

SHRINES IN AFRICA History, Politics and Society

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Earth Shrines and Autochthony among the Konkomba of Northern Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The Konkomba are a people located in the interstices between the larger paramount chiefdoms of northern Ghana. They are a group that has, until quite recently, rejected the institution of hierarchical chieftaincy as a foreign construct imposed upon them by outsiders and colonial rulers. Chiefs, many Konkomba will say, are nothing but thieves – they are out to collect wealth and prestige for themselves and do very little for their own people. The Konkomba's lack of regard for the institution of chieftaincy and the importance they place on the office of earth priest within the village can only be understood in the context of autochthonous origin claims in areas of the Northern Region by many different ethnic groups and in the history of expansion and migration across the Sahel in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Togo, and other West African countries.

Keywords: earth shrines, Ghana, Konkomba, chiefship, Dagomba, kinship, autochthony

INTRODUCTION

The Konkomba people inhabit the eastern half of Ghana's Northern Region and are contiguous across the border into northwestern Togo in the areas known as the Oti flood plain, a region that suffers from both flooding and severe drought. Stretching from the ridges of the Gambaga escarpment down into the northern edge of the Volta region, the Oti plain alternates between swampy fields of red soil during the rains and arid stretches of land covered with patches of hardy shrub grass during the dry season. The earliest anthropological mention of the Konkomba is in Rattray's *Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland* (1932) – a two-volume work that presents a broad ethnographic survey of Ghana's Northern, Upper East and Upper West Regions – essentially those ethnic groups seen as existing on the periphery of the Asante kingdom. The first long-term ethnographic project to study the lifeways of the Konkomba people was undertaken by David Tait (1961). Tait's work was also supplemented by that of Froelich (1954; 1963), who wrote extensively on the Konkomba living on the Togolese side of the Oti plain.

The Konkomba refer to themselves as *Bekpokpam* and their language as *Lekpokpam*. I use the term *Konkomba* to describe all of the groups subsumed by the term *Bekpokpam* as within Ghana the Konkomba are divided into two groups, the northern Komba and southern Bimotiev – the Konkomba often refer to these groups as two of the 'tribes' of *Bekpokpam*. The Komba reside primarily within territory claimed by the Mamprusi chiefdom around the town of Nalergu, the traditional centre for the Mamprusi and the seat of power for the *Na-Yiri*, the Mamprusi paramount chief. The Komba's traditional centre is at the village of Namong, a settlement, which, although it has the status of a de facto capital or tribal centre, has never witnessed the 'enstoolment'² of a paramount chief, the highest form of traditional authority found amongst the Voltaic peoples of West Africa (For more on traditional authority and paramount chiefs in Ghana, see Ray 1996; Skalnik 1987, 1989, 1996).

The same can be said of the southern Bimotiev Konkomba, whose traditional centre has, until recently, been the border town of Saboba. Until quite recently, both groups of Konkomba have resisted investing political authority in a paramount chief. They insist that their experience with the institution of chiefship in their relations with the Dagbani peoples has been one of oppression and extortion and that chiefs in general are not to

