



THE BELLOWING BULLS SHALL SEEK EACH OTHER OUT: DAGBAŊ PRAISE NAMES AS EPITHETS, NARRATIVES AND HISTORY

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Abstract

Oral narratives feature prominently in the daily activities of African societies. These often foreground future happenings. Epic song collapses time, linking past, present, and future events. Our main interest is the historical, linguistic and poetic aspects of the praise song of Naa Abdulai Yaakuba (Naybiɛyɛ), who reigned from 1849 to 1876. This work is both ethnopoetic and ethnographic in nature, combining an inquiry into the genre of royal praise-naming, the nuances of language that goes to the making of this lore. Using ethnographic and secondary sources the paper ties history, song and performance to the daily lives of the Dagbamba of Ghana. An epic battle gives birth to this performance.

Key Words: Dagbaŋ praise songs, Yaakuba Naybiɛyɛ .

1. Introduction

This paper seeks to exemplify the use of an oral narrative poetic genre, known as *salima* “praises”, in the local Dagbani language of Northern Ghanaⁱ to provide an insight into the art of praising. This is done using the ‘Bellowing Bulls’ the praise Name of Naa Abdulai Yaakuba (Naybiɛyɛ), who reigned from 1849 to 1876, one of the outstanding kings of the Dagbaŋ kingdom of Northern Ghana. Not much has been written on this aspect of praise poetry from Dagombaⁱⁱ land. The literatures I have found in our searches have been those that cluster around musical dimensions of the craft of Dagbamba *lunsi* “drummers”. Our data has been primarily, ethnographic material which I analyze as folkloristic performances. These performances draw heavily from a pool of oral history which is constantly re-contextualized to include recent happenings. This paper is framed within a larger body of research I conducted among the Dagomba drummers. They, as cultural performers, compose praise epithets (also called “names”) for their patrons. These names could be as simple as a single word/Noun Phrase, a sentence, or a passage long. “The Bellowing Bulls...” is one such names.

1.1 About the People of Dagbaŋ

Dagbamba^{vii} are the largest of the ethnic groups in Northern Ghana and they have a very rich oral tradition. This pool of ‘raw’, ‘untapped’ literature has yet to be captured in print. The drummers’ craft is an oral folkloric form like most African folklore (see Marion Frank-Wilson 2004: 217) which to a large extent is orally composed and transmitted.

Dagbamba (also called Dagombas) is an ethnic group from the Gur language family of the Niger Congo language family; speak the Dagbani (or Dagbanli) language. The Dagbaŋ (or Dagbon) Kingdom which is some 8082 square miles in area, dates back to the fifteenth century, with its early warrior equestrian ancestors coming into the present north-eastern location in modern day Ghana, from the Chadic region. The Yaa Naa is the King and overlord of the Dagbaŋ nation, and he has an ensemble of musicians whose duty it is to praise as well as entertain him. Music, and musicians are thus of paramount importance to Dagomba cosmology, because the King is at the core of the tradition, as he is the embodiment of the people’s soul. The history of the Dagbaŋ nation is invariably tied to the political historyⁱⁱⁱ of the Kingship. Every village and town has a chief who also has a team of elders to assist in his administration, modeled along the same lines as the King at Yendi, the Capital of the Dagbaŋ nation.

The musicians are called *lunsi*, praise singers, and historians of Dagbaŋ. This drummer institution is believed to have been established under the Dagbaŋ King called Nyayisi (1416-1432), grandson of Naa Gbewaa^{iv}, who is the common ancestor of the Mole-Dagbani languages of Dagbanli, Mohili (Moori), Mampruli (Dmampruli), Nanunli, and Kusahili (Kusaal).

Praise names are proverbs which need to be interpreted. It is this interpretation that may serve as the sharp thorns that will prick others, or the ‘soft’ thorns that will pinch them to wake up to their responsibilities. Aristotle distrusts poetry because of this subversive potential. John H. McDowell (2000: 14) echoes this same concern about the potency of poetic expressions to “...kindle violent actions that in turn provide grist for further poetic expressions.” Yet, poetry is centrally placed in the scheme of events in the daily life of humans.

