

**ROTATION WITHOUT GENEALOGY:  
THE OFFICE OF THE RAINMAKER IN YIKPABONGO  
(Komaland, Northern Ghana)**

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**Abstract**

Among the Balsa, neighbours of the Koma, an ancestral shrine is inherited by the “rule of seniority”, i.e. the oldest living male of the most senior generation of the ancestor’s descendants will be the new owner. Compared to the Balsa, the Koma have insufficient genealogical knowledge and as such an extensive rotational system of inheritance cannot be expected. Nevertheless, despite not knowing the founding ancestor of a lineage segment, they do know about every relevant male person of their lineage segment and whether he belongs to an older or younger generation or whether he is an older or junior classificatory brother of their own generation. This knowledge suffices in maintaining a rotational system regarding the inheritance of shrines. This article demonstrates the inheritance of a rain-shrine which rotates through six compounds of a lineage segment in the Koma village of Yikpabongo.

**Résumé**

Chez les Bulsas, voisins des Komas, un autel ancestral est hérité par un droit d'aînesse qui donne priorité de succession de l'héritage à l'homme le plus âgé de la plus vieille génération des descendants d'un ancêtre commun. Contrairement aux Bulsas, les Komas ont une connaissances généalogiques limitées, et par conséquence, on ne peut pas s'attendre à un vaste système de rotation. Malgré leur ignorance d'un ancêtre fondateur pour un groupe de filiation, ils connaissent chaque candidat potentiel de leur groupe et leur degré générationnel. Ces connaissances suffisent pour le maintien d'un système de rotation pour l'héritage de l'autel ancestral. Cet article dépeint l'héritage d'un sanctuaire de la pluie qui tourne à travers six groupes de filiation dans le village Koma de Yikpabongo.

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When I collected data for the book — *First Notes on Koma Culture* (2010), I diligently tried to establish genealogical tables of a considerable depth to examine whether the system of shrine rotation, which I had proven existed among the Balsa, existed in a similar way among the Koma. Among the Balsa, shrines are inherited by the oldest surviving brother of the recently deceased shrine-holder, and it is only when there are no living brothers does the oldest son of any of these brothers inherit it. After some generations of inheritance, the number of classificatory brothers and sons (SoSo, SoSoSo, etc.) who are entitled to the office of the shrine-holder increases immensely, and these brothers often live in different compounds. Thus the shrine and the office of the holder and sacrificer rotates throughout the compounds (in Wiaga-Badomsa there are about 50 compounds through which the shrines rotate).<sup>2</sup>

The genealogical knowledge of the Koma is not very extensive and never exceeds the time of their immigration from their settlements in Mamprusiland into the present area at the end of the 19th century. Too rashly I concluded that without a thorough genealogical knowledge a rotation of shrines and offices in larger lineage segments might be impossible. This presumption was certainly wrong.

In 2003 Salifu Mumuni, my assistant and co-operator, informed me that Ginggaang (also called Asani), the aged rainmaker (*niwasiru*) of Yikpabongo, had died, and a man from another compound, Alazi, had become his successor although Ginggaang had adult sons. The results of my inquiries about the rules of succession were that the rain-shrine and, along with it, the office of the rainmaker “rotated” through six compounds within the Barisi clan of Yikpabongo.

When I visited Yikpabongo in 2011, I decided to make the rules of succession, especially those regarding the rain-shrine, my primary research subject. All of my informants agreed that the shrine rotated only within the six compounds of the Barisi lineage proper, excluding the sub-lineage of Barisi-Latideng. I failed, however, to find out the common ancestor of these six compounds. During my research, when I tried to establish genealogical relationships between certain people of different compounds, I often heard the following answer: “A calls B his elder brother (or alternatively his father, son, etc.)” My first embarrassment about this, in my eyes an inexact answer (for, of course, the informant did not mean a

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<sup>2</sup>Kröger 1982 and 2003.

biological brother) gave way to the recognition that herein lay the solution to my problem, namely finding the genealogical relationship between persons. Further inquiries revealed that nearly every male adult member of the lineage could say which male adult (e.g. of another compound) was his (classificatory) “elder brother”, “younger brother”, “son”, “father”, “grandfather (FaFa)”, etc., which means that the knowledge about the lineage membership down to a certain genealogical depth had not been lost, and that this knowledge is completely sufficient for establishing rules of succession, even in the absence of any knowledge of the epical common ancestor.

