

The Story of Takai

Told by Dolsi-naa Abubakari Lunna, March 29, 2002

Edited by David Locke

DL

It is Tuesday March 29, 2002. Dolsi-naa Abubakari and David Locke are talking today about Takai. So Dolsi-naa, our old friend, Takai, that we have worked on for 25 years--I am asking you to review it for us again.

AL

The history I received from my fathers--we don't say "teachers" we say "fathers"-- is that the Takai rhythm started from a war. Our ancestors composed Takai to stop war.

There was a time--I think I can even say it was before Naa Gbewaa. The reason I say that is that Naa Gbewaa bore Naa Sitobu and Naa Sitobu's son was Naa Nyaysi. Before these chiefs, we had a chief whom we call "Tohibu." Tohibu--I learned he fought many, many

wars. I think it may be that chief who lost his daughter--he lost his daughter. There was a hunter--those who go to bush and kill animals for meat --how do you call them?

DL

You have the right word.

AL

This hunter found the woman, Naa Tohibu's daughter, alone in the bush. She could not understand the hunter's language. The hunter also was unable to understand her. But there they were in the bush together and as far as they looked alike--human-to-human--the hunter was able to feed her--to give her water and food. Days passed. They found love and they produced family.

During those times, if some nation's leader called upon our chiefs--"I want to make war. Come and help me."--our warriors would go to help. Then, they would go back home. It happened that people of Fadan Gurma, called them like that. Those people are like our grandmothers. Our grandfather came with empty hands. He didn't come with a wife. He

helped the Fadan Gurma people, got marriage, and then produced his family. When war came to them again, they asked for our help. Our people went. We were fighting for them when this Takai matter came.

In war, there are times when the warriors stop fighting so that everybody can go back to a place where they can sleep. The next day, they start the journey--they start the fight again. So, in this particular war, our people were pushing the other people--pushing them far. You know, when you are fighting, you should never go backwards. When you are going back it means that your enemy is coming to defeat you. Our people had pushed these people--just like from Medford all the way down to Boston--when the time came to stop. The warriors were going back to rest, but the chief said they shouldn't go back too far. "We have collected something. We should remain here."

So, they made camp there. What I heard from my teachers is that in the night, one man was trying to go out and free himself. One of my teachers told me that the man went out to smoke tobacco, but another teacher told me that he went out to urinate. I don't know which story to take; I think I will take both!

DL

Who were these teachers? M-ba Ngolba and Issahaku Namowo? Or your father, Lun-naa Wumbee?

AL

--my father Ngolba and my grandfather--

DL

--your actual father's father?

AL

--my father's uncle. My father never knew his father--my father was still young when his father died.

So, this man was relieving himself when he heard someone moaning, "Umm umm--Nchi me." He said to himself, "What!? Who is speaking like our people?" You see, in our

Dagbani language we say, "N kpi me--n kpiya." When he heard someone saying, "N chi me," he thought that sickness was holding the person's throat so that he could not talk properly. "N chi me--n kpi me."

DL

The phrases mean the same thing?

AL

Yes, they mean, "I am dying!" When the Dagomba man heard, "I am dying," he rushed toward that voice. He held the other man and said, "Wula m-bala?" Who are you?

Then, he heard the man say "M maam." Instead of "Mani" he said, "M maam." In Dagbani, if someone asks "Wula m-bala" and you want to say, "It is me," you have to say, "Mani." But the Mossi people say, "M maam." The two men were talking, but their dialogue wasn't proper quality. When one spoke Dagbani, the other could understand, and when the wounded man spoke, the Dagomba man also could understand. The Dagomba man could see that the wounded man's clothes were different. He asked, "Oh

why? Are you my enemy?" but the man was too sick to answer. The Dagomba man decided to carry the wounded man back to his camp.

All night, the Dagombas were massaging this man with herbs. During the olden days, we used fire to cure people. Now we use hot water, but our ancestors put leaves in fire and then massaged the sick person. By morning the man was able to talk, "We are the leading warriors! Who are you people?" The Dagombas also asked, "Where from you?"

