

Dipo Rites of Passage and Psychological Well-being Among Krobo Adolescent Females in Ghana: A Preliminary Study

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Abstract

Dipo is a historical rites of passage among the Krobo in the Eastern Region of Ghana. The goal of Dipo is to assist pubertal girls in transitioning into adulthood by shaping moral values and social responsibilities, learning home management skills, and preventing risky sexual behavior. Differences in psychological distress among girls who had and had not participated in Dipo were examined in the current study. The sample included 145 adolescent females, 80 Dipo initiates and, 65 nonDipo initiates. Participants, 12 to 20 years of age, were recruited from junior and senior high schools, and administered a questionnaire with measures of psychological distress, a sex role inventory, and a measure of favorability of Dipo. Findings revealed that Dipo initiates reported significantly less psychological distress than noninitiates. Dipo initiates also reported more favorable attitudes

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about Dipo than noninitiates. Although this study is preliminary, findings suggest that Dipo may be useful for increasing psychological well-being. Recommendations for future research are provided.

Keywords

rites of passage, Dipo rites, rites of passage in Ghana, Krobo adolescent females

Various cultures mark diverse developmental transitions in life. Within a traditional African context, Dipo is employed as a puberty rites of passage for young females transitioning into womanhood among the Krobo people of Eastern Ghana. Rites of passage are rituals dictated by life cycles used to symbolize life transitions. Historically, rites of passage programs have served as a guide to preserving and strengthening communities by helping individuals achieve a strong sense of personal and community responsibility (Gavazzi & Blumenkrantz, 1993). Dipo is a rite of passage for pubertal females among the Krobo people in the Eastern Region of Ghana. This article provides a preliminary assessment of Dipo and its effects on psychological well-being. The study was conducted in Odumase-Krobo in the Eastern Region of Ghana. The people belong to the Ga-Adangme ethnic group (Adjaye, 1999).

Rites of Passage in African Culture

Indigenous African cultures recognize different rites of passage, including birth, adulthood, marriage, eldership, and ancestorship (Ampim, 2003). Rites of adulthood occur mostly during puberty and help shape adolescents into productive and responsible adults with societal morals and responsibilities (see Delaney, 1995 and Boakye, 2010, for further discussion of Rite of Passage in Africa and Ghana.) In Ghana and other contemporary African societies, social, political, economic, and technological factors have led to change, especially among youth (Monyenye, 2004). These changes include urbanization, increased educational opportunities, and access to global media and the internet (Monyenye, 2004). Changes have brought on different meanings of events, which have eliminated rites in many communities. However, rites are still prevalent in some cultures, including the Krobo people in Eastern Ghana. This preliminary study was conducted to inform future research on Dipo rites of passage.

Dipo Rites of Passage

Historical Background of Dipo

One theory is that Dipo was introduced by the priestess, Nana Kloweki (Steegstra, 2005). Historically, Dipo was instituted to mark the stage of puberty and was intended for young females of marriageable age, although it is now performed with girls younger than puberty. During rites, Krobo participants acquire skills to fulfil roles as responsible female adults, including vocational training, house-keeping skills, and preparation for married life (Boakye, 2010).

Significance and Symbolic Aspects of Dipo

Salm and Falola (2002) wrote that the benefits of Dipo included the propagation of a lineage, status, and family organization. Others believed that Dipo was a traditional method of preventing promiscuity, infidelity, premarital sex, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections (Schroeder & Danquah, 2000). Dipo involves several symbolic actions. Exposure of a person's body, such as the breast and stomach, is used to distinguish initiates from noninitiates, and help identify those ready for marriage, and detect pregnancy. Libation is poured at the beginning of most rites to ask the "gods" to bless all Dipo participants. Blood of castrated goats, which is usually poured on initiates' feet, is believed to wash away bad omens (Schroeder & Danquah, 2000).

Different types of beads used during Dipo rites have specific names and meanings. Those with many types of beads signify wealth. Blue beads are called *Koli*, meaning something valuable. Yellow beads represent maturity and prosperity, whereas large yellow beads are known as "*Boredom*" and are believed to possess magical powers. White beads signify respect for gods and ancestors. (Also see Sackey, 1985 for a fuller discussion of beads significance in rites of passage programs.) Finally, while not compulsory, an incision may be done as a form of identity on the back of the left hand for those who have successfully completed Dipo rites (Affum, 2009).

