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The Overwhelming Minority: Traditional Leadership and Ethnic Conflict in Ghana's Northern Region

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Abstract

This paper investigates the importance of the historical construction of chieftaincy, and the interaction of traditional institutions with the state, in structuring the inter-ethnic conflicts of the Northern Region of Ghana between 1980 and 2002. During this period, the area experienced a series of episodes of large-scale violence, culminating in the 1994-1995 conflict that cost thousands of lives. This crisis has been interpreted variously as an inter-ethnic civil war or as a rebellion against the traditional authority of some groups over others. Labelling the clashes in these terms, however, may disguise more than it informs, as tradition and its cousin discourses of ethnicity, are socially constructed and politically contested both at local and national levels. In Ghana, the powers of political and traditional leaders overlap and interrelate, making direct competition over access to traditional state structures important to these conflicts. Moreover, since most of Ghana's conflicts are connected with chiefs, traditional leadership in Ghana has become associated with a combined development and security discourse. The paper draws on interviews with members of the affected ethnic groups conducted in villages in the eastern part of the Northern Region in July and August 2005 and a review of primary and secondary documentary sources to provide a nuanced analysis of the social tensions. It challenges the common view of Ghana as a peaceful country, exempt from ethnic conflict. It also makes the case for alleviating some of the pressures that have caused such communal violence through careful review of traditional institutions and a constructive state presence providing effective security and discursive outlets for disputes.

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Table of Contents

1. The Development Challenge of Conflict: Introducing Issues of Traditional Leadership, Ethnicity and Conflict in the Northern Region of Ghana	4
2. Ethnic Conflict in Ghana: Some Specifications, Definitions and Caveats	5
3. (Re-)creating Empires: The Historical Creation of the Conflict Structures of the NR	6
4. Constructing Dichotomies: The Meaning of Minority.....	9
5. An Historical and Political Overview of the Konkomba and Other Minority Groups	10
6. An Introduction to the Majority Ethnic Groups of the Northern Region: the Mole-Dagbani and the Gonja	12
7. The Post-Colonial Period: A Changing Political Climate for Chieftaincy	13
8. The Escalation of Inter-ethnic Violence in the NR	17
9. The Discourse and Practice of Chieftaincy in the NR.....	20
10. The Role of State Incentives and Interventions in NR Ethnic Emergencies	22
11. Basic Causes of NR Conflict: Discrimination, Access to Employment and Education, and Underdevelopment	24
12. More than a Factor of Production: Theory, Practice and Interpretations of NR Land Rights	25
13. Neo-Traditional Leadership Institutions, Political Influence and Cultural Authenticity	27
14. Ethnic Block Formation: Shifting Perceptions and Conflict Narratives	29
15. The Role of 'Traditional' and 'Modern' Inter and Intra-Ethnic Associations	33
16. Negotiating Power: The State, NGOs and NR Conflict Levels	36
17. Learning from Past Strategies: Military Intervention and Commissions of Inquiry	38
18. The Impact of Traditional Leadership and Institutions on NR Conflict	39
19. Towards A Communal Re-imaging of Tensions: Defusing Traditional Conflict in the NR	41
20. References.....	43

List of Tables

Table 1. Ethnic demographics of the Northern Region	9
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List of acronyms and abbreviations

BADECC	Business and Development Consultancy Centre
BAYA	Bassare Youth Association
DAYA	Dagbon Youth Association
DCE	District Chief Executive
GANEP	Ghana Network for Peace building
GOYA	Gonja(land) Youth Association
GPRSP	Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
ISODEC	Integrated Social Development Centre
KIA	Konkomba Improvement Association
KOYA	Konkomba Youth Association
NAYA	Nanumba Youth Association
NDC	National Democratic Congress
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NHC	National House of Chiefs
NR	Northern Region
NORYDA	Northern Region Youth and Development Association
NPI	Nairobi Peace Initiative
NPP	New Patriotic Party
NRHC	Northern Regional House of Chiefs
NYA	Nawuri Youth Association
PPNT	Permanent Peace Negotiating Team
RHC	Regional House of Chiefs

TC	Traditional Council
WB	World Bank

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By Julia Jönsson

1. The Development Challenge of Conflict: Introducing Issues of Traditional Leadership, Ethnicity and Conflict in the Northern Region of Ghana

Civil war, as Nicolas Stern, the then vice-president of the World Bank, put it, 'is development in reverse' (Collier, 2003, ix), generating and intensifying the poverty problems of developing countries. It is therefore no surprise that the focus of development studies and policy has shifted radically to incorporate in its analysis the possible causes and responses to such conflict, in a post-Cold War climate in which intervention in the conflicts of poor countries no longer threatens to spark another world war. Such tendencies have been even more pronounced since the attacks of September 11, 2001, which brought security to the top of the international agenda. Hence we have seen what Duffield (2001) calls a merger of development and security: the effects of war and the containment of instability becoming an important concern in development, and what would previously have been regarded as development issues colouring the way security is understood.

However, such an understanding of intra-national conflicts threatens to depoliticise them and hold out hopes of their technocratic solution, as they become incorporated into what Ferguson (1994) calls the interpretative grid of the development problematic. The inconsistencies between theoretical constructs of developing country intra-national conflicts and their reality may give rise to theoretically, and politically, inadequate generalisation, as issues of definition and distinction homogenise and obscure the analysis. Ghana is a case in point; in the period between 1980 and 1995 its Northern Region (NR) experienced a series of episodes of large-scale inter-ethnic violence, culminating in the 1994-1995 conflict that cost thousands of lives. This conflict, while corresponding to the WB's definition of civil war in that it engendered more than 1,000 combat-related deaths, diverged from it in that it was not a case of a rebellion by an identifiable organisation against the state. Instead it has been interpreted as a rebellion against the traditional authority of some ethnic groups over others (Skalník, 2002; Talton, 2003a; Bogner, 2000).

Imposing another label on these clashes, that of 'tradition', again disguises more than it informs. Tradition, as we shall see, is a concept open to contestation. Such contestation can be intensely political; in Ghana the power of political and traditional leaders overlap and interrelate, making direct competition over access to traditional state structures crucial to these conflicts. Moreover, since most of Ghana's conflicts are connected with chiefs, traditional leadership in Ghana has become associated with the development-security discourse.

The link between development and conflict exists on different practical levels: in the discourse of actors, in the socio-economic grievances they perceive as important in the causation of the violence, and of course through the effects of the fighting. Conflict has not only disrupted the progress of this region, destroying its resources and development projects, but the tensions underlying it are intertwined with many other issues, political and traditional. One village, Kpandai, has been effectively cut off from state support for most of the last ten years, after having alienated the ethnic group of its district capital through traditional conflict.

Struggles over questions of what constitutes authentic local representation, and legitimate land rights, have ambiguous consequences that must not be ignored. It is in this context that the paper investigates the particular importance of the historical construction of chieftaincy and the interaction of traditional institutions with the state in structuring the NR conflicts. Its objective is to provide a nuanced view of these conflicts, by presenting the accounts of

members of all the affected ethnic groups collected through interviews conducted by the author in villages in the eastern part of the NR in July and August 2005. In addition it draws on primary documents collected from interviewees and NGOs and a careful review of national and foreign writing on local history, the conflicts and their possible explanations. It challenges the common image of Ghana as a peaceful country, exempt from the horrors of ethnic conflict.

The paper is divided into three parts: Sections 2-8 provide a historical background, Sections 9-16 present conceptual and empirical understandings of the conflict processes and Sections 17-19 draw out conclusions. It makes the case for alleviating some of the pressures that have caused communal violence in the past through careful review of traditional institutions and a constructive state presence providing effective security and discursive outlets for disputes.

2. Ethnic Conflict in Ghana: Some Specifications, Definitions and Caveats

The importance of discourse, including legitimising discourses of development to chiefs and conflict narratives to violence, necessitates a few definitions and specifications that can also serve as a background against which to compare the claims of different groups. The Northern Region where the conflicts under study took place is the largest and most sparsely populated region of Ghana, its 70,384 km inhabited by only 1.8 million according to the 2000 population census. It is home to approximately 17 ethnic groups (Pul, 2003) that perceive themselves as indigenous. Importantly, ethnicity in Ghana has come to assume a group of overlapping characteristics: language, culture and, for groups indigenous to the modern territorial unit, a 'traditional' place of residence (Nugent and Lentz, 2000).

Horowitz (2000) defines ethnic groups as characterised by ascriptive differences identified by colour, language, religion, or some other attribute of common origin, including myths of collective ancestry, which usually carries with it traits believed to be innate. While in the context of the NR the relevant groups overlap with the old concept of tribe, and actors often self-define as belonging to 'tribes', this label will be avoided for two reasons. Firstly, it carries with it misleading historical and cultural assumptions which are somewhat better problematised by the term 'ethnic group'. The significance of perceptions such as ancestral myths are made clear by Horowitz's definition, which still emphasises the importance of the ascriptive nature of these groups which makes them difficult to exit and essential to social identity.

Secondly, the static connotations of the terms 'tribe' or 'tribal' associate them with explanations of violence that posit ideas of ancient hatreds. Such labelling serves only to obscure the motives and tensions that underlie these conflicts. In order that the designator 'traditional' should not play a similar role, its meanings will be scrutinized and the word put in quotation marks when it is particularly problematic. The import of a few other ambiguous terms, most prominently 'minority' and 'majority' ethnic groups, will also be elaborated. Enough for now to say that their definitional volatility contributes to the complexity of ethnic discourses which have very real effects on mobilisation, hence our understanding of these terms must be specifically contextual.

Because of the separation between concepts of ethnicity and tradition, and a certain southern bias, previous analyses of inter-ethnic conflict in Ghana have tended to focus on narratives of Ashanti/Ewe political rivalry (cf. Agyeman, 1998). Ethnic competition is not limited to the government and state, however; it surfaces in the parallel politics of chieftaincy and at the local level as different ethnic groups interact. In fact one of the foremost strengths of the Ghanaian political system is the mainly national rather than ethnic character of its parties. While large-scale violence along inter-ethnic lines has taken place, mainly in the NR and over issues related to 'tradition', these have not directly translated to the level of the state; an important safeguard preventing its escalation into full-blown civil war.

Two final warnings before we start. In the text the NR conflicts will sometimes be referred to by their popular names. It is important to point out that labels such as the Guinea Fowl War (1994-1995), the Pito War (1981) and the Cow War (1940) carry derogatory connotations in Ghana as they imply that the wars were fought over such everyday items. Similarly, when used, terms such as 'minority', or 'insert ethnic group' interviewees, are simply shorthand for interviewees who defined themselves as members of these groups. Although at times perceptions of ethnic identity have proved powerful in mobilising individuals into organised group violence, such processes are not automatic.

We must be careful not to perceive these groups as homogenous and in doing so conceal important variability: in group perceptions of their ethnic identity over time, in the social identities of actors who may privilege alternative identities to ethnicity, and crucially, in opinion. The people of the NR, its villagers, intellectuals and chiefs, hold fascinating, far-reaching and sometimes competing visions of how best to promote inter and intra-ethnic peace and further the development of their region. Crucial to these visions are differing historical constructions of the area and its inhabitants.

