

The Story of Jenkuno, Appellation for M-ba Duyu Sheni

Told by Dolsi-naa Abubakari Lunna, May 7, 1991 and March 29, 2002

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DL

Dolsi-naa, Could you tell me the story of Jenkuno. Who is this appellation for?

AL

Jenkuno is an appellation for Duyu Sheni, one of the officials in the court of the Yaa Naa.

DL

Which Yaa Naa was it?

AL

Duyu Sheni was during Yaa Naa Abudu. You know, we have two Naa Abudus. We have Naa Abudu, who is Naybieyu, and then we have Naa Abudu Satan. Some people

say "Shetan," but it is "Satan." Naa Abudu Satan was the first son of Naa Alaasani Zim

Taai Kulga. After Naa Abudu Satan came Naa Mahama Korle.

DL

What sort of duty does the Duyu do for the Yaa Naa?

AL

Everyone in Dagbon knows that without him, you can't see the Yaa Naa. Supposing you come to the Yaa Naa's palace, ask the people if the Yaa Naa is at home. Even if you go inside, the Yaa Naa will never mind you unless you go back to see this man. Because of this duty, M-ba Duyu always will be at the chief's house. He doesn't go to farm; his farm is chief's palace [laughs]. Jenkuno was created for Duyu Sheni.

Dagombas call it "M-ba Duyu," which means "my father pot." "Duyu " means "pot."

DL

Like a cooking pot?

AL

Yes. You know, pot is respected because we use it to make the food we eat. We compare chieftaincy to food and say the M-ba Duyu helps to make it. M-ba Duyu holds the walking stick of the Yaa Naa. You know, when a Yaa Naa walks, he goes like this. [AL demonstrates walking with his head facing forward.] He must not turn his neck to look around.

DL

He has to keep his head facing straight ahead?

AL

He has to keep his head very straight. If he wants to turn to see something behind him, he can't twist his neck. He has to do it like this. [AL turns his whole body.] When a Yaa Naa is moving, he has people in back of him. Back in time, there were twelve gunmen-- twelve guns loaded with bullets. But now, because of the national government, they use only one gun when the Yaa Naa is walking. Presently, when the Yaa Naa stands up to go

outside, there is one gunner standing behind him. If the Yaa Naa turns his head, it means that he thinks something bad is happening there. The gunner has to shoot immediately.

Also, when a Yaa Naa is sitting, he cannot turn his head. Nowadays, do you know what they do so that he can turn to look behind him? They find a rolling chair.

DL

[laughs at the idea of a swivel chair entering Dagomba tradition] Like an office chair?

AL

[laughs] Like an office chair. So, when he is sitting and there are people saying something interesting behind him, the Yaa Naa just uses his chair to make his whole body turn. Before, if he were to do that at his formal sitting place, M-ba Duyu would shout at him like a child. M-ba Duyu controls the Yaa Naa. He will say, "Lion, everybody is here to see you. Whom are you turning to see?" We take our paramount chief as our lion. Then, the Yaa Naa will come back, quiet.

Some people say that the Yaa Naa doesn't dance, but that is not correct. The Yaa Naa can do everything, but he must know the rules. When he stands up to dance, M-ba Duyu should kneel down and give him the walking stick. All the elders also will kneel down. If the Yaa Naa dances forward toward an elder and wants go back again, he must turn around. He can't dance backwards or spin himself like other dancers can do.

DL

He can't turn quickly?

AL

No. He has to turn gently.

DL

What is the story of this particular man with Jenkuno as his appellation. Why were drummers talking about mice and a sleeping cat?

AL

The Jenkuno story comes from the way Duyu Sheni made the chiefs suffer. According to my father, when Naa Abudu finally got the skin, he had become paralyzed in one arm and one leg. When he wanted to go out from the palace, people had to pick him up and carry him outside. He could see, but he couldn't talk; his voice would sound, "ah ah ah." At this present time, the kingmakers would make another chief, but during the old days, they said, "No. Unless he dies, he will remain Yaa Naa." So, because of this situation, Duyu Sheni had to be very active. Whenever there was something that the Yaa Naa had to do--for example, say some town chief died and it became time for candidates to contest for that title--Duyu Sheni was the man to speak.

