

NOTES ON SETTLEMENT HISTORIES OF GBELAY-GEH STATUTORY DISTRICT, NIMBA COUNTY, LIBERIA

[Maarten Bedert in collaboration with Freeman B. Bartuah]



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FIELD NOTES AND RESEARCH PROJECTS XVII

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SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

(GÜNTHER SCHLEE)

ABOUT THE SERIES

This series of *Field Notes and Research Projects* does not aim to compete with high-impact, peer reviewed books and journal articles, which are the main ambition of scholars seeking to publish their research. Rather, contributions to this series complement such publications. They serve a number of different purposes.

In recent decades, anthropological publications have often been purely discursive – that is, they have consisted only of words. Often, pictures, tables, and maps have not found their way into them. In this series, we want to devote more space to visual aspects of our data.

Data are often referred to in publications without being presented systematically. Here, we want to make the paths we take in proceeding from data to conclusions more transparent by devoting sufficient space to the documentation of data.

In addition to facilitating critical evaluation of our work by members of the scholarly community, stimulating comparative research within the institute and beyond, and providing citable references for books and articles in which only a limited amount of data can be presented, these volumes serve an important function in retaining connections to field sites and in maintaining the involvement of the people living there in the research process. Those who have helped us to collect data and provided us with information can be given these books and booklets as small tokens of our gratitude and as tangible evidence of their cooperation with us. When the results of our research are sown in the field, new discussions and fresh perspectives might sprout.

Especially in their electronic form, these volumes can also be used in the production of power points for teaching; and, as they are open-access and free of charge, they can serve an important public outreach function by arousing interest in our research among members of a wider audience.

INTRODUCTION

In this booklet, I present settlement histories of about fifteen Dan towns and villages in Gbelay-Geh Statutory District, in the northeast of Nimba county, Liberia. The Dan are a small ethnic group living in the border region of Liberia, Ivory Coast and Guinea¹. The Statutory District is divided in two districts (Gbelay and Twah River), made up of two and three chiefdoms respectively. Each chiefdom is further divided into clans. These are political demarcations that have been initiated after the establishment of the Liberian state, as indicated in many of the settlement histories below. The Statutory District is made up of about ninety towns (see appendix 1)². Between and among settlements in these clans and chiefdoms, there are historical connections that are being remembered and transmitted. The settlement histories as they are presented here pay testimony to these historical connections and indicate their continuing relevance in the present.

The oral histories presented here were collected within the scope of ethnographic fieldwork between July 2011 and July 2013 as part of my PhD research entitled: “Of strangers and secrets: continuities and change in the articulation of belonging in contemporary Liberia” (Bedert 2016). In my dissertation, I provide a more detailed analysis of some of these narratives. I argue that settlement histories provide crucial insights that help to understand contemporary practices and social relations both within and between communities. In other words, these settlement histories are not only testimonies to past developments but also have contemporary social and political implications. For instance, when it comes to land rights or the determining of local political and ritual authority, settlement histories are often invoked. Relationships that are mentioned in these narratives also have long term effects and are often brought into present practice and discourse.

The presentation of this type of data fits in a growing body of literature both within history and anthropology. Whereas historians have tried to reconstruct the historical significance of these narratives within the region (e. g. Geysbeek 2002, Person 1968), classical anthropologists, especially in the German speaking world with regard to the Dan, have provided an overview of narratives very similar to the ones presented here to get at their social implications and relevance (Fischer 1967, Himmelheber and Himmelheber 1958). It is within this body of work that the present overview of narratives can be seen.

¹ In Liberian English Dan speakers are often referred to as Gio. In French in Ivory Coast, this group is often described as Yacouba. Throughout this booklet, I maintain the label Dan.

² For a comparative perspective on this geopolitical distinction, see Riddell et al. (1971)

Based on their contemporary relevance, these narratives should not be regarded as the ‘final’ version of the past. Instead, attention will be given to the contemporary context within which they are shared. I aim to produce a text that is supposed to be worked with and taken as a starting point rather than as a definite, timeless anthology. The oral histories are presented here in a rather rough form and contain many different names of people and places relevant in the establishment of particular towns and families in this region. For many without specific knowledge of or interest in the region this might not make for an easy and smooth read. Nevertheless, I have chosen to present these narratives in this form because they were transmitted as such. Still, I hope to demonstrate three different angles to these narratives and show how they are relevant as a set of data to work with, beyond the specific local knowledge it divulges. A first angle is a methodological one. Going through the process of collecting these settlement narratives provides great insides into different, but potentially related, types of information. Moreover, the way in which these narratives were collected provides an insight into local questions of belonging, hierarchy and representation. The second angle from which these narratives are relevant, I argue, details their narrative qualities. I approach these settlement histories as memories that are being transmitted. Therefore, recording these narratives and situating them in a particular context provides insight into how knowledge is being retained and passed on between generations or between in- and outsiders. Third, related to the recent boom in memory studies is the way the past is brought into the present. Settlement narratives are often invoked in legitimising contemporary social and political hierarchies as the first settler in a territory is considered the landowner and to be politically superior to those who settled in that same territory at a later stage. The continuing relevance of these relations plays an important role in the way settlement narratives are conceived and transmitted (cf. Bedert 2016, chapter 2). Each of these three angles will be discussed in more detail before presenting the actual historical narratives.

1. METHODOLOGY AND METHODOLOGICAL RELEVANCE

Methodology here refers to two different aspects. On the one hand, I intend to point at the practice of collecting data. On the other hand, there is a more general relevance to focusing on this type of data as it might provide insights into other types of data in return. I set out to collect these oral histories together with my research assistant, Freeman D. Bartuah. We started off in Karnplay, the Statutory District’s capital and started expanding in a concentric circle from there. We considered the villages located closer to ‘home’ as a baseline study. The more towns we visited, the more informed we became about new, potentially interesting locations. If towns were located further away, Freeman would visit them beforehand to inform the elders and local authorities of our visit over the next few days. This gave them the chance

to prepare our visit and clear out some historical questions. Because of the deplorable road conditions throughout the district, we spent several weeks 'on tour', visiting settlements further away from Karnplay and sleeping in these towns.

For the vast majority of the towns we visited the narration was a public event (cf. below). Besides the narrators there was usually an audience varying from about 5 to 30 people. This format is significant in considering the data it produced. There were often moments in which audience members intervened or interjected knowledge or raised questions. Furthermore, the public nature of these events and the fact that elders were informed beforehand so they could be prepared made that we heard a particular version of the past. This version is most likely one about which general consensus exists and which leaves out more sensitive details on one or the other family (members). Nevertheless, the frequent interjections were often revealing and informative in their own right. The public nature of these events makes them highly interactive and therefore should be read in this light.

I started off my fieldwork with several months of language learning. The collection of the oral histories presented here followed this and served as an interesting basis on which the rest of my fieldwork was based. Collecting settlement histories are relevant as an entry point into a particular community. Especially due to the public nature of the way it was set up, as events, this proved a useful exercise in which I got to learn about the tropes used to describe family relationships. As a performance, it was insightful to witness a community respond to certain aspects of these narratives. In the dissertation (Bedert 2016, chapter 4), I provide the narrative of Sergeant Town, a village first established by Sgt. Farnvalo, a former Frontier Force soldier whose descendants went on to become ambassadors, members of parliament and local authorities. I present this narrative in relation to the funeral of Martin Farnvalo, one of the prominent members of this family. Considering the oral history in this case puts into perspective the contemporary social position of Martin Farnvalo as a *kwii* (civilized) person within the district and helps to understand the historical relations this position was built on. It contextualises autochthony discourses as the settlement narrative details very clearly the ways in which they came as 'strangers' into a Dan territory but have assimilated through intermarriage and by adopting local ritual practices. Similarly, I argue that, the narratives presented throughout this booklet provide insight into how oral histories inform broader social relations.

2. NARRATING SETTLEMENT HISTORIES AS A MOMENT OF KNOWLEDGE TRANSMISSION

The second angle from which these narratives are of significance beyond their detailed local knowledge deals in more detail with the way they are set up. As mentioned before, I consider the narration of settlement histories to be events that were highly public and always had an audience. As such, they turned out to be interactive moments of knowledge transmission. The narratives as they are transcribed here therefore sheds light on the way knowledge is being passed on based on the way they are conceptualised and received by this audience. At the same time, the actual narrative characteristics, i.e. as texts, these oral histories demonstrate the way in which knowledge is retained and formalised.

With regard to the oral histories as a public event, I present brief sections of my field notes in relation to several occasions to indicate the significance of having an audience and the interaction amongst community members.

▫ *In Duoplay: upon arrival, we parked our bikes at one old man's house. We went to the back of the house where one man was sitting down squatting and swallowing his GB. After eating, another 'old man' joined us. As we were getting ready, the eldest man's son stopped by and stopped the interview. He mentioned that two people had come in 1987 to record the town's history and they never heard from them again. He urged his father not to talk. When Freeman explained what we were doing, he was convinced and urged his father to provide all the detail he knew. As soon as the old man started talking, several bystanders started shouting "no, no!". The chief elder turned out not to have the most knowledge so somebody else started talking instead.*

▫ *In Youhnlay: When we started, one of the elders was talking but the story he gave us had several gaps. The second elder wanted to come in every once and a while but he was held back, told to keep quiet, by the others. Until somebody from the audience interrupted us and said it would be better and more complete if the second elder would also have his say. This man is going deaf so that would make it a bit harder to communicate though. The audience had grown bigger by then and they often sighed when he wouldn't answer the question asked. This raised the tension in the room. Fortunately, as soon as he got into his flow, he didn't stop talking.*

These indicate that the sharing of an oral history is never an isolated event. The audience is there to comment on what is being said or even to call out the narrator. On many occasions there was laughter or even anger recorded in response to what was being said. In other cases, what is being withheld is even more powerful than what was shared. The case of the Fauna history

presented in the dissertation is key in this as I recorded two divergent histories of this settlement with two different interlocutors and at two distinct moments in time which also speaks to the contemporary significance of these narratives (Bedert 2016, chapter 2; cf. below).

In the texts below, the case study of Sro-Yoolar serves as a similar example in which the meta-text is as significant as the actual historical narrative (see below). It demonstrates how oral history is often a search together with the elders rather than an exclusive one-way sharing of information.

Warren d’Azevedo (1962a) has convincingly pointed at the importance of the actors involved in this process of knowledge transmission. He writes: “It is the business of the elders of great families [...] to prepare themselves as reliable sources of information about the past. An elder with a poor memory, or ‘whose old people told him nothing’ is a ‘small boy’ among elders and might very well be looked upon with contempt by younger persons” (ibid: 13). In many a case, elders had spent time in Monrovia as foster children enjoying education and, later on, jobs with local and national government or with (inter-)national companies operating in Liberia (cf. Bedert 2016, chapter 2 and 4). As this information might be useful and considered an advantage in some contexts, it was often downplayed as the local past was considered. It is a sense of *authenticity* that was being expected and performed by the elders in order to be considered as knowledgeable on these issues.

Besides considering the general context associated with this performance, the actual narrative qualities of these settlement histories are equally interesting. As mentioned before, they are presented here as rather rough texts. The narratives as they were told were never neat chronological narratives. They consist of fragments and parcel information spread over in chopped up bits. The complete story was often constructed by revisiting data and reflecting again and again on the issues at hand. This apparent arbitrariness is not to be confused with a lack of knowledge. In many of these narratives a lot of issues play out at once. It considers people, their relatives, migration into a new territory, they often involve some spiritual element, etc. Through the apparent chaos there are clear sections that appear more structured, coherent and complete. It often concerns here so-called pivotal moments of these historical narratives (see Murphy and Bledsoe 1987, Højbjerg 1999). These pivotal moments are made around two key elements in the narrative: territory and kinship. They establish the first settler in a new, virgin territory and articulate the arrival of significant strangers with whom marital ties are often established. It is these pivotal moments that are significant also in establishing the contemporary relevance of these historical narratives (cf. below). This distinction is important to keep in mind when considering how knowledge is being retained and passed on. For each of the individual settlement histories, I attend to some of these key textual elements throughout the text.

3. CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL RELEVANCE OF THE PAST

Historians and anthropologists have since long established the significance of landlord-stranger reciprocity as a dimension of social relations that structure social interactions throughout the Upper Guinea Coast³ (d'Azevedo 1962b, Murphy and Bledsoe 1987, Højbjerg 1999, Brooks 1993, Mouser 1980, Rodney 1970, Knörr and Trajano Filho 2010). Landlord-stranger reciprocity refers to the emic distinction between people who arrived in a particular territory first and those who arrived in this same territory at a later stage. The reciprocity in this type of relationship refers to the fact that landlords used to offer protection, security and land to their strangers while strangers, in return, pledged their loyalty to their landlord (see Trajano Filho 2010: 161–162). This implies that it concerns here a form of asymmetrical reciprocity as the landlords hold a position of authority over their strangers. In recent years, this dimension of social relations has been invoked to analyse dependency relations during and in the aftermath of the civil war in Liberia and beyond or to interpret the emergence of an autochthony discourse (Bøas and Dunn 2013). The pivotal moments of territory and kinship in settlement histories I referred to before are key in establishing the relationships between landlords and strangers. Contemporary claims to autochthony are inherently historical as they imply references to the past. More than a documentation of the past the oral histories presented here are often invoked in order to legitimise contemporary political and social relations (Bedert 2016, Menard 2015, Lentz 2013).

Two excerpts from my field notes indicate the contemporary significance of these narratives.

▫ *Peelar: Before the interview and before the recorder was switched on, there was a serious discussion on whether the elders in the town could sit down with me and give me the history because, as they openly discussed afterwards, they were afraid that I would go behind their backs and report them to the authorities. Since the end of the war, they are especially concerned about their security. Beforehand, Freeman had to go and drink with the chief elder to comfort him. Afterwards they felt a bit bad about this and we all shared some 'cold water' (yi saa) and the chief elder brought some kola nuts as a sign of peace. They mentioned that "the town is for [us] now" and that we would be "welcome any time" from now on.*

The fear they mentioned was brought up in several locations. Some referred to the recent Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) organised

³ This is the coastal region of West Africa from Senegal to Ivory Coast. For a discussion on the conceptualisation of the Upper Guinea Coast, see Knörr and Trajano Filho (2010).

in the aftermath of the civil war (1989–2003) when people entered villages to take statements on what had occurred during the war. Afterwards, several people were taken away for questioning without warning. This led to a feeling of betrayal among many of the community members throughout the district and a reason they felt their history had to be protected.

▫ *Goagortuo: Early in the morning, we tried to assemble the elders within the town but right from the start they gave us a hard time. They had started talking but at some point they couldn't or wouldn't give us any good answers anymore. It turned out later on that one of the 'younger' elders who originated from a different family than the landlords wanted to explain the origin of the different quarters in the town but every time they wanted to start talking, the others hushed him to be quiet. As they started arguing, the zone chief intervened and tried to find a solution but he couldn't convince them to continue. We decided it would be better for us to go and return at a later stage.*

The oral history of Goagortuo in the end did not make it into this overview and the apparent sensitivity of this version of the past was part of the reason why. It shows that up till today, who talks and what is being said are often political issues as they have significant political implications. This has especially become clear during land conflicts as I have elaborated on in detail in my dissertation (Bedert 2016, chapter 2, 3 and 4).

Beyond the establishment of a first settlement, I have argued in my dissertation, these narratives also give testimony to the various relationships that have been established along the road. I have demonstrated the importance of mobility and composition (Guyer and Belinga 1995) in the formation of alliances along the way that carry similar patterns of reciprocity as the actual incorporation of strangers. Several examples throughout this booklet indicate the importance of relationships established in the process of migration that turned into more formal covenantal relationships.

Of interest here is the fact that very many of the oral histories are surprisingly short and don't go into much detail. For some the elders did not go beyond: "This town was founded by [name] and later on others joined him." This was literally the extent of their spontaneous narration. On the one hand, this brevity might hint at the lack of knowledge about historical events. On the other hand, I argue that it might also serve as an indication that there is actually not much discussion about who settled first. Within the logic of the landlord-stranger reciprocity relations, these cases might imply that the rights associated with firstcomer status are not challenged. Accordingly, there is no need to perform an elaborate narrative that legitimises this type of relationships.

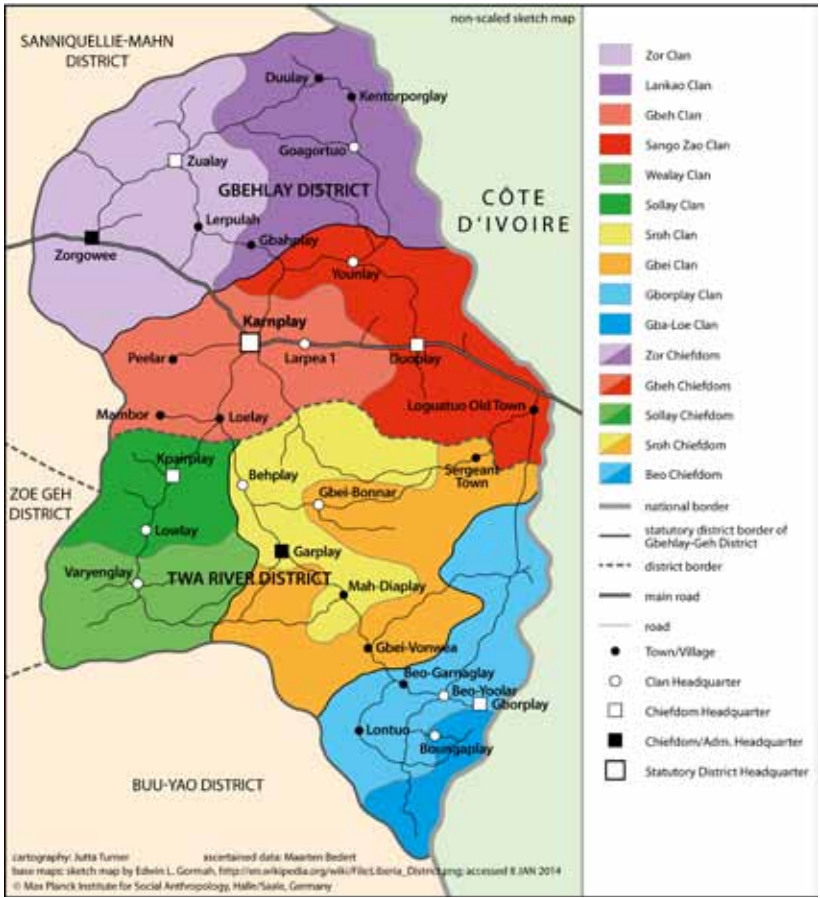
4. STRUCTURE OF THE BOOKLET

This booklet is divided in three parts. This division is based on the historical relationships between the various settlements that figure in this overview. Also, it follows contemporary political demarcations (see Map 2). Part one focuses on the Gbelay chiefdom and contains settlement histories of the settlements closest to Karnplay, the chiefdom's capital. These are also put together as there are significant historical links between the various settlements which I highlight in the narrative of elder Kei Yeah and the attempted genealogical reconstruction and the end of this first part. Part two includes settlements of Gbelay District. These settlements are still closely related to Karnplay but have a more diverse historical background. Part three contains settlement histories of settlements in Twah River District. All of these have a significant difference in that they had a different leadership in the era before the establishment of the Liberian state. Still, the narratives demonstrated intensive links with the rest of the statutory district.