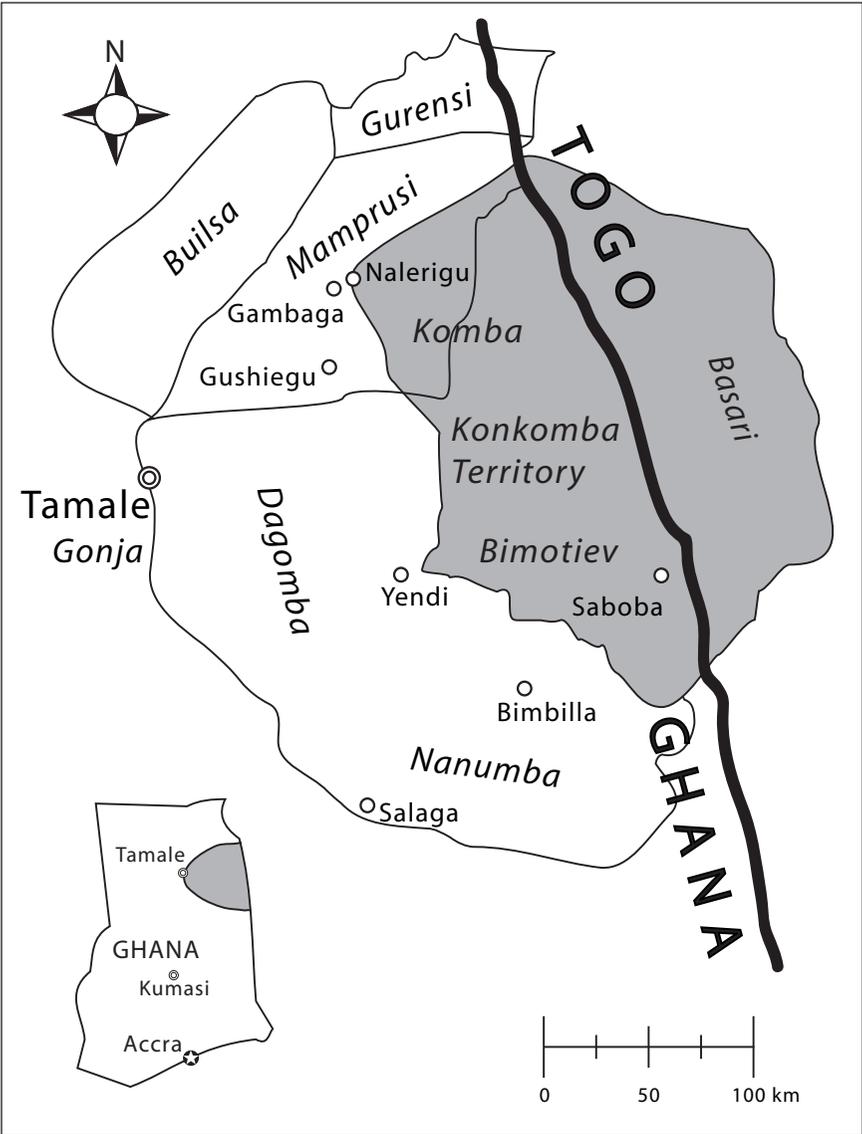


Fig. 1. Detail of eastern section of Ghana's Northern Region and northwestern Togo.

be trusted. To be sure, the Konkomba have had extremely contentious relations with their larger neighbours, the Dagbani chiefdoms of Dagomba, Mamprusi, Nanumba, and the Gonja to the west. They have often been required to pay tribute to the paramount chiefs of these groups and on a number of occasions have engaged in rather bloody conflict with these groups³ (Barker 1991:2).

The Dagomba are perhaps the most important of these powerful neighbours as it is they, both Konkomba and Dagomba recall,⁴ that drove the Konkomba out of town and district of Yendi. This event is vitally important in understanding the Konkomba dislike for paramount chiefs but also serves here as an historical starting point for this paper, which will attempt to explore:

- The dynamic movement and re-arrangement of internal ethnic frontiers in northern Ghana.
- Why the Konkomba revere earth shrines in the form of natural formations such as trees, groves, and ponds as important territorial markers and signifiers of ethnic identity.
- Why the Konkomba have something of a disdain for the office of chief and elevate the position of earth priest or Utindaan above all others in both daily village life and in regional ethnic politics.

YENDI

The Dagomba form the southernmost edge of an expansion of Mole-Dagbani peoples that took place in the early fourteenth century and are part of a network of chiefdoms that span the territory from “the forest bend in the south nearly to Timbuktu in the north; from the Volta bend in the west to northern Nigeria in the east” (Tait 1954:1).

Most northerners agree that it was the Dagomba who expelled the Konkomba from Yendi district, just east of White Volta. After being defeated by the Gonja, a conflict in which their king or Ya-Naa, Muhammad Zangina, was slain, the Dagomba, in the second half of the seventeenth century, were pushed eastwards into the area of the Oti plain (Wilks et al. 1986:122) and occupied a considerable portion of the territory already settled by the Konkomba. Tait places the date of the conquest of Yendi somewhere in the middle of the sixteenth century – he reaches this date

by approximating ten years to the reign of each *Ya-Naa* since the occupation. Wilks' (1986:122) mid-seventeenth century date is recorded in the Gonja Islamic text, the *Kitāb Ghanjā*, authored in the eighteenth century. Informants with whom I spoke in 1999 and 2003 frequently told me that the Konkomba were expelled from Yendi ten generations ago. Using a baseline of approximately twenty years per generation, these accounts indicate that the Dagomba expansion into Yendi took place approximately two hundred years ago. The date suggested by the Konkomba certainly accords with their overall attitude towards Yendi; that they were only recently removed from this important regional centre and that, to quote a Konkomba elder in the town of Sangur, "everyone knows it." For the Dagomba, their control of Yendi is more of a historical fact and it is of little use for the Konkomba to still be protesting:

Yes, the Konkomba were here once. But why do they carry on? Everybody used to be somewhere else. We are here and everybody knows that Yendi is a Dagomba town. Also, when the Konkomba were here, hundreds of years ago, this place was so rag-tag. We have made it a proper city!⁵

It was also during this period of eastward movement that the Dagomba became instituted as a state under the rule of one man, the new *Ya-Naa* at Yendi. One of the first steps taken by Na Luro, the first Dagomba king at Yendi, was to follow a pattern already set in motion by Zangina and slay a large number of Dagomba earth priests, whom he saw as competitors and rivals for authority, and replace them with royal sub-chiefs (Staniland 1975:4). These royal chiefdoms were to stand guard against possible Konkomba reprisals.

The new Dagomba order was composed of a hierarchy of chiefdoms, known metaphorically as 'skins.' Sub-chiefs would sit on a pile of skins, typically cow hides, each one representing an ancestor through whom the sub-chief's authority has been passed down. Before over-hunting and habitat destruction decimated their population, lion and leopard skins were often draped over a chief's stool. Now however, only the *Ya-Naa* sits on a lion skin – most sub-chiefs sit on a variety of domesticated animal hides. Each royal chiefdom is embedded within another more powerful 'skin,' and each chiefdom is considered a 'gate' to Yendi (Tait 1961:6).