This man was a wise older man who knew about that lady who had gotten lost in the bush. He mentioned her name. The Dagombas were surprised and said, "This name resembles our chief's daughter's! Why?" And then the old man said, "Oh, as for me, that is my mother's name." They asked him, "From which town?" He told them, "My mother said she had been lost in the bush and then her husband found her." The Dagombas said, "OK. Let us take this news to the elders who can talk to our Naa [chief]." At that time, we didn't call our chief "Yaa Naa"; we just called him "Naa." They called the elders together and told them what they had heard. Then, they all went to tell the chief.

It was morning. The Naa and his warriors were preparing to go to the battlefield. The elders said, "We have heard an important matter. We have to stop and check some things before we continue the fight." After the Naa heard the news, he said, "We are not going to meet them in battle. We are going to send a message."

They sent a messenger to the enemy camp to say, "We have found one of your people. We have questioned him. This is the story we heard from him. I have been sent to see if it is true. Is the person we found one of yours?" The leader of the enemy warriors said, "Yes, that man is my brother." Then, he explained his family history, "This is our mother, this is what happened . . ." The messenger took the story back to the Dagombas. According to my teachers, it took more than one week to go inside the case.

When they had finished investigating, the Naa asked his war leader for advice. He said, "Naa, I won't stop the fight yet. If I stop, these people will think that we fear them." But the chief drummer spoke up, "Yes, we should stop this war. We drummers will represent the situation. Give us a chance. I will take my children into bush and we will prepare a rhythm. Everyone who understands our drumming will stop fighting."

So, the chief drummer took his children to the bush, along with the same old man they had found. Then, the chief drummer quickly composed a rhythm for the leading lunja--zen deyen dehen diyan dahan dehen deyen deyan. He asked his children, "Do you hear?" The children said, "Yes, we hear, we hear." He asked them, "What did I say?" The children replied, "You said, 'Naa naa wum, naa wum, naa wum, to,' 'Chief says listen.'" The chief drummer said, "It has two meanings. What is the other one?" They said, "Naa naa nya, naa nya, naa nya, to' 'Chief says see.'" The drummer said, "OK. I am going to be playing those two." The children asked him, "What do we answer?" He said, "You people answer me, 'Naa wum, naa wum' or answer me, 'Naa nya, naa nya.' Those two can answer me; you can pick either one." In those days, we didn't have the gun-gon drums like we do now; we had a smaller drum called batani. The chief drummer asked one batani to play kwao kwa kwao, which can mean "To naa wum" or "To naa nya"--"To naa wum" means "Chief says listen"--"To naa nya" means, "Chief says see." Then, he ordered a second batani, "You tell them, 'Che zabli,' 'leave the fight.'" He asked the children, "Do you understand the language? Can you drum it?" The children said, "Yes."

The drummers came back to the Dagomba camp and drummed for the Naa and his warriors. The war leader, the one who said he would not stop the fight, said, "When we hear this, what do you want us to do?" The chief drummer told him, "Take your sword, turn to the person standing near you, and strike his sword. Everybody should be turning and striking sword-to-sword or spear-to-spear. When the other people see, they will also do the same thing. Then, we can come together and stop the fight." But the war leader said, "For me, I will not do it first. If they do it first, I will also do it. I won't do it because they will say I am still afraid."

The elders decided to send a delegation to the enemy, together with the man they had saved from death. You know, the Mossi play bundili, a calabash drum like the Frafra bima drum. They also have luja and a small guŋ-gɔŋ like the one people from Lagos play. The wounded Mossi elder told his people about the Dagomba drummer's idea. He asked his musicians, "Can you people also drum the same way?" They accepted, "Yes, we can do it." So, he trained them. They did it.

The two sides set a date. The Mossi side came over to the Dagombas. When the Mossi were coming with their group, our people heard their luḡas--den den diyan dan--their calabashes--ten teten ten ti ti, ka ti kara. Then, our people also moved forward. When our drummers started, our Dagomba warriors were still walking. They saw the Mossi people and, yes, they were turning their swords--striking. Our warriors also started to strike their swords together, but our war leader wanted to make sure. He selected some people and said, "Go to the Mossi. Strike their swords and see if they strike or try to stab you." They went. The Mossi didn't cut them. Instead, the warriors struck swords three times. They came back.

You know, by that time Naa Tohibu, the chief whose daughter had gotten lost in the bush, had died. The new Naa was the junior brother of the missing woman and he wanted to know if she was still alive. He went with another delegation to find out. The Mossi elders said that their mother, the Dagomba chief's senior sister, was dead. The woman's first child was a daughter. Our Naa asked if they could bring her to him. She came.