Let's say some chiefs had come to the Yaa Naa's palace. Duyu Sheni would go inside and come out to say, "The chief is sleeping. There is no way to see chief." Instead of letting the sub-chiefs spend one day or two days in Yendi before going back to their towns, he would make them sleep at Yendi for two weeks or even one month without seeing Yaa Naa. You see, once you go to Yendi and report that you are there to see Yaa Naa, you cannot go back to your town before the Yaa Naa sees you. If you don't report

yourself to M-ba Duyu, you can go back. But if you do go to him and say, "I have come to greet my grandfather," there you will feel it in your pocket. He will take money!

The Yaa Naa receives visitors only on Thursday, Friday, Sunday, and Monday. If you go to M-ba Duyu's house on these days, he will take you to the Yaa Naa. This particular Duyu Sheni would leave you outside, go inside, and then come to tell you that the Yaa Naa is sleeping. All you could do is wait and then go back to his house another day. You know, any time you go to M-ba Duyu, you have to give him kola. Duyu Sheni was forcing money from people in this way; they were wasting time staying at Yendi. That was the trouble.

Dagombas remember Duyu Sheni as an elder who chopped the food we call "bribe." He wasn't afraid to be open about it. Everyone knew that the man was chopping, but he kept demanding more and more. Sub-chiefs were worried. If one of them needed to see the Yaa Naa, he had to give more kola to Duyu Sheni than he would have to give to the Yaa Naa himself.

Some of the chiefs from smaller towns in Dagbon, we call them the "grandchildren" of the Yaa Naa, started going behind the back of M-ba Duɣu when they came to Yendi to greet the Yaa Naa. They would not report themselves to M-ba Duɣu. Instead, they would go to the chief's servants, the Naazoos, when they were outside the palace. The Naazoos would take them to the Yaa Naa. One day, Duɣu Sheni went to the Yaa Naa's palace and met some sub-chiefs doing this. He said to himself, "Oh, so this is what people have started to do now?" So in the evenings he would wait in a house next to the chief's palace. When he saw plenty people leaving the palace, he would come out and say, "Now I have caught you. So, you want to pass behind my back? We will see about this!"

People started talking. Luckily for him, Duɣu Sheni had a drummer who loved him. The drummer knew that his chief, Duɣu Sheni, was not doing right. The drummer had an idea. He called his children and told them, "The chiefs are talking against my lord, Duɣu Sheni. I am going to create an appellation for him. I am going to drum and sing to him. If he is a person who listens to advice, he will reduce taking people's money. If not, maybe someone will kill him." The drummer composed the Jenkuno rhythm to make

Duyu Sheni think twice about the kola [bribes] he had been taking by force from the sub-chiefs.

In Dagbani, "jenkuno" means "cat" and "jenbariga" means "mouse." We Dagombas say that both cat and mouse are from God. God made mouse to be the food of cat. The drummer took his time, composed the appellation, and taught it to his drumming family.

The leading drummer plays,

Jenkuno, jenkuno	Cat, cat
Man' dimi ni, man' dimi ni	I am thinking
Puporiga dapala	Son of leopard
Bandan tinya jenkuno gbihiya	People have gone to see the sleeping cat

The answering drummers say,

Shela jenkuno ni	The cat is in the room
Shela jenkuno ni	The cat is in the room
Jenbariga mini jenkuno gbihira	The mouse enters thinking the cat is asleep
Shela jenkuno ni	The cat is in the room

Jenkuno bieyu

Oh, the wicked cat.

The leading luja continues,

Man' dimi ni jenkuno gbihiya

I am thinking the cat is sleeping

and,

M-kpee nye ma

My rival compares himself to me

Turi zuṅ ku gba ma

He is annoyed, but can't catch and kill me

Turi zuṅ ku gba ma

He is annoyed, but can't catch and kill me

DL

When did the drummers make this drumming name, this appellation, for him? After he had died?

AL

No--while he was still alive.

One day, the drummers played this music at the house of M-ba Duyu. As an elder who knows the customs of Dagbon, the drumming attracted his attention. He wondered, "What rhythm is that?" and sent for the drummers. "Why are you playing that?" he asked. "Whose appellation is that?" The drummer said, "My love ["m-maam" is a term by which drummers address their direct chief], it is for you!" [laughter] M-ba Duyu asked, "Why?" and the drummer said, "People are talking about you. The children and grandchildren of the Yaa Naa say that you are chopping too much from them. That means you are cat and they are mice." M-ba Duyu didn't want Jenkuno as his appellation, but what could he do? He accepted it.