Stages of Dipo Rite of Passage

Adjaye (1999) classified Dipo into four stages based on specific activities. The first stage, known as the stripping stage, involves replacing everyday home attire with a string of multiple beads. Dipo participants also have their heads shaved during this period. The second and third stages (middle and climax, respectively) emphasize different symbolic activities, including

having a special meal (fufu), taking a ritual bath, and smearing the body with a white substance. The climax phase involves the pouring of libation (three consecutive times) and climbing a sacred stone. The final stage consists of activities that include body marks and the last dance (Adjaye, 1999).

Dipo includes other rituals such as eating particular types of meals. Dipo initiates learn a special dance known as “Klama,” where the dead and the living are believed to participate (Coplan, 1972). Participants usually undergo a ritual bath and are required to sit on a stone before the ceremony ends to determine their virginity (Steegstra, 2005).

Critique of Dipo Rites of Passage

Not everyone in Ghana or even the Krobo people accept Dipo rites, and there is disagreement about its value and actual essence. While some people believe it is a cultural practice that should be continued, others believe it has no significance in modern Ghanaian society (Boakye, 2010). Because Dipo is conducted within traditional African religion and culture, Ghanaians influenced by Western culture and Christianity may believe it to be unacceptable (Teyegaga, 1985). Another aspect of the debate is the initiates exposing certain parts of their bodies to the public to signal Krobo men of their readiness for marriage. Today in some communities, initiates are allowed to cover their breast with a “wax- print cloth” (Agra et al., 2014). This change was made to cater to current societal opposition of exposure of private body parts. Finally, Christians may view Dipo rites as a practice that is traditional and unacceptable to Christian beliefs. For example, Dipo rites include practices, such as ancestral worship, incisions, and ritual baths (Teyegaga, 1985), practices antithetical to Christianity. Many communities in Ghana today do not have rites of passage. However, traditional leadership and customary law among some ethnic groups have retained the cultural legitimacy of rites of passage, such as in the Krobo community.

Dipo Rites, Psychological Well-Being, and Gender Roles

In Africa, rites of passage have served as a means by which both individuals and communities respond to stressors during life transitions. One primary reason for Dipo rites is for initiates to understand their gender roles and cultural identity better and to develop a positive self-image (Teyegaga, 1985). Ghanaian scholars have speculated that rites of passage will leave both male and female initiates with positive experiences, such as empowerment, self-identity, and self-esteem (Salm & Falola, 2002; Steegstra, 2005; Teyegaga, 1985).

Limited research has addressed Dipo rites and psychological well-being. The few studies that have addressed this topic are qualitative and have not systematically evaluated Dipo. Anarfi (2003) reported that Dipo rites were no longer preparation for a good marriage but permission for early sexual activity, which is problematic because initiates as young as 8 participate in Dipo. According to Anarfi (2003), individuals who have undergone Dipo rites may feel that they can begin sexual activity, which increases their risk of pregnancy and HIV. On the other hand, Schroeder and Danquah (2000) reported that Dipo was a traditional means of avoiding early and risky sexual behavior because participation involved moral training and self-discipline.

We could not identify research on Dipo and gender roles. However, a woman's inability to bear children has been linked to the lack of participation in Dipo, suggesting that not participating in Dipo may interfere with specific responsibilities of women such as motherhood (Abbey, 2016). In the current study, we expected that participation in Dipo would increase feminine gender role beliefs given the emphasis on learning skills necessary to manage a household.

Theoretical Framework

The ritual process paradigm model was the theoretical framework for this study (Dunham et al., 1986). This model's four major stages are the preparation stage, the separation stage, the transition stage, and the reincorporation stage. The preparation stage prepares the individual for a new identity. During this stage, the individual has incorporated an identity that has come about from the support group that has played a key role in the person's life. The second stage is separation. The individual begins to experience new environmental demands that push her out of the security of the old role into liminality (e.g., being forced out of an old identity but not yet accepted into a new one). The third stage is one of transition. In this stage, the individual has an attitude of respect, alert expectancy, and openness to a new life. There is accommodation to a cognitive change or closure, which signals the beginning of the new role. During the transition stage, there is a paradigm shift and feelings of humility, elation, and celebration. The final stage is one of reincorporation. Individuals and the community perceive that the person has a new identity with balance, a new moral order, new behaviors and habits, and new role models.