3. (Re-)creating Empires: The Historical Creation of the Conflict Structures of the NR

In order to understand the repeated outbreaks of large-scale inter-ethnic violence in the NR which culminated in the 1994-1995 war, group conceptions of history, tradition and ethnic identity must be taken into account as they interact with perceptions of land rights and discrimination. Any analysis of these issues is fraught with ambiguity, however, not just because the meaning of the terms used often deviates from their standard literal definitions, but also because they are inherently unstable, signifying different things to different people and changing over time. History in the region is a hotly contested and continuously evolving narrative, as Sara Berry found when researching the subject of chieftaincy and land in Asante:

neither the codification of statutory and customary law nor the accumulation of written evidence on land claims and transactions has produced consensus on either the interpretation of Asante history or its relevance to contemporary claims on property and power. Far from converging toward a single hegemonic narrative, both written and oral accounts of Asante history have proliferated – stimulating rather than stifling debate, and promoting rather than silencing the reinterpretation of tradition. (Berry, 2001, xxviii)

The nexus connecting chieftaincy and ethnic conflict is, if anything, more complex, touching on issues of ethnic identity, group history and rights which are intimately connected with status as well as economic opportunities. Internal differences in the political organisations of the peoples of the region, which may previously have had little intrinsic importance to their everyday life, became crucial during the period of British colonial rule and have come to dominate and structure ethnic identity and concomitant claims ever since. Despite traditional leadership's claim to draw on pre-colonial sources of legitimacy, the colonial period has become an historical touchstone. Demands are typically validated by reference to colonial laws and documents, and opposition to structures seen as having originated with or been reinforced by the British is still cast in the language of the independence struggle.

Without delving into the circumstances that conditioned the patriarchal, hierarchal, and to some extent, politico-secular 'scientific' worldview of the colonisers, their preference for organisational systems which could be fitted into this mould had an enormous impact. Groups or peoples whose political systems were interpreted through this lens as chiefly or cephalous 'tribes' were considered culturally superior, a view justified by cultural Darwinist discourses as well as the practical consideration that they could more easily be incorporated into an indirect rule superstructure (Kopytoff, 1987). Their male chiefs became the

intermediaries of the colonial political order, charged with representing the interests of their people and adjoining 'acephalous' groups to the colonial administration, and the administration's interests to the people on the ground (Talton, 2003a).

Other ethnic groups, who combined non-centralised structures with hierarchies and cultures that emphasised the importance of religious figures, were put under the jurisdiction and administration of chiefly groups in the hope that they would eventually amalgamate with them and develop into what was seen as more advanced forms. As governor Sir Gordon Guggisberg declared in 1921:

Our policy must be to maintain any Paramount chiefs that exist and gradually absorb under these any small communities scattered about. What we should aim at is that some day the Dagombas, Gonjas and Mamprusi should become strong native states. Each will have its own little Publics Works Department and carry on its business with the Political Officer as a Resident and Adviser. Each state will be more or less self-contained (Quoted in Staniland, 1975, 58).

The goals of modernisation were to be achieved by formalising chiefly kingdoms that were loosely constituted at the time of the arrival of the British, disrupted by slave raiding, the collapse of Ashanti domination of Dagomba and Gonja, the internal dissent and ambitions of divisional chiefs and partly conquered groups, and constant warfare. The late 19th century saw two Gonja civil wars (1892-1893, 1895-1896) and one in Dagbon (1888) in addition to raiding by various groups, including the lieutenants of Samory Touré, who was fighting the French, and Babatu, a Zabarima warrior (Ladouceur, 1979).

The colonial administration attempted to channel cultural evolution through selective reinterpretation. The 'progression' was never seen as a fully automatic process that could be relied upon to produce desired changes; rather traditional leadership and forms of organisation were political resources available to both colonisers and colonial subjects. The late 19th-century pre-colonial period was one of rapid change in large parts of Africa, as Chanock reminds us:

anything but a traditional world in which custom reigned. We do not have a 'traditional' world as an identifiable baseline. (1985, 10)

Some chiefly groups had already signed treaties of trade and friendship with the British in the late 19th century¹ and at first colonial administrators relied on English-speaking interpreters from cephalous societies in their dealings with acephalous groups. After parts of what is now the Northern Region became a British protectorate in 1901/1902, the power and prominence of these chiefly peoples was strengthened as the population was ruled through them, although importantly the Land and Native Rights Ordinance of 1927 vested the control of land in the governor (Konings, 1986).

In 1932, as indirect rule became official policy, cephalous groups were formally defined as Native Administrations through the Native Authority Ordinance. Chiefs were given tribunals, the ability to make by-laws, treasuries, and local police forces under their control². They had already been charged with collecting tax and tributes to support their local government functions; when the 1932 Ordinances made the chiefs government officials, non-cooperation became illegal. Unsurprisingly, male chiefs and educated elites amongst the groups perceived as chiefly can be said to have cooperated with and reinforced perceptions of their cultural superiority and traditional domination. Cultural evolution was envisaged as a long-

¹ In 1892-1894 George Ekem Ferguson signed treaties with, amongst others, the chiefs of Bole, Daboya, Yendi, Bimbilla, Wa and Gambaga on behalf of the Gold Coast colonial government.

² The tribunals were created through the Tribunal Ordinance of 1932, later amended by the 1935 Native Courts Ordinance, and the treasuries through the Native Administration Treasury Ordinance of 1932, which also gave the chiefs the ability to impose their own taxes.

term project, and acephalous groups, whose traditions were being sidelined, found that 'tradition' was evolving and congealing for the foreseeable future into forms in which their position was subordinate.

Complaints to the colonial administration were expected to go through the chiefs of the cephalous groups, and since these imposed chiefs were often both the objects of dissatisfaction and in charge of the local courts, acephalous groups were left without clear political or legal recourse. Some, such as the Nawuri, appealed their status to the UN, while amongst the Konkomba an intermittent pattern of large-scale violent opposition to chiefly demands was started by the attack on the Dagomba village of Jagbel in 1940, sometimes known as the Cow War. The burning of the village and the killing of its chief and members of his family and retinue were precipitated by the chief's attempt to take advantage of a colonial vaccination programme to collect a bull as a fine from an owner of unvaccinated cattle (Talton, 2003a).

While chiefly political identities developed in parallel with the indirect rule system of the region, the emerging political consciousness of acephalous groups was shaped by their opposition to their subordinate status and exploitation. The aftermath of the Jagbel attack, for example, may have contributed to the transformation of Konkomba clan identity into a wider ethnic identity since, as Talton puts it:

Toward bringing the widely scattered Konkomba subclans under more effective control, officials began to deal with Konkombas as a homogenous group within a defined political space (2003a, 195).

To understand the historical dynamics of the region, it is important to appreciate that the development of 'tradition' was never power-neutral but fiercely contested from the start. In order to render effective the indirect rule policy, the British administration encouraged the formalisation of tradition, its adaptation to the indirect rule structure's requirements, and the homogenisation of ethnic identity. A general study of the traditions of the ethnic groups of the north (Rattray, 1932) was undertaken by the Special Commissioner for Anthropology and a series of conferences was organised in which the increasingly standardised 'constitutions' of some ethnic groups were agreed upon and written and the divisional chiefs compelled to endorse their paramounts³.

However, customary practices were conceived by many of the political officers and the rising African educated elite as being incompatible with democracy and before long indirect rule came to be seen as outmoded and unworkable. It was officially abandoned in 1952 when the 1951 Local Government Ordinance came into affect and Local Councils were set up in the region, although it should be noted that one third of the seats on these were still reserved for chiefs until 1960. While the legal authority of chiefs has waxed and waned since then, the 'traditional' structure of the early 20th century has remained both symbolically and legally important, as we shall see in the context of modern 'traditional' leadership institutions, land and ethnic identity.

Apart from institutionalising political marginalisation, the creation of, or emphasis on, a chiefly versus acephalous dichotomy resulted in a corresponding cultural marginalisation that is still reflected in popular and academic discourse. The matter is further complicated by the fact that at least two of the ethnic groups classed as acephalous according to the category of Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940), the Nawuri and the Nchumburus, claim to have chiefly traditions, proving the problems of characterising complex political systems according to this dichotomy. Similarly, many groups that agree that they were previously without chiefs in the Western sense are now trying to create their own versions of this institution.

³ Examples of such conferences include Gonja (1930), Dagbon (1930) and Mamprusi (1932); see Ladouceur (1979).

4. Constructing Dichotomies: The Meaning of Minority

In an effort to be more politically correct, 'acephalous' peoples are referred to as 'minority' ethnic groups and chiefly groups as 'majority' in Ghana today, although these terms are not used in their literal, demographic, sense. Rather, as Brukum (mimeo, 1) has put it: 'they are used to connote ethnic groups that did not build or built empires in the past'. While according to the 2000 census the Dagomba remains the largest group, the Konkomba (the 'minority' group involved in the 1994 conflict) are numerically larger than any of the other three chiefly groups, the Nanumba, the Gonja and the Mamprusi (see Table 1 below).

In the 1981 Nanumba-Konkomba war, the tensions of which carried over into the 1994 conflict, the Nanumba were outnumbered three to one (Skalník, 1986) and completely overwhelmed by the surrounding Konkomba 'minority'. Similarly, the fact that the minority and majority groups defined as two blocks were very equally matched contributed to the 1994-1995 conflict and its violent nature. Mutual attacks resulted in a bloody stalemate that could only be broken by state military intervention.

Table 1. Ethnic demographics of the Northern Region

Ethnic group	Status	N. R. Percentage	Population
Dagomba	Majority	32.9	594865
Mamprusi	Majority	7.3	132494
Nanumba	Majority	2.5	45414
Gonja	Majority	7.3	131814
Total		50.1	904587
Konkomba	Minority	16.9	305575
Non-Konkomba Gurma	Minority	4.1	73598
Grusi	Minority	2.7	48538
Chokosi	Minority	2.0	35989
Nchumburu	Minority	0.8	13624
Other Ghanaians by Birth	N/A	19.9	358788
Non-Ghanaians by Birth	N/A	3.6	64728
Total		49.9	900840

Note: Rounding creates a discrepancy in the cumulative percentages.

Source: Government of Ghana 2000 Population Census.

As the table shows, the presently land-controlling majority groups make up roughly 50% of the population of the Northern Region, while minority groups and ethnic groups from other regions, and non-Ghanaians by birth, make up the remainder. It is important to note that these figures are strongly contested, however. The Konkomba Youth Association claims that a significant proportion of the Konkomba were not counted as the officials did not venture into the sparsely populated areas where they reside. The picture is further complicated by the successful attempt of one minority group, the Mo, to gain recognition for their chief through government appeal before the passing of the 1992 Constitution. The Bamboi-kuoro was hence elevated to paramount status and given a place in the Tamale Regional House of Chiefs and the Mo a Traditional Council and Area in which they had the land rights.

Despite their semantic complications, I will use the term 'minority' and 'majority' groups for two reasons: because they are terms that are acceptable to most groups, and because other labels are equally contestable and even more contentious. Terms such as 'autochthonous' or 'indigenous' groups and 'invaders', for example, are difficult to justify historically and are associated with land claims, while minority groups object to the term 'acephalous' as denigrating and not reflective of their political organisation past or present.

