore:-
Tãsɔb kõ zom kɔgr,
N yɛdg pɛɛm n tuus faado.
Pis-yoob lok n wãand tẽnga.
Nɔ-raoogo pum zabd sũuri.
Zabr mik m kulgẽ,
Poanda n sok b sãoongo.
Tãsɔab sigua lokẽ,
Kõ sig a suuri ye.
Zabr rãam kõgda beoogo,
Sũur sẽn n kiɛɛma kie n yuu.
Tãsɔab ye kiɛɛmẽ !

English:-
A tãsɔba never sits upon a stool
To lay out his arrows and sort out the harmless ones.
A quiver bought for three hundred francs lays waste to an entire land.
The sting of the cock's spur wounds to the very depths of the heart.
When battle takes me by surprise in the pond,
Even the toads enquire after their losses.
Even when the war chief has laid down his quiver,
Never does he lay down his martial fury.
The beer of battle will ferment tomorrow:
Let whoever has a fearless heart come and drink his fill!
Honour and valour to the tãsɔba!

Ethnolinguistic commentary:-
This passage is a masterpiece of poetic hyperbole. The prohibition of comfort ('kõ zom kɔgr', does not sit on a stool) expresses the state of permanent vigilance of the military bulwark. The image of the quiver of paltry monetary value (pis-yoob lok, sixty sous / three hundred francs) which nonetheless succeeds in laying waste to a kingdom underscores the disproportion between the market value of a weapon and its destructive capacity. Finally, the metaphor of the pond's toads as collateral victims of the fighting reveals the cosmic upheaval provoked by the clash of men at arms.

The masks (wando) or the chthonic transcendence of the autochthonous peoples:-
In the religious system of the Moose, the mask (wãngo, pl. wando) is not a museum artefact but the living manifestation of a spiritual force originating in the bush (weogo) and entrusted to the autochthonous nyonyose clans (Kouraogo, 2012; Schweeger-Hefel, 1980). The bearers and guardians of the masks (sukwaba) hold the secret of agrarian fertility and of mediation with the tutelary spirits of the earth. The mask whips, purifies, blesses and chastises whoever transgresses a prohibition.

Example 4: The occult power of the son of the mask (Song 2, extract 1):-
Moore:-
Kéelge n bool wangã biiga,
Wang tiim yiid sõod biigã.
Mi soor kõ kẽng tirga,
N guu kuulm n na boob yãgmdɛ.
Sikaoob roog tõt pambɔ,
Sẽn n kiisa pam tẽnt-tuuma.
Wama biig la woto,
Wama biig la woto !
Mam la a nuug ka gãdɔ,
N zãand b zuuã na sã bindu.

English:-
Listen! Call the son of the mask!
The remedy (tiim) of the mask surpasses sorcery.
He knows the straight path yet chooses the winding ways.
He waited until old age to show his impatience.
It is forbidden to undermine the dwelling of the mask initiate:
Whoever defies the prohibition brings bitter torments upon himself.
Here is the son of the masks,
Yes, such is the son of the masks!
It is I, 'the hand that cannot be seized':
Those who hold the animal tails will void their bowels in terror!

Example 5: The cold flame and the mystery of the invisible (Song 2, extract 2):-
Moore:-
Ya wanga tʊʊlum,
Ya b tʊʊlum kõ yõog vãado woo.
Wang tiim yiid sõodɔ.
Pɛndg wẽ ti m zõogõmdɛ,
Wa kong rʊk n mʊẽ zaidga.
Mam sã yi zaabre,
M na sãam tuum wooo.
Pa foog sãbg n deng wẽedɔ,
Ka belm tʊɛɛg sẽn tar biidu.
Peelm kõ yõk rulgu,
Wanga biiga la m pʊʊsda.

English:-
Such is the burning heat of the mask:
Yet this heat never scorches the green leaves!
The occult remedy of the mask overpowers sorcery.
The lute resounds and my body falls into a trance.
Lacking an iron pot, I cook in the woven winnowing basket!
Should I appear at nightfall,
I shall overturn the established order.
No one tears off a branch to beat the master without warning;
No one flatters the baobab laden with sour fruit.
Never does broad daylight ensnare the black hornbill:
It is the noble son of the mask whom I salute!