Salima translates as ‘praise’ or ‘stories’, combining the senses of reality and fantasy, oral narrative and history. The performances of epic poetry and praise singing is the preserve of the drummer caste (including drummers, *lunsi*, fiddlers, *goonjenima*, the timpani player *akarima*, or the flutists *yu’ piebira*), an in-group sort of system, so that it is not all Dagbanli speakers who may even be able to interpret the language used by these practitioners. A Dagomba who is not part of a particular royal lineage is as much an outsider as a non-Dagomba. Privileges may however be extended to others whom each family decides to adopt as a member of their in-group.

2. Methodology

The bibliography is divided into three sections: history, ethnomethodology, and folklore/praise poetry, corresponding with the three broad areas the paper focuses on. The bulk of the data I used is primary material got from

narratives from drummers, the keepers of the age-old oral tradition. The drummer, Alhassan Fuseini of Choggo (in his seventies), Tamale, was our main source. He narrated the history of Naa Aburu and other epic poems to me. This was supplemented by field recordings I made during performance sessions at festivals, plus interpretations of recorded songs by two younger drummers, Zosimli Lunnaa Issah Yakubu (in his twenties) and Kanvili Tahanaa (about sixty years old). I also used secondary sources: library material, handbooks and online indexes. Some of our sources were cross-references from some of the reference books themselves.

3. Salima as Historical Narratives

As already stated, the language of praise-poetry is condensed and proverbial. The proverb that a royal person takes as his/her praise name is either witty or satiric of his/her foes or political rivals^v who they might have beaten in the contest to ascend to their present political position, or title. Dagbamba 'praise names' both bestow praise on their targets as well give pointers to their ancestral lineage, and incidents in their careers. This fits the paradigm noted by Gordon Innes (1976: 22) to be common to African praise epithets. Praise lines (also called "names") like,

i. *N daŋ ba nyabu, be ku niŋ sheli.*

I precede them seeing, they NEG do anything.

I know them they cannot do anything.

might induce the target audience to act in order to show that they can act, or,

ii. *X –nim dabari zaana.*

X-PL deserted homes maker.

One who creates deserted houses in town X.

Tells of someone who killed people of town X, a stock phrase used by the bards to describe a patron as a brave warrior, bravery being a quality worthy of emulation by contemporary rulers.

iii. *Ba, she ŋun nye o karimbaan bindi ni va o karimbaan bindi.*

Dog who that shits its arrogant feces will collect its arrogant feces

The arrogant dog who defecates at a prohibited place will clean up its feces.

This third name calls the rival a dog, and says he acts in vain pride. This certainly is non complimentary, and could incite other to verbal warfare, or indeed actual fighting.

iv. *Kambaŋ paya/ Guŋɔna pay' bia, Naybieyu.*

Kambaŋ/ Guŋɔna woman child, awesome cow.

Naybieyu, the son of the woman from Diyali.

This identifies the patron with his mother's town, Diyali, whose pet name is Kambaŋ yili. He is the brave, awesome fellow whose mother hails from the traditional warriors' town, Diyali.

4. Praise Singing and Folklorism

We essentially view praise singing as a process of communication. Dell Hymes (1975) is one of the early proponents of this "Folklore as Communication" tradition. Performance is primarily seen as an overt manifestation of the speaker's verbal knowledge and behavior. Contemporary folklore combines knowledge of traditional material with elements in the emergent social event. This view conceives of performance as context dependent, emergent and arising within a particular context and also involves cultural behavior that is interpretable, reportable, and repeatable.

Alan Dundes (1999) and Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957) consider folklore to be 'living' in distinction to the previous notion of the discipline being of 'dead' survivals from the past. I do not start this enquiry as a collector of material that is on the verge of dying, getting corrupted, and thus needing to be captured on paper before it is lost to eternity. We see the art as an everyday phenomenon which is alive, beautiful and worthy of attention and consumption. It should not be the preserve of one sector of the community. Good art such as this should be documented, so that those not in its immediate environment can access it too. This art is literature, much in the same way as any written work of art. We see that the songs and epithets the griots of Dagbaŋ sing have diachronic and synchronic dimensions, and it is the creative genius, and virtuosity of the individual artist that makes the difference between one's performance and that of another.

