

Interview with Salagawura, Chief of Salaga, Alhaji Kanyiti Osman Fusheini, Salaga, July 1, 2004.

Interview conducted by Emmanuel Akyeampong and Jacob Abudu

Also present Kassampawura Mumuni and Baba Ibrahim

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Kanyiti Mahama (Chief): I ascended the throne or became a chief on the 14th of September 1983. Salaga has been established for a long time. As our grandfathers told us, here started as a market. People started coming and it expanded. In Gonja when we say Salaga it comes from the word “Sala” to spread or expand, that is how the name came about. People came from Burkina Faso, from Mossi, Wangara, Hausaland. All over the suburbs or the regions. Salaga was strategically placed and it was spreading and where we have a market that is where people came. People came here to trade in kola-nuts, gunpowder, clothing etc. Actually here is more of a Zongo with every tribe here. In the nutshell this is what I have to say. Maybe my elders will say a word or two.

Jacob: I am saying that the one to speak must mention his name first.

I am Kassampu wura Mumuni: What I have to add is that what the Salagawura said it is true. It is as a result of the visitors or traders that the Salaga skin came about. Actually this was a footpath but already there was a landowner (Kasawuliwura). He the Kasawuliwura requested that once people were already settled here the Kpembewura should bring somebody to take care of this place. Therefore a native from the Lempur sub-division in Kpembe was brought here as a chief. This is what I know about this place.

P.A.: Can I ask a question? You mentioned that Salaga was strategic. Did it only facilitate trade or they also produced something? What was it that drew people to Salaga?

Chief: I describe it as strategic because people came from north, south, east and west.

Mumuni: I stated that people passed here to Upper East and Upper West and beyond. They passed with goods.

Chief: You see this place is central from Volta, Yendi, Kafaba, Tuluwe, Tamale all of them came here because of trade, they traded in gunpowder, liquor and so on for slaves, kola nuts etc.

P.A.: As a historian the groups that helped in developing trade routes in [Gold Coast] were the Wangara. The second were the Hausa. Can you talk about these two and their coming to Salaga, when we talk about their role in opening trade routes like Begho, Bouna, Kong, the Wangara were important in opening the trade routes.

Chief: It is true that the Wangara and Hausas did a lot to open up this area. We, those seated here including myself, we can trace our routes to these Wangaras. They brought trades and professions like blacksmithing and weaving.

P.A.: In the early years what was the trade like? Was it barter or what was the currency used?

Chief: Trade was by barter and if you did not have goods to barter you could mortgage with your child or somebody.

P.A.: What happened in terms of trade and religion, usually when Muslim traders go to a place they stayed separately from the rest of the community. In the south we may call it Zongo, but in actual fact it is a trading community and initially there will be little crossover. Then much later the indigenous people will try to convert to Islam and Islam will have a local route. What is the relationship and when did the people of Salaga convert to Islam? When did Islam become important?

Baba Ibrahim: Nkramo Nsowa brought Islam to the whole of the Gonja area. They have a section in Kpembe, they are referred to as Sakpare (I want to start). There was a king called Mansa Musa and he sent people to come southwards to spread Islam. Those who refused should be forced to convert through conquest. When they came here their headquarters was at Buipe. As far as Gonjaland is concerned the Islamic headquarters and the chief for Muslims are over there. The chief who first settled here that is the first chief or leader of Islam came from Damongo side and settled at Buipe. He was called "Napo" in the colonial records or in books. White people wrote "Naba," but it is "Napo". Even though the Muslims were Wangaras they met the aborigines called the Ntrapo. They actually intermarried in terms of the Gonja area and got children. It was those children that converted to Islam, one of them was selected to be their leader at Buipe and that is Napo. There was also another Arab. He settled at Larabanga and he got Islam to spread in Gonja area.

Jacob: What is the name of the Arab?

