

Chiefs in Post-Colonial Ghana: exploring different elements of the identity, inequalities and conflicts nexus in the Northern Region

Abstract

By the mid-1990s Ghanaian ethnic groups were (re)discovering chieftaincy on a wide front and looking to traditional 'chiefly' structures as part of a move towards more extensive political indulgence. In this paper, the author examines the discussion of traditional authority in anthropological literature, examines the emerging political discourse on 'chiefs' within Ghana, and comments on its contemporary political significance. The author looks at the following: Konkombas, described here as "Bigmen" and traditional chiefs in post-colonial society, and contestable issues of land, marriages, extortions in traditional judicial courts, and 'taxation'; as they impact the co-existence of the ethnic groups in the Northern Region of Ghana. It remains to be seen whether the clamour for traditional leadership by so-called 'stateless' groups, represents a permanent change in the nature of Ghana's political system, or whether it is primarily philosophical and semantic in nature.

Introduction

In the 1980s and 1990s, what most people knew – or at least thought they knew – about Ghana's so-called 'stateless' societies was that they were essentially egalitarian. That is, believing or maintaining the belief that all people are, in principle, equal and should enjoy equal social, political, and economic rights and opportunities. Excepting a few societies, that possessed hereditarily chieftaincies, leadership within the 'stateless' groups, is typically by 'Bigmen,'¹ who achieve their status through competition, and where community decision making is predominantly consensual. Although challenged by a number of scholars from the mid 1970s within anthropological circles, this stereotypical view still has a good deal of currency. Several other commentators have observed that the 'bigman model' was heavily influenced by African segmentary lineage models prevalent in the anthropological literature of the time (see Barnes 1962/1971; Langness 1972; Strathern 1982b) and by one or two major contemporary studies of Papua New Guinea² highlands societies – notably Brown's (1963) study of the Siane, which

¹ Where power and authority are diffused and non-centralized (Langness 1972:927, 933. Also see de Lepervanche 1972; Lawrence 1971).

² Also see the *Encyclopedia of Papua New Guinea*, 1972

characterized pre-colonial Chimbu society by ‘the absence of any fixed authority (“anarchy”)', and went on to say:

*On the other hand, there were suggestions that even in the highlands societies portrayed by Brown and others as conforming to the bigman model, leadership was in fact frequently passed on from father to son, and was often more despotic than communalistic*³

In a reconsideration of the ‘bigman’ model, Standish (1978) quoted Chimbu informants’ statements that in pre-colonial times leadership was commonly hereditarily. It is pointed out that such statements were consistent with early accounts of missionary-anthropologists Bergmann in Kamanegu (Chimbu) and Vicedom in Mount Hagen in a recent studies by Reay amongst the Kuma and Strathern amongst the Melpa (Vicedom’s Mbowamb of Mount Hagen). Having reviewed this evidence Standish concluded that:

*“The central core of the ‘Big-man’ theory is the open nature of the competition for leadership, which is achieved on merit rather than ascription” (Standish, 1978:16). This pattern of authority – that of the ‘big man’ or ‘man with a name’ – is virtually universal in New Guinea.*⁴

The indicative quality of big-man authority can be found within the Konkomba clanships in Ghana, where leadership is based on personal power. Decisions in all Konkomba clans are reached by consensus, with leaders and elders exerting more influence than others. Power and authority is diffused and non-centralized. ‘Big-men’ do not come to office; they do not succeed to, nor are ‘bigmen’ installed in, existing positions of leadership over political groups. Within the Konkombas and their allied clans, the attainment of ‘big-man’ status is rather the outcome of a series of acts that elevate a person above the common herd and attract about him respect of loyal lesser men. It is not accurate to speak of ‘big-man’ as a political title, for it is but an acknowledged standing in interpersonal relations. Therefore, leadership authority as it exists within the Konkombas and their clanship in the Northern Region of Ghana is based almost exclusively on personal ability, not on inheritance of kinship, descent, or supernatural sanction. Leadership is almost always achieved, almost never ascribed ... It is achieved through personal charisma, by accumulating wealth in the form of cows, pigs, farm-size, number of wives, and other material goods that can be used to aid others thus, placing them under

³ Also see the *Encyclopedia of Papua New Guinea*, 1972

⁴ Ibid Langness, 1972; de Lepervanche, 1972

an obligation. The status of ‘bigman’ is achieved sometimes by the possession of specialized knowledge, or through sheer physical power and the ability to direct warfare (Ibid, 165).

In the mid 1990s in Ghana, people begun (re)discovering chiefs on a wide front and looking to traditional ‘chiefly’ structures as part of a move toward more extensive political decentralization. Stimulated by a series of reviews of postcolonial government systems and the attempts to nurture new local-level political structures, the dichotomy of the chiefly structures and that of the so-called ‘stateless’ societies have come under increasing challenge. The current ‘pressures’ between these two groups stem from the misunderstandings of British colonial authorities in the then Northern Territories . When the chiefly groups were first asked by the colonial representatives, about the relationship between them and other ethnic groups, the local rulers seriously argued that they controlled several ethnic groups. But on further investigations several decades later, during the 1920s and 1930s, the British authorities realized that their first reading of the political geography had been superficial: few of the different ethnic groups in the north acknowledged the rulers of Dagbon, Nanun, Gonja, Mamprugu or Wa as their overlords.⁵ This paper looks briefly at the discussion of traditional authority in the anthropological literature. In doing so, the paper examines the emerging political discourse on ‘chiefs’ within Ghana, and comments on its contemporary political significance in reference to land acquisition, the collections of taxes, extortions, and customary practices. At stake in the process is the question of self-representation, citizenship and, ultimately, land ownership in the Northern Region of Ghana.

