

SUCCESSION AND DEMOCRACY IN NANUN, NORTHERN GHANA

Dedicated to the memory of Elena Bertoncini, née Zúbková

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The chiefdom of Nanun situated in northern Ghana has existed for centuries up to our time. Although it has been subject to the transformations common to colonial and postcolonial states the mechanisms of succession and ritual have survived and can be studied in the field. My research, which began in 1978, has included two successions, a number of installations of new chiefs and the observation of ritual activities of specialists during successions. It appears that two chiefly houses alternate but no chief becomes such without competition. The paper will discuss in detail the political culture of Nanun resulting from the complex articulation of factors which combine succession rules, ritual conditioning and the quest for power. The Nanun case can be understood as an example of neotraditional democracy coexisting with the modern state but following its own trajectory.

Keywords: chiefdom, succession, democracy, northern Ghana, Nanun

The Nebulous Nature of Nanumba and Konkomba Ethnicity

Nanumba (sing. Nanuŋa) is the self-designation of several tens of thousands of people who inhabit Nanun and recognise the authority of the Bimbilla Naa, their paramount chief. In a modern administrative sense, Nanun practically coincides with the Nanumba District of the Northern Region of Ghana. It is quite characteristic that the Nanumba District has no precisely defined boundaries, a deficiency which helps to limit friction between chieftaincies and people. However, the modern idea of boundaries has now penetrated the minds of people in Northern Ghana.

The fact that the Nanumba speak a language (Nanuni) which is practically identical to that of the Dagbamba (Dagbani), along with the non-existence of

any formal criteria of traditional citizenship, has contributed to a state of affairs where people move very easily between the two polities, Nanun and Dagbon, and do not bother much about questions of identity. Identity comes to the fore only in confrontation with people who speak a very different language, like the Gonja or the Konkomba. Up to this day many Nanumba identify as Dagbamba, even though they recognise the authority of a chief who has been enskinned (=installed) by the Bimbilla Naa. The problem is also that many women and men have come from Dagbon (and even from Mamprugu) to settle in Nanun and so do not feel any ethnic allegiance. In the first three decades of the Gold Coast's autonomy and Ghana's independence (1951 – 1981), the chieftaincy was less prominent in the lives of the people who, thus, have not had the opportunity to identify themselves around ethnic symbols. However, the conflict between the Nanumba and the Konkomba¹ has not only helped to define their mutual ethnicities but has also made clear the concept of Nanumbanness as against that of Dagbambanness.

Historically, the Nanumba emerged from the confrontation of militarily organized people, who immigrated three to four hundred years ago into what has become Nanun, and the autochthonous population. Of the latter very little is known except that they were sedentary agriculturalists (practising shifting cultivation) whose communities lived around shrines (*boxole*) of gods of a totemic nature. Their leader was Dalana. They put their dead on trees (Nazo Mumuni Feb. 1980). The immigrants were led by Dmantambu, one of the sons of Naa Gbewaa, and they moved from Dagbon in a southeasterly direction. Other kingdoms of Northern Ghana as well as Upper Volta (with the exception of Gonja) claim a common origin because tradition maintains that they had been founded by either sons (Mamprugu, Dagbon and Nanun) or grandchildren (Moogo) or great-grandchildren of Naa Gbewaa. Naa Gbewaa himself, according to different versions of the foundation myth, arrived from the East, most likely from the area of Gurma in modern Burkina Faso. The Bimbilla Naa calls *m'mabia* = my brother both Ya Naa of Dagbon and Na Yiri of Mamprugu.

The contemporary Nanumba ethnic identity derived largely from shared knowledge of the 'mythical charter' connected with the story of Dmantambu. Nanumba ethnicity is derived from the existence of a polity and is not based on

¹ Cf. SKALNÍK, P. Nanumba Chieftaincy Facing the Ghanaian State and Konkomba 'Tribesmen': an Interpretation of the Nanumba-Konkomba War. In BINSBERGEN Van, W., REYNTJENS, F., HESSELING, G. (eds). *State and Local Community in Africa*, pp. 89–109; SKALNÍK, P. Chieftdom at War with Chiefless People while the State Looks on. In *Social Evolution and History*, 2011, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 55–121.

language identity. Nanun actually derives its name from *naa* (chief) and *muu* (hand). According to the legend, Dmantambu's younger brother, Sitobu, the founder of Dagboŋ, asked Dmantambu to protect him from enemies by positioning himself on Sitobu's southeastern flank. Sitobu pointed his hand in that direction. Another version has it that all three brothers split from a lake called Baxri in Dagboŋ. The early history of Nanun is a fascinating topic, but cannot be discussed here.

To summarise, Nanumba ethnicity had been built around a foundation myth that stresses the role of chieftaincy as its unifying principle: in fact, chieftaincy is the very reason for the existence of the Nanumba. The Konkomba emerged out of external pressures. Konkomba ethnicity has been bolstered by literacy and evangelical campaigns and, undoubtedly, also by the conflicts with the Dagbamba and, recently, with the Nanumba. Both ethnicities are, however, relatively loose owing to the ritual and linguistic proximity between the Nanumba and the Dagbamba on the one hand and, on the other, the internal fragmentation of the Konkomba, who have a weak linguistic identity and no uniting chieftaincy.