Baba Ibrahim: He is called Ayubar-ansar. He had a son called Yidan Braimah and Yidan succeeded his father and helped to spread Islam in Gonja. In these areas the Muslims in Gonja also spread Islam they even fought up to Bimbilla area. They mixed with commoners and had children and some even became non-believers or commoners who stopped praying. The commoners became many and outnumbered both royals and Muslims. It was during this time that a war broke out in an area around Buipe. In fact I cannot tell whether the name is Kule or Kulor I am saying this from Islamic records but it was a war between the Yagbonwura called Ndewura Monwura. The war was fought for years without stopping and one chief brought a Muslim from an area called Begho, it is in Nsowa language. The people of Buipe brought the Muslims from Begho around Mali. When he came he was sent to the battle ground at that time the Buipe people were mostly losing but he offered prayers and they won. He then asked them whether they were not praying or had become unbelievers. They could not answer him so he decided to convert them again into Islam. Those who led the war were Monwura, Amoah, Larte, and Jakpa, Mapha these were the leaders and he decided to give them Muslim names so that they leave out their traditional names. Monwura was renamed Umar he later became a Yagbonwura. Amoah became Saiyd and he also later became a Yabonwura. When the Sakpare people are praying they mention Yagbonwura Alhaji and they refer to Saiyd when they say that. The Sakpare are responsible for the spiritual power of Gonja chiefs in a Muslim but traditional perspective, but he Saiyd himself never went to Hajj or to Mecca. He usually gives money and they go to perform the Hajj but he had the title Alhaji, Larte was renamed Iddrisu; Iddrisu is well

known in Gonjaland than any of them and it is his grave that is known and it is the one that can be found at Buipe. He Iddrisu has his appellation as Ndwura Jakpa, Ndwura Jakpa means he is the owner of all towns that is Ndwura and Jakpa means he conquered all men and took their spears. He became paramount chief but decided that he would go on fighting rather than to convert people to Islam. In some books he is referred to as Ismail, he is called Iddrisu. Even though he was called Ismail, the name Ismail was the name of the father of the Muslim who was brought from Begho. He Ismail came and offered prayers for Gonjas and on his way back to Begho he died at a place called Sampa in Brong Ahafo, his grand child was called Fati Muikpe [Jacob interrupts and adds to it that our books say he helped the founder of the kingdom he was praying [for] whilst Jakpa was fighting). Ndwura Jakpa fought and conquered the area but after that he abdicated and gave the position to his son called Assura. He enskined Assura as the Yagbonwura. So he later devoted time to worship God. So he studied the Quran and Islamic prayers. He held to that for four years until he died.

P.A.: So that in as far as Gonja is concerned instead of conflict between Islam and traditional leadership the two rather went hand in hand. I hope I am right!

Chief: It is true that Gonja and Islam are inseparable. Every Gonja man who wants to do anything if he does not attach Islam to it will not work, it could be marriage, naming even death eventually it is a Muslim who will pray for him or her.

P.A.: Usually when a trading town emerges, especially if it is a small town there seems to be conflict between the trading town and its overlord, for example in Anlo, Anloga was the capital and as Keta becomes important in terms of trade there appeared to be tension or Elmina was the fishing village and port for Eguafu which is the state in the interior the Europeans come and Elmina becomes a town even a republic independent from Eguafu. In the case of Salaga we even have a Salagawura. What happens then?

Chief: You are right Salaga is bigger than Kpembe but among Gonjas we like strangers because strangers bring wealth. So we do not even sell land to strangers, we give strangers land free of charge to stay. So if you have heard that Gonjas are fighting or have fought with other ethnic groups it is due to the belligerent nature of those people, they are right. From creation they do not have understanding and have been warriors. As we are here if you settled on Gonja land and your farm produces yams [they] are yours; if you get gold through mining it is yours but what we want is that in as far as you are accumulating this wealth or getting the gold you should remember that the land is not yours but for Gonjas. So that is how we are!

