

The Story of Saṅmari Gɔŋ, Appellation of Naa Abudu-bla

Told by Dolsi-naa Abubakari Lunna on March 15, 1999

Edited by David Locke

DL

OK. Craig Polasko, David Locke, and Dolsi-naa Abubakari Lunna are here on March 15th, 1999 at 19 Sagamore Avenue. It is 8:20 on a Monday evening. We are grateful to you, M-ba Lun-naa, to take time tonight. You are tired and we appreciate it a lot. We ask you for the background on the rhythm called Saṅmari Gɔŋ. Can you tell us the history behind this rhythm?

AL

Saṅmari Gɔŋ is a title for Naa Abudu-bla. Naa Abudu-bla was the first son of Naa Mahama-bla Zambalan' Dim Kurigu. Naa Mahama-bla died before Naa Abudu-bla had a chieftaincy. Before Naa Abudu-bla was allowed see his father's body, the elders had to "enskin" him, as we say. The elders made him Boggu-lana, chief of Boggu. Boggu is a

chieftaincy that is never given to anyone under normal circumstances. It is only given if a chief dies before his eldest son has chieftaincy. After the elders gave Naa Abudu-bla the title of Boggu-lana, they brought him to see his father's body. Then, they made the funeral; they did the "third day" and the "seventh day" customs.

After the seventh day custom was finished, the elders declared Boggu-lana to be the regent of Naa Mahama-bla. The elders got a lot of argument at that point. People went against the decision to make Naa Abudu-bla the regent, saying that he was not up to the standard of being a Yaa Naa's regent.

DL

Because of his youth?

AL

No, because of his body and the way he acted while the father was still alive. The elders took the regent's special things to Naa Abudu-bla. They put the garments on him, they

measured him, and they removed them. When they saw that Naa Abudu-bla was not up to being a regent, they chose to bring the things to Kpatin'-lana Ziblim, the brother of the chief who died, Naa Mahama-bla.

Yes, they gave regent title to Kpatin'-lana Ziblim. Kpatin'-lana came out of the Yendi palace wearing the regent's garments and then he put the towel turban on his head as is the custom. When he came out, people were surprised at what the elders had done. Some people were saying, "Yes. This man is up to a regent standard," but others said, "He is not up to being the brother's regent. The brother was very big and he is small, too small."

DL

The size of his body was important?

AL

Yes, the size of his body was important.

Another argument started. The elders sent Kpatin-lana back to Yilikpani, the house in the chief's palace where he was supposed to stay. The following Friday, he came out and greeted people. The next Friday, again he came out, greeted people, and went back. He never came out again. He died.

DL

The brother of Naa Mahama-bla, Naa Abudu-bla's uncle, died?!

AL

Yes.

You know, when a Yaa Naa dies, the kingmakers stay in Yendi for up to a year--making the funeral and selecting the next Yaa Naa. After the death of a Yaa Naa, they don't go back to their towns once they report to Yendi. We perform the final funeral of a dead Yaa Naa on Thursday. On Friday night, they "catch" [choose] the next Yaa Naa. On

Friday morning, all the chiefs sit together and greet the people. Then, everybody goes home.

So, these elders of Dagbon quickly sat down together and said, "We have done wrong."

In fact, they had argued on the very day they had chosen Kpatin'-lana. He had not been everyone's choice. When all of them got together, again they said, "Now we should put the robes onto Naa Abudu-bla. We should give it to the real person who should be regent. We did wrong; that is why that Kpatin'-lana died." So, they give it to Naa Abudu-bla.

Then, it came to the time to make the father's funeral. Several people contested for the chieftaincy. The regent, Naa Abudu-bla, contested, but people start laughing. When those gathered outside the palace heard that he was asking for the skin, they said, "Oh, forget him." This was because they didn't respect him. They started criticizing the way his body looked. Do you remember my uncle's Fuseni Jablon's eye?

DL

Yes, one of his eyes was bad.

