

The Story of Tampima Dundon, Appellation of Naa Alaasani

Told by Dolsi-naa Abubakari Lunna on March 1, 1999

Edited by David Locke

DL

This is Monday, March 1, 1999. Ethan Flaherty, David Locke, and Dolsi-naa Abubakari Lunna are gathered for the first of a series of talks about praise name drumming for the chiefs of Dagbon that is especially used when chiefs ride horses. Dolsi-naa and I have had several preliminary talks and made a list of about thirty of these praise names. I have selected one apiece for each of my students in the Music 128 class to have as their focus. Dolsi-naa has agreed to see how the work will go. Ethan, I will be the primary person to conduct the session. As you will see, I won't ask many questions. In fact, I will ask one and then Dolsi-naa will talk. When he feels that he has reached a conclusion, then we can ask follow up questions. While you are listening, you can jot down questions to ask later. Then, I will make a copy of this tape and give it to you to work up for the class assignment.

Dolsi-naa, I have to take this man back to Tufts in about 45 minutes. As I explained to you yesterday when we went through the list of the chiefs, the proverb that Ethan will work on is Tampima Dundɔŋ. Can you tell us about Tampima Dundɔŋ? You have already told me a little bit about the sound of the drumming and the language of it, but I don't know why the drummers chose to give the chief this appellation. So, my big question is, "Tell me the history of Tampima Dundɔŋ and why they made it so?"

AL

This is part of Naa Alaasani's story. Naa Alaasani is a son of Naa Abudu Nayɔbiɛyɔ who is son of Naa Yakubu Nanto Nimdi. When we Dagombas say "Naa" Alaasani we mean that he was a Yaa Naa. Yaa Naa is our paramount chief for the whole of Dagbon. He is the head of the Dagbon nation. Naa Alaasani happened to be a son of a Yaa Naa. In fact, to be a Yaa Naa you have to be a son, you can't be a grandson. During Naa Alaasani's time, the Europeans--English people--had forced into our land. It happened that the chief before him, Naa Andani, died. In our country, when a chief dies, the elders have a set amount of time to complete the funeral. If there is no special reason, the funeral shouldn't take longer than that time. So, the elders made the funeral of Naa Andani.

In Dagbon, people we call "kingmakers" get together like cabinet ministers sitting together to decide on who should be the next Yaa Naa. When a Yaa Naa dies, many people may contest for the title. The kingmakers don't just look at your face and say, "Because I love you, you will be our Yaa Naa." No. They have to consider, "If we give this one the Yendi skin, can he can take care of the people?" How can they know? What are they going to do to see if the fellow can take care of people? They have to study each person. They have to talk with people who know the person's beginning, the way he acted in his childhood, the way he respects others, if he doesn't fear and is strong-- everything together. In this way, before they make their choice, they know, "If an enemy force is coming, this person will never run. If something is getting spoiled in Dagbon, this man will see to it that the thing doesn't spoil. Let us make him Yaa Naa." So, those eleven people sat together and they said, " We have looked into it. Yes, he can be Yaa Naa." So, they give the Yaa Naa position to Naa Alaasani.

There are certain people the elders had to call to tell, "We have finished the funeral. Our new Yaa Naa is going to be Naa Alaasani." Then in the night, these people "caught" Naa

Alaasani. When they did that, the regent of the late chief, Naa Andani Naani Goo, refused to accept their decision. Why? You see, when the Yaa Naa dies and the kingmakers choose the next Yaa Naa, they also give the regent a chieftaincy. At that time, Naa Alaasani was occupying the Karaga skin, but the regent didn't want to go to Karaga [a major town in Dagbon]. He wanted to go to Savelugu [a major town in Dagbon] and for the chief of Savelugu to become Yaa Naa. But the elders hadn't chosen the chief of Savelugu to become Yaa Naa.