The Neo-Traditional Chieftdom of Nanun

The Nanumba chieftaincy (*naam*) stands in complementary opposition to the 'regulated anarchy' of the Konkomba. This thesis sounds very unusual because anthropologists, as well as historians, developmental sociologists and administrators, and both the Nanumba and Konkomba themselves, believe in the total opposition of these principles of indigenous politics.

The *naam* is a concept that needs elucidation. The data I gathered among the Nanumba² makes it easier to do so and can be compared with the findings of

² I carried out my intensive anthropological fieldwork in ten periods totalling no less than two years during the years 1978 – 2003. My first field report is available in SKALNÍK, P. *Report on an Exploratory Study into Correlations between Rural Development and Traditional Political Hierarchy in the Nanumba District, Northern Region, Ghana (June/September 1978)*. Unpublished manuscript. Financing was provided by myself, the Netherlands Foundation for Tropical Research (WOTRO) and the Centre for African Studies at the University of Cape Town. The Human Sciences Research Council and Bremner Bequest Travel Fund enabled me with their grants to participate in the 12th ICAES at Zagreb in 1988. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic helped me to participate in the 13th International Congress of the Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences at Ciudad de México in 1993. The late

other researchers such as Fortes, Goody and Drucker-Brown.³ The translation of this native concept is very difficult as it may mean ‘power’, ‘authority’ or ‘office’. I believe that it can best be described as chieftaincy, as the name for chief *naa* (pl. *naanima*) suggests. It appears that the whole existence of the Nanumba is connected with *naam* while the chiefs are only incumbents of *naam*. They, in turn, in their capacity as chiefs, depend on the spiritual support of the representatives of the autochthons.

There are four sacred villages in Nanuŋ. They are sacred because they contain shrines that symbolise the relationship between the autochthons and Dmantambu with his retinue. This relationship is ritual, in fact politico-ritual. Dmantambu and his chiefly people did not fight their way into Nanuŋ, except in some places where they met with resistance. The emergence of the common ethnic group, Nanumba, is based on a kind of politico-ritual pact. The ritual specialists, the earth priests (*tindanima*, sing. *tindana*), accepted the chiefly people with their institution of *naam* on the condition that *naam* can be renewed only with the sanction of the earth priests. The paramount chief, called Bimbilla Naa, who is a direct descendant of Dmantambu and a member of either of the two chiefly houses, resides in Nanuŋ’s capital Bimbilla and enskins (i.e. installs) most chiefs in Nanuŋ including those in sacred villages. However, his relationship with the latter is marked by ritual avoidance and fear. The Bimbilla Naa’s funeral cannot be ritually – i.e. ultimately – performed unless the autochthonous ritualists from Dalanyili and Binda villages led by their ‘chief’ Dalana (Yidana) proclaim him dead and perform a series of secret ritual activities on his grave.

According to the foundation legend, Dalana was the only leader whom Dmantambu ‘met’ in Nanuŋ. When I asked the Bimbilla Naa for permission to go to Dalanyili he laughed helplessly and said that such permission was not his to give as he had no direct authority over Dalanyili. Similarly, the Bimbilla Naa enskins his relative as the chieftainess of Ponaayili (lit. female chief’s house) but cannot see her again and is not allowed to go to this small place to the north

Salisu Wumbei and Yidana Adam assisted me in the field and I gratefully acknowledge that. This paper honours their memory. The Centre for Development Studies at the University of Cape Coast and the Tamale Institute for Cross-Cultural Studies, represented respectively by the directors Dr E. Amonoo and Dr J. Kirby, welcomed me in Ghana and helped to arrange good conditions for research.

³ FORTES, M. The political system of the Tallensi of the Gold Coast. In FORTES, M., EVANS-PRITCHARD, E. E. (eds). *African Political Systems*; GOODY, J. *Technology, Tradition, and the State in Africa*; DRUCKER-BROWN, S. *Ritual Aspects of the Mamprusi Kingship*.

of Bimbilla where some very secret paraphernalia connected with *naam* are kept. The chieftainess, Pona (lit. female chief), never comes to Bimbilla during the Bimbilla Naa's lifetime. However, she and her male co-chief Kpandixli come to Bimbilla at the time of *naa-kuli*, the Bimbilla Naa's ritual funeral, to supervise the procedure of the funeral. Without them the chief's funeral may not be performed.

The fourth sacred village, Duuni (lit. the place of the room), is the place where Dmantambu died, according to the founding myth, and where (according to some versions of the legend) his sister was buried. Dmantambu was to be buried in a sacred room in Duuni, specially kept and renewed by the Duuni people, but he disappeared, presumably to the pond called Bagri, in Dagboŋ, where the other children of the ultimate ancestor Naa Gbewaa are also believed to rest. Although the Bimbilla Naa officially enskins the Duu Naa, chief of Duuni, he sends his elders with the chiefly gown (*kparba*), which is put on the Duu Naa in the hall of his own palace. All other chiefs have to come to Bimbilla for their enskinment. The Bimbilla Naa must obey the taboo and not ever see the Duu Naa. If he travels on the road towards Yendi, he has to be blindfolded when he passes near Duuni. The Bakpab Naa, chief of the nearest village to Duuni, is not allowed to go to Duuni as well, but he can see the Duu Naa when the latter visits Bakpaba (Bakpab Naa Abudulai Natogmah, Feb. 1980).