AL

Mmm hmm--It was the same with Naa Abudu-bla. When he was a child, he went to cut grass for his father's horses and some grass poked him in the eye. The accident didn't completely damage the eye, but as he grew, it stayed smaller than his other eye. People outside the palace started abusing him. They said, "Don't give the Yendi skin to a one-eyed person. You can't take one eye and hold Dagbon."

Among those contesting for the chieftaincy were two grandchildren of a Yaa Naa. Kar-naa Bukali's son, who had contested for the Yaa Naa title when Naa Mahama-kpema died, was a great-grandson. Savelugu-naa--the same thing--his great grandfather was Yaa Naa. But Mion-lana Tori Buni was a Yaa Naa's son. Naa Abudu-bla seized on that point. He told the elders, "Mion-lana opposed my father when he was trying to become Yaa Naa. If you give it to Mion-lana, then you know what you want." The elders knew that

Naa Abudu-bla was hinting that something bad would happen. The elders went to soothsayers who looked into the future. The soothsayers said, "If you want Dagbon to be at peace, give the Yaa Naa title to the regent. Leave Mion-lana. If you give it to him, there will be a lot of killing." Now an argument started among the kingmakers themselves.

DL

Some people wanted Mion-lana?

AL

Only one person wanted Mion-lana. All the others said, "Yes, let's give it to the regent."

So, the kingmakers gave the Yaa Naa title to Naa Abudu-bla.

We made the funeral of Naa Mahama-bla on Thursday. On Friday, some people were telling Mion-lana, "You will be Yaa Naa. Prepare." So, Mion-lana was preparing at his compound--waiting until the elders would come to catch him. Imagine his surprise to

hear the drums announcing, "We have a chief. Our chief is the regent." You see, Naa Abudu-bla was the first person caught to be Yaa Naa before people were asleep. Usually the elders let people go to sleep before they catch a new Yaa Naa, but this time some of the elders said, "Let's not waste time. If we delay until people are asleep, maybe Mion-lana's people will bring him inside Katini [house in the Yaa Naa's palace where dead chiefs are buried and new chiefs stay on night they are "caught"]. That will bring a quarrel. It is better to catch Boggu-lana Abudu as our next Yaa Naa before Mion-lana's supporters find out. Let's prepare and do it."

I was at Yendi that night. I was the person drumming the leading lunja when the lunsu were telling the Yendi story. We were still eating when my father Namo-naa Issahaku said, "Adam! Where is Adam?" I answered, "Adam told me he wasn't going to eat. He went outside." Namo-naa said, "Wash your hand. Go and get my drum. I am coming out. We are going to the chief's palace." Before we got there, the kingmaker's had finished everything and were waiting for us to drum the announcement. We drummed from nine o'clock at night till six o'clock the next morning. After stopping for prayers, we continued drumming until the elders started coming to chief's palace. When all of

them had come together, they went into the palace. They brought Naa Abudu-bla out for the public before sending him to stay at Zohi [neighborhood in Yendi; where new Yaa Naa stays during enskinment process].

When the elders bought out Naa Abudu-bla, my drumming-father sang, "My love has appeared. My love is a fasting moon. Everyone keeping the fast should prepare. My love is a star. A star always shines in the sky. A star will never sit on ground. The thing people don't love, that is the thing God loves." That is the meaning of his appellation, Saṅmari Gɔŋ. In Dagbani, my father said,

to to to	Listen
Kurigu dapala	Son of Kurigu
Ninsalnima zaɣisi sheli	The thing people reject
Naawuni pihi maanda	God polishes
Saṅmari gɔŋ, saṅmari gɔŋ	Curved Star, curved star
Saṅmarigɔŋ ku zini tiŋa	The crescent moon will never sit on the ground.
Ɔeya	Stay

Namo-naa said that his love, the new chief, had appeared. His love resembles the moon in the fasting month. His love is a star that always is up in the sky, never down on the ground. The thing human beings don't like, is the very thing that God is polishing.

So, that is the story of how Naa Abudu-bla got his appellation, Saṅmari Gɔŋ.