For each of these settlements I provide the date the interview was conducted, the names of the elders who were present at the time of recording. This bullet-point overview is accompanied by a brief introduction in which I indicate the particular points of relevance of these narratives, in relation to their various angles of interest outlined in this general introduction.



Map 1: Gbelay-Geh Statutory District within Nimba County, Liberia



Map 2: Map of Gbelay-Geh Statutory District

PART 1: GBELAY CHIEFDOM

KARNPLAY CITY

Karnplay is the administrative headquarter for Geblay-Geh Statutory District and, since 2001, a city with a city mayor appointed by the president of Liberia. The city of Karnplay has about 7000 inhabitants and continues to grow as the region's most important settlement. Karnplay's prominence builds on its rich history. The town is named after its founder, Karn. As a historical figure, Karn figures prominently in close to all the oral histories that were collected throughout the region. He was a strong warrior and welcomed the Congoe⁴ settlers who established the Liberian state. His son, Mongrue, was made the first Paramount chief following the pacification of the Dan. Today Karnplay counts seven quarters, all reflecting the prominent strangers that have arrived later and settled in this territory or referring to smaller settlements that have been included in the city limits due to its expansion.

Karn is at the centre of the present narrative as well. It builds his social and political position and, in so doing, justifies his and his descendants' prominence within the city. Still, the narrative acknowledges past migrations and settlements. There is mention of Youhnlay which counts as the place where the family's ancestors have settled (cf. Youhnlay and Kei Yeah on Flahn's generation). The pivotal territorial element of the narrative is also underscored by making reference to the Gwehn tree Karn used to rest under.

- Date of the interview: 28/10/2011
- Tarkpor George That – former town and quarter chief, elder
- Oldman Karntay Tuah – former chief, elder
- Interview conducted together with Rev. Tee T. Latahn.

⁴ Congoe people is used here to refer to the Americo-Liberians, a group of freed slaves who were sent back to 'Africa' and who established the Liberian State. Originally, Congoe was reserved for those people who were caught on the slave ships after the abolition of slavery and never made it to the US. In Liberian English today, Americo-Liberian and Congoe are used interchangeably.



Photo 1: Elders in Karnplay

(M. BEDERT, 2011)

This town, the original name for this town is Gbeh-Lay. When our ancestors travelled from the East [Da]⁵, they travelled here and they called this place Lo Gbeh Lay. The first place they settled was the town that is today called Youhnlay. When they left from the Ivory Coast, they settled in Youhnlay. From Youhnlay they came to yet another place that is no longer inhabited now. It is a deserted area now. This old town spot [*kpanaa*] is the first place where Karn's ancestors lived.

Karn's mother descended from a man called Fauna. It was Fauna who first settled in the town that is today known as Karnplay. Karn came to live with his uncle Fauna because of his mother. Traditionally, your daughter's son is your son. Fauna is therefore Karn's father, indirectly. That is why Karn also could take possession of this land.

Karn left his home to come to his uncle and that is where he built the town that is now Karnplay. The first place he settled in this area was called Tuah Village. When Karn came to his uncle, his town was called *Nyenglay* (lit: in the sand). It is only a little distance from the current town centre. Karn was a warrior, a very strong warrior. These were people who were chosen by god at the time⁶. He decided to come and make his farm a bit further away from Fauna. He left *Nyenglay* and moved into the forest. In this forest, there was a

⁵ The East most often refers to contemporary Guinea and Ivory Coast. It refers to the an undetermined place either across the Nuon river that marks the boundary with Ivory Coast or the Nimba mountain range.

⁶ The narrator inserted: "There was nothing like a formal school to become a warrior but there were some people who dreamed who had a power from dreams."



Photo 2: *Gwehn* tree in Karnplay

(M. BEDERT, 2011)

tree called *Gehwn* which is where he went to make his farm. It is this *Gwen* tree that is today still at the centre of the town⁷. After he started making his farm around this tree, he declared that he would never leave from this place again. This is how Karn decided to establish his settlement. Once he was settled, other people who wanted safety and protection decided to come closer to him. As a warrior, he enjoyed a powerful reputation.

⁷ In 2016, as streets were laid in Karnplay the *Gwen* tree was cut down. Residents have plans to set up a memorial to commemorate the site.

The Gwen tree that he used to rest under, as time passed, he took some rocks, huge rocks and put them under this tree. As he lay down in the shade, he said: “Well, this is now my town, I will not go anywhere.” As more people settled closer to him, the area slowly came to be known as Karnplay. The name of Nyenglay now was disappearing as residents were leaving from there to come to Karn. In the end, Karnplay became more popular than Nyenglay and Karnplay became the official name of the town.

All the people who came to Karn were Dan people. As people gradually started coming, building the town by building their houses, the town became more populated and Nyengleh was eventually deserted. As Karn was the strongest warrior in the new settlement, he also became the first chief of the new town. Karn became so popular throughout the region because so many people were coming to live near to him. As the town got bigger, nobody dared to challenge him. In those days, the more manpower you had, the more powerful you became.

That is how this town started.

Karn had a son called Mongrue. When the Congoe people were conquering more land and when they reached to this area, it was Karn’s son Mongrue who led them through this land. When the Frontier Force⁸ soldiers at the time entered his territory, Karn did not fight them. Instead, he made peace with them and allowed his son to become the military leader so they could conquer more land.

During these wars though, those who sought refuge as they were chased or defeated in war, Karn gave them safety whenever they came to Karnplay. Nobody dared to come and pluck people out of Karn’s hands or out of his territory. That is how Karnplay grew even bigger in this time period.

When the government at the time, the Congoe people, came to Karn, he said: “No, I will not fight them.” He had a friend in the next town called Kialar who said: “Since you are not going to fight against these people, to be sure that you are truthful to them, you will have to give your first son who will be a general to lead these troops in war.” Karn agreed to this proposition and that is why he gave his son Mongrue.

The story is more complex though. When they asked Karn to give his first son, a man from nearby Duoplay stood up. He was called Deuseu. He was part of the Karn warrior group. He decided it would be best to replace Karn’s son so he could insert himself into history. On two different occasions, he dressed himself as the chief’s son. Each time the citizens recognized him and said: “No, you are not the biological son of Karn.” It was at this time that Mongrue stood up. He led the troops from here all the way to the Krahn⁹ Settlements.

⁸ The Liberian Frontier Force was established to secure Liberia’s borders and the precursor to the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL).

⁹ Contemporary Grand Gedeh County.

After the pacification wars were over, local leaders travelled and met in Sa-clepea. At this meeting, the state government was established among the Dan people. At this meeting too, they chose Mongrue to replace his father Karn as the local leader. It was from that point that Mongrue became the Paramount chief of this particular settlement.

As Mongrue had travelled with the government forces and had conquered the surrounding territories for them, he could be trusted by the authorities. Karn stayed on as an advisor to his son but Mongrue was the government official representing the Dan people in this territory. Karn died in 1914, that is how the story was narrated to us¹⁰.

When the Congoe people had their meeting, they first thought to of making Zortapa¹¹ its headquarter and capital city. At that time though, the people from Zortapa were involved with medicine [*běle*]¹². The people of Zortapa were not happy with the Congoe people's decision. They were worried that, if they would become the capital city, their secret societies and medicine would be diluted and reduced in power. So they went together and decided to drive out the Congoe people using bees. This is how they went to Sanniquellie and built the government's headquarters there.

This is the whole story of how Karnplay began. This is why this town is officially called Karnplay and why Nyenghleh completely disappeared. Nobody even remembers that name anymore and nobody remains in that original settlement. Even though present day Karnplay extends beyond Nyenglay, the town is just known as Karnplay. This is the story.

ON THE RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER GROUPS:

At the time this story played out, there were separate Dan settlements all over. When a group of people arrived somewhere at a certain time, they simply settled and it became a town. For all the Dan people in this larger territory¹³ to come together as a Kingdom, it only happened after they were conquered by the Congoe people. At that time, Mongrue became the first Paramount chief.

Before then, there were different warriors who each had their own settlements but nobody ever conquered all of them to become their overall leader. They were rulers for their own settlements.

They were not really fighting each other but there was a kind of system¹⁴ in place. You couldn't just rush into another person's territory. If you wanted

¹⁰ The exact year Karn died is unknown. Different accounts have been collected in various oral histories.

¹¹ Zo is the Dan word for bee. Zor people are said to have used bees. See Zorgowee settlement narrative.

¹² See Bedert (2016, part 2)

¹³ Reference is made here to Northeastern Nimba County, an area that roughly corresponds to Gbelay Geh Statutory District today.

¹⁴ This 'system' is referred to as *longda* in the Dan language.

to visit people in another kingdom, you would have to send a messenger first to explain: “I am coming at this time.” That way, they had time to prepare themselves for that visit. If they just see you coming, unprepared and unannounced, they might think that maybe you are coming to attack them.

War did at times occur between the Dan and the Mano or Kpelle people. But the same rules applied at the time: you don’t just travel into another person’s territory without their permission.

PEELAR

Peelar is a small settlement to the east of Karnplay. Even though it is considered a separate settlement, the close historical ties between both communities are often stressed. During this interview, the elders were incredibly brief about the origins of this town. It was only after further questioning that they shared a bit more details. I argue that the particular value of this historical narrative lies in its focus on connections with other settlements, most in particular with Karnplay. Peelar’s continuing relevance here is articulated by focusing on its connections with Karnplay. Rather than focusing on the town in its own right, its prominence is derived from being the ‘original home of Karn’.

This settlement history is also interesting because of the narratives detailing how Tennis and Tahn, two warriors, received their powers¹⁵ and how Simon used to fight wars. Whereas it was relatively difficult to obtain detail about the past, these two ‘stories’ were told and retold often, in a chronological narrative and with reference to several formulaistic expressions. The ritual connections they articulate also returned in many other oral histories. The most prominent example is the dragging of a fork to find the suitable place for a settlement. These elements might provide an insight into how knowledge is retained and shared.

- Date of the interview: 13/02/2012
- Bartuah Wilson – chief elder
- Sehweh Zeambo – member of the elder council
- Eduard Very – former town chief
- Gibson Dankawah – traditional singer
- Karseah Luompea – elder

¹⁵ See Fisher (1967)



Photo 3: Elders in Peelar

(M. BEDERT, 2012)

This town was built by a man called Drohr. Through migration, all those who settled here came from Guinea way [*Da*]. Then other people too came here and settled with him. There is an old town spot [*kpanaa*] there, where the new school stands now.

One man by the name of Mami Galeh, he came here later and made his farm in this area. Later on, he also built his house here. Some other groups of people that were living around there, they deemed it necessary to come to Mamie Galeh. That is how the town was built.

The founders of this town, they were warriors. These warriors, they were like soldiers. The particular group of warriors that was based here were called *Pie Gönme*. The chief warrior among them was Tennis. Tennis's father is called Aafiah. Afie's father is called Bi. Bi's own father is called Flahn. That is why the traditional name for this town is Flahn.

Karn, the founder of Karnplay, is from in town here. Karn's father was called Tuah Kailar. Tuah's father is called Zlu. Zlu is the brother of Tennis¹⁶. Karn derives from the Seuplay quarter in Peelar here. This town, Peelar, was the first town to be established. It was the first town where a big chief for Gbelay came from. Peelar existed before Karnplay and it was a bigger town since.

When Karn left from Peelar, he went to his relatives in Karnplay. Where the Karnplay radio station is today, that is where his first settlement was. At

¹⁶ This link between Zlu and Tennis is not certain but a tentative one. Compared to other oral histories from Youhnlai and the comments by Kei Yeah on the Flahn generation make it plausible though.

that time, the town was called Nyenglay/Faunaplay. The traditional name for Karnplay is Nyenglah. The first person that Karn met over there was called Fauna. He remained there and decided to make his farm where the Gwehn tree is standing.

The warriors that remained in Peelar were all related to one another and to Karn. Tennis, as the most famous one was older than Karn's father, Tuah. When Tennis was getting older now, he called Tuah to come and take care of his legacy. This is how, through Tuah too, Karn received his powers as a warrior and managed to build his kingdom. The strength that they gained all came from Tennis. He was the big brother of Tuah¹⁷.

ON TENNIS ZEH, TUAH KAILAR, KARN AND THE POWER OF THEIR GENERATION

Before then, the Mano people, the Ivoirians, every one of them really, they came and fought people from Peelar. In their attempts, all of them failed. During Tennis's regime, they fought Peelar but they all failed.

Tennis got his strength when he was a leader here. He left and went to the east [*Da*]. He went to the East to go and get his powers. He went to a foreteller¹⁸. The foreteller told him that he just had to go back home and mobilize everybody. When they were all assembled, he had to ask them to say "Keahnkuhn." Keahnkuhn is the word spoken by a monkey and means 'yes'. If everybody says "Keahnkuhn", then that means he received his strength and power. When he entered his town coming back, he mobilized everybody. He went on top of the roof and sat down. From there he started giving his order now that people should say Keahnkuhn. All the residents came to the centre of the town. As they reached there, people were looking down upon him. They started saying to each other: "What did Tennis say over there?" Others replied: "Don't you mind him, he said we should all say Keahnkuhn." When they asked Tennis, what is the meaning of Keahnkuhn, he replied: "Klan." When they asked: "What is the meaning of Klan?", he replied: "Keahnkuhn." At that moment though, as soon as you opened your mouth and said the word Keahnkuhn, whether you intend to or not, you had said it. He tricked all his fellow residents in Peelar into saying it, that is how he gain his strength [loud laughter from the narrators and bystanders].

This is why, up till today, the people from Tennis's generation do not eat monkey meat.

When Tennis was getting old, he called Tuah, the father of Karn, and passed down his power to him. Tuah went to get his power in the east.

¹⁷ Uncle here is still possible as big brother is often used to refer to uncle. See footnote 16.

¹⁸ A diviner

Tuah went to a foreteller, a diviner. He went there to get his medicine. When he went, they prepared some chalk¹⁹. The foreteller put this chalk over the skin of a baboon early in the morning. They said: “Take the chalk and take your skin. If you take the monkey skin, it will be your power. It will be your protection.” He touched the chalk and then, as soon as his hands touched the skin of the monkey, it transformed into a real monkey. The foreteller told him: “If you don’t grab the monkey here, then you will not get your power.” As soon as he heard this, he started running behind the monkey. He ran behind the monkey skin for twenty-four hours. The monkey stayed within the town. It never went into the bush. As he was getting tired, he was able to grab the monkey. From the moment he touched it, it turned to monkey skin again. From that moment, the foreteller told him that he would have a special bodyguard. This bodyguard will be towing the skin for him. Be they at war or facing any other difficulty, bullets will not touch his bodyguard as long as he has the skin on. Finally, the foreteller told Tuah: “As you go home, when you enter the town, you should kill your mother.” At that time he had not born Karn yet. They said: “If your mother comes to welcome you, kill your mother.” So when he came back home, his mother came to welcome him. He said: “No, don’t welcome me.” He told the bystanders: “This woman, this my mother is the one who made me to leave from this town and wander around endlessly. For this reason, grab this woman and give her an oath²⁰.”

The woman denied the allegations. Because she denied, they decided to bring her before the oath. This particular oath was a liquid. The suspect is supposed to drink it. As soon as she drank this oath, it started to kill the woman. She never was able to confess to anything or even deny the allegation before she died. This is how Tuah got his own powers.

This also made that Tuah Kailar became the chief for the whole town. The powers that they gave to him were supposed to last for seven generations.

From Tuah, he gave it to his son Karn [2]. He was still in Peelar when he received these powers. Karn’s mother is from Faunaplay. He left Peelar to go and settle with her brother’s family. Karn then gave the power to Monlgoe [3]. Mongrue enjoyed the powers until he born Woto Monlgoe [4].

From Woto Monlgoe, confusion entered within the family and people started fighting over the powers. [laughter from the bystanders and the narrators]. Politics and political ambitions entered the equation and the next generation spoiled the law of the powers. They started making confusion and fighting. The reason behind the argument was that only one person from each generation should rule. They started spreading the powers now, like they were dividing property.

¹⁹ Chalk is a powder mixed with water often made out of leafs.

²⁰ And oath (*sō*) is often given in relation to the use of medicine, witchcraft or to members of secret societies (see Bedert 2016)

ON THE WARS FOUGHT.

The warriors that were here in Peelar were called Feah, Yiakeh and Kiandeh. They were here under the supervision of Afie. They were the ones who fought for Afie until Tennis was big enough and took over as the main warrior.

One man came from the east and came to Tennis. He said: "I came to be with you and to fight for you." They called this warrior Simon. He alone could fight off more than a thousand people at one time. He fought on his own. The law that he gave to people was that, before a war would break out, people should make a sound either on a trumpet or on a drum. They had to beat the drum²¹. When anybody heard that sound, people from Peelar would respond with the same sound and then Simon would come to the people in need. Simon only knew the location of Peelar but he did not know of the other places. Anytime somebody beat the drum anywhere, when he heard the sound coming from Peelar in response, he would know where to go based on the location of the sound.

Before he left, anywhere he was, he told people to prepare two big knots of GB²² which he would put it in his bag without the accompanying soup and go.