Historically the Konkomba were unable to mount the kind of defence that might put an end to Dagomba raiding, owing to the Konkomba's lack of any regimental system or cavalry. In these raiding incidents, the Dagomba would ride forth out of their fortified encampments on horseback into the Konkomba villages – this marauding tradition they received from the Hausa in the eighteenth century, during a time when some Dagomba paramounts began converting to Islam (Staniland 1975:91–100). Frequently, these raids were to round up slaves for the annual tribute the Dagomba owed to the Asante (Staniland 1975:35). Goody has noted that the Asante acquisition of slaves from the north for the trans-Atlantic trade led to pressure upon the Dagbani states of the north to produce “human booty,” which in turn led to cavalry raids upon the horseless groups such as the Konkomba (Goody 1971:57). Groups such as the Konkomba, the LoDagaa and the Tallensi were unable to resist the onslaught of mounted raiders and so were forced into or fled to land that was difficult to access on horseback (Goody 1971:57). For the Konkomba, this meant the riverine land around the Oti River and the mountainous territory around the Gambaga escarpment. Dagomba raiders also attacked for frequent requirements of tribute payment in the form of yams and millet (Staniland 1975:35) and for labour, often women, who were captured and kept in the court of sub-chiefs to cook food.⁶

During the time of German occupation in what is now western Togo and some of eastern Ghana, from 1896 until the end of World War I, independent Konkomba in the Dagomba areas around Yendi were distinguished from conquered Konkomba. However, with the imposition of British rule, Dagomba chiefs began to exert greater degrees of authority over all Konkomba (Tait 1961:9):

After World War I, the Dagomba got strength from the British. They thought they could do whatever they wanted. But whenever they took one from us, we would take ten from them. We would always thrash them when they tried to battle us.⁷

Under the British, the ultimate authority in Dagomba society, the *Ya-Naa*, delegated territorial control to appointed ‘skins’ or village sub-chiefs throughout his territory, while individual household heads maintained usufruct rights over the lands in their village (Oppong 1973:17). These sub-chiefs had judiciary power over disputes concerning the boundaries

of a family compound's agricultural plot or in boundary disagreements between villages. By contrast, the Konkomba living on the edges of or within Dagomba territory received no such rights of access or arbitration and were forced, with the complicity of the British in an attempt to strengthen the chiefdoms, to pay tribute in return for the right to work the land. Tait records the British District Commissioner's (D.C.) confiscation of two whole truckloads of sorghum in 1950 from the *Ya-Naa* who had required it from the Konkomba settlement at Saboba, with the declaration that "The European says it has got to be paid" (Tait 1961:9). I was informed by elders at Sangur in 1999 that around fifty years ago it was not uncommon for Konkomba carts and the few trucks they owned during this period to be stopped and for all goods on board to be confiscated. Tait's work would seem to confirm this recollection; he writes "Konkomba were stopped by Dagomba on their way into Yendi market and their headloads of new yams taken, on the grounds that they had paid no tribute to the *Ya-Naa*" and of this confiscated lot, "one load went to the District Commissioner, one to the Yendi sergeant of police and the rest to the *Ya-Naa*" (Tait 1961:9–10). In response to acts of Konkomba revenge directed at Dagomba chiefs, District Commissioners would burn compounds and foodstuffs in Konkomba villages. The District Commissioner of Tamale district in 1929 is noted to have said "the only way to stop these fights is to burn all the compounds and food, I hate these fine men to kill each other when I am convinced that by burning their compounds, fights would very soon stop" (Staniland 1975:43).

Despite centuries of displacement, however, the Konkomba still regard the earth shrine at Yendi as theirs, and I was frequently informed that the Dagomba dare not venerate the original earth shrine of Yendi. "They know it is ours, and they won't touch it," one informant in Saboba informed me.

The expulsion from Yendi has become, for both the Konkomba and the Dagomba groups, a pivotal historical event. Konkomba insistence that they are the 'first-comers' on the earth around Yendi follows the pattern of internal frontier expansion outlined by Kopytoff (1987):

When we came here, the land was rough. We used to call Yendi Charee. The people that had been here were few and not good at farming and you still see some of those people in the bush. They are ragamuffins and can't farm anything, they

spend most time talking to dwarves and taking *akpeteshie* [alcohol]. We planted yams on this land and they grew well, because this is good land for growing. Afterwards our brothers Komba came to the north, you know there are three tribes for Konkomba. We are the Bimotiev, the original Konkomba, and the others are the Komba and also what you call Basari, we say they are Konkomba too. So you know that the earth gods are at Yendi because it is our land and my fathers are there. And the Dagomba when they came they were running from the Gonja and they tried to make us work for them and give them yams and they took some Konkomba women as wives and made some Konkomba be chiefs for them.⁸

This narrative asserts that the Konkomba preceded the Dagomba in the Yendi area but also notes, at one point, that they forced out another, meeker, almost sub-human or ‘ragamuffin’ population. Indeed, the Konkomba oral history of their connection to Yendi is not dissimilar to the Dagomba story of their westward movement. Staniland (1975:4–5) notes that when the Dagomba arrived in the Yendi district they pushed back the Konkomba to the margins of society where relationships were distant and hostile.