Elements of Dipo are seen in the ritual process paradigm model. Consistent with the ritual process paradigm model, initiatives are prepared for Dipo by assuming the identity of those who have been their support network in the first stage. In the second stage, they are separated from their typical environment and "given" to an adult female, who will care for and train them. In the

third transitional stage, they are engaged in several ritual activities and emerge with new roles, responsibilities, and identity (fourth stage).

Current Study

The current study was designed to examine whether participants in Dipo rites of passage reported better psychological well-being than those who had not. We hypothesized that those who had participated in Dipo rites would report having less psychological distress than those who had not (Hypothesis 1). We also hypothesized that females who had participated in Dipo would have stronger feminine gender role beliefs than those who had not (Hypothesis 2). We did not expect differences in masculine gender role beliefs between participants and nonparticipants. A third hypothesis was that adolescent females who had participated in Dipo would have a more favorable perception of Dipo than those who had not (Hypothesis 3).

Method

Participants

The sample was 145 Krobo female students who lived in the Eastern region of Ghana. Those who had undergone Dipo were classified as Dipo initiates. Noninitiates had not and had no intentions of undergoing Dipo rites. While noninitiates had not participated in Dipo, they were aware of and had some knowledge of Dipo rites. Eighty participants had undergone Dipo rites (52 from junior high schools and 28 from senior high schools) and 65 participants had not participated and had no intentions of participating in Dipo rites (43 from junior high schools and 22 from senior high school). The majority were at the junior high level (65% initiates and 66% noninitiates). Participants ranged from 12 to 20 years of age (Initiate $M = 16.2$, $SD = 2$, Noninitiate $M = 16.2$, $SD = 2$).

Measures

Measures relevant to this study were the Kessler Psychological Health Distress Scale (Kessler et al., 2003), the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1974), and the Dipo Perception Scale. Two demographic questions asked about age and year in school. Measures were tested in a pilot sample of 20 Krobo female students to determine appropriateness concerning readability, comprehension, and interpretations. Findings from the pilot sample revealed no problems in readability, comprehension, and cultural translations.

The *Kessler Psychological Distress Scale* is a 10-item screening measure that assesses psychological distress, such as anxiety and depressive symptoms experienced in the past 4-week period (Kessler et al., 2003). Response options range from (1) *none of the time* to (5) *all of the time* with higher scores denoting higher distress. The 10-items are summed to arrive at a total score. Kessler et al. reported an internal consistency reliability of .93. Validity was established through significant relationships with other measures of serious mental illness (concurrent validity) and significant differences between those with and without mental illness (discriminant validity). The scale has shown good reliability and validity of the scores with Western and non-Western samples (Andersen et al., 2011) and has been used in adolescent and adult populations (Kessler et al., 2003). Cronbach's α for our sample was .87.

The *BSRI* measures masculinity, femininity, androgyny, and undifferentiated sex role orientations (Bem, 1974). This study used only the masculinity and the femininity subscales. Participants rate items (e.g., yielding, independent) on a scale that ranges from (1) *never* to (7) *always*. The masculinity subscale measures socially desirable masculine traits, and the femininity subscale measures socially desirable feminine traits. In Bem's sample, Cronbach α was .86 for the masculinity subscale scores and .80 for the femininity subscale scores. Validity was established through significant correlations with other masculinity and femininity measures and higher scores for males on the masculinity scales and females on the femininity scale (Bem, 1974). The scale has good validity and reliability of the scores in Western and non-Western samples (Choi & Fuqua, 2003). Cronbach's α for our sample was .84 for the masculinity subscale scores and .84 for the femininity subscale scores.

The *Perception of Dipo Scale* is a 20-item scale used to measure the perception of Dipo among Krobo girls. This scale assesses the favorability of Dipo rites among Krobo initiates (Abbey, 2016). Participants indicate on a (1) strongly agree to (4) strongly disagree scale statements about Dipo rites. Items are summed, and scores range from 20 to 80, with higher scores indicating higher favorability ratings of Dipo rites. A principal component analysis of the scale resulted in three factors: (a) Positive Perception of Dipo (e.g., Dipo serves as a means of strengthening cultural identity), (b) Experiences of Dipo Rites (e.g., "Girls feel guilty for undergoing Dipo rites;" and (c) Implications of Dipo Rites (e.g., "Going through Dipo helps in reducing promiscuity"). Cronbach's α was .81 for our sample.