DL

I used to think that the line in Jenkuno, "The mouse enters thinking the cat is asleep," meant that the sub-chiefs were wrong to go directly to the Yaa Naa.

AL

You remind me of another memory about the history of Jenkuno. On the day this appellation was created, my father was there. Those were the days when my father was

what I call "a complete drummer." He was active all over Dagbon and people knew him as a knowledgeable person who could play and sing nicely. My father Lun-naa Wumbee, told me this story.

One day, the Yaa Naa gathered all the chiefs. During the olden times, the Yaa Naa told chiefs, "This year make the Damba Festival in your town. Next year's festival should be here in Yendi." That is how it used to be--one year for your town, the second year for Yendi. So, festival time had come. All the chiefs got together. M-ba Duyu came out.

According to my father, he told the Yaa Naa that he had something to say to the chiefs of Dagbon. Everybody quieted down. Duyu Sheni said, "Do you people think that I am sleeping. I am not. If you pass behind me, I will catch you." Then, he turned to Namonaa, the Yaa Naa's chief drummer, and asked, "Am I telling lies? Was I sleeping?"

Namo-naa said, "No." Then, M-ba Duyu asked Namonaa, "Can you say something about it?" Namonaa Sheni, the grandfather of Issahaku Namowo, my second teacher, was Namonaa at that time. Namonaa Sheni said, "You are a cat and these people are mice. Cats have no food they like better than mice. Mice are passing by the cat, thinking

that he is asleep. Catch them. Let them become meat!" [laughs] That day they created Jenkuno.

At first, they didn't have the leading lundaa [leading luja] inside the drumming. After they played the answer luja rhythm, they stopped for Namo-naa Sheni to sing--calling the grandfathers of Duyu Sheni. For the next Damba Festival, the drummers planned out how to make this appellation suitable for dance. The Zohe Lun-naa was good on lundaa. When Namo-naa sang Zohe Lun-naa would play, the other drummers would answer.

When they finished, the singer and leading luja would play again. You see? They added many drumming talks that call the names of Duyu Sheni's grandfathers.

DL

I am a little confused now. Jenkuno is advising Duyu Sheni to reduce his demands on the sub-chiefs who are trying to see the Yaa Naa, but it seems as if the appellation is also talking about the mice. I mean, the mice should think and the cat should also think.

AL

The drummers are advising both M-ba Duyu and the Yaa Naa's children and grandchildren [i.e., the sub-chiefs]. The cat should realize that everyone is from one creator. He should have consideration for others. The mice also should know they are the food of cat. If you pass him, he will catch you and eat you. How can a mouse pass by a cat? Be careful! Don't let him know. Make it secret. Don't let anybody see you. If someone sees you and tells M-ba Duyu, M-ba Duyu will summons you.

Even now, chiefs go to Yendi in secret. Three months ago, my uncle, the chief of Wariboggu, needed to see the Yaa Naa. We left Tamale in my van at three o'clock in the morning and by five o'clock we were in the Yendi palace. The current Yaa Naa prays and has had a big mosque built in the palace. We prepared and went there to pray. As we came out, the Yaa Naa saw us, so we followed him directly to his sitting place. The Wariboggu chief greeted him and began telling him the reason we had come, "I have heard rumors that are worrying me. The chief of Tolon has died. [Tolon is the main town in the district of Wariboggu; the Wariboggu chief wished for the Yaa Naa to appoint him to be the next Tolon-naa.] I have been trying to help the people in the late

Tolon-naa's household by giving them food, but I have heard that people are talking against me, saying, 'The chief of Wariboggu already has made himself Tolon-naa!' I am worried that you would be annoyed if that sort of talk reached Yendi." He said, "My lord, I have come to tell you that the late Tolon-naa told me, 'If I die, take care of my people.' That is why I am feeding the late Tolon chief's family." The Yaa Naa said, "This is not a problem. Don't worry about it. Do what you can do to help them. People have already come and told me what you have been doing. For me, I don't think it is bad."