More can be gleaned from this brief narrative of Konkomba occupancy of Yendi. The Konkomba describe the original inhabitants of the Yendi area as humans that have now been relegated to a mythical hinterland in almost quasi-magical terms. The bush, inhabited by so-called dwarves, is a place where powerful magical forces are at play, and that the original inhabitants are connected with this sphere indicates that the Konkomba see themselves as the first truly human residents of the Yendi area. When pressed, many Dagomba in the Yendi area, who still remember the conflicts with the Konkomba in the early 1990s, describe their former adversaries as ‘wicked,’ as similarly ‘not quite human,’ or as witches. Murphy and Bledsoe note that the Kpelle of Liberia use a “code of arrivals” to classify inhabitants of Kpelle country based on time of arrival in a certain area and on socioeconomic importance to daily life (1987:131), and we might similarly classify the inhabitants of the Yendi area in this way. The fictive ‘original’ inhabitants of Yendi are, to the Konkomba, certainly “insignificant previous inhabitants” of little import, socially or economically, and do not play an important role in local history other than to punctuate Konkomba assertions that they were the first ‘true’ humans to arrive. However, the

Dagomba would likely see the Konkomba as *important previous inhabitants* whose territory has been somewhat subsumed by overall Dagbani advancement eastwards and who have become subordinate labourers and tribute-paying farmers (Murphy and Bledsoe 1987:129–30).

The practice of insisting that ‘we are from here,’ that we are the autochthonous inhabitants of a particular patch of earth, and that all others are from elsewhere is common amongst competing or historically antagonistic groups in West Africa. In Ghana, ethnic groups regarded as interlopers are often described as hailing from the North or from Mali, anywhere but from ‘here.’ Among the Tallensi of Ghana’s Upper East region, local oral history debates exactly who moved into the Tongo Hills first, why they moved there, and where they are from (see Insoll this volume). Inhabitants of the Nzema village, Nzulezu, a village built on stilts in a lagoon off the western Ghanaian coast, are said to not be true Nzema but rather migrants from Walata, a city of the ancient Ghana Empire in what is now Mali. In the 1990s, distrust and enmity turned into full-scale armed conflict in Ivory Coast as President Gbagbo sought to root out, expel, or kill so-called fake Ivoirians, whom he claimed were really Burkinabé. Geschiere and Jackson explore how these claims of autochthony, a term literally meaning ‘of the earth,’ have such local resonance, mobilizing power, and what they term apparent “naturalness” in different ethnographic contexts (2006:1). Claims of autochthony, they suggest, serve as a resource for assertions of ethnic identity and unity that transcend the need for a group name, a specific history, or even a common language (Geschiere and Jackson 2006:5). In the context of nation states, global culture, and questions of citizenship, appeals to autochthony possess a great amount of political power and social flexibility when it comes to mobilizing populations. However, Geschiere and Jackson (2006:6) also assert that the frequently redefined categories of who is ‘from here’ necessarily require a constant reassessment of who is not ‘from here’ and that such readily adaptable discourse, devoid of culturally relevant particulars, frequently becomes the rhetoric of ideologues and demagogues.

However, for the Konkomba, assertions of autochthony are not merely “empty,” to use Geschiere and Jackson’s term, rallying points that construct Dagomba as the other, the invader (2006:5). The entire Konkomba worldview revolves around the earth and that which grows from the soil. Konkomba explain that the earth of Yendi is integral to the spirits of their ancestors and so in a very concrete way, denial of access to the earth of

Yendi by the Dagomba is an obstruction to the proper veneration of the ancestors by Konkomba. Moreover, denial of access to an important earth shrine by the Dagomba is, to a certain extent, a negation or refutation of Konkomba ethnic identity.

EARTH SHRINES

In the religious life of the Konkomba, as with many other Voltaic peoples, earth shrines and the cult of the earth play a crucial role. The earth is the essential medium through which the Konkomba, people to whom the spirits of the ancestors play a supremely important role in quotidian life, commune with the past and those who went before. The earth is a vital symbol of fertility in the home and in the fields, and the ancestors are the ultimate source of sanction for social life among the people of the Voltaic region of West Africa.

Manoukian (1951) identifies two important modes in which the earth is considered by the Konkomba, the Dagbani chiefdoms, and other northern peoples. First, a practical, owned, proprietary aspect, in which the land is divided up and allotted for people to work. The second is the mystical, living side of the land, responsible for influencing the activities of daily life and as a source of health or benefactor. The Konkomba do not personify the earth as a deity as the Ibo, Yoruba, or Ashanti do; however, the Konkomba do engender the earth as female (Manoukian 1951:83; Zimoń 2003). This female embodiment of the earth is known as *Ketik*, she who nourishes and cares for the earth through her partner in the sky, *Umbor*, resident in the sun and in the rains (Froelich 1963:150). *Ketik* is an aspect of *Umbor*, a deity that represents the world and the universe. Through *Ketik*, *Umbor* is able to exercise influence over the land and the animals that reside upon it (Froelich 1963:150). It is through the earth shrine, the *ntengbe* or *littingbalm*, that the *Utindaan* or earth priest communes with the earth – with *Ketik*. It seems, however, that the animistic aspect of the earth, the ‘face’ of *Ketik*, is only invoked when the Konkomba wish to contact or appeal for the aid of one of the spirits that inhabit the wild, natural places of Konkombaland. The spirits of the river, the baobab tree, or the crocodile pond are called upon when the earth adjacent to their shrine is in need of assistance through some aspect of *Umbor*, from the warmth of

the sun or through the rains. These spirits do not inhabit a material shrine but, rather, are considered to be within the earth.