DL

Tell us more about the drumming in Saṅmari Gɔŋ

AL

When we lunsi are going to drum, the leading drummer says,

N-shiri maa yina

My love has come out

N-shiri ŋmaŋ'la nolori gɔli

My love looks like fasting moon

Nolori gɔli biɛyɔ pihita dali

The fast is on the thirtieth day of the month

Ŋun nya o, o ni lo noli

Whoever sees it will fast

Ṅun bi nya o, o ni lo noli

Whomever does not see it will fast

N-shiri nyela saṅmariga

My love is a star

O zela saa zuyu

It is in the sky above our heads

O ku zini tiṅa

It never sits on the ground

Ninsalnim' ni zaṅisi sheli

The thing people reject

Ka Naawuni pihi maanda

God takes and polishes

Saṅmarigōṅ ku zini tiṅa

Star never sits on the ground

That is the talk. The luṅa drum says, "[vocables]," and then guṅ-gōṅ comes in,

"[vocables]."

DL

Now, we will ask some questions about the story.

Naa Abudu-bla didn't have a chieftaincy title when his father died? Why? Was he young at that time?

AL

He wasn't young. Not everybody gets chieftaincy easily. People had advised Naa Abudu-bla that it was his destiny to be a Yaa Naa. When Naa Mahama-bla was alive, he knew that his son was at risk from jealous elders. He told Naa Abudu-bla to hide himself--to make himself appear useless--because if his rivals knew of his future, they would bring him down. At that time, I was living with my mother's father, Wariboggo Tahinaa. Every year Naa Abudu-bla would come to Wariboggo. Naa Abudu-bla loved my grandfather so he would not sleep anywhere other than our compound. If you saw Naa Abudu-bla in those days, you wouldn't think his father was a big man. He didn't drink, but he didn't dress well either. He didn't put on huge smocks. People who didn't know that his father was Yaa Naa would say, "Oh. This is not even a Dagomba man."

DL

About the accident that spoiled his eye when he was young--Am I correct to think that Dagombas don't like to have a chief who doesn't have a perfect body? If a person has any problem with his body, is it against tradition for him to become a chief?

AL

No. Some people say so, but the kingmakers can't decide chieftaincy like that. In my drum knowledge, drummers usually say, "It is God who makes a chief. Human beings can never make a chief." Unless God has chosen you, merely looking like chief will not make you one. If you don't resemble a chief, but God created you to be one--whether people like you or not--they must give the title to you. And another thing--the elders remembered the history of Naa Andan' Siyli. His deformity was more severe than Naa Abudu-bla's, but he became a chief. He went to war and killed a lot of people. He was a chief who also fought seriously, but if you saw him, you would say that he was small boy. He wasn't tall and he didn't have a strong body. The old people, the elders, were telling everyone not to forget that Naa Andani was shorter than Naa Abudu-bla. They

shouldn't forget Naa Bimbiɛyɛ either. We have many chiefs who didn't look good, but became Yaa Naa.

DL

Was it when Naa Abudu-bla died that they put Mion-lana into the Katini? [DL alludes to a chieftaincy matter in which Mion-lana was supposedly enskinned as Yaa Naa by his supporters, going against the customs of Dagbon.]

AL

Yes. When Naa Abudu-bla died, Dagbon's chieftaincy problems became hot. Two years after Naa Abudu-bla became Yaa Naa, Kwame Nkrumah helped Ghana get independence. At that time, the strong people from the Northern Region who were members of the CPP, Nkrumah's party, all supported Mion-lana Andani. Because their political party was in power, they saw a chance to remove Naa Abudu-bla from the chief position. Mion-lana's people, many people call them "the Andani family," took the elders of Dagbon to court. They said, "We will remove Naa Abudu-bla as Yaa Naa." At the

time, my uncle was Tolon-naa, one of the kingmakers who had made Naa Abudu-bla to be Yaa Naa. He was considered to be one of the most well educated people in the whole of Ghana. When the Andanis sent the case into court, my uncle quickly withdrew from his party and joined the CPP.

