

Dagbon: Recalling History, the Battle of Adibo

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At this low point in Dagbon's history when we await the whims and caprices of the powers that be to determine its fate, it might be useful to recall how the ancient kingdom made contact with European colonisers, particularly the Germans.

There is a popular date in the history of Dagbon that every Dagbana knows. It is recalled by Dagbon drum historians as Adibo Dalla (The Day of Adibo). This was the day over a century ago in September 1896 when Dagbon fought a battle with German colonizers at Adibo, a village 10 kilometres south of Yendi. At the time the king who reigned was Yaan Naa Andani II (popularly called Andan Naanigoo) and he said that his kingdom, Dagbon, would not be taken over by the white-man and that he would protect it at all cost. But his kingdom was threatened by the Europeans from all directions - from the south by the Germans, from the West by the British and from the North by the French. In all Dagbon resisted colonialism for seven long years.

Andan Naanigoo's reign was a long and in his youth he led and personally commanded the Dagbon army to score many victories. He had warded off the invading Zambaramas who had come conquering from afar; he also subdued the notorious slave raider Babatu and permitted to him to settle in Yendi where his grave is now a tourist attraction. He had also undertaken the unpleasant duty of disciplining recalcitrant sub-chiefs who had become bullies in their areas or had become treacherous. Unfortunately all these exploits were in his youth and when the threat from the white-man became a reality, Naa Andani was very old and nearly blind. Nevertheless a hurriedly assembled army fought a heroic battle under the leadership of many divisional chiefs from Sang, Miong, Sunsong, Dimong and Gbungbaliga.

Rumours had been rife in Dagbon of the coming of the white-man. News filtered from the Atlantic coast about them into Dagbon and various descriptions of what they looked like had been narrated. Some said the white-men were like monkeys because they had long noses like those of monkeys; others said that they looked like human beings but came from the sea. And what else could be coming from the sea other than fish? It is recounted that the people of Sunsong, north of Yendi, laughed at how easy it would be for them to catch this human-fish; since these white-men were coming from the sea they could be captured with the help of fishing nets!

During the last quarter of 1896, the rumours intensified about the imminent arrival of the white-man. On 27th November they had reached Kpandai and by 30th November they overrun Bimbilla and were now at Pusuga 30 miles south of Yendi. The Bimbilla Na sent a messenger to inform the Ya Naa of the fall of Bimbilla to the white-man, whose advance had been too swift and without notice. The long awaited clash with the white-man had come but the Dagbon army had not been assembled.

Stop the Germans: When news of the capture and burning down of Bimbilla reached Yendi, it was ordered that the big war drum be beaten to signify that the Ya Naa had

declared Dagbon at war and that an attack on Yendi was almost at hand. The section elders of Gagbini, Balogu and Zohi rushed to the palace, hotfoot, and despatched messengers to all corners of the kingdom to tell chiefs, whom they represented in court at the palace, that all the armed might of Dagbon should rally to Yendi to repel an invader - the white-man.

But as this move was too late, the German advance was too swift and only a handful of chiefs were able to rally. The important and powerful chiefs of Kumbungu, Savelugu, Tolon, Tampiong, etc. all in western Dagbon, and also the great armies of the paramount chiefs of Karaga, Gusheigu and Yelizoli (Zabzugu) had not got the news and were not in Yendi nor did they even have the time to prepare to come to the defence of Yendi. The Ya Naa, who was very old, after consulting his oracles advised his lieutenants to negotiate but Kanbon-nakpem Ziblim will have none of this; the white-man would not enter Yendi while he remained alive.