The first time he went to war he bypassed the town. He only moved in the bush close to where people were burning *country*²³ salt. A woman and her son were there. He grabbed the woman and killed her. He told the little boy: "Go in town and tell the people that Simon from Peelar has killed your mother in the bush." The drum sounds that followed were twofold. There was an emergency sound and a jubilation sound. For the jubilation sound, when it sounded anywhere, Peelar people would respond to it as it was the sound Simon responded to. When Simon heard it, he left and took the woman's head.

The jubilation sound, Simon followed it trying to find his way back to Peelar. They stopped to a place that is now referred to as Simon's hill. He stood up there and started listening whether he could hear his friends and relatives. When he heard the voice of some of his friends, he started calling his own name: "I am a one man army." At that time, he was fighting like a *hamen*²⁴. Nobody could see him. When people came into a town after he had entered, they could only see dead bodies, unexpectedly. So people started talking: "Ah, this man who is killing, he is from Peelar. We can't see him. Even when we go in the bush, we can't see him." Usually, when he finds five

²¹ In the Dan language, this drum is referred to as *Tukpah*.

²² Popular dish among the Dan consisting of boiled and beaten cassava.

²³ Country is opposed to kwii. It refers to things that are considered local, traditional, or customary. Issues related to Kwii, on the contrary, refer to modernity, civilization and the global. For a detailed description of this distinction, see Bedert (2016, chapter 4)

²⁴ Term in Liberian English to refer to poachers who also kill humans for their bodyparts and who use medicine to kill.

people, he would usually kill four of them and leave one person to go inform the others. He gave them instructions saying: “Go say that I am Simon and that I am from Peelar.” That is how his name spread. So from then on, in all surrounding settlements, people felt discouraged and started saying: “This type of warfare, I don’t understand it. So the best thing is we could do is to go and reconcile with people in Peelar. They came together and took one lady from the east, they call her Luo, and put the sign of reconciliation around her neck as a way to demand a ceasefire. They marched towards Peelar and shouted: “We want peace.” They also brought a chicken as a sign of peace. They gave these tokens to Afie and Tennis. This narrative is another demonstration of how Tennis became very powerful in the community.

ON THE ARRIVAL OF THE CONGOE PEOPLE

When the Congoe people came to Zorgowee, the first bigger settlement they reached in this territory, their secretary, he sent a bullet round as a message. He said: “Carry it to Karn, tell him we are here.” If they give you the round and you refuse it, that means that you automatically become an enemy to the Congoe people. When they sent it to Karn, he accepted it.

Karn said to his followers: “The Congoe people are the ones that will take care of us. So I don’t want any of you to fight them.” They also sent a bullet to Garplay, to Ma Gblelegbeh who refused the round.

The Soe clan, in fact all of what is today Twah River refused the round. Since Karn received the round, they came to him and settled among him as strangers. As they fought people in Twah River though, Karn was at one point arrested. The reason they arrested Karn was, when they entered in Yoolar, one of the luitentants of the Congoe people he went in a tree and sat down there in the night. Residents in Yoolar started calling one of the warriors in town: “Kanaaoh, Kanaaoh, Kanaaoh.” The luitenant misunderstood this call for Kanaah to be for Karn. He travelled back to Karnplay and said that Karn had betrayed them. Congoe commanders were instructed to arrest Karn. When they grab Karn, he denied the allegation. He explained to them that they get one other name over there called Kanaah, which is different from Karn.

The Congoe people responded: “Since you deny the allegations, we want one of your sons to lead us to go to that place.” He gave one man by the name Tinie. Then other people remarked: “No that is not his son. His own son is Monlgoe.”

Karn gave in and started giving a verdict: “People who say that this Kanaah is me are lying. Since it is not me, I will agree and give you my son. If it is me, they should kill my son in battle. If it is not me, my son should go fight and bring victory to me.”

That is how Monlgoe became the point man for the Congoe people. The conquered all those who refused the round. And that is how he became the first paramount chief when the Congoe wars were over.

Before that time, a big warrior was the leader of a settlement. It was only after the Congoe people came here that chiefs were introduced.

LOELAY

Loelay has three aspects of its oral history that jump out here. First is the link between the two brothers credited with founding the town. Family is often given as a reason for migration. Either through a fight or through more positive experiences. Second is the story of the daughter on whose grave the Loe trees grew. This serves as another example of the way a more formalized story has been passed on. It also stresses the link between the first settlers and the land in an autochthony discourse. Third is the link between Doo people from Loelay and the ones in the Tappeta region mentioned towards the end of the narrative. It indicates the importance of migration and mobility and the way it complements the pivotal moments set up around kinship and territory.

- Date of the interview: 20/02/2012
- Old Man Kawee Suomi – elder
- Zogwo Loh – former quarter chief
- Loelicy Paye – former town chief, former acting clan- and paramount chief



Photo 4: Elders in Loelay

(M. BEDERT, 2012)

The first person to establish this town, his name was Gbor. He came from the East, from Guinea.

The town he came from in Guinea was called Gama. Gbor was a hunter. He and some of his followers came and settled in Xlulay. The town was named after a mountain. Xlulay is in Ivory Coast. From there they travelled behind Nimba mountain. Another name for our people is the Doo people.

While in Xlulay, Gbor decided to go on a hunting trip. He had an older brother called Mahn Senahn. Both of them came hunting on this side of the river. As they were on the hunt they stopped in this located and it appealed to them so they decided to settle and to build their own town here. The first settlement they built was called Mahplay. It was named after Gbor's brother, Mahn Senanh. As time passed they called their family members to follow them, one by one. The old town spot for this settlement is on the road towards Karnplay. When you pass by the new school building after the creek, it is on the right hand side.

At that time though, When Mahplay was established, Karnplay did not exist yet. Loelay [Mahplay] is one of the oldest towns in the district. Whether Peelar was there, we don't know. In the oral histories that we were told, the focus was only on how the town was established, whether Peelar was there, they never told us about it.

When the people established Mahplay, Tuah Kailar, Karn's father, was living. Other family members had settled in Mahplay and each of these families had their warriors. Over time, conflicts among them emerged. Because of this confusion, some warriors decided to travel a bit further and settle down in a nearby place. At that time though, Karnplay had established and Tuah Kailar started to display great leadership. He saw that all of them were warriors and he had felt threats from other groups. Tuah got involved and decided that one of the warriors, Karyahgbee [lit.: stay strong], you should be our standby leader.

To where the school building is today, that is where they establish a second town. Tuah had ordered Karyahgbee to relocate and other people started following behind him to the new place. Karyahgbee became the leader of this new settlement through the influence of Tuah Kailar. Karyahgbee is a warrior from a family that came from the east also. They have a town in over there called Kwienlay. From this family, there are still people who remained in Kwienlay. They are called Leh people.

Gbor had a son. They called him Manteuh Sehgbou. His daughter was a singer. Her name was Luo [lit.: advice]. At one point in time she died and her death has become an important story in the establishment of this town.

During those days, the traditional court was at the intersection of the road from the two districts (Twah River and Zoe Geh). The roads leading to those two districts met where the big trees are.



Photo 5: Loe tree in Loelay

(M. BEDERT, 2012)

This junction was used as a court. Whenever there was a serious matter, people would go there with a mat, sit down and discuss until a solution was found. This place is almost like a *saa gly*²⁵. So when Luo, the granddaughter of Gbor, died, the elders and the warriors said: “This little lady died young, but she was one of the most popular residents among us. So what we will do, we cannot just bury her in the bush. Let’s carry here to where the court can

²⁵ A sacred space protected by medicine often erected in relation to secret society activities. Within this space, initiation or healing ceremonies take place.

meet, right at our intersection.” This is where they buried her. Not long after the burial, one specific tree, called Loe, started growing on her grave. So the elders back then decided that if this is so, then this town should from then on be called Loelay. Up until today, they consider the tree to be their daughter. The tree is still growing and nobody is allowed to cut it down. Even other trees of the same sort, people from here do not like to use it for wood. People who come from outside or who come to collect wood under the government’s authority can take it. Before long, these trees almost surrounded the town. Today there are not many left though.

The two brothers, Gbor and Mahn Senahn, at last they separated. This is how the two towns, Leh and Mahplay came about. Mahn Senahn built his town called Mahplay and Gbor came here to establish Leh. This is the settlement that is now called Loelay.

At the time Luo died, Gbor was no longer living. Only his son, Maneh Segbou and Luo’s father was alive. Gbor’s son was the leader for this place when Luo died? After Gbor, the leader for this town was his son, Segbou. Gbor was still alive though when Tuah ordered them to go and stand guard. When Tuah instructed them, they accepted this without contest as they saw it as a way to be together.

The town has known a lot of warriors. The first warrior who was here was called Karnue Va. After Karnue Va, the second warrior was Deuseu Waungbar. The third warrior was called, Ge Lemangba who belonged to the generation of old man Gbar.

Traditionally, when you build a house, you make sticks and loosen the soil to make it strong like cement. With this stick you start beating the soil to make it solid (*gba*). When Gbar fought, he attacked his opponents and broke them down until there is nothing left. This is how come they started using Gbar as a nickname for him as he turned his enemies in beautiful, solid floors. He also had a different nickname, after the name of a particular tree, the highest tree in the bush.

Besides the Gbar generation, one lady by the name of Goun got a son who was a warrior also. They call him Suomie. Besides Suomie, his little brother, was also a warrior.

Goun had a third son, called Gloo Gongbeh and a fourth son who was known as Kruah Goungbay. From this one family came four warriors. They all had the same mother.

Gbor, Mahn Senahn and all of these warriors all belonged to the same family. Karnue Va was a son of Gbor. Luo’s father, Manteuh Sehgbou, was the first child of Gbor. He and Karnue Va were brothers. All of the other warriors also descended from Gbor. As the family extended, those warriors could not stick together. Because they were all men from the same father, they could not really pull together. So those who felt they were stronger than the others went to sit down on their own and established their towns elsewhere. They

separated and settled into four or five different zones within the town.

Because of Tuah's intervention, they finally decided to come back together and sit down in one settlement again.

The strongest warriors, they were nine in total. In the end though they decided to come together. As Tuah advised them, it was the time the Congoe people started nearing.

ON DOO PEOPLE, THE NAME FOR PEOPLE IN LOELAY ALSO EXIST IN TAPETTA.

The reason why there are Doo people around Tappeta is that some of Gbor's children who separated went down there and settled.

At that time, people used a drum [*dugbah*] which was used for passing on information. Any time there was a sign of war or fighting somewhere, they would beat these drums and the warriors would come from all over to meet to either attack their enemies or defend their homes. At one time, one of Gbor's children went and bought a drum as their own was broken. The payment for this drum was a human being that would be used in the preparation of a sacrifice. Other groups who heard about this were scared that they would be chosen for the payment and the sacrifice. They said: "What we will do, if you permit us to go, we will go and hunt for an animal so we can use its skin to fix the drum." This was an excuse they used to escape from their stronger brothers and warriors. They ran away and entered in Diaplay. They reached down to a certain creek, named Slan. As they arrived there, they decided to rest. As they were resting, they decided that they would not go back home again. They were scared that if they went back and their drum was not fixed, that one of their sons then would be given in sacrifice. They thought it better to go to a diviner to find out what the future would be like for them.

They went and visited a sand cutter who told them: "I am giving you a stick in the shape of a fork. You have to drag the stick in the bush and go. Wherever the fork will hitch on a tree, that will be the most suitable place for you to settle. You will have to either kill an animal in that place or you must have to settle there.

In the process, they started traveling until they reached to Gblondah, in Tappeta. When they reached there, the fork hitched on a tree so they decided to start brushing the place. When they were brushing, they found the carcass of a dead elephant. So now this place is called Glosondah (the settlement where elephant remains are found). And so, this was their indirect escape from their brother warriors in Loelay. This all happened after the death of Luo. This story makes that there are traditional norms between the two communities.

Besides the Doo people in Tapeta, we also have a covenant with the Nyor people who live in Buu-Yao District. It all happened in the past. Two warriors, one from the Gbor Generation and one from the Nyor Clan, fought

endlessly but there was never a winner. They fought for several years. As the fighting progressed, it was becoming more disastrous as more and more people lost their lives. For this reason, they called for reconciliation and to establish a covenant. The elders of both communities came together and decided that there should be no more war. Today, they can't see one another's blood and they can't see one another in trouble. If they do, they cannot just pass by and walk away: "Their trouble is our trouble too. They are like brother to us now."

Even if somebody offends the authorities, the other would have to appeal to the authorities for mercy. This is the covenant between them. Nyor is the community where Prince Johnson²⁶ came from.

The fighting with Nyor originated because they wanted or needed to protect Karnplay. Tuah sent a message to several of the outlying towns saying: "You should not wait for people to come to you to take your territory." In those days, the more territory you had, the more power you had. The people from Zoe Geh [Nyor] would have liked to extend their territory much to the dislike of Karn and Tuah who were in power over here. They would not have liked it if Nyor people would have simply walked over Loelay people as their settlement was too close to Karnplay. Loelay served as a military barrack to Karnplay just like Larpea did.

Today though, Loelay people have intermarried with Nyor people.

ON THE ARRIVAL OF THE CONGOE PEOPLE

When the Congoe people came, Karn called all the warriors from the various surrounding communities and they all came to Loelay to sit down under a tree that died now. They had a meeting to discuss that it did not make sense to fight the Congoe people. Karn explained: "The weapons they got are more powerful than ours." This makes that everybody agreed. Well, at first, there were a few who still said: "We will try." But Karn was able to control them in the end.

When the Congoe people arrived, they had asked Karn: "What will be the stronghold here where we will face resistance?" The people responded that this would be Sroh clan. The warrior there was called Kannah Longbeh. Sroh clan and Kannaah were not under Karn's rule at that time.

When the Congoe people went there, they met up with serious resistance. And Kannah was constantly calling his own name because that is what warriors fighting during those days would do. They would call their own name in jubilitating as they were winning. When the commander from the Congoe people hear this, he claimed: "Oh, Karn has deceived us, he showed us the road and then passed the other way." The commander hid himself up in a tree

²⁶ Prince Jonson is current Senator for Nimba County. In 1989 he entered Liberia from Ivory Coast together with Charles Taylor in the invasion that would start the civil war. Soon after he entered, he deflected Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) to start his own Independent NPFL.

and he saw this man and heard him shouting: “I Kannah Longbeh, nobody can able me.” The commander returned to Karnplay and said: “You, Karn, you are the one!”

So they arrested Karn and jailed him in Sanniquellie. They put fire under him and put pepper in the fire to smoke him. The women after whom Sanniquellie is name was called Sennie. When she saw Karn being treated that way, she complained. She said: “This man is a chief and I know him. Whatever he is saying, I know it to be the truth. To convince you people, let him give his son, let his son go with you. If that same resistance is met, then you will know he is the one.” The Congoe people agreed but decided that Karn should stay in Jail until his son returned. That is how Karn’s son, Monlgoe went into battle with the Congoe people.

YOUHNLAY

Besides the specific town history of Youhnlay. One of the elders proves to be particularly knowledgeable and able to share more details on the larger generation of the Karn family. It is these hints at more knowledge that lead to the next overview of the Flahn generation (cf. below). It came about only, as mentioned in the introduction, when the speaker switched from Dahn Vlemoh who talked about the particularities of Youhnlay, to elder Kei Yeah who focused on this wider regional histories.

Also, the link with land and authority is made explicit in the use of the agricultural lands as a place to settle.

- Date of the interview: 22/02/2012
- Dahn Vlemoh – elder, former town and quarter chief, worker in Firestone plantation
- Kei Yeah - elder

The founder of this town is Gëh Kpoaleah. He was a warrior. They gave him a name so that there is no way that aggressors would bypass him or escape from him. His father was Drosieh. He was from Dealah. When Gëh Kpoaleah became a man, when he became mature, he decided to go and build his own town right here. Dealah is just a *kpannaa* now. It is in Liberia. As Gëh travelled, he brought his family along.

Youhnlay was formed in its present form when the Congoe people arrived. Before that time, the towns around here were too small but after Gëh had arrived, it was Karn who told them to merge together, to become one town. Youhnlay is made up of people from Boanlay, Lahmplay, Lendehplay, Blaplay and Sieplay. These five towns merged together to become Youhnlay. Well, they all came to the area of Dealah. All these five towns joined Dealah to become Youhnlay.

Gëh was the first person to become chief as he guided the unification. Then from there, after they finished putting together the new settlement, Yei became the first chief of the unified Youhnlay.

Yei and Gëh are not related. Yei is from Boalay. Yei was a warrior too. After Yei, his son Yene succeeded him.

After Yene came Nezah. These two were also related. They both came from Boalay. After Nezah came Beh Samie. Beh Samie came from Dealah. After Beh came Dahn Vermo who originated from Lehndehplay. When Dahn was old now, Dennis Kakoh took over. Dennis originated from Dealah. Dennis and Dahn are related, they came from the same family. After Dennis came John Yarmie who originated from Sieplay. After him came Sammie Lahm who originated from Boanlay. The selection of the chief is determined upon agreement of the congregation.

Today, all the towns that made up Youhnlay have their own quarters. The chief can come from each one of those quarters. Today, when asked, people respond that they are from Youhnlay and not from the various quarters. All the original six towns were founded by warriors. The moment Karn said you should go together, there was no argument, everybody agreed.

Because by the time they went together, the Congoe people were already there and people were paying tax. But at the time too, people were involved in forced labour. Before anything, the Congoe people came into the town to look for manpower. They would enter a town and would go to the chief. The town chief would send them to the quarter chief and the quarter chief would have to give somebody to go work for the Congoe people. If the quarter chief didn't comply, then he would be grabbed and beaten. If you were young during those days, there would be a good chance that they would grab you.

The warriors that founded the six towns, were all related though. All these towns are from one father and all of his children decided to create all these towns, each in their own right. Flahn is the ancestor whose children founded all these villages. Flahn's own father is Bartuah. Bartuah originated from Grand Gedeh. His mother was a Mandingo woman. They call her Fatuma. Bartuah was married to Lium. Lium's father is Mah and Mah came from Gbelay here.

Flahn was the father to Kwri and Sehr. He actually had a lot of children but Kwri and Sehr were the popular ones. The descendants of Kwri are the ones that own the towns of Youhnlay and neighbouring Gbarplay. Sehr's son is Nyoah. Nyoah's son is Zlu. Zlu's son is called Tuah Kailar, Karn's father. Karn's son is Mongrue and Monlgoe's son is Woto.

The towns of Bahplay, this Youhnlay, Peelar, Karnplay and Mambor were all built by descendants from Flahn.

