

# Playing with the Paga crocodiles

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The Paga crocodile ponds (pools) are among the most famous tourist centers in Ghana, and by far the most sacred, peaceful, loving sites in the ancient and modern world. Located in the Kassena-Nankana West District of the Upper East Region, these friendly reptiles display human warmth, allow themselves to be touched and patted, and receive and give divine love. The mystery of the Paga crocodiles is woven deep into the fabric of the people, and this is one of the few places where the life of crocs, and beings in the animal kingdom is indistinguishable from those of the human kingdom. The sacredness of life has been preserved for millennia and thanks to the wisdom of the ancestors, modern humans can partake fully in the life of these loving creatures. This little piece reports of a visit to the chief crocodile pond and offers information on the crocs and the tourism potential of the ponds. The Paga crocodiles are here to teach us precisely how apex predators can live side by side with humans when the rules of mutual respect, common heritage and ultimate love are observed.

**Keywords:** Crocodiles; Tourism; Paga; Kassena-Nankana West; Ghana

## 1 The making of the Crocodile Kingdom: Ayipaga

In the town of Kampala in present day Burkina Faso, a chieftaincy succession battle between two brothers about 600 years ago laid the foundation for a new settlement that will change the course of history in northern Ghana. The royal feud led to the enskinment of the junior of the two brothers much to the dissatisfaction of the older brother who was tipped to ascend the throne. Knowing that the legitimate heir apparent did not get the throne, and he and his supporters could be a threat to the stability of the new king, persecution of the elder brother and his supporters ensued. Prince Panlogo, the older of the two brothers, deeply dissatisfied with the situation, took flight. This was when the northern savannah was still the pristine land of abundance, occupied by the strongest ethnic groups, and the tallest of humans, warriors of distinction, living side by side with the most robust and powerful trees and plant species, crisscrossed by rivers and water bodies, fertile and productive, offering limitless land and opportunities for settlement and regeneration. The deer, antelope, elephant and various wild dogs and cats roamed the land. Extreme determination and endurance are required to survive the savannah, then and now, making it one of the most interesting landscapes of the African landmass suitable only for the genetically advanced humans. Tensions and feuds among clans and families provided new avenues for founding new kingdoms and peopling the vast tracks of land that knew no bounds. From local folklore and what can be learned from the tour guides, the younger brother and his group gave a chase to the running Panlogo and his supporters as they hived off on a journey of discovery of a suitable abode where they can set up a new kingdom. They came up to a river that was not only difficult to cross but if they did not cross it soon, they will be decimated by the chasing warriors of his junior brother. In the heat of desperation, Panlogo and his fleeing supporters had a flash of mystery. A crocodile showed up at the edge of the river. This was in the days when the language barrier between humans and animals was strong, and the obvious fact that the spirit of ancestors dwelt in other creature beings. Sensing that this is no ordinary crocodile, Panlogo approached the reptile and pleaded for help in crossing the river safely. In return, he and his descendants will neither kill, harm nor eat the flesh of a crocodile, from now until eternity. The deal was signed, sealed, and delivered with the greatest of honesty and sincerity.

The story of the crocodiles in Paga is not a mere a passing legend. Panlogo had a son called Haveh (Hah-vey), a very famous hunter. After crossing danger to the new land from the pursuing uncle and his supporters, Haveh went hunting with his dog in the wild savannah. He pursued an



antelope with his hunting dog into a deep crack on the earth. The antelope escaped on his blind side. Losing touch with his dog which found its way home without its owner, and drained and almost unconscious for days from starvation and thirst, a crocodile appeared and nursed, and led him to a stream of fresh waters where he was brought back to life. Returning home safe and sound, he reasoned that it was the same crocodile that saved his father and his supporters that once again came to his aid. Out of danger, and in a new land flowing with milk and honey, Haveh lucidly opined that this is the land which his ancestors had a premonition for in bygone years, and that they were led to it by divine providence. This new abode and kingdom signify hope, confidence, and reassurance of survival, hence, Ayipaga, an expression in the Kassena language literally means 'my eyes are set on this sacred land'. The name given to the territory now called Paga is a shortened version of Ayipaga.

The founding ancestor, Havey, reaffirmed the pact laid by his father that none of his descendants will harm or kill a crocodile. The striking similarity between the crocodiles in the new settlement at Paga, and at Kampala, the ancestral home, established this reality in Haveh's mind, and henceforth, a good connection between the reptile and humans will forge one of the greatest sacred pacts in northern Ghana. Today, crocodiles are revered in Paga and its environs as much as they were in antiquity. The town exudes the brilliance, passion for life and forward-looking attitude with which the founding fathers who first set foot had imagined it to be. Ayipaga is a place of dreams of great manifestation and the integral play of the forces that guide the modern and ancient worlds.

## 2 Fun with crocodiles

In their wild state crocodiles are predators. With their massive jaws, they can take on prey effortlessly, crush it and then swallow. These unique carnivores cannot chew or break off small pieces of food. Crocs typically feast on fish, birds, and crustaceans, and they can cannibalize each other especially when living conditions are grim. The most aggressive of crocs is the gigantic Nile crocodile. These cold-blooded people need warmer places to generate internal heat hence their preference for some of the tropical regions of the planet.