Ethnolinguistic commentary:-
The paradox of the 'heat that never consumes the leaves' (tʊʊlum kõ yõog vãado) illustrates the supernatural nature of the mask's force: a formidable power that defies the laws of physics. The image of cooking in the straw winnowing basket (zaidga) evokes magical invulnerability. By glorifying the mask in liwaga, the troupe recalls the chthonic sovereignty of the autochthonous peoples vis-à-vis the holders of secular political power.

The masters of the word (yʊʊmba and benda): genealogists and the conscience of the prince:-
Among the Moose, court music and oral historiography are the preserve of the benda drummers (who play the great royal calabash drum, the bendre) and the luse genealogists (who handle the armpit drum lunga) (Tiendrébéogo, 1963). The lead singer or song-maker (yʊʊma) is inseparable from this tradition. Poetically described as 'the king's first wife' (naab paga), the master drummer enjoys the exclusive privilege of reminding the sovereign of his ancestors' great deeds, but also of his moral duties and the limits of his authority (Sissao, 2002).

Example 6: The ambiguous condition and the bitterness of the singer (Song 4):-
Moore:-
Mama ya yʊʊma,
N boon ti Sãag la Dubar yʊʊma,
La Wagdg ra yɛɛs beoga yʊʊma,
N kit ti yʊʊma yi nõnga.
Pʊyagda n kãnẽg zabre n bas n dɛla,
Lung risg zabd suuri,
N zɛkzɛk n paam naaba,
N kong n naab n zĩ nẽ zãndɛ.

English:-
In truth, I am the singer,
He who is called the bard of Sanga and Doubaré,
The singer who tells Ouagadougou: 'Fear nothing for the morrow!'
He whose voice makes the artist beloved of all.
The treacherous one kindles discord and settles in as a spectator;
The leather strap of the armpit drum cuts the heart with pain.
I ran until I was out of breath to reach the prince:
Having failed to find the king, I had to resign myself to sitting beneath the shelter!

Ethnolinguistic commentary:-
This song lays bare the tension inherent in the status of the court artist. The singer lavishes comfort and serenity upon the community ('Wagdg ra yɛɛs beoga'), yet he experiences in his own flesh the wounds of his symbolic labour: the strap of the armpit drum that rubs against and lacerates the chest ('lung risg zabd suuri'). The closing anecdote of the missed meeting with the chief (naaba) conveys the precariousness of the griot's status, dependent on the prince's favours yet retaining, through poetic derision, his critical lucidity.

The poetics of liwaga and socio-political regulation:-
The ethnolinguistic analysis of formulaic mottos brings to light a poetics that extends beyond the strict confines of artistic performance to touch the very foundations of the social bond. It is now appropriate to set these textual data against the socio-political ecology of moaga society. This section discusses the regulatory scope of liwaga, showing how the evocation of status figures deconstructs the preconception of a hierarchy of oppression in favour of an organic complementarity of functions, before examining the contemporary transformations of this oratorical art transposed into the urban space of Kadiogo.

Status figures in the corpus of the Naaba Yadega troupe:-
To account for the articulation of these different figures within the textual dynamics of liwaga, the four status groups are presented below in turn, setting out for each its defining features, material attributes and regulatory functions as identified through the analysis.The blacksmiths (sãaba) are associated with the heraldic patronymics Bamogo, Gansonré, Konkobo and Kinda. Their material and symbolic attributes are fire (pelle), iron, the anvil (kudu) and the hoe (kuuri). Their sphere of competence covers the extraction of ore and the fashioning of farming tools and weapons, as well as the ritual handling of violent deaths such as suicide or death by lightning. In social terms, they are indispensable to agriculture and act as crisis mediators whenever the earth has been ritually defiled.The warriors (tãsɔbanba) bear patronymics such as Tapsoba and Zangré. Their attributes are arrows (pɛɛma), the quiver (loko), the cock's spur and the pond. They exercise defensive and offensive command, serve as a praetorian guard and protect the borders of the kingdom. They thus form a security bulwark against external aggression and embody physical courage and self-sacrifice.

