

## **Ethno-Politicization in the 1994-1995 Case of Conflict in Northern Ghana: The Role of Youth Associations and Faith-Based Organizations**

### **Abstract**

*Most large-scale ethnic conflicts move beyond state-centric issues to involve a variety of actors, issues, and motives. In Northern Ghana, the protracted conflicts of the 1980s and 1990s were altercations between ethno-politicized communities seeking to either maintain “traditional” authority over neighbouring groups or obtain autonomy and recognition within the “traditional” system of rule. This article relies on theories of ethnic conflict that underscore the importance of inequality between groups and thereby considers both remote and immediate factors underlying the 1994-1995 conflict in Northern Ghana as well as the role played by key actors in framing ethno-political identities leading up to the conflict.*

## **Introduction**

The widespread devastation inflicted by protracted ethnic conflicts constitutes a profound cause of human loss and suffering and a considerable security dilemma facing the international community. Since the end of the Second World War, the number of ethnic conflicts has increased continuously and peaked in the early 1990s. The magnitude and destructive capacity of these conflicts also intensified during this time. Most large-scale ethnic conflicts are located in the developing countries of the Global South and concern issues of self-governance and territorial autonomy (Boege 2006). These conflicts frequently move beyond state-centric issues to involve a variety of actors, issues, and motives. In Northern Ghana, the protracted conflicts of the 1980s and 1990s are not rebellions against the state; rather, they are altercations between ethno-politicized communities seeking to either maintain “traditional” authority over neighbouring groups or obtain autonomy and recognition within the “traditional” system of rule. In 1994-1995 the conflicts in Northern Ghana culminated in a destructive violent outburst that rapidly spread through seven districts.<sup>1</sup> The violence devastated the region leaving numerous villages destroyed, wounding and killing a large portion of the population, emotionally scarring many that survived, and reversing development activities.

This article moves beyond state-centric approaches by relying on theories of ethnic conflict that underscore the importance of perceived or actual experiences of deprivation between groups and thereby considers both remote and immediate factors underlying the violence. To build on the existing literature, this article draws on archival research and twenty- one interviews with individuals representing nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), traditional authorities, religious leaders, opinion leaders, as well as the state to consider the role played by key actors involved in processes of framing ethno-politicized identities leading up to the 1994-1995

conflict.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, this study highlights the importance of examining remote and immediate causes and considering numerous actors when seeking to understand and address complex conflict situations.

The first section of the article examines key theoretical debates about the conditions that give rise to ethnic conflicts. The second section discusses the remote and immediate causes of the 1994-1995 conflict in Ghana. The third and fourth sections add to the available literature by analyzing the role of youth associations and faith-based organizations in processes of ethno-politicization leading up to the conflict.

### **Conditions That Give Rise to Violent Ethnic Conflicts**

Despite the frequent occurrence of intra-state conflict during the period between 1945 and 1990, much of the pre-1990 literature examining the causes of violent conflict focus on international conflicts (Smith 2004). Gurr's (1970) relative deprivation theory is an exception.<sup>3</sup> According to Gurr (1970), experiences of relative deprivation can lead to violent conflict when there is a gap between expectations and fulfillment of perceived needs. In particular, conflict can arise when individuals or groups are denied the "goods and conditions of life to which people believe they are rightfully entitled" (Gurr 1970, 24). In this way, forms of disadvantage, such as political and economic discrepancies, poverty, discrimination, and a historical loss of autonomy, contribute to the grievances of minority groups (Gurr 1993a). The greater the discrepancy between groups, the easier it is for group leaders to mobilize individuals for conflict. As will be seen, the expectation of "non-chiefly" groups to attain equality within the system of chieftaincy was a significant factor underlying the 1994-1995 conflict.

In addition to relative deprivation, collective forms of discrimination (i.e. targeted

deprivation) can trigger violent conflict by contributing to group mobilization and solidarity (Zartman 2004). Targeted deprivation occurs when inequality is rooted in discrimination against a specific identity-based collective category (such as ethnicity, religion, or political affiliation). In the context of relative deprivation, targeted groups have a common sense of grievance that can be mobilized for violence and manipulated by political entrepreneurs. Significantly, political entrepreneurs emerge in contexts of targeted and relative deprivation to articulate and frame the grievances of groups and, at times, bend group “interests” towards personal gain. In Ghana, the Konkomba Youth Association (KOYA) was formed to articulate Konkomba desires for autonomy; in doing so, KOYA also framed Konkomba grievances and contributed to processes of ethno-politicization and the emergence of violent conflict in the region.

Lake and Rothchild (1996) also contribute to our understanding of ethnic conflicts. For them, ethnic conflicts are caused by “collective fears of the future resulting from the state’s inability to protect groups” (Lake and Rothchild 1996: 1). Although their state-centric focus fails to adequately recognize the importance of non-state issues in numerous conflicts of the Global South, these authors contribute to our understanding by highlighting the importance of collective fears in violent conflict circumstances. Such fears emerge when experiences of heightened social instability, past conflict, and uncertainty about the future politicize ethnic identities. This is an important point given the colonial legacies and the arbitrary, unequal, and instable relations that have emerged in the Northern Region of post-colonial Ghana. Despite their simplistic argument that competition over resources and control of state policy underlie violent conflict, Lake and Rothchild (1996) recognize that such factors are not sufficient causes of violent conflict. Rather, they argue that “at least one of three strategic dilemmas” including “information failures, problems of credible commitment, and incentives to use force preemptively (also known as the

security dilemma)” cause violent conflicts to occur (Lake and Rothchild 1996, 3). As will be seen, by framing ethnic grievances in provocative media statements, youth associations in Northern Ghana became significant actors in the cycle leading to violence. When strategic dilemmas are present, within group factors (such as political entrepreneurs and ethnic activists) can polarize groups by overriding the claims of moderate politicians, which, in turn, reinforces the strategic dilemmas and thereby feeds a destructive cycle that can lead to violent conflict.