The earth shrine is central to understanding clanship, territory, and chieftaincy among the Konkomba. The earth shrine is the nexus for ritual that petitions the earth for a good harvest and for proper veneration of the ancestors. The Konkomba view proper worship of the earth and veneration of the ancestors as much the same thing. The earth is often viewed as a powerful supernatural and elemental force, embodied by the feminine *Ketik*, but the spirits of ancestors, who were at one point earthbound human beings, are intimately bound up within this force – to honour one is to honour the other.

Both Manoukian (1951) and Zimoń (2003:421) make the point of distinguishing the economic, material aspect of the earth from the religious dimension and regard them separately. The tendency to make this division is, I think, somewhat reinforced by an assumption that Tait's division of ritual labour in a Konkomba settlement between the lineage that is believed to have been the founders or first-comers in a particular area and the later arrivals also applies to how Konkomba view and talk about the earth. As stated by Tait and others (see Barker 1991; Horton 1971; Tait 1961; Zimoń 2003), Konkomba political structure is based on the dyadic relationship between the *Utindaan* and the elder for the people. Each Konkomba village is typically composed of two contraposed lineages – this refers to a division of religious and secular roles between the so-called 'lineage for the earth' and 'lineage for the people.' The apical ancestor of the earth lineage is the individual who is understood or is claimed to have established a settlement, and the ancestor of the 'people's lineage' is "he who helped the one who first came here" (Tait 1954:214). It is a mistake, even if just for analytical purposes, to attempt to separate the practical from the spiritual side of the earth. In my conversations with Konkomba farmers and with Konkomba earth priests, the cycle of sowing and harvest, drought and flood, good years and bad years is so completely bound up in the religion and ritual of earth and ancestor veneration that it is unproductive, from an ethnographic standpoint, to try and disconnect them:

When we sow yams or millet, it is also giving libations. When you put anything on the ground, if it is a room [a rondoval hut] or some food or you put yams or millet for eating or selling or

you pour libations it can be the same. Why not? From the earth comes everything.⁹

The earth shrine is the symbolic and ritual centre for each group of related clans and both the Bimotiev and Komba have numerous earth shrines in their territory. Traditionally, both the Komba and the Bimotiev Konkomba use some natural landmark such as a baobab tree, hill or clearing, or crocodile pond as their earth shrine.

The earth shrine at Yendi that the Konkomba claim is theirs and that cannot be venerated by the Dagomba is a large baobab tree on the town's northern edge. To ritually serve a shrine, one needs to provide the appropriate sacrifices and water – libations – to the shrine that ties a particular lineage's ancestors to the earth. Bimotiev Konkomba throughout this region maintain that this shrine still belongs to them and that the Dagomba are unable to “do the gods” of Yendi:

The Dagomba, you know, they can't touch it! They can't give water to that shrine. The tree, it looks like a crocodile, because it is so old. They can't do the gods of Yendi because it belongs to us. Yendi is for us, the earth from Yendi, from the gods, is for us. Dagomba will say, after the war only, Konkomba get power from this place.¹⁰

Dagomba have taken our gods only. But we can't go there and look after our land. Yendi is for us but they took it from us. And so we must make our gods somewhere else, but not at Yendi and its not correct, we shouldn't have to go somewhere else when we know that it is our land.¹¹

Indeed, throughout southern Konkomba territory, communities claim to have been forced to move away from what they claim is their ‘original’ earth shrine – where the ancestors of their village, *Utindaans*, are believed to have founded a settlement. Earth shrines are fixed natural features that serve, for the Konkomba, as implicit markers of Konkomba control over a particular area.

Within the hollow of a sacred baobab tree, in a grove, in a rock overhang near a crocodile pond or in close association with any natural

landmark that is considered to be an earth shrine, there is usually placed a collection of small circular stones, pots, and/or calabashes. In the Konkomba village of Tuna in the Northern Region, the earth shrine is a small coppice or grove of trees next to a yam field with a large baobab in the centre. Under the baobab is a small circle of nine red clay pots and one central sacrificial stone. In the Konkomba village of Namong, close to Tuna, the earth shrine is simply a baobab tree with one libation stone in a hollow at the base of the tree. In Katani, the Konkomba earth shrine is again a baobab tree; however, this tree is located next to a stagnant pond claimed by locals to contain a particularly fierce crocodile of which I could find no evidence. Further, I could find no evidence of any object of material culture, pot, stone, or calabash used in association with the Katani shrine.