The guardians of the masks (sukwaba / wando) belong to the autochthonous nyonyose lineages. Their attributes are the mask of wood and fibre, the remedy (tiim), the whip and the forces of the bush. They preside over the cult of agrarian fertility, communicate with the chthonic ancestors and act as guardians of public morals. Their role is to preserve the moral order, to bless the harvests and to serve as a spiritual counter-power to the conquering kings.
The masters of the word (yʊʊmba, benda, luse) are associated with patronymics such as Tiendrébéogo and Zoungrana, among others. Their attributes are the royal drum (bendre), the armpit drum (lunga) and the voice. They write the historiography of the royal lineages, proclaim the mottos (zabyʊya) and counsel the prince. They transmit collective memory, provide catharsis through praise and blame, and help to pacify conflicts.Within the repertoire of the Naaba Yadega troupe of Kadiogo, the liwaga song unfolds as a space for archiving and proclaiming status identities. Through the ethnolinguistic decoding of the texts collected, this section examines the ways in which formulaic mottos sculpt and magnify the four corporate and symbolic pillars of the moaga world: the pyrotechnic demiurgy of the blacksmiths, the defensive fearlessness of the tãsɔbanba, the chthonic mystery of the masks and the critical conscience of the bards and drummers.

From "caste" to organic complementarity: a counter-model to exclusion:-
The ethnolinguistic analysis refutes the notion that these categorisations constitute a mere scale of inferiority or ritual purity in the manner of the Indian subcontinent.

Among the Moose, as Michel Izard (1985) emphasised, the cohesion of the political whole rests on an unstable balance between two competing yet inseparable sovereignties:-
- secular political power (naam), held by the nakombse descended from the conquering epic of Naaba Oubri and Naaba Yadega;
- spiritual and territorial power (tẽng-koma, tẽng-soba), the inalienable privilege of the autochthonous earth priests and of the mask clans (nyonyose).

The blacksmith, through his mastery of metallurgy, stands at the intersection of nourishing iron (the hoe) and bellicose iron (the arrow of the tãsɔba). By singing of these different entities within a single performance, the Naaba Yadega troupe accomplishes a ritual act of totalisation. It reminds Ouagadougou audiences that no sovereign can govern without the blacksmith's iron, without the warrior's arm, without the clemency of the autochthonous masks and without the memorialising word of the bendre player. The liwaga performance is thus transformed into a space for the imaginary institution of society, in which the mottos of some answer to the pride of others.

Urban transmutation and the memorial function of liwaga in Kadiogo:-
The development of the Naaba Yadega troupe of Kadiogo also illustrates the contemporary transformations of oral tradition. In transplanting liwaga from the northern heartland of Yatenga to the cosmopolitan arena of Ouagadougou, the artists are not indulging in nostalgic withdrawal. Rather, they deploy a strategy of cultural resilience in the face of musical standardisation and the onslaught of cultural commodification (Bazié & Sanou, 2019; Kouraogo, 2012).
In the modern city, marked by anonymity and the individualism of market-based economic relations, the rhythmic proclamation of the zabyʊya reactivates networks of inter-ethnic alliance and joking relationships (dakyɛra). The listener who recognises in passing the motto of his or her clan (Bamogo, Tapsoba, Gansonré) immediately identifies with the symbolic community summoned by the drum. Live performance thus becomes a locus of civic education and intergenerational transmission.

Conclusion:-
The study of the songs of the Naaba Yadega troupe of Kadiogo highlights the aesthetic richness and sociological depth of liwaga. Through the systematic use of formulaic mottos (zabyʊya), this ensemble perpetuates a centuries-old musical tradition whilst adapting it to the identity challenges of the present. The ethnolinguistic analysis of status figures confirms our hypothesis. Far from expressing a stratification of oppression or exclusion, the choreographed and rhythmic evocation of the blacksmiths (sãaba), the army chiefs (tãsɔbanba), the tutelary masks (wando) and the genealogists (yʊʊmba/ benda) celebrates a fundamental alliance of complementary competences and sovereignties. In this oral poetics, each social group finds its historical and sacred legitimacy, contributing to the overall equilibrium of a community in which the dignity of each conditions the prosperity of all.In a contemporary African context in search of endogenous points of reference with which to consolidate peace, overcome communal divisions and promote cultural sovereignty, traditional oral arts such as liwaga should no longer be confined to the status of folkloric curiosities. They constitute genuine philosophical and ethical repositories, which it falls to African cultural studies to document, theorise and promote in the service of the integral development of our societies.

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