For the so-called minority groups, cultural marginalisation made the fight for ethnic status a vital symbolic battleground. Issues of chieftaincy came to structure this struggle, a logical

extension given the importance of chiefs to majority groups in attaining both symbolic and practical prominence but surprising to those unfamiliar with the history of the region. In 1994 the question of why the Konkomba would engage in a war over paramountcy with the Dagomba, Nanumba and Gonja, three out of four of the Northern region's prominent chiefly peoples, baffled many observers both from the south of Ghana and further afield. Misinterpretations of the complex answers to this question led to the reinforcement of negative stereotypes of irrational belligerence – centring on the Konkomba in the Ghanaian public consciousness and press, and African 'tribalism' abroad.

Much can be gleaned from a more detailed and empirically rigorous rephrasing of this question however. By examining why and how ethnic violence occurred in the Northern Region, the interplay of history, ethnic identity creation, and rapidly evolving indigenous institutions and political systems, the complex dynamics that fuelled these conflicts can be laid bare. Similarly, by investigating the peace process, shifting incentives, the political climate and the evolution (if not resolution) of the issues under dispute, much can be learned about the dynamics of the region's current uneasy peace and the possible threats to its stability. But first an overview of the salient features of the main ethnic groups involved, the role of the post-colonial state in the conflicts, and a short summary of the largest incidences of inter-ethnic violence is required.

5. An Historical and Political Overview of the Konkomba and Other Minority Groups

The heartland of the Ghanaian Konkomba is the eastern parts of the Northern Region. Their settlements are often located in inaccessible outlying rural areas⁴ reflecting their traditional clan organisation, although in recent years KOYA, the Konkomba Youth Association, has tried to change this pattern in order to ensure access to education, voting and other services facilitated by centralisation. This area was colonised by Germany in the late 19th century and was then captured by Britain in 1914 during the First World War, a situation that was formalised as a UN Trusteeship after the German defeat in 1919.

In 1956, after a public referendum, British Togoland was incorporated as part of the Northern Region of Britain's Gold Coast colony, formalising the division of the territory inhabited by Konkomba-speaking clans into French- and British-controlled areas. This division has led to the popular stereotype of the Konkomba as aliens from Togo exploited by anti-Konkomba propaganda. Conversely, Konkomba statements express the view that they are still denied 'true independence'. During the period of colonisation by the British, most NR Konkomba were nominally controlled by the Ya-Na, the Dagomba paramount chief, and a number of new Dagomba chiefs were implanted amongst them, in contrast to the Konkomba of French Togoland who remained autonomous (Skalnić, 1986).

The Ya-Na was put in charge of the inhabitants of both the areas that may previously have been mutually considered as Dagomba-conquered, and of the neighbouring parts controlled by Konkomba clans referred to by them as Likpamkam, or Konkomba-land. According to Tait, an anthropologist who spent considerable time collecting the accounts of both groups in the 1950s, prior to that in these regions:

Dagomba 'rule' was limited to sporadic raids to obtain the slaves needed for the annual tribute to Ashanti. (1961, 9)

At some point in the 15th or 16th century, Dagomba ancestors had entered this region as armed cavalry and driven the indigenous Konkomba further east. Here historical accounts diverge as the Dagomba claim political control whilst the Konkomba insist that actual,

⁴ While there are no ethnically disaggregated figures, the 2000 Population Census quotes 93.3% of the population of Saboba-Chereponi district (with a large proportion of Konkomba residents) as rural, whereas the Northern Region average stands at 73.4%.

meaningful, authority was never exercised and that they never recognised Dagomba 'overlordship'. However, the two groups have a history of mutual trade and sometimes intermarriage. Although representatives of KOYA insist that this was mostly through the abduction of Konkomba girls for the Ya-Na's harem of wives, the ambiguous symbolic importance of this to the Dagomba royal bloodline can and has been exploited in different ways, most recently in the Yendi succession dispute where both 'gates' or lineages have courted the Konkomba, who are now recognised as wielding significant influence in terms of politics and numbers.

The Konkomba are mostly subsistence farmers with an emphasis on the production of yams, which since the early 1980s have been sold directly through the Konkomba yam market in Accra rather than via Dagomba and Nanumba intermediaries. They practise long-term shifting agriculture, moving on when soil fertility is exhausted. Land pressure, through soil degradation and population increases, has led to significant southward migration since the 1930s, primarily to Nanun and West and East Gonja Districts. The monetisation during colonialism also encouraged migration in search of ways to acquire consumer goods and meet tax obligations. This pattern was reinforced by the 'Cow War' alluded to earlier, which led Konkomba refugees to settle in Nanun (Talton 2003a, Skalník, 1986). The Konkomba also hunt, traditionally with poison arrows but now mostly with rifles, both weapons that were used in the inter-ethnic violence.

As there are no ethnically disaggregated statistics, circumstantial evidence must be used to determine the factual basis for common claims of inter-ethnic differences; though it is also important to remember that the significance of such claims is not directly correlated with their substance. The Konkomba are seen as having higher birth rates than the majority groups, a perception connected to recent migration patterns as well as to external understandings of their family structure, which has fuelled fears amongst the Gonja and Nanumba of being 'swamped'.

The common perception of the Konkomba as having lower levels of education than the majority groups is supported by observations, such as the fact that the first secondary school in a Konkomba area opened in the 1970s when there was already a teacher training college in Yendi, the Dagomba capital. Konkomba youth were also disadvantaged by the difficulty in getting to school when homesteads are scattered across a large area and past cultural differences relating to the obligations of children and youth. The resulting educational gap is interpreted variously as a sign of discrimination and relative impoverishment or as proof that the larger political elite of the majority groups has been selected on merit. In general, levels of illiteracy in over fifteens are much higher in the NR, at 78.7%, compared to the national average of 45.9% (Government of Ghana, 2002).

The Konkomba myth of origin states that they came from a hole in the ground, a legend common amongst autochthonous groups. Their pre-colonial political organisation seems to have centred around districts inhabited by clans whose status and autonomy were represented through the presence of an earth shrine tended by a religious leader. The earthpriest is an important figure to all Northern Region groups generally known as the *tindana* (pl. *tindamba*), or *otinda* in Likpokpaln, the Konkomba language. Literally, this term means the keeper of the land, although some of the majority representatives now take this to mean 'first settler on the land' (NORTRAD, 2002, 7) implying that these were chiefs who were subjugated and hence forfeited their land rights. The *tindamba* of conquered groups were sometimes incorporated into chiefly power structures, as court officials or minor chiefs⁵. As in other parts of Ghana (cf. Konings, 1986), there is disagreement as to whether earthpriests were universally considered the land-owners in the pre-colonial political order, while the chiefs controlled the people, or if only the indigenous minorities held this view and the majorities already regarded *tindamba* as having solely ritual importance. *Tindamba* and

⁵ An example is the Konkomba *tindana* in Yendi, a former Konkomba town known as Chare that became the traditional capital of Dagbon, who was incorporated as an official of the Ya-Na's court.

other minority representatives were amongst the traditional leaders bypassed by the indirect rule structure of the British administration, which also notably excluded all the female chiefs of the Nanumba and Mamprusi. The highest 'African' colonial institution, the Northern Territorial Council, was composed entirely of the male chiefs who were the heads of the Native Authorities when created in 1946, later including their educated advisors. Hence the NR *tindamba* are not represented in the modern chieftaincy institutions that evolved from the interpretations of tradition and the alliances of this period, such as the Traditional Councils and Regional and National Houses of Chiefs.

In the colonial and post-colonial period, Christian missions succeeded in converting many minority ethnic group members to their faith, setting up schools, churches and literacy programmes in their areas, whereas the majority ethnic group elites remained nominally Muslim. Disregarding the role of traditional religions, which remain very important to all groups in the Northern Region, there have been some suggestions that this religious divide further contributed to the inter-ethnic tensions. The churches have been seen as empowering minority groups through literacy campaigns and egalitarian theology (van der Linde and Naylor, 1999, 20) and as contributing to oppositional identity formation, for example through the formalisation of a Konkomba language (Skalnik, 1987). It is easy to overestimate the role of religion in the conflicts, however; although some churches were burnt during the 1994-1995 war, most interviewees did not regard it as an important factor in the conflict.

Other smaller minority groups that have been involved in the recent inter-ethnic conflicts include the Nawuri and Nchumburu, who were both put under Gonja control during British indirect rule although they claim to be independent and have their own chiefly traditions, and tangentially, the Bassare who have been ruled under the Dagombas. As we shall see, the 1991-1992 Gonja-versus-Nawuri conflict contributed, like the 1981 Nanumba-versus-Konkomba conflict, to the polarisation of majority and minority ethnic groups and to a build-up of tensions that would engulf the region in the 1994-1995 war.

6. An Introduction to the Majority Ethnic Groups of the Northern Region: the Mole-Dagbani and the Gonja

The 'majority' ethnic groups of the Northern Region share certain characteristics, the most important being a history of empire-building and hierarchical traditional leadership structures. These structures were not straightforwardly apical, however, the polities being divided into 'estates' with different functions (Skalnik, 1987). The Mole-Dagbani kingdoms, Mamprugu, Dagbon and Nanun, are also closely related through myths of common ancestry and language group. Their main oral histories claim descent from the warrior king Tohajiye (Tamakloe, 1931) and his cavalry who entered what is now Ghana from the North and conquered the indigenous people. The population which the cavalry subjugated, and from whom they must have drawn their wives, spoke a language from the Gur group and are known in Dagomba legend as 'the Black Dagomba' (Staniland, 1975).

Tohajiye's grandson, Na Gbewa, is said to have settled at Pusiga where the line was split between groups of his 17 children⁶. The Gonja, who are not seen as 'related' to the other majority groups, having in fact been in conflict with the Dagomba in the pre-colonial period, have a similar oral history. Their line is said to have been founded by Ndewura and his band of warriors from Mande (Goody, 1970). As a result, the Gonja also base their land claims on conquest and have a formalised hierarchical structure, their chiefs being known as '*Wura*' rather than '*Na*'.

⁶ Na Gbewa's sons are said to have conquered and founded the different kingdoms following a succession dispute at his death. While the eldest, Na Zirile, remained at Pusiga, Mamprugu was founded by Tohogu, Dagbon by Sitobu and Nanun by Ngmantambu.

The Nanumba, Dagomba and Gonja live in villages, often close to roads, and in small cities, reflecting their more centralised traditional hierarchy. Although the proportion of educated professionals is perceived as being larger amongst these groups, most are subsistence farmers, practising a rotational falling system to ensure soil fertility, which has led to tensions over the possibly damaging consequences of Konkomba shifting agriculture being reported by Nanumba elders.

While the Konkomba are considered the original inhabitants of Eastern Dagbon, and may have settled more widely than that in the 17th century⁷, their migration into Nanun and Gonja took place mainly in the first half of the 20th century, partly occasioned by colonial pressures and made possible by the imposition of colonial peace in a previously turbulent area. The Nanumba originally gave the Konkomba permission to settle in their territory on the condition that they would pay allegiance, including a tribute, to the Nanumba chief. This tribute consisted of some free labour on the chiefs' farms, a hind leg of any large wild or domestic animal that was slaughtered, and intermittent shares of foodstuffs and livestock.