The ritual underpinning of the Nanumba political system becomes even more obvious when we realise that the earth priests (*tindanima*) are warriors (*sapashinima*) as well. This function must have developed from the original occupation of the autochthonous inhabitants of Nanun as hunters. In their dual function, the earth priests are guarantors of the *naam*-chieftaincy, legitimizing it and defending it. That is why the warrior villages (Jilo, Ganguyili, Pusuga) surround Bimbilla or are situated close to other two important towns of Nanun, namely Nakpaa and Dakpam. The warriors have no claim to the *naam* but they know its rules and are on guard against its abuse.

Another group with politico-ritual status in Nanun are the *naakpamba* (sing. *naakpema*) or chief elders. They are considered senior to the chief of Bimbilla, as is reflected in the kinship terminology. For example, the Juo Naa or the Wulehe Naa would call the Bimbilla Naa *n'yang*, my grandson. They would be addressed as *n'yaba* - my grandfather - by the Bimbilla Naa, who, in turn, is viewed as father to all chieftaincies which are derived from Dmantambu. The Wulehe-Naa and a number of other *naakpamba* occupying important villages to the north-east, east and south of Bimbilla are the electors of the Bimbilla Naa ('kingmakers' in colonial terminology). The most important of these are the Juo Naa, the Lanjiri Naa (chief of Kukuo village) and the Gambux Naa. Others are the Jilo Naa, the Chichax Naa, the Dibsi Naa (chief of Nakpayili village) and the Juali Naa. These chiefly elders meet very rarely, if ever. In their very special

position, they do not have the right to compete for the *naam* of Bimbilla. Some of them are probably of autochthonous origin although they do not stress that; the *naakpamba* like to be less conspicuous than ordinary chiefs, but their influence on the whole Nanumba polity is considerable.

The Kpatihi (some title him erroneously as the Kpatihi Naa) also occupies a very special position. My information indicates that his function of ‘skinmaker’ – a ceremonialist who technically enskins chiefs on behalf of the Bimbilla-Naa – was only recently introduced into Nanuŋ, probably under the influence from Dagboŋ. But the Kpatihi family is also believed to have come with Dmantambu in his retinue. At any rate, the Kpatihi Ponadoo, enskinned by members of his own family (the only dignitaries to enskin themselves) on 4 January 1983, had more influence on the procedures of the Bimbilla Naa’s funeral than any of the electors. The *naakpamba* live in their own villages with the exception of the Jilo Naa, who resides in Bimbilla (the village of Jilo is situated just one kilometre from the capital town). The Kpatihi lives in Bimbilla and has easy access to the Bimbilla Naa, thus exerting considerable influence upon the decision-making at the centre of the Nanumba polity.

Although all who are ceremonially enskinned bear the same *naa* after their title – i.e. they are chiefs – it is only the members of the Dmantambu line/house (divided into two sublimes) who can compete for the titles within the hierarchy of chieftaincies. All other chiefs become so by birth, more or less automatically. The ultimate goal of members of the two Dmantambu houses, which have existed for generations, is to assume the *naam* of Bimbilla. Only they are called *naabihi* (sing. *naabia*) or chief’s children, both in the sense of belonging to the Dmantambu chiefly line and of being children of a particular chief. The competition for the *naam* of Bimbilla is open to all members of the Dmantambu *dunoli* (literally gate, i.e. lineage), but a special rule is applied here: the *naam* of Bimbilla must alternate between the two sublimes, Gbuxmayili (house of the lion) and Baŋyili (house of the bangle). Thus, if the present Bimbilla Naa is from Gbuxmayili (as was the case when I began my fieldwork in Nanuŋ), after his death a member of the Baŋyili became the Bimbilla Naa. As the maxim goes, ‘If the sceptre of Baŋyili is put down, that of Gbuxmayili should be taken up. If then the sceptre of Gbuxmayili is put down, that of Baŋyili should be taken up’. Today, this rule appears to be an absolute imperative. However, tradition tells of a third, Suburi house, which is still officially entitled to the *naam*, but lost its chance of succession in the battles of the past. The last Bimbilla Naa from the Suburi chiefly house was Naa Sulgu (=falcon) who betrayed the Nanumba and therefore he and his line was condemned to oblivion.

Competition for the paramount *naam* of Bimbilla is now regulated so that the person most likely to win is the incumbent of the *naam* of Nakpaa in the case of Gbuxmayili, and the *naam* of Dakpam in the case of Baŋyili. Bimbilla

Naa Dasana (1959 – 1981) from Gbuxmayili was Nakpaa Naa before he became the Bimbilla Naa. The Bimbilla Naa Abarika (1983 – 1999) from Banyili was Dakpam Naa before he ascended to Bimbilla. Past cases indicate some divergences, however. For example, Bimbilla Naa Natogmah (1945 – 1957), the elder brother of the Bimbilla Naa Abarika, ascended to the title of Bimbilla Naa directly from the incumbency of the *naam* of the less important village of Gbungbaliga.

The *Ɖmantambu naam* villages are divided into those traditionally belonging to Gbuxmayili and those belonging to Banyili. The Gbuxmayili villages are located to the north-west of Bimbilla whereas the Banyili villages are situated to the south-west. In fact, the distribution of villages of electors, chief elders, (east and south) and the two *Ɖmantambu naam* houses is amazingly well defined. I could not find anything but an historical explanation for the fact that the eastern part was where the more autochthonous elements were preserved whereas the western part was under the tighter control of the *Ɖmantambu* chiefly people (see map).