‘Stateless’ societies and Chiefs in Pre-colonial Ghana

In the 1950s, the period leading up to independence, Ghanaian societies in the Northern Territories (Konkombas in particular), were characterized as ‘stateless’, lacking the formal, hereditary chiefly structures which typified neighboring Akan, Mossi, Dagati, Dagomba, Nanumba, Mamprusi and Gonja chiefdoms. Konkomba leadership is

⁵ See Paul Zeleza: Ghana in Africa and the World, Essays in honor of Adu Boahen, ed. Toyin Falola, Trenton, NJ & Asmara: Africa World Press 2003.

localized, and normally determined by competition based on skills in warfare, oratory, accumulating wealth and arranging exchanges, or in the possession of special knowledge or personal qualities.

In the Ghanaian society, manifestations of operative hereditary principles have been identified in several areas, and practical demonstration shown not only of the mechanics of advantage for members of certain lineages, but also several instances of succession. 'Hereditary advantage' is perhaps a better term for the findings presented (Dupuis, 1996; Petchenkin, 1993; Banks (ed.), 1996; Constitution of Ghana, 1992). The re-emergence of chieftaincy however has come to symbolize an important vehicle for more or less authentic indigenous political expression. In this paper, any reform of chieftaincy must have as its objective the award of chieftaincy to all the indigenous ethnic groups. The central issue, therefore, is how to make traditional rulers more democratic and accountable.

- Is the institution of chieftaincy relevant or anachronistic? What kinds of roles can traditional authorities fulfill in the post-independence period, and how can they contribute to democratic decision-making in their respective countries?
- There is no denying that some gains in freedoms have been accrued to the African populations through Western-style democracy, but to what extent have these developments built on strengths of the indigenous institutions of politics in Africa?
- Are the modes of participation for ordinary citizens in traditional leadership and decision making effective? Can they be improved upon?

Chieftaincy in Historical Perspective

Ghana is a republic in the West coast of Africa. There are dozens of ethnic groups in Ghana, and the institution of chieftaincy is guaranteed by the constitution. Although chiefs are not permitted to participate in politics, they play an important role in the Ghanaian society. The National House of Chiefs has authority over traditional laws and customs, and chiefs have a great deal of influence in the community and government⁶.

Traditional leaders are social leaders and systems rather than actual government institutions. Their primary function is to regulate and control relationships and social

⁶ Constitution of the Republic of Ghana. Op. cit, 165.

behavior within a traditional community. They are in essence people-oriented and not service-oriented as government structures are. "The authority of traditional leaders is derived from tradition and is exercised in consultation with senior advisers without being regulated by provisions. A traditional leader is a leader by birth."⁷ Where the institution of traditional leader or cultural leader exists, it is sanctioned in accordance with the culture, customs and traditions or wishes and aspirations of the people to whom it applies.

Starting in the late 19th century, Europeans conquered and colonized most of Africa. Modern-day Ghana is comprised of Britain's Gold Coast colony and the British part of Togoland, a German protectorate that eventually fell under the control of Britain and France. Ghana became independent in 1957. The country's Prime Minister (and later President), Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, named the new country after the great ancient empire of Ghana. "We take pride in the name of Ghana," he said, "not out of romanticism, but as an inspiration for the future."⁸

Chieftaincy institution can be described as a modern institution in Ghana, and to a high degree well adapted to capitalism. Chieftaincy institution is understood and legitimized as being founded on the principle of tradition; chieftaincy without reference to tradition seems as unimaginable concept, a contradiction in itself. Many Ghanaian societies in fact had elaborated chieftaincy institutions, whose holders individually and effectively ruled 'qua' office, in the pre-colonial era. This was not only the case in Northern areas of Ghana, but also in the Ashanti, Eastern, Western and Brong-Ahafo regions of modern Ghana. In these cases, the reference to tradition of chieftaincy makes some sense, if as it is widely done in Ghana, the term 'tradition' is understood to refer to a continuity from some pre-colonial status quo, at least in the late 19th century if not at some much earlier period in history. Even then the fact may frequently and conveniently be overlooked that the functions and meanings of the institution might have drastically changed, transformed, and possibly even perverted, during the last century, and increasingly so in recent decades.

⁷ See Ray and Reddy, 2003: Grassroots Governance? Chiefs in Africa and the Afro-Caribbean. Pp. 90

⁸ ."Ghana Republic is born," delivered in Accra, Ghana, on July 1, 1960 (Nkrumah 1997a).

The group referred to as traditional leaders/rulers or "tribal" leaders/rulers are individuals occupying communal political leadership positions sanctified by cultural mores and values, and enjoying the legitimacy of particular communities to direct their affairs. Their basis of legitimacy is tradition, which includes a whole range of inherited culture and way of life; a people's history; moral and social values and the traditional institutions, which survive to serve those values. (Adeuwmi & Egwrube, 1985:20). Generally, the institution of traditional authority is divided into three categories, namely Kings/Paramount Chiefs, Chiefs and Headmen. The concept "traditional leader" has as its features (amongst other things) been a living and adaptable institution. It is an institution of governance, which is recognized by both the State and communities ruled, with an area of influence, and having control over instruments of administration such as customary law courts. With reference to Ghana, for example, chiefs settle the majority of disputes with finality and only a relatively small proportion of cases are filed in the regular government courts. In this wise, chiefs remain "tribunals of preference" for most citizens. With regard to communal lands, chiefs execute judicial, governance and land management functions. In many African kingdoms, those who abuse their traditional authority through the illegal sale of lands or misappropriation of public revenues can be ousted or face charges if certain strict procedures are not followed.

However, there are many areas in Ghana, where the institution of chieftaincy did not exist in pre-colonial times, or, at least, were much less significant than in the above-mentioned cases. The largest single ethnic group of this kind are the Konkombas and other allied clans. There are many other 'stateless' groups in the Northern Region as well as in much of the Ghana. In these societies, chiefs as rulers emerged only during the post-colonial period. Among the Konkombas, colonial chiefs were at times strongly resented by the population; and it will be shown in this article that neither the colonial state nor the government of post-colonial Ghana did always provide a guarantee for their continued existence. Present day chieftaincy amongst Konkomba clans has little pre-colonial roots, and even its colonial foundation is comparatively weak. If the term 'tradition' is applied to Konkomba traditional rulers, one has to be aware that it does not refer to pre-colonial

historical facts, but primarily constitutes a strategy of gaining legitimacy for a rather contemporary phenomenon.