### **The 1994-1995 Conflict: Remote and Immediate Causes**

In 1994, Ghana’s Northern Region was engulfed in unprecedented inter-ethnic violence.<sup>4</sup> The violent conflict began on January 31, 1994 in the market of the small town of Nakpayili. Armed conflict erupted between the Konkomba and Nanumba; however, allied communities were quickly drawn into the fighting. The “non-chiefly” Nawuri, Nchumburu, and Bassare fought alongside the Konkomba against the “chiefly” communities, while the Dagomba and Gonja mobilized in support of the Nanumba against the “non-chiefly” communities. Within three days, seven districts in the Northern Region were overcome by violent ethnic conflict.

The 1994-1995 conflict was the culmination of a series of conflicts in post-independence Northern Ghana (see van der Linde and Naylor 1999 and Bogner 1997 for a list ethnic conflicts in post-colonial Northern Ghana). The inter-ethnic violence of 1981, 1991-1992, and finally 1994-1995 in Northern were fought between ethno-politicized groups seeking to either maintain the status quo or obtain autonomy and recognition within the system of “traditional” authority. They are rooted in historical perceptions of deprivation created by slavery and colonialism, yet are fueled by the constitutional developments of the post-independence state.

*Historical Roots: Contested Settlement, Slavery, and Colonialism*<sup>5</sup>

Settlement myths have become highly politicized in the Northern Region. In particular, conflicting historical narratives provided a backdrop for groups to legitimize their claims and grievances prior to, and following, the 1994-1995 conflict.<sup>6</sup> Studies focusing on the Dagbon area of the Northern Region indicate that, prior to the fifteenth century, the region was inhabited by “non-chiefly” societies, such as Konkomba communities, who were under the spiritual control of a Tindana – an earth priest (Staniland 1975; Ladouceur 1979; Brukum 2001; Kirby 2003; Pul 2003a).<sup>7</sup> From the fifteenth until the seventeenth centuries, the region was invaded by “centralized” or “chiefly” dynasties, including the Tohajie (i.e. Dagomba, Nanumba, and Mamprusi) and the Ndewura Jakpa (i.e. Gonja) (Pul 2003a). Although many *tindamba*<sup>8</sup> were killed during the invasion of western Dagomba, the earth priest institution was preserved and, in most instances, the *tindamba* continued to “carry on their sacred duties in relation to custodianship of the land, while the invaders’ chiefs became secular rulers” (Ladouceur 1979, 29).<sup>9</sup> Thus, Fentiman (1995, 2) argues that the Konkomba “were never conquered as a whole by any group.” Thus, two contrasting narratives emerge: Representatives of Dagomba communities claim to have preserved the ritual authority of the *tindanas*, but subjugated the Konkombas on political grounds; whereas representatives of Konkomba communities claim to have never submitted to the Ya-Na (the Paramount Chief of Dagbon) as their overlord (Weiss 2005).

Nonetheless, under the century-long Ashanti Empire, the Dagomba were required to pay tribute to the Asante in the form of slaves and thus came to perceive “non-chiefly” communities as a “pool of manpower” (Ladouceur 1979). This formally established inter-group boundaries and relations of inequality and oppression between Konkombas and Dagombas in the North.<sup>10</sup> In turn, these relations affected British policies of indirect rule, which reinforced and

institutionalized the subjugation of Konkomba communities. As one civil society representative remarked, “a lot of the issues of conflict in the Northern Region are legacy from the slave raiding time” (Civil Society Representative, NCRC/SPI). The Asante ruled the North until the British defeated them in 1874.

British policies of indirect rule further entrenched unequal relations in the Northern Region. Despite the decentralized nature of the chieftaincy system, the British created and consolidated chiefly power in the region in order to implement policies of indirect rule. Although presented as restorative models of “traditional” government, the ambiguous and conjured conception of “tradition” underlying policies of indirect rule led to a manipulation of ideological history (Staniland 1973). To the colonizers, tradition referred to a “set of inherited and immutable rules concerned with succession and internal government” (Staniland 1973, 374). By applying their own understanding of tradition to the Ghanaian context, colonial rulers altered the chieftaincy institution by creating and/or artificially bolstering chiefly authority. As a result, formerly autonomous “non-chiefly” communities were subjected under the authority of chiefs: “Where there were no chiefs they sought to bring the nearest chief from one of the chiefly groups to rule over the non-chiefly groups so there and right there the seeds of conflict were sown” (Civil Society Representative, WANEP). Eventually, British colonizers recognized the indefinite character of societies they deemed “non-centralized”; nevertheless, they bolstered “traditional” rule in the area to maintain a structurally simplified model of control over the region (Talon 2003).

