

Chieftaincy Succession Dispute in Nanun, Northern Ghana: Interrogating the Narratives of the Contestants

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Abstract

The Nanun chieftaincy dispute involves two persons from the royal gate of Gbugmayili, both of whom claim to have been selected and enskined by the appropriate traditional authority as the Bimbilla Naa, the overlord of the Nanumba people of Northern Ghana. The paper critically examines the narratives of the two contestants in the light of the contested oral traditions of the population as well available documentary evidence. Data for this paper was collected between May and November 2006 and in 2007 and 2009 by observing court proceedings in the Northern Regional House of Chiefs where the dispute is currently pending. Other data came from reviewing archival documents relating to the dispute. Informal conversations and in-depth interviews were also held with the two main contestants, some of the kingmakers of the traditional area and with a cross section of the population. The paper argues that though the dispute is essentially a power struggle between two princes for the highest traditional office among the Namumba, it is also a contest for power between two of Nanun's most powerful kingmakers, the Kpatih Naa and the Juo Naa. While interrogating the narratives of the two contestants, the paper reveals the changing traditions and the malleability of roles amongst traditional office holders in Nanun.

Keywords: *Chieftaincy, Dispute, Northern Ghana, Enskinement*

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Introduction

In the last half century, Northern Ghana has become synonymous with conflicts, with several areas experiencing violent ethnic, land and chieftaincy conflicts. Though these three main sources of conflicts are interconnected, chieftaincy conflicts are without doubt the most preponderant in the north. Chieftaincy conflicts have usually been characterized as either inter-ethnic or intra-ethnic (Drucker-Brown 1995: 39). Inter-ethnic conflicts normally involve two or more ethnic groups contesting for sovereignty and control over the land and the inhabitants within a given territory. In Northern Ghana, such conflicts have occurred between the Kusasi and the Mamprusi (Lund 2003); the Nanumba and the Konkomba (Skalnik 1983; Bogner 2000, Julia 2007); the Gonja and the Vagala (Brukum 2000); and between the Konkomba, Nawuri, Nchumuru and Basare, on the one hand, and the Dagomba, Nanumba and Gonja on the other (Mahama 2003; Akurang-Parry 2003). Intra-ethnic conflicts, on the other hand, are conflicts over claims to chieftaincy titles involving persons from the same ethnic group or smaller units such as the clan and the family. Such conflicts include the fierce fighting that has characterized the competition for the high traditional office in Wa (Tenkorang 2007) and Dagbon (Mahama 1987; Agyekum 2002; Anamzoya 2004, 2008; MacGaffey 2006). Conflicts over paramount chieftaincy titles have also occurred among the Gonja (Brukum 2005) and the Mamprusi (Tonah 2005). In societies with the gate arrangement, intra-ethnic disputes usually arise when members of one gate believe that they have been by-passed by another gate in contravention of an established principle of rotating the chieftaincy position among the various gates (clans) within the ethnic group.

Amongst the centralized, hierarchical traditional states of Northern Ghana such as Mamprugu, Dagbon and Nanun, chieftaincy conflicts are usually over the chiefly office, *naam*. The term "*naam*" refers to an "office" with administrative and religious functions and is thus associated with rituals and sacrifices performed by the office holder (Drucker Brown 1975: 31). *Naam* is thus the office while the occupant (that is, the office holder) is referred to as Naa. Each office-holder is described as an "owner of naam" (*naam-dana/lana*), and his title (*naam yuri/yuli*), is a portion of *naam* acquired directly or indirectly from the king or chief during the rituals that constitute the installation ceremony. These rituals, in all their various forms, are called *naam disibu/dihibu*, literally, "the eating of *naam*". Skalnik (1983: 13) makes a similar observation amongst the Nanumba when he notes that "each new chief receives his title and *naam* (office, authority) in a ceremony of 'enskinment' (*naam leebu*); i.e., putting on a skin".³

This paper analyzes the chieftaincy succession dispute among the Nanumba

people of Northern Ghana that erupted following the death of the Bimbilla Naa, Naa Abarika II in 1999. After Naa Abarika's death, two persons from the royal gate of *Gbugmayili* laid claim to the position of the Bimbilla Naa. Both contestants claim to have been selected and enskined by the appropriate traditional authority as the Bimbilla Naa, the king and overlord of the Nanumba people. The paper critically examines the narratives of the two contestants in the light of the contested oral traditions of the population as well as available documentary evidence.