After this recognition I changed my method of research and asked questions like: Who was the rainmaker before Ginggangnaang? Who will be rainmaker after Alazi? What do you call this person (father, son, etc.)? In this way I could establish six lists of rainmakers which, ideally, should be identical. However this was not the case. All my informants were sure about the names of Alazi’s immediate predecessors and successors, but the further they moved back in time from the acting rainmaker into the past or the future, the greater the discrepancy in their information. Informants, especially those of the younger generation, probably have no thorough insight into the line of succession.

My next line of investigation was to establish the relationship of the informants to the past and future office-holders. Here the generational affiliations could also not be listed without some inconsistencies among my informants, but nevertheless the principle of succession was established in an unmistakable way.

In the genealogical table below, the patrilineal ancestors of the present Barisi elders are arranged in such a way that names in the same row represent men of the same generation (although the common ancestor of all is not known). The numbers before some of the names refer to the list of shrine-holders and the order of succession, according to Bukari, the adult son of the late Ginggangnaang.

**GENEALOGICAL TABLE OF THE SIX COMPOUNDS**



Assumed names of ancestors before the immigration into Yikpabongo and the names of small boys at the end of the waiting list are left out here. Bukari’s list of rainmakers differs from those of others (e.g. Alazi and Zakaria) in that he does not mention Bafaga (or Nwayeli, which may be another name for the same person).

Alazi and Zakaria, who are regarded as experts in matters of rainmaking and rainmakers, gave me a list of rainmakers that differs in some points from Bukari’s.

**ALAZI**

Banyingvaasa (in Barisi, Alazi’s family)

Kajebra (in Barisi, Alazi’s family)

Bafara or Bafaga

Jua-Ngming or Juangming

Ginggangnaang

Alazi

Zakaria Amaafu

Basugile

**ZAKARIA**

Ayee (in Barisi)

1. Bafaga (in Yikpabongo, Kparibaga’s family)

2. Juangming (Alazi’s compound)

3. Ginggangnaang (Ginggangnaang’s compound)

4. Alazi (Alazi’s compound)

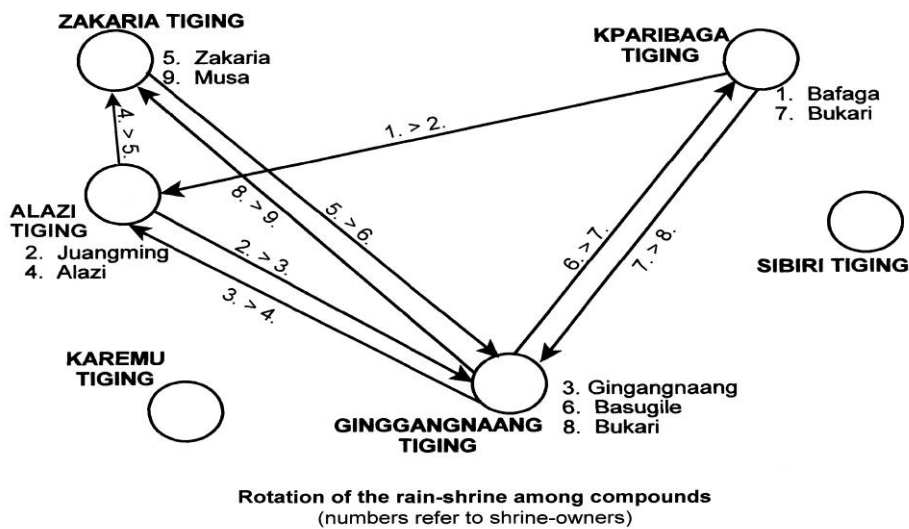
5. Zakaria Amaafu (Zakaria’s compound)

6. Basugile (Ginggangnaang’s compound)

Bukari

- 7. Bukari (Kparibaga's compound)
- 8. Bukari (Ginggangnaang's compound)
- 9. Musa (Zakaria's compound)

Zakaria's information was used to demonstrate the rotation of the rain-shrine and the office of its holder through four Yikpabongo compounds on a diagram which demonstrates that the rain-shrine, even according to information given by Karemu, had never been in Karemu Tiging nor in Sibiri Tiging, although everybody assured me that they are potential houses for receiving the shrine. My own interpretation of this is that the shrine-candidates of these two houses, in spite of their old age, belong to a younger generation and thus can hardly survive long enough to receive the shrine.



The examination of the rotating rain-shrine in Yikpabongo supports my hypothesis that the rotation of shrines according to the principle of seniority is very common (if not universal) among the ethnic groups of Northern Ghana.

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