Thus, the colonial powers perceived the Konkomba as a subordinate group, and, under British policies of indirect rule, the Dagomba chiefs became intermediaries between the colonial administration and the interests of the subordinate Konkomba. “Non-chiefly” communities were

required to pay duty to the chiefs by submitting to “traditional” chiefly customs and ceremonies, providing symbolic tributes at specific occasions (e.g. following a hunt), and accepting the chief’s judgment over their small-scale disputes, such as marriage or land disputes (van der Linde and Naylor 1999). These requirements provided a consistent symbolic reminder to “non-chiefly” communities of their subjugation and were used by Konkomba “political entrepreneurs” to mobilize for conflict against the Nanumba in 1981. In particular, Konkomba representatives challenged the authority of Nanumbas to demand tributes and sought the ability to arbitrate their own disputes. Many issues that remained unaddressed following the 1981 conflict resurfaced in 1994.

*“Traditional” Rule: Issues of Land and Paramountcy*<sup>11</sup>

Interview respondents clearly highlight the interrelated issues of land tenure and paramountcy as the central proximate causal factors underlying the 1994-1995 conflict. Contested historical narratives and post-colonial land tenure have made land ownership in the Northern Region a highly politicized issue. However, land ownership in Northern Ghana cannot be understood in terms of private ownership; rather, “land is a communal asset held in trust for the dead, the living, and the unborn” (Pul: 2003b, 62). Kirby (2003, 186) underscores the incompatibility of “chiefly” and “non-chiefly” groups’ “traditional” approaches to land:<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, “The chiefly groups have taken [the] role of ‘landlords,’ or ‘owners of the land,’ those who hold political and economic rights in the land.” Until recently, “chiefly” groups understood land in terms of the people who reside under a particular rule (i.e. the kingdom or *naam*). Increasingly, the geographic and material aspects of land have gained importance in Dagomba communities. The “non-chiefly” groups, on the other hand, have “traditionally” taken the role of



“the ‘custodians’ of the sacral Earth” (Kirby 2003, 189). As discussed above, the *tindamba* of “non-chiefly” communities controlled the land. Even after the Dagomba invasion, the *tindamba* continued “their sacred duties” of pacifying the spirits of the earth, “while chiefs became secular rulers” (Ladouceur 1979, 29). As a civil society representative suggests: “the social structure of their communities was along the lines of a spiritual head, not a political head” the *tindana* was not a political ruler, but a “mediator between the people and their god” (Civil Society Representative, WANEP). In this way, “non-chiefly” communities used the land, but never claimed ownership. Consequently, when the Dagomba invaded the regions inhabited by Konkomba communities, “they didn’t win the land from the non-chiefly peoples because it was never theirs to give...It was not land, but rather people who were conquered,” and, as much of the literature highlights, the people themselves were never entirely conquered (Kirby 2003, 189; also see, for example, Tait 1961; Goody 1971; Staniland 1975; Fentiman 1995).

The politics of land ownership in Northern Ghana was further exacerbated by the various land tenure regimes that were enacted during colonialism and particularly the post-colonial era. In order to avoid land abuses in the Northern Territories, the British administration ratified the Northern Territories Land and Native Rights Ordinance of 1927 (amended in 1931). In this way, land “remained the property of the people in the Northern Territories” but “was held in trust by the Crown, through the Governor, on behalf of the people of the Territories” (Ladouceur 1979, 60; 123). Upon independence, attempts were made to amend the 1927 Ordinance. Particularly, the Lands and Native Rights (Amendment) Bill sought to vest lands in the hands of the Northern Territories Council (NTC).<sup>13</sup> However, the North was politically divided and attempts to amend the Ordinance proved unsuccessful. Therefore, land trusts were transferred into the hands of the state. In effect, from the enactment of the 1927 Ordinance until the late 1970s (and the

development of the 1979 constitution) traditional land practices were largely unaltered, particularly among “non-chiefly” communities (Pul 2003b).

Although land practices remained principally unaffected by colonial rule, the institution of chieftaincy was transformed to the detriment of ethnic relations in the Northern Region. When the British consolidated the power of the chiefs in the region, the four “chiefly” communities, namely the Dagomba, Nanumba, Gonja, and Mamprussi, acquired “a monopolistic position in the system of ‘traditional representation’ and therefore a key role in the political development of the Northern Region” (Bogner 1997, 1). As the post-colonial state emerged in independent Ghana, relations between the institution of chieftaincy and the structures of the state proved consequential for subsequent inter-ethnic relations in the Northern Region.

Despite their domination over “non-chiefly” communities, “chiefly” power was limited: first by the British; then by the emergent post-colonial state under Kwame Nkrumah. As Ray (1996, 188) highlights, British policy maintained “that state recognition was necessary for the former pre-colonial political authorities (now traditional authorities or chiefs) to be able to exercise their status and duties as chiefs.” In effect, this policy placed the British in an intermediary role with the ability to enhance or limit the authority of chiefs. During the initial stages of independence the institution of chieftaincy was granted some freedom with respect to political authority; however, Nkrumah’s government largely undermined these initial political gains. Given Nkrumah’s nationalist, and ultimately pan-Africanist, political tendencies, he reacted against the “chiefly” collaboration with colonial rulers and their support of opposition parties (particularly the NPP). According to Ray (1996, 181), “when chiefs have been seen as competitors for sovereignty, the state has moved to limit their power.” In order to limit chiefly power, Nkrumah sustained the British chieftaincy policy, which enabled the central government

to recognize and derecognize chiefly authority.