Baba Ibrahim: You spoke and mentioned the name of Hausas. Hausas did not spread Islam here. In the whole of Gonja land when it comes to reading the Quran it is done in Arabic. So it is not Hausas, it has been said severally, it is not true so it is rather the Wangara and the Wangaras came and intermarried with the original people called Ntrapo. Everyone met them here. So we got to tell you the truth so Wangara people brought Islam and their leader was Mansa Musa. Salaga becomes important as far as cattle, slaves and kola are concerned, none of these is produced in Salaga it only passes through Salaga. Did the Gonja themselves or the people of Salaga engage in trade themselves or it is just the people who meet here and use the facility.

Chief: Gonjas had a lot of traders and they came from various parts of Daboya, Debre and the Gonjas in Salaga were farmers and they also brought foodstuffs.

P.A.: In the C19th we have all these places that the Hausa and Wangara came from. There were Jihads. Osman dan Fodio in Northern Nigeria, in Masina Sheiku Ahmadu, I am sure traders brought news. Was there religious tension about how Salaga people felt and how they reacted?

Chief: Gonjas were already settled, they had their warriors. It is true we heard it but Gonja was already well rooted so we had nothing to fear.

Bawa: Those wars, we heard of them far away such as dan Fodio fought among the Gruma and there that he ended Ahmadu in Burkina Faso, so no one was afraid. The one whose wars shook this place and there was fear was Samori and Gonjas were afraid of him. One cause of the fear was that he was not spreading Islam, he eventually got into Gonja land and his fighters got as far as to Busunu, they got up to Tuluwe but he did not come here personally.

P.A.: To the colonial period. In the first census in 1921 the population of Salaga and the population of Tamale was almost the same and things beginning to change, Tamale started growing but people seem to leave Salaga for Tamale for the same reasons, water though the colonial records described Salaga as a place with a thousand wells.

Bawa: Tell him now they say we have pipe-borne water those days we had wells and when the wells dried out we went to surrounding villages. We had a place called Butugu that we go for water also.

Contribution from an Informant: I want to say that what the Muslim chief said is true up to now we still have the Ntrapo, they can be found at Deba, Kaba, Ohe, Kibiase, Yala, Kpalanase. All these are Ntrapo. Then you can find some of the indigenes around Tuluwe they are called Apre. We have some at Debre called Nchale so you can still trace the original settlers.

P.A.: So what is the backbone of Salaga's economy? What makes Salaga stand out, is its trade or farming or what, what is the wealth of this town?

Response from Chief: Farming too is the backbone, but unfortunately land is becoming infertile we need to go far away in order to farm that is where the fertile lands can be located but without a motorbike or bicycle one cannot go that far. We used to farm near our homes near but we had to apply fertilizer. All this has gone to destroy the quality of the soil. Our women also pick sheanuts some years ago there are low yields and sometimes too they have high yields. We asked for irrigation since our product is only dependent on rainfall.

P.A.: So it is no longer a trading town?

Chiefs: It is still a trading town but trade has declined and we now trade among ourselves and we still go down south and up north to buy cattle but it is not as at first.

P.A.: What is the relationship between Gonja and Asante? Salaga was an important town and Asante will send things here for sale but as the late C19th because of conflict a market such as the one in Kintampo was created by Asante and they moved the kola market from Salaga to Kintampo. So as far as I am in Salaga I thought I might as well touch on that.

Informant (name not given): What we were told was that it was at Kafaba that people traded. Asante traders came to trade at Kafaba that time the water was not as plenty as we have it now, they traded as far as to Mpaha and Buipe and to Kintampo. Those from Upper North came here. People from Wa, Bole and beyond but strategically Kintampo is well placed for settlements to the far west such as Bole, Wa and so on. So since some of the articles of trade especially kola came from the south it was as well better for them to do the trading there. In fact kola was bought much by people of the west. That time also trade from the east had declined, in the process Kintampo picked up but there was conflict between Salaga and Kintampo.

Jacob: What conflict, was it war or what?

Answer: It was not war the conflict was that people from Salaga would not send their goods of trade to Kintampo they instead preferred selling the goods or trading at Kete Krachi and not Kintampo. So this is what we were told.