There is a relationship between the context and folklore, "the 'learning of the people', 'the wisdom of the people', the people's knowledge", as observed by Dan Ben Amos (2000: 6). This knowledge is individually possessed by the drummers, who represent and re-present them to the best of their abilities. Nineteenth century national romanticism was suspicious of this process, because the feeling was that it could endanger tradition. The feeling then was that the olden days were better, and that the good bearers of tradition had died. Contrary to this belief that the re-presentation will endanger tradition, the process recreates tradition every time, and thus engenders it. Folklore is an integral part of culture and can be adapted to newer environments within which it finds itself. Folklore is thus transcultural, and even when items of folklore travel into newer cultures, we can still identify them as variants of the same type of phenomenon. The practice of praising royalty has a cultural function of elevating the institution of *nam* "royalty" to a near sacred status. It is akin to profaning the culture if a drummer does not acknowledge the presence of a royal when they meet, by properly clothing them with the appropriate family praise. The functional approach to folkloristics has been championed by the Anglo-Polish Bronislaw Malinowski, Franz Boas and William Bascom (1954).

Our informants most times felt very uncomfortable divorcing the praise names we demanded from their song genres in which they are usually found. I had to be patient then, and listen to the whole historical narrations. The drummers also needed to do their renditions with drum accompaniments. It is music that orders the raw materials used for creating the metaphor which the drummer-poets use in their art. Music is the essence of metaphor, the essence of music is feeling, not just sound, so that together they produce emotionally evocative messages. We need the four essential elements of music – rhythm, melody, harmony, and tone color – to bring up the complete spectacle. This corroborates Dan Ben-Amos' assertion that folklore should not just be seen as collectible material, and that folklore in its cultural context is a process. The product cannot be separated from the process. They are in a continuum, the product arising in an artistic and creative

communicative process. A compromise situation (a hybrid) had to be found by these informants, whereby they broke into song, as they tried to tell me praise names and histories of chiefs. This was invariably done in a narrative format, where the chronological order in which chiefs came to power, as well as their praise epithets, were narrated. And I was addressed as the target (a pseudo-patron) of the performance event. It is thus the process that brings out the best performances. What I did in eliciting these names out of context constituted a divorce of the praise epithets from their performance situations. This induced performance is regarded as sacrilegious by some of the drummers I came into contact with.

John Miller Chernoff (1979) and David Locke (1990, 2005) have focused on the rhythmic dimensions of the Dagomba drummers' craft; while Jacqueline Cogdell DjeDje (2008) traces the history of the fiddle in Dagbon and West, focusing on the use of the Dagomba goonje in the service of their king. Chernoff (1997: 93) says the epic performances here are older than the Homeric epics. Ruth Finnegan (1970, 2007) calls on African societies to document these oral repertoires, which she sees as one form of literary expression with esthetic as well as practical appeal. These dimensions seem worth looking at, to me.

4.1 The Drummer

Every culture is a precipitate of its history. Until very recently^{vi}, the history of the Dagbon nation has largely been kept by the drummers, who narrate it at epic singing sessions during festivals. If the importance of history cannot be overemphasized, it goes without saying that the *luŋa* is very vital to the survival of Dagbon's culture. European history, for example, has been documented for centuries, but only a little part of Dagbon's history has been documented, and this has been largely after the mid twentieth century.

Many a drummer has aptly defined their roles in performance, as reported by Stephen Belcher (1999: 8) who quotes the griot Mamadou Kouaté, from Djibril Tamsir's Niane's *Soundiata*,

... we are vessels of speech, we are the repositories which harbour secrets many centuries old. The art of eloquence has no secrets for us; without Us the names of kings would vanish into oblivion, we are the memory of mankind; by the spoken word we bring to life the deeds and exploits of kings for younger generations.

Similarly, at an evening of epic poetry a drummer, Issah Zōhi (PC) of Yendi, said,
We speak of events that have come to pass.

The fact is an event that has not occurred we do not even know it.

Our father has asked that I publicize what the world hides.

Our father told me that if a thing happens once, I should announce it ten times; there is no problem about that.

But what has not happened, I should never say it has.