Notwithstanding Nkrumah's efforts, under the government of Busia (1969-1972), chiefly authority was largely reinstated. The Chieftaincy Act of 1971 paved the way for what one interview respondent deemed a "renaissance of chieftaincy" (Civil Society Representative, NCRC/SPI). In essence, the Act "fully restored the chieftaincy institution to its pre-independence status" (Pul 2003a, 43). As a result, the National House of Chiefs was formed and granted authority to adjudicate over chieftaincy matters. The subsequent constitutions of 1979 and 1992 reaffirmed the enhanced power of the chiefs, which, in turn, served to exacerbate tensions between "chiefly" and "non-chiefly" communities in the Northern Region. In an attempt to "insulate the [chieftaincy] institution from the state in order to ensure the political neutrality and hence survival and prestige of chieftaincy," the 1992 constitution formally separated the institution of chieftaincy from the state (Jönsson 2007, 16). On the one hand, state intervention in chiefly matters, particularly the appointment and elevation of chiefs, was prevented: "Parliament shall have no power to enact any law which—(a) confers on any person or authority the right to accord or withdraw recognition to or from a chief for any purpose whatsoever" (Constitution of the Republic of Ghana 1992, Article 270, 2a). On the other hand, Article 276 (1) states "A chief shall not take part in active party politics; and any chief wishing to do so and seeking election to Parliament shall abdicate his stool or skin."<sup>14</sup> In light of such constitutional arrangements, an advisor on traditional Dagomba customs underscores the process of elevating chiefs to paramount status:

The law says if the Ya Na makes a decision at the traditional council, it comes to the regional council, then to the national council, then it goes to the central government...then it becomes gazetted, then it becomes law once it's gazetted, but

the central government has no hands at the traditional level, at the regional level, and also at the national level. It is when the national level takes it for gazetting that the government comes in and that's the time they look at it and if there are any conflicts of interest they will point out to the national house of chiefs, who will point out to the regional house of chiefs, who will point it out to the traditional house of chiefs.

That's how it's supposed to work...these structures exist but how we use [them] is where we are found wanting (Traditional Authority Representative, Dagomba Customs Advisor).

It is interesting to note the respondent's hesitation regarding the functionality of the system of instituting paramount chiefs. Constitutionally, the government and chiefs are to run as "parallel systems" that do not overlap; however, functionally, many interview respondents deplored the partisanship embedded in the system (State Representative, Member of Parliament). The inability of the government to respond to the grievances of "non-chiefly" communities and the intensification of tensions in the region is particularly clear when examining the combined effects of the 1979 constitution on both land and chieftaincy.

Besides enhancing the political leverage of "traditional" rulers, the 1979 and 1992 constitutions also inextricably intertwined land and chieftaincy in the Northern Region. Though largely unaffected during colonial rule and early independence, the land tenure regime was drastically altered in the 1979 constitution following the recommendations of the 1978 Alhassan Committee.<sup>15</sup> The constitutional reforms of 1979 legislated the controversial recommendations of the committee to vest lands in the hands of the four "chiefly" groups of the Northern Region "on the grounds of conquest, rather than indigeneity or existing freeholds, to the exclusion of the 13 minority groups" (Jönsson 2007: 15). Thus, under the 1979 and 1992 constitutions, the

institution of chieftaincy became the trustees for the corporate ownership of land. Although constitutionally, all citizens of Ghana were entitled to equally access state resources, the income generated through leases essentially excluded non-chiefly communities. By failing to clearly delineate the issue of land ownership, the constitutional text paved the way for contested interpretations and certainly perceptions of institutionalized exclusion on the part of Konkombas and other “non-chiefly” communities in the Northern Region.

In addition to heightened levels of exclusion, many “non-chiefly” communities felt thwarted by the central government. Optimistic sentiments were raised among “non-chiefly” communities in Ghana during the Rawlings revolution of 1979 and its corresponding political discourse. As a former government advisor suggests, many perceived Rawlings as “the champion of the underdog” (State Representative, Former Government Advisor). Given this perception, “non-chiefly” groups thought the Rawlings administration would reverse the 1971 bolstering of chiefly authority. Indeed, throughout his regime, Rawlings did launch several attacks on the institution of chieftaincy. In 1985, for example, the PNDC amended the 1971 Chieftaincy Act by re-vesting the government with the right to recognize and derecognize chiefs (Pul 2003a). Some interview respondents indicate that the Konkomba adopted Rawlings’ “power to the people” message and felt they would receive governmental support if they launched an attack on the “chiefly” rulers (State Representative, Former Member of Parliament). However, political restraints prevented Rawlings from influencing the 1992 constitution, which marked a transition from his military rule to civilian governance. As one civil society representative states: “Rawlings was afraid to touch it. It was certainly advised by all the Northern people that he can’t touch it, he was a bit afraid because he needed the public votes. If he didn’t need the votes anymore perhaps he would have done it” (Civil Society Representative, TICCS). Therefore, in

1992, the chieftaincy institution regained the status it had achieved in 1971. As the government was no longer able to elevate chiefs to paramount status, “non-chiefly” communities felt they had little recourse.