My uncle Tolon-naa became the first speaker in parliament after Independence. At first, he was in the Islam Party, which is the PNP party today, but when he heard about the court case, he said, "I am a kingmaker and well educated person. If Mion-lana Andani's people are alone on the CPP side, we won't have a chance." So, he "crossed carpet." My uncle changed parties on a Tuesday and Kwame Nkrumah welcomed him. Kwame Nkrumah felt happy. They announced on radio, "Alhaji Yakubu Tolon-naa has crossed carpet from Islam to CPP." On Friday, they announced that parliament would open on Monday and that Kwame Nkrumah was asking all the big candidates to select speaker of parliament. So, Nkrumah appointed my uncle as the speaker of parliament.

One day, we heard that the government had called all elders and important chiefs to Accra--like the way Acheampong called for Naa Mohammadu and then told him, "You

are no more Yaa naa"--that is how the government called the chiefs. [The Andani family continued pressing in the courts and in government to get a Yaa Naa. In 1974 head of state Acheampong ordered Naa Mohammadu removed and Naa Yakubu installed.] All the chiefs went.

My uncle said " If Mion-lana's people want to make a legal case, let's push it along in the courts." Nkrumah agreed that they should put it into court. He wanted to see the truth.

The case went to court. Every kingmaker was called to write his views. Each person decided whom he loved. There were eleven of them--ten supported Naa Abudu-bla. Ten were united, but one person, Kuya-naa, supported Mion-lana. Kwame Nkrumah said that Mion-lana did not have a majority. "We want a majority person to be a chief. If you are a chief and you don't have a majority, how can you act? Naa Abudu-bla should be allowed to remain as Yaa Naa."

DL

Mion-lana was very stubborn! He wanted Yaa Naa so badly. Why did he have the right to contest or challenge? If they had made the Yaa Naa already, shouldn't he have just kept quiet and said, "OK. I lost"?

AL

Yes. He suffered. He was not a small boy when he died; he was old. Educated people say, "Law." You know, it is people like you, those who have gone to school, who want to put customs into law. Mion-lana was going against the tradition. During the olden days, after they make a chief you have to be quiet, but this is "law time."

DL

Did Mion-lana try kill Naa Abudu-bla?

AL

He couldn't prepare himself to do that. Mion-lana's father had tried to kill Naa Abudu-bla's father, but couldn't get him. He himself also tried, but failed. It was because of Mion-lana that Naa Abudu-bla had made himself small when he was young. When at last Naa Abudu-bla come out, he did it suddenly and with force so that Mion-lana was not strong enough to get him any more. Naa Abudu-bla was Yaa Naa for 15-18 years. When he died--

DL

--that is when they put Mion-lana into Katini and brought the troubles.

AL

--and brought the troubles.

DL

OK. Now its time for Craig's questions but let me first summarize the story.

So, this is the story of a man whose father was the Yaa Naa. The man's name is Abudu, son of Yaa Naa Mahama-bla. Naa Abudu-bla had a childhood accident and one of his eyes was stunted in its growth. Naa Abudu-bla had learned from fortune-tellers that he was destined to become a Yaa Naa, but that he had enemies who would try to thwart him. He was advised not to become prominent, but to make himself like a common person. In this way he wouldn't appear to be ambitious and a threat to his rivals. When the father died, the son did not have a title; that is, he hadn't yet been a chief. The elders gave him a chieftaincy position that is reserved in case the eldest son of a Yaa Naa hadn't already received a title before the father dies. They keep it for that purpose because the eldest son of a person who dies has special duties to perform at the funeral of his father.

His father died. There are formalities to funerals in Dagbon. They have a special ceremony at the third day after the death and a ceremony on the seventh day after the death. M-ba Lun-naa was referring to these ceremonies when he said, "They made the third day and the seventh day." There was a dispute as to whether Naa Abudu-bla was

the appropriate person to become regent. The elders gave the regent title to another person, Kpatin'-lana Ziblim, and within three months he died.