Colonial Chieftaincy in the Northern Region

The story of how British colonization introduced chieftaincy into the Northern Region of Ghana will be touched here briefly. In the Northern Region, as it will be deliberated upon, the British instituted courts of oppression, the imposition of taxes known as “Lampo” and installed chiefs by warrant to control the so-called ‘stateless’ people. The chiefs that were installed by the Native Authority, with the aid of the British of the then ‘Northern Territories,’ were without much recourse to local Konkomba traditions of hierarchy and status. The British colonial authorities basically engineered the subjugation of Konkombas and allied clans under the rule of the chiefs. The arbitrariness of the installation of these chiefs among the Konkombas resulted mainly from the fact that the British knew very little about pre-colonial Konkombas and their relations with other tribes in the region. All the British knew then and believed was that African people had to be governed by chiefs. Somehow, it was a very crude version of indirect rule, but still they believed it to constitute indirect rule, at least in its early years.

Chiefly peoples like the Dagombas, the Gonjas, the Mamprusis and the Nanumbas served as agents of British power in other parts of their empire and so was the case in Northern Ghana. According to Skalnic,⁹

“Nowhere in the voltaic area was any monarchy formally abolished. The African states were severely controlled in their politics, economy, and ideology, but they did not cease to exist legally. Initially the Europeans (British in this case) attempted to rule the colonies directly and neglected the pre-colonial state system. Eventually, however, the European administration realized the need for the collaboration with the ruling class (Dagombas, Gonjas etc.), without which there would be no effective administration or viable economy in the voltaic area”

So did the British need the chiefs to rule the various ethnic tribes in the country and took every step and support to back the chiefly groups. In Ghana, the British sided with the “traditional rulers” (chiefs), as they are known today by the Ghanaian government over the so-called ‘stateless’ peoples like the Konkombas, the Anufos, Kombas, the Bassaris, the Nawuris and others. During these times and in the history of skirmishes and

⁹ Skalnic “Questioning the Concept of the State in Indigenous Africa,” *Social Dynamics* 9 (2) 1983. Pp. 11-28

irredentist activities between these two sets of groups, there was simply no existing machinery among the Konkomba for British overrule, so it had to be invented. Tait describes one such incident in which the power and force of the British was unjustly used against the ‘stateless’ Konkombas and clanship:

“In 1944 the Benafiab, a sub-division within the Konkombas who lived around Wapuli close to Yendi, rebelled against continual extortion of a Dagomba chief who was forcefully sent to lord over the Konkombas. Dagomba sub-chiefs had long extorted from the neighboring Benafiabas, in particular a Dagomba chief named Dzaberi Na. Those Konkombas living near Dzaberi raided the house of the chief and during the course of that raid killed him, his elders and his wives”¹⁰

With a massive force and manhunt, and with the assistance of the British, the perpetrators in this incident were caught and punished. To prevent the occurrence of such incidents the Konkombas were used as forced labor in the construction of the Wapuli-Saboba road as well as the establishment of the existing Police Station in Saboba – a predominately Konkomba town close to Yendi in the Northern region of Ghana.

Konkombas were known to have fomented trouble for the colonial administration; they inflicted so much pain and anguish by the assassinations of German and British soldiers. Froelich says:

“In the face of Konkomba hostility in what is known today as Yendi, the Germans maintained fortified garrisons at Kidjaboun and Orip. When relations worsened continuously and at the least provocation, the Germans pursued the Konkombas, encircled them and exterminated them mercilessly. At one battle around Iboudou the Konkombas lost more than one thousand warriors.”¹¹

The severity of the problems caused by the assertions of the Konkombas – the “unruly clans,” (as often referred to, then and even now), can still be seen today in the severity of the punishments the Germans meted out to the Konkombas. Today, older Konkomba men in their 80s and 90s can still show their right hand-thumbs, severed as proof of the method the Germans and British soldiers used for limiting armed resistance with the archery of the “bow-and-arrow” by the Konkombas. Konkombas also fought their

¹⁰ Tait, David “A Sorcery Hunt in Dagomba” Africa 33 (2). 1963. Pp. 10

¹¹ Froelich, J-C. *La Tribu Konkomba Du Nord Togo*. IFAN-Dakar. 1954. Pp. 4

Dagomba “rulers” from time to time and won several of the battles using only the bow-and-arrow; the 1981 and 1994 conflicts were not an exception in this regard.

The spatial inequalities in the Northern Region

Case I - Landownership and Custodianship

Land ownership has become a contested issue between the major ethnic tribes of modern day Northern Region of Ghana. The limitations of this narrowly conceived perspective of land ownership was brought to light by the intensity of the minority conflicts and problems all over the Northern Region in the 1980s and has continued to worsen. The land and custodianship conflicts, which fully revealed the complex and dynamic nature of societal problems, have been neither purely ‘ethnic’ nor ‘historical’, in the conventional sense with which writers of Ghana’s history are familiar. But they have to do with demanding what is rightly theirs (for the so-called ‘stateless’ groups), and for which history and sociological factors have taken away or brought to bear on the peoples of the region. The problems are not new ones but new phases of old problems propelled by changed social, political and economic contexts in which the peoples involved in the conflicts have been transformed over the years. Historical factors continue to credit the Dagombas, the Nanumbas and the Gonjas as landowners because of the continued influence by these ethnic chiefly peoples in the social, political and economic life of modern Ghana. This paper analyzes how Ghana’s governments have proffered “ad hoc” solutions or “one-sided” settlements to ethnic conflict situations in the country and also, to demonstrate how such lack of interest in finding lasting solutions to regional problems has created animosity among the civil society.