In terms of relative deprivation, “non-chiefly” groups were not only denied access to a perceived need (i.e. land and chiefly representation), the denial of their needs followed a brief period of optimism where they felt their needs would be met independent of their own action. The combination of a constitutional arrangement where “non-chiefly” groups perceived themselves as landless and without “traditional” representation, as well as the inability of the state to mediate their interests with “chiefly” groups, intensified tensions in the region. In the words of one civil society representative, once the 1992 constitution was signed, “that was when the 1994 war came, it could have come right after that” (Civil Society Representative, TICCS).

#### *KOYA’s Petition for Paramountcy: A Timeline to Conflict*

The issues of land and paramountcy and the contested claims of “chiefly” and “non-chiefly” groups in the Northern Region culminated in the Konkomba petition for paramountcy dated June 29, 1993. The Konkomba Youth Association (KOYA) prepared the petition “on behalf of the entire Konkomba people in Ghana” requesting the elevation of the Chief of Saboba to paramount status (Petition of Chief, Elders, and the Youth of Konkomba Land 1993). To this end, the petition sought for the creation of a paramount stool for the Konkomba known as “Ukpakpabur.” The petition was addressed to the President of the National House of Chiefs and a copy was sent to the Ya-Na (King of Dagbon). This was perceived as an attempt to circumvent the authority of the Ya-Na because under the stipulations of the 1992 constitution all requests for paramountcy were to go directly to the Ya-Na (Jönsson 2007). According to an advisor on

Dagomba customs, “they did not either know the correct procedures or if they did, they did not find it a route that would give them the immediate rewards that they were after, they maybe did not trust the bureaucratic structures” (Representative of Traditional Authority, Dagomba Customs Advisor). The petition also controversially claimed that the Konkomba are indigenous to Nanun and Gonja Districts: “As early as the 17<sup>th</sup> Century we were already inhabiting the entire Oti basin stretching from the Northern tip of the Northern Region to Northern part of the present Volta Region” (Petition of Chief, Elders, and the Youth of Konkomba Land 1993). This claim marked a key transition in the politicization of settlement narratives in the Northern Region. Prior to KOYA’s 1993 petition, the Konkomba had made no claims of indigeneity in the Nanun and Gonja districts. Moreover, both Nanumba and Gonja communities firmly deny the validity of Konkomba claims. Although the Konkomba were not claiming rights to own land in Nanun or Gonja, “they wanted to be accepted as the equals of the majority groups, with the right to farm without paying tribute and to settle their own disputes” (Jönsson 2007, 19). Again, these tensions reflect the unresolved grievances of the 1981 and 1991-1992 conflicts.

On October 22, 1993, the Dagomba Traditional council sent a reply to the Konkomba petitioners. In essence, the letter dismissed the petition stating:

Any person who knows the fact of the matters written by the petitioners will undoubtedly conclude that the petition is nothing but a pack of false claims compounded by unnecessary provocative statements and abysmal ignorance (Dagomba Traditional Council 1993).

The Konkomba request for paramountcy was thereby denied. However, the Ya-Na, in whose name the reply was issued, instructed Konkombas to re-submit a proper application, solely for paramountcy, directly to him, and in a more respectful fashion. Although KOYA resubmitted a

revised petition, the Ya-Na issued a clear refusal in October of 1993 by claiming that the Konkomba were immigrants from Togo (Bogner 2000).<sup>16</sup> Again, the perceived political discourse of the Rawlings government contributed to the heightened tensions of the region. According to Pul (2003b, 50):

The greatest impact of the Rawlings era on the conflict between the chiefly and non-chiefly ethnic groups in the Northern Region comes from his statement that ‘no one was born with a land.’ This was in apparent reference to the resistance of the Dagombas to grant the Konkombas a paramountcy. Some Dagomba opinion leaders have held up this statement as a direct encouragement to the Konkombas, which emboldened them to prepare for, and execute the Guinea Fowl War of 1994.

It remains controversial whether Rawlings actually made this statement or whether it was invented as a form of propaganda against his government. Nonetheless, the perception that Rawlings would support “non-chiefly” land and paramountcy claims helped frame tensions between “chiefly” and “non-chiefly” groups. The media further inflamed hostile sentiments in the region. On October 31, 1993, soon after the Ya-Na’s repudiation of the Konkomba petition, the *Ghanaian Chronicle* “published rumours warning of an imminent bloodbath” (Jönsson 2007, 30; also see Bogner 2000). On November 6, 1993, KOYA issued a statement expressing that they were not preparing for conflict, nor would they launch an attack on any of their neighbours. A couple months later, on January 31, 1994, the violence began in the market of Nakpayili.<sup>17</sup>

## **Framing Ethno-Politicized Identities: The Role of Key Actors**

### *Youth Associations and the Educated Elite*

In Ghana, youth associations are voluntary organizations that ascribe membership based on



ethnic affiliation or territory of origin (Lentz 1995). Youth, in this context, does not refer to a specific biological age group; rather, it refers to a “socio-political category” that frequently includes chiefs, elders, and opinion leaders (Lentz 1995, 395). Early associational forms emerged in the 1960s at educational institutions (primarily teachers training colleges) and included a small number of educated elite. Initially, the associations were regional in focus because the limited number of students from each locality meant they were no longer able to identify themselves by their village of origin. In the early 1960s, a Northern Students’ Union was set up to promote Northern interests, particularly access to education and development resources for the North. However, as access to education improved, the motivation behind the association diminished, as did the association itself (van der Linde and Naylor 1999). Internal struggles also emerged within the association as members began to disagree over the allocation of development projects in the Northern Region. Nonetheless, many of the founding members of the present-day youth and development associations were active members of these early unions. In the late 1960s, the Northern Youth Association was formed by an elite group of Northerners, including lawyers, politicians, businessmen, and civil servants. According to Lentz (1995, 398), their aim was building up “supra-party representation of regional interest to the central government in Accra and of advising and influencing future parliamentary representatives and members of government from the North.” Although the Northern Youth Association disintegrated in 1969, the concept of a “supra-party” lobby carried forth in the emerging youth and development associations.