The different generations, they were together at some point in the past but then they spread. When they came on this side now to where Youhnlay is today, they were together first. But before long, they started making confusion

among one another. Just imagine, a large group of warriors packed together in one place.

Boahn and his people said: “Let’s go and make our own town on this side.” So did those they called Sieh. Their own particular activity and quality is to curse. When a child does anything, they just curse that child. They train their children to curse. Abusive words. That is why today they call their quarter the Sieh quarter.

[...]

So Geh who founded this town, he said: “No, it is better we come together.” After he managed to do this, he is the one who decided to give the power to Yei.

The whole land here, they used to call it Pehpeh [lit.: soft]. It was Yei who used to make farm all over here. Where they were before, there was a source of water that people used to drink. They called this water *Gblah*, it means plus. This plus is negative plus. When people used to drink this *Gblah* water, two persons would die, three person will die, all at the same time. This water used to affect the community too much. Therefore they went to a foreteller to ask him what was going on. The foreteller told them, the problems are caused by the name of the water. This is what is affecting you people. After this verdict, they asked Yei: “If this is the case, where will we go to build our town?” Yei told them: “Let’s go to Pehpeh, where I am making my farm, let’s go there and make a town.” That is how they all came here and built the town. Everybody was behind Yei. Even Than who was a friend of Yei. He was controlling his own little kingdom too. When he heard that Yei was coming to look for a place to build, then he decided to leave his home and to be with Yei. The place where they shook hands is where the centre of the town is today. Today, there is a warehouse standing on that location.

When they decided to settle here, they asked: “Who is supposed to start this job first, the brushing of the land?” For this job, they asked one of their nephews, their sister’s son. His name was Sei Gbaleh. He was the one who started the job first. After he had started, everybody joined him now to brush. After they finished brushing, they started building now. The place where the first hut was built, the one where everybody would take a rest, I know about it.

This town was built in 1939.

It is not the oldest in the region though. The next town is older than this town. That is Sackolay.

This particular history came about after a second and third meeting with elders in Karnplay. During those meetings, we intended to find out more about the relations between Karn's relatives and the nearby settlements. Unable to provide many of these details, the elders in Karnplay suggested we go visit elder Kei Yeah in Youhnlay who, they thought, would be able to provide a more detailed account of these historical connections. They argued that he belongs to 'our' same family so it will be the legitimate family history. Rather than focusing on a particular territory, the present overview attempts to sketch out a genealogy that legitimizes the boundaries of the Gbelay chiefdom. It has a lot of cross-references to earlier presented narratives from this area.

- Date of the interview: 07/06/2012
- Kei Yeah – elder in Youhnlay town

Flahn's ancestor is Gbor Vein. Gbor Vein was a Mandingo man from Guinea. His daughter was called Fatuma. Fatuma married Ser. Sehr came from Grand Gedeh. The two of them had a son called Bartuah.

Bartuah was hated by the Krahn people in Grand Gedeh. The reason why they hated him is that his mother did not hail from Grand Gedeh, she was a stranger among them. After his father, Ser, had died, Bartuah decided to go look for cattle so that they could set up the required feast following the funeral. Within his town, nobody was willing to give him cattle. For this reason, he decided to travel and to look for cattle elsewhere. During his search, he ended up in Nimba. When he came here now, he found that Gbelay was a suitable area for him. At that time, several warriors already had their settlements here. One of them was called La and the second one was called Mah who had his own town between Zeanlay and Larpea.

These two warriors had their towns closer to one another but Gbartuah decided to live with Mah. When he arrived though, Gbartuah spoke Krahn while La and Mah both spoke Dan. Mah decided to give a portion of his land to Gbartuah. Gbartuah built his own town there and they called it Zehntontuoh. The place is in a rubber farm now, the current Paramountchief's rubber farm. Mah gave his daughter to Gbartuah to marry. Her name was Lium. The two of them got a son called Flahn. He was born in Zentohntuoh. Gbartuah had many children but Flahn was the most prominent of them all. As he was getting mature, he decided to move and establish his own town. Today the area is behind Sakolay, right after the rocky hill. This is where Flahn decided to build his own village. The place is now called Gonkanu Mehndaplay Hill. Gonkanu was the head of the snake society at that time.

Flahn was a hunter. As soon as they settled in their new home, they started hunting. Each time they killed a piece of meat, they sent it in town. Each time too, some parts were sent back to Sehntontuoh, to his father.

Mah's children back in Zehntontuoh, they were wondering why they couldn't see these their strangers doing any other thing besides hunting for meat and towing a load. The load they were carrying, the *kinja*²⁷, they call it Gbeh. They said: "We should just end this and start calling them Gbeh people." This is how the name of Gbelay and Gbeh people came about. The *kinja*, it can be made from plait palm leaves or cassava leaves that are used to tie things together.

After Mah died, Mah's children started rumors by saying that, even though Flahn always carries meat, they can't give them their share so they are just mean people. When Flahn heard about these stories, he was concerned that, if people can talk about you like that, then they must be getting ready to do something to you also. This is why he and his family decided to move their village and go to Gbahplay. This place today is a coffee farm. His stranger father in this new location was Kpeah Gweh. Kpeah Gweh originated from Zor Ganaglay. When he moved, Mah's children said: "Since they came to us and they decided to behave in this ungrateful and mean way to us all of the time, it will be better if we go and wage war on them." When Kpeah Gweh, Flahn's new host and friend heard about this, he went and brought a foreteller to see whether the people will actually bring war or not. He sent the foreteller to Flahn. The man said: "The people are planning war against you. For this reason, I see that, if they just wage war that means that they forget about the relationship between you people. If they decide to wage war on you people, don't be afraid. You and your son, Sehr, you should fight this war. If you fight, you will carry the victory.

Sehr was the father of Bartuah. Sehr was also the name for the last son for Flahn. If you love your father and your father died, then you can name your child after him and that is how Sehr Tee²⁸ came about. Flahn's last son was Sehr Tee.

Later on, as expected, Mah's children decided to come and wage war on Flahn and his children. When they came, Flahn was still alive. As soon as Mah's children arrived, Sehr decided to open fire. When he opened fire, one of the stronger warriors brought by Mah's children was killed by the shot. As soon as they killed him, the rest of Mah's children decided to run away. When this war ended, rumors started coming up that Flahn's children too were planning a war of retaliation against Mah's children. When they picked up on these rumours, Mah's children started moving from their villages and

²⁷ Expression in Liberian English to refer to a make-shift basket made from oil palm fronds.

²⁸ Lit.: "Small Sehr."

went to La in Larpea. At that time, they used to call the town Lalay. So when the people decided to move, they said to each other: “Oh, let me move to La over there before they kill me over nothing.” That is how Larpea town got its name. They said: *aloa La pieh* (lit.: I will go and visit La). In the end Flahn never waged war again.

Later on as Flahn was getting old, Sehr was mature now and he decided to go hunt around in his own right. On one of his trips, he went to Peelar. At that time the name for Peelar was Gwehlay. They met people there, in this village that was called Gwehlay. He decided to settle there. He said: “I will stay here in this village and plant my tobacco leaf [*tah*].” As he was living there, he became the father to several children. Today they all get their own quarter in Peelar, they call it Sehr. There he remained until his father, Flahn, died. After his death, they carried Flahn to Zehntontuoh to bury him.

Sehr fathered many children but the most important one they call Nyoah. From Nyoah the generation goes on with Zlu. After Zlu came Tuah Kailar. Then Tuah born Karn. Karn had a brother named Kwemi. After Karn had become a chief, all of a sudden, his brother Kwemi died. When Kwemi died, Karn was very frustrated. Anybody who came to sympathize with him, he told them off. He said: “Oh you came to remind me of my brother who died, I will make you take an oath.” If this person was involved with witchcraft, the moment they eat the oath, it would kill them. That is how plenty people died around here throughout his period.

At the time this happened, Karn was in Karnplay. It is in Karnplay that his brother had died. They had come to their uncle Fauna together. Tuah was the one who brought his children to Fauna. But they were born in Seiplay, in Peelar.

When Tuah came he had a specific aim. He had a plan. He said: “I will go and build Gbelay to unite all the Gbeh people.” It was Tuah’s mission to build a larger kingdom. Actually it was to reunite the Flahn descendants as all of Flahn’s children had spread out. Sehr had gone to Peelar. Kwrii had gone to Gbarplay. Kwrii was the first born for Flahn, he settled in Gbarplay to replace his father. As hunters, for him too, all of his children, any time they killed meat, they would bring a portion of it to Kwrii as the head of the family. One of Sehr’s children went to Mambor.

It was Tuah’s mission to bring all of them together and to protect the family because they were hearing that the Congoe people were coming. He decided that they shouldn’t harm each other anymore and that the Flahn family should get to know one another and form a closer alliance.

Before he went on this mission, he went to a foreteller. He went to Saolay, Tapetta district. There, he was told that he would be a great man. They gave him a monkey skin. The skin was his medicine that would grant him his leadership qualities. Tennis Zeh was part of this same generation but Tuah Kailar was the older one. Moreover, Tennis came as a warrior. He went to a

foreteller too so that he could become a leader. They told him: “go and call all the people together. If you do, go on top of the roof of the highest house. You will tell them: “Everybody should say “klan.” If they say it, you must respond by saying “keahnkuhn.” If you do this, that means you have succeeded.” So when he came back, that is exactly what he did. He called his people together and explained: “I have called you to tell you something.” He was sitting down on the roof now. He said: “I want for everybody to say “klan.” People responded: “What with this man”? or they asked: “What did Tennis say”? while others commented: “Don’t you mind him. He said that we should say “klan.” As soon as they spoke these words, Tennis responded by saying “keahnkuhn, I am now your leader”²⁹.

When Tuah Kailar died in Karnplay, they also carried him to Zentontuoh to be buried. When Tuoh Kailar died, the Congoe people had not arrived yet. Karn himself was getting very old by the time the Congoe people came.

Fauna, Karn’s uncle is from Ganglay (Zor) but he descends from the same Flahn generation. He is one of Flahn daughter’s descendants. Monlgoe’s mother, Sangalay, she is from Kahnlay, a small town between Lepulah and Karnplay. What my father told me was that Fauna’s mother descended from Flahn’s generation. What my father also told me was that all the generations from Ganaglay, they are from Flahn’s daughter. This Fauna from Karnplay, he is from Ganaglay too and his father was called Wisei. Larpea was a settlement on its own, not related to Flahn. They only had a relationship with Mah and his descendants from Mahplay.

There is a rumor that Karn had a son first, before he had Monlgoe. They called him Woto.

From all the Flahn descendants, Sehr went to Peelar, Kwrii remained in Gbarplay. One of Sehr’s children went to Mambor. Flahn descendants are responsible for the building of Youhnlay and Sehr descendants built Karnplay. All of Gbelay people descend from Flahn.

GENEALOGICAL OVERVIEW OF THE FLAHN GENERATION

At this point, based on the oral histories of four out of the five towns that deal with the Flahn generation, it is possible to attempt a modest reconstruction of the Flahn generations in a genealogical model. It needs to be stressed that this is a very tentative overview and serves only as a way to sketch out links between settlements and families. Based on the oral histories above, it is clear that an accurate reconstruction based on a linear temporal view with accurate dates is not possible. From this overview, the gender dynamics are also obvious. Only in a few cases does the name of the mother or wife figure prominently. Nevertheless, in establishing connections and relationships, marital exchange and the connection with the ‘mother’s home’ (*legbē*) is of great significance.

²⁹ The same story was narrated in the settlement history of Peelar.

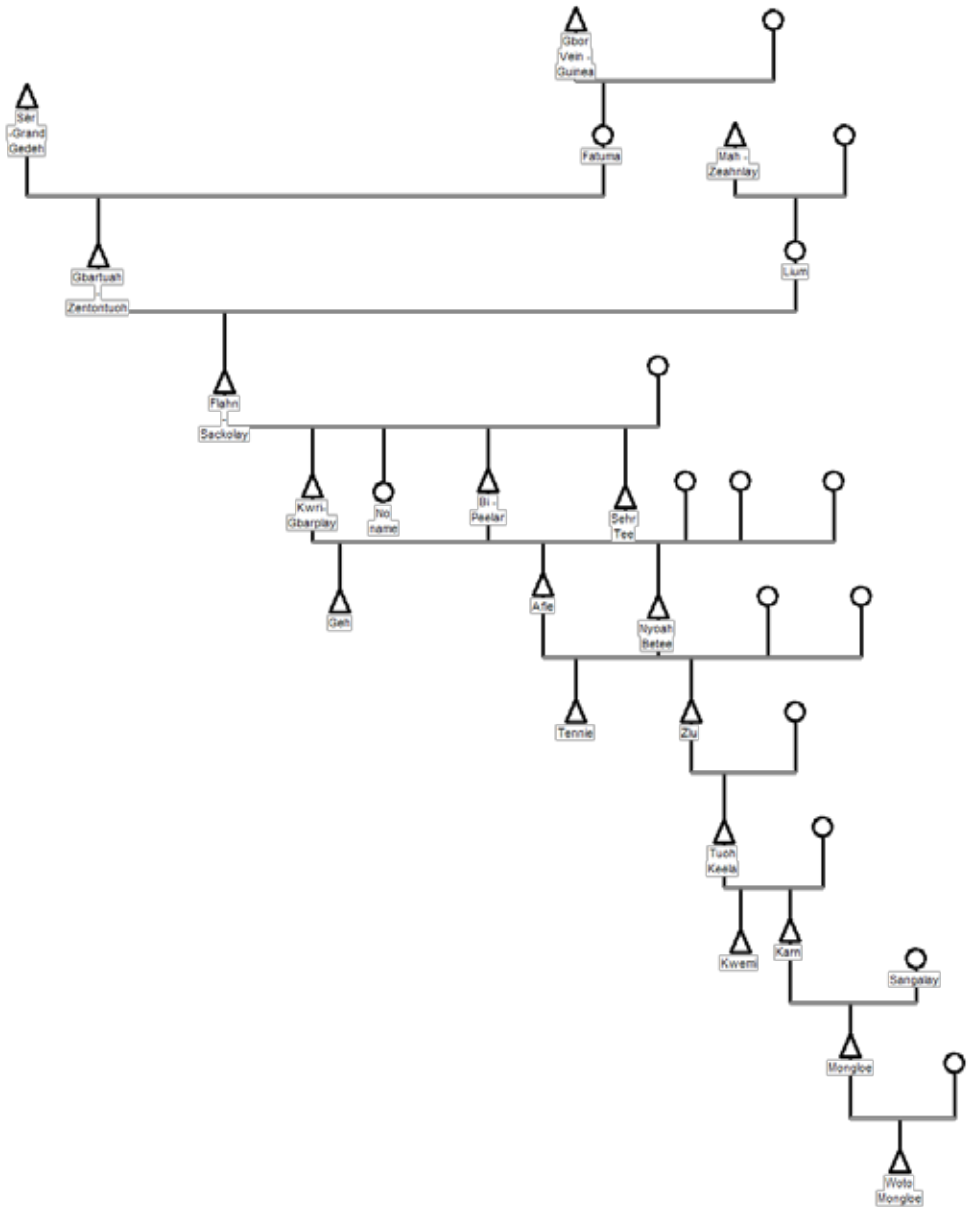


Fig. 1: Genealogy of the Karn Family

(M. BEDERT, 2012)

PART 2: GBELAY DISTRICT

LARPEA

The town history of Larpea introduces a theme that returns in several other cases as well. It demonstrates the way town were managed in the aftermath of the pacification by the Congoe people. The town actually is made up of several smaller town that were told to come together by Mongrue, the first Paramount Chief. This unification had tax and security reasons but is indicative of the way local politics influenced settlement arrangement and how they continue to do up till today. New settlements are still being founded and migration is still ongoing.

A second aspect of this narrative hints at the significance of secrecy as a dimension of social relations. The refusal to share details about the separation of Larpea points at the sensitivity of some of the data and of the importance of the distinction of those who know (i. e. those who are initiated) and those who don't³⁰.

- Date of the interview: 24/02/2012
- Zigban Teah – former quarter chief, elder
- Liegbeh Vuah – elder, former Firestone tapper, carpenter
- Zohn Teah – elder

The founder of the town is Wungbeh. Wungbeh's father is called Gwen Kaya. And Gwen Kaya was a slave to La Kei and his children. But later on, Kaya remained with them, stayed loyal and gained his freedom. La Kei's family took their own daughter and gave her to him for marriage. Kaya became a chief as he stayed with this family and married from them and so, eventually, became one of them. Wungbeh is the son of Kaya and La Kei's daughter, Gbealeh.

Wungbeh was just and elder person too. Monlgoe knew him and went to him so he asked I want for you to mobilise the people. Since Monlgoe know him, people followed behind him. Wungbeh went to tell Monlgoe, I want to go establish Larpea two and he agreed.

Larpea was scattered at first. It consisted of many settlements but before they could come together. Larpea was made up of Bietloh town, Dah-ziehplay, Kruoplay, Wingbaplay, Gwenplay, Daahpieh, Deihgboplay, Dahnglay, Togbowuohnplay, and Gwamplay. Wungbeh, the founder, came from Gwehnplay. Wungbeh's father is called Gwen Kaya.

It was Mongrue who told the nine towns that they should come together and to build this Larpea town. He passed through Wungbeh to deliver this

³⁰ For a more comprehensive overview of the significance of secrecy as a dimension of social relations, see Bedert (2016).

message. He asked Wungbeh to mobilize the nine towns so that they can come together so they can form a guard for Karnplay. They should form a wall around the town so they can protect Karnplay. They were here like a military barrack for Karnplay.

The main warriors of these towns at that time were Sami and his mother Lupu. Sami came from Gwamplay. Another one was Goonsantee who came from Gwamplay. Also, there was Nyetee who came from Dahnziehplay.

All together though, each of these towns mentioned come from the line of La Kei. La Kei, where he came from is not known.

Wungbeh as the first chief of Larpea passed on his power to Togbeh. Then the chieftaincy went to Kpahn. Then to Mune, to Beh Sebo and to Peter Gbeh.

The land on which the current town is built belonged to somebody before. They used this land to make their farm. They burned the land before settling there with the approval of Mongrue, son of Karn. They had taken the area by force before and had to put all the people together on this one plot. At the time of this merger, La Kei had died long before. Still, La Kei is the man the town was named after.

