

Interview with Kpembewura, Chief of Kpembe, Alhaji Ibrahim Haruna, Kpembe (Gonja), July 4, 2004.

Present, two subchiefs, Salagawura (chief of Salaga) and Mobuwura (chief of the Mobu, the autochthonous people of Kpeme).

Interview conducted by Professor Emmanuel Akyeampong with Jacob Abudu

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P.A.: I am in the company of chiefs – three senior chiefs, the paramount chief, Kpembiwura which is a division of Gonja, the Salaga chief and Mobuwura and we are in the Kpembiwura's palace on this day, July 4th 2004. I stand to be corrected because this is where I can get my history corrected. I did quite a lot of reading in the archives and established that the Gonja state was founded by Mande warriors who came with Muslims. The Muslims offered prayers and after the conquest the warriors became the ruling class, the Muslims formed the Muslim community and the conquered people became the commoners, including the Nchumburu who are the indigenous people, is that correct?

Kpembewura: That is very true, that was what happened. We still have or maintain the Muslims and during festivals or occasions they offered prayers. They sit in front of the chief and offer prayers. The warriors were led by Jakpa and the indigenous people that he met he assimilated them into the Gonja kingdom, some of them he gave them independent status in the sense that they still kept their tradition though they were conquered and all that they did was to serve under the chief. The chief did not disturb their functions up to now they still do that without any interference from the chief. Whenever the chief needed any service they came to serve. Even up till now they still do that but what usually happens is that the Gonja chief selects one of them as head and that person selects his elders then they handle their affairs.

P.A.: So would I be accurate in describing the Gonja chiefs as Muslims and what is the relationship between Gonjas and the indigenous people?

Kpembewura (KPW): What happened was that Jakpa came with Muslims and wherever he conquered he left his son and the leader of the Muslims was Fati Muri-kpe so wherever he conquered he left a son and one of Fati Murikpe's sons or Muslims to offer prayers.

P.A.: I ask this because for example farming in West Africa is tied to gods or deities so that pacification becomes central in agrarian societies hence the position of Tindana. So I was hoping that you elaborate more on how these got incorporated into the political structure.

KPW: We call the tindanas Kasawulewura and they perform rituals for the earth, but the chief provides the items for them to perform. We do not know where the deities are located; they know because we came and met them. They are allowed to perform. Also the Muslims have their functions. With the Kasawuliwurana If there is no rain they say it is due to this or that so we need a goat or a fowl or cow to pacify or perform these rituals. The Muslims as I said came from Mande. Jakpa had quarters for them they never mixed up with Gonjas. They are called the Sakpare.

P.A.: So the Gonjas never forced the people they had conquered to convert to Islam?

KPW: No, they rather assimilated them into the system, they only accepted to serve the chiefs but annually they pay tributes as allegiance to the chiefs.

P.A.: The second thing you talked about was Sakpare. Now subsequent Muslims came from Wangara, Hausa etc if they come do they mix up with the Sakpare or they stay separately?

KPW: They usually stay separately and what they do is to be away from the first Muslims. Let me give you a typical example. In Kpembe we have the Sakpare but when the other Muslims came (now let us call them foreign Muslims because they have not been absorbed), we gave them Salaga. So Sakpare's are different, the others stay in strange quarters called Zongos. So the Hausas stay in Zongos.

P.A.: So Salaga started as a Zongo?

KPW: Oh yes, Salaga is a Zongo. Take Kpembe we speak Gonja and we are all Gonjas, but Salaga it is Hausa because a Hausa trader came here and was given land to stay. Eventually it developed into a big market center.

P.A.: Historically, there seems to be a kind of relationship between the Gonja, Dagomba and Mamprusi but in about the C19th there were also reports of tension between Gonjas and Dagombas and even later than C19th. Can you tell us a little bit about it?