In the hostile political environment of the 1970s, when political parties were banned and meetings could only take place among “officially recognized organizations,” numerous ethnically based youth associations were formed (Lentz 1995, 398). Given the “self-reliance”

rhetoric of the central government of the day (i.e. Acheampong) and the state's promised support for such initiatives, youth associations committed themselves to the goals of development and "self-help." Not surprisingly, the historically subordinate Konkomba communities founded the first youth and development association in the North, namely the Konkomba Youth Association (KOYA). The educated Konkomba activists sought to counter "regional or 'ethnic' imbalances of development" by engaging "in more localized lobby politics" (Lentz 1995, 399). Thus, the representation of regional interests disintegrated into narrower ethnic concerns.

Lentz (1995) highlights that youth associations in the Northern Region have taken the role of spokespersons (typically spokesmen) on behalf of their ethnic communities, particularly during the "militant ethnic conflicts" of the region (Lentz 1995, 395). In the words of a state representative, the youth associations developed into "a very comprehensive network that used media to articulate their concerns" (State Representative, Member of Parliament). However, as Jönsson (2007) suggests, it is important to distinguish between youth associations and ethnic militias. Not all youth associations were involved in the violent 1994-1995 conflict; in fact, some associations, such as the Bassare Youth Association (BAYA), helped distance their ethnic communities from involvement in the conflict. Youth associations were also significant contributors to the peace process once the 1994-1995 violence subsided (Civil Society Representative, CRS). Prior to the 1994/95 conflict, attempts had been made to limit the ethnicization of youth associations, particularly by re-directing emphasis from ethnic to regional identities (Jönsson 2007). For example, the Gonja Youth Association was formed with the intention of becoming a regional unit, rather than an ethnic body. This initiative failed when the association sought to change its name to Gonjaland Youth Association, which undermined the participation of "minority" groups that had land claims within the Gonja Districts. In this way,

attempts to sustain a regional youth association proved largely unsuccessful prior to the 1994-1995 conflict.

Although distinct from armed militias, ethnic-based youth associations certainly played a significant role in mobilizing efforts for the 1994-1995 conflict. According to interview respondents, youth associations became an arena where preparations for the conflict could take place (Civil Society Representative, WANEP). The youth associations also contributed to what Pul (2003b) calls the “politics of (mis)information,” such as the numerous provocative statements and rumours that preceded the fighting (Civil Society Representative, BADECC).

Youth associations and their leaders were especially pivotal in the process of mobilizing people to fight in the conflict as well as framing the conflict through the use of media. Interview respondents point to the fact that youth leaders are very influential because they frequently hold elite positions within society (e.g. lawyers). They are also powerful mobilizers because they are greatly respected within their communities (Civil Society Representative, CRS). Despite the pivotal role they played in instigating the violence, many of the elite leaders remained in Accra for the duration of the fighting (Civil Society Representative, FOSDA).

Youth associations were formed with the intention of encouraging development; however, their campaigning also contributed to framing ethno-politicized identities and heightening ethno-political tensions in the Northern Region. Although they played a key role in mobilizing individuals to fight, they were also significant actors in the peace process.

#### *Faith-Based and Civil Society Organizations*

The 1994-1995 conflict was not fought over religious doctrine or ideology; however, faith-based organizations became “unwilling accomplices” in the 1994-1995 ethnic violence (Pul

2003b, 77). Contrary to southern stereotypes, the Northern Region of Ghana is not Muslim; in fact, based on the findings of the 1960 and 2002 censuses, the majority of Ghanaian Muslims reside in the large cities of the south (Weiss 2005). Nonetheless, Islam has played a significant role among the chiefly groups in Northern Ghana, particularly prior to colonialism, and relations between Christian and Muslim groups have become increasingly politicized in the Northern Region.

Prior to colonialism, Muslim scholars and traders arrived and settled in the kingdoms (i.e. chiefly communities) of the North. They were actively involved in slave raiding practices, which created a barrier between Islam and the “non-chiefly” communities that were affected by the raids. Colonial rule further entrenched divisions between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. British reliance on the North as a labour pool meant education was reserved for the sons of chiefs – the chiefly princes – who would advance their policy of indirect rule (Civil Society Representative, TICCS). In this way, the colonizers prevented the education of the masses, particularly people belonging to “non-chiefly” communities. This continued until the Christian-based missionary schools opened in the 1950s. At the same time, the colonial administration depended on the literate elite and thereby relied on Muslim scholars, both foreign and local, to perform the duties of scribes and clerks (Weiss 2005). Thus, a Muslim elite played an influential role in the bureaucratic structures of the colonial state.