Seniority plays a very important part in the competition for *naam*. It is almost automatically applied in the selection of incumbents of *naam* which do not lead to the paramountcy of Bimbilla. But it is also applied to competitive chieftaincies of the *Ɖmantambu* (immigrant) type. It seems that, originally, seniority was a more important factor than being chief of a gate town. Of course, the coincidence of the two is best, but in practice this rarely happens. There had always been tough competition for succession, even in the 20th century when the colonial or post-colonial state power has invariably intervened.

I cannot go into detail here about these succession cases. It should be realized, however, that the competition for *naam* in every village (which ‘belongs’ to either Gbuxmayili or Banyili) is ideally open to every *naabia* (member of a particular sub-line) and their number is far in excess of the number of vacant village chieftaincies. The spirit of competition for *naam* is an integral part of Nanumba political culture, and could not be suppressed by the attempts of the German, British and Ghanaian administrations to straightjacket it with unqualified decisions or by recording the ‘rules of succession’. However, the Nanumba Customary Regulations and Procedures of 1969 by and large determine the primacy of the *naam* of Nakpaa and the *naam* of Dakpam, which means that the incumbents of these ‘gate’ towns are more or less assured of succession to the Bimbilla *naam* when it is the turn of their house. Alternation must be safeguarded, and the Nanumba are very keen on observing *kali* – the tradition. My research shows, however, that if a particular custom is not repeated for whatever reason, it falls out of the customary cycle and a new procedure, with new practices, comes in. So it was with the introduction of

the Kpatihi (skinmaker) or *gbonlana* (regent) which is probably an innovation of the 20th century but is presented as an age-old tradition.

The *naam* in Nanuḡ functions on a daily basis as a system of chiefly courts – *naayili*. Each village has a court headed by a chief or other leader (*lana* – custodian); non-Nanumba groups (especially those in the Konkomba settlements) have headmen. The most important and also the largest court is at Bimbilla. The courts are composed of various elders – *nayilkpamba* (lit. elders of the chief's house). In Bimbilla they are led by the titleholder Worikpamo. The court elders are of various origins; some may even come from outside Nanuḡ. For example, the Yimahi Naa came from Dagboḡ. This, then, is another unusual aspect of Nanumba political culture, i.e. an important function may be performed by a person of foreign origin (although coming from a ritually related polity). The *nayilkpamba* have a strong influence on the chiefs because they live in his vicinity. The courts include Muslims and musicians (such as praise singers, *lunsi*). The courts meet formally on Mondays and Fridays with more or less full numbers present (depending upon the importance of the period) and this is also when village chiefs come to greet the Bimbilla Naa or other important chiefs. Elders can meet at any time at the request of the chief or if they themselves wish to consult him. The case of the Bimbilla *nayilkpamba* is special because the village chiefs see the paramount very rarely and only if they travel to Bimbilla. Thus, they have much less frequent access to the Bimbilla Naa than the elders. It would be possible to speculate about the competition between the elders and the chiefs for the favours of the Bimbilla Naa. However, it seems that this does not happen because the Nanumba political culture, similar to the estates system in medieval Europe, has a strict division of competence. Elders have their tasks, chiefs also have theirs and they differ considerably.

The social mosaic which surrounds (and is part of) the *naam* is completed by the inclusion of various professional groups (often of outside origin) and pure stranger groups, for example, learned Muslims, weavers, butchers, barbers, drummers. All professional groups and ethnic minorities (the Konkomba are in fact a majority!) have their chiefs (one per group) and other title holders. These are usually enskinned by the Bimbilla Naa. Whereas all such groups either feel themselves to be Nanumba 'professionals' or strangers recognising the sovereignty of the Bimbilla Naa, the resident Dagbamba may have divided loyalties. Their *naam* does not differ much from that of the Nanumba, they speak an almost identical language and their paramountcy is located at Yendi, not far from Nanuḡ. Thus, they feel somewhat ex-territorial in Nanuḡ. Their position is tolerated by the Nanumba, but the Bimbilla Naa does not enskin a Dagbamba chief in Nanuḡ to take care of the Dagbamba minority.

Political Culture in Nanun

Nanun is one of the Voltaic polities which in literature were portrayed as based on the complementary opposition of an immigrant chiefly element and of an autochthonous earth cult element. The monographs by Meyer Fortes⁴ are classic examples of this equilibrium image. Fortes logically concluded that Voltaic polities were of a politico-religious nature. His student, Susan Drucker-Brown, analyzed ritual aspects of *naam* (chieftaincy) in the related chiefdom/kingdom of Mamprugu⁵. She, however, made no conclusions about the nature of Mamprusi society. I am not rejecting the dualist picture altogether. But as far as Nanumba polity is concerned the case is more complex. During numerous periods of fieldwork in Nanun, I had the privilege to witness the complexity of Nanumba political institutions. Without pretending that I have grasped all the intricacies and meanings hidden behind appearances I am presenting what I have learnt.