AL

Three weeks.

DL

The person's death indicated that something was against the tradition. Dagbambas probably thought that the person died from supernatural causes. Perhaps the spirit of the dead father caused that man to die. Then, they made the eldest son, the hero of this story, the regent, and made the formal ceremony, the last funeral rites of the dead Yaa Naa. It is on the occasion of this final funeral that the elders choose the successor. In this part of the story, M-ba Lun-naa introduced the antagonist of the tale, the chief of a town called Mion. The Mion-lana strongly wanted to be Yaa Naa. In normal cases, they wait until the middle of the night to go and quickly catch the person who is going to be the next king. They whisk him off to the special places in the palace where they do certain special

rites that anoint him as chief. But in this case, they did it earlier so that Mion-lana's supporters would not have an opportunity for tricks.

The kingmakers did the rituals of putting the special regalia on the new chief. When Naa Abudu-bla came out, the person that M-ba Lun-naa called his "father" said the praise poem that is the basis of Sangmari Gong. Namo-naa Issahaku was not his biological father, but one of his teaching fathers. The title of Namo-naa is for the chief drummer in the hierarchy of drummers and the chief drummer of the Yaa Naa. Namo-naa Issahaku said, "My love has appeared." Drummers call chiefs "my love." He used a metaphor from the Islamic lunar calendar. One of the months, Ramadan, is the month of fasting from sunrise to sundown. Abubakari's teaching-father compared Naa Abudu-bla to the fasting moon, saying, "The fasting moon has appeared." That is a very potent symbol, a strong image. Then, Namo-naa used the image of a star in the sky. "My love is like a star in the sky. A star always stays in the sky. It never falls on the ground. God put it there and the star will always stay." This image conveyed the divine origin of Naa Abudu-bla's destiny to be chief. So, that was the story. In response the question of whether a deformed

person is eligible to become chief, the answer was, "Yes." Destiny determines a chief, not human beings. It is God and destiny.

Then, there was the story of the interface of traditional culture with party politics in contemporary Ghana. At the time of the independence from Britain, Ghana had had party politics for quite some time. The major political figure was Kwame Nkrumah. The antagonist in the story was active in Kwame Nkrumah's party. His supporters must have had the sense that they could use their allegiance with the national government to get an opportunity to overturn the decision of the traditional kingmakers and get their man, Mion-lana Andani, installed. Here we met a very prominent person in M-ba Lun-naa's life. At that time, he was the chief of Tolon, one of the best-educated men in Ghana, and among the first educated chiefs from the North. Tolon-naa cleverly changed his political party; he "crossed carpet" was how M-ba Lun-naa put it. It was as if he switched from being a Democrat to a Republican because it was a Republican administration. Like a chess match, he blocked the move of the other people who were saying, "Let's use the power of our political party to get what we want." Kwame Nkrumah was happy that such

an important figure as Tolon-naa Yakubu changed parties. Nkrumah wouldn't let the party thing overturn the--

AL

--the tradition.

DL

Other stories that students in the class are working on reveal that Mion-lana and his supporters never gave up. When Naa Abudu-bla died, supporters took Mion-lana Andani secretly in the night and installed him as Yaa Naa against all tradition. Civil war has followed. A number of the other stories have had to do with the influence of Europeans in the history of Dagbon, and the influence of contemporary sort of politics. The tradition now is intermingled with contemporary life.

Now, can you remember what questions you were thinking of asking?

CP

How many chiefs came and went since the change to independence?

AL

Since Naa Abudu-bla died? Only two. Some people count Naa Andani IV as a Yaa Naa, but he didn't come out to greet people. They buried him as a Yaa Naa, but his regent was not sitting like Yaa Naa's regent. After a year, they made Naa Abudu-bla's son to be Yaa Naa Mohamadu. Five years later--

DL

--they sacked him.

AL

The case was still running in five year's time.