In the public oratory of village *Utindaans* pertaining to the earth shrines of Yendi and neighbouring towns, there are, as we can see above, continued references to the 'earth' the Konkomba claim they have lost to the Dagomba. Also contained in this speech is the implication that the Konkomba's rivals understand this; they understand that the earth shrine of Yendi is tangible evidence of the Konkomba connection with Yendi. The shrine of Yendi embodies a regionally and cross-culturally shared understanding of religious control over geography. This knowledge of what the Yendi shrine actually means is widely known to Konkomba society.¹²

Dagomba informants often grudgingly admitted that the tree in question in Yendi was a shrine but not one served by their earth priest. When asked about earth shrines in Yendi, most Dagomba informants would emphasize that they, as the people that turned Yendi into a thriving market town and traditional centre, have their own earth shrine. However, few Dagomba argue that Yendi was at one point a Konkomba settlement. When interviewed about the large baobab on the north side of Yendi, on the road towards Tamale, the Northern Region's capital, one Dagomba informant told me:

Yes. That tree is a place for libations and sometimes some people come through and put things in there. There are witches there in some way. So don't go there or you will go mad. Maybe it is for the Konkomba or also an old Gonja place but it is not for us so we don't touch it. Anyway it is not in Yendi, it is on the perimeter of the town as it is on the road leading to Tamale¹³

ANCESTOR SHRINES

In addition to the important earth shrine in a village or settlement, each compound within the village will venerate an array of protective ancestor shrines. In southern Konkomba or Bimotiev territory, small red clay pots covered with calabashes are brought out to the centre of a family compound and 'served' with the killing of a white fowl and the pouring of *pito* or sun-fermented millet beer. These pots are ancestor shrines and are brought to the compound by the *Gbondaan*, a man who is subordinate to the village's *Utindaan* and the individual responsible for maintaining and storing the *kopanjok*, the ritual paraphernalia of the *Utindaan*, and for serving ancestor shrines within his major lineage.

I was told repeatedly that in Bimotiev territory it is very important that when serving ancestor shrines within a compound, it is of utmost importance to use a white fowl. However, I rarely witnessed a case in which the libations and veneration of a shrine proceeded according to the meticulous play-by-play often related to me by community members, *Gbondaans* or even *Utindaans*.

The photo in Figure 2 is of the sacrifice of a red rooster to the ancestor shrines of a family compound in Bimotiev territory only moments after I had been told that a white fowl must be used. This easy substitution demonstrates the flexibility and dynamic nature of many of the earth shrine rituals of the Voltaic peoples. Frequently an earth priest will improvise a rite, and I never once saw quite the same ritual performed the same way twice. The religious traditions of the Konkomba and indeed many of the Voltaic peoples are very much cosmologies in the making where ideas of ritual purity, codified forms of praxis, and hierarchy do not easily interact with the complex of earth and ancestor veneration. These belief systems are in every way unsystematic and their contained meanings, references, and usages continually change and adapt to new social contexts.

For the Konkomba, land is intimately connected with fertility, and the number of pots used in a land rite is always greater than two. Two of these pots are always supposed to be separated during a land rite and are regarded as the shrine of the twin spirit; twins are seen as symbols of fertile land and of a bountiful harvest to come. Here again, however, I frequently witnessed incidences of earth priests separating three, four, five, or sometimes no pots for the twin spirit. Indeed, one could easily fill an entire volume describing the manifold variations of ancestor veneration found



Fig. 2. Gbondaan of Namong.

in Konkomba society. When I asked about this apparent inconsistency, respondents often looked at me quizzically and in the village of Tuna I was informed:

Yes there should be two pots. But in this case we always use four as that helps us with one harvest for us and for some of the harvest that we are required to give to the *Na-Yiri*. We need fertile land for the Konkomba and also to feed everyone else. You know, the Konkomba feed Ghana. So we need extra libations also to improve our production for the Konkomba yam market. We produce and sell more yams than anybody else and many of our yams get sent to Europe. So we ask for good food for us and good food for others. So then we have to change the libations to the new circumstance. Only in the church do I have to keep things the same all the time.¹⁴



Fig. 3. Utindaan of Namong.

Indeed, the Konkomba have become extremely important to the agricultural economy of the Northern Region. The large Konkomba yam market in Accra now sells yams not only to the capital region but has also struck an agreement with a European supermarket chain to export yams to Germany and France. This change in agricultural strategy has brought about a small and rather logical change in the practice of land rites.

Another form of protective shrine that is often found in Konkomba yam fields, both in the northern Komba areas and among the southern Bimotiev, are small, square clay posts, approximately twenty centimetres in width and half a metre high. Upon these posts, calabashes filled with medicine, typically the leaves of germinated seed yams, are placed. These shrines are intended to ensure the well-being of village members through therapeutic and curative powers. These shrines are not seen as earth shrines *per se* and neither are they entirely understood to be ancestor shrines. These shrines are served by pouring the blood of two to six fowl or guinea fowl, regardless of colour, over the posts leaving the calabashes untouched. Depending on the status of the individual, goat's blood, and libations of beer are also poured.