To an outsider Nanun – at least until 1999 – appeared as a neo-indigenous polity, represented by a paramount chief, the Bimbilla Naa (chief of Bimbilla), who resides in a palace in the capital, Bimbilla, surrounded by his wives, children, courtiers, elders and subordinate chiefs. *Naam*, often translated as chieftaincy, appears as the politico-religious principle and basic value around which the life of the Nanumba people revolves. The Bimbilla Naa is normally surrounded by a number of courtiers and elders whose functions vary. Some assist him in running his daily routine but others meet him about matters of importance which have to be decided or acted upon. Such important decisions and actions, of a customary or modern nature, have to be corroborated by the religious specialists. These are the earth priests (*tindanima*, sing. *tindana*) and Muslims led by a *liman* (imam). The *tindana* pours libation and the *liman* prays for the success of the matter. So it goes in ordinary times, rarely leading to serious disagreements or crises.

The problem arises with succession to chieftaincy. According to *kali* (tradition) the Bimbilla Naa cannot be deposed; he ceases to be a chief only upon his death. However, that is not exactly true. Though his body is buried almost immediately after his physical passing away, he is not considered dead by other Nanumba until his ritual funeral is performed in accordance with

⁴ FORTES, M. *The Dynamics of Clanship Among the Tallensi*; FORTES, M. *The Web of Kinship Among the Tallensi*.

⁵ DRUCKER-BROWN, S. *Ritual Aspects of the Mamprusi Kingship*. Leiden: Afrika-Studiecentrum, 1975.

complex and obligatory rules. After his physical passing away and burial begins the period of an interregnum which as a rule may last as long as one year (in concrete cases even longer).⁶ His eldest son acts as a regent (*gbonlana*, literally custodian of the skin). According to tradition *naakuli* (the ritual funeral of a chief, the paramount chief included) is to be closely followed by another cycle of ritualised activities which climax in *namyibu*, the outdoor ceremony for the new Bimbilla Naa.

The crucial importance of succession is underlined by the fact that *naam* is being passed not only from person to person but from one chiefly house to another. The alternation of *naam* between two houses, Gbuxmayili (lion's house) and Banyili (bangle house) has been a rule for the last two hundred years. Oral tradition mentions a third chiefly house/lineage which became disqualified from succession. Although nobody in Nanu questions the rightfulness of this alternation, the *naabihi* (chiefly descendants) of the deceased chief accept only with great reluctance that their house has to vacate the incumbency of *naam*. Similarly, within the succeeding house/lineage, frictions may arise about who is the rightful candidate for the *naam* of Bimbilla. I will come back to this question below.

After the *naakuli*, the palace of dead chief is to be vacated by the widows and orphans and is gradually left to fall apart. The incoming Bimbilla Naa from the other chiefly house/lineage would then build his own palace on the ruins of the previous palace in the traditional site reserved for this lineage. Thus at present there are two palace sites in Bimbilla. Still, the succession is not a smooth affair because of another factor, which is competition among the entitled candidates, members of the succeeding chiefly house. The conflicts are usually between the incumbents of gate chieftaincies, i.e. the *naam* of Nakpaa and Dakpam respectively, and the most senior members of the succeeding house who do not necessarily occupy an important 'gate' *naam*. At any rate the paramount *naam* of Bimbilla must be won in a contest and not by automatic succession of a European type. The German colonial, British colonial and Ghanaian independent post-colonial authorities tried very hard to regularise the succession but never succeeded.⁷ Nevertheless, most Nanumba would agree that the incumbents of the *naam* of Nakpaa (for Gbuxmayili) and *naam* of Dakpam

⁶ The Bimbilla Naa Dasana died on 31 May 1981; his *naakuli* was completed on 31 January 1983. The Bimbilla Naa Abarika died on 22 August 1999; his *naakuli* was completed in March 2003.

⁷ Cf. SKALNÍK, P. Monarchies within Republics: Early Voltaic States in the Twentieth Century. In *Asian and African Studies*, 1975, Vol. 11. pp. 177–193.

(for Banyili) are the strongest in their respective bids for the *naam* of Bimbilla. The mechanism of succession between the two houses has to be analysed historically from case to case and it is not the intention of this paper to do so.⁸

Let us look at some remarkable factors in the succession process whereby it will become apparent that *naam* is under an effective control by dignitaries and institutions which technically are not part of it or its holders. Among those are ritual specialists from the sacred villages of Dalaanyili, Ponaayili, Binda and Duuni, electors and skinmakers of the Bimbilla Naa whose collective name is *naakpamba* (chief's elders, sing. *naakpema*), earth priests and warriors (*sapashinima*). What unites all these four categories is their real or putative claim of autochthonous or ancient origin. This would suggest that the influence the autochthons exert on *naam* can be related to an original historical arrangement between the immigrant holders of *naam* and the conquered autochthonous inhabitants. A dualist image?