The claim of the Dagombas and Gonjas that they are the “landowners,” or that “the land on which they currently reside belong to “them” is sometimes translated by the word “*naam*”, or chieftaincy, and sometimes by “*tindana*” (ritual landowner). In the past, neither of these terms ever meant “ownership” in the Western idea of private property ownership. However, this is precisely the way it is being presented and interpreted via the media in contemporary Ghana. On the contrary, the concept of *naam* hinges on political power exercised by the use of force, usually through a superior military

organisation and technology including the all-important use of the cavalry.¹² The office of *tindana* or ritual landowner (custodian of the earth shrine) was the highest office held by the autochthones, the original inhabitants, particularly the Konkombas of Northern Ghana. This office was exercised through a religious role as their authority was ultimately vested in their ancestors called “Otindaan”(in Konkomba). The *tindanas* (*Dagbani*) or *otindaan* (*Konkomba*) were, and still are, the intermediaries between the “veil of the “seen” and “unseen” worlds”.

Cardinall sees great significance in the ubiquitous spread of this religious “landownership” role. “But apart from this divergence of dialects, there is one great similarity in all these tribes found in the Northern, Upper West and Upper East regions of Ghana today. The similarity stem from the institution of the tindana and the various references made to that specific role within the ethnic groups. The Kassenas’s Tigatu, the Builsas’s Tengyonya , and the Moshis’s tensoba are all names of tindanas and significance of their duties and titles as “owners of land” (Cardinall 1920: 15-16). As Cardinall asserts there is a “primacy” in the office of tindana as relating to farming matters and day-to-day living and management of land matters.

In all these areas of the Northern Region, and even in the Upper East and West Region of Ghana today, the *tindana* does not only own the land, but by reason of his ownership is the only one who knows or is known by the “spirit of the land”. Since the tradition and worship of the ‘earth-gods’ is common throughout Ghana and amongst its people it is only the landowners (*tindanas*) that can pacify the gods of the earth. It is with this analogy that the Chairman of the Interim Peace Negotiation Committee in the aftermath of the Nanumba/Dagomba/Gonja versus Konkomba/Nawuri/Basari peace summit wondered why the Yendi chief (Ya Na) had to request the assistance of the Konkombas around the village of Kulkpeni – a suburb of Yendi. The request was to pacify ancestral ‘gods’ and to cleanse what he termed “the blood that had tainted Yendi and its surroundings”.¹³ It follows then that sacrifices to traditional lands and gods around Yendi can only be initiated and accomplished by the Konkombas – hence the realization that Konkombas as *tindanas*, are landowners and are responsible for the lands in the eastern part of the Northern Region.¹⁴ Accordingly, as Cardinall alludes to, there is no place

¹² For details of this analysis, see Goody, 1971 and Skalnik, 1989.

¹³ An interview with Konkomba Headman, Ali, an interpreter at the Bimbilla District Court and proposed Konkomba chief prior to the conflicts of the 1980s with Nanumbas.

¹⁴ See appendix I: Map of the original inhabitants of the contested areas.

without a *tindana*, and to this day when people move into uninhabited areas in the country owing perhaps, to the poverty of soil in their own, they obtain the land from the *tindana* who is nearest to the site of the new settlement”(Cardinall 1920:19).

The understanding put forward here is that, there is a distinction between, and importance attached to a *tindana* and *naam* (chief) or *naba* (chieftaincy or chief). The *tindana* cares for the religious observance of the people and land and by tradition, owns the land, and the *na* (*naam*) or *naba* (chief(s)), was in the process of developing into a political head, when the advent of the “white man” (colonialism) interfered with it and accelerated the slow process of its evolution into what we see today in Ghana. Besides, it is the lack of innovation and vision by generations of governments in Ghana that has created an impression that the so-called paramount chiefs or chiefly people own land in the eastern part of the Northern Region of Ghana.

In the Northern Region of Ghana there was an attempt to combine these offices because of the support and indulgence of the British and Germans. The office of ritual headship was assumed by the invaders, that is, the Dagombas, the Gonjas, and the Nanumbas, who slew the original *tindanas* of the ‘stateless’ tribes – the “Otindaan” (pronounced...*oh-tindaan*) of the Konkombas, the Bassaris, the Nawuris, the Anafos and others and usurped their functions. This primacy is extended even to the chief of Yendi, the Ya Na as he is often referred to by the Dagombas. As Cardinall reveals:

“the Na (chief) of the Dagombas preserves to this day the cap, gown, and necklace which were the insignia of the principal tindana of the so-called 'stateless' tribes, whom his forefathers slew. But the Na has never dared to arrogate to himself the duties of the tindana. Infact, he humbles himself before a tindana and appears disguised as a poor man when occasion arises for him to visit the tindana.”

All over eastern Gonja dominated areas in the Northern Region and within the eastern Dagomba and Nanumba areas, these ‘ritual heads’ along with their people were assimilated into the traditional state system at the level of “Commoner” status. Yet two roles have remained distinct, though there was, until very recently,¹⁵ a certain priority given to the ritual landowner when it came to allocation of land to farmers. Although chiefly peoples claim land ownership, particularly those in western Dagomba areas who

¹⁵ Due to increased demand for land in all parts of the country and the prices paid for land, the sale and management of land has been taken over by the chiefs in most areas. This problem is not only the case in northern region of Ghana, but permeates the Greater Accra region where land ownership has become a contested issue between the chiefs and the custodians of land.

combined both offices under chiefship, they have not been “landlords” in the Western (British), recognition or even feudal meaning of the word. Goody informs us about West African landlords:

"Although there were no landlords, there were of course lords of the land – the local chiefs of centralized states, who, from the standpoint of food production, were in a sense carried by the rest of the population"(Goody 1971:31). "Politically, chiefship tended to be over people rather than over land; thus, a leader had to try to attract as well as restrain" (Goody 1971:30).