KPW: The Gonja – Dagomba relation is not as the Dagomba – Nanumbas – Mamprusi relations, they understand each other. But the Gonja are the only Guan speaking group in the north. [NB It must be corrected that Nawuri Nchumburu and Krachi are Guan speaking the first two are in northern Ghana and some of the Nchumburu and all Krachis are in the northern Volta].

We are Guans and our language is related to Larte, Nkonya, Awutu. We have annual Guan Congress that we attend. When we speak Dagombas cannot understand but Nanumbas, Dagomba, Frafra, Mamprusi they understand each other. We Gonjas understand Nkonya, Larte etc.

P.A.: So Jakpa as Mande adopted the language of the indigenous people when he came?

KPW: He took the Guan language. As we settled here others moved southwards

P.A.: Can you tell me about the authority structure in Gonja, what is the relationship between Yagbonwura and others?

KPW: As I was saying here is the Mobuwura they are the indigenes of the area so what Jakpa did was that when he conquered an area he made one of the sons to be there as chief then made the indigenous people as one of the elders or advisors. The fact is that they were already there before the conquest: they know where the water is, the deities and every thing so all that they had to do was to serve but he Jakpa made them understand that my son is a chief. The indigenes know how to talk to their gods, the gods understands their language.

P.A: Aside the Mobu do you have other indigenes?

KPW: Yes, we have the Matalapu they are the war captains if there is war they lead. Then we have Ntrapu they take care of the rivers. Then we have executioners “bigbanpu” they sit by me, it is now ceremonial, now you cannot do that.

P.A.: So these are non-gbanya people who have been brought in and given portfolios and made part of the system.

KPW: Yes that is it.

P.A: It means they cannot ascend to the skin.

KPW: No, the skin is reserved for Jakpa’s sons here in Kpembe we have three divisions – Singbin, Kanyasi and Lepu, they are the sons to the original sons of Jakpa throughout the five divisions that is it. But the original people can not ascend to the skin.

P.A: So we have three gates in Kpembe. I also understand that any head of the divisions can become the Yagbonwura.

KPW: Yes, what happens is that the Yagbon skin rotates among five [divisions] - originally there were seven.

P.A: I understand there was an eight one but they never succeeded

KPW: No they are 7 these include Kpembe, Kusawgu, Bole, Tuluwe, Wasipe, Kandie and Kong [NB Wasipe skin is sometimes referred to as Daboya skin but Daboya is only the town where the Wasipewura resides]. Historically something happened. The Kong people wanted the Yagbon skin but then went in and brought Samori and his people to fight the Gonjas for the Yagbon skin. They were not successful that was the reason why they were disqualified with Kandie. They supported the people of Kong that is why they were also disqualified. So it is now left with Kpembe, Tuluwe, Bole, Kusawgu and Wasipe, they are now five.

P.A.: What of Buipe, it is also a division, right?

KPW: No, Buipe cannot be a division because thy conqueror Jakpa was buried there and the Buipe wura takes care of the grave. As a result there is a tradition or a taboo and it is that the Buipe wura enskins the Yagbon wura and after that they do not see each other till death. Even if they are by accident supposed to meet they all close their eyes. It is the belief that if they see each other either one of them or both of them will die. So they do not see each until eternity.

P.A: So the Buipe wura is a sacred person?

KPW: He is separated; he is traditionally the vice president of the Gonja traditional area because if the Yagbon wura is dead he is in charge till a new Yagbonwura is enskined but if by accident

the Yagbonwura is passing through Buipe he has to cover himself so as to avoid seeing the Buipe wura.

P.A: Now back to Salaga, and Kpembe. Salaga become important as a trade center especially in the C18th, it is so and in the 1730s the Asantes came here and also in Dagomba. But Asante – Gonja relations were often tense. Understandably they wanted back their autonomy. Salaga market depended on three things, cattle, slaves and kola but none of these according to my reading were from here or were made in Salaga itself. Cattle were brought by the Mossi and they brought some donkeys as well. The kola came from Asante and the Hausa come to buy the kola. In a sense Salaga was a facilitator of trade. Now the unwelcome guest Asante supplied much of the trade here but the issue is that I want to know how all these affect Salaga and Kpembe relations and Salaga and other divisions in Gonja.