From Dagbon's point of view, one man whose name comes out for his bravery on the battle days of 3rd and 4th December 1896 was the chief of Gbungbaliga, Kanbon-nakpem Ziblim. He had promised the Ya Naa that he would apprehend any white-man who would step foot in Dagbon. This chief warrior was indeed a remarkable soldier and fighter, well built, brave and an inspiration to his troops. He was affectionately called Kanbon-nakpem Wohu and rode a white stallion horse, carried two guns and a sword to match his status. Kanbon-nakpema means chief warrior, and Wohu means snake. He was likened to a snake because he said that to kill him the combined effort many people wielding truncheons was needed, as is done with snakes. He was also known as the-one-who-sweeps-all that stands in his way. He fortified himself wearing his powers, a gbogno, which is his version of a bullet-proof vest and believed that no metal in the form of a bullet or knife could penetrate his body. Several Dagbani poems and accolades are dedicated to the memory of this great son of Dagbon.

The kanbonsi (the warriors of Dagbon) dress like southerners preferring to wear cloths (however cumbersome) instead of the smock that is identified with northerners. They jokingly refer to any king or chief of Dagbon as Mmaambia; and referring to the Ya Naa as Mmaambii Naanigoo, they asked him to wait patiently; that they would capture and bring white-men to him alive! (The gbogno, a simple smock decorated with talismans and soaked in concoctions, is still abound in Dagbon today. It is the gbogno that is worn by southern kings and chiefs as "batakarikesie", something obviously bequeathed to them from Dagbon).

By the time the five divisional chiefs reached Yendi on Wednesday 2nd December the Germans were already at Laginja, only fifteen miles from Yendi and in the afternoon Kanbon-nakpema Wohu marched his troops southward in a bid to halt them. All day Thursday 3rd December 1896 the Dagbon army was encamped on a hill at Adibo. They waited and watched, and by afternoon horsemen were sent to search and scan through the thickly wooded bushes below them. It was harvest time and the guinea-corn crop used for brewing pito, a local beer, had grown tall. Nothing was observed for the day.

Historians have relayed that accounts from persons who were actually present in this battle agree in accessing the numbers of the Dagbon army at about 2500 gunmen, 130 horsemen, and about 2000 archers. The German expedition was led by a Dr Gruner and consisted of 368 soldiers armed with rifles and commanded by a certain von Massow.

Next morning Friday 4th December, they took up positions again and Kanbon-nakpema Wohu drew up his war formation; he would be at the centre at the head of the Yendi force of gunmen. On his right wing he put the Chirifo and backed him with the chiefs of Miong and Sang who were also leading a group of gunmen. To his left he placed the Damankung who had behind him the chiefs of Dimong, Kunkon and Sunsong with their powers. Between the three divisions, and to the front, were mounted spearmen and an elite group of Konkomba archers who accompanied the Dimong-na.

This is how the battle lines were drawn on that Friday morning which also happened to be a special Yendi market day, Alizumma-koofe-dali.

The rest of my article on 'The Day of Adibo' draws heavily on the work of Dr Peter Sebald who recently, on 11 January 2005, gave a lecture at the Goethe Institut in Accra. The lecture was titled – *From Ewe Country to Dagomba. The German Occupation of 1888-1900*. Dr Sebald is writing a book on the subject under the title “**With Machine Gun and Military Band**” which will be published this year, 2005! He says he chose this title for the book because the Germans used both the machine-gun and mercenary bands “to establish military domination” over the locals. His book is based on the account of Lieutenant Valentin von Massow’s who led German troops to occupy “the north of Togoland and the north-eastern part of Ghana, Dagomba country”. Valentin von Massow “wrote very carefully, day by day, a diary and moreover a lot of letters to his mother and sister” which Dr Sebald will use for his book.

‘The Battle of Adibo’ was the time of the European scramble for Africa and so the Germans were in competition with the English in this part of West Africa; only by establishing a permanent station in an area could one power demonstrate control. So Germany was in a hurry to establish as many stations as possible and Yendi was a prize they had their eyes on. This will prove not to be an easy task.

The Germans had earlier spied on Dagbon to prepare for what they called the Togo hinterland expedition and had warned the German government of the powerful Dagomba kingdom in the north. In May 1896, Dr Gruner had tried to enter Yendi under the pretext of passing through to Sansane-Mongu “but the Na or King of Yendi refused to let him pass through Dagomba-country”. So this time round Governor Köhler attached Lieutenant Valentin von Massow to join Dr. Gruner in the expedition which “included 4 Germans (Lieutenant Massow as supreme commander, Dr. Gruner, lieutenant Thierry and sergeant Heitmann), 91 trained mercenaries, 46 carriers (armed with modern rifles) and 231 other carriers.” This group was considered “the most powerful expedition in the region”.