While the Nanumba viewed this as a fair sharecropping arrangement with the Konkomba elders, lenient in comparison with those in other parts of Ghana such as the '*abunu*' or '*abusaa*' system of the Akans, problems appeared, partly because the scheme was not formalised. Some Konkomba regarded the arrangement as a system of tribute comparable and related to their subjection under the Dagombas and saw the collection of tribute from them as arbitrary and denigrating, their status as settlers adding to their representation as subjects within a 'traditional' order.

KOYA therefore recommended that their people should stop paying tribute and appoint their own leaders to adjudicate internal disputes. This resulted in the Nanumba chiefs feeling that they were being cheated of their rights as landlords and that the Konkomba, whom they had at first welcomed and given yam seeds to plant, were being ungrateful. The Konkomba had also been allowed to settle in Gonja, part of the theatre of the 1994 'Guinea Fowl War', where they were expected to pay tribute to the Gonja chiefs, but as tensions mounted the Konkomba halted their payments.

7. The Post-Colonial Period: A Changing Political Climate for Chieftaincy

The national political context has been important in affecting the nature and timing of inter-ethnic wars over tradition. The first large-scale conflict interacted with the political turbulence and economic crisis of 1981 which culminated in the overthrow by Jerry Rawlings of the civilian government he had handed over to less than two years earlier. Subsequent local wars took place in 1991-1992 during the build-up to the reintroduction of democratic elections in 1992, and in 1994-1995. Some interviewees saw this as a point of frustration with political developments, such as the failure of Rawlings to deliver on the hopes of minorities raised by his election rhetoric, and the effects of the 1992 Constitution.

In the period between 1980 and 2002 alone there were 22 ethnic conflicts in the Northern Region (Brukum, mimeo). Some of these have been episodes of intra-ethnic violence, a type of dispute with a long tradition as individuals and clans fight for positions within their power structures. As mentioned, succession conflicts are believed to have led to the founding of three of the majority groups. The most famous recent example of this form of violence was the 2002 flare-up of the intra-Dagomba conflict in Yendi, which led to the death of their paramount, the Ya-Na, and his retinue. Interviewees often attributed the increasingly fraught, if not violent, nature of such disputes in recent years to attempts by wealthy and politically powerful non-royals to become chiefs. Since military power was delegitimised in the colonial period and government interference in succession banned by the 1992 Constitution,

⁷ This view, expressed by KOYA in their statements, is supported by archaeological evidence of what they see as Konkomba-style pottery shards found in this region.

attempts to influence kingmakers have become the main pathways to chieftaincy, apart from genealogy and appointment by a senior chief.

Inter-ethnic violence in the Northern Region has generally taken place between minority and majority groups⁸ and has been bloodier than intra-ethnic disputes. In fact, as we shall see, the growing scale of the conflicts during this period, reaching its peak in the fighting of 1994-1995, can be partly explained by the perceived polarisation of minority and majority blocks. These recent inter-ethnic conflicts, often described in Ghana as 'wars', have differed in important ways from earlier pre-colonial forms of inter-ethnic violence, such as wars of conquest, raids and counter-raids, and indigenous-versus-settler opposition. They have, in a sense, been modern conflicts, with roots in colonial structures, state politics and laws.

While the NR ethnic groups have existed as diverse peoples for hundreds of years, flexible reciprocal understandings over land-use and the respect that comes from autonomy developed into mutually incompatible visions as a result of relatively recent power-balance shifts. Pre-colonial minority-majority relations were negotiable: an example is the incorporation of some Konkomba into the political order of the Dagombas in post-invasion Western Dagbon while others migrated to the east (Tait, 1961). Since the region was very scarcely populated, domination of people rather than land seems to have been the object of the majority chiefs and such control could not be entirely coercive as subjects could opt out by escaping to farm and hunt elsewhere.

The colonial period formalised ethnically segregated 'traditional' political structures, however, allowing domination to become more exploitative. The groups were brought into closer contact, but on very unequal terms, and prejudices against acephalous peoples as socially inferior became more acute. The symbolic and practical consequences of this were equally resented by members of these communities, contributing to the unification of Konkomba clan individualism into a larger group consciousness, and Nawuri and Nchumburu differentiation from the Gonja to whom they had previously been culturally close⁹.

It is apparent from a historical perspective that major chieftaincy institutions have never functioned as a parallel system in isolation from the state structure, rather the way the systems have interacted has been crucial for the potential for inter-ethnic conflict. The colonial and post-colonial state has mediated the power of the chiefs, both challenging their authority and influence (Boafo-Arthur, 2003; Ray, 1996) and selectively strengthening their control. The first President of the Independent Republic of Ghana, Nkrumah, resenting the former alliance between chiefs and colonialists and their later alliance with his political opponents such as the Northern People's Party (NPP), oversaw measures to limit the administrative and judicial authority of chiefs. By contrast, the government of Busia, himself a Wenchi royal, depended on the support of Southern chiefs and hence sought to restore some of their lost influence.

As mentioned, the colonial system of indirect rule as applied in the NR vested land control and administration in the governor and after independence, responsibility devolved to the Ghanaian state. In the South the land was vested in traditional groups¹⁰ and control in the early post-colonial period fluctuated between government and traditional authorities depending on the political orientation and support of those in government. In the North it remained vested in the president of the republic until 1978, although in practice customary

⁸ Only two inter-ethnic conflicts took place between minority groups in this time-period: the Bimoba-Komba clashes of the 1980s, commonly known as the Mango war, sparked by a market dispute (see Drucker-Brown, 1995) and a recent Konkomba-Nawuri dispute, the latter being more akin to a murder case than an ethnic conflict (interviews with Nana Atorsah and Nana B.M.).

⁹ The historical accounts of the two groups differ: in the interviews, Nawuris claimed that they are indigenous and separate and that their language is similar but different, while the Gonja considered the Nawuris as having originally been part of their invading army, hence the Gonja referring to the Nawuris as *mbongwura* – war captains.

¹⁰ Mainly in stools, as the office of the Southern chiefs is known, but also in some families.

rules were followed, including in the adjudication of land disputes in state courts. Since, as Pul (2003, 59) puts it:

indigenous laws among the Konkombas and the Dagombas alike vested the ownership of land in heads of families serving as trustees only, interethnic competition for land was virtually non-existent.

The weakening of the chieftaincy institution on a national level and the maintenance of working inter-ethnic relationships with regard to land-use minimised the potential for large-scale minority-versus-majority violence in the Northern Region during this period. The North was not insulated from political developments, however. As the military government of General I. K. Acheampong¹¹ came under increased political pressure in the late 1970s, it attempted to transform itself into a civilian one-party state through a national referendum and decided to repeal the old legislation and divest the land from the state in the hope of securing a badly needed Northern yes-vote. The effects of such a strategy depend of course on who is identified as the 'rightful' owners of the land, and thus to whom it should be divested.

At this point, previous academic interpretations diverge. According to Pul (2003) the outcome was already predetermined by the promise of the Northern majority chiefs to deliver a block yes-vote. Konings (1986) interprets the same events somewhat differently, seeing the pressure for state divestment of lands to the same chiefs as originating with the Nkrumah government's¹² educational reforms, which had created a Northern educational elite capable of campaigning for the rights of their traditional leaders. The two views are not irreconcilable, however, when considered in the light of the educational differential between majority and minority ethnic groups mentioned earlier. The power distribution created by the increasingly meritocratic post-colonial system was not ethnically neutral, as educational uptake was affected by cultural traditions such as decentralised minority settlement patterns and the Konkomba custom of infant betrothal of girls (Talton, 2003b).

The 1978 committee¹³ established under I. R. Alhassan to investigate in whom the land should be vested was unusually skewed in its ethnic composition, however, dominated by members of the four Northern Region chiefly groups¹⁴. Its conclusion was controversial: that the land should be vested in the chiefs of the four majority groups on the grounds of conquest, rather than indigeneity or existing freeholds, to the exclusion of the 13 minority groups. The reason adduced for this was that groups such as the Konkomba were implicitly recognising the fact of conquest by not demanding the entire area in which they were indigenous.

While events overtook the then military government¹⁵, the broader change in policy was subsequently enshrined in the 1979 Constitution, Article 188, Paragraph 3 and 4, which stated that:

For the avoidance of doubt it is hereby declared that all lands in the Northern and Upper Regions of Ghana which immediately before the coming into force of this Constitution were vested in the Government of Ghana are not public lands [...] all lands [...] shall vest in any such person who was the owner of any such land

¹¹ The Supreme Military Council which ruled Ghana between 1975-1979.

¹² The Convention People's Party which was in government between 1949-1966.

¹³ The Committee on Ownership of Land and Positions of Tenants in Northern and Upper Regions, popularly known as the Alhassan Committee.

¹⁴ Six out of the twelve members of the commission came from the NR majority ethnic groups, two from the Upper Regions and four from the South; none came from the 13 NR minority groups.

¹⁵ The Armed Forces Revolutionary Council seized power on the June 4, 1979, led by Jerry Rawlings, before temporarily handing over power to civilian politicians through the elections later that year which led to the founding of the Third Republic.

before any such vesting or in the appropriate skin (Government of Ghana, 1979, 140).

A policy of vesting the land in the institutions of chieftaincy for communal use, while hypothetically viable, was not acceptable to groups that are not represented in the institutions of chieftaincy. Despite state land appropriations for development projects such as rice farms and the Damango Game Reserve, they generally felt more comfortable with ultimate state control. While every citizen of Ghana is equally entitled to the communal resources of the state, the minorities found themselves excluded, both symbolically and practically through the income from leases, when control of the land was placed in the hands of the majority groups. Moreover, later developments seemed to close off the route to land control via the recognition of minority chiefs, which the 1979 Constitution had left ambiguously open by not spelling out who the original owners were.

The current highest chieftaincy institution, the National House of Chiefs, was created by the 1971 Chieftaincy Act introduced under the broadly pro-chief Busia government and reaffirmed by the 1992 Constitution, with a small difference of emphasis that came to have major consequences for the tensions in the region. The 1992 Constitution sought to insulate the institution from the state in order to ensure the political neutrality and hence survival and prestige of chieftaincy. It forbade the state appointment of chiefs (Article 270, Paragraph 2a) and the active participation of chiefs in party politics (276, 1) and conferred on the National House of Chiefs the right of recognition of any chief which had previously rested with the state (270, 3b)¹⁶.

If a minority group failed to get the desired recognition for their chief through their Traditional Council, all of which are majority controlled in the NR, they could no longer turn to the government directly, as the Mo had done in the early 1990s – winning a seat in the Northern Region House of Chiefs (NRHC). Instead they had to appeal the decision to their Regional House of Chiefs and then to the National House of Chiefs, and from there on to the Supreme Court. At every stage there was the possibility of year-long delays, besides which minority groups faced the risk that the choice to bring the case to the chief the majority groups considered in charge of that area would be interpreted as recognition of his relative superiority.

To minority group chiefs the situation resembled that of the colonial period: once again the lower traditional courts through which a case must pass could be closed off through delays or the refusal of majority chiefs to forward a case. The principle of inheritance was also enshrined in the definition of who constitutes a chief in Article 277 and, crucially, the responsibility for the reformation of the institution was placed with the structure itself. Hence it became difficult for minority groups to see how their demands for land-recognition through a seat in the NRH as nationally recognised indigenous ethnic groups in the region could be won.