The Paga crocodiles are part of the family of the West African crocodile, however, they are very different from other crocs. They live in many of the smaller ponds scattered around Paga and its environs. Three of the ponds are very well known: the Chief crocodile pond very close to the Ghana-Burkina Faso border, the Zenga Pond a few meters drive from the border, and the Nania pond which is occupied by young crocs. In their natural abode, they represent the soul and spirit of the Paga people. Killing a crocodile is tantamount to homicide as there is an exact correspondence between the death of a crocodile and the imminent death of a Paga citizen. These sacred truths are deeply honoured in the land, and the crocs bind the soul and spirit of humans to this and the other world and keep the cycle of life intact.

The purity of the Paga crocs is matched by the behaviour they display when in contact with humans. They are harmless, however, like any living being, discernment must be always exercised when approaching them. There are reports of people whose energies are awkward not resonating well with the crocs. It is therefore advisable to vibrate well and carry good intentions before one makes the journey to see these holy beings. While in their presence they should be treated with the greatest of respect, as one would accord to a very important personality. Observing these few rules of etiquette naturally opens the door for interaction. The symbiotic relationship between crocs and humans, and the love and joy shared between these lovely predators and their human counterparts is beyond description. One can take photographs at close range, sit, touch, and even lift them up by the tale.

Fun with the crocs can go on all day but visitors must observe the protocols and always follow the advice of the tour guides. The weather in Paga can be extremely hot in certain parts of the year and visitors who are not used to this level of heat should make enquiries and visit either in the early hours of the day or just before sun set. There is a very elaborate procedure for calling the crocodiles. On arrival visitors are welcomed and the rules of the sacred site explained. One pays for a fowl which is used to invite the croc out of her humble abode, in addition to a very nominal tour fee which is used to maintain the environment. Some of the crocs can be seen lying outside enjoying fresh air



**Figure 1. Having Fun with Sacred Crocs.** A rare display of love and affection between crocs and humans at the Paga Chief crocodile pond. In one of these small ponds adjacent to the main Chief crocodile pond, this beautiful and peaceful reptile walks out majestically and welcomes a son of the land who has visited as a tourist. There is whistling and crying of chicken that precedes the emergence of the croc. As soon as she is out of water, she signals for you to come and play with her. She says, touch me. Take my tale and move me around. Feel my skin as I feel yours. You can even sit on me for me to take you round my home in the sacred waters. Take as many photos as you can and show to the world what and who we are. 'I am you and you are me'.

on the banks and shores of the pond. Sometimes the crocs can be very deep in the waters making it difficult to hear the cry of the fowl and the whistling of the tour guide. A relentless guide will explore the many small ponds around the chief pond, and very often there is a croc nearby who jumps out to play. Like humans, the most social and friendly crocs make the first move, and as if by orderly design, the rest stay back unless there is need for the visitors to see many at once. Some crocs are known by specific names and sounds. The chief croc has a special feature of a kingly appearance. The fowl can either be offered before, and /or after the display. When the crocs have already been fed, the fowl is used simply as a bait to get the reptile out but is not offered to be eaten. Crocs have very slow metabolism hence they do not eat three times a day as their human counterparts are accustomed to. A good meal today can take them several hours and sometimes days before they become hungry.

### 3 Rediscovering the tourism potential of Paga

The north of Ghana has a very advanced eco-tourism potential that awaits careful development to harness the potential of the area for economic development. Like many tourist destinations in the country, the infrastructure remains undeveloped. Access to the sites is sometimes difficult due to poor road network and connectivity. The Paga area abound in tourism wealth, but not enough attention has been paid to the development of the local area. Unlocking the energies of the Kassena Nankana West is inextricably linked to the reptile beings of Paga, however, that task faces multiple challenges. Temperatures have been rising, especially in the peak months of March and April, where they average around 43 degrees celsius. Mean annual temperatures are around 34 degrees celsius, with August as the coolest month. The north has a single rainfall pattern which tends to be erratic. The shifts in the weather have had tremendous effect on the crocodile tourism as water bodies dry up especially in the dry season exposing the reptiles to grave danger. A good amount of the lands around the ponds have been encroached for human settlement thereby limiting the space available for the crocs. As competition for land and water resources increase between humans and their reptilian friends, the survival wars intensify.

Despite the challenges, the latent gifts of the north for growth and further development are limitless. Paga has abundant land and human resources. Its location is very central to the north-

south trade. As a border town, it is at the confluence of many cultures at once. The Kassena nagila (dance) involves very stylish movements that exercises every muscle of the body making blood circulation optimal. The different moves amidst the drumming and singing, coupled with the briskness of the dance requires very fit people with abundant stamina to execute. Lilara is the war dance, performed when a very old person dies and during festivals such as the annual harvest celebrations. The artistic genius of the people is expressed in wooden masks, pottery, jewellery, and folk stories. When properly developed, the slave camp, the crocodile ponds, the architecture, cultural dances, and cuisines could serve as a magnet to tourist to generate the needed revenue for local development, and employment for the youth to arrest the migration to the southern section of the country in search for non-existent jobs.

#### 4 Some reflections

The Paga crocodiles hold the key to understanding the land and the people. Their presence is a constant reminder of the bonds existing between humans and animals, and our reptilian heritage long forgotten by many two-legged beings. To comprehend properly who we are, a reconnection to our animal roots is fundamental, and the Paga crocodiles, the Boabeng Fiema Monkeys among numerous other creatures such as the Temple of Pythons in Benin have preserved this heritage. The true history of northern Ghana is due for a thorough re-write, and crocodiles form part of this larger narrative. With right thinking, selfless leadership and organized communities around the traditions and values that bind the people to the land, the journey back to the greatness achieved by the ancestors of these warrior groups is guaranteed.

#### Author Bio

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