KPW: As I said it was the Kpembe wura who actually provided the land that is where Salaga is now. So as the owner of the place he always sent Lepuwura to collect what these days you call tax.

P.A: So that is one of the divisions.

KPW: No, this one is corrupted from Lere-epu-wura [NB literally means one responsible for soup]. So he the Lepuwura will go if you have ten slaves he may take two if you have cattle he will take some. Now when Asante conquered Salaga, Kpembe was to pay tribute in the form of slaves and it was the Lepuwura who ensured that all the slaves were got and even Kola. He takes a quantity as tax for the chief, if the kola is too much he can sell some. When Asantes come it is actually the Lepowura they meet and he gives out the tribute and comes to report back to Kpembewura. Up to now we still have the Lepowura, but his functions have been watered down too much.

P.W. So the Lepowura was distinct from the Salagawura.

KPW: Yes, the Salagawura is a recent creation. In 1896 the colonial authorities wanted a place to stay and the Yagbonwura gave them Salaga. As part of the colonial administration they wanted someone to keep Salaga clean because it was becoming an urban center and that was how Salagawura came about.

P.A: So in a way Salaga became cosmopolitan and an administrative center and was there no pressure from any colonial authorities for the Kpembe wura to relocate [to Salaga] or perform some [administrative] roles?

KPW: That is what I am saying. So the Lepuwura, for example, was far away in Kpembe so there was pressure on the Kpembewura. That is why he appointed someone, one Osman, who was then very strong to take care of the area to ensure that there was good sanitation, that the gutters were clean etc.

P.A: So there was a compromise agreement that instead of the Kpembewura relocating he rather gave someone as the Salagawura.

KPW: Yes so the agreement was if you have any problem see the Salagawura and he will come to see me.

P.A: Throughout our interviews or observations at the slave sites we realized all the names of the sites were in Hausa but from your account it appears the slave trade issue came before the arrival of the Hausa. How come the names in Hausa? I have forgotten some.

Jacob: Blujia, wankan biri etc

KPW: Yes, at first when Hausas came here they had their section in Salaga. They came from northern Nigeria. Until recently, when people were coming from Nigeria they said they were going to Goo-nja [NB some people say Goro-nja]. It is white people who made it Gonja. Salaga means “go and spread”

P.A.: So Salaga is a Gonja word.

KPW: Yes it means, “to spread”

P.A.: But the dominant language was Hausa so the fact that the slave sites were in Hausa does not mean they dominated but it was the language that was the dominant factor.

KPW: Yes, they brought cloths and other Orientals and then followed by the Mossi and the Zambramas they came here to trade.

Jacob: I wanted to ask and know whether the Gonjas met the Hausas here?

KPW: There was a settlement here occupied by the Nanumbas and they were conquered up to date we still have the Nanumbas as the Kasawuliwura no true Gonja can become the Kasawuliwura.

P.A.: So it means before the Gonjas there were Nanumbas here.

KPW: Yes, their descendants are now the Kasawuliwura [NB Kasawuliwura means landowner].

KPW: Yes, when any ethnic group comes, they were given a place to stay. If you were Grunshie you were given a place and you were joined by other members of your ethnic group. Then we had the Lampur. They were here in Kpembe and we asked them to go and stay there. They now become the Salaga wura,[NB I strongly feel that Lampurwura was the ideal title for the resident chief in Salaga in the pre-colonial times rather than Lepowura. In the interaction Lampur and Lepo have been used interchangeably but Lepo is a division as stated earlier in Kpembe and one of the gates to the Kpembe skin]. Then we have others Grumas, Mamprusis.

P.A: Is there a Gbanya section in Salaga?

K.P.W No we have the Lampur people. They were here before they relocated. The Lampur were war captains, they were the original inhabitants also and they relocated to Salaga. They speak the Gonja language.