The historical record also testifies that chiefs traditionally did not allocate land in the Northern part of Ghana. Staniland quotes H.A. Blair, “the most knowledgeable of British District Commissioners in the Dagomba area,” on this question as saying:

"Right of control is vested in the Ya-Na (Yendi chief), for the decision of boundary dispute between Chiefs, but not for the apportionment of land outside Yendi sub-division. Similarly, sub-divisional Chiefs have no right to apportion land to persons except within their own towns... The Chief does not grant farming land to individuals. He is considered not to have any right over farms...Tindamba or Otindaan (in Konkomba)still have power over Chiefs and are feared."¹⁶

This tradition changed after the independence of Ghana in 1957. The primacy of the *tindana* in the distribution of land to farmers only applies far in the bush, away from the district and regional centres where through government manipulation, chiefs claim this right. In the towns and cities where land is sought for personal, commercial or industrial use, the regional governmental bureaucracies control such functions and compensation is paid to chiefs who are selected and recognized by the government. The key to understanding this transition is the conceptual shift from land as the patrimony of the ancestors, to land as “people” (who could be coerced), to land as a scarce economic resource. Coercive power is now being exercised not with the cavalry of nobles but through governmental bureaucracies over which chiefs have a disproportionately strong influence. Land was not a scarce resource in pre-colonial Northern Ghana as today. In reference to the land issues, Goody says:

“under such conditions neither individuals nor kin groups bothered to lay specific claims to large tracks of territory, since land was virtually a free good” (Goody 1971:29), and “... ties of subordinations rose not out of shortage of land but as the result of purchase or conquest, thus giving rise to slavery rather than to serfdom”(1971:31).

¹⁶ For details of this analysis, see Goody, 1971 and Skalnik 1989.

Therefore, land ownership was never a contested issue in pre-colonial days. In conflicts that ensued, the pay-off arrangements between the Konkombas and other allied clans to the chiefly people was in human booty and not land. Because such captives were often transported as slaves to the southern part of the then Gold Coast. Therefore, booty was indeed part of the productive system of the ruling class and never the seizure of land as the Dagombas and its allied groups now lay claims to lands in the eastern parts (Yendi district) of the Northern Region of Ghana.

Case II – Un-inclusive customary practices

One of the strongest complaints voiced by Konkombas and other similarly situated people today against the chiefly people, particularly that of the Dagombas, Nanumbas and Gonjas, is the excessive extortion of food, animals and money coupled with the Konkombas' strong desire for "self-determination." This too has its roots in history. In the 19th Century periodic raiding and the extraction of tribute and revenues was very important for maintaining chieftaincy. Although colonial rule put an end to the raiding, there was a system of paying heavily for the office of chieftaincy, and then using the office to collect tribute of various sorts and to extort the peasantry especially through the traditional court system. Tait describes the adaptation as follows:

"Relations between the two peoples have long been hostile and remain so today. Dagomba 'rule' was limited to sporadic raids to obtain the slaves needed for the annual tribute to Ashanti. Today, sporadic raiding continues in a different form. From time to time collectors are sent into Konkomba territory to collect corn, yams, maize, millet, and cassava, which is sold in the markets to raise money. In 1950 when the Ya-Na was fined in the District Commissioner's court, no fewer than two truck loads of sorghum was collected in the Saboba area alone because the Ya Na claimed, 'the European said it has to be paid'. In the same year Dagomba stopped some Konkombas on their way into Yendi market and their head loads of new yams were seized, on the grounds that they had to pay tribute to the Ya-Na. (1963:9).

Citing the case of Nanumbas of Bimbilla District today, Skalnik points out that there has been little change in the patterns of extortion from Tait's time until the periods of the first Konkomba-Nanumba conflict in 1981 and the combined conflict involving the Konkombas against the Dagombas, Nanumbas and Gonjas in 1994. The story of the extortion in the chief's court is as follows: "Konkomba leaders had over the years accepted the conditions of the Dagomba, Gonja and Nanumba chiefs of paying allegiance in the form of labour, food, meat and money. There was a mutual agreement based on the annual supply of 'labor for the chiefs' of the Native Authority. The so-called

‘stateless’ people were also forced to bring their customary (marriage) disputes to the chiefs’ judicial courts. In addition, the Konkombas were to bring a hind leg from the first animal slaughtered at their funerals or killed in hunts each year (Skalnik, 1983).

After Independence, and the control of the country placed in the hand of the Kwame Nkrumah’s government, the competition for political control of the chiefly peoples over the ‘stateless’ people did not decrease but was exercised more covertly through intrigue and payments which soon became a profitable source of revenue. In this regard, Skalnik says,

“But probably the most important source of revenue for the ruler and influential chiefs and ministers of state and in the regions was the corrupt practice in political competition; for the office had to be both won and bought” (1983).

Modern Ghana governments over the years have ignored Konkombas, Vaglas, Nawuris, and Anufos sub-chiefs’ appeals of the extortions from them by the chiefly groups.¹⁷ The extortions have also been transformed over the years into a system of heavy fines and tributes passed down, ultimately, to the farmers, who are predominantly minority tribes and other migrant people. Besides, the extortions extended to include tribute to the chiefs in the form of livestock and produce from farms of Konkombas, as well as exacted fees for judicial proceedings by the royal lineages of the Dagombas, Gonjas and Nanumbas. According to Skalnik,

the practice was an already established one from the 19th century. “The capitals where slave raids took place in this period were surrounded by villages of captives, foreigners, and dependents of commoners. It was not rare for commoners to seek aid at the royal court when confronted by the misrule of chiefs and the raids of young nobility (raids continued until the end of the 19th century)” (Skalnik 1983).

Prior to the 1981 and 1994 conflicts, these chiefs’ courts had become particularly onerous to Konkombas and other allied clans because of changes propagated by the Konkomba Youths, who were now well educated at home and abroad and stipulated modern rules, values and attitudes regarding Konkomba marriages and culture.¹⁸ Konkomba marriage-

¹⁷ See comments in the ‘Uhuru Newspaper, 1994; The Daily Graphic Newspaper, March, 1994. Also relevant are letters to the Bimbilla chief and the Northern Regional House of Chiefs by the Konkombas Youth Association (KOYA), in respect to Konkomba customs and the need to select their Headman, Ali (a court reporter), at the District court in Bimbilla in the 1970s and 80s.