We finished talking with the Yaa Naa at a few minutes to 6:00. We went to the petrol station to fill up the van. We did not know that somebody from M-ba Duyu's house had also been in the mosque and had seen us go into the Yaa Naa's palace. This man rushed home to tell his father, "I saw Wariboggu chief and Kasul' Dolsi-naa at prayers. They are in the Yaa Naa's palace right now." M-ba Duyu quickly came, but was too late to meet us in the palace. He sent one of the Naazoos to trace us. The Naazoo said, "I am sorry, but you can't leave yet. If you go, M-ba Duyu will say that you have bribed me to say that I did not find you. Wait here for the wulana [linguist] of M-ba Duyu." I told my

uncle to let me handle it because, as a drummer, I joke and play with M-ba Duyu. When the wulana came I gave him a small sum and told him a story to tell his master, M-ba Duyu. We dodged that case.

DL

In the story of Jenkuno, the drummers were advising the chiefs. What can you tell us about how drummers are supposed to act towards chiefs? Is giving advice part of the work of drummers?

AL

Yes! Giving advice is part of the work of the drummers. During the olden days, drummers were like judges. If there was a misunderstanding and members of a family were fighting, they had to consult a drummer. Let us say that you and I were quarrelling. Our people would invite a drummer to come. He would come. The people would tell him, "Do you know Davis? Do you know Abubakari?" The drummer would say, "Yes." The people would ask, "OK, tell us about Davis. Tell us about Abubakari." The drummer would start talking about the history of our families. You know, we Dagombas

have long generations. The places where your grandfather and grandmother started--you still have family there. We don't cut them away. You see? Like your father Larry--didn't Larry start at a different place before he came to Boston?

DL

Yes, by all means--in New York.

AL

Ah hah! So, you have family there. Those New York people have families too, but the New York people will never know your family here in Boston. You see? Now suppose I am part of Larry's New York family. We happen to meet and get into a palaver. A drummer who knows the whole family will come to give us advice. He will beat some rhythms about the Boston family and beat some rhythms about the New York family--talking about you and talking about me. At last, we discover we are in the same family. You can't believe it! Then, you and I will know that we should not fight each other. You see? From the drummer's talk, we see it for ourselves. Then, the younger person should

give some money to the senior fellow to give to the drummer. That means there will be no more fighting. This is what drummers did during the olden days.

DL

What you are saying reminds me of the idea behind Takai.

AL

Yes, yes! Ah hah! You see? Drummers' knowledge is serious. Dagombas should listen to us. One day, I will tell you the story of our drumming grandfather Lunzeyu. Because of what he did, the Yaa Naa gave an order that no chief should punish any drummer. A chief who punishes a drummer should be punished.

DL

OK. We will take that one for another day.

AL

In our Dagomba tradition, people are expected to listen to drummers. Dagombas should respect drummers. The other day, somebody was joking with me. One of my uncle's sons said, "You are a beggar!" He was telling me that I am a beggar. In fact, that is what some Dagombas call drummers--beggars. I told him, "Please! You don't know your left and right. That is why you call me a beggar. Suppose I tell you something about your family that you never knew before and you give me money. I have used knowledge about your own family to make you happy. You gave me the money. Now you are telling me that I have begged money from you! How?"

Then, one of people who were with us said, "Oh no! You drummers are lecturers."

DL

Uh huh. Right--drummers are professors of history.

AL

The man said, "You lecture us about what we don't know and we give you the money. If a person does work and collects money is he a beggar?" [laughter] That is why I always tell people, "You can't call a drummer a beggar." That day, come and see, all the people were saying, "Yes, yes." I said, "Look, drumming is not a small thing. If a drummer is singing and he is not talking true, Dagombas who are listening will start laughing because they know it is not correct."

DL

Just yesterday you were telling me that your children were nervous when they went to play Sambanluḡa at Kasuliyili because they know how hard it is.

AL

You see? But nowadays, money has spoiled so many people. My drumming fathers used to tell me, "Look! Don't sell your tradition. Don't think of money. Whenever somebody asks you for some of our history, never say, 'Give me this amount before I tell you.' Don't! The fellow can't pay you for what you are going to give to him. Once you have

charged him, he will say that he has bought it. Then, you will see that your knowledge of the tradition is getting away from you."

DL

The money means that he owns it.

AL

It means he owns it! [laughs] So, drumming is very, very, very, very, very, serious--very, very hard.

DL

Well Dolsi-naa, I thank you for another interesting story.

AL

Your welcome.

END