**<AT>Biography of Christopher Azaare Anabila**

*Based on two interviews with Christopher Azaare on 27 and 28 July 2018.*

According to his official birth certificate, Christopher Azaare Anabila was born in Gowrie, Ghana on 21 September 1953. Years later, however, his own research allowed him to identify and correct an important error in the official record. One day he was talking to the chief of Gowrie, who was a relative of Azaare and a well-travelled man, and mentioned to him his birthdate in the year 1953. The chief corrected him: ‘No, you were born during the year when I was enskinned.’ Azaare consulted the colonial archives and found out that the chief was enskinned on 5 May 1949 and identified as his correct birthday month and year September 1949. He laughs when he tells this story and notes that it would not have been possible for him to begin attending primary school at the age of four because he would have failed the hand test. If your hand could not touch the tips of your ear on the opposite side, it meant that you were not old enough to go to primary school.

After completing six years of primary school in Gowrie from 1957 to 1962, Azaare attended Zuarungu boarding school, the only boarding school in the Frafra District Council Area, from 1963 to 1967. In 1967 he passed the common entrance exam for all Ghanaian students and he was admitted to Navrongo secondary school, which he completed in 1972. His ‘main’ subjects in school were maths and biology, and he attributes his fondness for biology to his father, who was a butcher and sparked his interest in the study of the different parts of the human and animal body. One of his plans after graduation was to pursue a degree at a veterinary school. Another plan was to go to a textile school. Azaare’s father was also a skilled weaver. Everyone who knew Azaare in school remembered the smocks that he used to wear to class. On graduating from Navrongo secondary school, Azaare moved to Tema to help with his father’s textile business. He spent the next three years at the Tema Textiles Training School in the south of Ghana, weaving and working on textile design, a job which allowed him to pursue his love of maths as it involved both design and calculations.

In 1975, Azaare returned to his home village to teach at Gowrie primary school. His aptitude for teaching had become apparent much earlier in secondary school, where Chris formed study groups and tutored his classmates in maths, biology and chemistry. Some of his peers did not understand the material that the master presented in class and would come to Chris with requests for help. He would then provide them with mnemonics on certain subjects and topics:

<EXT>When you are looking at the reactivity table, or the electrochemical series in chemistry, then you say ‘Popular Scientists Can Make A Zoo In Low Humid Countryside More Satisfactory’. When you have this you have Potassium, Sodium, Calcium, Magnesium, Aluminium and so on … So people were using it as a song [laughs] … I was sometimes not resting because almost every day people in my class, even though we were students together, asked for my help.

Chris volunteered as a teacher from 1967 to 2006, without ever being formally employed by any of the local schools or signing a contract as a teacher. When the senior high school in Gowrie opened in 1990, he was one of the first volunteers at the school because the school did not have enough staff. Even after they had employed a sufficient number of teachers, Azaare explains, some of them would understand biology but may not understand the chemistry aspect of the curriculum and had to use a single textbook that included chemistry, physics and biology. Chris knew how to teach all of these subjects and the headmaster kept inviting him to help with different classes. Chris proudly notes: ‘I don’t think actually anyone from my students ever failed.’ The first students to receive distinctions, he notes, were Charles Abugre, who later held the position of a chief executive officer of the Savannah Accelerated Development Authority (SADA), and Richard Ayinga Anamoah, the former managing director for Ghana Ports and Harbours Authority. In middle school, Azaare was part of a study network that included Dr Gheysika Agambila, vice president of the Ghana Association of Writers, Dr Amiah Aduko (Amiah Hospital), and other students who have risen to prominent public positions and have been awarded distinctions. During our research trips together, many of the educated chiefs and opinion leaders in the Bongo district turned out to be former students of Azaare and shared fond recollections of how much they had learned from him in the classroom.

Like his school explorations of maths and science, Azaare’s study of traditional Gurensi knowledge began at an early age. Between 1959 and 1962, Azaare was appointed to act as a custodian of the community earth gods – Abongo. Soon after his return to Gowrie in 1975 he heard of the science of weather forecasting and said to himself: ‘Let me use my traditional experience in meteorology and then incorporate it into the orthodox type of meteorology.’ A year later, in June 1976, Chris moved back to the south, where he completed a three-year course in meteorology at the Meteorological Training School in Legon. When I asked him about his training and which method of forecasting – the traditional or orthodox – is more effective, Azaare responded with a smile:

<EXT>They are all the same … In those days [in August 1927] there was a serious drought in Bolga and it took several weeks and the [District Commissioner, R. S. Rainsford] at that time said: ‘There is no rainfall, the people are complaining, what is the way out?’ And the chiefs said that there is a rainmaking man in Dua. So he gathered all the chiefs and said, ‘OK, give this man the items that he needs to perform the ritual.’ All the chiefs gave the items to the man and it rained so heavily! When you look at the missionary diaries, you get that information. Actually, the Christian fathers were also conjuring rain through prayers. The people took them seriously because of that. For the traditional way is also the same as [the orthodox]: they can determine [the weather] by the flowering of dawadawa or the eating of the fruit of the sinsibi tree. They know rain is about to come. So I had to bring these two [ways] together and decided to have that knowledge.