Christian missionaries also played a significant role in the formation of ethno-politicized identities in Northern Ghana. In particular, Christian missions brought together formerly diverse “minority” communities. Skalník (1987, 308), for example, illustrates the role of Bible translators in unifying the dialects of previously scattered Konkomba communities:

[The Konkomba] were originally divided into a number of ‘subtribes,’ each having

its own name. Until recently there was no unified Konkomba language. Likpokpaln (the Konkomba language) is the result of efforts of the linguists of the Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation, who designed its alphabet, formalized its grammar and published the first textbooks on the basis of the most central, Sanguli dialects.

By targeting the disenfranchised, the missionaries also brought education to “non-chiefly” communities (Kirby n.d.).<sup>18</sup> Higher levels of education, specifically Western education, among “non-chiefly” groups created a community of “Christianized elites” that sought to articulate the grievances of “minority” groups and “liberate” “non-chiefly” communities from their subordinate status (Civil Society Representative, TICCS). As discussed above, a community of educated elites established KOYA, which played a significant role in articulating and framing Konkomba (and other “minority” group) grievances. KOYA further unified the formerly separate Konkomba communities, as well as formerly distinct “minority” groups as a whole. Thus, education contributed to the empowerment, unification, and identity formation of “non-chiefly” communities. Increasingly, Christianity influenced the minority groups, while “majority” groups were identified as Muslim.

Despite the polarization of religious identities in the Northern Region, prior to the 1960s, the majority of Northerners continued to adhere to traditional African religions (see Weiss 2005; Kirby 1998). In the 1960s, the Ghanaian authorities deported many “foreigners,” including numerous Hausa and Yoruba Muslims who went to Nigeria. As a result, the “indigenous Muslims” of Northern Ghana began to lead Muslim communities, which, in turn, led to the “indigenization of Islam in Ghana” (Weiss 2005, 16). Meanwhile, Ghanaian Muslims began to receive support from Middle Eastern countries. In 1983, Muslim aid groups provided a

significant amount of relief when the North was engulfed by a famine. Within a few years, Islamic identification markedly increased, particularly in the Dagomba regions: “The villages around Tamale that had almost no Muslims 15 years ago are now 40 per cent Muslim” (Kirby 1998, 4). In this way, polarized religious identities became increasingly solidified in Northern Ghana.

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to provide an in-depth analysis of the polarization, and increasingly the politicization, of religious identities in Northern Ghana, it is important to note that religious identities are potential mobilizing forces for the ethno-political conflict in the Northern Region. The religious dimension of the 1994-1995 conflict is best exemplified by the targeting of faith-based NGOs in the fighting itself. According to one civil society representative:

There were some incidents that nearly degenerated into a religious dimension, what actually happened was that some Konkombas took refuge in the church premises and the idea was that the Christians are backing the Konkombas (Civil Society Representative, Christian Council of Ghana).

The Catholic Church, for example, was targeted and attacked for their perceived support of the “minority” groups, which also created a precarious situation for other civil society organizations, particularly the Red Cross (Civil Society Representative, Red Cross). In addition, “minority” groups associated with Christianity feared the Muslim organizations, while “majority” groups affiliated with Islam feared the Christian organizations. Although Catholic Relief Services (CRS) worked in numerous communities in Northern Ghana, it was targeted as a pro-Konkomba organization and was even accused of fuelling the conflict (Civil Society Representative, BADECC).

The polarization of religious identities in Northern Ghana created an atmosphere of fear where religious labels became synonymous with ethno-politicized affiliations. In turn, as Weiss (2005) argues, polarized religious identities were solidified during the conflict. In light of this context, future research should examine the construction, and especially the politicization, of religious identities in Northern Ghana.

## **Conclusion**

Given the complex nature and destructive capacity of recent conflicts in West Africa, and the Global South in general, this article moves beyond state-centric approaches to support the deprivation theories of Gurr (1970; 1993a) and Zartman (2004). In particular, the article highlights the importance of perceived and actual experiences of targeted and relative deprivation between communities. From a deprivation standpoint, the slave raids under the Asante Empire helped structure inequality between groups and instigated oppressive inter-ethnic relations characterized by targeted and relative forms of deprivation. British colonizers institutionalized inter-ethnic inequality by formally dichotomizing “chiefly” and “non-chiefly” groups through policies of indirect rule. Thus, the “tradition” of chieftaincy was elevated (and in some cases invented) in colonial Northern Ghana and “non-chiefly” communities were formally marginalized in the region. In the context of institutionalized inequality, settlement narratives became highly politicized where youth association leaders and the educated elite framed claims of land ownership and paramountcy rights to mobilize ethno-political identities.

By examining the role played by youth associations and the educated elite, as well as religious and civil society organizations, this article supports Zartman’s (2004) claim that political entrepreneurs emerge in contexts of inequality to articulate the grievances of

communities in conflict (Zartman 2004). Youth associations, such as KOYA, were formed with the intention of promoting development in the region and to articulate Konkomba desires for autonomy. However, the provocative statements and rumours originating from the associations contributed to the politicization of ethnicity and mobilization for ethnic conflict. In this way, youth association leaders played a significant in framing and mobilizing ethno-political identities prior to the emergence of the 1994-1995 conflict. Meanwhile, faith-based organizations became unintentionally involved in the conflict because the polarization of religious identities in Northern Ghana created an atmosphere where religious identification could contribute to processes of ethno- politicization.

