

# NLANJIRBOR DEFEATS UBOR IN A BATTLE OF WITS

(as narrated by Yaawork at Chakping, Saboba on 16/03/2022)

## Introduction

The following story is a variant of a tale (in the Konkomba folklore) that features a little boy who outsmarts a self-acclaimed wise *ubor*. In this variant, a battle of wits ensues between a certain *ubor* (i.e., the political head of a Konkomba community) and a little boy when the latter decides to call himself *Nlanjirbor* – a name which translates as ‘Wiser than *ubor*.’ In the end, the boy proves to be truly wiser than the *ubor* and receives two cattle from the former. Essentially aimed at showing that no man is the repository of all wisdom, this story reflects the Konkomba belief that names have the power to shape behaviour and determine destinies – the reason Konkombas often give names that communicate specific messages or wishes parents desire for their families, their children and even their foes.

## Story

‘There lived a certain *ubor*,’ Yaawork commences her story directly without the usual introductory protocol of declaring her intent to tell the story.<sup>1</sup> She then proceeds as follows:

One day a child was born in his community. The child told the parents to name him *Nlanjirbor*. When *ubor* heard it, he wasn’t happy about it – for he couldn’t fathom why a little boy would claim to be wiser than him. *Ubor* therefore summoned him and confronted him. But the boy told *ubor* to fret not because his title was *ubor* while his name was *Nlanjirbor* – the two were, thus, not the same.

A while after this confrontation, *ubor* summoned *Nlanjirbor* again. When the boy arrived, he took him to his cattle ranch and gave him an *unaaja*. He then told the boy to take the *unaa* home and look after it so that when it gave birth, they would share the calves. Without uttering a word, the boy took the *unaaja* and departed.

On arrival he informed his father, who couldn’t help but wonder how and why *ubor* could give his son an *unaaja* to take care of it so that when it delivered, they would share the calves. The boy then told his father not to worry because he knew exactly how to make the *unaa* multiple.

The next day, at the crack of dawn, the boy took a machete and went to *ubor*’s palace. Near the palace was a shea tree. The boy started chopping the tree, kpa kpa. One of *ubor*’s wives heard the noise, came out of the house and saw the boy chopping the tree. She then called out to *ubor* to come out quickly because *Nlanjirbor* was chopping the tree near the palace. *Ubor* soon emerged from the house and asked, ‘*Nlanjirbor*, why are you chopping the tree at this ungodly hour?’ In reply, the boy told him that his father had given birth the

previous night. Unfortunately, they didn't have firewood to boil water for him; and so, he was chopping the firewood for that purpose. On hearing that, *ubor* shook his head, amid laughter, and asked: 'How on earth can a man give birth?' The boy replied, 'Well, if males don't give birth, why did you give me an *unaaja* to take care of it so that when it gives birth we'll share the calves?'

*Ubor* realised that the boy had outwitted him. He then took the boy to the ranch again and gave him ...

'... an *unaasal*,' interjects one of Yaawork's audience who probably thought that the storyteller had forgotten that detail due to a short pause she made.

'... an *unaasal*,' Yaawork adds that detail and continues her narration as follows:

The boy took the *unaa* home and hitched it outside the house. When the father came out of the house, he saw it and asked his son, 'Ah! 'lanjirbor, you brought only one *unaa* yesterday; how come there are two *inaa* today?' The boy replied, 'Yesterday I told you I knew how to make the *unaa* multiply, didn't I?' He then added that at dawn he went and started chopping a tree near *ubor*'s palace. The latter came out and inquired why he was doing that, and he told him that his father had given birth the previous night. He added that *ubor* then asked him how on earth a man could give birth, whereupon he in turn asked him why he had given him an *unaaja* so that when it gave birth they would share the calves. He further added that *ubor* realised his fault and gave him an *unaasal* in addition.

'*Maatiin gur ki m muun chaa*,' Yaawork concludes her story rather abruptly after admitting that she has forgotten the musical interlude of the tale.

## Note

### 1.

In the Konkomba storytelling culture, one can plunge directly into his or her story without seeking permission in the form of announcing an intent to tell the story and receiving permission in the form of a response from the audience. This is mostly the case when a storytelling session has been ongoing for a while, or if a storyteller has already told one or more stories and is seeking to add another one.

## A Glossary of Likpakpala Words

### **maatiin gur ki m muun chaa:**

translated as, 'May my story diminish while I grow very tall.' This is a shortened version of the standard conclusion *Maatiin gur ki m muun ke n-yaaja aagbem na* (translated as, 'May my story diminish while I grow as tall as my grandfather's Kapok tree'). This standard conclusion is one of the numerous ways in which a Konkomba storyteller can end his/her story. The ending and its numerous variants suggest that Konkombas believe that storytelling (or entertainment in general) has health benefits, especially healthy physical growth. The association of storytelling with

physical growth is so entrenched in the Konkomba belief system that it is even believed that when a child engages in storytelling in the daytime – for Konkomba storytelling sessions are held normally in the evenings after supper – he or she will suffer stunted growth.

**Nlanjirbɔr:**

a male name which is a truncation of the Likpakpaln phrase, ‘Kpa nlan jir ubɔr’ (transliterated as ‘Wiser than the chief’).

**unaaja:**

Likpakpaln word for a bull. Its stem is **unaa**. Unaa is a gender-fluid noun so to assign gender distinctions, one will have to add Likpakpaln gender markers such as ‘ja’ (for masculine) or ‘sal’ (for feminine) to the noun. Thus, a cow is called unaasal while a bull is called unaaja. In the context of this story, the storyteller uses unaaja and unaasal to distinguish between the bull and the cow in the tale. But occasionally she uses the non-gender-specific noun, unaa. In such situations, the context determines whether she is referring to the bull or the cow. The plural form of unaa is **inaa** while the plural forms of unaaja and unaasal are **inaaja** and **inaasal** respectively.

**ubɔr:**

the political head of a Konkomba community. Ubɔr is usually the eldest male member of the royal family. He inherits that position from his father after the latter’s demise. Thus, Konkombas practice the patrilineal system of inheritance.