Our chief asked, "Can you tell me what you heard from your mother?" She answered, "Yes n-yaba, grandfather." Dagombas and Mossis call each other "n-yaba." The lady was thinking that the Naa was her mother's father; she didn't know that he was her mother's brother, her uncle. She said, "N-yaba, my mother told me that she was with her father when a war came. There was fighting and they were always moving their camp. One night, she went into the bush to make her toilet. The fight had stopped and there was no noise. My mother could not hear anybody. She started walking back to camp, thinking she would soon find her people. She was still alone. She lay down in the bush to sleep, thinking that the next morning she would hear them. But the next day she couldn't hear them, so she started walking around in the bush until a hunter found her. The hunter took her to his bush hut. After that, they lived in the bush together. Naa asked her, "This man didn't take your mother home? He took her to his bush hut?" The woman said, "Yes." Naa said, "OK."

The lady was having a small, small son. The boy left his mother's side and started walking toward the chief. Naa embraced him and then stood up. Naa put his hand to his head, took off his hat, and immediately put it on the boy's head. Then, Naa said, "True."

Can you people give my title to this boy? Can you people allow him to be your chief?"

Up until that day those people did not have a chief; they were just simple hunters. Our

Naa said, "A ηϔ mɔyɔ naa, mɔyɔ naa, mɔyɔ ne naa." Your grandfather found your

grandmother, my sister, in the bush. My sister bore your mother in the bush, so now you

are Mɔyɔ Naa." That is the meaning of "Mɔyɔ Naa [literally, bush chief]."

DL

So, this is the beginning of the name "Mossi?"

AL

That is when the name started.

The Mossi people say, "Tarakai" and we say, "Takai." "Takai" means "fight stop," "Zabli

naya," "the fight is finished." Ever since then, we Dagombas have continued doing

Takai. Each year, when we passed that date--that month, that day--drummers and

warriors would go to the chief's palace to represent themselves as they had done before.

As time went on and things were changing, our Yaa Naa allowed the public to dance

Takai. But people have stopped using swords because, by all means, somebody might be wounded. A person shouldn't wear a dancing smock with a sword. What if another person's gbinjmaa [smock] catches it? Someone might be wounded. So, we changed from swords to sticks, which we call "kpaa." When people started using sticks, they began treating Takai as a dance.

The way you hear the rhythm of Takai now? How it has become very sweet?--that is the work of us, the drummers. Drummers have improved the Takai drumming talk.

Drummers have made Takai become very nice and very danceable, too. At first, the people just faced each other. Let's say I am facing you. The guṅ-gṳṅ will say, "Che zablī, che zablī, che zablī" and on the third time we will knock sticks--"Che zablī, che zablī, che zablī" and we turn again. There was no dancing to it! Much later, some joking people put more dancing movements inside and everybody started copying them.

This is what I know in Takai. So, are you OK? [laughter]

DL

Yes! That is very much OK.

AL

So, that is Takai. Takai is thick traditional dance about us and the Mossi people. As I told you before, when we talked about Takai in Accra [1976] the Dagomba and the Mossi--we are thick, thick, thick, thick brothers. From the old days until now, we treat each other are like members of a grandfather's family and a grandmother's family.

Whenever a Dagomba person dies, Mossi people from that neighborhood will come together and go to the dead person's room and say, "No! We won't allow this person to be buried by anyone else. We are here to help our brother." The dead person's family must find some money, give it to them, and beg them for permission to bury him.

I just called home today. My people told me that this coming Sunday is Fire Festival. I told them that I would call them on Saturday to tell them what to do. You see, the morning after we do the fire ritual, Mossi people can go house-to-house to collect money, even if just a pesewa. On that day, Mossi people will get money! This is how it is

between Dagomba and Mossi people. Even if a Mossi man teases you and you don't like it, there won't be any fight. You can get annoyed, but you can't fight with him.

Not everyone who plays Takai knows this history. Do you remember that I traveled once to Sokoto in Nigeria--not Sokoto--Sogode! I saw them also dancing Takai. I asked them how they came to know Takai and if it was an old dance for them. They said, "No, we only found it. Dagombas were dancing it and we copied." I asked them, "Do you know the meaning of the drumming?" Their drummers said, "No, we only collected the rhythm." Even the way they were playing the rhythm--they played it in their own style of music.