Procedure

The study underwent institutional review and approval by an institutional ethics board and took place in Odumase Krobo, Ghana. Participants were

recruited from schools in the community; a junior high school and two senior high schools. Institutional heads at each school approved the study to be carried out in their respective schools. Teachers in participating schools worked with researchers to develop a plan for recruitment and data collection. Three Ghanaian language teachers helped identify and organize data collection in schools. All were English speakers, the national language of Ghana; two also spoke the local language, Krobo. Teachers also aided in forward and backward translation of each measure, written in the English language (Brislin, 1970).

Consent forms for parental permission were distributed to female students between the ages of 12 to 20 years. Students were recruited into the study if they returned parental consent forms. Data were collected at one point in time and questionnaires were administered in classrooms consisting of about 30 students. Participants were assured of confidentiality and told that they did not have to answer a question if they did not want to. Once the questionnaires were distributed, Dipo initiates were asked to write *One* (1) on their questionnaire, whereas noninitiates wrote *Two* (2). Measures on the questionnaire were completed in the same order for all participants. It took approximately 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Participants were thanked for their participation and did not receive an incentive.

Results

Data Analytic Strategy

This study was part of a larger study on Dipo rites. The design was cross-sectional and between subjects. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences software (Version 20) was used for data analyses. Prior to primary analyses, data were screened for outliers, missing data, and normality (i.e., pair-wise deletions were used for missing data, and skewness and kurtosis of measures were acceptable).

Study Analyses

See Table 1 for descriptive information on study measures. There were no significant correlations among the four study measures except for femininity and masculinity ($r = .82, p < .0001$). To test the three hypotheses, a series of independent sample t tests were conducted on outcome variables based on the grouping variable of initiate status (initiate vs. noninitiate; $\alpha < .05$ for a two-tail test). Homogeneity of variance was met for all analyses.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Study Measures for Dipo and Non-Dipo Participants.

Measure	Dipo initiates → <i>N</i> = 80				Non-Dipo initiates → <i>N</i> = 65				<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Skewness	Kurtosis	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Skewness	Kurtosis		
Psychological Distress	19.04	8.04	1.13	1.60	22.37	6.42	0.28	-0.04	2.71	.008
Femininity	4.38	1.17	0.01	-0.60	4.27	1.11	-0.26	-0.39	0.560	.576
Masculinity	4.14	1.23	-0.47	-0.33	4.11	1.06	-0.62	-0.32	1.64	.870
Dipo Perception	48.44	12.71	0.12	-1.18	43.03	8.85	-0.57	-0.14	2.99	.003

For Hypothesis 1, difference in psychological distress, the finding was statistically significant, $t(143) = 2.71, p = .008$, Cohen's $d = 0.46$) with a moderate effect size. Those who had not gone through Dipo rites reported higher psychological distress ($M = 22.37, SD = 6.42$) than those who had gone through Dipo ($M = 19.04, SD = 8.04$). For Hypothesis 2, differences in gender role beliefs, two independent sample t tests were conducted. Both t tests were statistically insignificant: Feminine gender role beliefs, $t(143) = 0.56, p = .576$; Masculine gender role beliefs, $t(143) = 1.64, p = .870$.

Regarding the third hypothesis, the difference in the favorability perception of Dipo rites, the finding was statistically significant, $t(143) = 2.99, p = .003$, Cohen's $d = 0.49$) with a moderate effect size. On average, Dipo initiates reported having a more positive perception of Dipo rites ($M = 48.44, SD = 12.71$) than nonDipo initiates ($M = 43.03, SD = 8.85$).

Discussion

The purpose of this preliminary study was to assess whether initiates who participated in Dipo reported better psychological well-being than those who had not. Another purpose was to determine whether gender role beliefs differed among Dipo initiates and noninitiates and whether there were differences in the perception of Dipo among initiates and noninitiates. The ritual process paradigm model guided this study (Dunham et al., 1986). We found support for two of the three hypotheses.

As expected, Dipo initiates reported significantly less psychological distress than noninitiates, suggesting benefits from participating in Dipo rites. Although Ghana has become a more modern and global economy, traditional practices, such as Dipo, may still serve an important function. While formal education has effectively supported girls in gaining knowledge and skills regarding personal, homemaking, and social issues, Dipo may be an alternative way to enhance psychological well-being.