Not really. An analysis of the oral tradition and of the mythical charter of Nanun shows that the confrontation of the incoming, mounted, warriors led by Dmantambu with the partly Nawuri-speaking autochthons was violent only in some localities. In most of the places it was a peaceful encounter. The mythology, relatively common for the whole Voltaic area, relates a story of north-eastern origin of *naam* holders. The three crucial lineally related mythical personalities are Tohajie (the red hunter), Kpoghnumbo (a blind man) and Naa Gbewaa. The Voltaic polities of Gulma/Gurma, Tenkudugu, Moogo, Yatenga (and other smaller Mossi polities) as well as Mamprugu, Dagboŋ Nanun and Wa derive their origin from these ancestral leaders.⁹ Naa Gbewaa's existence is actually merely semi-mythical. According to oral traditions he arrived at Pusiga in today's Kusasi country of northern Ghana and built a court there. Gbewaa's grave can be seen in Pusiga today. His sons Tohagu, Sitobu and Dmantambu are believed to be the founders of the polities of Mamprugu, Dagboŋ and Nanun respectively. Nanun, the name of which is derived from the words for chief (*naa*) and hand (*nuu*), is usually ascribed to Dmantambu following a disagreement with his brother Sitobu, the founder of Dagboŋ. After the argument, Sitobu is supposed to have pointed with his hand towards the southeast and Dmantambu with his followers left in the direction indicated to

⁸ SKALNÍK, P. On the Inadequacy of the Concept of 'Traditional State' (illustrated with ethnographic material on Nanun, Ghana). In *Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law*, 1987, Nos. 25 & 26, pp. 301–325.

⁹ Cf. IZARD, M. *Gens du pouvoir, gens de la terre. Les institutions politiques de l'ancien royaume du Yatenga (Bassin de la Volta Blanche)*.

find his domain in the present-day Nanuŋ. There are no graves for Tohagu, Sitobu or Ɖmantambu. They all are believed to have disappeared after their respective deaths into a lake called Baxri which is located near Karaga in Dagboŋ.

The belief in the common origin of the Voltaic polities is shared not only by the members of the chiefly houses but also by all other population categories which recognize the chiefs as their superordinates. There never was a war between any of the Voltaic polities as it has been ritually abhorrent to use violence and shed blood in the fight against a related brotherly people. The chiefs kept contact, sent gifts and delegations to one another during festivals, inaugurations of new paramount chiefs, etc. To some extent they even considered themselves one people. This is certainly true for some sections of Dagboŋ and Nanuŋ whose languages are very close. The more distinct ethnic identities of the Dagbamba and the Nanumba seem to be forged only recently because of differential experiences in the colonial and post-colonial periods. The Nanumba-Konkomba war of 1981 was one such experience.¹⁰

As far as Nanuŋ is concerned Ɖmantambu entered the present-day Nanuŋ at the place called today Duuni, in northernmost Nanuŋ. This is now a sacred settlement because Ɖmantambu also died there and then disappeared, allegedly into the Baxri Lake. A Bimbilla Naa who would have to travel near Duuni must not see the room in which Ɖmantambu died and has to be blindfolded when passing near the room. Duuni is in charge of special custodians of local, autochthonous origin. The Duuni people and the inhabitants further in the interior of today's Nanuŋ received Ɖmantambu and his people on condition that the immigrants respected their customs. The most important condition was that he can only 'rule' if he is confirmed in office by earth priests and that he, as chief, submits himself to mortuary rites and enskinment rituals (the Nanumba, like other northern chiefs, sit on skins instead of thrones or stools). Thus the deceased Bimbilla Naa is not deemed dead, and the *naam* cannot continue in the body of a new paramount chief without performing the *naakuli*, a ritual funeral. This ceremonial cycle that lasts over one week is almost solely in the hands of

¹⁰ Cf. SKALNÍK, P. Questioning the Concept of the State in Indigenous Africa. In *Social Dynamics*, 1983, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 11–28. SKALNÍK, P. Nanumba Chieftaincy Facing the Ghanaian State and Konkomba 'Tribesmen': an Interpretation of the Nanumba-Konkomba War. In BINSBERGEN Van, W., REYNTJENS, F., HESSELING, G. (eds.). *State and Local Community in Africa*, pp. 89–109; SKALNÍK, P. Chieftdom at War with Chiefless People while the State Looks on. In *Social Evolution and History*, 2011, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 55–121.

the ritualists from the sacred villages of Dalaanyili, Ponaayili and Binda (those first visited and inhabited by Dmantambu). My data comes from observing the *naakuli* for Naa Dasana during January – February 1983 and Naa Abarika in March 2003. I also use oral traditions on other, earlier, *naakuli* for previous *naanima* of Bimbilla.

The ritualists from autochthonous villages had to come on invitation from the *gbonlana* (regent) to open the grave in the dark of night and to proclaim the Bimbilla Naa truly dead. Before that they performed a series of secret ceremonies which involved killing (and eating) a horse and a little bull provided by the *kubihi* (the mourning children of the chief). The Dalaanyili people used staged ‘blackmail’ towards the *kubihi*, e.g. they delayed their arrival at the funeral in order to extort money or goods from the regent’s representatives. On Wednesday night, the Daalana (Yidana), chief of Dalaanyili, came to Bimbilla after a long time of haggling and dragging it out with the *kubihi*. Then he sent for the Kpandixli of Ponaayili. The Kpandixli is a male co-custodian of the god (boxle) of Ponaayili. The other co-custodian is the Ponaa, a female chief who also plays an essential role in the *naakuli*. A Dalaanyili boy instructed the regent to receive Dalaanyili people well. The Daalana asked why they had called him. Gbonlana answered: “O goya, o chan puuni” – he (the chief) has travelled, he went to farm the land. Only then did the Dalaanyili people together with the Kpandixli open the grave after a special fire sacrifice in front of the door to the grave (the Bimbilla Naa was buried in a round chamber, in a special underground space dug under the burial room) was performed. Nobody was allowed to enter the palace, nobody could use any light, it was pitch dark everywhere.