To make their move to occupy Dagbon, the Germans waited for the beginning of the harmattan and the dry season, because – traditionally the grass will be burnt. “The soldiers badly needed the open space and they were afraid of being attacked in the bush.”

About 15 km south of Yendi at Adibo, the Dagomba army blocked the road. The village of Adibo is placed on a little hill, sloping towards Nakpachie to the south. “The Dagomba army took a favourable military position on the hill. For the Germans, it was difficult to develop their combat order on the battlefield, because first, on the ground they had to pass through a small passage man by man (in a single file). In this very moment the expedition was defenceless but the Dagomba war chief missed this chance to give the signal to attack the expedition because for moral and strategic reasons he preferred being attacked by the Germans first.”

Without being disturbed down at the beginning of the slope, lieutenant Massow arranged his band of mercenaries in three platoons and behind them followed those who carried supplies. Dr. Gruner followed in the rear with a fourth platoon of other carriers armed with rifles ready to fight to the right and to the left. In this military formation the expedition moved forward towards the Dagomba. “Approximately 300 metres in front of the Dagomba army the German expedition stopped. The Dagomba army remained in their position on top of the hill in a line of nearly one kilometre long.”

In Bimbila the Germans proved an attack when they started burning the town but the Dagomba had met them for open combat well outside Yendi. Therefore at “Adibo the Germans had to take the initiative, so von Massow started to provoke a counter attack from the Dagomba. At high noon Massow commanded a volley-fire from each of the three platoons.”

Kanbon-nakpem Wohu responded by ordering his men to surge forward; and so they did encircling the German expedition. This was just what the Germans had wanted - to get the Dagomba closer to within the range of their modern rifles. But for the Dagomba something was amiss; at the distance they stood they did not expect to be hit by bullets. They knew only the traditional rifles, the so-called muzzle-loaders; after shooting once it took nearly one minute until one could shoot again and even then the effective distance has to be close at 20 to 30 metres. But the German bullets were coming too far and too fast. The Dagomba warriors had not seen a breech loader gun before and “therefore many of them were shot or wounded before reaching an effective distance for their own weapons.”

It was after some amount of fighting that the Kanbon-nakpema realised that the German side could shoot repeatedly with their guns without having to reload. What sort of guns are these Germans using, they wondered? Realising how fast his men were being depleted, Kanbon-nakpem Wohu then gave another order and “... the Dagomba warriors at once changed their method of attack. They attacked in small groups and came close to 30 metres.” But still, according to Dr. Sebald, “the Dagomba could not come close enough to start direct fight man-to-man.” The horsemen could have covered the distance faster but by Dagomba traditional warfare they were situated behind the warriors. The

horsemen had the role only to pursue the enemy when they are beaten and are fleeing. That is their understanding of winning a war - you have to overthrow the enemy and see them feeling.

Not able to decipher the fire power they were facing, the command went round in Dagbani: '*limsi mi ya, limsi mi ya*' meaning that the warriors should take cover because the guns facing them were not loaded like theirs. This time, for the first time, the Dagomba army broke and retreated, confused at the new type of weapons and warfare they were encountering. [The situation was similar to other colonial wars with Asante. Although the Asante performed admirably, superior weapons allowed the British to carry the day: In 1826 the British used Congreve rockets to frighten Asante warriors on the Accra Plains. The Asante believing that the enemy was using thunder and lightning against them panicked and fled to Kumasi.]

“The losses of the Dagomba were terrible: 430 dead on the battle field including 40 war chiefs (*sapashinnema*) who, on the hill, had tied themselves on chairs with cords to demonstrate to their warriors that they would not run away.” Some died long with their horses. Tragically, Kanbon-nakpem Ziblim was shot with a pistol at point blank range when he tried to apprehend a white man with his bare hands. Also killed were the Chirifo, and the chiefs of Dimong, Kunkong and many other elder warriors, the '*sapashinnema*'.