CP

I also wanted to know--Kpatin'-lana Ziblim, the regent that was to replace the Yaa Naa's son, where did he come in exactly and how did they decide to make him regent?

AL

He is the son of Naa Alaasani. His brother, Naa Abudu-bla's father, was the son of Naa Alaasani. In our custom, if a chief dies without a son or only bore daughters, the elders put the dead chief's brother as regent, or one of his junior brother's sons.

CP

Kpatin'-lana Ziblim is the man who died shortly before the final funeral of Naa Mahama. Was there any suspicion that Naa Mahama's son, Naa Abudu-bla, had anything to do with the death?

AL

No. Naa Abudu-bla didn't kill Kpatin'-lana Ziblim. His death didn't show that somebody killed him. He got up and didn't feel like eating. Some time later he vomited and started going to toilet with diarrhea. Coming to evening--he died.

DL

Did soothsayers go into why he died?

AL

You know they will! But for that one, it will not come out. [The findings of the soothsayers will be kept private.] Whenever a person dies, Dagombas use soothsayers to go into the death. Except me. Me--I refuse. If you learn who caused the death, you can't kill the fellow, and you can't send him to court because a court will never believe these things.

DL

Craig, anytime anybody dies, people consult fortune-tellers and soothsayers to understand the cause of death--was it some behavior of the deceased or some behavior of other individuals that caused the death? In addition to natural causes, when anybody dies, there are human or supernatural forces at work. So, M-ba Lun-naa is saying that when anybody dies, people try to figure out what happened. But he himself chooses not to do that because it just causes quarrels. It causes revenge and feelings of retribution.

AL

It can make you to be a wicked man. I don't like it. This year I lost my senior brother. I loved him--true--I loved Alaasani. He was at home doing our drumming customs in Kasuliyili for Lun-naa, our senior brother. He enabled me to be away from Kasuliyili, working. I could be free to do what I can do. Then, he just died. When he got sick, I spent a lot. I took him to hospital three times. It all cost money. And still he died. Because he had been at home doing our own lunsu work, he had not gotten many things. But he was a drum chief, so I couldn't make his funeral like an ordinary funeral, like a poor man's funeral. I had to make the funeral like a chief's funeral, like a rich family's

funeral. I didn't go to soothsayers, but some people did. They wanted to contact me and let me know what had happened to my brother. I told them, "No, I don't want to sit with you people." I just cleared away from them. Learning the cause of death causes a lot of trouble.

CP

Would you say most people prefer to go to the fortune-tellers?

AL

Yes, most people do it. I do go to fortune-tellers if I want to look into what is going to happen to me tomorrow or in the coming year. But I don't go to ask, "I lost my brother. He got sick and died. What came so that he got this sickness?" If I get that answer what will I do next? When my brother was still alive--yes--I could ask, "What caused the sickness?" I may have had luck. A soothsayer may tell me, "Oh, this is what happened, so if you do this and do that, then he will be OK." For that--I do it. But not after he died. People in my family do it. They call all the family, both mother's side and father's side.

They sit and bring a soothsayer in front of them. They ask and he will give them the examples. If they push him, he can even call the name of the evildoer. That causes troubles. I don't like it.

CP

Thanks.

DL

I want to bring you back to the part of the appellation, "God polishes."

AL

"A thing humans don't love that is the thing God loves."

DL

Can you help us to understand why they said that?

AL

They say that because people had even stopped him from becoming regent, but he became their Yaa Naa. Who made that happen? It is God who did it. It is simple to understand the meaning. He wasn't made regent, but now he is Yaa Naa. Who made him Yaa Naa? God.

DL

I think Saṅmari Gɔŋ is one of the coolest rhythms--a very enjoyable musical rhythm--but M-ba Lun-naa, you always say that no rhythm that is better than another.

AL

Yes. If you hear one you may like it, but when another comes you will say, "Oh, this is fantastic." Another also will come and you will say, "Oh, this is fantastic." Every rhythm has its meaning.

DL

So, for you there is not one better than another one?

AL

Right. They are all good.

END