¹⁸ First Konkomba Youth Association (KOYA) minutes at Tamale Workers’ College in the Northern Region.

culture is intergenerational. This means, a young man of about twenty (20) years is betrothed to an infant girl and works (farming) for the girl's family until she grows up. By the time she is grown (18-21 years), the proposed husband is close to forty years old and in contemporary open society, the girl usually prefers her young lover and often chooses to run away with the lover. This leads to extensive arbitration, social turmoil as the husband's family, having worked for years is jilted. The family of the girl, from that time on is indebted to the husband's family. The lover's family is usually unable to pay compensation because it is calculated from the time the girl was born and betrothed to the husband. This can add up to a hefty amount. The non-payment of such fines can result in the eloped couple being ostracised from the community and must flee to escape prosecution or death from the lawful husband.

In Nanumba areas, the monopoly of arbitration had until the Konkomba-Nanumba war in 1981 always been in the hands of the Bimbilla chief (Naa), his elders and other Nanumba sub-chiefs around Bimbilla town (Skalnik 1983:20). These traditional courtiers found it extremely profitable to prey on this type of situation. In the analysis of this dilemma of the Konkombas and other minority groups in terms of judicial process in matters of this nature, their constitutional rights were often violated. Justice came to them through chiefs and not through the constitutional interpretations of the laws of the state of Ghana. According to Skalnik,

“The authorities in both instances (Dagomba, Gonja and Nanumba chiefs and governmental magistrates) were not really familiar with the intricacies of Konkomba marriage custom but they knew very well that the Konkombas were ready to give anything for the solution of their disputes because of the threats to them by these chiefs of violating state laws.” (Skalnik 1983:20).

The glamour for justice by the traditional rulers resulted more often in the form of subjugation and “ethnic racism.” The chiefs' rulings emanating from the proceedings of the ‘stateless’ people were used to the arbitrators' advantage. The chiefs usually demanded material remuneration (in money or in kind), from both sides in the dispute regardless of the truth. Accordingly, large sources of income for the court of the Bimbilla Naa (chief) came in those years (prior to 1994), from such ‘arbitrations. Similarly the “lay magistrate” who represented the State in formal judicial settings was usually a retired Police Officer without formal legal training and corrupted. One of the magistrates in Bimbilla township became infamous in a dispute involving two Konkomba sides to a

dispute when he married the Konkomba woman, who was the subject of the dispute between the two Konkomba men, leaving both of them empty-handed.¹⁹

The Polarization of History, Time and Space

In the above cases, time and space is politicized and history has become a contested (but also conflicting) narrative. At odds between the Konkombas and its allied clans and the ‘chiefly groups’ is the question of self-representation, citizenship, extortions and, ultimately, land ownership. Different parties have put forward different interpretations of History as presenting one single truth that the other either misuses or distorts. History, and by extension, geography, is used as a substitute for ideology and political power. In all the historical and geographical narratives regarding who owns what, when and how, most of the analyzation, is devoid of substance and lacks cohesion. The various claims seem as if such blueprints or truth are warehouses where anyone who enters takes out what is needed to construct an impression. Moreso, history has been part of the modernization project of independent, postcolonial Ghana. To say the least, the history of Ghana as an independent state begins in 1957 and not before that date.²⁰ Ghana in the 1900s were three loose ends tied together – the Gold Coast Colony, Ashanti (Asante) and the Northern Territories of Gold Coast. These areas had little in common apart from being part of the British Empire until in the 1900s. There were myriads of historical processes but no grand story if one turns from the micro to the macro of the prevailing conflicts and divisions prevalent in the Northern Region today.

The historical and geographical narratives reflect a postcolonial period towards explaining the conflicts in the Northern Region of Ghana. The central issue was (and is) a mistaken extension of legitimacy to the Dagombas, Mamprusis, Nanumbas and Walas of political authority by the British. Because at the end of the C19th, surveys conducted by the European colonial powers – Britain, France and Germany – painted a dualistic picture of the political landscape in the Voltaic Basin. George Ekem Ferguson’s

¹⁹ The emphasis here is mine. An interview with the Konkomba Negotiation Committee led by the president of the Konkomba Youth Association, Mr. Kenneth Wujangi in Accra in 1994 during the fact-finding joint commission established by the government of Ghana to find solutions to the conflict.

²⁰ See further Paul Zeleza, “The production of Historical knowledge for Schools” in: Ghana in Africa and the World. Essays in honor of Adu Boahen, ed. Toyin Falola, Trenton, NY & Asmara: Africa World Press 2003, this refe. To page 104.

investigations into the Asante hinterland were of key importance for establishing the British colonial narrative. He identified centralized kingdoms as the Mossi Kingdoms, Dagbon, Mamprugu, Nanumba, Wa and Gonja – which existed side by side with so-called stateless or minority groups. But from a colonial perspective (British or other), only the centralized kingdoms were of importance since they had identifiable rulers with whom they could negotiate and sign treaties. Thus, a link between the local rulers and the colonial authorities was established, either by signing treaties or by conquering and imposing loyal candidates as new rulers, as the Germans did in Yendi in the 1900.²¹

Therefore, the colonial outline of these two different sets of societies in the Northern Region of Ghana: the kingdoms and the ‘stateless’ societies, was (and still is) the result of the lack of colonial personnel’s acknowledgement of the centralized states’ claim to rule over the stateless societies. Such an outline suited the colonial perspective and remains the general knowledge most prevalent within media circles and ordinary Ghanaians today. Though British colonial authorities were aware of the fact that Konkombas and its allied clans had come under heavy pressure during the pre-colonial period due to the slave raids orchestrated by the kingdoms, the development of autonomous political structures for them was felt to be problematic. In some areas, where the nominal overlordship of the kingdoms was regarded as nonexistent, British actions resulted in the ‘invention’ of native rulers and the establishment of a rudimentary Native Administration. Although the British authorities were aware of the religious and symbolic position of the earth priests (*tindanas*) of the stateless societies, as the ritual owners of the land, their position was overlooked when the new Native Authorities were established or when the political structure of the old kingdoms were codified. Moreso, by defining the stateless groups as ‘minority people’ - which the government of today even alludes to - the colonial and also postcolonial authorities - have created a vocabulary and image that the centralized states were the majority of the population in the North. Various censuses, however, point to a different direction: those groups that were termed ‘stateless’ or minorities constitute the majority of the inhabitants in the Northern

²¹ See “the papers of George Ekem Ferguson by Kwame Arhin (ed). A Fanti Official of the Government of the Gold Coast, 1890-1897, Leiden: Afrika-Studiecentrum and Cambridge: African Studies Centre 1974.