Study Area and Population

This study was carried out in Bimbilla and neighbouring settlements in the Nanumba Traditional Area, otherwise locally referred to as Nanun. The homeland of the Nanumba people is located in north-eastern Ghana in the modern administrative districts of Nanumba North and South. The total population of the Nanumba people in Ghana is estimated at 78,812 (in 2000), out of which about 45,400 persons live in the Traditional Area. Nanumba land is a slightly wooded, undulating savanna country between the rivers Oti and Daka (Kulkpini) and covers a territory of about 5,000 kilometers (Skalnik 1983:12-13). Their language, also called Nanumba, is identical to Dagbani, a Gur language spoken by their northern neighbours, the Dagomba. The Nanumba are a patrilineal people with a patrilocal form of residence. The typical household consists of a compound with two or three generations living together. Like most settlements in Northern Ghana, the Nanumba live in compact, oval-shaped buildings, and walled villages, with each household consisting of related men, their wives and children. Almost all of the semi-detached houses in the area are found in Bimbilla, the largest town in the Traditional Area. Some of the festivals celebrated by the inhabitants include the Bugum, Damba, Kyimisi and the Kpini. Besides the autochthonous Nanumba people, the main migrant groups in the area include the Konkomba, Chamba, Kotokoli, and the Nawuri. The low population density of the area and the fertile lands has made Nanumba-land a major destination for migrants from the less agriculturally-endowed areas of Northern Ghana. Today, there are more migrants in the Nanumba kingdom than the indigeneous population (Awedoba 2009). The Nanumba are predominantly Muslims while most migrants are mainly traditionalists and Christians.

Bimbilla, with a population of 21,016 in 2000, is the traditional capital of the Nanumba kingdom and the seat of the Bimbilla Naa, the king of the Nanumba people. Bimbilla is also the district capital of the Nanumba North administrative district. As an urban community, Bimbilla has some infrastructural facilities including the District Assembly offices, a police station, a district court, a hospital, a training college, a bank, several junior and senior high schools as well as four guest houses. The town is connected

to the national electrification grid but access to pipe borne water is very limited. Most residents rely on dams, dug outs and boreholes for water. Communication facilities are quite good in the area, with good reception for all the four major national telecommunication companies. Bicycles and motorcycles are the dominant means of transport in the township. Besides Bimbilla, the rest of the settlements in the Nanumba Traditional Area are mainly rural villages with less than 5,000 inhabitants. These rural settlements have very poor social and economic infrastructure and poverty is endemic in this part of the country (Van der Linde and Naylor 1999).

In comparison with other parts of Northern Ghana, the Nanumba area has some of the most fertile soils suitable for the cultivation of food and cash crops. Most of the inhabitants of the Traditional Area are farmers. They cultivate mainly yams, maize, millet, guinea corn, beans and groundnuts for household consumption while cashew and teak are grown as cash crops (Oelbaum 2010). Most farm work is done by the men; however, the women often assist with crop harvesting. Besides farming, they also keep animals such as sheep, goats, cattle and poultry. Some residents are engaged in petty trading of household and consumer items while a few do white collar jobs as administrators, teachers, bankers and local government officials.

In terms of its social structure, the Nanumba society can be categorized into two main groups, that is the royals (nabihe) and the commoners (tarembe). Amongst the group of royals are the elders (Nayili Kpamba) who constitute the king's courts as well as those of every village chief. Other social groups include the earth priests (tindaniina), learned Muslims as well as several professionals including blacksmiths, barbers, weavers and butchers.

Finally, the relationship between the Nanumba and migrant groups in the Traditional Area, in particular the Konkomba, has been rather frosty and conflict-ridden for several decades. Intense animosity has for years characterized the relationship between the two groups, with the Nanumba expressing disquiet about the increasing population of Konkomba migrants in their territory. The two groups have fought several wars since the early 1980s over issues relating to ownership and control of land, payment of levies, the adjudication of cases, petty squabbles. Nanumba attempts to regain sovereignty over their entire territory and Konkomba desire for respect and the right to elect their own leaders (Bogner 2000, Talton 2003).

Research Methods

The authors employed a combination of methods in obtaining information about the Nanun chieftaincy conflict. First, we observed proceedings at the Northern Regional House of Chiefs on the chieftaincy dispute between May and November 2006, and in May 2007. Information obtained from the

judicial records of the Northern Regional House of Chiefs on the dispute, and observations made during the judicial proceedings were crosschecked and complemented with interviews held at Bimbilla and the surrounding settlements in November 2007. The disputants, their witnesses, elders of the deceased king, holders of traditional offices, the educated elites and commoners were also interviewed. Further interview sessions were held with the disputants themselves to help clarify some conflicting statements which emerged from their narrations. Archival studies were also conducted at the Northern Regional Archives in Tamale within the same period. We also gathered information about the origin of the Nanun kingdom and the two ruling gates during the entire period of field work. Further collection of secondary materials on the conflict was intermittently carried out by the authors from 2009 to date.

Nanun Political System and Background to the Current Dispute

Nanun or the Nanumba kingdom is one of the three traditional states established in Northern Ghana between the 14th and 16th centuries by Mantambu. According to oral tradition, Mantambu established the kingdom of Nanun after defeating the autochthonous populations and incorporating the leadership and cultural practices of the vanquished groups into the newly established kingdoms (Rattray 1932; Wumbei 1981). The Nanumba political system can be described as a centralized but hierarchical system under the leadership of the Bimbilla Naa who is considered to be the king and overlord of the Nanumba people. The Bimbilla Naa reigns over a number of largely autonomous settlements administered by chiefs who occupy various levels of the political hierarchy and who owe allegiance to him (the Bimbilla Naa). Each Nanumba settlement has a ruling class (*nabihe*) consisting of the chief (Naa) and several elders (*Nayili Kpamba*) who constitute a court responsible for the administration of their territory. Nanun also has female chiefs such as the Pona, Bimbilla-Pona, Kpatua-Naa, Nakpan-Zoo Naa, and Jikuhi-Pona.