Many too on the German side were killed, including sergeant Heitmann, and a quarter of their mercenary force; many were wounded. The Germans had won this battle but not the war. The bulk of the Dagomba warriors escaped and Dr. Grunner's men could not take any prisoner. In the afternoon of the same day 4TH December the remainder of the expedition continued toward Yendi.

When the Dagomba effort to stop the white man collapsed, word quickly spread on the road from Adibo through Choo, Gbungbaliga to Zugu and to Yendi that the engagement with the white-man at Adibo was disastrous. People then started to abandon their villages and to take cover in the bush. The Germans burnt every village they passed and when they got to Yendi at sun down the market had been abandoned; they met only a ghost town.

The Ya Na was informed that Kanbonnakpema Wohu had fallen in battle and that he was to be taken out of his palace to safety but he refused to leave. It was very difficult persuading the Ya Na to go to safety until one of his sons, the chief of Sang, arrived and persuaded him that if he had to die then he should be killed where his father Na Yakuba's grave was. In present day Yendi this grave is marked by a big baobab tree about 400 metres behind the palace towards Kuga. And so the Ya Na was taken to his father's grave where he remained till the next day.

Lieutenant von Massow and his men then destroyed and burnt Yendi down; they also looted, taking with them some valuables from the Gbewaa Palace. But they were still afraid of counter attacks given the number of Dagomba warriors who had escaped from Adibo. They were also short of ammunition and could not stay too long in Yendi town so

they continued, the same evening, along the road and camped for the night at Sakpeigu. The following morning they hurried away toward Sunsong on their way to Sansane-Mongu (a town in present day Togo).

An incident occurred in Yendi the day after the battle in which the Achiri-kpema of Yendi is said to have killed himself. He went to the Ya Na's palace the day after and was questioned why he survived when the Kankonna-kpema and many of his colleagues died in battle. What did he want to live for? Did he like food more than fame? When he got back to his house he was further attacked by his wife as a good-for-nothing warrior, that she could have done better at the battle. The Achiri-kpema is said to have then gone into his room, loaded his gun and shot himself through the mouth.

'The Day of Adibo' fell on a Friday, a Yendi market day; and market days that fall on Fridays are special and attended in a grand style even up to this day. These markets days are called Alizumma-koofe in the local parlance, because in the olden days young women decorated themselves beautifully with 'koofe' (a kind of beads) around their waists to show to young men at the market.

'The Day of Adibo' is remembered in Dagbon as a solemn occasion, the Ya Na stays indoors and must not appear in public on any market day that falls on a Friday (Alizumma koofe). It is remembered in so many other way – in drum history and on special occasions like the Fire or Damba festivals. The Dagban-kanbonsi also have a special brisk-dance in remembrance of those who fell in that battle. The song for the dance goes like this: *Tinin zhin zo, Tinin zhin zo. Ka Adibo dal'la? Nagla din ko.* Translated, the song simply says "we have never run away from battle, never". Then someone teases: "what about the Battle of Adibo"? And the answer is "oh, we run only on that day". They also chant during the dances: "Adibo-dal'la Mba n daa nye doo yiee" meaning "on the day of Adibo my father was the bravest" Kanbon-nakpem Ziblim has a special dirge composed by Dagbon praise-singers in his honour.

For the next three years the white-man was still trying to occupy Dagbon but faced the combined force of Dagomba and Konkomba. In all, the Germans colonialists (known in Dagbon as Garman-Do-dziegu) were engaged in about 45 battles and skirmishes before they gained control of eastern Dagbon and only after the death of the Na Andani Naanigoo. The 'white man' then exploited local animosities which led to another important date in Dagbon history 'the Day of Sang' – (Sang Dal'la) after which they raided Yendi again chasing out a newly installed Ya Na and burnt the palace for a second time.