One of the elders went and told the regent, "Look, we know that the chief of Savelugu is your cousin. The chief of Karaga also is your cousin. If we give the Yaa Naa title to the chief of Savelugu, we will have civil war. Now we have Europeans close to us. They had wanted to take our land. We refused. We fought them and sacked them from Dagbon. If they hear that we are fighting, they will jump in. If they come, we won't know whether they are coming to help one group or to fight all of us. They will kill all of us and take the land for themselves." But the regent said, "No, I don't agree. They should come. The fight should come. I can face it."

So that night, before the elders got to know, the regent sent for the chief of Savelugu. He wanted to make him Yaa Naa. We call him Kukara Djee, but his real name is Dahamani, so when drummers are talking about him, we say, "Savelugu-naa Dahamani Kukara Djee." The regent ordered his warriors to bring the elders by force, but the senior kingmakers escaped. You know, not all of them were staying in Yendi; some were living in their own towns. So, when they heard that he was trying to gather the elders, they refused. Then, the regent asked other elders to put the Savelugu-naa to be Yaa Naa. They told him, "We cannot do it because we never take orders about selecting the Yaa Naa from a regent. We always receive orders from Gushe-naa and Ko-naa [chiefs who lead the kingmakers] before we select the Yaa Naa. They are not here, so we can't do it." Then, he said, "Whether you people do it or you don't do it, he is my Yaa Naa." So, everyone vexed. Those who were not based in Yendi went back to their towns. Then, Dagbon had no paramount chief. Not for one month or one year, but for several years we only had sub-chiefs. We didn't have a Yaa Naa.

There was a chief from Korli--we call him Kor-naa--who was a cousin of Naa Alaasani. He thought, "As for me, I can't be sitting doing nothing when people have cheated my

cousin." So, he passed behind everyone's back; he didn't consult anyone. At that time, Europeans were in the North, but not in the Dagomba land. They were in the Dagarti land--living at Jirapa. Kor-naa traveled to Jirapa and told the English, "You people came to our land. Our chief summoned warriors to sack you. We fought and you left. Now we need to make a new chief, but his son doesn't agree with the choice. Can you people come and help? If we get our chosen chief, we will allow you to come and live in Dagbon land." The English said, "Yes." They send soldiers with him.

So, they were coming. Kor-naa didn't look like he was going to war. He didn't come with plenty of people--only with a few strong people who could face a fight. They were not going to kill everybody; they just wanted to kill the regent. A spy came with information on his enemy, "The regent is no more in Yendi. He is going to pass to go to Tugu before he goes to Savelugu. He has reached a town called Salankpang." The messenger also reported that the regent himself had enskinned the Savelugu-naa as Yaa Naa; he himself was going to be the new Savelugu-naa. Kor-naa and the English went to Salankpang. Before daybreak, Kor-naa sent his warriors to surround the regent's lodging house and hide themselves. They came to the town. Nobody saw them.

In the early morning, the regent's servants dressed his horse, his drummers got ready, and all his people got together. The regent came out. He was not dressed like he was going to war. He dressed himself beautifully--like a chief going to enjoy himself. He climbed on the horse, got seated, and started to move. Then, the warriors of Kor-naa appeared. The regent tried to come down from the horse, but they shot him. Before he got to the entry of his lodging place, they gave him another. He fell dead from three bullets.

Then, Kor-naa went to Karaga and told his cousin Kar-naa [who will become Naa Alaasani], "I have killed the regent. Move to Yendi." Alaasani moved toward Yendi and called all the elders together. Before they reached Yendi, Savelugu-naa Dahamani Kukara Djee, whom the regent had made a so-called Yaa Naa, heard the news that warriors of Kor-naa had fought and killed the regent. He ran--the so-called chief ran away. Then Alaasani came to Yendi and the elders found a day to make him Yaa Naa.