A unique feature of the Nanumba political system is the rotational and promotional system whereby royals become chiefs of smaller settlements and then move to higher chieftaincy positions until, if eligible, they may aspire to the kingship position of Bimbilla Naa. The position of Bimbilla Naa alternates between members of the two established clans (gates) of Gbugmayili and Bangyili.⁴ Traditionally, a prince from the Gbugmayili gate must rise through the chiefly positions at Makayili, Djua, Suga, Gundo, Bakpaba, and others before getting to the principal “skin gate” of Nakpa where he becomes eligible for the position of Bimbilla Naa. Similarly, royals from the Bangyili gate must first become chiefs of settlements such as, Gbinbgaliga, Chamba, Shikpam, Tua, Sakpe and others before getting to the principal “skin gate” of Dokpam, whereafter he becomes eligible for the

position of Bimbilla Naa. In recent times however, the applicability of the promotional system has been questioned by some royals competing for the position of Bimbilla Naa (cf. Awedoba 2009: 180).

Background to the Current Chieftaincy Dispute

The current chieftaincy dispute in Bimbilla dates back to 1999, when the ruling Bimbilla Naa, Naa Abarika died. Since he was from the Bangyili gate, his successor was expected to come from the Gbugmayili gate in accordance with Nanun tradition. The funeral of the deceased king was performed in 2003, which was to be immediately followed by the selection and enskinment of his successor by the nine kingmakers of Nanun. However, six of the kingmakers (led by the Kpatihi Naa) decided on Mr Andani Dasana Abdulai, a son of a former king of Nanun, as the next king while the other three kingmakers (led by the Juo Naa) selected Alhaji Salifu Dawuni, the sitting Nakpa Naa, as the successor to the deceased king. The kingmakers could thus not agree on the legitimate successor to the Bimbilla skin. Two princes emerged from the Gbugmayili gate, each claiming to have been selected by the appropriate authority as the Bimbilla Naa. The emergence of two claimants to the Bimbilla skin threatened the existing peace in Bimbilla and the entire Nanun kingdom with fears of unrest and clashes between supporters of the two rival claimants. The Northern Regional Security Council (REGSEC) intervened to forestall any clashes in the town and ensure continued peace in Bimbilla. The REGSEC also compelled the two contestants to sign an undertaking that the funeral of the deceased king as well as the nomination of a successor would be done in a peaceful atmosphere.

Fearing that Alhaji Salifu Dawuni would be enskined as Bimbilla Naa, the six kingmakers (led by the Kpatihi Naa) and their supporters quickly enskined Andani Dasani Abdulai as the Bimbilla Naa. This action was intended to take advantage of a traditional Nanun custom which says that a legitimately enskined chief or king could not be deskined (Awedoba 2009). This preemptive behaviour of Andani Abdulai's supporters enraged the supporters of Alhaji Dawuni who vehemently protested against it and lodged a complaint with the REGSEC. They also took the matter to court. The court subsequently placed an injunction on the enskinment process and all other activities connected to becoming a Bimbilla Naa. The six kingmakers who enskined Andani Abdulai as Bimbilla Naa were arrested and charged with involvement in actions likely to breach the peace in Bimbilla and with contempt of court. They were, however, later released by the court. Not satisfied with the decisions of the court on the matter, supporters of Alhaji Salifu Dawuni referred the case to the Bimbilla Traditional Council. The Traditional Council ruled that, according to Nanun custom, only someone who had previously been chief of Nakpa could move on to become the

Bimbilla Naa. Andani Abdulai therefore did not qualify to be the Bimbilla Naa. Furthermore, it was decided that the Juo Naa (the leader of the kingmakers) must be part of the final decision on who would become the Bimbilla Naa (Awedoba 2009). The decisions of the Bimbilla Traditional Council were upheld by the Northern Regional House of Chiefs which also dismissed the submission of Andani Abdulai's counsel that although Alhaji Dawuni occupied the "gate skin" of Nakpa he could not become the Bimbilla Naa because he was not the son or grandson of a former king of Nanun. The three kingmakers led by the Juo Naa subsequently proceeded to enskin Alhaji Salifu Dawuni as the legitimate Bimbilla Naa. By their actions, Nanun had two rival claimants to the Bimbilla skin, both claiming they selected by the appropriate authority, performed the required rituals, and had been enskined as Bimbilla Naa by the legitimate authority.

The chieftaincy dispute in Nanun thus brings to the fore the question: what are the processes involved in the selection of the Bimbilla Naa? Who has the traditionally legitimate authority to nominate, select and enskin a person as the Bimbilla Naa? What rituals accompany the selection and nomination process, and who traditionally performs these rituals? In the next section, we shall consider the narratives of the two contestants to the Bimbilla skin and critically interrogate these accounts.