Other state policies related to the vesting of the land in the chiefs of the majority groups also contributed to the polarisation of NR minority and majority ethnic groups. While the judicial system was obliged to disregard the current demographics and use of disputed land in favour of 'traditional' ownership as then defined, no attempt was made to mitigate the inter-ethnic tensions resulting from this policy or even to re-draw regional borders to reflect the new 'traditional' borders. In 1981, as hostilities between the Nanumba and Konkomba erupted, this was to lead to a disastrous delay in police intervention. The alarm was raised in Bimbilla, the capital of Nanun, but had to go via Tamale, Accra and Ho before it reached

¹⁶The practice of state recognition of new chiefs through the publication of their names in the Local Government Bulletin, known as gazetting, was started by the Nkrumah CPP government through the 1961 Chieftaincy Act, removed by the Busia government through the 1971 Chieftaincy Act, and then resumed by the Rawlings PNDC government which adjusted Section 48(2) of this act through the Chieftaincy (Amendment) Law in 1985.

Nwanta in Kpasaland, which had recently become part of the Nanun Traditional Area (Skalník, 1986).

8. The Escalation of Inter-ethnic Violence in the NR

In 1981 the first large-scale inter-ethnic conflict in the Northern Region since the pre-colonial period broke out, also known as the Pito War. Young Konkomba intellectuals in Bimbilla had founded their own local office of KOYA in the late 1970s, which argued for emancipation, education and the abolition of 'outdated' customs that had previously led to intra-ethnic feuding, such as the infant betrothal of girls in exchange for the labour of their future husband on the parents' farm. Subsequently, the Konkomba had stopped paying tribute and started adjudicating their disputes under their own headmen (or *onikpel*) and leader.

Since chieftaincy in the NR has come to be intimately connected with the right to land, this was seen by Nanumba chiefs as an act of rebellion, denying them their status as landowners as well as an important source of income. The Nanumba lodged a complaint against 'secret tribunals' with the district administration and when nothing was done seized a Konkomba leader and temporarily expelled him (Skalník, 1986). The Konkomba maintained that they had a right as citizens to appoint leaders amongst themselves and that the Nanumba were unacquainted with their culture and hence ill-equipped to settle Konkomba civil cases in their traditional courts. KOYA also organised direct market access for Konkomba yams in Accra, terminating the lucrative role of Nanumba market-women in parts of Nanun.

Tensions had already developed over the refusal of the Nanumba paramount, the Bimbilla-Na, to appoint a Konkomba who had been nominated as chief in Kpasaland, formerly uninhabited Nanumba hunting grounds where some Konkomba had settled. This led to the Konkomba siding with the Atwode, another previously acephalous ethnic group whose recently created paramount chief was seeking to control Kpasaland. When the courts ruled in favour of Nanumba control in 1979 the Bimbilla-Na posted a number of new chiefs to the area, whom the Konkomba ignored.

The violence was finally sparked by a fight between a Nanumba man and a Konkomba man over a woman in a *pito*¹⁷ bar and spread from Bimbilla to Kpasaland where the Nanumba and Dagomba, who were also seen as 'oppressors', were even further outnumbered by the Konkomba than in the Nanumba traditional capital. By the time the state police arrived in Kpasaland several days later, the ethnic majority residents had all been killed or forced to flee. The attempts by the Nanumba to retake Kpasaland resulted in more casualties and the war was only ended through state intervention by Tamale police when Bimbilla itself was threatened. Estimates of the number that died in the conflict range from the low hundreds to 2,000 and thousands of people were made homeless and lost their cattle and material possessions.

The 1981 conflict left an enduring sense of humiliation amongst the Nanumba who had lost their paramount chief in the fighting, as well as control over several villages. There was no settlement and the commission set up to investigate the war headed by Justice Lamptey was suspended by the government take-over of Rawlings on 31 December 1981. Nanumba traditional leaders petitioned the government for removal of a long list of 'disloyal' Konkomba, but the Rawlings administration was content to enforce the stalemate. Meanwhile the Konkomba were coming into conflict with the Gonja through the 1991-1992 war, and increasingly with the Dagomba through KOYA petitions for an independent Konkomba paramountcy.

The next large-scale inter-ethnic conflict, the 1991-1992 Nawuri-Gonja war, was to break out on the eve of democratic transition. The Nawuris, who were part of East Gonja District,

¹⁷ A form of locally brewed sorghum beer.

refused to recognise Gonja claims of traditional control since they had never been invaded and the issue of who controlled the land had become increasingly tense after it had been vested in the majority chiefs in the late 1970s. The Gonja claim was strengthened by the fact that the Nawuris had been put under the administrative control of the Gonja town of Salaga during the British colonial period; previously when they had been part of German Togoland they had been administrated through Krachi and their chiefs recognised through the awarding of medals.

In 1991 the disputed control resulted in the double allocation of a piece of land after a plot given by the Nawuri chief to the Catholic church was leased by the local Gonja chief to a mechanical workshop, argument over which sparked the fighting. Again, tensions had been aggravated by ethnic youth associations. The Gonja Youth Association had originally been an inter-ethnic organisation aimed at bringing all the groups in Gonja Districts together¹⁸, but as minority groups dissatisfied with the dominance of ethnic Gonjas started their own youth association it became a more exclusionary vehicle for Gonja territorial and political ambitions. The political shift was reflected by a name change to Gonjaland Youth Association, implying Gonja traditional ownership of all Gonja District lands.

The association sought to hold their annual meeting of 1991 in Kpandai, the traditional capital of the Nawuri and the seat of the highest Nawuri chief, under the new name. The chief, viewing this an outright provocation, appealed to the government, which banned the meeting. Shortly thereafter fighting broke out in which the Gonja initially expelled the Nawuri. The Konkomba, who live and farm in the area surrounding Kpandai, were mistaken for Nawuris by the Gonja and suffered some casualties, after which they joined the Nawuri side. The fighting spread to Nchumburu villages, another minority group under the Gonja, and to the district capital, Salaga. A stalemate ensued after the Nawuri regrouped under the leadership of the Nawuri Youth Association and recaptured Kpandai in 1992; the houses of Gonja residents were burnt and the government forced to aid in their resettlement and removal from the area by bus.

The government set up the Justice Ampiah Committee to investigate the conflict and the claims of the various groups. The conclusions of the committee were broadly in favour of the Nawuri case, a view that proved so controversial that its report was never published after having been leaked to newspapers in 1994, and no related government white paper released¹⁹. The Nawuri-Gonja tensions remain unresolved to this day. They have led to considerable underdevelopment of the Kpandai area, as the district capital from which government funds are allocated is the Gonja-controlled town of Salaga, and continued post-war ethnic segregation. Moreover, through these events the Konkomba were brought in to conflict with the Gonja, leading the two groups to perceive each other as threats and impediments to their traditional political ambitions, a fact that was to influence the extent and nature of the 1994 war.

In 1994 the Northern Region was engulfed in an inter-ethnic war of a size not previously witnessed in independent Ghana. As the Nanumba, Dagomba and Gonja fought the Konkomba, 441 villages were destroyed and in excess of 178,000 people displaced (Inter-NGO Consortium, mimeo). At least 2,000 people²⁰ lost their lives (NPI/Inter-NGO Consortium, mimeo), a particularly high death toll in a region with a population of only just over 1.8 million (Government of Ghana, 2002). As mentioned earlier, the question of paramountcy was a major factor precipitating the escalation of tensions leading up to the conflict.

¹⁸ The Gonja, Vagla, Lobi, Nawuri, Nchumburu etc.

¹⁹ See *The Ghanaian Voice* (1994, 11-13th April), 'Gonjas threaten to go to war over Kpandai Lands'.

²⁰ While the 1999 Oxfam report estimated that 15,000 lives were lost, 2,000 is the official figure quoted by the InterNGO Consortium and was based on a body count. However, it is important to note that many NR inhabitants believe the actual death toll to have been higher. The final number is difficult to verify, especially because of the Konkomba custom of taking their dead with them from the battlefield for burial.

In June 1993, KOYA presented a petition directly to the president of the National House of Chiefs requesting the elevation of the Chief of Saboba to the status of paramount chief, thus circumventing the Ya-Na, through whom the request should have been made according to the 1992 Constitution. Furthermore, the petition asserted that the Konkomba had inhabited the entire Oti basin from the 17th century, a claim that would negate their status as immigrants in Nanun and Gonja Districts. While the Konkomba were not looking to establish land ownership outside of Dagbon 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.

The Ya-Na demanded that the petition be reformulated in a more respectful tone and resubmitted to him, but when this was done his reply in a letter to the NHC was an unambiguous refusal, claiming that the Konkomba were immigrants from Togo. The Ya-Na later clarified his position, stating that the Konkomba had originally been driven out by the Dagomba cavalry, but had then 'trickled back'. After the petition and its refusal, tensions were running high, and on October 31, 1993, the Ghanaian Chronicle published rumours warning of an imminent bloodbath. In Bimbilla the police station was broken into in November 1993 and guns seized, some of which had been confiscated from the Nanumba by the police during the 1981 conflict. Weapons appear to have been stockpiled by all sides.

The 'Guinea Fowl War' got its popular name from the incident that finally sparked the violence, an argument between a Konkomba and a Nanumba man over the sale of a black guinea fowl²¹ at Nakpayili market near Bimbilla on 31 January 1994. The quarrel quickly degenerated into ethnic abuse, threats of oncoming war, and violence in which the Konkomba man severed a finger. The following day the son of the Konkomba man injured in the fight sought out the Nanumba man on his farm and shot him, after which large-scale Konkomba-Nanumba fighting broke out in Nanun, and quickly spread to Dagomba and Gonja-controlled areas.

Two days after the start of the war, the Konkomba minority in Tamale, numbering about 5,000 people at the time, were attacked by youths from the majority ethnic groups and forced to flee. The fighting centred around the Oti river region, mainly outside the district capitals that were protected by the army. Almost all Dagomba, Nanumba, and Gonja settlements along the Bimbilla-Yendi road were burnt and February-March saw intense fighting in seven districts²².

Road blocks were also erected along the Tamale–Buipe road in the West Gonja District. While it is believed that a significant number of the Konkomba victims were killed at these road blocks (Bogner, 2000), West Gonja District was not among the seven districts included in the state of emergency declared by the government on February 10. All Konkomba villages in West Gonja were destroyed and the survivors have never returned, the paramount chief of the Gonja both at the time and at present having made it clear that they are not welcome. The current Yagbonwura was formerly the Gonja divisional chief of Kpandai at Kpembe, from where he was forced away by the Nawuri and the Konkomba in 1992; he personally lost 16 close relatives in that and the following 1994 war.

In June 1994 a government commission²³ pressured the parties into signing a peace treaty. The state of emergency was lifted in August, but despite this renewed but localised fighting took place in March and April 1995 in Bimbilla in Nanumba district and the area around Kpatinga in Gushiegu-Karaga District, which was burnt by the Konkomba. The government responded with retaliatory attacks on the Konkomba villages seen as responsible (Bogner,

²¹ Completely black guinea fowl are unusual and often used for ritual sacrifices rather than cooking (interview with Naa Alhaji Salifu Dawuni II of Nanun and his elders and court).