The European people asked the elders, "Why has this happened?" The elders told them, "At first, when you came, we didn't want you people. We fought you. After you left, you send a delegation to tell us, 'We are not coming to fight you. We are coming to make you have peace. We don't like fighting, so you shouldn't kill each other any more.' Now we don't want to kill so many people. That is why we asked you to help us kill only the regent--so that our country will be at peace." The British said, "Now that you have killed him, what is next?" The elders said, "We are going to find the real Yaa Naa." The British asked, "Who is your real Yaa Naa?" and elders said, "Kar-naa." Then, the elders of Yendi enskinned Naa Alaasani as Yaa Naa.

On Friday night, they put him in the Katini. [Special building in the palace compound used for this purpose.] When they brought him out in the morning, Naa Alaasani talked to the drummers, telling them his name, "Tampima dundɔŋ na ku nim saha. Tampima dundɔŋ na de ku o suli, Zim pali kulga ni, ka kul pali nim wɔlim jɛ. Nawun' cheli saha din viela, ka so chandi pagi Nawuni. Tampima dundɔŋ na kul nim saha." That is how this rhythm came to exist. The lunsɩ talked among themselves about what he said and put his words onto drums. The answer rhythm came, "Tampima dundɔŋ la, ŋuŋ paɣa ni o

gbaaigi Alaasani, Tampima dundɔŋ la." The leading drummer said, "Zim pali kulga ni, Zim pali kulga ni," and the others answered, "Tampima dundɔŋ la. ɲun' wɔlindi ni o gbaaigi Alaasani. Tampima dundɔŋ la." The lead luŋa said, "Nawun' cheli saha din viela, ka so chandi pagi 'Wuni," and the others answered with their part.

So, Ethan, that is a story about Naa Alaasani Tampima Dundɔŋ to fit the time you have for your work today. Let me explain the talk of the drums in Tampima Dundɔŋ. We don't build houses in our place the way you build them here. We have a courtyard. We build the house in a circle around a yard in the center. We call that yard "dundɔŋ." We have some very strong stones--so strong that if you want to break one you need a chisel and hammer. We call those stones "Tampima." Alaasani was telling people, "I am Tampima." He is strong; he is Tampima. When he says that his courtyard is very strong, he means that he has strong people in his family. How can you break into his house? You can never enter into the family, you can never enter in the house. If you cannot even enter his house, how are you going to see him to kill him. That is the meaning of Tampima Dundɔŋ.

DL

OK. That was very clear. Thank you for you knowledge.

EF

Thank you.

AL

You're welcome. Any questions?

DL

Could you please review what the answer drummers are saying and just the most basic of the lead drum talks.

AL

Yes. What I can break off from all the lead drum's talk is, "Zim pali kulga ni, zim pali kulga ni," and the drummers answer, "Tampima dundɔŋ la, ŋun' wɔlindi ni o gbaai, Alaasani, o ku gbaai suli. Tampima dundɔŋ la, ŋun' wɔlindi ni o gbaaga, Alaasani, o ku gbaai suli." The lead drummer says, "There are many fish in the river," and the response says that annoyed or jealous people can never catch or kill Alaasani. I can just put the meaning as, "Jealousy cannot kill Alaasani." Another lead drum talk says, "Nawuni cheli saha din viela, ka so chandi pagi Nawuni. Nawuni cheli saha din viela, ka so chandi pagi Nawuni." "May God leave time for people to love you." Sorry, "May God make the people who love you strong to guard you." Then, another may come, "Tipariga Alaasani Nawuni ni ti sɔŋa. Tipariga Alaasani Nawuni ni ti sɔŋa." They are saying, "Tipariga." "Tia" means "tree" and "pariga" means "uncommon" so "Tipariga" means "tree which is never common." You have to go from area to area before you can find those trees. I think you get me. "Nawuni ni ti sɔŋa " means "God will help you." When the drummer says, "Tipariga Alaasani Nawuni ni ti sɔŋa," it means, "Alaasani is a good tree which is not common. May God help you."