Contested Narratives in the Selection and Enskinning of a Bimbilla Naa

In Nanun, there are nine kingmakers: the Juo Naa⁵, the Kpatihi, Lanjiri Naa, Gambugu Naa, Jilo Naa, Wulehi Naa, Joli Naa, Dibsi Naa and the Chichegu Naa. In the activities leading to the burial, selection and enskinment of a new Naa, certain roles are traditionally allocated to each of these elders, but those of the Juo Naa and the Kpatihi are of utmost importance (Halawayhi 2008: 30). Six of the kingmakers (Kpatihi Naa, Lanjiri Naa, Gambugu Naa, Wulehi Naa, Dibsi Naa, and Chichegu Naa) under the leadership of Kpatihi Naa, claimed they had given the kingship title (naam) to Mr Andani Dasana, while the other three (the regents of Juo, Jilo Naa and Joli Naa), led by the Juo regent, declared they had enskined the Napka Naa as Bimbilla Naa. The question of who selects a Bimbilla Naa has thus become very controversial. In this case Napka Naa Salifu Dawuni is claiming that the regent of Juo is the sole kingmaker of the Bimbilla skin. Though there are other kingmakers, according to him and his supporters the Juo Naa's voice is the final authority when it comes to selecting a Bimbilla Naa. He alone does the selection by sending cola to the selected candidate. He can consult the other kingmakers just to listen to what they think about a particular candidate, and they can express their opinions and possible preference for a particular candidate, yet they cannot enforce what they want. What the rest of the kingmakers do is to perform the necessary initiation acts on the selected candidate, including certain acts that the Juo Naa himself performs. Thus, the two major

arguments of the Nakpa Naa are that he is the occupant of the Napka Skin and was chosen by the Juo regent whom, he claimed, is the leader of the kingmakers. The late king (Naa Abarika) was from the Bangyili gate. Nakpa Naa's position is that since he is the occupant of the Nakpa, he is the only person qualified to be enskined as the Bimbilla Naa. According to him:

Every Nakpa Naa is the first born [zuu] of the ruling Bimbilla Naa. When I was a Nakpa Naa6, for sixteen years I did my duty to the Bimbilla Naa. During every Damba festival, for all these sixteen years I was a Napka Naa, I sent a cow annually to the king because everybody knew that I would be the next king if the king died and I am still alive ... and of sound mind ... and in good health. We have two gates in Bimbilla, Bangyili and Gbugmayili. If the ruling king is from Bangyili, the Gbugmayili prince who is occupying the Napka skin becomes his first born and every Damba, the Nakpa Naa is supposed to send a cow to the king. Also, if the reigning king is from the Gbugmayili gate, then the Bangyili prince occupying the Dokpam skin becomes the first born of the king and he sends a cow to him during the annual Damba festival. Look, everybody in Bimbilla knows that I am the Bimbilla Naa because I was the Nakpa Naa. In the history of Namun kingdom, since the inception of the gate system, there has never been a situation in which it is the turn of the Gbugmayili, and the Nakpa Naa is there as I am here, and is of sound mind as I am of sound mind, and yet somebody else is made the king. It has never happened and it will never happen in this kingdom.

In subsequent interviews with the Juo regent in Bimbilla, he claimed that he alone selects the Bimbilla Naa, a claim which a section of the elders, chiefs and people of Namun support. According to him, this explains why he enskined the Nakpa Naa as Bimbilla Naa. To him, he is the leader of the kingmakers and thus has the sole responsibility of selecting the new king, with the others playing secondary roles. He revealed that though he selects the Naathis procedure is symbolic since the one who will become the Bimbilla Naa after the death of the incumbent is already known to all. This is because it is a rotational system, and the gate system is also clear as to who is the senior-most prince. If, for instance, the incumbent Naa is from the Bangyili gate, the senior-most person in the Gbugmayili gate (that is, the occupant of the Nakpa skin) becomes the automatic successor to the incumbent upon his death.⁸ In the same vein, when the ruling Bimbilla Naa from the Gbugmayili gate dies, the occupant of Dokpam succeeds. Hence the expression, "If the sceptre of Banyili is put down, that of Gbugmayili should be taken up. If then the sceptre of Gbugmayili is put down, that of Banyili should be taken up" (Skalnik 1983: 15; 1996: 112).

Giving evidence before the Judicial Committee of the Northern Regional House of Chiefs on May 10, 2006, the Juo regent's major argument was that, he is the leader of the nine kingmakers of the Bimbilla Skin. Explaining further the leadership role of the Juo Naa, he posited that the historical movement of the Nanumba people to Bimbilla brought them into contact with the Juo people who were the original settlers at Nanun, and were ruled by a chief-priest called Juo Naa. The immigrants, led by Mantambu, engaged the indigenes in a battle and conquered them. The Juo Naa surrendered to the forces of Mantambu and thereafter handed over to him the regalia of chiefship. Then the king, Mantambu, gave the regalia back to the chief-priest and asked him to enskin him as king over all the conquered people, including Juo. Accordingly, the Juo Naa dutifully used the regalia to enrobe (enskin) Mantambu. Since then, it has been the Juo Naa who enskins the Bimbilla Naa. The Juo regent claims that in the course of time, the Bimbilla Naa created other positions including that of Kpatihi Naa to assist the Juo Naa in enskinning a Bimbilla Naa. According to him:

When I said I choose the Bimbilla Naa, I also follow a particular process. I cannot just choose anybody as Bimbilla Naa if there is Nakpa Naa. So if the ruling king is from Bangvili and he dies, I look at Nakpa, whoever is occupying the skin, whether he is a stranger, a Konkomba or a Frafra, he becomes the next Bimbilla Naa.⁷

In a subsequent interview with the Juo regent in Bimbilla, he remarked that though he was a regent, he saw himself as the extension of his father and could thus perform all the functions that his father performed in his capacity as a substantive Juo Naa. He argued thus:

My father was the Juo Naa and he died. I was installed as regent upon his death. So I am still the Juo Naa. All that my father was doing and what he stood for is what I do and what I stand for. It is just like when a chief dies and there is a regent. The regent is the father. When you are your father's first born and you mature to meet him alive, he will tell you everything because he knows one day he will die... so my father taught me... everything... He taught me that in Nanun chieftaincy, if it is the turn of the Gbugmayili, it is the Nakpa Naa who becomes the king, and if the incumbent from Gbugmayili dies, and it is the turn of the Bangvili, the Bangvili prince on the Dokpam skin becomes the King. It is automatic. The whole country, the whole world, everybody knows about that. That is what we all know; our great grandfathers, our fathers. That is what we grew up to meet. Our kingship is like a school. You start from class one, class two, up to class six, then to college and university. You cannot use class one to sit on the Bimbilla Skin.... to enter class six. If a Bimbilla Naa from

Bangyili dies and you are a Gbugmayili prince occupying the Bimbilla skin, then the whole world knows that you are the next king. It is simple. You only pray for long life and good health. As for the kingship, if you are alive, nobody can compete with you, nobody can take it from you.¹⁰

He referred to the Kpatihi Naa (who allegedly enskined Mr Andani Dasana as Bimbilla Naa) as only a messenger at the Bimbilla Naa's court who only acts when instructed to do so. To the Juo regent, therefore, the Kpatihi has no traditional authority to enskin a king unless instructed to do so by him.

The arguments of Mr. Andani Dasana stand in sharp contrast to what was narrated to us by the Nakpa Naa. His position and that of his elders and a section of the Nanun population is that, a successor to the Bimbilla naam should be a son or a grandson of a former king, a condition he has met. According to him, his father was Bimbilla Naa Andani Dasana (1959-1981), and his grandfather was Bimbilla Naa Abdulai. Since both his father and grandfather were Naas of Bimbilla, his position today, compared with the Nakpa Naa, is uncontested because only sons and grandsons can ascend the Bimbilla Skin. He posited that Nakpa Naa Salifu is a great grandson and therefore cannot become the Bimbilla Naa. He recalled that in the history of Nanun, no great grandson has ever ascended the skin. According to him:

In Nanun, kingship is a property ... left behind by our fathers and grandfathers for their sons and grandsons. Only direct sons or direct grandsons can succeed to the Bimbilla Naam. The father of Nakpa Naa Salifu Dawuni was Lepuhi Naa Dawuni and the grandfather was Nabinyong Dahamani (a prince who never became a chief). Prince Dahamani's father was Bimbilla Naa Kalo, whose father was Bimbilla Naa Shero. The father had four children: Suga Naa Dawuni, Mahamang Ghang, Nakpa Naa Dawuni Salifu and Amiru. Out of the four, only Nakpa Naa Salifu Dawuni and Suga Naa Dawuni are alive, with Suga Naa Dawuni as the eldest and still ruling Suga, a settlement about seven miles from Bimbilla. So you can see, Nakpa Naa is a great grandson. You cannot have sons or grandsons while you allow a great grandson to be enskined a Bimbilla Naa.¹¹

The second argument of Mr. Andani Dasana is that it is the Kpatihi Naa who selects a Bimbilla Naa. "He puts the regalia on the candidate". He observed that it is the naam kali (the kingly robe) that makes one a king, and this naam kali is in the custody of the Kpatihi Naa. It is the putting of the naam kali on the selected candidate that gives him the naam, and legitimizes his position as a Bimbilla Naa. He rejected the position that Juo Naa has the final authority in deciding who becomes a Bimbilla Naa.

Mr. Andani further argued that following democratic principles, six of the nine kingmakers have given him their support against the three on the Nakpa Naa's side. He remarked thus:

It is a democratic principle that governs the selection process. I have six of the kingmakers behind me and he [referring to Nakpa Naa] has three. How then can he be the King over me? It cannot happen; over my dead body.¹²

The Kpatih Naa also strongly rejected the idea that he is only a messenger to the Bimbilla Naa and only playing a secondary role after the selection. He claims that his forefathers came with Mantambu from Buin to Nanun. On their journey to Nanun, they were the ones keeping the regalia (naam kaya).¹³ Upon their arrival in their present territory, the Kpatih enskinned Mantambu, and ever since, the Kpatih Naa has remained the enskinning authority of all subsequent Nanima of Bimbilla. He argued that:

Mantambu came to Nanun with the first Kpatih. He was carrying the regalia of Mantambu. After the conquest, Mantambu became the king over all the people he had conquered. In becoming a king, the first Kpatih Naa he came with, used the regalia to enskin him as Naa, and since then it has been the Kpatih who puts the regalia on a candidate to make him a Naa of Bimbilla.¹⁴

Interrogating the Narratives

Opinions are divided as to whether Kpatih Naa came with Mantambu or whether the position, like some others, was created by Mantambu and subsequent Nanima. However, information gathered from most informants seems to suggest that Kpatih came with Mantambu. The question is: does that make him the sole kingmaker of a Bimbilla Naa, or is the role he performs in the enskinning that of a mere messenger?