Territories – and still do so in contemporary Northern Ghana (Gyimah-Boadi and Asante, 2003 & Appendix 1).

The outcome of the historical space and time of the conflicts in the Northern Region of Ghana was the establishment of colonial boundaries which brought about the confusion. When Dagbon was divided between the British and the Germans, Eastern Dagbon and, with it, the majority of the Konkombas were placed under German colonial rule. After the first World War, when former German Togoland was divided between the British and the French, Eastern Dagbon was re-united with British Dagbon. However, the making of a colonial geographical landscape resulted into the politization of geography. Following the new colonial division of indigenous inhabitants and alien groups, the Konkombas, who were mostly along the borderline areas of Kpalb, Kpasa, Damanko, Bunacha begun to be regarded and identified by the Ghanaian media and by Dagombas and Nanumbas as alien immigrants and foreigners (Tait, 1961). It can be argued that the Dagomba position rests on a British position, i.e., one that takes into account the situation in Western Dagbon, whereas the Konkomba position has a German twist in the sense that one of its central documents is the 1908 hut-count (*huttenschaft*) in German (eastern) Dagbon. This document has either not been known to Dagomba historians like Ibrahim Mahama's account of the Northern Conflicts,²² or to Abayie Boateng's unreferenced categorization of Konkombas as foreigners, and their 'homeland' being in Togo.²³ Though the Dagombas constituted one of the major ethnic groups in the Northern Region of Ghana, there were more Konkombas living in the Jendi (Yendi) area before the combination of the western and eastern Dagomba sub-districts. The issue of granting the Dagomba a leading role in the German colonial administrative setup was questioned not only by some Germans residents but also by the Basel Missionary Society which had established itself in Yendi in 1913. This critical position was reflected in the discussion between the missionary representative and the German authorities about which language should be taught at the missionary school. Though 'Dabangli' and 'Hausa' were preferred at the moment, both missionaries and the German authorities were fully aware of the fact that

²² See Ibrahim Mahama, *Ethnic Conflicts in Northern Ghana*, Tamale: Cyber System 2003.

²³ See a paper written by one Abayie Boateng "Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflicts in Africa: Ghana's Example" PAAA/APA, 1999, University of Ghana, Legon.

neither language could ever become a functional *lingua franca* in Northern Togoland. Instead, it was thought that by siding with the Konkomba and other groups, a more suitable alliance between colonial subjects and the German authorities could be established. However, before 1914, not much was done mainly because the *realpolitik* of the German authorities echoed British colonial praxis, basing their rule on a working relationship with the kingdoms of Dagombas, Nanumbas, Mamprusis and others.²⁴

But within all these narratives, the postcolonial link is what has culminated into the open conflict between the kingdoms and the so-called ‘stateless’ Konkombas and their clanships. First, is the attitude of pre- and postcolonial governments: from 1957 until the two democratic dispensations of the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the ruling National Patriotic Party (NPP), no one proffers the truth. Reading British colonial files, there is a created impression of both the colonial authorities, the local rulers (kingdoms), as well as the press in modern Ghana that Konkombas are a quarrelling and disturbing element. Here, the history of time and space has not been fair to the Konkombas because of the riots and clashes that were mis-reported, either among quarrelling Konkomba groups or between the Konkombas and their neighbors. Such events seem to have fortified the negative perception about the Konkombas, who are rather peace-loving, generous people, hard-working people, superior food and particularly, yams farmers, who, since the 1930s started to settle in sparsely populated areas (Wess, 2003). Secondly, the conflicts in the Northern Region are caused in part, by the lack of knowledge of the historic time and geographical space of Ghana’s postcolonial governments in then Northern Territories. One unimaginable factor behind the conflicts was the 1978 Land Law in Ghana by the government, which placed all issues of land ownership under the authority and control of the native rulers – the chiefs. The law meant that no Konkomba or its associated clans had any right to land, hence their alienation became legal.

In these regards, complex situations prevail in contemporary Ghana. The present calm in the Northern Region is an illusion until the government is able to demarcate the Northern Region into three (3) regions. Any division must take into consideration the numerical

²⁴ Holger Weiss; “Islam, Missionaries and Residents. 2005

strengths of these kingdoms and so-called 'stateless' societies. The issue of land ownership and the question of political representation have been and will be difficult problems to solve. As elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, the root cause of the conflicts is poverty. But poverty too, is politicized if contesting parties refer to their miserable conditions as an explanation for their actions. The Konkombas will always do, because in Northern Ghana, poverty is prevalent: some groups have more influence than others do. The so-called 'majority' people have better access to political authorities than most of the 'minority' or 'stateless' clanships. Since rich people get their voices heard to the detriment of the poor, there will always be sporadic clashes if the government does not distribute the 'national cake' evenly among the people. An example is the government's electrification project funded by the World Bank in the Northern parts of Volta Region and the North. Konkomba areas such as Bunacha along the north-eastern corridor up to Damanko in the Northern Volta Region are all without electricity or has the most 'terrible network of roads'; whereas all Nanumba areas, Western Dagomba areas, including Bimbilla and up to Yendi are lighted, have good roads, but excludes again, the villages of Saboba, Kpalk, Kpanjan – Konkomba areas.

In this paper, history has emerged as a legitimizing narrative and is used as a political ideology. History and geography are also politicized over landownership, blended with different narratives of the historical past. One group's claims rests on the past as conquerors, warriors and rulers over subjects, another disputes such a claim and argues that the claimants never controlled or ruled the area or that the land had been taken away from them in the first place. History is being contested in space to a point that the colonial authorities created one story; one that to some extent was taken over by the postcolonial state and remains the guarded truth. Whether a more coherent analysis of the truth is required, history is seen as an imperialistic projection from the perspective of the disempowered and represents a myriad of possible stories for people who may never know the truth in the contemporary relationships among the peoples of the Northern Region of Ghana.