DL

Thank you for that. I think I understood. Now, I want to ask you to help us with the drumming. We will have a time to hear it on drums, but in terms of singing the rhythm, can you help us get a picture of that? [Ethan needed this recording to do transcriptions for his Tufts' assignment.]

AL

OK. The leading luṅa says, "din den diyen kren den dit, din den diyen kren den," and the answer comes, "dan dadan deyan diyan den, dan dan dan dan den den den dan den den din, dan dadan deyan diyan den." The lead luṅa says, "din den diyen kren den dit, din den diyen kren den," and the answer comes back "dan dadan deyan diyan den, dan dan dan den den den den dan den den din, dan dadan deyan diyan den." Then, the lead says, "din dan den, dan den den din, zan dan din dide diyan," and the drummers answer, "dan dadan deyan diyan den, zan dan dan dan den den den dan den den din, zan dadan deyan ziyen den." Then, the leader says, "dayan dan den de den, den den den, zeyan de den diyen de diyan."

"Nawuni cheli saha din viela, ka so chandi pagi Nawuni" is "dayan da den den den dan dan da, zayan degede den de diyen." I think you get that. When the leader plays, "din den diyen kren den dit, din den diyen kren den," that is, "Zim pali kulga, Zim pali kulga," and the answer says "dan dan dan deyan diyan den, zan dan dan dan den den den den dan den den din, dan dadan deyan diyan den." The other call can come again, "Nawun' chel' saha din viela ka so chandi pagi 'Wuni," which is "dayan da den deyen, gre din den da, zayan digeden zayan grin diyen, and they answer, "dayan da den deyen, gre din den da, zayan digeden zayan grin diyen." Another one will say, "Tipariga Alaasani Nawuni ni ti soṅa " and then "dan gran deyen, dan den den diyen, zan din den zeyan diyen."

DL

If you happened to be playing guṅ-gṅ, how would you support the luṅas?

AL

The guṅ-gṅ comes like this, "kao kakao kik kao kik, kao kao karao kao kik kik kik kik kao kik kik kik, kao karao kik kao kik." You see, "kao karao kik kao kik, kao karao kao kik kik kik kik kao kik kik kik, kao karao kik kao kik." You know, we have knowledgeable drummers, those whose hands are better than others. These guṅ-gṅ drummers will play, "kao kaokao kik karao kik, kao karao kakao kao kik kik kik kik kao kik kik kik, kao kaokao kik karao kik." You see?

DL

I get you.

AL

For me, I can play like somebody who doesn't have a sweet hand, but I also can play and put sweet hand [improvise]. You may think it is a different talk, but it is the same thing.

It is the same talk, but I improvise some small things inside.

So, that is Naa Alaasani Tampima Dundon. When he became chief, we played this
appellation for him before the drummers themselves thought of Zim Taai Kulga.

DL

Good, you came to one of my questions before I even asked it!

AL

After drummers selected Zim Taai Kulga for him, one day he was riding on horseback
and a drummer composed Nawuni Za Shire, "Alaasani Nawuni za shire." "dan dan din,
dan den dadan, bi bi, Zim taai kulga, bi bi." That is his horse riding rhythm also, "dadin
dan, daden dadan, bi bi, dan daden dedan, bi bi, Tampima dundon, bi bi, Tampima
dundon, bi bi, zim taai kulga, bi bi, zim taai kulga, bi bi, kul pali nim wolim je, Nawun'
cheli' saha din viela, ka so chandi pagi 'Wuni. Alaasan'-bla, bi bi, Zim taai kulga." You
see? So, this chief has two horse-riding rhythms and one dancing rhythm.

DL

Now I am going to repeat the story in my words to Ethan. Dolsi-naa, listen to see if I make mistakes.