From 1979 to 1988, Azaare worked as a meteorologist for the Navrongo Station. During the next seven years, he was a community mobilizer for a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) agroforestry project by the Vea dam. He was one of the people who brought the project to Gowrie, which was focused on planting trees to prevent the dam from silting. When the UNDP project was over in 1996, he completed a two-year course offered by the Institute for Marketing Studies in Kumasi, where he took courses in understanding the customer, advertising and related topics. The courses gave him the idea of opening a museum that displays the botanical names of indigenous trees and reflects his eclectic collection of knowledge.

The idea of building a museum continued to evolve as Chris became more and more dedicated to his research. As early as 1972 he had become increasingly concerned about ‘the decay of tradition’, and during the next few years he embarked upon his first research forays into Gurensi cultural practices:

<EXT>In 1976, I started doing my first-hand information … my mother was a traditional birth attendant and I decided to record and question her as to how names are given and why I am given that name. So that started it. I started recording the traditional birth as part of it. That was my first research work. And then there was a nearby man who was a circumcisionist. He quite liked me. Any time I went around, some of the old men would say they will be asking their sons to sit by them to listen to stories but they don’t. So I had that advantage and they gave me all the information that I needed. My second research project was the female circumcision in our society here. And then the funerals. At that time, I had a camera and I think I was the only one who had a camera in the village. At every funeral, I was there. I was capturing, I was snapping pictures … That was 1979, I started with these … I had a passion for writing and then in 1980 I decided to join the Writers’ Association of Ghana. That was my interest. So I started writing.

Azaare’s writing received unexpected encouragement and support from Reverend Monsignor Roger Abotiyuure, who began to type Azaare’s work and has been supporting his research since 1980. Chris did not even realize that ‘Monsignor’ had been typing up his writings on traditional birth rites and marriage until Father Abotiyuure presented him with copies of the typed manuscripts. Chris also received encouragement from a German researcher, Ludwig Rapp, who in 1968 worked with Azaare’s grandfather on a project of writing Gurene proverbs. The team of researchers was using the assistance of Azaare’s uncle, who worked as Rapp’s interpreter. Azaare recalls that any time his uncle and Rapp would go to a research site, he used to follow them. At times they would visit the house of traditionalists and they would say: ‘Oh, don’t give the whole information to the white man.’ He noticed that in the absence of written records, the elders would be suspicious of the researchers and ‘even feed you with the wrong thing’. Later on, when Rapp published his book on the proverbs, Azaare realized that not all the information had been captured: ‘That’s why I also took that to write about proverbs.’

Azaare also mentions the support of Chris Russel from Britain, another researcher who noticed his writings and told him that ‘this work should not be lying here’. Russel took a sample of his work to the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, Legon and shared it with the late Professor Kropp Dakubu. Professor Dakubu concurred with Russel: ‘No, we will not allow this thing to go to waste.’ In 1991, Dakubu edited the first volume of Azaare’s book, *Recollections of Past Events of British Rule: administrative history*, but she passed on before she was able to assist Azaare with the publication of the manuscript. Another faculty member at the Institute of African Studies, Dr Albert Awedoba, also became interested in his work and edited a draft of Azaare’s *Bolga Skin History*. Dr Awedoba even used part of one of Azaare’s family trees in his work and sent him the manuscript. Azaare notes with a smile: ‘These were the people who were always telling me to keep on. I had the encouragement of these people. The natives – they look at you as somebody who is mad! That’s what inspired me to go into the writing.’

As a man of multiple talents, he also cultivated an interest in sports, especially football. Azaare played football at all school levels and joined the Ghana Referee Association in 1980. He was a football referee for almost ten years and played in the football teams in the primary and middle schools in Gowrie and Zuarungu respectively. He eventually moved away from football after he suffered a hip injury, and he joined the Ghana Association of Writers in order to make more time for writing and research. Azaare has also devoted years of service to community development and education. He has served as a programme assistant for the Non-Formal Division of the Ghana Education Service from 2004 to March 2013, facilitating literacy programmes; a member of the board of governors for the Senior High School in Gowrie from 1991 to 1996; chairman of the Parent–Teacher Association for Zoko Senior High from 2010 to 2012; member of the board of governors for Ghana Cooperative Bank from 1981 to 1986; regional secretary of Ghana’s Fishermen and Farmers’ Cooperatives from 1986 to 1989; and secretary to the editorial board of governors for the Material Development Committee from 2004 to 2006. Azaare was also a member of an advisory committee of the Regional Advisory Information and Network Systems (RAINS), a Ghanaian NGO in Tamale that is committed to promoting the rights of the marginalized in society. He was one of the RAINS representatives who travelled to a conference on customary land law in Africa in Botswana in 2009. He also formed the first Red Cross Mothers’ Club in Gowrie, which enabled women to visit neighbouring houses and report back if they discovered any unhealthy conditions.