Nanun elders argued that, in their custom, the process of enskinning sub-chiefs is different from that of a Bimbilla Naa. Thus, the elders made a distinction between two concepts: gbaaibu and leeibu. A lower ranked chief the king selects to enskin goes through the process of naam leeibu. In this process of naam leeibu, the king chooses a day on which the nominee comes to his palace, and he is enskinned. The king instructs any of his elders to put a gown, normally a white one, and a hat on the nominee. This is immediately followed by drumming, singing and dancing. Naam gbaaibu, on the other hand, is a process reserved for chiefs occupying very high offices such as that of the Bimbilla Naa. In the naam gbaaibu process, the candidate is selected and later enrobed. Thus, there is a distinction between the selection

and the enskinment process, two functions that have contributed to the current chieftaincy dispute in the Nanun kingdom.

Questions bordering on the selection and enskinment of a Bimbilla Naa, and whether one kingmaker performs the two roles, were posed to the contestants and the kingmakers. Kpatihi Naa claimed that putting the regalia (naam kali) on the candidate constitutes selection and enskinment, which he alone does. The Juo regent argued otherwise and indicated that putting the regalia on the candidate is secondary to the selection (naam gbaaibu). He does the selection as the leader of the kingmakers, and instructs any elder to invest the candidate with the regalia in the room of the eldest wife of the deceased king on an approved night.

Available documentary evidence does not offer much help in determining whether it is the Kpatihi Naa or the Juo Naa who plays the primary role in the selection and enskinment of a Bimbilla Naa. Skalnik observed as follows:

.... a specific place in Nanumba polity is occupied by the Kpatihi Naa who is the 'skinmaker' of the Bimbilla Naa, all major chiefs, regents and palace elders. His lineage claims to have come with Nmantambu as part of his retinue (1983: 13). (Our emphasis)

However, if the Kpatihi is the “skin-maker”, including that of the Bimbilla Skin, is he also the “the skin selector”? Skalnik attempts a distinction by stating as follows:

The selection of the Bimbilla Naa is made by several naa kpamba... Most important among them are Juo Naa, Gambugu Naa and Lanjiri Naa... Technically each new chief receives his title and naam (office, authority) in a ceremony of 'enskinment' (namleebu), i.e. putting on a skin. (Skalnik 1983: 13). (Our emphasis)

However, some thirteen years earlier (that is, in 1996) Skalnik noted that:

[In] Naam Babu [gbaaibu] (lit. holding the naam) or the selection of the Bimbilla Naa, ... the leader of the naakpamba who is the Juo Naa sits in the paani (eldest wife's) room of the palace of the deceased Bimbilla Naa. The Lanjiri Naa and the Gambux Naa enter the room with the selected candidate of the naam of Bimbilla, holding him tight. The other electors such as the Jilo Naa, the Dibi Naa and the Chichax Naa keep guard outside and chase away any other possible witness. The candidate is presented to the Juo Naa... The candidate is then bathed in a special herb bath. Besides the Juo Naa, the Lanjiri Naa and the Gambux Naa and also Kpatihi are present. Kpatihi then performs the naam kparibu by putting the chiefly gown

and cap on the candidate (Skalnik 1996: 115-116). (Our emphasis)

Available archival materials do not seem to clarify the issues any further. One archival source indicated that:

The Head chief, that is the king of the Nanumba people (the Bimbilla Naa) must be the son of a former king of Bimbilla, and be promoted from either Nakpa or Dakpam or Chamha, appointed by Joe [Juo]-Na, Gambugu Na, Koko Na, Luanja Na and Wulaise Na. 15 (Our emphasis).

Politics and the Nanun Chieftaincy Conflict

The Nanun chieftaincy conflict, like other such conflicts in Northern Ghana, has been affected by events and interferences from personalities located outside the Traditional Area. One of the most important of such interferences is the alleged meddling in the conflict by prominent politicians and government officials at the local and national levels. Another is the spillover from the on-going chieftaincy conflict in the neighbouring kingdom of Dagbon. In this section we examine how both events have affected and escalated the Nanun chieftaincy conflict.