A time came when a Yaa Naa, the paramount chief, died. There is a group of eleven people who are chiefs themselves from the different regions of Dagbon--sort of like nobles from the regions. When a Yaa Naa dies, the kingmakers gather at the capital, Yendi. They discuss the eligible candidates and then select only one from among many. Only the sons of Yaa Naas have the eligibility to become Yaa Naa. These kingmakers selected the one on whom this talk centers, Naa Alaasani. However, the regent disagreed with the choice. After a chief dies, there is a period before they have installed the new chief when a regent holds the reins of power as an interim leader. In this case, the regent preferred the candidate who was the chief of a town called Savelugu. At that time, Naa Alaasani was the chief of another town called Karaga. So, because of this disagreement, for some period of time there was no Yaa Naa. It came a time that one of the cousins of Naa Alaasani, Kor-naa or chief of Korli, decided that this had gone on long enough and that some action should be taken. Dolsi-naa, which Kor-naa was it?

AL

Kor-naa Bukali

DL

So, this man traveled to another tribal area where the Dagarti people live and the English had established a headquarters, an outpost. He enlisted their support. With the English people backing him, they ambushed the regent. They shot him three times, killing him. Then, the chief that the regent had been backing realized that he wasn't going to get the chance to be Yaa Naa. He also was under threat, so he also ran away. They informed Naa Alaasani, who then was still chief of Karaga, that now the path was free for him to come to Yendi where the palace of the Yaa Naa is located. They made the ritual of investiture and he was properly "enskinned," as they put it, as Yaa Naa. It was at that point that they composed this piece. The text refers to the cousin and other family members who made the way clear for Naa Alaasani to become chief by using the metaphor of hard-to-break rocks. Dolsi-naa, is what I said acceptable to you?

AL

Yes. Naa Alaasani made the story into a proverb, "If not for my family, I could not have become Yaa Naa. How could I be Yaa Naa without a strong family?" Then, the drummers put it, "Tampima dundɔŋ la, nun wɔlindi ni o gbaaga, Alaasani, o ku gbaai suli." I think that it is over two hundred years now since that time. [One hundred years on the Christian calendar is more accurate].

DL

Thank you. Now is time for questions. I only have one question, Dolsi-naa. You might be surprised that I need to ask it, but I need to be clear, "What is Katini?"

AL

Ah ha! The Yendi palace controls four houses. The Yaa Naa lives in Yilibla, the "smaller house." When you come out from that house, you see Yilikpani facing Yilibla. When you go to the place where the Yaa Naa sleeps, you will not see a grave. They don't bury chiefs where the Yaa Naa sleeps; they bury him in Katini. We have a chief wife

called "Katini." She lives in the Katini, the second house. In that house, they "make" a Yaa Naa. If they are going to select Yaa Naa, they put him in the Katini before they bring him out.

Because you said that you have only 45 minutes, I made the story very short. When Naa Alaasani became Yaa Naa, he gave the Karaga chieftaincy to the person who helped him become Yaa Naa . No one could challenge Kor-naa. From that time up to now, that man's family still lives in Karaga. That is the first person for whom we played Zambalanton. [laughs because he knows DL will be intrigued]

DL

There is a Kar-naa on my list, so when we come to that history, maybe you will tell us that story.

So, Ethan, now is your chance for questions. Is there any part of what you have been listening to you that have a question about?

EF

What was the relation between Naa Alaasani and the chief that takes Karaga, the person that helped him to become the Yaa Naa?

AL

That man called Naa Alaasani "cousin." Kor-naa was Naa Alaasani's father's brother's son.

EF

I guess everything else is pretty clear.

DL

Who was the regent?

AL

Tugu-lana Iyiri. [laughs] Your time is short, but you are asking me a question like that!

Tugu-lana Iyiri was the regent of Naa Andani. You see, sometimes we don't want to recall all of our talks. Because of this talk's matter, many people are still fighting. This has never died in our country. This started the Abudu-Andani feud.

DL

The Savelugu-naa was an Andani?

AL

Yes.

DL

And the Kor-naa?