²² Yendi, Tamale Municipal, Gushiegu-Karaga, Saboba-Chereponi, Zabzugu-Tatale, Nanumba and East Gonja Districts.

²³ The Commission for Permanent Peace.

2000), which in combination with the peace negotiation efforts by civil society organisations finally halted the violence. The post-colonial ethnic dichotomies of the NR had become violently explosive and defusing them would prove a very complex task.

9. The Discourse and Practice of Chieftaincy in the NR

As Sally Falk Moore has pointed out: 'The traditional used in the present is not the same object it was in the lived-in past.' (1987: 728) The various political and religious systems as practised in specific localities at specific times in the Northern Region's pre-colonial past referred to as its traditions, and particularly those functions that came to be identified in the colonial period with chiefly roles, have evolved into very different objects in the way they are now perceived and used. While the fact that the practices and authority subsumed under the label tradition are dynamic may seem an obvious point to make, it is important, both because this is a discourse legitimated by ideas of continuity and authenticity and hence prone to self-representation as unchanging, and because as noted earlier the development of tradition in the NR was not power neutral. These two tendencies in conjunction have left a problematic political legacy.

Because the colonisers chose to rule through a decentralised system based on ethnic criteria, what Mamdani (1996) calls 'decentralised despotism', ethnicity became a dimension of both colonial power and of resistance to it, as racial domination was mediated through ethnically organised local institutions. The ascriptive nature of ethnicity made it powerful since it meant that this form of social identity could coexist and encapsulate other forms of consciousness. As Vail puts it:

People were members of a particular ethnic group whether they liked it or not. It was simply a fact of existence. As such, ethnic identity could inhere in both petty bourgeois and worker, in both peasant farmer and striving politician (1989, 10) .

Bourdieu has emphasised the way existing hierarchies, or social topographies, can exert an influence on our unconscious. He writes:

The categories of perception of the social world are, as regards their most essential features, the product of the internalisation, the incorporation, of the objective structures of social space (1985, 728).

In the NR, since certain rights have become associated with the traditional sphere, traditional discourse with its different constructs such as chiefs is invoked to justify access to these, even if the competition involves only groups who have historically been without leaders and traditions of this type. As Drucker-Brown puts it:

chiefship in the Ghanaian north is an institution of long duration and its idiom is in many ways closer to that of chiefless peoples than is the idiom of modern political rhetoric. It is also true that in general, for chiefly and chiefless groups alike, all politics in the Ghanaian north is influenced if not directly mediated by leaders whose authority stems from the values and organization characteristic of pre-colonial politics (1988-89, 94).

Drucker-Brown points to the combination of modern political and traditional power, justified through continuity, of chiefs. While versions of the community leadership roles now regarded as chiefly have existed for a long time, from an alternative perspective this may be seen as less significant to contemporary inter-ethnic 'chieftaincy' struggles than their current importance. Their relatively recent state-mediated rights and powers are also important in explaining the acquisition of chiefs, similar to majority traditional male leaders, by most formerly chiefless minority groups in the latter half of the 20th century and why they had not done so before.

The role of chiefs is particularly complex as they are both ethnic leaders and important ethnic identity symbols (Awedoba, 2003) in their own right. Through the idiom of traditional authority, chiefs have come to mediate the relative status, material rights and the unity of an ethnic group. As such, traditional authority is a powerful political discourse, not an historical artefact to be unearthed and reconstituted. That is not to say that the legitimacy of chieftaincy is invented; in the case of many ethnic groups the concepts with which it has become equated have fundamental spiritual importance, representing the moral philosophy and unifying principle of their group identity (Skalník, 1987).

Chieftaincy draws on real political resources conceptualised as traditional, such as historical continuity, spiritual and ritual community functions, perceived cultural authenticity and local knowledge. This makes it an attractive discourse to both ethnic and political leaders (two different categories in Ghana even if they may often overlap in the lifetime of an office-holder) as a way of mobilising a constituency through imagining and prizing a common social identity (Lund, 2003). Such discourse can be more or less inclusive, ranging from Pan-Africanism to nationalist usages²⁴ to narrow ethnic conceptions. Significantly for its relationship with violence, it has also been theorised as unusually volatile (Gilbert, 1994). Because it is dependent on symbols, attempts to co-opt it can backfire as utterances are recast in unintentional and potentially explosive ways.

It is important for our understanding of the meanings and implications of chieftaincy to remember that the content of the functions described by the concept of 'chiefs', originally European, was never uniform as it had its basis in different pre-colonial political systems and has been continuously re-imagined. In order to be practical and to persist during the colonial and post-colonial periods it has had to be fundamentally syncretic (van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal, 1999) borrowing ideas and forms from the colonisers and from other 'chieftaincies' within the new system of the colonial unit. While chieftaincy is dynamic precisely because it is still an operational political system, in Ghana a national cross-cultural definition of what chieftaincy means together with a societal consensus that African values should be preserved, enshrined in the 1979 and 1992 Constitutions, have led to modern traditional state institutions²⁵ that are problematic on both a theoretical and ideological level, since access to these is determined by whether a traditional leader is seen to be chiefly.

State institution building, if it is exclusive, can be understood as a vehicle of class formation. To quote Lonsdale:

Ready access to state institutions is therefore literally what makes classes dominant. It economises their class effort with an external constraint. Institution-building is therefore more correctly construed as class formation than political development. It is an exclusionary process before it is an integrative one. Dominant classes have internal access to the state apparatus as its operators; dominated classes have external access only, as supplicants (1981, 162).

If access is differentiated along ethnic lines this will serve to reinforce and multiply perceived and actual inter-ethnic inequalities and give grounds for resentment. As Bourdieu (1985) would put it, such institutions are the materialised form of the social topography that some actors are fighting or trying to reform.

Similarly on the local level, while chieftaincy is often imagined as a cheap and culturally authentic institution which can be harnessed to take pressure off the judicial system and

²⁴ An interesting example is the way African Socialism was constructed and legitimised through imagery of chieftaincy, especially during the Nkrumah CPP government's spell as a one-party state (1965-1966). For examples of this discourse, see Apter (1970, 310).

²⁵ These include the Traditional Councils which were reintroduced in 1971, the Regional Houses of Chiefs established in 1959 (currently 10 – one for each region) and the National House of Chiefs established by the 1969 Constitution, Article 154(i).

provide local order (cf. Fred-Mensah, 1999) it must nevertheless fund itself. If it is seen as culturally foreign, a vestige of the colonial period, then the collection of funds for its upkeep through fees and tributes will be seen as illegitimate, giving grounds for social change. Rather than a locally authentic system, dispute settlement, when conducted by majority chiefs for minority populations, was one of the complaints cited by the Konkomba in the run-up to the 1981 war, and these tensions were also seen as contributing to the 1994 conflict.

Konkomba interviewees claimed that the Dagomba and Nanumba were ignorant of their culture and used their neo-traditional courts as a way of asserting themselves and collecting revenue for incidents that would not have resulted in fines according to Konkomba customs. Other minority interviewees saw the problem as one of partiality towards majority defendants in chiefly courts, leading to a preference for state courts which were seen as more, if not entirely, neutral. These are vital considerations which must be taken into account if institution building is not to institutionalise inter-ethnic tensions.

The attempt by minority group leaders to achieve chieftaincy can hence be seen as a multidimensional neo-traditional enterprise to gain admission into the elite rather than simple institutional access. Through official recognition of their chiefs, the status, public profile and clout of the group may be elevated and the direction of power influenced. From an elite-centred approach it also offers an opportunity to unite personal ambitions for office with communal aspirations (Lund, 2003).

Crucial to the impact of the institutions of chieftaincy and of chiefs is the way that traditional authority is currently being conceptualised. Both Ghanaian academic writing on the future of chieftaincy (cf. Boafo-Arthur, 2003) and its modern institution-holders (NORTRAD, 2003) emphasise the role of 'progressive' chiefs in community development projects. Similarly, their oft-cited role as guardians of tradition is envisioned as decidedly instrumental, weeding out traditions considered impractical and immoral and preserving those considered morally uplifting and culturally appealing to outsiders as well as group members, what Lentz has called 'a kind of local "folklore"' (1995, 420).

There is a clear parallel here with the insistence of colonial administrators on weeding out customary laws 'repugnant to natural justice and morality' or 'inconsistent with the provisions of existing ordinances' of the Native Tribunals Ordinance of 1932. As in the colonial period, the role conceived for chiefs is simultaneously secular in character and legitimated by tradition. For traditional institutions to be fitted into the administrative framework of the nation they must be consistent, pragmatic and rational, or otherwise ritual; there can be no challenges to the underlying rationale of the modern state. Chiefs are seen as a mediating link between state and people, representing their people symbolically, as their 'grandfather' or 'Nana', rather than democratically – the image of the family bond an important element in how this representation may easily become ethnicised.

The sphere of chieftaincy is popularly understood as depoliticised, a view in keeping with the colonial conception of chieftaincy as closely parallel to European monarchic systems, which historically 'evolved' to be neutral. Since chiefs are perceived as standing for the unity of their communities they must not be 'partisan' (Lentz, 1998) yet they are expected to lobby the government for state development projects, which brings them into close relationship with political actors. The development of such links means that one party is often identified as being more supportive of the interests of the group that the chief represents, whether this is an ethnic community or an intra-ethnic subgroup such as a royal family or gate, leading to the interpretation of political events in terms of salient conflict narratives. Such tendencies are reinforced by Ghana's two-party system of government and opposition (Lentz, 2002).

10. The Role of State Incentives and Interventions in NR Ethnic Emergencies

The relationship between ‘traditional’ and state institutions in Ghana is highly contested and indeterminate, a situation which can be explained by its advantages to governments. Official traditional leadership institutions lend imagined continuity and the sanction of a pre-colonial past to the unit of the nation-state²⁶ and divert the efforts of the chiefs away into a sphere separated from politics. Meanwhile the under-resourcing of such institutions ensures that they cannot compete for equal status with the other organs of the state and provides the potential for their disciplining, making them solicitous of government support and cheap to run. As Lund (2002, 2003) argues, when a state imparts legitimacy, its own legitimacy is also strengthened by the perception of having the final authority to recognise other leaders. Rather than being competitors for the loyalty of their citizens, recognised chiefs and government legitimate each other, creating common incentives for these groups.

In the interest of legitimacy the state must be seen to be neutral, to represent the interests of all citizens, and chiefs must be seen as depoliticised in order to function as the guardians of society’s values. In combination with the legal separation of the spheres of chieftaincy and state of the 1992 Constitution, aimed at excluding the Houses of Chiefs from political pressures which could endanger the prestige of chiefs, and the volatility of traditional discourse, this creates disincentives for government to intervene in ‘chieftaincy affairs’. Even vague comments by prominent politicians may be interpreted through conflict narratives, and valuable neutrality and prestige lost.

A solution to this problem is to deny jurisdiction or devolve responsibility, either by referring any issues related to ‘traditional authority’ back to the sphere of the Houses of Chiefs or by setting up independent commissions to investigate competing claims. The state is very much involved in the creation of the incentives for inter-ethnic conflict, however, and as it is responsible for the peace of the country and the holder of the monopoly on sanctioned violence, it falls to the state to stop large-scale outbreaks of violence.