On the decisive day of the *naakuli* which is the following Thursday, the Kpandixli, holding a special hooked stick, dressed in a thick coat and cap with cowry shell decorations, together with similarity dressed people from Dalaanyili and Binda, sacrificed a red cockerel and a male goat. There was a *baa* (dog/slave) sacrifice as well. Dalaanyili people sang calling a dog to come in front of the chief’s palace. A dog invariably came, was strangled and dragged around the palace until dead. The dog allegedly symbolises a human being – a slave sacrificed in this way in earlier times. The ritualists coaxed the regent and mock regent to dance, to perform a special jumping dance. They, followed by a large crowd of *kubihi*, performed this kind of jumping dance three times circling the palace (*yil gilgu*). The dancers were tailed by the Ponaa and her relatives in cowry shell headdresses. On yet another day a ritual with a hoe was performed by the Kpandixli and the Dalaanyili people. The regent and the mock regent had to watch it. In all these ritual activities the role of people from the sacred villages was paramount and the *naakuli* was unthinkable without them. There are also other rituals such as a mock battle and going for water (widows

simulating their daily household activities) in which other dignitaries from among the autochthons also participate. But the role of the autochthons from the sacred villages is crucial. They actually keep the whole polity in check during the time of the ritual funeral of the paramount chief. Everybody fears them and they indeed behaved very frighteningly.

To make the 'rule' of the Bimbilla Naa socially valid every paramount chief must go to Ponaayili to bathe in a sacred metal pan which is kept in a sacred room there. No metal sound is allowed in Ponaayili. The pan has to be taken out of the sacred room. If the pan (*ashili tahle*) expands and cannot be taken out of the room, the chief will die and not be recognised as a chief. If the pan can be taken out and the chief can bathe in it, he will live but will have no more children. The fear of the power of the Ponaayili pan is such that for example the late Bimbilla Naa Dasana (1959 – 1981) did not go to bathe in it but shortly thereafter he died. There were even rumours that he never intended to go to Ponaayili because he wanted to continue to procreate and feared infertility. Actually after his death his wives gave birth to four children. Some people believed that he caused the Nanumba-Konkomba conflict because he was chosen as chief in spite of the adverse advice of the diviners.

To illustrate the symbolic power of Kpandixli, the following incident can be recounted. During the interregnum in 1982, a time which coincided with the first months of the then new PNDC regime, a report was received by the police that weapons had been hidden both in the grave room and in the sacred room in Ponaayili. Because it was soon after the bloody Nanumba-Konkomba war of 1981¹¹ the information was taken seriously. However, the police did not dare to open the grave door or the Ponaayili shrine door. Neither did the family of the deceased chief. It had to be the Kpandixli, who was called to Bimbilla and then reopened the grave room. The same procedure was followed in Ponaayili. Nothing was found in either case.

The selection of the new Bimbilla Naa follows almost immediately after the full cycle of *naakuli* is completed. The nine *naakpamba* (literally chief's elders) fulfil the role of electors. The *naakpamba* are chiefs who are *naam* incumbents in several villages to the east and south of Bimbilla. These chiefs are enskinned by the Bimbilla Naa but they cannot ever aspire to the *naam* of Bimbilla. They are not members of either the Gbuxmayili or Banyili chiefly houses. These

¹¹ SKALNÍK, P. Nanumba Chieftaincy Facing the Ghanaian State and Konkomba 'Tribesmen': an Interpretation of the Nanumba-Konkomba War In BINSBERGEN Van, W., REYNTJENS, F., HESSELING, G. (eds.). *State and Local Community in Africa*, pp. 89–109.

chieftaincies are inherited in particular lines which have no direct descent from Ɖmantambu. However, some of them are maternally related to either chiefly house. Their real roots are in the autochthonous society encountered in Nanun by Ɖmantambu. The relations are expressed in kinship terms. The Bimbilla Naa addresses the *naakpamba* and other Ɖmantambu chiefs as *yaba* (grandfather) whereas they call the Bimbilla Naa and other members of Ɖmantambu houses *yanga* (grandchild). The relation of the Bimbilla Naa and other Ɖmantambu chiefs to the rest of the population is that of father to children. People (and lower chiefs) call the Bimbilla Naa *m'ba* (my father). It is widely believed that the *naakpamba* chieftaincies are older than the Ɖmantambu (i.e. Gbuxmayili and Banyili) chieftaincies. The most important *naakpema* is the Juo Naa, but the Wulehe Naa is believed to be extremely powerful because of his custodianship of Naapaxa (literally chief's wife) shrine, a god residing in an earthenware pot within the confines of his palace at Wulehe. The Lanjiri Naa, another elector of the Bimbilla Naa, is besides being a chief of the Kukuo village also a custodian of the Malizugu well god. Because of this god old women come to Kukuo to neutralise their alleged witchcraft potential by drinking potion from the Malizugu god. Also the Nakpayili chief, the Dibsi Naa, is simultaneously a priest-chief. In brief, the electoral college of *naakpamba* is more sacred and feared than the paramount chief they are selecting. This fact challenges the usual ideas about sacred chiefship or kingship which centre on the sacredness of the ruler. The Bimbilla Naa is evidently less sacred than the *naakpamba*.