Conclusion

Central to the arguments presented are that anyone, who has intensively and over an extended period of time participated in post-Independence Ghanaian society, cannot help to be aware of the great importance attached to chiefs. Nor is this importance limited to rural districts outside the city centers of Ghana. Ghana is one of the African countries that have reserved a specific and honorable place for chiefs at the national level, where the *House of Chiefs* (as a complementary institution to Parliament), has the ear of central government. The proceedings of the House of Chiefs are regularly published and offer very useful (if of course one-sided and bowdlerized) materials on the interaction between chiefs and the postcolonial state. However, the House of Chiefs constitutes only one aspect of chiefs/state interaction, and probably not the most important aspect. This is clear from developments in the present decade where Konkombas and other ethnic groups are demanding recognition and representation. What is important in the case of these ‘stateless’ or minority groups mentioned in this paper, is the fact that they see chieftaincy as a solution to their marginalization as cultural communities in Ghana today. Through chieftaincy institutions, they believe they can have the cultural recognition and representation they seek as citizens and most importantly, be regarded as indigenous inhabitants of modern Ghana. Despite their current dispersion from the Northern Region, due in part to the Northern conflicts, and particular because of good farm lands, into the Brong-Ahafo, Ashanti, Volta, Eastern and even to the Western regions of Ghana, Konkombas are the original inhabitants of eastern Dagomba district.

In other words, while Konkombas and clanships appreciate their political rights as individual citizens in modern Ghana, they lament their collective subjection to other similarly situated groups and the references made to them collectively as ‘stateless’ and minorities, when they are actually not. Similarly, the Konkombas, Bassaris, Bimobas and other groups object to the reference of the Yendi chief (Ya-Na), as the ruler or “king of Dagbon” because there is no such vocabulary or recognition by them of the Ya-Na, in respect of Yendi and surrounding areas. By means of various declarations and ideological interventions, the KOYA members up to now, courageously demand recognition and equal rights for all Ghanaians: the restitution of their ancestral land and

the establishment of Konkomba hegemony, independent of the Ya Na, chief of Dagomba, based at Yendi. Hence, the glamour for the installation and recognition from the central government of chiefs of their own, to remedy pre-and postcolonial injustice, and the refusal to endorse the argument that chieftaincy is an outmoded institution in the modern context of rights.

It is understandable that establishing a balance between ‘group rights’ and ‘individual rights’ requires delicate government initiatives through legislation and can be difficult to attain. Nevertheless, a workable solution can be achieved by the government through the development of principles and a set of institutional models that seek and enjoy support from the broad array of forces from both sides of the divide. But even before this is attempted, Ghana needs a general acknowledgement across the board, and a sensitization of the people that the rights of the so-called ‘minorities’ and so-called ‘stateless’ be erased from their mindsets. That the history, time and space of the country do not confer such syllables on its original inhabitants, who were unfortunately displaced because of the lack of a formalized institution known as chieftaincy. They are primarily the original inhabitants of the pre-colonial state and not just citizens of postcolonial Ghana. However, there will be contention on specific issues (land, chieftaincy, marriages) and mechanisms to achieve these goals, a bold step in such direction should *converge on affirmative action and a regime of laws* by the government. Public opinion in the country will however, still have to be educated that affirmative measures are by definition *short gap interventions* to ameliorate *extant inequities*. Perhaps such an education will help salve considerable agitation from assorted apprehensive groups. The issue of protection of ethnic constituencies or groups is even more vexed and problematic. There is a strong case however, for greater local autonomy as a way of giving groups control over their affairs. Such initiatives will perhaps counsel greater devolution of political and economic powers than already exists in the current constitution.

Appendix I- A Map of Northern Region. Shows Dominant inhabitants of areas before the British rule.



Source: Ladouceur, Paul André. 1979. Chiefs and Politicians: the politics of regionalism in Northern Ghana. Publication: London.

Table 1 Distribution of ethnic Groups in the Northern Region of Ghana

| Ethnic Group | Popn (National) | In N.R | Percentages (National) | In N.R. | Residents in NR as % of Reg. Popn |
|-----------------------|-----------------|---------|---------------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Dagombas | 747,924 | 594,865 | 4.3 | 79.5% | 32.9% |
| 2. Konkombas | 474,293 | 305,575 | 2.7 | 64.4% | 16.9%** |
| 3. Gonjas | 211,703 | 131,814 | 1.2 | 62.3% | 7.3% |
| 4. Nanumbas | 78,812 | 45,414 | 0.5 | 57.6% | 2.5% |
| 5. Mamprusis | 200,393 | 132,494 | 1.1 | 66.1% | 7.3% |
| 6. Mosis (Deg) | 55,174 | 5,178 | 0.3 | 9.4% | 0.3% |
| 7. Bimobas | 113,130 | 49,013 | 0.6 | 43.3% | 2.7% |
| 8. Nchumburu s | 113,334 | 13,624 | 0.6 | 12.0% | 0.8% |
| 9. Bassaris | 51,299 | 20,331 | 0.3 | 39.6% | 1.1% |
| 10. Vaglas | 41,684 | 5,205 | 0.2 | 12.5% | 1.1% |
| 11. Safalba | 7,827 | 2,159 | - | 27.6% | 0.1% |
| 12. Chokosis (Anufos) | 63,910 | 35,989 | 0.4 | 56.3% | 2.0% |

Total Regional Population (2000) = 1,805,428 . These numbers were contested by KOYA²⁵ as not reflective of Konkombas in the diasporas. Example: Konkombas in Ashanti, Brong-Ahafo, Eastern, Volta and even Greater Accra regions of Ghana. ** One of the original inhabitants of the Modern day Northern Region

²⁵ Konkomba Youth Association's formal case to the central government during the commission hearings, 1994.

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