Local incentives for inter-ethnic conflict deriving from the policies of the state include making theoretical land-rights dependent on access to chieftaincy institutions, as well as other forms of ethnic competition for state resources. Drucker-Brown (1995) points to the role of policies of decentralisation in generating inter-ethnic conflict in the NR. Since 1989 the importance and number of districts has increased steadily. State resources are channelled, taxes collected, and much of the available employment for the educated elite is generated through districts that are essentially ethnically defined, creating strong incentives for achieving ethnic dominance and securing a new district.

The Ghanaian state has been criticised (Akwetey, 1996; Skalník, 2002) for choosing to repress the expressions of conflict rather than changing the institutional incentives for its development, an approach that is understood to be conflict-freezing (Skalník, 1986). The exclusion of debate over ‘traditional’ issues from the fundamentally discursive political sphere, while temporarily distancing the government from involvement that may threaten its perceived neutrality and hence legitimacy, may become in itself a contributor to large-scale inter-ethnic violence as it displaces its expressions into spheres that are less flexible. As Zartman (1991, 300) puts it:

Conflict reduction means both reducing incompatibilities, where possible, and returning the pursuit of those incompatibilities to non-violent or political means. The ends and means are inextricably linked, a commonplace that is often forgotten in conflict management. Politics is the process of handling demands, and demands unhandled can escalate from politics to violence; conflict management that does not deal with basic causes is likely to be short-lived.

²⁶ See for example Arhin’s (2002, 111) description of the NHC as a means of overcoming the alienation of the national state from local governance inherited from colonialism; unifying the chiefs institutionally unifies the ethnic groups of the nation and ties ethnic identity to loyalty to the state.

11. Basic Causes of NR Conflict: Discrimination, Access to Employment and Education, and Underdevelopment

Perceptions of inter-ethnic inequality and discrimination in the fields of education, government influence, resources and appointments, access to justice and cultural status are widespread amongst ethnic minority group members and others sympathetic to their cause. In direct contradiction to the intention of the 1992 Constitution to keep political and chieftaincy spheres separate, political appointments as well as the right to headmen and chiefs were seen as related by interviewees; such achievements and rights being valued in terms of group position and power. A common view amongst minority interviewees was that majority group members' feeling of superiority made the general subordination of acephalous groups important to them. As Nana B. M., a Konkomba headman, speaking about the Nanumba and Dagomba, put it: 'They don't want a Konkomba man to be a head of any other thing.'

Some majority group interviewees brought up discrimination and prejudice against minority groups as a problem, though there was a feeling that this was in the past and tensions could have been resolved through dialogue between their representatives and majority chiefs. Most seemed to consider such claims as exaggerated or irrelevant. Views of disparities as natural, caused by better qualifications and larger numbers of majority members (cf. Frimpong, 1994; Mahama, 2003) and allusions to minority groups, especially the Konkomba, as aggressive and abusing the generosity of the communities in which they were considered settlers were frequently expressed.

Generally there was a correspondence between the concerns raised by non-elite and elite members of an ethnic group; it was not the case that the rural farmers who had been involved in the 1994-1995 conflict did not know what they were fighting for, as reported by the Ghanaian press at the time (cf. Kassim, 1994a). Issues of land, chieftaincy, tribute, ethnic group status and discrimination were clearly articulated and understood, although rumours (such as the Western Togo Liberation Front conspiracy theory) that were dismissed by educated group members were sometimes put forward as arguments by less educated interviewees.

Access to education was seen as especially important, the concerns of the young rural Konkomba who attended a group interview reflecting the emphasis of KOYA, their ethnic youth association:

maybe a Konkomba boy gets a very good pass and he should get maybe some nice school to attend, when they realise the boy is a Konkomba boy they cancel the name.

This focus on education formed part of minority group strategies to increase the political clout and standing of their ethnic group, as well as the personal control that comes from having literate representation and reliable interpreters of documents.

Concerns were raised that the educated professionals that they did have were discriminated against for employment or that their appointment gave rise to majority objections. A recent example mentioned by Konkomba interviewees was the Nanumba opposition to a Konkomba District Chief Executive for the new Wulensi District, nominated by the President. Interestingly, a follow-up question about respect in response to claims of discrimination was answered by some Konkomba elders as if the assumption was that their rising modern power was disrespectful to the majority groups:

If when you get to a position, that one everybody can be there, then the thing is if I'm there too that doesn't mean that I wouldn't respect you. But if you are seen suppressing me not to be there, definitely I won't be in good terms with you and you feel that I don't respect you.

Such perceived inter-ethnic inequalities do not translate directly into economic superiority of majority commoners or even chiefs over members of the minority groups, however, a fact which may reduce conflict risk. Other groups commended the Konkomba as proficient yam farmers, and since the surplus is sold they are seen as relatively prosperous, although such perceptions should not be overstated as the poverty levels of the NR²⁷ are generally high. Similarly, the chiefs of the NR are not wealthy compared to those of southern Ghana. Only the four former paramounts of the majority groups and the paramount chief of the Mo receive a government stipend, currently set at 200,000 cedis a month, or approximately £12.50. Since tributes from the minority groups mostly ceased before the outbreak of the 1981 conflict and have not resumed, they are largely dependent on the support of their own ethnic group and farming, supplemented with fees from dispute settlement and sometimes by allowances from their local District Assemblies (NORTRAD, 2002).

Poverty and underdevelopment were still spontaneously mentioned by many interviewees as a cause of the conflicts. This factor was seen to work in different ways: some believed that it had created desperation and a lack of perceived value of human life, others that the poverty of chiefs led to friction by making them vulnerable to manipulation, and there were rumours that young men had been paid 100,000 cedis per day to fight. The building of irrigation dams to avoid the male unemployment caused by the long dry season, from the end of October until May, which was seen as contributing to recruitment and tensions, was suggested as a means of alleviating tensions.

Poverty was also seen to have estranged minority groups and reinforced perceptions of inequality. As Emmanuel Bombande, a post-conflict peace negotiator, put it:

There is no road to Saboba, that bridge floods when the rainy season comes in, you name it. So then they were like 'are we part of Ghana?' [...] For government, development is development, 'we are doing our best to distribute the resources equally', but for the community – no, the perception is completely different.

The absolute deprivation caused by underdevelopment may have increased attention to relative positions, making perceptions of inequality sharper and inter-group relations more hostile. Many indicators also pointed to the importance of land rights.

12. More than a Factor of Production: Theory, Practice and Interpretations of NR Land Rights

Majority and minority group interviewees expressed claims to land based on different legitimising discourses, ranging from historical claims of indigeneity and conquest, to claims based on current and recent land-use and different interpretations of citizenship. A common phrase amongst majority interviewees was that the control of land and people had been theirs 'since time immemorial'; this was countered by elite minority discourses of autochthony and rights as citizens of Ghana. Poorer and less-educated Konkomba settlers did not refer to any historical claims, however, but expressed views on rights to land use as practice based. One Konkomba headman summed up this sentiment by saying that he couldn't understand how someone could come and drive him away from land they claimed belonged to their grandfather which he had been farming before they were born.

As mentioned, discourses of ethnicity in Ghana assume a group of overlapping characteristics: language, culture and, for groups indigenous to the modern territorial unit, a 'traditional' place of residence. This conflation of the cultural and physical is embodied in ethnic mapping, an intensely political exercise that was last undertaken in the 1960s census,

²⁷ The Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper puts poverty levels in the NR at 69%, compared to a national average of 40%, and a Greater Accra District incidence of 5%.

when it was still believed that the production of such a map could be a neutral exercise with a scientific basis. The perception of territory, language and culture as not only congruent but inter-connected has imbued the concept of land rights with multiple significances, both practical and symbolic. Right to land control as the custodian of an ethnic homeland within Ghana confirms the rights of group members as national citizens and the legitimacy of their chief, who is also an ethnic symbol whose status reflects on the group.

Many interviewees from other ethnic groups stated that the 1994 Konkomba-Dagomba conflict was not over land but paramountcy. However, Konkomba and Dagomba informants pointed out that these were inseparable and emphasised their symbolic aspects. The Dagomba court historian Alhaji Gonje Sulamana Al-Hassan described the pre-conflict refusal of the Ya-Na to grant the Konkomba paramountcy, with its implied land rights, as based on a fear of the fragmentation of the Kingdom of Dagbon, which has great symbolic significance to the Dagomba. Meanwhile, Konkomba group interviewees said that the historical attempt by Dagomba to seize formal control over territory in which they were indigenous by conveying the impression that they controlled it to the British had been an attempt to rule them as slaves, because slaves do not have property. This interpretation may have been coloured by Konkomba historical memories of late 19th-century Dagomba slave raiding but is also an example of a popular discourse that directly contests the legitimacy of Dagomba traditional claims.

According to the present legal framework, all land in the Northern Region that has not been appropriated by the state is vested in chiefs on behalf of their 'people' or ethnic group. This provision is interpreted differently, not only by minority and majority groups, but by different actors within these. The Northern Regional House of Chiefs (NORTRAD, 2002) and the majority chiefs interviewed insist on the reading of the 1978 Alhassan Committee: that their chiefs are the only legitimate landowners. This interpretation is confirmed by official state practice since the incomes from skin lands²⁸ are channelled to the recognised Traditional Councils²⁹, which in the NR are still organised around the courts of the five chiefs with kingship status in the Regional House of Chiefs. Such courts may or may not include members of minority ethnic groups that have been assimilated into the majority chieftaincy structures.

The Regional Lands Commission grants consents and concurrence to the skin land transactions. All monetary income from the land has to be paid into Skin Lands Accounts and is distributed according to the allocation formula prescribed by Article 267(6) of the 1992 Constitution³⁰. In practice, however, in the NR income from land channelled this way, mostly through ground rent in urban areas, is small and the Land Commissions sometimes fail to return the prescribed portion to the skins (Kasanga, 1996).

The 1996 Kumasi Peace Accord offered a more inclusive reading of the legal framework: in Dagbon the Ya-Na was said to hold the land 'in trust for all the citizens of Dagbon' who all have 'equal and unimpeded access to the land in accordance with customary law'³¹. Citizens, according to the treaty's definition, encompassed members of all ethnic groups that are 'reputed' to be indigenous to the territory of Dagbon Traditional Council. While the legal backing for such an interpretation is unclear, as is the notion of Traditional Council citizenship, land use in practice, especially in the vast rural areas of Dagbon where the

²⁸ The lands held in trust by chiefs in Northern Ghana. In the south such lands are referred to as stool lands.

²⁹ The TCs correspond to the four NR Native States of the British colonial period of Nanun, Dagbon, Mamprugu and Gonja, with the addition of North Mo TC created in conjunction with the admission of the Mo Bamboi-kuoro Nana Kwaku Dapaah II into the Regional House of Chiefs.

³⁰ 10% going to the Office of the Administrator of Stool Lands to cover administrative expenses, 25% to the skin through the Traditional Council, 20% to the Traditional Authority and 55% to the District Assembly.

³¹ See Appendix 3, Text of Kumasi Peace Accord, Agreement Between the Dagombas, Konkombas and Bassares, Art. 1.

Konkomba are recognised as indigenous, works according to customary arrangements. Traditional leaders, to whom only nominal tribute is paid, are approached if new land is required and *tindamba* are consulted as to the appropriate sacrifices.