Overall, this article challenges simplistic approaches to understanding violent conflict, particularly those that focus exclusively on state-level interactions or competition over scarce resources. From a deprivation standpoint, researchers should consider both remote and immediate factors underlying the emergence of conflict, particularly the role played by political entrepreneurs in framing and mobilizing ethno-politicized identities prior to the violence. In Northern Ghana, violent conflict represents a legacy of slavery and colonialism where historical perceptions of deprivation are fueled by post-independence constitutional developments and fanned by the polarizing statements of political entrepreneurs engaged in the politics of “(mis)information.”



## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The seven districts include: Nanumba, East Gonja, West Dagomba, East Dagomba, Zabzugu-Tatale, Saboba-Chereponi, and Gushiegu-Karaga.

<sup>2</sup> Interviews were conducted from August to October 2006 in Accra, the capital of Ghana, as well as Tamale, the capital of the Northern Region.

<sup>3</sup> Horowitz' (1985; 2000) group entitlement theory also focuses on intra-state ethnic conflicts.

<sup>4</sup> For further descriptions of the 1994-1995 conflict also see Van der Linde and Naylor (1999), Assefa (2001), Bogner (2000), Kirby (2003), Jönsson (2007), Kaye and Béland (2009).

<sup>5</sup> This section draws on Kaye and Béland (2009).

<sup>6</sup> The purpose of this research is not to determine the validity of particular settlement claims; rather, this research seeks to examine the role of key actors in the construction of ethno-political identities.

<sup>7</sup> This body of literature largely builds on *The Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland* by R.S. Rattray (1932), the British Special Commissioner for Anthropology.

<sup>8</sup> Tindamba is the plural form of Tindana.

<sup>9</sup> During Rattray's (1932) research, many chiefs described the relationship between the *tindana* and chief by saying: "the people belong to me, the land belongs to the [*tindana*]" (Ladouceur 1979, 29).

<sup>10</sup> Significantly, although raiding practices manifested in Dagbon, they did not occur in Nanun and inter-ethnic relations in Nanun were initially characterized by inter-dependency. Nonetheless, under colonial domination "chiefly" Nanumba communities were granted authority over "non-chiefly" Konkombas, who were likely driven from Dagbon into Nanun in the late 1930s. This article indicates that legacies of slavery severely altered relations between Konkombas and Dagombas and affected British perceptions of inter-ethnic relations in the region; however, future research is necessary to examine the legacies of slavery in Ghana and how these legacies differ throughout the region.

<sup>11</sup> It is beyond the scope of this research to examine the role of particular chiefs (rather than the institution of chieftaincy) to understand the 1994-1995 conflict; however, this is an important area of research that should be examined in future studies. See Ray (1996) for a discussion of the interaction between the state and traditional authorities in the post-colonial era.

<sup>12</sup> This section focuses primarily on the contested narratives of the "chiefly" Dagomba and "non-chiefly" Konkomba because, as will be discussed below, the Konkomba petition for paramountcy in the Dagbon region was a significant factor underlying the 1994 conflict. However, it is worth noting that tensions over land are not limited to these particular groups. In fact, as discussed above, tributes that the Konkomba were required to pay the Nanumba chiefs in order to use the land was a key grievance underlying the 1981 Konkomba-Nanumba conflict. Left unresolved, these issues were also significant in 1994.

<sup>13</sup> The NTC, created in 1946, was a council of chiefs that sought to break down narrow-minded "inter-tribal" interests and establish a cohesive interest in the welfare of the region among the chiefs. The council was formed to maintain British policies of indirect rule. To the British, the NTC was "a training school where future representatives to the central legislature might learn the arts of debate, rules of procedure, and other traditions of the Westminster-style legislature" (Ladouceur 1979, 73). During independence, the NTC played a significant role in the political development of the Northern Region.

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<sup>14</sup> “Stool” and “Skin” refer to the offices of southern and northern chiefs respectively.

<sup>15</sup> Formally known as the Committee on Ownership of Land and Positions of Tenants in Northern and Upper Regions, the Alhassan Committee was established in 1978 to investigate land tenure possibilities in the Northern and Upper Regions. However, as Jönsson (2007, 15) highlights, the committee severely underrepresented “non-chiefly” communities: “Six out of the twelve members of the commission came from the [Northern Region] majority ethnic groups, two from the Upper Regions and four from the South; none came from the 13 [Northern Region] minority groups.”

<sup>16</sup> Bogner (2000, 192) highlights that following the conflict the Ya-Na clarified his position to the state-appointed Permanent Peace Negotiating Team (PPNT): “he claimed that the Konkomba had been driven out of what is now Ghana by the Dagomba, who conquered them ‘some 6000 years ago.’ But the Konkomba ‘have over the years been sneaking into Dagbon in Trickle’ - that is into the land under his sovereignty.”

<sup>17</sup> Significantly, the fighting began in Nakapyili (located in Nanun) while the key tensions at the time focused on Konkomba paramountcy issues in Dagbon. However, as Bogner (1997) indicates, the Konkomba petition for paramountcy also criticized other “chiefly” groups in the region. Moreover, unresolved tensions from the 1981 conflict continued to affect Konkomba-Nanumba relations in 1994-1995. Mounting tensions in Dagbon likely inflamed unresolved issues in Nanun.

<sup>18</sup> Mass access to education continued during the post-colonial period when the independent government of Nkrumah institutionalized compulsory education. However, as Weiss (2005) reveals Muslim parents felt the missionary and government schools threatened their culture and thereby provided their children with a solely Muslim education. This isolated the Muslim population in the independent state because Western education came to be viewed as the medium for attaining social mobility.

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