Even though Karnplay now is the main town in this district, Larpea is one of the original Gbelay towns. Larpea and Loelay make up the real original towns of Gbelay. Besides that, the Karn family came here as strangers. Larpea existed before Karnplay existed. The ten towns that were mentioned before all existed before Karnplay came into being. When Karnplay was established now, Mongrue came in power. This was after the war with the Congo people. He called the people here together to build this particular town.

In all the ten towns, it was the warrior, the leader who established the town. They named the town after themselves. La Kei was the grandfather to all of them. They were all his children. All his children, when they were getting mature, they started building their own towns all over and as you build your town, you have to name it after yourself. La Kei's town too was Zehntontuoh, near Karnplay in Kampala. La Kei was a king. His area was considered as a kingdom and nobody could ever do anything there. He did not tolerate fighting. La Kei's first son is Goo. Goo's own son was called Tieh Gela.

The same Wungbeh who brought the two towns together, he is also the one who left this town and built Larpea No 2³¹. Still, people in the two towns, they are all family.

It is not true that Bi [from Duoplay] bought that mountain from the Lapreah people³². He took it by force as he was a warrior and used to fight all over.

³¹ A large discussion followed off record in which they discussed on the possible reason for this deflection but in the end they decided that it could not be shared. Today, Larpea No 1 and Larpea No 2 remain two settlements right next to one another.

³² See Duoplay history.

Actually, he is part of the reason why these various settlements merged together here and built Larpea. Bi was a warrior who dared to fought Karnplay and all.

DUOPLAY

Duoplay's settlement narrative starts off with a detailed description of the fight between two brothers that led to the migration of one on them. It is an example of the way in which kinship is crucial in determining causes for migration. What is equally significant in this case is the prominence given to the way a connection was established with people from Beiplay who offered Bi protection from his own brother and how these actions resulted in more substantial relationships between both groups afterwards. It shows the significance of migration and mobility in understanding contemporary relations between various settlements. The exchanges with Larpea too indicate the importance of cooperation and composition as a way to honour reciprocity dynamics.

- Date of the interview: 14/02/2012
- Leagloh Zeambo – town elder
- Deah Zeambo – town elder

The founder of this town is from Zeahn Gbeleglay in Zoe Geh. His name is Bi. Bi Tahndeh. Bi is from Tappeta, in Zeah. Bi's father is Tahn. Bi was a warrior.

Bi Tahndeh came from Zeah together with his brother, Meagolu. They came and settled here because of the tribal wars that were going on during those days. They migrated and settled first in Gbelayglay. For Meagoluh, the only food that he used to eat was bright people. Be they white or simply more bright in complexion, he couldn't show respect for a white person as compared to a black person. Any light skinned person, he would kill them and eat them. So when he was in Gbeleglay, Bi decided to go and travel. As warriors, they used to take a tour, fighting all around as mercenaries before. So as Bi went to travel, Meagolu went and killed Bi's wife as she was a brighter person. When Bi came back from his trip, he decided to take revenge on his brother. He grabbed his brother's wife and killed her in return. Following these acts, fighting broke out between the two of them. Bi retreated and came to Beiplay in Twah River. He settled with one of the warriors there. So this one warrior who was living in Beiplay, he rescued Bi. The warrior in Beiplay was Nyoahpeah.

When he entered in Beiplay, Bi went to this warrior and explained that his brother Meahgoluh was chasing him to kill him. When Meahgoluh entered the town a bit later, the warriors decided to stop him. By that time, villagers had

run away with Bi. They had brought him here, right after crossing the Luohn river, the iron bridge that is here today. The warriors that remained in Beiplay managed to persuade Meahgolu. They told him: “Your brother has escaped from you already. There is no reason you should continue to run behind him so just hold your peace and go back.” That is how his brother decided to go back and how Bi decided to come and settle on this side. Before establishing a town though, you have to do certain things. You have to see the signs of where you could build your home so that it can be prosperous forever. Bi cut a fork and started hauling it. He hauled it throughout until he came in this town here. The fork hitched on a certain stick. He said: “I find it necessary to build my town here.” This is how he built this town.

When Bi came and settled here, all the people surrounding him, they called him Blah. Because Blah means ‘to run’. This town used to be called Blahlay. When Bi came and built the village named Blah, he and his wife had a son called Duo. Over time, Duo started taking care of the town and his name started ringing throughout this region until they finally named the town after him.

Duo is the one who accepted the Congoe people. It was during Karn’s regime that this town was built. There were several warriors from this town. Some of them were Deazikpokpeh, Tomazah and Bonzuah. They all used to fight for Karn.

When Bi came here and established this town, he also was a strong farmer. During one season, in the nearby town, Larpea, where the owner of the town at that time was named La. It was during the hunger season that La came to Bi and asked him for some wheat. At that time they used to plant something like wheat. He asked: “What will be the price I have to pay?” That is where La took this mountain back there, it is called Sango, and gave it to Bi. All this land used to be for Larpea but they gave the mountain as barter in return for four *kinja*³³ of wheat. The wheat they used to farm is called *gbolo*. *Gbolo* is no longer farmed today, some people will only farm *su* or *klan*. They gave this mountain so that, if there would be any war, Bi could retreat with his family and hide on the mountain. It is a gift that implies safety. There would be water on this hill and all.

People used to spend up to five months to a year on the mountain when there was war. The whole village could go up there. When the town was under attack and it became time to retreat, the warriors would carry all their children there up this mountain.

During those days, they also used to make sacrifices on top of the mountain there. They used to make sacrifice with human beings. The type of human beings they used to make sacrifice with were either slaves or people captured at

³³ By the narrators, the *kinja* was described as “a huge measurement, maybe 50 or 100kg”.

war. The warriors used to bring them back home. They had to make sacrifices for their powers to come to them. They had to go up the mountain there and throw one of the slaves down. Sometimes when they talked to the mountain, it gave them power. That is how they used to make sacrifices.

From there, when they made those sacrifices, the warriors would have a good dream and power would come to them again over night. Their powers would be reinforced. That is how this town became very powerful and used to produce more warriors than any other town. The power would go to the warrior from this area. They all had smaller soldiers who surrounded them. Those soldiers, when they went to the front, as long as the powerful warrior was in front of them, they were safe and the town was safe too.

Sometimes when they fired at with a gun, nothing would happen to them. During those days, they had a stream of water here. The name of the water is Vlein. This particular water, they have a certain portion of it that people used to make sacrifice in. This sacrifice was mainly performed in cases where somebody has unable to conceive. As a woman, if you don't have a child yet or you want to receive a gift, you would have to go there and make sacrifice with food. You put food in the water. After doing this, then anything you request for, it would come to you. This type of sacrifice would work especially for women. A woman who can't give birth to a child, she would go there and make a sacrifice with food and all. From there, within that same month, she would conceive.

For the water, when there was confusion within the family, they would explain this by saying that the cause could be a lack of sacrifice to the water. They would then go there and make sacrifice and everything would return to normal, that is how it used to be. Sometimes people would be dying. Then too, people would say: "Maybe we need to make sacrifice again."

During the Congoe wars, everybody was fighting Karn in the sense that when Bi came here, his stranger father was La and La was also a warrior for Karn. So they were all together. Karn was the only greater warrior too. Karn married from our town too.

The quarter for Bi is Biglu. Other people in this area are the Kpei, they are Mano people who settled here after Duo ruled this town.

The chiefs sometimes used to marry 14 or 15 women. How did they take care of all of the women? As they had hunters, they also had small hunters. They had people farming for them and all. All those people used to live in the same house. They knew, the chief would go to one woman that day, so on those days, the women would go to other men also.

Zorgowee's settlement narrative hint at ethnic conversion which I discuss in more detail in my dissertation (Bedert 2016). It articulates their migration from Guinea as Mano people and their settlement among Dan people. They stress intermarriage as their main reason for integration. This corresponds to the prominence given to marriage and kinship as a potential pivotal moment to legitimize contemporary presence and relatedness.

The narration of their taboo again presents another example of a more formulaic version of text that is distributed in a less coherent larger narrative.

- Date of the interview: 29/02/2012
- Nluogon Glee – elder, tailor
- Charlie Doeleh – former zone chief, council of elders
- Jacob Gei – former town chief, elder

The person who founded this town is named Gbor Gbor. It means 'something big' but it is a nickname given to him by others until it just stayed on him. Gbor Gbor originated from Guinea. He came from Zor, in Veipieh.

They were in Guinea as Mano people. Because Zor contained the Mano and the Konnoh. The Konnoh people and the Mano people, they were always falling into conflict. Gbor Gbor decided: "No, I don't like too much confusion. The best thing would be for me to go to Liberia. That is how he came. Majority of the people here still speak Mano even though they also speak Dan. The people were all Mano but then they married women from Gio families. We married their daughters.

Gowkeh Dui, this is the name of a river. Coming from Zor, it is where he settled first. Later on, he moved from there and he decided to come and build this settlement here. At the time, there was nobody living here. When he arrived, the reason he called it Zorgowee, was the people. They are from Zor. Also, when he came here he saw a certain tree. This tree, in the Mano language is *Goo*. He decided: "Since I now saw Goo, I will build my town under this tree here." It is the tree that got burned due to the recent storm here last week. *Goowee* means 'under the tree' in the Mano language. It implies that anybody who is coming from Zor, they should be welcome to sit down under this tree.

Gbor Gbor was a warrior. All his relatives were warriors too. Gbor Gbor's brother was Weleh. They named him after a mountain. When he came here, he decided to live on a mountain. He was a warrior too. Sowgbe was a third brother. The three of them were the most popular. After he had founded the town, Gbor gbor became the first chief.

After Gbor Gbor, his son, called Goo, succeeded his father. At the time, his father was old but still living. Also, at the time Karn was living in Karnplay.

Monlgoe was still very young those days. Goo spent about 19 years in the seat. He was succeeded by Gbei. Gbei was Goo's son. He stayed on for 23 years. Zlu was the next in line, he was Gbei's son. Gbei died before Zlu could take over. Mongrue was still alive when Zlu took over. Geh was next in line. Geh came after Zlu. Zlu came in 1941. Geh came in 1946. Mongoe was still living as Monlgoe died in 1950. When Geh relinquished power, Samuel Geh, his son, took over. Samuel Geh came during Woto Monlgoe's regime. Woto Monlgoe was clan chief when his father died. They made him Paramount chief as a replacement of his father in 1950. Samuel Geh became our local chief in 1962.

From Samuel Geh now the generation decided to relinquish the power to a different group.

Power went to John Samie who is from Gbei Lepulah. This decision was not made through elections. It was just the good will of a chief's son. His character is what they went by. Well, actually, during the war, people started to say: "We should choose our own leaders." That is when John Samie took over.

When they came from Zor they were all Mano people. We have four quarters here. One is Soe Gbei. A second is Riverside, also called Gbor Gbei. Gbor was one of the warriors who came with Gbor Gbor. He came a bit later than Gbor Gbor so they named one of the quarters after him. People from Gbor Gbei also came from Guinea as they joined Gbor Gbor. These are the two original quarters but now they are divided. We have no name for the other quarters yet. Since we are plenty, we decided to divide the quarters again. We did it year before last.

The only war that was ever fought here was when the Zor people, Gbor Gbor's children, and the Kpei people went together. Kpei people lived in Sanniquellie Mah³⁴. They came and borrowed Gbor Gbor's children who were warriors to go and fight. At that time too, a group of warriors came from Grand Gedeh. They came to fight the Kpei people so the Kpei people decided to come here to ask the Gbor Gbor people for assistance. Until they conquered these strangers from Grand Gedeh. Besides that, they never fought any war here. Zorgowee fell under the rule of Karn.

At the time too, the Kpei people fell under the jurisdiction of Sanniquellie Mah, under Sennie Suah's regime. Sennie Suah was a *zoo*³⁵ and a great warrior. Because of the assistance that Zorgowee had given them back then, there continues to be a traditional norms between them so that they can't harm each other.

People from Zor have a taboo: they can't eat honey or dog. The reason why they can't eat dog is that it saved their parents way back. It happened so. One

³⁴ The neighbouring district to Gbelay Geh.

³⁵ A traditional healer.

of the ancestors in Guinea, he and the Konnoh people were having a fight. He was raising dogs. He had four dogs. These four dogs are partly the reason that could survive in life. He also was a hunter. On this day he went hunting and on his way back he saw a ripe bunch of palm. He made a reef, and climbed in the tree to cut the bunch and throw it down. Instead of he getting down, his enemies had come and taken the reef from on the tree, there was no way now for him to come down.

They said: "Since he thinks he is a man, let's see how he gets down." At that time, the four dogs were sitting down under the tree. They were guarding the meat they had hunted before. After a while, it was getting dark. The dogs knew that it was the man's enemies who did this. So the dogs went together and transformed into the form of human beings. They managed to put the stick on the tree again. They told their master to come down. When their master came down now, he asked himself: "But who were those that were talking here and who put the stick on the tree?" The dogs by then had taken on their animal form again. The dogs responded: "What we going to narrate to you, if you tell it to any other person, you are going to die. Don't tell anybody." That is how, when he came back in the town now, he only informed people that dogs are our family from now on. He advised his whole family, we should not eat dog again. Dogs are our family. Up to now, nobody can eat dog in this town.

The same goes for honey. During those days, people used to make sacrifices to honey. If they wanted children, it all happened through one particular family. For this reason, it became a taboo. Anybody who makes an attempt to eat it, they can get seriously sick. This is so until today. For instance, at this present moment, these few days, the honeybees were coming plenty in this town. They came in a way that started running away. The bees went under the roof of a particular building. All the honey bees were just all over. When they called the owner, he went and talked to the honeybees until they just decided to leave.

One time too, one boy in this town, the honeybees just came from in the bush and went in his house. They settled in one of the rooms. They just packed together but they never touched any other person in the house. In the boy's bedroom, the honeybees went into the room and packed together. The bees spent three weeks in that room until their time reached. Then everyone left. Bees are just part of us now. The people who had the house even made a sacrifice to the honeybees before they could leave. They carried rice, cassava, everything. They just gave it to them. They said: "We know you people are our stranger in town here. So you shouldn't do any harm to us. We recognize you people."

Three elements characterize the narrative of Zualay. They make reference to the hardship they experienced under the Congoe people's regime. They detail the harsh physical punishments they had to undergo if they were unable to meet the tax requirements imposed on them. Several of the elders who talked about their own personal experience recalled the burden of forced labour (lit.: *plo yuo*) that characterized much of their labour years. Their experiences with the Congoe people are further shared by detailing the story of Zortapa which was supposed to become the county's capital. Second, related to their link with Zortapa, they stress their historical connections that work through up till today. Third, they narrate their taboo in a similar narrative version as collected in other towns. In terms of the narrative structure, these stories take on similar generic elements.

- Date of the interview: 02/03/2012
- Gbwee Mayi – elder
- Lama Kee Yormie – elder
- Peter Koden – elder
- Kpahn Puu - elder

The founder of this town is Yormie Leankibogweh. His father was called Geah. Geah's father is Sewun Gweiduh. They all originated from Ivory Coast. They came from a town called Nyolay. They were warriors. They were living in a kingdom in Ivory Coast. When they came, Geah was a warrior. The king at that time, Gwen is the one who sent Geah. Considering that he was a warrior, he sent him to come look for an animal skin to fix their drum with. As he travelled, they saw this as a suitable area and they decided to remain here.

Geah was the founder of this town. When he died now, Yormie took over. When Geah founded the town, the first name of the town was Zuoh Kado. The meaning of the town's name refers to the fact that different generations and families came together in this place. As such they became one. Therefore they call this town Zuoh Kado.

Those warriors that came together, they are all part of the same group. These warriors, their name together is Goozo. They were the kings. The group that came first. Those who derived from Yormie, they are called Giagbenu. They are the special guards for the warriors. Even if the barracks are asleep, they would be the ones standing guard. At the time they first came, Tuah, Karn's father had not yet taken over power. At that time, Tinnie Va was alive. The time they were establishing this town, Karn was living. Tinnie Va was a chief too.

Yormie was the second chief for this town, Geah was the first. From Yormie it was Quiwonkpa, Yormie's son. This Quiwonkpa would be the father to

the late Thomas Quiwonkpa³⁶. Gehtee succeeded Quiwonkpa but he is from different generation. It was decided through elections. Through this vote, the family delivering the chieftaincy changed. Gehtee is from a different group. They came from Yolowee. They ended up here because of the Congoe People. The Congoe people brought them and dropped them here while some of them continued on to Zortapa.

The original name for Yolowee is Moahplay. Some of them also came from Ivory Coast. The rest of them came from Guinea. They settled in Moahplay. Being that the town was small and people came in larger numbers now, the Congoe people decided to merge the two settlements. It was actually because of the tax reasons that they merged. The money they used to collect first was the *ploh*. And this *ploh* they would collect it. It was about 20 cent USD³⁷. If you didn't have this money to give up as tax, they would get a certain thorn, it just looking like a yam in the bush, and they would pack it together in the *kinja*. If you are the quarter chief or the town chief, they will put you over the *kinja*. They would tie you down strongly and carry you away. Or they would break the palm kernels, they would spread them on the ground and make you to lay down in it until your parents or your people produced this 20 cents. Yet another punishment they used to give was to put a stick between your knees and you had to sit over it until the people produced the 20 cents. So Yolowee was too small to carry this burden and produce the 20 cents on their own. The chief at that time called upon his residents and told them that it would be better if we merge together so that we would just become one group. That way we could raise the 20 cents quicker.

Gehtee was a chief in that place. When he came here now, the power was still in him. He and one man called Dahn, went into an election and Gehtee won. This is how the generation changed. When Gehtee left the office, the generation connected again. The next chief was Joseph Yormie. The elders went together and decided at that time. There was no vote. From there Benzie Samie took over. After him, Cooper Mahie became the chief. Prince Miehn is the current chief. He was voted in September of last year. He originates from Benzie Samie and he is part of the Goozoo family. He derives from the king's family. He is from Moahplay.

The Zor people in this clan. When the Congoe people were already here, there was one man, he was a white man from Ivory Coast. When he came, he decided to come and develop Zortapa. He promised that it would become a city like Sanniquellie is today. When the residents in Zortapa heard about this they said: "No, we and the white people will not be together." In response,

³⁶ Quiwonkpa was one of the soldiers who participated in the 1980 coup that overthrew the Americo-Liberian regime.