They, the drummers, also say it is for the benefit of those not present today, that the griot institution was put in place by our forebears. Many see the Dagbamba drummer primarily as an entertainer. The artistic function is important, not as an end in itself but as a means to achieving a higher end, which is the transmission of historical and cultural information. As observed by Jeff Todd Titon (2005: 13) this emotive force evoked by the drummers' music carries us to more serious realms,

At the center of the music (as you experience it) is its radiating power, its emotional impact – assent, smile, nod your head, sway your shoulders, dance. That is called music's *affect*, its power to move, and which forms the center of the model.

When they tell a "story" therefore, the drummers intend it to be taken seriously. This is where the current exploits of Naa Abdulai Naybieyu comes to be viewed almost like a religious incantation.

4.2 The Praise name of Naa Abdulai Naybieyu

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kambaŋ paya/ Guŋgona pay bia, Naybieyu • Ninsalnim je ma ku ŋmani Kpieŋ lan' Wuni • Yelmaŋa naaya ka guula yelimaŋ' dara, ŋun ti mali tu' saata ŋun' m mali yelmaŋli • Yelmaŋa daŋ zia ka ziri zani/ wum labira • Ti' yoyu galimla zeriga: zeriga (bia) m be • M bi niŋ zamba ku chirigi bieri • Kuli noli din viel' ni layim nyuriba • Baynarigu tuŋ luri ŋmana, ka tuŋ kandi/ maŋli luri salima • Guŋgona pay' bia goŋi • Gbanzalin' naa Laamihi bia, Bawuna • Changbaa niyi doyiŋi nay' liba. • Niyi ŋumda, be ni bo tab' shee, Kpaakpa kuuŋ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diyali woman's son, the ferocious evil bull • Humans hate me, but they are not almighty God. • Real Truth has ceased and bought truths have taken over. Only the rich are right now. • Truth has found a seat and left falsehood behind. • The hollow in the tree says it will not accommodate the snake, but the snake will find a place. • I have not done a wicked deed so no harm shall come our way. • A blessed drinking hole shall attract drinkers. • A baynarigu creeping plant has borne calabashes and the real calabash plant bears gold. • Diyali woman's son, the crescent • Gbanzalin' naa Laamihi's son, the warrior • Changbaa cattle give birth to twin calves. Mooing cows shall seek each other. • 'Bawuna' used to be a war rhythm, but nowadays it has become a tune for dancing. • The two ferocious bulls (one from Baasali, and Abudu from Dagbaŋ) shall seek each other out.
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Abdulai (Abudu) Naybiegu = Yaakuba's son

This praise name is the direct historic experience of this king in a war expedition as narrated below. This is his name and all of his descendants. They are praised now using this epithet without even mentioning his name but only the praise name. This has been engraved eternally, not on a stone, his grave, on the face of every descendent of his. The drummers (*lunsi*) only read the epithet by singing it to the glory of he that is long dead, and more importantly, the present generation of his descendants.

4.2.1 Naa Abdulai Naybieyu's Expedition

The story I use for our illustration in this paper is that of King Abdulai Yaakuba (also Naa Aburu), the eldest son of King Yaakuba Andani (1824-1849). Yaakuba has scores of children from numerous wives (polygamy is an accepted way of life among the Dagomba), and each child covets the throne. Each child seeks spiritual protection in order to rise to the top of the political ladder, after which he embarks on expeditions into other territories, so that after he is dead and gone, he will have heroic songs composed in his honor. This was the order of the day in pre-colonial Dagbon. A king who had no war record was considered a non-achiever, and liable to taunts by his detractors. Brief sketches of the exploits of Naa Aburu are also captured in Cardinal (1931), Staniland (1975), and Yakubu (2005: 8).

When Naa Aburu ascends to the throne he calls his brethren to come and help him settle scores with neighboring Bassari ethnic group, found on the Ghana Togo border. He tells his brother Andani Girilɔŋ (Andani will subsequently succeed him as king) to lead troops to Asati, the chief of Kɔrili (Kɔrili naa Mahami) goes to Lalibaŋ Dobe, while he goes to Baasali hinterland. The three would come back, with songs and dance rhythms composed by their drummer poets to "sing them home" after their victories. These tunes are *naani goo* 'trusted thorn', *daŋ tooni* (Primus inter pares), and *nay'bieyu* (the dreadful cow) for these three personalities respectively.