The New Patriotic Party (NPP) came into power in January 2001 after defeating the incumbent National Democratic Congress (NDC). The following year, the Dagbon chieftaincy conflict reignited, leading to the death of the king of the Dagomba (Yaa Naa) on March 27, 2002. The NPP government was accused of complicity in the king's death and within two weeks the Interior Minister, the Northern Regional Minister and the National Security Advisor were forced to resign. They were members of the Abudu faction in the Dagbon chieftaincy dispute serving in the NPP government (Anamzoya 2004: 1). The Dagbon conflict was a big embarrassment to the NPP government and affected its political fortunes in subsequent elections, particularly in the Northern Region. Thus, in 2003 when the funeral of Naa Abarika II (king of the Nanumba) was being performed in the neighbouring kingdom of Nanun, the NPP government treaded with caution. The newly-appointed Northern Regional Minister invited members of the Gbugma gate whose turn it was to choose a new king and advised them not to choose a new king "until a universally accepted selection and enskinment is performed on one by the college of kingmakers" (Halawayhi 2008: 68). When, few weeks later, six of the kingmakers started the enskinment process of Mr. Andani Dasana, the Regional Minister immediately sent security forces to halt the process. Mr. Andani was arrested and sent to Yendi where he was locked up for a week. The arrest of Mr. Andani attracted different interpretations from our respondents in 2007. While some thought the arrest was necessary to avert any possible clashes between followers of the disputants and thus

praised the Regional Minister, others felt that the Minister was only acting on the orders of the Vice President of the Ghana, Alhaji Aliu Mahama who, it was alleged, was a bosom friend of the Nakpa Naa, the rival claimant to the kingship title.

It was not surprising that the next year the Nakpa Naa was also enskinned by a section of the kingmakers as a Bimbilla Naa and subsequently filed a formal complaint at the Northern Regional House of Chiefs claiming to be the legitimately enskinned king of the Nanumba people. Both Mr. Andani and the Nakpa Naa obtained talking drums to be beaten on Mondays and Fridays, and received homage from their loyalists; Mr Andani on Mondays and Nakpa Naa on Fridays. Having learnt bitter lessons from events in Dagbon, the Bimbilla District Security Council ordered the two contestants to stop all activities (drumming, dancing and the firing of musketry) that tend to portray each of them as a king.

Since 2004 the Nanun chieftaincy dispute has been pending before a Judicial Committee of the Northern Regional House of Chiefs. The dispute took another turn when the chieftaincy dispute in the neighboring Dagbon kingdom spilled over into the Nanun chieftaincy dispute. The two factions in the Dagbon conflict, that is, the Abdulai (Abudu) and Andani factions, are supporting Nakpa Naa and Mr. Andani Dasana, respectively.

Given the political undertones in the Dagbon chieftaincy conflict, both sides in the Nanun conflict have accused each other of receiving some form of political support from government officials. Mr. Andani and his supporters revealed during interviews that the Vice President Aliu Mahama, an Abudu and a major actor in the Dagbon chieftaincy conflict, was giving various kinds of support to the Nakpa Naa. The Nakpa Naa and his followers denied this allegation and accused Mr. Andani and his supporters of enjoying political support from the then Northern Regional Chairman of the NDC, Alhaji Suman Zakari. The latter allegedly provided accommodation and food for Mr. Andani and his supporters anytime they came to Tamale to attend court proceedings at the Regional House of Chiefs.

Whilst the Nanun chieftaincy dispute is still pending before the Northern Regional House of Chiefs, several attempts have been made by both contending parties and other groups in an attempt to break the stalemate and resolve the conflict. These interventions have mainly relied on alternative dispute resolution strategies. They include an attempt by the Damongo Catholic Peace Mission. The Nayire, the king of the Mamprusi has also attempted to resolve the dispute. Both attempts have however failed. In 2007, the Nanumba Youth Association also approached the Chief Director of the Ministry of Chieftaincy and Culture and pleaded with her to use her good offices to help resolve the dispute. She, however, advised the two factions to

allow the Northern Regional House of Chiefs to determine the matter.

Discussions and Conclusions

The question of who has the authority to select and enskin a Bimbilla Naa is at the centre of the chieftaincy dispute in Nanun. Based on the lack of clarity on the issue in the literature, archival documents and interviews conducted, it would be difficult to take a position on this matter. It appears, however, that based on observations made by Skalnik during the enskinment of the last king in 1983, it is the Juo Naa who decides on the candidate and instructs any of the elders to put the regalia on him. The Kpatihi Naa usually does the enrobingment. Whilst a section of the population sees the role of the Kpatihi Naa as secondary, and only dependent on the selected candidate (by the Juo Naa), another section sees it as the most significant role, because to them, if a candidate is not enrobed, his enskinment is incomplete. Unfortunately, among the Nanumba, as is the case with most ethnic groups in northern Ghana, the customary procedures for selecting and enskinning a Bimbilla Naa are very secretive and not codified. Not even an earlier attempt by Peter Skalnik in 1983 to see the regalia used in enskinning a Bimbilla Naa yielded any result. As a result, the process is open to manipulation by people with divergent interests. Both the Juo regent and the Kpatihi Naa claim to have the regalia used in enrobing a Nanun king in their possession and to have used it in enrobing their candidate. Meanwhile, there can only be one set of regalia.

Commenting on a similar situation in neighbouring Dagbon where there are also two rival claimants to the kingship as a result of controversies about what constitutes the appropriate procedure for the selection and enskinment of a king, Ferguson and Wilks (1970: 34) note that "it is difficult to determine the 'real' rules of succession, as there are none". Staniland (1975: 22), after studying the Dagbon conflict, also remarks that it is virtually impossible to talk of a 'proper' procedure, since there are disagreements over several crucial elements of the selection process.

