

The Story of Zim Taai Kulga, Appellation of Naa Alaasani

Told by Abubakari Lunna, March 2 and 6, 2001

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[Continued from "The Story of Naani Goo, Appellation of Naa Andani." Also see "The Story of Tampima Dundɔŋ," which is another appellation of Naa Alaasani]

AL

At that time, Naa Alaasani was Tampion-lana. Then, Kar-naa died. According to my teachers, during that time Naa Alaasani had made himself to be a person of bad character. He put himself to appear like a drinker, but he didn't really drink. He was pretending. He was covering himself because of something his brother Savelugu-naa Mahami had told him at the war barrier before he died. So, when Naa Alaasani came to ask for Karaga, advisors told Naa Andani, "Give it to him. As for this man, he is a drinker. He will die soon." So, Naa Andani gave the Karaga skin to Naa Alaasani. Naa Alaasani became Kar-naa.

In our Dagbamba skin system, when the Yaa Naa dies, three gates can ask for the Yendi skin. After he made Naa Alaasani to be Kar-naa, then Naa Andani realized, "I didn't kill Mahami. Alaasani is more than Mahami. If I die, he will be Yaa Naa." He tried to undo his mistake. He told his regent, Tugu-lan' Iyiri, "If I die, your uncle Savelugu-naa Dahimani--I want him to be Yaa Naa."

Naa Andani died. The elders came together.

DL

Did Naa Andani die because it was his time to die?

AL

Yes, nobody killed him.

On the right day of the funeral--Thursday--regent Tugu-lan' Iyiri came out in the morning. All the elders came to sit. Whenever the elders come to sampahi, the chief's sitting place, they have to be moving by leadership--according to seniority. All the elders

were entering. Kar-naa is senior so he had to come first. Kar-naa came and Namonaa said, "The first son of Yaa Naa--[Dagbani]." That is the praise of Karaga. Savelugu-naa was second. Savelugu-naa was coming to where the Yaa Naa sits and Namonaa said, "The second son of Yaa Naa--[Dagbani]." He came and sat down. The Mion-lana moved. Namonaa said, "The third son of Yaa Naa--[Dagbani]." Mion-lana came and sat down. When the Namonaa finished the greetings the regent shared kola to all of them.

Tugu-lana Iyiri called the Namonaa, "Leave your place. Come close to me." He came. The regent said, "Can you talk about Naa M-bakpem' Kar-naa?" The Yaa Naa calls the Kar-naa "senior father--"senior father, m-ba kpema," that is what elders call him. Namonaa repeated the praises of Kar-naa. The regent said, "Can you talk about Naa M-bakpem' Savelugu-naa?" Namonaa talked the same way. The regent said, "Can you talk about Naa M-bapira Mion-lana?" Namonaa said the same thing. When Namonaa had finished, the regent got up and walked into the palace. Everyone moved to his house.

You know, town praises are the highest--the town praises are love. Karaga--[Dagbani]-- means somebody who is creating talks or creating matters. Savelugu-naa is--[Dagbani]-- means the person who can ride on every animal. You see? Mion-lana--[Dagbani]-- means black--his people--something like they are poor.

DL

How is that a praise? It sounds more like an abuse.

AL

[Dagbani]. You are killing poor people to take their property? He says, "I won't go and be finding troubles, I will go and sit on lions. I won't go and be killing poor people, I will go and ride elephants." You see? That is the matter of that praise.

In Yendi and every paramount house, we have seniority when the chief is sitting. When the elders come, they sit outside until the chief himself enters the sampahi, where the paramount chief sits.

When the paramount chief enters, we drum Ginggaani. Ginggaani is very big music. If a good drummer like me plays Ginggaani when certain chiefs are in the sampahi, you kill them. They can never get a Ginggaani skin anymore. They must be away from the sampahi when we are playing Ginggaani for the paramount chief. You can't be near to him. Yes. If you are a small chief, you can't enjoy Ginggaani. For example, the Wariboggo chief can play Ginggaani in his own palace, but he can't play Ginggaani in Tolon. He can't. Because of that, any Wariboggo chief who wants to get Tolon cancels Ginggaani. He doesn't like it. Even in his own house--he doesn't play it because he is not up to Ginggaani yet.

DL

If they are appointed by Yaa Naa? Does that determine it?

AL

No. You can be appointed by the Yaa Naa, but still be small. Wariboggo-lana is appointed by Yaa Naa, he can't play Ginggaani; Lamesheyu-naa is appointed by Yaa Naa, he can't play Ginggaani; Barvum-lana is appointed by Yaa Naa, he can't play Ginggaani;

Morle-lana--he can't play Ginggaani. The chiefs that play Ginggaani in Toma are Tolon-naa, Kumbun-naa, Kasuli-lana, Zo-lana, Savelugu-naa, Diari-lana, and Nanton-naa--that is it.