The people who can give you the meaning of Takai--if you get a complete Mossi drummer--he will talk about it. He will say "Tarakai," but I will say "Takai."

DL

I think at the time of this Takai story, the Dagomba were not yet in Dagbon.

AL

At that time, we were not in Dagbon. It was Naa Nyaglsi who brought us into Dagbon.

At that time, we were in Biyung--after Bolga--toward the Bawku side. We were not in

Ghana, not in Ivory Coast, not in Burkina Faso--we were on the border. Our Naa

Gbewaa's grave is in the Bawku secondary school grounds. They built Bawku Secondary

School where the Naa's palace was.

DL

Right. I have seen the photo in a book.

AL

Naa Nyaglsi left his father in Biyung and traveled down to Diari. There we have the first house, the starting house of Dagbon; we call it "Yendabari." That is where Yendi began.

When Naa Nyaglsi came there, his uncles said, "O yaa n tu." They called him "Iyaa

Naa." He took his chieftaincy with strength--by force. "Iyaa naa" means "strong

person." Before that time, we called our chief "Gbewaa"--"Naa Gbewaa."

DL

At the time of this Takai story, do you think the drums they were playing looked like the drums of today? Maybe the drums were a little different from today's drums.

AL

Today's drums have changed. The old drums were the same type that we are using today, but the tones of the drums, the sound of the drum--I can say the melody of the drums--has changed. When we were drumming when I was young, my teaching father Ngolba always said, "Hey you, Abubakari, you are trying to make your drumming very sweet--sweeter than my sound. Why?! We both are making the same talk, but your hand is sweeter than mine is. Why?!" I said, " Oh, father, maybe it is just how God made my body." I think this kind of thing has always been happening. For example, the way we play Naybieyu now has more style than in our grandfather's time.

DL

Yes, you have told me this before.

AL

Even now, the way we play Takai is different than the Takai of our grandfathers. If they said, "We are going to play Takai," you are going to hear only "ka kik ka" (3x). The drummers are not going to add anything. They are only going to be playing "ka ki ka kaka." It is we, the drummers, who have put more rhythms inside. Drummers thought to themselves, "You know, if I put this--and this--will it sound sweet?" They made Takai better.

In this present time, people like nice things! The carvers also have become very clever-- more clever than the old carvers. My father used to tell me, "You people are lucky. The carvers have created different sizes of luḡas for you people. In our time, we all played the same kind of luḡa." You see, our grandfathers played luḡas of equal size. I think you have seen my fourth grandfather's drum. It is not as big as what we call "lundḡyu." At that time, they didn't have lundḡyu; their only luḡa was we now call "lundaa."

DL

Like the ones we are playing?

AL

--like the ones we are playing, you see! But now, we have the drum we call "luntitalli."

It's sound is close to guṅ-gṳṅ.

DL

Is that the very biggest luṅa?

AL

Yes, the very biggest one. The next biggest one is called "lundaa maṅgli." During that time our guṅ-gṳṅs also were different.

DL

That was before your contact with the Dendawa people.

AL

Before--before! It was not until after Naa Zangina's time that we started playing drums like today's guṅ-gṅ.

DL

The Takai story--it has to be before Bizuṅ's time.

AL

Yes. You should remember that I told you that drummers collect appellation talks from old ladies. They are the ones who keep stories. At the time of the Takai story we had people who played drum, but we didn't call them "lunsi." It was our grandfather Bizuṅ who presented himself as something special. He told Dagombas, "I am going to be a 'luṅa' and the family of Bizuṅ shall be called 'lunsi.'" Before Bizuṅ, whenever a chief wanted drumming, his own children or his own brothers would have to be doing it. Even now, when you go to Gonja land drumming is like that.

DL

The Gonja people don't have a special family of drummers?

AL

No, they don't have a special family. Even in Dagbon--right now, if you go to our warriors, the Kambonsi, their children have to learn how to play drums. The people who play the kambonluṅa and the talking drums are their own children. But now, some of them do cross over and marry into a drummer's family. In that case, lunsi play Kambon-waa. But in the olden days the warriors' own children played.

END