CHIEFS

Although often characterized as a so-called acephalous or 'headless' people, the Konkomba do indeed have an office of chief or 'head,' and most villages have a leader in whom political authority is invested – a chief. The typical pattern of first-comer–latecomer relationships that follow Tait's (1961) and others' (Barker 1991; Horton 1971) form of leadership in which two contraposed lineages, one of which is understood to have founded a settlement and maintains a grip on religious authority, typically find elders from the latecomer's lineage occupying a position of only nominal importance in ritual, economic, and indeed political matters. This secondary position, often characterized by informants as 'elder for the people' or 'chief,' is often demeaned by members of a village's primary lineage as a usurper, an also-ran, and not someone that I, as an ethnographer and someone who has come to understand Konkomba society, should bother with:

All of our villages have chiefs. But they are nobody. They are fools who want to be important. Everyone knows that the *Utindaan* is more important. Those chiefs are puppets put there by Dagomba and they can't do anything for the shrines or to help us fight against people who take money¹⁵

The Konkomba experience with the institution of chieftaincy has largely been one of tribute and supplication to a Dagbani paramount leader. They perceive the Dagbani expression of this institution as an attempt to control the land upon which they make their living and which they hold sacred. In the towns around Yendi where many Konkomba villages were forced, for a very long time, to pay tribute to the *Ya-Naa*, the elder for the people is often appointed by this external power and is often married to a Dagomba woman. A similar pattern is found in Komba villages near the Mamprusi centres of Gambaga and Nalerigu. "A chief is a thief," I was often told by Konkomba informants:

These chiefs are nothing but people who want too much power and will be corrupted by outsiders. The Konkomba are becoming very strong in the yam business and everyone knows it so they put these puppet chiefs all-around to try and steal our money and do juju on our fields. But what do they know? They can't do anything! You know, since colonial times they've been trying to do it and even today in the year 2003 we see them still trying to make these chiefs work for them. But soon we will have a paramount chief and all this will stop.¹⁶

In this comment by a respected leader of the extremely profitable Konkomba yam market in Accra, we see a peculiar irony with respect to the institution of chieftaincy. Although village chiefs appear to be universally reviled throughout Konkombaland, there is a growing movement among wealthy yam-trading families to have two Konkomba paramount chiefs appointed to Ghana's National House of Chiefs. As of 2008, this had not yet occurred, however, the demand for the enstoolment of these chiefs is still strong. In interviews conducted in 2003 and in recent correspondence with leaders of this movement, there is general consensus that the candidates for the positions of Komba paramount and Bimotiev paramount must come from the villages of Namong, considered to be the traditional

centre for the Komba, and from Saboba, the traditional centre for the Bimotiev, in lieu of an imagined return to Yendi. Traditional centres are often considered to be the original settlement of a particular ethnic group – the first town or village that was founded, often by a mythical, apical ancestor. With respect to Saboba, the Bimotiev claim that they were forced to make a new traditional centre after the loss of Yendi. In stressing that the new paramounts must come from Konkomba traditional centres, the leaders of this movement are suggesting that the new paramount will be like an *Utindaan* for all Konkomba people:

You know the Asante have the Asantehene and the Dagomba have the *Ya-Naa* and the Mamprusi have the *Na-Yiri* and we deserve to have a seat in the House of chiefs as the Konkomba are a strong people also. But when a Konkomba paramount comes to the House of Chiefs and sits next to the Asantehene we will help to prevent them from becoming corrupt. Our paramounts will have to come back to Namong and Saboba, and one day Yendi, to venerate the shrine there. Just as I told you Allan, when you came here in 2003, how the paramount must be like the earth priest for the people and watch after the health of village so will the paramount, if we get it, look after the health of the people.¹⁷

It is interesting here to note that those who strongly support the Konkomba petitions for paramount chieftaincy also speak out vehemently against Dagbani paramounts and against the chiefs in local villages. These individuals, often leaders of the yam market or members of the Konkomba Youth Association (KOYA),¹⁸ invariably claim ancestry from the founders of their respective villages. Throughout my interviews conducted with village members who claimed to be of the lineage of the earth, there existed a general consensus that chieftaincy was, intrinsically, a bad thing. The only real leader of consequence, for these informants, was the *Utindaan*.

Indeed, the *Utindaan*'s primary tasks are to maintain the health and prosperity of the community by soliciting the goodwill of the earth and the ancestors and to direct the rites performed during the planting season. The building of a new village compound also requires the *Utindaan*'s presence, and he receives part of the libations or sacrifices offered to achieve the earth's blessings. The successful establishment of a new compound is

a significant event in Konkombaland as it is considered the unit of expansion and movement across the land and is to the Konkomba a powerful signal that the earth has permitted them to flourish.

The *Utindaan*, as the de facto head of the lineage of the first-comers within each village, is the effective head of the biggest ritual unit within Konkomba society – the clan as it is represented within the village. It is the *Utindaan* that presides over and permits earth rites to be performed within Konkombaland and within these rites the *Utindaan* embodies the true authority within Konkomba society. Through sacrificed offerings and libations, the Konkomba establish and maintain contact with supernatural forces whose existence is believed necessary for the prosperity of quotidian life.