DL

What is Toma?

AL

Toma is the west of Dagbon. That is how the Yendi people call us. From Savelugu--Zogu right down to Diari, right down to Tamale, right down to Tugu, right down to Tolon and Kasuliyili--they call us Toma. We are still having the olden language. When Dagbon started, we were the people. We didn't move from the old houses, the old towns. Once we got the towns, our people stayed there. A lot of the towns moved to the Yendi side. There is Wariboggo in the Yendi side; we have two Wariboggus. Kasuliyili was Gushegu--that was where Gushe-naa was living. When Gushe-naa moved, one of his elder warrior said, "I will go back to keep the town moving." Gushe-naa said, "[Dagbani]

You are not vexed?" He said, "No. I will go back." That is the meaning of "Kasuliyili".

Gushe-naa selected three Kasul'-lanas before he gave it to the Yaa Naa.

After they finish playing Ginggaani, they have to walk in by seniority. They go, "I am the elder, I am senior," and then they move. That is why every time we celebrate with our chiefs--every Friday--we can't go to farm. Because it takes time! The senior man coming to the father--the drummer has to tell the chief, "This is your son coming to you. He started from this ex-chief's son." You talk about him until he finishes sitting. If the chief is somebody who gives, he will call the vocalist to get money for the drummers. The one who just entered will go to the paramount and get money for the drummers before the second person moves. Even if the Yaa Naa does not give him that money, he himself--when he sits down and the drummers sing one to two times--he himself will take money, give it to the chief, and then the Yaa Naa will give it to drummers. The money means that the second after him can come. They do the same thing until all the big people have come in.

When we go to Yendi--if all the kingmakers are in town--they all have to be in the sampahi before the Yaa Naa comes out. Gushe-naa has to be in sampahi, Ko-naa has to be in sampahi, Tolon-naa has to be in sampahi--all the people, you see?

DL

It takes time.

AL

It takes time. And what do they hear there? Gushe-naa is the first elder to enter sampahi before anybody. When he moves in--there are the chiefs from his area who move with him.

DL

You have to play for them, too.

AL

Chiefs like Nokol-lana, Barle-naa, Ga-naa, Nakponzu-naa--they come with him. When Gushe-naa has drummed--going--he will hear Tolon-naa's drummers. Chiefs like Gulpe-naa, Kumbun-naa, Langa-lana, Kasuli-lana--they are all with Tolon-naa--they are all following. When they come, they go in together. When Ko-naa is moving--like Zohe-naa, Kagbanda-naa, Mali, Gbaago--they all come together. When they have entered and others hear that they are finished sitting, then you will hear Kar-naa also coming. If Kar-naa leaves his house before these people finish, he won't go to chief's palace. He will be in a different house, near to the chief's house, until the others have all come. Everybody sits by his way, coming toward chief house. That is why we have a big field at every chief's house. When they have all sat, then M-ba Duyu will go inside and bring the Yaa Naa out. He comes last and he gets up first. Yaa Naa comes last--gets up first. In the olden days, Yaa Naa never would see Gushe-naa. He can hear him talking. You know, we have mats--they close the mats between where Yaa Naa and Gushe-naa are sitting.

DL

Like the way Japanese people use screens?

AL

Uh huh! Good. And Gushe-naa never took kola from Yaa Naa. Yaa Naa would send kola to Gushe-naa. When Yaa Naa sat down finish, he would send kola to Gushe-naa before he shared kola to the others.

Tugu-lana Iyiri called the elders and told them, "You hear what Namo-naa said? I won't like to be Kar-naa. When I finish my father's funeral, I won't like to be Kar-naa. I won't like to be Mion-lana. I would like to be Yulbariga-naa [chief of Savelugu]." But the elders told him, "No. Our soothsayers haven't caught you for Savelugu. Our soothsayers are in Karaga. Prepare to be Kar-naa."

DL

Can I just stop you for a minute and see if I understand? Does this mean that the regent was saying he also wanted to become Yaa Naa?

AL

No, he didn't want to be Yaa Naa. The person who is going to take his father's Yendi skin--he wants his position. But if Kar-naa became Yaa Naa, he wouldn't give Karaga to anybody because that is the rule in our custom. Because if the regent is small chief, like Tugu-lana, you have to push him up before he can become a big chief.

DL

The one the kingmakers put for the Yendi skin--they take the regent and put him into that place?

AL

Yes--into that place.