AL

Was Abudu.

DL

Ethan, they have been having a civil war in their country. Sometimes it doesn't break out into fighting. It is like a hostility between parties. You could even think of it as party politics.

EF

Starting from this?

DL

That is what he is saying. This is part of it. The chief who died is the one for whom they play Naani Goo, the piece we are playing in class. His regent wanted to keep the Yaa Naa title in that side of the family.

AL

The Naani Goo family. The regent wanted the Yaa Naa title to go to someone who came from the same father. Savelugu Naa Dahamani was Naa Andani's son. Naa Alaasani didn't come from Naa Andani. Naa Alaasani is Naa Abudu's son.

DL

You see, the chief whose rhythm is Nanto Nimdi had several sons who became paramount chief. But then, their sons also vied for the paramount chieftaincy.

AL

There were two sons.

EF

Nanto Nimdi's grandchildren?

AL

Yes. Nanto Nimdi's grandchildren. Nanto Nimdi's first son is Naa Abudu Naybieyu.

Because Naa Andani followed Naa Abudu as Yaa Naa, some people say that he is the second son. No. Naa Abudu was first. After Naa Abudu came Savelugu-naa Bukali.

After Savelugu Naa Bukali came Kor-naa Mahami, the person who helped Naa Alaasani's father. After Kor-naa Mahami came Naa Andani.

DL

So, there are more children inside the story?

AL

You see! But Savelugu-naa Bukali and Kor-naa Mahami didn't become Yaa Naa. Naa Andani became Yaa Naa.

DL

Their junior brother.

AL

Yes. The junior brother became Yaa Naa, but people claim him to be ahead of these two people. Kor-naa Mahami's son is Kor-naa Bukali. When this fight came, Kor-naa Bukali supported Naa Abudu's son, Kar-naa Alaasani.

DL

Nephews started to fight against each other and supported different uncles.

EF

Whose nephews?

AL

Naa Abudu's nephews and Naa Andani's nephews.

DL

I think we are going to end here. Ethan, you can see that the stories go on forever.

EF

Interesting. Thank you.

AL

In Dagbon we have "story drumming." Story drumming is just singing and drumming.

You can even just talk. Let's say I decide to tell the story of Naa Yakubu. How did Naa

Yakubu become Yaa Naa? What happened before he became Yaa Naa? After he became

Yaa Naa and died, how many children did he leave? I will count all of his children. If

ten, I have to call all their names in my singing. When I finish calling his children, I will

say, "After Naa Yakubu died, who became Yaa Naa?" And then I will say, "Naa Abudu

came to be Yaa Naa." Then, if I am a proper drummer, I have to talk about Naa Abudu's

mother's family. His mother is not close to Iyandi [Yendi]. Then, I will start saying Naa

Abudu is Kambonpayabia [warrior woman's son]. I will talk about his grandfathers from his mother's family, "Who raised his mother and sent her to marry Naa Yakubu and give birth to Abudu?"

DL

You see, the Dagomba drummers do this grand narrative of chieftaincy in the night.

They will go from 9 or 10 o'clock in the night until the sun comes up the next day. If the leading drummer has detailed knowledge of the family and the history, he will start from the grandparents and then gradually bring the story towards the present. The stories become like a great web that weaves in and out of itself. Different people appear and their life histories intersect. The story is as long as the drummer has the time to do it and how sweet he wants to make the story.

AL

It is very hard. You have to be a good drummer before you can do that.

DL

It is the part of drumming that Dagombas really respect. The drumming he teaches us is not a small thing but--

AL

It is not a small thing, but it is just for fun. I can say, "Just for fun." It is music that makes people feel happy.

DL

Where the most knowledgeable men--the "lover" drummers as they are called--show themselves is in storytelling. They are prized. They are the special drummers.

Dolsi-naa I have to get Ethan back to Tufts. We are going to have to beg you to break now.

AL

OK. I break. [laughter]

END