³⁷ Liberia has a double currency. Both the Liberian Dollar and the United States Dollar are valid currency.

they brought a lot of honeybees³⁸. They waged a war with these honeybees on the people who had visited them until they left and never came back. That is how come now they went to Sanniquellie to develop it into a city. They went to Old Ma Sennie to ask her whether they could settle there and she agreed. That is how come Sanniquellie became the capital for Nimba County.

Similar as in Goagortuo³⁹, there is a story with us that when we travelling in the bush, we met somebody in the bush. As our ancestors were travelling, a palm wine tapping shell was travelling along the river. When they saw it they said to one another: “Okay, it seems to be that somebody is in the bush here.” When they went on, one of the warriors said: “I will find out where the shell is coming from.” He started travelling along the riverside. He went and came upon a man who was tapping the wine. Actually, the people who were tapping the palm wine were descendants from Zor in Guinea. Their town was called Gbie. The man called his name: “Gbei Gendeh.”

So they decided to embrace each other. The man came down with the palm wine and said “Where are you people”? We responded: “We are in the bush here. We are to where Geah village is. He followed them to their settlement. When he saw the settlement he was astonished: “How can you people be so numerous here without us knowing about this. We should go to Zortapa to discuss this.” That is how come they took the family and brought them to Zortapa. As they were there, they were warriors in the town. They used to behave just like a bulldog. They were too aggressive. So the people from Zortapa decided that it would be better to find a place where they can go and build their own town. That is how they sent the people on this side but first their stranger father were the Zortapa people. So Zortapa was in existence before Zualay.

There was one wonderful things that happened here during those days. There was one old lady here. They accused her of being involved with witchcraft activities and during those days, when you would deny such allegations, they would give you an oath. For this oath, they would take a certain tree in the bush, they call it *Gluh*, it is very toxic. They went and took the bark, soaked it in water and gave it to her. Before she could eat this oath, they would spread ashes all over in a circle. Then they put a mortar there and you had to sit down over the mortar before drinking the water from the bark.

So this old lady, when she went to sit down there, they ask her to drink the water. She sat down over the thing, spread her *lapa*⁴⁰ over her shoulders. Then she just flew and went away. Up till now, she has not been seen. She is from the Gbleh family, the same warrior, Goozoo family.

³⁸ This story relates to the honeybees mentioned in the Zorgowee narrative. People from Zorgowee and Zortapa are said to be closely related.

³⁹ The settlement narrative of Guagortuo does not figure in this overview.

⁴⁰ A lapa is a piece of cloth.

Dog is our taboo.

One of our sisters, since she was born she never had a child. At one point, she conceived. When it was time now for her to deliver, she delivered a dog. From there, all her relatives, told her: “No, from now on any dog is our friend. Dogs are our brother and nobody should eat dog from now on.

The consequences for the violators of this law is that you can go crazy. If you kill a dog here, in presence of the citizens, you cannot survive or anyway be successful in life. You will always encounter problems. If you do it unknowingly, people will explain it to you. Then you have to bring 1000 LD and 50 kg of rice. Also, you have to bring one gallon of oil and all the ingredients like pepper and salt. Then they will cook the food to make a sacrifice and bless you so that you can be safe. That is the law.

PART 3: TWAH RIVER DISTRICT

GARPLAY

Garplay is the main settlement of Twah River district. This is a recent political demarcation. Based on this settlement narrative, there is a clear separation from all the previous settlement histories. Before the arrival of the Congoe people, this region never fell under the direct control of Karn or his ancestors. Boyaa is presented in this narrative, as well as in contemporary discourse, as the ultimate warrior/leader of this kingdom. Still the connections they indicate with Karnplay through intermarriage shows the strength of composition in the establishment of connections between settlements and social and political hierarchies between individuals and groups.

- Date of the interview: 19/03/2012
- Tarkpor Bou – former town chief, elder



Photo 6: Chief elder and his wife in Garplay

(M. BEDERT, 2012)

The person who established this town is called Gaa Tee. Gaa Tee's³⁰ father is Gaa Lou. Gaa Lou came from the East, from Guinea. Gaa is from Veipieh. Gaa Lou's son is Gaa Tee. When Gaa Lou decided to become a leader, he went to a foreteller. He gave him a fork and told him: "So long you are walking, you must be dragging this fork. Where it will hitch is where you will build your town." From there he decided to haul it. When it hitched, he built a first town called Frontuoh. It is in the forest right on the main road from our current town. It is inside the rubber farm on the road to Bongweah, opposite the mission³¹. Gaa Lou was a warrior. What made him to leave Veipieh, we don't know.

When he came and established Frontuoh, he then went for this family. He came here alone at first. Gaa Tee was born in Frontuoh. After his father had died, he decided to come and settle on this side.

Gaa Lou had three children. His second son was Moeh and his third son was called Meh. Gaa Tee decided to leave his brothers and establish his own settlement as the family was enlarging. Moe and Meh established Likpehleh [a town in Zoe Geh district]. All three of them were warriors.

When Gaa Tee came here to establish the town, other people started following behind him. Small villages around here decided that it would be better to come together in one place. This town, its original name is Takwei Tuoh.

There are three original quarters in this town Moeh quarter, Yunglay, and Nyanze. The Moeh people are from the same family of Gaa. Gaa Tee's brother decided to come back. His descendants decided to come back from Lekpehleh. Meh stayed there. Moeh's family came back because they knew that their brother Gaa Tee was building now. He was popular within the region and his brother's people felt that when they came here, they would feel secure. As more people came, they decided to divide themselves. Some went to sit down under a tree to establish their settlements. The tree was called *yun* so they called the quarter Yunlay. But they are the same family. They just decided to go settle under that tree. Nyanlay were a different family. I don't know where they came from but they settled right there, after where the bridge is today, in a rubber farm before they decided to settle here.

The only one that I can remember from the Nyanlay people was one Weih. All were Dan people though. The leader for Yunglay was Tieh Kpanleh. Teah was the leader for Moeh quarter.

In Veipieh [Guinea] today, they have a town there called Garplay. It is in Guinea today and some Yacouba³² are still there also.

³⁰ *Tee* literally means small.

³¹ Garplay has a mission school from the Inland Church of Liberia. It has a secondary school going till 12th grade. This is the only high school in the district outside of Karnplay. Moreover, the memory of missionary activities is still a constitutive element in the social imagination of Garplay residents.

³² See footnote 1.

When the people came together from the various quarters, since it was Gaa who built the town, people started calling the town Garplay. When Gaa was getting old, Gbeh took over power. Gbeh is Gaa Tee's son. After Gbeh came Teah. He is from the Moeh quarter also, he is Teah's son. The next chief was Weih. He came from Yeanlay. Later on came Bleuh who was the son of Mag-beh Boyaa and derived from Moeh as well.

Boyaa himself is from the Moeh family. Boyaa was Teah's brother. They had the same father but not the same mother.

Weih from Yeanlay was voted upon but in the case of Beuh and Teah there was no vote. The elders just went together and decided. After Bleuh there were acting leaders but they were not doing well until the present chief took over now.

Teah was the one in power when the war with the Congoe people broke out. It was also during his regime that the war ended.

Boyaa was the most important warrior, he was the commander for this whole region. All of the rulers back then came from Moeh. Boyaa's father is called Mah.

During those days, when our parents were narrating this story, they were discussing all types of issues so it can be difficult of us to remember them all now. But I remember that Boyaa's father is Mah. How he came to be known as Moeh's son, I don't understand. The reason why I don't really know or understand is that, at the time he was a warrior, Boyaa used to call his name: '*Amahbeme*, people only know my mother but not my father'.

Boyaa had a specific way to fight. Even when the Congoe people came, when they came firing, he would go on the road. Any bullet they fired, none of them would touch him. They will just fire at him and no mark would leave on his body. Even for his friends, any time they were getting ready to do anything, he would draw a circle on the ground and say: "If you can remove me from this circle than you have beaten me." He never lost. Even when he would be sitting down, resting after fighting war, and people fired at him unknown to him, he will not be hit.

At that time Boyaa was the commander, when he said something, his word was final. He told Teah, the chief at that time, not to accept the round sent by the Congoe people.

Boyaa was the king of this whole region while Teah was only ruling this particular town. Boyaa was the king of the Sroh kingdom with authority that extended beyond the town. Although Boyaa is from Garplay, he was controlling the entire area. He is from the same family as Teah.

At that time, Karn and Boyaa knew each other and were friendly. Mah, Boyaa's father took one of his daughters called Seah and gave her to Karn. This girl was Boyaa's bigger sister, Seah Likpoh. They never fought each other but as I look at it now, critically, Karn must have been the stronger warrior because the Congoe people came directly to him. He was popular

more than any other warrior. The Congoe people knew Karn was the stronger warrior. I think they even took Boyaa's bigger sister and gave her to him so that they would do any harm to him. Even today, because of that woman, Mah's daughter, Boyaa's bigger sister, who they call Seah, she is the reason why everybody from Garplay calls people from Karnplay their *zie* [in-law].

After the Congoe wars, they gave Boyaa Sroh chiefdom. From that moment onwards, they started carrying him around in a hammock like a chief. They made everybody Paramount Chief back then but they were just too many. In the end they chose Karn to be the one Paramount Chief and reduced Boyaa's rank to Clan Chief.

The Mandingo entered this region through the town of Gborplay. Some came to Garplay here. Later on, the commissioner³³ gave the order, stating that all of them should go to Karnplay and leave the border region. They came to buy kola [go].

The taboo for the warriors here is goat. The medicine that they made was done with goat skin. They told everybody here that they should not eat goat. We saw the same during Charles Taylor's regime. When they said nobody should eat pumpkin and they saw you with pumpkin on the farm, they would grab you and kill you. During the war nobody used to eat pumpkin here. Pumpkin was gun medicine. If you ate pumpkin, guns would kill you but if you didn't eat it, you would be strong. During those days, it was the same deal with goat.

MAH DIAPLAY

In the settlement narrative of Mah Display, the two pivotal moments around which oral histories are structured, territory and kinship, figure prominently. With regard to territory, there is a strong focus on the ritual connection to the land. Emphasis is put on the ritual sacrifice that has been done, twice, in order to guarantee the success of this settlement and its longevity. It also indicates a strong connection in terms of autochthony discourses. With regard to kinship, martial exchange plays a crucial role in establishing lasting relations between settlements and actors.

Interestingly, before actually settling down, the history of mobility and migration points at the importance of connections established along the way. It shows the significance of establishing relations with a stranger-father and of acknowledging the reciprocity that characterises this relationship.

³³ An official of the Liberian government and part of the regime led by the Congoe people.

- Date of the interview: 14/03/2012
- Dieweh Gëy – elder
- Joseph Kaw – elder
- Sampson E. Kruah – tribal chief in Monrovia, Justice of the Peace, mining official, special assistant to the township commissioner

Dan's father is Fannao. Fannao's father was called Seah. Seah came from the East. He was a warrior. Probably he came from Guinea, in-between Guinea, Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast, to be exact, this is Guinea. When they were travelling from Guinea, they came and settled in Gblei, in Yarmein. When Seah came from Gblei, they came and settled in-between Garplay, Beisplay and Soelay. They get a *kpanaa* there now. They were living there at the time Fannao was born.

After some years, Fannao's father was getting old now and Fannao had a son, Dahn. Dahn in turn had his own son called Deah.

The reason why he came from Guinea is that Seah was the youngest of six in the family. He was considered the weakest. Seah had five brothers and they were all warriors. One of his brothers' wives and Seah had an argument. As they were arguing Seah got his sword and killed the woman. He killed his brother's wife. To make things worse, she was pregnant. Considering these events, the family came together and had an overnight meeting. They made a plan to kill Seah. As they were making plans, Seah's wife was around and went to eavesdrop on the people. She heard all what they were discussing. She ran to her husband Seah and told him: "It would be better if we escape or else they will kill you." That is how they ran away and how they came to Gblei.

When he entered in Gblei, his stranger father was Old Man Kofa. He was a chief there. Seah was a warrior but he was too aggressive. The citizens of the town started complaining all of the time. For this reason, Seah decided to escape again and come to an area between Gbeisplay and Garplay. Their stranger father in this in-between town was Sehr Piahn and the town was called Sehplay. In this place there, Seah remained there and had his son, Fannao. Seah remained in Sehplay as the family started expanding.

When they were in Gbeisplay, they were too problematic. Deah and his father Dahn, they were too problematic. At the time, Seah had already died. When the rainy season started, people's rice as it was growing on the farm, Deah and Dahn would go brush this area and plait it with sticks and roof their house with it. This brought confusion all of the time. At that time they moved and settled right behind Garplay, where the mission stands today. They built a village there. The town they built over there, they called it cotton tree [*Gwehglay*]. So while they were there, Deah's daughter, Suo, she was married to one of the citizens of Garplay. One of the citizens for Soelay, from Soe

Slangonplay, his name was Tran, Slangoflahn's son³⁴. He came and started inciting Suo to leave her husband from Garplay.

In so doing, Deah was interested in Tran as a person too, more than in his daughter's husband from Garplay. So they sent to Slangon, the chief in Soelay at the time. Slangon came and said: "Okay, let's have a covenant." He told Deah that there should be a covenant in which "all your daughters are my wives, and all your wife are our in-laws. This means that there is no hard thing between us ever again. You should marry to us and we should marry to you." After this covenant was established, right away, Tran took Suo overnight and carried her to Slangonplay. Up till today, this is the tradition that exists between us in town here and the entire Soelay clan.

Because Deah took his daughter and gave her to the people of Slangonplay, arguments broke out between them and people from Garplay. That is why they decided to move on this side. Dahn was still alive when they settled in Mah Diaplay.

As they moved from their location close to Garplay, his gut feeling told him that he should take all his warrior material. He was told: "You should take all your material and put it in a cave, close to a waterfall." So they started travelling along this river. They went over there and found a place. They went there and put all his warrior materials there so that this settlement could be established. Later on, his son Deah went to lower Nimba County, to Weahnlay. He went there to see a foreteller. He was told: "You need to grab your daughter's child, bury her alive and plant a tree there. Then, whatsoever you will say, it will be final."

Deah came back and when everybody went on the farm, Deah's granddaughter, a sick little girl he grabbed her, he dug a hole, put a pan over her head and buried her alive. He planted a tree over her. Then when the rest of the family came home from the farm, his daughter was among them, they were looking for the child. Deah started telling them the story now. He explained that there was nothing they could do for her now. In reparation, they decided to have a covenant stating that nobody should disgrace or abuse a girl in this town. Anybody who goes against the law would pay a fine. Also, they shouldn't make love to any of their sisters in this town. During those days, anybody who violated the law would have to give 4 USD plus a sheep. The women involved with the cheating, alongside the men, they would have to give two chickens. The men gave the sheep and collect rice, oil and food ingredients. They would order the two to remain naked and go draw water. They brought the water under the tree where they buried the child. They bathed the couple under this tree and blessed them.

The people of this town built a wall, a circle with rocks around the tree which is still standing today. Besides the tree there is also the cave where

³⁴ Sangoflahn was the chief in Slangonplay

Dahn buried his weapons. They call this cave Dahngaobah. It is still an area too to make sacrifices today.

The chieftaincy line of this place continued with Teah Zahn, the first son of Deah. Then it was passed on to Meah Renge, Teah Zahn's son. Kruah came next. Bokuah was the next but he was not Kruah's son but he was from the same family. Bokuah was not close to Old Man Kruah but he had citizenship in the place. The leadership was just going around now. So they gave him the leadership to have control of the town. Bokuah also came from this town. After Bokuah leadership passed on to Woneah Petenialay. They are all the same family as Deah. All of them relate to Meah Renge. They are the third generation behind Meah Renge. Leadership then passed on to Maiah Logbeh, also same family as Renge. Later on the next chiefs were Noah Kruah, then Blahsough Deneisiah, and Dorman Woto. Woto belonged Kruah's family. After Peter Leagloh, the chieftaincy returned to Meah Renge's family with Wimpeah.

Kruah was the chief during the Congoe wars. Magbeh Boyaa from Garplay, he was the commander then, the strongest warrior. At that time he was the commanding chief for all the warriors in Slor Clan. Boyaa was the one who refused to accept the Congoe people. All those who followed him therefore also refused to accept the Congoe people.

The first Congoe people that came, they passed through Tappeta. They passed straight to Karnplay without any molestation anywhere. Karn received them there. He said: "I don't want any war. Since you people have come, we highly welcome you." In response, the Congoe people stated: "To be sure about your goodwill, it would be better if you carry these cartridges, to your various chiefs. If they agree, and accept this round, then they have received us." That is how Karn passed the round all over to the various chiefs. When they reached to Garplay, Mahgbeh Boyaa said: "No, nobody but me is going to rule my father's land. So I don't accept the round." This is how come this war broke out. Boyaa was a stubborn warrior. They were all under Karn's power but he was very stubborn and besides Karn he didn't want any stranger to come and take control over his father's land.

This place here, Diaplay, was a barrack for Magbeh Boyaa. It was a training base. All the warriors that were behind Boyaa, it is here that they were based. So when the Congoe people captured this place, they came and built their own barracks here. During the establishment of the barracks, it was Mongroe's who was in charge. Mongroe came and captures this place.

ON THE DIVISION OF THE TOWN

It was Deah, when he was a warrior, he didn't want for people to build a wall around the town so he told his children to set an ambush up there in case any thing would happen. He hoped that the people would notice this and blow alarm. That is how come this town was somehow divided in two. They got separate names, Diaplay Gbinta and Diaplay Gwanzlay.

They have a certain piece of cloth here, When they were finished making sacrifice with his daughter, then Deah said: “I don’t want for you people to be separated.” He took a piece of cloth, a real traditional country gown. He said: “Okay, you people, I want for you to haul this cloth” and everybody started hauling it but it never cut. Deah said: “Since this cloth never cut, the relationship between the two groups should remain tight just like the cloth.” The recent civil war made that the cloth is lost now.

SROH-YOOLAR

Sroh-Yoolar was one of the few cases in which we only had one elder narrating the story, despite the presence of a larger audience. It serves as an example of the search, together with the elders at getting at the past. Because it was spun out so extensively, I have decided to represent this common search also in the narrative. The elder here could not provide the background of a whole quarter of the town and was highly uncertain about the exact background of the founder of the town. It required the contribution of somebody from that quarter to figure out the details.