So, the regent found one person and told him his plan. When the funeral finished--coming to evening--the regent sent to tell the elders, "You should choose Savelugu-naa. If you bring Kar-naa into the Katini, I will kill all of you." Until daybreak, no one brought Savelugu-naa. In the night, the regent sent Naazoos to bring Savelugu-naa from

his house. They brought him. The regent asked them to put Savelugu-naa into the Katini. They put him into the Katini. All the elders then got vexed because there is not any custom down for that. Gushe-naa said, "I am leaving. Anybody who is here and he gets his trouble, it is not my matter." All of them went to their homes. Kar-naa went to his home. Mion-lana went to his home.

Then, Kar-naa asked the elders for advice and the elders said, "We have nothing to do because we can't fight a Yaa Naa. Ours is to fight for the Yaa Naa. The regent is acting as Yaa Naa so if we fight and kill him--we can't do that. But if your people know the way they can find--it is not our palaver." Kor-naa Bukali was the son of the second brother of Naa Abudu, Kor-naa Mahami. Kor-naa Mahami had died and Kor-naa Bukali was occupying the Korli skin.

Kor-naa Bukali said he would never agree. He went and told Kar-naa, "Let us go and fight him. I can't be Yaa Naa because my father didn't become Yaa Naa. But your father became Yaa Naa. If we don't fight him so that you become Yaa Naa, that means he is kicking you people--he is kicking you away." Then, Kar-naa said, "In custom, you can't

kill the Yaa Naa and then come to be Yaa Naa. Let somebody else fight him." Then,

Kor-naa Bukali said, "I will find a way."

When Tugu-lan' Iyiri put Kukara Dzee into the Katini, he gave him the walking stick, the damli--the walking stick is always with the regent. He gave it to Savelugu-naa when he went into the Katini. But the regent couldn't find the gown, the smock, the hat, and bolun and gbewaa, the chair and the skin. Then, the regent told Savelugu-naa Kukara Dzee, "Now, I give you Yaa Naa. Make me Savelugu-naa." They called his drummers.

Kukara Dzee made him Savelugu-naa.

DL

The drummers didn't refuse?

AL

What?! If a chief is having his drummers and he asks them to play, they can't refuse.

Even if you know what he is doing is not correct, you have to do it, and then tell him,

"You are not doing correct." But you can't refuse to do it. In Dagbon, we have too many drummers. Even right now, we have Andani drummers and Abudu drummers.

The new Savelugu-naa went around Yendi--greeting everybody--saying, "I am going to guard you for some time." He stayed at Yendi for a long time. Kor-naa Bukali was preparing.

Kor-naa Bukali went to the British and told them, "Please. We need your help." The last war of the British and the Dagombas was for Naa Andani. Naa Abudu fought them once. Naa Andani twice. Naa Andani fought them second and third. After the third time, the British didn't go back to Cape Coast. They passed through Dagbon and stayed Jerapa--northwest--in Dagaaba--Dagarti land. Kor-naa Bukali told the British what happened--how the regent brought confusion and that they wanted to kill the regent. "If the regent is killed, we Dagombas will be set. Then, the Yaa Naa will allow you to come and sit in Dagbon." The British gave him three white officers and black soldiers, too. You know, when the British came to sit in the South, they got black people and trained them.

They came to Salankpang. As they were reaching Salankpang, they heard news that regent Tugu-lan' Iyiri, the new Savelugu-naa, was coming home. He was going to sleep in Singa and the next day he would pass Tugu and go to Savelugu. Between Salankpang and Singa is three miles. They stopped there for the night. Kor-naa Bukali took the British right to Singa and showed them the house where the regent was lodging. Then, he passed to Karaga to inform Kar-naa, "There is going to be fighting tomorrow morning at Singa."

In the morning they dressed the regent's horse. Tugu-lan' Iyiri came out and sat on the horse. Then, he saw one white person sitting in a tree, one white person sitting in the grass on top of the building, and one white person coming towards him. He said, "Why these jensi"--the way his father called them--"What do these monkeys want here? Kill them for me." They start shooting. When he heard the guns sounding, he came down from the horse to go back into the house. They shot his back and he fell down. He died.

The news went to Yendi. "The white people are back. They killed Tugu-lana and they are coming to Yendi." The person the regent had made to be Yaa Naa--he ran. He ran

from the palace. When they came to Yendi, they couldn't find him. They put people to find him--for so many months--they couldn't.

The white people called the Dagombas and asked them, "What we did--did we do wrong or did we do good?" The elders of Dagbon told them, "You people didn't do bad. You did good. Tugu-lana Iyiri did bad and you paid it to him. A regent has never chosen a Yaa Naa before. Tugu-lan Iyiri tried to choose our Yaa Naa by himself. Elders make a regent to be acting as Yaa Naa; we don't choose him to be Yaa Naa. He tried to put somebody to be Yaa Naa and go to that person's position. You people didn't do bad."