The Nanun chieftaincy dispute therefore brings to the fore one of the major sources of chieftaincy disputes in Ghana: ascertaining the proper procedure involved in the enskinment or enstoolment of a chief/king of a particular chiefdom or kingdom. Most succession disputes pending before the Houses of Chiefs in Ghana are not only about the legitimacy of the contestants, but also about whether a particular contestant or chief was properly appointed by the appropriate or legitimate appointing authority, and enskinned or enstooled according to the appropriate rules, using the appropriate regalia. The appointing authorities (the kingmakers), the enskinment or enstoolment procedures, and the acts that constitute the enskinment process are customary processes which are neither codified nor open to public knowledge. They are normally fluid and thereby open to manipulation and

debate (cf. Ferguson and Wilks 1970). Most enskinment or enstoolment rites are shrouded in secrecy, especially with respect to the period when the selected candidate is confined to a room to enable him undergo certain traditional rituals.

The Nanun chieftaincy dispute and the narratives of the two contestants provide further evidence of the frequent manipulation of oral tradition by the very people charged with the responsibility of maintaining the culture and tradition of the group. In an attempt to tell their stories, each of the two contestants presents different versions of the role played by the kingmakers and holders of high offices in the past. Their tales are told to justify their current arguments. Such attempts to reconstruct past roles so that they will fit into their present expectations are a common feature in chieftaincy disputes throughout Ghana (cf. Lentz 2006). The Nanun case study also shows the extent to which traditional roles can be manipulated by the current occupants. It is not uncommon for current office holders to expand or change their roles with the justification that these roles have been played by their ancestors and predecessors over several generations. In our case study, both the Juo Naa and the Kpatihi Naa claim their respective roles are the most important in the selection and installation of a king. Both claim to have in their possession the regalia used in enskinning past kings. The Kpatihi Naa attempts to usurp the role of the Juo Naa by claiming that the person who enskins a king is more important than the one who selects the candidate, while the Juo Naa underplays the significance of the role of the Kpatihi Naa by asserting that he as the leader of the kingmakers may call upon any of the elders present to enskin the candidate he selects.

Furthermore, even when the criteria for the selection of a chief or king are quite well documented, it is not uncommon for contestants to use an exception made in the past to justify the validity of their case. In the Nanun case study we reviewed, the principle of rotating the kingship between two gates (Gbugmayili and Bangyili) and the existence of a promotional system whereby royals progress from being chiefs of lower ranked communities until they reach the "skin gate" of Nakpa and Dokpam for their respective gates is a well established practice. So also is the fact that among the Nanumba, unlike with some neighbouring groups, sons and grandsons of former kings may contest and be selected as Bimbilla Naa (Awedoba 2009). In spite of these, the Kpatihi Naa and his supporters dispute the validity of these well established practices, in particular the requirement that a contestant for the kingship position must have occupied the "skin gate" of Nakpa and Dokpam.

The Nanun chieftaincy dispute also exposes existing structural weaknesses in the traditional political system in Nanun. The political structure does not adequately address the leadership question during the period of interregnum.

Although the political system is very hierarchical, there appears to be no clearly laid down authority structure distributing responsibilities amongst the elders in the absence of a king. Instead, the political system relies on the existence of consensus amongst the elders and kingmakers in the selection of a new king. In the absence of such consensus, as is currently the case in Nanun, the political system becomes paralyzed as no single individual is able to act in the absence of a king. Attempts by supporters of Andani Dasana to claim the kingship through the use of the democratic principle by virtue of having obtained the support of the majority (six out of the nine) of the kingmakers in Nanun was also rejected outright because this practice has not been used in the past.

Mediators and adjudicators of such chieftaincy conflicts, when confronted with claims and counter claims by the contestants, often resort to the use of available written reports such as those found in anthropological studies, diaries of colonial officials, missionaries, traders, religious scholars and many others. However, anthropological monographs and other such evidence is not always complete nor reliable, and even when it is, it is often contested by the losing candidates. Attempts at documenting the sacred rituals employed in the king-making process have often been met by lack of cooperation from the leaders and complaints from members of the group. Staniland (1975) reported how one of the elders of Dagbon registered his displeasure at his attempt to document the succession rules of the Dagomba people in Northern Ghana. In Nanun, Honourable H.W. Ainsworth (then Assistant District Commissioner at Bimbilla) recorded his own experience when he tried to document the history of the Nanumba. In his Informal Diary, he noted the following on Thursday September 10, 1931:

The elders came again in the afternoon. They kept on producing fresh aspects of things, so that one is continually revising what one has already written...I feel convinced that if one kept questioning them every day for a year one would still be inaccurate and full of halftruths.

Given the ease with which elders and kingmakers can re-interpret the past, alter their roles and manipulate the process of selecting and enskinning a king, the question of who has authority to select a Bimbilla Naa and who enskins him will continue to be debated on the streets of Bimbilla for a long time to come.

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