This narrative also provides a detailed account of the fight they had with the Congoe people. Sroh-Yoolar played a pivotal role in this war as indicated also in other historical narratives. The physical landmarks that are well known throughout this region are mentioned here and further linked to the organization of sacrifices and ritual.

- Date of the interview: 20/03/2012
- Sampson Gruzian – town chief, elder



Photo 7: Elders in Sroh-Yoolar

(M. BEDERT, 2012)

Our people came from the East. They originated from Guinea. Sanga Maten was their leader and he came from Guinea. I don't know the exact town they came from. Maybe it was Lola. They went straight to Bassa³⁵. From there, they came directly and established Yoolar old town, a settlement between Behplay and Kpairplay, the *kpanaa* is still there to this day.

As people were already living in Behplay, there was a stranger father there but I cannot remember the name of who that was. People were living in Behplay before though.

All of the time, people from Zao kingdom [the area around Loguatu] used to come and wage war on the people in Yoolar and Behplay. The elders that were in Behplay, they told the Yoolar group: "Since indeed you people have more warriors, it would be better if you go and sit down right on the boundary between us and the Zao kingdom." That is how come our people moved to their current location.

[This narrative was hard to come by as the narrators admitted that a lot of the information had been lost over time and that it was hard to reconstruct the exact sequence of events with the right names of the people. Amongst the participants, there was frequent discussion on how to proceed and on what to include in the official narrative, mostly off record. These further questions led to a more complete history overall.]

Q: Sanga Maten was the leader who guided his people to Behplay?

A: Sanga Maten was the one to lead the people into Liberia. They went to Bassa first. But coming now to Behplay, it was his son, Sanga Tee, who brought the people there.

The new town was built by Aa, he led the people to their current location. Aa is Sanga Maten's son also. He was Sanga Tee's brother.

During those days, they had a drum. When they knocked it, then people from all over came to for a meeting. During one of those meetings, it was explained that they were under constant attack from the Zao people. It was decided then and there that the Yoolar people should go 'right there', along the boundary to settle there and protect the rest of the families around. When you go out, you can see the big cotton trees right there, They were planted by our people way back during these wars. They built a gate around the town and left a small door. At that door, people used to stand guard so that they knew when war was coming

³⁵ Grand Bassa County.



Photo 8: Cotton tree that served as a fence in Sroh-Yoolar

(M. BEDERT, 2012)

[Changing his mind] Well actually, Yiehgbieh was the one who led the people to Yoolar. We don't know who his father was or where he came from. It is not the same family as Sanga Maten though. He was with the Sanga Maten family in Yoolar old town, that first settlement in Behplay.

Q: In Yoolar old town, after settling there, other stranger came to your people there?

A: Yes, Yiegree was a stranger to our people but I don't know where they came from. Sanga Tee and Aa, they were warriors. Yiegree was a warrior too. All of them came here but Yiegree built this town.

Q: Did he marry one of your daughters?

A: Yes, that is what happened.

Q: Whose daughter did he marry then?

A: Let the old lady come, maybe she will know something about it.

Bystander: Because if you don't know Yiegree and you don't know where he comes from then the story is not completed.

[Listeners stepped outside in order to go look for the old lady. As they left, a more informal discussion broke out and people started sharing their thoughts.]

During those days, when they were fighting war, it can just be warriors that they send in ahead. It does not have to be necessarily the chief or members of his family. Even when somebody came from elsewhere and married from their hosts. Like maybe they married their daughter and now he is recognized to be one of the strong warriors, they might send that man along with their own brothers. For their own protection. Some even went as a commander although they were in-laws.

Things like that are happening now. For example, this *pikin*³⁶ that [one of our citizens] brought here. This boy is living in town today. We don't know his home. We don't know where he came from. He is almost looking like a citizen in this town but nobody knows him or his parents. Still, he is there with us. He came during the war. I will say he is a 'wild capture'. He is here and he has almost become a citizen in this place. He can speak the dialect and all the stories about Yoolar, he knows about all of them. This boy, he is Mende, he doesn't even know how to speak the Mende language again.

Q: This type of people, how can we classify them? What you are trying to say is that Yiegree had no destination or no place of origin?

³⁶ Liberian English expression to refer to a 'small person'. Mainly used to express social dominance.



Photo 9: Old Ma Yiegbee (right)

(M. BEDERT, 2012)

A: Wait, let the old ma come here, maybe she will talk about him a little bit because they are the ones that can play with that name: Yiegbee. The leader for the chiefdom at that time was Boyaa. So it is Boyaa who decided they should come here.

Q: So Yiegbee is not from Garplay?

A: [Laughter] maybe they capture him way back, maybe he was with them...

[At this point the Old Ma arrived and she was brought up to speed about the questions that remained open. Together with the town chief, she managed to fill in some of the blanks]

Yiegbee was the one who established this town. He came from Kialar. He was an in-law to the Sanga family of Yoolar. His wife was called Lato. She was the daughter to Sanga Tee. The reason why he came here was that Aa and Sanga Tee, including Boyaa, sent him ahead as they were under constant attack by people from Zao. They sent him here to be the protector for them.

Yiegbee came first because he is brother-in-law, no blood relation to Aa or Sanga Tee. [laughter]

After building a structure there, the people deemed it safe and possible to follow behind him and come here also.

THE LEADERSHIP OF THE TOWN.

The first chief was Aa. His brother was Sanga Tee. Second in line was Nie-nyeh. His father is Yiegbee. Tonga's father is Gbeahn, a brother of Aa. Mah-peh, Aa's grandson. Zigban belonged to the Gruzian family, They are the third generation of Aa. Meahweh was next. Woagheh belonged same third generation of Aa. Buu derived from Tonga but still the third generation from Aa. Tomehnpka belonged to the descendants of Yiehgbee. Same goes for James Gbena. Zehn Tarkpor derived from the Tonga generation with Aa as their ancestor. Kawe, from Aa *bēh*³⁷.

Edward Lehe from Aa *bēh*. Peter Meatoh from Yiehgbieh *bēh*. Sampson Gruzian from Aa *bēh*

This town has two quarters. Keah *gunlay* and Aa *gunlay*. A third quarter is called Beyonplay *gunlay*, but actually this falls under the Aa quarter. Keah *gunlay* are the in-laws to Aa. They are the ones who derive from Yeighbee. Beyon *gunlay* are those who derive from Aa's brother, Sanga Tee.

ON THE MEANING OF YOOLAR

Yoo is a certain water. When they were still in the old town, they settled on the right side of a stream. When they came here, they settled besides a stream again. It is our traditional God and we can make a sacrifice in this water. During those days, any time when hardship came along, we went to that water and made a sacrifice there. Then, any other difficulty would immediately cease. Even during the old wars with the Zao people and during the Congoe wars, they would go there and make their sacrifice. The stream is just outside of the cotton tree fence.

When the Congoe people came, Tonga Beah was the chief. He was a son of Aa. They fought the Congoe people for seven years. At that time, Boyaa was the one who decided what to do. At the end of the seven years, he and Mongrue had a sit down around a peace table. From there they decided to come together and make peace. Boyaa was the king here, he was controlling the whole community, ruling the various towns and villages. After fighting for seven years there was no result so he and Mongrue went to negotiate. He and Mongrue sat down and had a meeting agreeing that fighting would not do anything good for either one of them so they decided that the best thing would be to cease fire. They each went out and informed their people that they should stop fighting. During those days, they held the power. Boyaa's decision was final.

During the war with the Congoe people, there were a few reasons why we were able to keep them off. First, we had a secret place where we would hide. This town was very small with a fence around it. Our people then had made

³⁷ This expression is used to refer to the general ancestor the people derived from and, in most cases, the contemporary quarter they derive from, a sib of some sort.



Photo 10: Gahn Valley in Sroh-Yoolar

(M. BEDERT, 2012)

a small pathway that led to a valley, a very deep one. On top of the valley, the whole place was covered with thorns, They call this valley *Gahn*. When the scouts were saying that war had entered in the town, reconnaissance man would come in the town and fire. As soon as people here heard fire, people would lift up the thorns over the valley with a special fork and everybody would go under there. The thorns would cover the whole place and the attackers would never know where the people went. When the fighters came, they didn't know. They would just be firing up in the air.

All the while, our people were sitting down in the valley, just looking at the people. Yoolar people used spear, or a single barrel gun [*lithro*] and an arrow to fight. Somebody from here wanted to become chief but he did not want to come directly to his people to run for the position so he passed behind everybody here and went to join the Congoe people. He was a brother of Aa. He went to the Congoe people and told them where the people can hide. Armed with this knowledge, the Congoe people went to the valley first and set an ambush there. The moment the Congoe troops entered now, when people tried to run away, the met up with those already hiding in the valley. That is how the majority of the warriors and the citizens got killed. From here Boyaa went for peace talks.

KPAIRPLAY

The history of Kpairplay is that of several settlements at once. It shows how family dynamics lead to migration and the division and (re-)unification of settlements. It demonstrates the importance of the establishment of the Liberian state and the impact this had for smaller settlements. More than that, it demonstrates how connections are being established through mobility and migration. It is these historical connections that continue to be reproduced and shared in contemporary everyday and ritual forms of interaction.

- Date of the interview: 16/03/2012
- Dahn Gbah – former quarter chief, elder
- Yenemie – elder
- Koatoo Suwamota – elder

Mleihn Masahn founded this town. Soupieh was the first settlement for Kpairplay. Mlehn was the first man who lead his people. He came from the east [Da]. Back in Guinea, they were two in the family. This is the reason why he decided to migrate from Guinea to Soupieh. Mlehn's father was a chief. He decided to hate Mlehn. He drove him from his family. That is why Mlehn decided to come to Soupieh.

Soupieh was in the general region of Sanniquellie. Before Mlehn went there, it was just a bush. He went and established a village there. The peo-



Photo 11: Elders in Kpairplay and Freeman Bartuah on the right (M. BEDERT, 2012)

ple from the Mano settlements in Sanniquellie heard about this settlement, they went there to actually see him. They said: “Wait now, the people who came silently like that, they just came and settled here. Where did they come from?” When they say Soupieh, it means soelay [lit.: lonely]: they came and settled alone and lonely.

They were all Mano people at that time. The word Soupieh means ‘to come sit down quietly’. The other people from Sanniquellie came and asked them: “What you people came to do here?” They explained: “We are looking for a place to go. We just decided to come and rest here. So if we are all rested, we will go again.” They spent some time there and decided to migrate on this side. This is how they have come to call us Soelay people today.

As they continued their journey, they decided to come to the mountain right here, they call it Gengatuo. Mlehn is the one who led his family to the mountain. He is the main ancestor. When they settled around the mountain, Mlahn had a son called Soeh. Mlehn remained in this settlement and died. As his family was expanding now, they decided to split up. Soeh told his people: “I am the elder person now. I will divide the family.” He decided that the first town remained in the original settlement, around the Gengatuoh mountain. A second town was Slangonplay. Besides Slangonplay he sent another group to Kpuorhlay. The first chief in Slangonplay was called Gwengluoh. Soeh remained close to the mountain and showed everybody where they should settle. He also died in that town.

Kpuorhlay was led by three brothers called Zongo, Galeh, and Kpeah. Zongo was the older one but he used to give a hard time to his little brothers. Whatsoever his little brother did or produced, he ordered him to hand it over. Even if they raised cattle all by themselves, Zongo would just take it for himself and kill it. He would simply claim that “this is the big brother’s share”. So the younger brother, Kpeah decided that it would be better for him to find his own space and to go settle somewhere else. This is how he went and built Kpairplay.

Over time though, all the family was scattered around in various settlements. There were five towns. Over time, they all merged together again to form the contemporary Kpairplay. The reason for their merger was that they all were brothers, They were either warriors or famous in their different disciplines. When Monlgoe came to power as the Paramount Chief, along with the Congoe people, he told them to merge together. All the five places that make up Kpairplay are: Kpeahnplay, Zogonplay, Guogenlay, Guanpieh which is the same as Doplay, and Gbahplay. The chiefs of these settlements were all brothers. They were all famous in different disciplines. Some were warriors while some were people who were skilled in cooling people down, they were more like counselors.

Kpahn was a chief. All the descendants from Kpahn, they call them Beigbee. Zogon’s people were called Lagbee. They were counselors. The

Guogenlay people were warriors. Doo people were looking like an infantry division, they were the ones that would go into a fight first, before the others would follow them. Gbahplay people were counsellors also, they were peacemakers.

After their reunification there were various chiefs: Vruh was the first chief. Then came Zlu who is from the Kpahn family. Next came Tozeh who was Gbah's son. Zawieh who came from Do. Zlahn, was one of Gbah's sons again. Weahboh came from Guogenlay (Zuomie). Ziedieh was Do's son. He was the son of Do Gbee. Next in line was Kanu who derived from Kpeah. Cooper Kpahn, who is the last one, the present chief.

Gbah, as chief of Gbahplay was a friend of Karn. Actually, Monlgoe was not the first biological son of Karn, he was just a daughter's son to Karn [laughter]. When they talked about fighting for the Congoe people now, Karn was afraid to give his own son. So he said: "Let my daughter's son go." Monlgoe's real father is Tennis. Tennis is from Kanlay, between Lepulah and Karnplay. When the Congoe people arrived and send their bullet around, he was the one who received the round. At that time, they had not come together yet. They were still different settlements. Gbah, was the leader of his own town. When the round came, He accepted it. He sent two girls and two boys with a white chicken and told them to carry it to Karn. He said: "I don't want any war in my region." As it happened, there was no war.

This was the time that people from Kpairplay welcomed the Congoe people and their fighters. The Congoe people even settled in Kpairplay and started fighting all over from there. They had a barrack here. Where so ever they went to fight, they always came back here.

VAYENGLAY

Besides its historical value, the story of Vayenglay as it is narrated at this particular moment in time also sheds light on the contemporary value of the past. They focus on the value of a sacred forest that also is the *kpanaa* of the town. They make the explicit link with an ongoing land dispute and the continuing sacred and spiritual nature of the forest. Especially their final statement on the possible fines for violators of the laws of the land are of interest in this regard. It was only few days later that an official hearing was organized in the land dispute in which one trader was accused of illegally cutting down trees. The same fee mentioned by the elders here was also brought up in this matter.

Besides mobility, the idea of composition as described by Guyer and Eno (1995) is articulated explicitly throughout this narrative. It is about how strangers are welcomed and become a valued addition to the landlord's family rather than only politically subordinate.



Photo 12: Elders in Vayenglay

(M. BEDERT, 2012)

- Date of the interview: 15/03/2012
- Tarkpor Teah – former town chief, elder
- Luan Magblë – former quarter chief, elder

This town was founded by Seah Tee and Seah Va from Guinea. They came from the East. They came from Tuoh in Guinea. Seah Va went to Slor. Seah Tee went to Soelay [Seah is the one they derive from. Seah is the one that came from Mah Diaplay]. Seah is the one who brought Fanlo. They settled between Soelay, Garplay and Beiply. From Tuoh, they went to Soepieh. From Soepieh, they came to Vatuoh.

Seah Tee's son is Yei Va.

When the people came from Soepieh, they came and settled in Vatuoh. It is the forest they are talking about now³⁸ and the *kpanaa* for this town.

Seah's first son was Yei Va. The second one was called Fan Lugboa. His third son was called Nyoah Legbe.

Vatuoh was established by Yei Va. From Vatuoh they came to Belalay.

In Vatuoh they decided to separate. Some of them went to Zeglay while others came on this side. At that moment in time, the family was expanding. This is part of the reason why they decided to come and settle on this side. After Belalay, Nyoah Legbe went to Zeglay. Liehmah was the person who brought the rest of the family here.

³⁸ At the time of this recording, a land dispute was ongoing that involved the *kpanaa* for their town.

Liehmah became the first chief here.

In Belalay, everybody was still together. Nyoah was the leader there. It was during his regime that the different parts of the family spread. Fahn Lugboa went along with Nyoah Legbe to Zeglay. Ko Va³⁹ was built by Fahn Lugboa.

There are three original quarters in this town: Zoe Gunlay, Tiannah Gunlay, Tuoh gunlay. The people from Tuoh gunlay have migrated here from Guinea. Zoe people were like our scientists. They were herbalists. They came later as strangers. It is they, as *zoo*⁴⁰ for this town who restrict whatsoever norms that belong here and should be respected. They are considered to be like a royal family by now. Whatever these people say, we will listen to them. They were able to tell what is going to happen to the warriors and to this town in the future. They were like our own foretellers. They made the medicine and used to dress the warriors before they went out to fight. They passed through Lower Nimba before. Then the Tuoh quarter, they are the ones that came from Guinea.

The third quarter, people derive from Tieh. Tieh's father was from Bongweah. When he was there, the children used to lick a certain fruit in the bush. When it was ripe, they collected it, broke it open and licked it. Plenty of his friends used to come by to visit him. At this moment, this fruit was in season. They started wasting the peel all over, not knowing that one of the children had thrown one of the peels in Tieh's mother's soup. This was the soup that she was preparing for Tieh and his friends. After preparing the food, she never checked it, she put the food onto plates and sent it to Tieh. While eating it, his friends saw one of the peels in there. They said: "Wait now, how come your mother cooked this food and we are seeing this inside." They started disgracing the woman in front of Tieh. Tieh too, started giving excuses but his friends wouldn't hear it. His friends started provoking him. The Old Ma heard it and she fell ashamed. She decided to be frustrated until she died. When she was about to die, she told her son Tieh: "If I die, the way your friends disgraced me in this town here, and the town people supported it, if I die, I don't want for you to stay here, go to my father. Go to your grandfather in Vayenglay."

As she told him, Tieh overlooked this advice. Tieh went on his father's kola farm. While he was there, his mother's spirit came to him as he was sitting in a tree and told him: "Why are you still overlooking my advice? The moment you get down, I want for you to go to your grandfather." That is how he got down and decided to come here. When he came, his grandfather was in a secret society meeting.

His mother's father, Tieh's grandfather, they called him from the society bush. Because Tieh too was a warrior, the moment the old man saw him, he

³⁹ A big house (in Dan: *ko va*) that served as a reference point in this region along the main road.