Transitional rites may support youth in learning about their values and expectations (Steegstra, 2005). Dipo may have achieved this purpose through the activities and rituals in which participants were engaged. Dipo also likely supported initiates in bonding with and connecting with peers, as well as adults who conducted the rites. Additional support was thus provided to these participants, and this additional support may have increased self-esteem and cultural identity, both of which are linked to psychological well-being (Corneille et al., 2005). This finding is consistent with those reported by Cherry et al. (1998). The researchers found that an Africentric rites of passage program resulted in significant increases in racial identity, knowledge of African culture, self-esteem, and positive behaviors among African American female adolescents. However, the finding of less psychological distress among Dipo initiates than noninitiates is preliminary, and more research is indicated.

In contrast, we did not find support for Hypothesis 2. There were no significant differences between Dipo initiates and noninitiates on the Bem Sex-Role masculinity and femininity subscales. Given the emphasis of Dipo on preparation for marriage and homemaking skills, we expected initiates to score higher on the feminine subscale but not on the masculine subscale. One plausible reason for the insignificant finding for feminine gender roles is that the Dipo rites program did not target beliefs and behaviors measured by the BSRI (e.g., affectionate, understanding, and reliable). Instead, Dipo emphasized the skills needed for a successful transition into adulthood and marriage (e.g., morals, community responsibility, and practical skills for managing a household).

The third hypothesis was supported. The finding of a more favorable perception of Dipo among initiates than noninitiates is not unexpected, given that initiates experienced the program. Experiencing Dipo for themselves within a supportive environment likely contributed to the more favorable rating. However, we cannot rule out the possibility of impression management for both initiates and noninitiates. Initiates may have been motivated to present a favorable perception after going through the program. Noninitiates lower scores may have been influenced by Christianity and other Western traditions that Dipo was no longer relevant in a more global Ghana.

The findings provide some preliminary support for the ritual process paradigm model, which framed this study (Dunham et al., 1986). Our preliminary findings suggest at the fourth and last stage of the model (i.e., reincorporation), girls had achieved some change in identity (e.g., better psychological well-being) consistent with the model.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is its design. Data were collected at one point in time after participants had either participated in Dipo or had not and did not intend to participate. A quasi-experimental design with a pretest and posttest would have allowed us to determine whether there were improvements in psychological well-being for both groups, resulting in greater internal validity. Another limitation was the sampling strategy. Students were included in the study if they returned a parental consent form. The consent form included information on evaluating psychological well-being among those who had and had not participated in Dipo. Those who had participated and those who had not and did not intend to participate may have had more positive or negative opinions about Dipo rites than the general population suggesting some possible external validity limitations.

Measures used are another limitation. Although the measures have been universally used for both adolescent and adult populations to measure psychological distress and gender role beliefs, other measures may have further captured the psychological well-being of the Ghanaian sample. For example, measures of positive constructs (e.g., life satisfaction, communal beliefs) might have better assessed the program's impact. Another limitation is the Perception of Dipo measure. This measure was developed specifically for this study, and prior reliability and validity did not exist. Given the preliminary nature of this measure, future research is needed to establish more robust psychometric properties. Finally, measures were presented to all participants in the same order constituting a possible order effect. The measure of psychological distress was the first measure presented (followed by gender role beliefs and perception of Dipo).

Recommendations

We offer a few recommendations for future research. A more rigorous research design that includes administering pre-, post-, and follow-up measures to both initiates and noninitiates would enhance validity and show whether Dipo effects are sustainable. A random sample of all Dipo initiates and noninitiates within a school or particular setting should be obtained to eliminate possible self-selection bias. Also, there is variability in how Dipo rites are carried out; thus, research targeted at examining different program components could be conducted to show which program component is most effective.

Conclusion

In his study, we examined whether Dipo initiates reported better psychological well-being than noninitiates. Dipo initiates reported less psychological distress than noninitiates, suggesting possible benefits from participating in Dipo rites. Initiates also had more favorable perceptions of Dipo than noninitiates. These findings are preliminary but promising for understanding the potential benefit of Dipo rites for Krobo adolescent females (and others in rites of passage program). Given the preliminary nature of findings and limitations in the research design, more research, including replications, is needed to extend the validity of our findings.

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