Among the people who were always supportive and who told him to keep on, Azaare adds, was his father. In response to Azaare’s question about the meaning of his name Anabila, his father explained that the name meant ‘small chief’ (from *naba* for ‘chief’ and *billa* for ‘small’ or ‘lesser’ in Gurene). In 1966, while Chris was attending middle school, his father brought him a red hat. He had visited a soothsayer who had told him that Azaare was ‘going to be a great man’. The soothsayer had instructed him to buy his son a red cap, which was the insignia of chiefs. Chris also received support and reassurance from the headmaster of his middle school, Paul Anachinaba, who was impressed by Azaare’s athletic abilities. Azaare excelled at sack race and high jump competitions and was selected to be on the school team. Once, Anachinaba observed that ‘this small boy is going to be a famous man’. That is how, in 1962, he was given the name ‘Christopher’ after the Italian colonizer and explorer Christopher Columbus. This was the headmaster’s way of recognizing that Azaare had never been baptized and had ‘been making some discoveries’. Azaare also acknowledges his Dutch instructor De Boer, who used to teach him general science at Navrongo secondary school in 1968 and sometimes would give him 98 or 100 per cent on exams, noting each time that Azaare was destined for success in the future. In 1997, Dr Sobote, the principal at the time of the Kumasi Branch of the University of Winneba, and a part-time teacher at the Institute of Management Studies (at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology or KNUST), taught Azaare a course entitled ‘Understanding the Customer’ and told him: ‘You will get a professorship in ten years.’ Azaare laughs at this story now because one of his current nicknames is ‘Professor’. Azaare reiterates his gratitude to all of the relatives, teachers, researchers and missionaries who noticed his intellectual talents and believed in his research endeavours.

Today, Azaare is solely dedicated to his writing and to the project of building his house into a museum of Gurensi history and culture. He sleeps little and sometimes writes until 3.30 a.m., staying awake with kola nuts. The concept of the museum has evolved since his marketing training in Kumasi and now his main goal is to display his research and the beautiful cement sculptures and miniature earthen compound that he has constructed to honour traditional art and housebuilding practices. His interest in art and housebuilding began when he was a child. Some of the local women used to invite him to draw lizards and other figures when they were plastering the traditional earthen compounds: ‘Just come and draw something on this wall for me.’ In school, he used to model pots out of clay. Then he met two men – Joseph Azuma from Zebilla and Adumbire from Kongo – who taught him how to use iron rods, tiny wires and nets as a permanent foundation for his cement sculptures. Azaare’s museum also features a collection of Gurensi pots and elaborate genealogical maps of whole villages and clans in the Bolgatanga and Bongo districts. The shelves of his dark and dusty study in the museum are curved by the weight of the stacks of multivolume, handwritten manuscripts on topics such as Gurensi pregnancy and birth, totemic animals and taboos, village and clan histories, as well as a number of studies of Gurensi oral traditions. In December 2016, Azaare’s first international publication, ‘Sacred trees in Ghana’, appeared in the literary journal *Cold Mountain Review*. The contribution included excerpts from *The History of Pioneer Clans in Bolgatanga, Bongo and their Satellite Towns: land ownership and sacred places*, a 150-page manuscript that documents and surveys the sacred places of the Gurensi people of Ghana. In March 2017, Azaare published selections from another manuscript – *Recollections of Past Events of British Colonial Rule in Northern Ghana, 1900–1956* – as a chapter in *Politics of African Anticolonial Archive*, edited by Shiera el-Malik and Isaac Kamola (Rowman and Littlefield). The six-volume manuscript draws on extensive personal interviews, oral histories and archival research to record the administrative history, missionary activities, military patrols and camps, and oral narratives of resistance to British colonial rule in the Upper East Region. In 2017, Azaare was invited to host a weekly radio show in Gurene on one of the Bolgatanga commercial radio stations, Tanga FM. The popularity of the show kept growing during the year that it aired and Azaare has been receiving more and more requests to provide chiefs, earth priests and local educators with copies of his research manuscripts.

<EXT>I have asked God to give me another fifty years on loan. [laughs] If I am granted, I feel that my work will be of help to them. Most of the chiefs and the tindaanas are asking for copies and I don’t have them. I imagine that it will benefit the society if they are published.