The British said, "Now what will you people do?" The kingmakers said, "We are going to select our Yaa Naa." The British asked them, "Who will be your Yaa Naa?" They pointed to Naa Alaasani. The British said, "Can you do the custom for us to see?" This was the first custom the white people saw us do. They put Naa Alaasani into the Katini. The next day, they brought him from Katini and sent him to Zohe. In one week, they brought him back to the palace.

The British told Naa Alaasani, "We are moving back to where we came from." Naa Alaasani said, "Thank you. You are welcome to live with us. But I am going to ask you something. I have heard that if you people are living with me I can't do lot of things. Number one, drummers make a person to be chief and our drumming is very loud." They said, "We don't care." Naa Alaasani said, "Number two, the elders have to do the tradition to make the Yaa Naa and our tradition is very strong." The British said, "We are not going to put our hands in your tradition." Naa Alaasani said, "You people are welcome." Then, the British built a house in Yendi. They built a house in the center of Tamale, which is the regional office now. They went to Tolon and built a house there. They went to Kumbungu; they built a house. They went to Savelugu--all the big, big towns--Diari, Yelizoli, Gushegu, Sunson--they built houses. But it was in Tamale where they put a regional minister, but at that time they said, "D.C."

DL

--District Commissioner. I am surprised that Naa Alaasani asked the British about the drumming being loud. Why would they even think about asking about that?

AL

He is saying that he has drummers--he has music--but his music is strong, not loud--strong. His music is strong--strong. You have been to Ghana. If you put your eyes into Ghana, you shouldn't be surprised. If you put your eye into Cape Coast or Takoradi--the Fantis don't have tradition anymore. The Fantis had drumming like the Ashantis. Yaa Asantewa had fought the British very strongly. That is why the white people didn't get a castle in Ashanti land--why the Ashanti still have drumming. Ashanti drumming nearly died when the Asantehene was far away.

Naa Alaasani told them, "I learned that you people don't want to live with many people--you want to be alone. But for me, a lot of my custom is very strong. If I am doing any custom, the drums will drum and it is very strong. He told them, "I have Fire Festival, I have Damba, I have Chuyu, I have Kpini, and I have Chimsi. For all these festivals, we drum until day break." During the olden days, the Fire Festival had a big Sambanluja. We would go through the fire, go home and wash ourselves, and then go back to the chief's house.

So, it happened that Naa Alaasani joined Naa Andani's chieftaincy. That brought Zim
Taai Kulga--that brought Tampima Dundɔŋ. The meaning of Tampima Dundɔŋ is that
he has big, serious brothers.

DL

Now, I would like to ask a question about music. To me, Naani Goo and Naybieɣu are
different from other rhythms because there is a section when the drummers just play one
stroke--they hit their drum once and then the lead luja talks. They go back-and-forth like
that for some time and then they change and play, "kokoko kokoko kokoko," or the Naani
Goo. I haven't heard other rhythms like that. Do you know of any other rhythm, besides
Naani Goo and Naybieɣu, that has this structure?

AL

It is the talk. They are following the talk. The rhythms are following the tongue.

DL

But having a section where the answer drums just play once and then another section where they come in and play the --

AL

--whole thing to put it together. Those two appellations are the only ones. Just like we play Zim Taai Kulga--Zim Taai Kulga has the same thing [sings in meter], "Kuli pali nim wɔlim jɛ, Kuli pali nim wɔlim jɛ," and then they leave it for leading drummer. The drumming--our music goes according to the tongue. Where the tongue will go, that is how the drum also will have to sound.

DL

But to me it is interesting that those two appellations are similar to each other, but different from all the other ones. Two chiefs in a row have that structure in their music, while no other music has quite the same form.

AL

Only those chiefs have that quality of sound. Yes.

DL

Is that one of the reasons why you think they are popular appellations for dancing?

AL

No, not because of that. We dance according to the sound. To me, these are the paramount chiefs' rhythms that are sweet for dancing. People likes them. Every Yaa Naa has drumming, but some rhythms are only for listening, and some are only for walking. Naa Yakubu's father's rhythm--Naa Andani Jenbariga--you can't dance to it. All the chiefs have appellations, but not all their appellations are good for dancing. But Naani Goo and Naybieyu --we can dance to these rhythms. Yes.

So, I think we have to break from here so that I can find something to eat. The middleman is crying. [My stomach is growling.] Then, I am going to my workshop to make my drum.

DL

Thank you.

END