The selection itself (*naam babu*, literally holding *naam*) symbolizes best the subordination of the Bimbilla Naa and thus of the whole Ɖmantambu chiefly stock to the sacred authority of the *naakpamba*. On the night of the selection, the substance of the relationship between the electors and the Ɖmantambu chiefs becomes apparent. The Juo Naa sits in the old palace of the Bimbilla Naa in the *paani* (senior wife) room, whereupon the Lanjiri Naa and the Gambux Naa bring the selected chief bound by ropes and present him to the Juo Naa with the words "Ti baya a bla la" or we captured your slave. The Juo Naa answers "A yanima n'sona. A banima n'sona" meaning ancestors (grandfathers) will help you, fathers will help you. The Jilo Naa, the Dibsi Naa and the Chichax Naa are waiting outside. All other witnesses are chased away. Then in the presence of the Juo Naa, the Lanjiri Naa and the Gambux Naa as well as the chief court ceremonialist Kpatihi, the candidate is bathed in a special powerful herbal concoction and the Kpatihi puts eventually the *kparbu* – chiefly white gown and white cap – on him. The moon must be high during that night. During the selection in February 1983, the Gbuxmayili *kubihi*, sons of the deceased

Naa Dasana, tried in vain to prevent at the last moment the enrobing and enskinning of Naa Abarika to the *naam* of Bimbilla because they preferred the Sakpe Naa on the Bimbilla skin.¹² The enrobed chief is then led secretly, in the middle of the night, to a secret house where he will be confined for a week. He walks through Bimbilla, now totally deserted, alongside a donkey, his hand on the donkey's back. According to tradition he should ride on the donkey.

The new paramount chief stays a week in seclusion before the ceremony of *namyibu* (outdooing of a chief) can follow and all the people can see their new Bimbilla Naa, who is then sitting in state with all his paraphernalia. The same day or soon afterwards the new chief still must go to the sacred village of Dalaanyili to submit himself to the *damli* (sceptre) selection ritual and some other ceremonial procedures. First he has to be blindfolded and then enters a sacred room where *damli* of all previous Bimbilla *naanima* are kept. He reaches for one *damli* while moving backwards. The Nanumba believe that the length of the *damli* shows the length of the reign and thus the length of life of the new chief. After that the Bimbilla Naa will be free from the dictates of the autochthonous ritualists. He will rely more on his councillors (*nayilkpamba*) and the town Muslims, whom he can consult at any time. They invariably come to pay their allegiance to the chief every Friday and sometimes on Mondays. The trend today is to turn to the Muslims for ideological (and symbolic) corroboration rather than to the *tindana* (earth priest) of Bimbilla whose power over the chief has dwindled. The Muslims participate on a daily basis in town activities and their economic might is obvious. But that does not mean that the paramount chief has to be a Muslim or must convert into one. Some of the less important chiefs are Muslims who once they become chiefs put their Islamic faith to one side. For all other Nanumba it is quite acceptable to combine Nanumba religious beliefs with Islam.

Conclusion

The *naam* in Nanuŋ is highly conditioned by the symbolic authority of the autochthons from the sacred villages and the *naakpamba*, mostly autochthonous chiefs or priest-chiefs. The former are crucial for the *naakuli*, the ritual funeral

¹² Ironically, the Sakpe Naa was the son of the Bimbilla Naa Salifu, the same who humiliated the grandfather of the *kubih*, Naa Dasana's father Naa Abudulai by taking a horse from him which Naa Abudulai bought for an elephant tusk belonging to Naa Salifu.

of the paramount chief and the latter are decisive in the *naam babu*, the selection and ritual making of the new chief. Thus the critical moments of succession are controlled by people who have no direct stake in the competition for chieftaincy. In Nanun there is no monopoly of coercive power as known in modern states. Authority is diffused in a symbolic network of checks and threats with ritual sanction. Sharing the belief in *kali* (tradition) makes the social integration of the Nanumba people possible and a consensus about the procedures of the *naam* is achieved and permanently renewed. This sharing, forged by the mutual recognition of values and roles held by groups of people with different origins, is the secret of Nanun as a neo-archaic polity. The chiefs obey the rules set by the autochthons and they fear their breach; on the other side the autochthons render unto Caesar what is Caesar's by performing the rituals of the *naam* and they respect the chiefs in normal times between the installation of a chief and his death. Nevertheless, the chief can never afford to abuse his office because his whole rule and his chiefly house is under the potential threat of punishment by the forces controlled by the ritualists, who are responsible for his ritual funeral. The *naakuli* (if properly performed) makes of them fully recognized chiefs and at the same time also socially legitimate ancestors.

In Nanun political legitimation is not only a question of the recognition of a Bimbilla Naa or his chiefly house. It is equally recognition by the chief and his people of the authority of the autochthonous symbolic forces which allow them to become chiefs. Thus in Nanumba political culture there is no grabbing and legitimating of power like in most states; there is no power there in this power-grabbing sense. A sophisticated balance of various institutions and groups of different origin is made possible by a shared symbolic universe of threat, fear and ritual recognition. It is, however, no classical equilibrium of British functionalism (which existed anyway only in the heads of some anthropologists). Neither is it an unbalanced power monopoly in which few rule and most must obey. Thus we may conclude that in Nanun we are dealing with a case of democracy without formal and popular elections but instead a prescribed alternation of chiefly houses, effective control of chiefly power by autochthonous ritualists and the unifying ethos of *naam* and *teja* complementarity.

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