Naa Aburu assembles his Baasali-bound warriors, comprising thirteen war generals, his head drummer and his ensemble, fiddlers, a flutist, and his (Naybieyu's) daughter. In the narration our informant interspersed his enumeration of these warriors with their praise epithets. Legend has it that Naa Aburu, drummers describe as one who was as strong as a bull, and hence affectionately called "the awesome bull", came face to face with his rival, who was also called "bull". The two bulls locked horns in that fateful battle, in which Nay'bieyu triumphs, thanks to the support of his brother Andani and fellow warriors. Andani felt betrayed when at the peak of battle he turns around to find that all but the war minister, Kambɔn nakpɛm Ziblim, had abandoned him, expecting that if he fell in battle they would have a better chance of ascending the throne after Nay'bieyu's death. Andani takes the proverbial name "trusted thorn" to proverbially allude to the situation where he was pricked by the thorn he least expected would think him harm (that is, his kith and kin).

4.2.2 The Poetic Quality of the Epithet

Poetry compresses language and expresses deep feelings using very rich and deep language. Poetry needs to be studied and interpreted. One very rich quality of poetry is the use of literary devices and imagery in expressing these feelings and experiences. We see this demonstrated in Naa Abdulai Naybieyu's epithet.

The very name Naybieyu is a metaphor with the king taking himself for a terrible wicked and strong bull. "Yelmaŋa daŋ zia ka ziri zani/ wum labira" This verse paints an imagery of two rivaling creatures for a place of honour and shelter. The rightful owner gets it first only for the usurper to follow but upon seeing the right heir turns round to vanish. In this case, King Abdulai gets the throne first, and his rivals go away in disappointment.

Kuli noli din viel' ni laɣim nyuriba there is a metaphoric language here where the king regards himself as kuli noli ie a part of the river where water is fetched. If such a part is a good one, many people will fetch from there; but if it is not good, no one will go there. If he the king is good, then he will have many faithful followers, but if his rule is bad, nobody will respect and follow him.

Changbaa niyi doɣiri nay'bliba.

Niyi ŋumda, be ni bo tab' shee, Kpaakpaa kuŋ

This is another historical allusion of the expedition that he led and the experience of his people showing personal interest and coming home separately. Though this happened, the people he refers to as bellowing bulls, will seek one another and collaborate when they return home.

One other very important poetic value in this is that these praise songs are sung but not said; the same normal medium of poetic rendition.

Above all, the whole of the epithet is proverbial and is translated in volumes of intended meaning and messages sent out to his brothers and everybody.

5. Conclusion

We have demonstrated that Dagbamba praise names have some inherent historical narratives, epithetic and poetic characteristics apart from the entertainment and culture maintaining role in Dagbaŋ royal and ordinary lives of the Dagbamba of Ghana. We have further indicated that it is mainly the *lunsi* who have the duty of these oral presentations which they bestow on their patrons for a token as the patrons accept and acknowledge the praises directed to them by the *lunŋa* (singular of *lunsi*).

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ⁱ Ghana is a West African country of about twenty million people that is bordered on the east by Togo, Cote d'Ivoire in the west, Burkina Faso in the north, and the Atlantic Ocean to the south.

ⁱⁱ This is the largest ethnic group in Ghana, after the Akan community, and has a population of about a million speakers throughout the West African country, Ghana.

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin Staniland 1975 gives a detailed account of this political history of Dagbon.

^{iv} Gbewaa is to the Mole-Dagbani group of languages what Sunjata is to the Manding (a term used to collectively refer to the Mandinka of The Gambia and Guinea-Conakry, the Bambara of Mali and Senegal and the Dyula of Cote d'Ivoire; see Gordon Innes 1976: 1).

^v Chieftaincy titles in Dagbon have always been contested between princes. They covet the position so much so that they see fellow contestants as enemies.

^{vi} A. W. Cardinal 1931:230-279, Fage 1964, and Martin Staniland 1975 have been the few authors to have done some in-depth study into the stories of the Kings of Dagbon.

^{vii} The plural name the people call themselves, Dagbana is the singular form, and Dagbanli the language. But Dagbanli also refers to the culture of the the Dagbamba.