P.A.: What I understand is that unlike in Asante where it is only the Oyoko that can occupy the stool, here among the nobility any one can occupy and the Lampur by relocating to Salaga do they lose that [right]?

K.P.W The Lampurs are not part of the royalty to the Kpembe skin. They are not part of the 3 gates.

P.A.: In the C18th and C19th instances of tension between Asante and Gonja arose and anytime Asante was in trouble Gonjas capitalized on that to say they were independent. But then claiming independence will it not disrupt trade. Also, the Asante felt safer here thinking that they have extended their rule to this place. A typical one was Gonja claiming independence in 1874 but I am interested in the effect this will have in terms of Muslim – Gonja relations. In 1874 when the British defeated Asante, Gonjas claimed independence but in terms of interest in trade Salaga and Kpembe may have had different interests so in 1874 when Asante was fighting what was the relationship between Salaga or the Muslims and Kpembe.

K.P.W No problem between us at all. In 1874 the Kpembewura told the British that they did not want the Asante but they wanted their kola.

P.A: That is where the paradox come in; you will not like one but like the other?

K.P.W It was simple; they did not want trade to be disrupted but did not like Asante either.

P.A: Can I touch on the slave market? Yesterday I was in the pikworo slave camp at Paga and there was this Sign Board that says, “Transit camp for slaves going to Salaga”. Yeji was seen as the river port for Salaga so if Paga becomes the entry point, Yeji becomes the exit point. Can you tell me how the whole slave trade was organized? The whole set up. Is it the same Hausa traders who bring them?

K.P.W It was not only the Hausas; we have the Zambarama and the Mossi they also came in and they all brought slaves. Some Gonjas also raided, they went further north. Before colonial rule the boundary of Gonja was at Atebubu, Atta was a Gonja hunter and he made his hut or room there it became known as “Atta be ebu” (Attah’s hut or room). You may come across it in the archives. So Yeji up to Krachi was part of Gonja. Yeji is a Gonja word meaning “Let’s go and eat” [NB This needs to be cross-checked because the word means the same in Nchumburu language.]

P.A: Is it because of fish?

(KPW) It was later, that is in 1960, that Yeji and Prang were put under Bono (Brong) Ahafo. Also the other side up to Babatukuma it was during that period that it was added. So you could see that we were close to Asante hence our trouble with them.

P.A: So when Gonjas raided did they do that to pay tribute to Asante or to sell or both?

KPW: No, they raided because within ourselves we also pay tribute. Others pay tribute to us so all the three gates also had the areas that they raided. We had camps for raiding like Tolo, Sisipe etc. The Sigbin people kept their slaves at Grunshi Zongo and the Lepo people kept theirs at Tolo (Cassette 2 continues from Kpembe) So these gates paid tributes to the Kpembe wura but after the slave trade or even during the trade some of the Grushi women got married to Gonjas and had children who even became chiefs. After the abolition of the slave trade some settled here and got absorbed into the system and became part of us. So we are now one people.

P.A: That is patrilineal?

KPW: Yes we are patrilineal

P.A: After emancipation did they become part of Salaga?

K.PW These villages are a few miles from Salaga, they are part of us. They were farming for the chief. One of the villages is just four miles on the Kpembe – Kpandai road.

P.A: So all these were slave villages?

KPW: Yes, Grushi Zongo has relationship with us the Singbin people, Tolo has relationship with Lepo, Sisipe has relationship with Kanyasi because of the intermarriages. No more master-slave relationship.

Jacob: Now the people in Tolo and Sisipe speak Gonja, do you regard them as Gonjas or you regard them as slaves?

KPW: We regard them as descendants of slaves because they cannot ascend to any skin in Kpembe.

J.A But they call themselves Gonjas

KPW: Yes, they are Gonjas they are part of us but they cannot become chiefs

P.A.: So they are Gonja commoners.

KPW: That is the right word, “Ngbanye blupo” (Gonja commoner)

P.A: Now I want to end I do not want to go too far.