⁴⁰ Traditional healers

starting petting him, giving him adjectives that would suit him. He asked him what happened over there and gave him a chance to let his heart cool down. Tieh explained everything. Afterwards, his grandfather told him that it would be better if he went to the border between the people in Slangonplay and Soellay. In between Lowlay and Vayenglay, there is a rock mountain there, that is where his grandfather told him to go and settle. He explained: “Whatever good thing that comes, it should see you first. You should be there as our barrack. Whatever bad thing that comes, it should see you first too.” He went there and built Tiehplay. Over time, this family became large and they call them Tieh gunlay today. His own family members reached this town too and started growing.

The chieftaincy line of this place started with Liemah who came from Tuoh gunlay. They derive from the Seah family. Next, Deklah came from Zoe quarter. Saami also came from Zoe quarter. Same for Bor, the next chief from Zoe gunlay. Dahn originated from Tuoh Gunlay. So did Semah and Opa Zeh. Liehmah was the one who received the Congoe people.

ON THE ZEBBA FOREST MENTIONED IN THE LAND DISPUTE.

Zieweah is the creek that is in the forest there. It happened once, when Seah brought his people first, one man who remained in Tuoh, he went and made love to one of his uncle’s wives. The penalty that the uncle prescribed was to put the man’s seed in boiling oil. He told the people: “The only way that I will forgive this man is to put his nut seed in the oil.” Everybody appealed to him, but he refused to be persuaded. They haul the man’s seed, they threw it in the oil and they boiled it. Then he was satisfied.

Their aunt [the uncle’s wife] who had a son by her lover said: “I am not going to remain here with my son. The best thing for me would be to go to my son who is all the way in Liberia.” When she was on her way coming, she said: “Our water that is here, the water that we use to make sacrifice all the time, I will take my own.” That is how she took it in a *pluu* [a type of container that resembles a calabas]. She took the water in it. When she arrived here, she met her brothers in Vatuoh. She explained everything to them. She said: “I have decided to come to you people and will make my life here with you and the rest of the family. However, our parents’ water that we used to make our sacrifices in, I brought some so that we can establish the same system here.” Her brothers agreed to this. They replied: “Since you brought some of the water that we used to sacrifice in, then we will worship it like we used to do.” She went and the water that she brought from within the *pluu*, she wasted it in the creek that was in the forest in Vatuoh.

She selected a portion of the water where fish was swimming in large numbers. This is where she poured out the water. From then onwards, everybody started worshipping there. If you wanted a child and you were in need of luck, you would go there and give something. You would make a sacrifice and it

will work. A sacrifice was made up of meat that was killed, left behind and then thrown into the water for the fish to eat. There would be plenty of chickens, bush chickens running around there as well because it was where the people established the first town.

One time, one of the Mandingo traders who came to buy Kola, he didn't know the bush or the laws of the bush. He went in that forest to go pick leaves so that he could tie his kola. When he went there, he saw a group of people working. They called him as they were eating. They called him to join them. He went and he sat down and ate with them in that forest. After eating they told him, you will not leave again. They kept him there for some time but later on now he still came back. When he came now, he started narrating how the people kept him over there and what their way of living there looked like. He started telling it to the people in town. When the town people went there they never saw anybody in that bush. After explaining this story, the Mandingo man never lived for a long time, he died soon after.

The tree that was there, they call it *Weah*. It was a very small tree where youngsters used to go and sit to rest. The tree was very young and it was growing around the junction. Anybody who came in town here, they had to pass under that tree. The youngsters from the town here, they would be there to say welcome to strangers. They thought: "There is nothing like a welcome before you can sleep in a town." Before you sleep in a town in peace, somebody is always supposed to welcome you.

The animals that are in the animal kingdom, people who go hunting can use the bark of that *Weah* tree. People can use the bark to get their popularity in the animal kingdom. If you are in animal⁴¹, you need to get the bark first to carry it to the animal kingdom and to become popular.

If you violate the laws of the forest, it used to be very dangerous. Nobody used to violate the laws. Today, people who violate it have to give 500 dollars, one sheep, a big ram, and two buckets of rice. Actually, 56 kilo of rice. That was once established as the fine but now the money is increasing so violators are supposed to pay more. If you refuse to pay, they send a messenger, the *glee sea*⁴² called Gbanaglee

⁴¹ This refers to the practice of transformation in which hunters take on the form of a particular animal.

⁴² Glee sea is a short masked dancer or 'short devil'. It is contrasted to the Glee Gbee, long devil. The former acts as a protector of morality whereas the latter often performs for entertainment purposes.

GBORPLAY

In Gborplay, a settlement on the border with Ivory Coast, all classical elements associated with historical narratives are mentioned. Interesting here is the continuity that is drawn with recent episodes of violence and disruption. As a border town, Gborplay was one of the first settlements to have been affected by the entering of Charles Taylor's troops. At some point, Gborplay even became the official residence of Charles Taylor and the town remained a training ground for the troops until the elections of 1997. This element of the past is drawn into the longer-term past as it is remembered as well.

- Date of the interview: 13/03/2012
- Teunzë Seah – former town chief, elder
- Samuel Saami – teacher, elder
- John Donsëola – former town chief, elder

Two people established this town. One was Nyeah Geadeh and the second one was Seah. Seah means 'on the ground'. Seah and Nyeah were brothers. Seah's father was Geleiy.

Geleiy came from Saloualeh in Veipieh in Zor, Guinea.

The reason why they came here is that confusion broke out in the town. Two parties were cheating on each other and made love to each other's wives. So, Geleiy's grandparents decided to migrate on this side. They first



Photo 13: Elders in Gborplay

(M. BEDERT, 2012)

settled in Trohngweah in Ivory Coast. When they were in Trongweah, they started having children. The family started to extend so they decided to move on and look for a more suitable place. The new location where they arrived was Biehplay.

They came to this town during Karn's regime. It was in Liberia here, it is there that they have the *kpanaa* for our present town here. They were famous for making farm. They were not warriors.

They came and saw a town and settled in that town. That place was called Bieplay. The town owner was Bieh Dah. They were strangers there. Later now, when the family was extending, they asked their stranger father: "We need to get our own area too where we can settle because the family is extending. We need more space so that we can make our own farm." This happened during Nyeah's time. Nyeah asked Bieh Dah for a piece of land to settle on their own. Bieh Dah told them: "Yes, I think this is a very good idea. You people should go on the mountain they call Gohn." And he lead them to the mountain. That is where they went and settled. It is around where we are now.

As the family continued to enlarge, they decided that they should come down because it was hard to get water. Overall, the place was not too suitable for them because of the hilly terrain. They decided they should come down the mountain.

They decided to come right in between this town and Yoolar, in what is now a cocoa farm. They came and built a town there. The town was called Gbeelegleh. From the mountain, they came and established this new town. They said: "The place where we can see cassava leaves, will be the better place for us to settle." This is why they name the place Gbeeleglay. It means 'cassava leaf village'. In this place, Nyeah had a son called Gbor.

They continued to extend so they decided to come here. They thought it would be better to go to the river side⁴³. Right to the river that we crossed before coming here. We need to go closer to it and build a town there. When they came here, after establishing the town, all the leaders like Nyeah or Seah, they were all getting old now so they decided that it would be better if they give the leadership to Gbor to take care of his people. That is how come he became the chief here. This was Gbor, Nyeah's son.

The only town that was around here too at the time was Beo-Ganaglay. At that time they used to call it Lowlay. Yoolar people had not come yet, nobody had come yet. The only two towns that were in Beolay at the time were Ganaglay (Lowlay, cordwood) and our own settlement. The place where Ganaglay was first, was in between Lontuoh and Ganaglay. They have a ghost town there. The place was full of Low trees, That is why they called it Lowlay.

Gborplay was established during Karn's regime.

⁴³ Gborplay is located along the Nuon river that marks the border between Liberia and Ivory Coast.



Photo 14: Nuon river and border crossing from Gborplay into Ivory Coast
(M. BEDERT, 2012)

Bieh Dah in Biehplay, he came from Nyoahplay. The town is between Ivory Coast and Guinea so they were Yacouba. There were both Konnoh and Mano speaking people there also but they were all Dan speaking people.

ON THE LEADERSHIP OF GBORPLAY.

Gbor was the leader during Karn's regime. Gbor was Nyeah's son.

When the Congoe people came with Mongroe and Mongroe saw Biehplay, He noticed that it was a very small town and he decided that the people should join Gborplay. At that time, the town chief over there was Gbow, Bieh's son. The stranger-father became stranger here but Bieh was no longer living so the relation was a bit more complicated than that. Gbow became the chief for the whole town.

The first leader for this general area, before Mongroe had come was Gongo. He ruled the Beo kingdom. At that time, the headquarter for Beolay was in Zyonweah, in Ivory Coast.

Mongrue entered here in the night with torch fire. This was the only visible light. They used to tow him in a hammock. He passed through Loguatuo, along the riverside, and he entered here in the night. He introduced himself saying that he was the chief and that this town was now his town. He announced that Biehplay should now join Gborplay to be one town and he was the one who selected Gbow to be the chief.

Gbow was a stranger, but he did not want to provoke one man two times. He already told them to come and join this town here. He had to consider

what would make them happy. By selecting Bow as chief he would please him and also Bow would be more keen to influence his own settlement members to come on this side. And by the way, Gbow was very popular in Gborplay too.

The Beo people never fought any war. They only heard about the war in with the Congoe people in Garplay. Mongrue only reached here after that war was over.

Dewon Zoodeh, Gbow's brother was the next chief. Then came Dieyuoh. His father was from Trooglay. They called him Fahn.

At that time, one of the elders that was here, he was friendly with Dieyuoh's father, in Troglay. They were close friends. Because they had this relationship, Dro from Gborplay and Fahn from Ivory Coast, Dro asked Fahn: "I want for you to give me a son to stay with me." That was Dieyuoh. He was like a foster child to Dro.

The Congoe soldiers who had come here to settle when they were transferred from Monrovia, They asked Dro whether Dieyuoh could travel with them. That is how come they brought him to Monrovia. He spent some time there. At that time, the language they used to speak among the soldiers was the Loma dialect. When he came from there, Dieyuoh used to interpret for the soldiers. For any officer that came in the town, Dieyuoh was able to translate.

The community looked at him and decided that since he knew how to interpret now, they let him be the chief [laughter]. In English they used to say: "lei da, lei say" [laughter]. In total they brought three people to Monrovia. One was Dieyuoh from Gborplay, the second was Va Nagbeh from Ganaglay and the third was Mendi from Lontuoh. They were the real *kwii*⁴⁴ in this place here. When they came together and they were speaking their own type of language here, people would come and look at them and say: "leinda, leingadesay, leinda". These people were not educated and didn't know what was going on.

When Dieyuoh died they gave the chieftaincy to Kwaze. Kwaze came from the Dro family. The same Dro who brought Dieyuoh. Kaplake Bartuah came next and he is from Seah's line of descent. Later on came Tune Seah from the Dro quarter. Droh actually was another brother to Nyeah and Seah.

The whole Geleiy family settled on this side. Everybody here descends from Geleiy.

During 1990 when the war broke out many of us went into exile in Ivory Coast. When they came back Tune as asked by the town to take over power again but he said: "No, I am not able to rule over this town now, I don't understand gun English, Charles Taylor's English. So the best thing would be to let John take over as the chief." This was John Donseleah. Still from the

⁴⁴ See footnote 23.

same family, Seah, Nyelah, and Dro. Onkwanlay was his successor and he is from a different family. They came from Duaplay in the Slor region. He is a nephew to us. His mother is from here. The next chief was Keijga Diejuoh and later on came Andrew, Diejuoh's son. He is the present chief

In the beginning there were only two quarters here. Seagunlay and Gelay quarter named after a grandfather and his grandson. Nyeah's quarter was Gelay. Konnoh quarter is a third and today Kwii gunlay is a fourth.

For the Konnoh people, the first one to come was Keifah. He came during Bow's time. The Konnoh people came as traders. When they entered now, they decided to settle. With the first one, the others started to follow. They bought kola and brought peanuts from on that side. Later on also they started bringing other goods.

ON THE 1990 WAR

Back then, we only used to hear that "war now entered" but all of a sudden, on January 3rd, we saw people surrounding the town. There were people with arms but without uniform. They started entering the town, just going around. They surrounded the whole town. Those people said: "We came in your favour, we did not come to do anything to you." They went to the soldiers' barracks. We had a group of soldiers here, they were government soldiers. All the uniforms that were in the house there, they took them, brought them under the flagpole and burned them all.

Those soldiers that were here, every one of them went to Ganaglay where they had a gate, a really tough gate. When they came here they never did anything to us. When the rebels left for the battlefield, then the whole town was looking fearful, everybody was scared. From here they went to attack the government soldiers in Ganaglay. Because of the sound of gunshots, everybody started running away to Ivory Coast.

So when we went to Ivory Coast, the elders called the youth. They said: "It will be better if you go and take care of the town over there. In case of any other thing happens there, you can come and inform us."

On March 6, heavy trucks with arms entered Troglay, right on the crossing point. They started unloading it, until the arms were everywhere. The citizens that were here taking care of the town, when they saw the amount of arms they were bringing, they left again and ran away. Charles Taylor came on the 7th and talked to the people here. He explained that he came to save the people, not to harm them. So the best thing we could do, he said, was to be with him here. Still, many ran away. Those who were brave, went to the nearby villages.

During this two month period, the rebels started fighting from Ganaglay all the way to Karnplay.

They and Prince Johnson were together. They went to Teaplay and took training there. When Charles Taylor was here, the living condition was not

easy because they ceased all our houses. When we came from on the farm, for us to enter our own house, they said: “No, this is not your house, this is our house. You now gave us this house . We could not even prepare food on our farm and then bring the food in town for our family.” The rebels would take it and eat it all. Nobody owned property at that time.

There were three camps in this small town during Taylor’s time. One was called ‘Crabhole’. The second was ‘Waterbank’, and the third was called ‘Lionhole’. The three camps were used to train the soldiers.

Before Taylor arrived here, what I remember, he called a meeting, a citizens meeting in Gborplay. He told us, in the time to come, people will come here and occupy the whole town. But however, when we push ahead, you people will be able to come back to your own town. He said: “It is not that we have captured your town and ceased it. Still, because of the large numbers of people that pass through here, they will occupy the whole town and your houses but as time goes by, they will give them up again.”

Some from Gborplay stayed here throughout the war. But not all though! [lot’s of noise in the background]. When Taylor left, he went to Tappeta first and then to Harpel, to the firestone plantation and then to Gbarnga. He left from here in June 1990. When he left, his people stayed behind. This town remained a training ground until 1997, the time of the elections. After 1997, the town was returned to the people.

Before the elections, everybody who was here went to Gbarnga. After the elections now, our people were slowly returning. Over these 7 years, more than 30,000 human beings were here at the time, at one time. They were living in the bushes all over. People used to come for two weeks training, three weeks or a month. As some left, others were coming to replace them. From here all the way to Ganaglay, there were more than fifty thousand human beings. People used to come from all over, from Lofa, from Buchanan, from all over. Anywhere they captured places, they sent people here for training, Ivorians and all were here. Guineans, Malians, Burkina Faso, Gambia, Sierra Leone...

By 1998 everybody now came back. The first ones started coming back in 1997. When people started coming back, what they decided to do first, the youth group, was to help the elders and their households by brushing and making farm for them. Some did it for lesser money while others volunteered for free.

Then they started calling the government employees to come back. Those who were on a teaching fee. Since indeed government could not help us at the time, we decided to initiate a school project. The proceeds that we got from the crossing point on the river, from the ferry, we put it towards the construction of a school building.

31 young people went together and formed a farming group. They decided that we should not go out of food. They started making a swamp farm here.

DRC⁴⁵ came in and looked at the project. They asked us what they could do to help us. We asked them for a warehouse and DRC built it for us. They also gave us a rice mill and some cattle. For the school, Martin Farnvalo helped us with the zinc but we were unable to complete the project.

The proceeds from the water side, we can divide it among the various quarters. The Seah quarter took their own proceeds and built their own warehouse with it.

⁴⁵ The Danish Refugee Council

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APPENDIX

1. GBEHLAY ADMINISTRATIVE DISTRICT

GBEH CHIEFDOM	
Gbeh Clan	Sango Zao Clan
Karnplay	Duoplay
Peelar	Younlay
Larpea 1	Sackorlay
Larpea 2	Gbeh-Nyuanplay
Loelay	Zeanlay1
Mambor	Zeanlay2
Tommyplay	Gbangoplay
	Kenlay 1
	Kenlay 2
	Kissyplay
	Daoplay
	Kpanplay
	Loguatuo Old Town
	Duanplay
	Zuoplay

ZOR CHIEFDOM	
Lankao Clan	Zor Clan
Goagortuo	Zorgowee
Yeaplay	Zortarpa
Gayeplay	Gorpa
Gbahplay	Zualay
Kentorporglay	Yorlowee
Duulay	Gehpa
Sehtontuo	Lerpulah
Nyantuo	Zor-Ganarglay
Kpoelay	Kialar

2. TWAH RIVER ADMINISTRATIVE DISTRICT

SROH CHIEFDOM	
Sroh Clan	Gbei Clan
Garplay	Gbei-Vonwea
Tahnplay	Gbei-Bleetuo
Behplay	Gbei-Youbah
Duaplay	Soepudehplay
Geanplay	Gbei-Bonnar
Souhplay	Dehvahplay
Sroh-Yoolar	Sergeant Town
Gbainnah (Mah-Diaplay)	Gbei-Goeplay
Guanzlay (Mah-Diaplay)	Gbei-Quiekerplay
Zoinlay	Tikehplay
	Gbonwea-Gayelay
	Gbonwea Old Town
	Loguatuo Old Town

BEO CHIEFDOM	
Gborplay Clan	Gba-Loe Clan
Teahyengbayeplay	Boungaplay
Teahzayebayeplay	Beo-Nyuanplay 1
Karweatuo	Beo-Nyuanplay 2
Gbehlay	Beanlay
Zoe-Yatuo (Nuahnplay)	Tartuo
Zerhnplay	Gbaielay
Gborplay	Bleemieplay
Beo-Yoolar	
Gben-Nerlay	
Trohplay	
Lontuo	
Beo-Garnaglay	

SOLLAY CHIEFDOM	
Sollay Clan	Wealay Clan
Kpairplay	Senlay
Lowlay	Zehglay
Kiehplay	So-Gayelay
Slangonplay	Vayenglay
	Kpehtuo
	Partuahpla

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