The nature of Konkomba political authority in northern Ghana can only be understood in the context of the *Utindaan*'s relationship with the earth shrine and village that his ancestors are believed to have founded, both at the village level and now, with reference to the Konkomba claims to paramount status, at the regional level. This relationship with the land has developed out of a pattern of migration that can be found throughout Voltaic West Africa. In this pattern we see communities pushed out onto the periphery of metropolises by slave raiding, expansion of other ethnic groups, or in search of new cultivable land. In so doing they create new local histories of autochthony and origin. For the Konkomba, the essential historical event that legitimates their claim to a piece of earth is the creation of a new earth shrine – this action, more than anything, brings into existence a new ritual focus for worship of both the earth and ancestor and ultimately a material representation of territorial control. The earth shrine becomes, in effect, the crown jewel of a lineage, the key to power, providing what Lancaster has termed the “spine” of a community, a senior group which holds sway over communal earth and ancestor cults (Lancaster 1987:106).

The essentially territorial nature of group identity in Konkombaland and throughout the Northern Region is made manifest through devotion to the earth shrine – identity, contained and defined by the controlling lineage, becomes intertwined with the concept of the earth. The earth lineage and its connection with the earth shrines come to represent the group against outsiders. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Konkomba's contentious relationship with the Dagomba over the Yendi shrine. In a region where the daily agricultural and economic activities are similar,

where, ethno-linguistically, most groups share a common origin, the earth lineage creates and shapes the image of community (Horton 1971:95) and ultimately of ethnic identity, as it is the earth shrines that truly determine who is not 'from here,' who is the 'other.'

The contested meaning of the tree in Yendi, the actual date of the Dagomba eastward movement, and the legitimacy of the Konkomba claim that they were indeed that first-comers on the earth around Yendi are important components of identity politics and claims of ethnic distinctiveness in northern Ghana. To the outsider, even to the Ghanaian from Accra or Kumasi, there appears, at first glance, to be little to distinguish the lifeways of the Konkomba from those of other northern peoples. Indeed, within the northern Ghanaian ethnoscape, there is considerable similarity between many of the so-called chiefdoms and small acephalous groups. However, these different communities often find themselves at odds on questions of allegiance with representatives of national political parties and in competition over market access for their agricultural produce. Consequently, contested claims of autochthony and territorial access to agricultural land often find expression in the religious idiom.

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NOTES

- 1 STANDD: Society, Technology, and Development; A multidisciplinary research institute at McGill University.
- 2 The term 'enstoolment,' referring to the installation of a new chief or paramount, is taken from the Asante tradition of a new chief being placed 'on the stool' – a carved wooden stool that is essentially a throne for the chief and is representative of the title holder's office. Many northern chiefs are not enstooled *per se*, rather they are 'en-skinned'; but the term has come to represent the process of installing or appointing any new chief in Ghana.
- 3 The tensions in 1994 emerged from petitions made by the Konkomba youth association of Saboba and by the market chief of Saboba himself for the right to own land in the Saboba area. This petition was largely ignored by the northern regional minister as just another incident in the long history of ethnic and chieftaincy conflicts in this region. The Dagomba asserted that the right to farm on land claimed by the Dagomba could only be granted if the Konkomba in the region bought the land from the *Ya-Naa*, the Dagomba paramount. Tensions mounted and eventually erupted into what would be called 'The Guinea Fowl War' – the initial outbreak of violence flared up over a drunken squabble between Konkomba and Nanumba farmers over the sale of a guinea fowl.
- 4 All interviews and comments by informants were collected during ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Ghana's northern region in 1999 and 2003.
- 5 Interview with member of *Ya-Naa's* court, Yendi, Northern Region, Ghana. 28/1/2003.
- 6 Interview with wife of family earth priest in village of Namong, Northern Region, Ghana. 6/7/1999.
- 7 Interview with Mr. DB, Saboba, Northern Region, Ghana. 22/8/99.
- 8 This origin of the Konkomba's claim to Yendi was told to me on 2/7/1999 by a market official of the Konkomba yam market in Accra. Staniland (1975:7) also notes that the Konkomba called Yendi by the name Chare.
- 9 Interview with Gbondaan of Namong, Northern Region, Ghana. 27/1/2003.
- 10 Interview with Mr. JB in Wale Wale, Northern Region, Ghana. 19/6/1999. The tree he is referring to is a large Baobab in the north-eastern quarter of Yendi, also in the Northern Region.
- 11 Interview with Mr. BNB in Tuna, Northern Region, Ghana. 24/6/1999.
- 12 For more on distinctions between esoteric and exoteric knowledge concerning shrines, see Hatt in this volume.
- 13 Interview with LD et al. in Yendi, Northern Region, Ghana. 14/17/1999.
- 14 Interview with Gbondaan in Tuna, Northern Region, Ghana. 5/2/2003.
- 15 Interview with Mr. TT, Naabule, Northern Region, Ghana. 13/6/1999.
- 16 Interview with Konkomba yam market official in Accra. 12/02/2003.
- 17 Personal correspondence with a leader of KOYA, the Konkomba Youth Association, 6/7/2004.
- 18 KOYA is a sodality formed in the wake of a number of armed conflicts with the Dagbani chiefdoms and with the Gonja. It was responsible for organizing and arming large number of youths in the so-called guinea fowl war; however, it primarily acts as a mutual aid association for Konkomba youth who have moved to major cities, such as Accra. The Dagomba, Dagara, and other ethnic groups in Ghana also have similar youth associations (see Lentz 1995).

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