KPW: You know a lot about Gonja history already only that you want to cross-check your facts.

P.A: Well, people only know I write very good history but something happened and I am a little puzzled. In the late C19th there seemed to be civil war there was one in Salaga another in Daboya then in Bole, all about the same time. In all these Muslims are very involved and I am

beginning to think that something larger was going on and all Kpembe went to war with Dagomba.

KPW: It is true. To be very precise, Kpembe even went to war against itself. The reason was on succession in 1896 there was the question of chieftaincy regarding the rotation system. When it started it rotated between Singbin and Lepo, then some where along the line twin brothers from Lepo, one left and created his own division as Kanyase, so when the rotation system came, a time came when Kanyase said they wanted to ascend the Kpembe skin and the Lepu and Singbin refused so they went to war. So Kanyase against Singbin and Lepu the Kanyase people went for Dagomba mercenaries. Eventually they won and that was how the gates became three.

P.A: So the Kanyase division dates very recently to the 1890s.

KPW: Yes

P.A: But in all, these Muslims communities were very central in the war.

KPW: The Muslim quarters here always fought on behalf of the Kpembe wura so anytime Kpembe went to war they saw it as a war of their overlord and they went to war alongside.

P.A: Throughout West Africa it appears Muslims were very peaceful but the Salaga Gonja were different. They were always fighting. What explains this?

KPW: You see in Gonja it is very easy to assimilate. When the Muslims came to take our women there were intermarriages. Eventually they had children who considered Gonjas as uncles so they got involved. This was what happened.

P.A: Last question and I am done and I will let you ask me questions. I have seen sites designated or written as slave sites, are these accurate places?

KPW: Yes, they are the real original sites. The market is still the original market. You went to Wanka baye. It is Hausa word (“the bath place”) When they were brought, they made them to bath before sales that those who would buy would buy.

P.A: So those who were bought were sent to the villages.

KPW: When you could not sell your slaves the rest were given to the Kpembe wura. Sometimes some were so weak that they will not be bought. Any body who came to Salaga and died even up to date and we do not know where he comes from the chief ensures that he is buried and the property becomes that of the Kpembewura

P.A: So when they are bought they are sent to the village, but whilst pending sales what happens?

KPW: Some are left in the open. It was an inhuman trade.

J.A Those who are humble and submissive were not chained.

P.A: So what happens to the rest, were houses built for them?

KPW: Yes, houses were put up in the market and those who were humble ended up in homes but the arrogant ones were chained to the tree at the market.

P.A: I am done but I will come for some more history

J.A How were the slaves transported across the Yeji River to the south?

KPW: The river or lake as you see it was not like that until the construction of the Akosombo dam. There were shallow places that people walked across.

J.A In terms of Kpembe, the divisions are three. In terms of Salaga how many divisions do we have not only in terms of political divisions but sections?

KPW: I think there are fifteen now or more because Salaga is settled according to ethnic lines. We have Dagomba line, Grunshie line and Gonjas from other areas have settled there.

P.A: I am going to walk round Salaga town take a few photographs and get a sense of it so that when I am writing I write in confidence.

KPW: You have already got a lot of information.

P.A: Thank you very much I am grateful

KPW: There is the Salagawura so he will help you with everything.

PROF. There is a grave in Salaga market, is it true?

JKPW: That is the grave of Kpembewura Essanwurifo I. Essanwurofo literally means “tit for tat” or eye for eye [NB According to J.A Braimah in his book “Salaga the Struggle for Power” Essanwurfo took that title during the wars of the period]. I think in about 1892 or so in one of these wars he fell there. The significance of the grave is that that was the last time he was seen. His body was seen there but later no one saw the body again. It was one of the wars to take over Salaga. Once a while the Kpembewura goes to perform some rites there. Maybe slaughter a cow or something else.

P.A: Thank you so much I am very grateful, thank you for the time.

KPW: It is my pleasure; you are always welcome!