Such practices represent a process of negotiation between the local groups inhabiting the land and are generally flexible. Tensions at this practical level said to have led to the conflicts were only recorded in areas of relatively recent (generally 20th-century) settlement where issues over the rights and obligations of indigenous versus settler groups, and the relative importance and duration of settler status as opposed to citizenship and present land use, were raised. Such tensions were present between indigenous minority communities and minority settlers, usually Konkomba, as well as between minority settlers and majority groups.

The friction that caused the three large-scale inter-ethnic conflicts under study has more to do with the symbolic aspect of land rights than their practice, although in the case of the 1991 conflict the dispute over traditional ownership manifested itself in the double allocation of a plot of land. The tie between chieftaincy, ethnic status and land rights is seen in all these cases: in 1981 when Konkomba demands for chieftaincy were interpreted as land claims; in the 1991 Gonja and Nawuri chiefs' competing claims to traditional land jurisdiction; and in the 1994 war, in which the paramountcy and land rights of the Konkomba in Dagbon were contested. Its intrinsic nature is demonstrated by the ongoing Nawuri-Gonja stalemate as progress on practical political issues of territorial administration, including the creation of a district and the resettlement of Gonja refugees from Kpandai, has been halted by the struggle over 'traditional' recognition.

The view that you could not be a proper paramount chief without jurisdiction over land was put forward forcefully by both the minority and majority traditional leaders interviewed. As Ewuntomah James Kala, GOYA organiser and son of a paramount chief, put it:

Land goes with chiefs, chieftaincy goes with land. So if you are looking for power, you will look for land too.

This perception is not only crucial to the inter-ethnic conflicts, but also interesting in that, despite historical discourses, no NR chiefs had formal land jurisdiction before 1978 and many Southern paramounts, in the Ashanti Region for example, have traditional titles which are completely unconnected to land. Indeed, many interviewees argued that the NR chiefs used to control the people rather than the land, which was the domain of the *tindamba*. Conflicts over land are another aspect of the conflict over chieftaincy, which in turn is a conflict over ethnic status; over which tradition should be privileged in the formulation of neo-traditional institutions and which value system should determine access to these.

13. Neo-Traditional Leadership Institutions, Political Influence and Cultural Authenticity

The problem when constructing traditional institutions is which traditions to use and how to 're-imagine' them. In the NR, the choice was determined by the legacy of the colonial period, itself now delegitimised, creating the potential for inter-ethnic discord compounded by neo-traditional recognition becoming conflated with rights to land, ethnic status and citizenship. As Hippolyt Pul of the Catholic Relief Service put it:

The chieftaincy law in itself confounds a lot of things. You are trying make a law that covers several cultural backgrounds, a lot of which are very different.

Complaints about the perceived authenticity of tradition work both ways. Just as the minority groups react to attempts by majority chiefs with little understanding of their customs to rule them in the name of tradition, to the majority group interviewees the minority groups'

appropriation of their traditions was understandably problematic. Because the pre-colonial polities of the majority groups achieved privileged status, the traditional hierarchies of their cultures form the basis of the official neo-traditional institutions of the region for which access is contested, within which they rightly regard themselves as better qualified.

Furthermore, when majority chiefs are charged with managing a traditional system built on their cultures but including very different traditions of which they have no knowledge, it would appear most practical for them to adopt a functionalist approach. In the group interview with the court of Nakpa-Na Alhaji Salifu Dawuni II, the view was put forward that the Konkomba should realise that Nanumba chiefs could not know their customs and accept the appointees that had been chosen on grounds of loyalty to Nanun.

However, most minority group interviewees saw the power and influence of majority group elites, both traditional and political, as perpetuating inter-ethnic discrimination. Such power was seen as blocking minority groups' aspirations in matters ranging from recognition of their chiefs through their privileged access to the NHC, to state benefits and the appointment of minority group officials; again the spheres of politics and chieftaincy were not distinguished. To quote Nana Atorsah, chief of the Nawuri, on why he has not been recognised as a paramount chief:

You know, to get the chiefs organised in the Traditional Councils – it's politically motivated. They manoeuvre to use the chiefs of other tribes, saying that 'if you don't support us, your people, you have got...' – they've also got similar problems in their areas so they just turn against the newly come in chiefs. [...] The government could have bypassed this, but they quickly enacted that law by the constitution. That was in 1992. But in 1991 it was there for us to be recognised, so they delayed. These people try to infiltrate in the constitution, you know. To block us, so that we can't go to any other person than them. Then I said, with me I don't serve under you for you to recognise me or to recommend me for elevation. So that is why, that's the bone of contention in the area.

The view of the spheres of traditional and modern power as intersecting seemed to be shared by most majority interviewees. As mentioned previously the Nawuris want the elevation of their chief to paramount status and the recognition of their land claim. They also want their own local government district which would channel state resources to them directly and avoid what they see as current discrimination against their area of East Gonja District, attributed to the Nawuri-Gonja inter-ethnic conflict and Gonja discontent after their 1991-1992 war. In the last round of district creation, a potential Nawuri-Nchumburu district was short-listed but retracted at the last moment. Nawuri interviewees interpreted this as evidence of Gonja political obstruction since other districts with a smaller population were created.

However, the Mabunwura Yakubu Asuma, a local Gonja chief speaking for the chiefs that had Gonja jurisdiction over the Nawuri area³², seemed convinced that the Nawuris would not get their Local District or their paramountcy until they apologised to the Gonja paramount. Likewise Ewuntomah James Kala of the Gonjaland Youth Association stated that government could not form a new district that did not correspond to a new paramountcy, which the Nawuri could only gain through the Gonja.

The neighbouring Nchumburu, who fought on the side of the Nawuris in the 1991-1992 conflict and wish to join a potential Nawuri District, have followed this route and received promises that their application for paramountcy status and a separate TC will be forwarded by the Gonja to the Regional and National House of Chiefs. In 2005 this had still not been confirmed, 10 years after the hostilities in the region ended, despite the articles of the 1996

³² The Kpembewura (divisional chief) and the Kolonkwulewura (Gonja Kpandai chief).

Kumasi Peace Accord³³ which stated that their application would be forwarded and supported and that they would have representation in the Regional House of Chiefs. The Nchumburu chief Nana Kwadwo Benyigni II explained the post-war situation through a simile comparing it to a cowpat:

the top is dry now, but when you step [on it] you see there is something under...
it is still hot. So this is our reconciliation, that's the matter.

Concern and frustration about the lack of progress on the underlying issues was a recurrent theme in interviews with those who had lived through the conflicts. In the aftermath of the Kumasi Peace Accord, Konkomba and other minority groups³⁴ indigenous to the area covered by Dagbon TC were granted nominal paramountcy status by the Ya-Na, although it was made clear that the Ya-Na retained the 'allodial title to all Dagbon lands'³⁵. However, in implementing the accord the majority group traditional leaders took the view that if a minority chief was to be elevated, any divisional chiefs in the NR that had ranked above this minority chief must themselves be elevated to avoid 'disequilibrium in the system', as J. S. Babinah, the registrar of the Regional House of Chiefs, put it. The four former majority paramounts were raised to the status of kings.

Such a scheme would lead to an enormous expansion in the number of traditional leaders with access to the NRHC. Its two main consequences would be the outnumbering of any minority leaders that may in the future be admitted, and a need for more infrastructure and stipend funding, necessitating the passing of a law listing the new members of the House. Hence, the regional registrar quoted lack of space and chairs as reasons why the law had not been passed and minority leaders had not yet been formally recognised and admitted.

Most minority group interviewees regarded this as a delaying tactic, evidence of majority resistance to equality and the illegitimacy of the neo-traditional chieftaincy institutions. That neo-traditional institutions are seen as very like Lonsdale's vehicles of class formation is reflected in rhetoric comparing them with the ultimate form of repression, colonialism. The KOYA petition to the NHC for paramountcy is just one example:

The cry of those who had been denied traditional independence in the country is so loud and clear that it has rendered Ghana's Independence from the British in 1957 meaningless to them (quoted in Mahama, 2003,13).

Brukum, an Nchumburu senior lecturer in the History Department at the University of Ghana, explained the position:

decisions taken by the Regional House of Chiefs are regarded as how we once viewed colonialism: not emanating from us, so they are not binding on us. So it is vitally necessary that the Regional House of Chiefs should be expanded to include every ethnic group.

14. Ethnic Block Formation: Shifting Perceptions and Conflict Narratives

Group demographics or rent-seeking approaches stress the effects of the perceived viability of inter-ethnic violence on its incidence and hence the dangers of relatively large social groups, whose interests conflict with another group or block. The econometric model of Esteban and Ray (1999) predicts that conflict will be maximised at a symmetric bimodal

³³ See Appendix 3, Text of Kumasi Peace Accord, Agreement Between the Gonjas and Nchumurus, Art. 1, 3, 4 and 5.

³⁴ The Bassare and Anufo.

³⁵ See Appendix 3, Text of Kumasi Peace Accord, Agreement Between the Dagombas, Konkombas and Bassares, Art. 1.

group distribution when two blocks both perceive success as viable and are willing to expend the largest resources to overcome the other. The escalation of inter-ethnic grievances into large-scale violence will hence be closely connected with the bimodality of the population. Importantly for understanding the patterns of conflicts in the NR, such bimodality may be achieved through the alignment of interests of several smaller groups who may derive utility from the outcomes of other groups.

Most interviewees brought up the role of changing perceptions in the translation of inter-ethnic pressures, such as inequalities and discrimination, into violent conflict. While the colonial categorisation of groups into acephalous and chiefly did create the potential for the formation of two demographically similarly sized blocks (an inheritance often cited by minority groups as discriminatory and by majority as a simple formalisation of pre-colonial realities), conflict along such a division was not seen as automatic or necessarily reflective of real conditions. Some interviewees felt that their ethnic group had been pulled into the conflicts by mistake or association. As previously mentioned, the Konkomba became involved in the 1991-1992 Nawuri-Gonja conflict when some of their members were mistaken for Nawuris and shot while working on their Kpandai farmlands. Similarly, the Mabunwura Yakubu Asuma felt that the Gonja had been drawn into the 1994 conflict because of being associated with the other majority groups.

Despite the correspondence of the views of villagers and ethnic leaders on what issues had caused the conflicts, with education, tribute, status and control in 'traditional' matters most frequently mentioned, educated elites were seen by almost all the interviewees as having contributed to them. Varshney (2002, 14) argues that leaders may construct conflict narratives in which rumours and seemingly minor incidents between members of opposing groups are re-interpreted in the language of group animosity and used in provocative speeches and written material, leading to retaliatory violence. Constructed dichotomies are then hardened by conflict, both political and violent (Skalník, 1987) and can give way to a widespread climate of fear and rhetoric of pre-emptive self-defence, minimising the space for moderates to operate.

This understanding of group violence is mirrored by social psychology. Discourses of ethnic discrimination generalise and homogenise discontent within a group and provide explanatory frameworks in which daily instances of conflict, such as perceived insults and disrespectful behaviour, can be inserted and translated into threats to individual and group status which justify violence. As Tajfel puts it, the perceived legitimacy of an inter-group relationship:

provides a basis for the shared and durable ideologising of arousal, discontent or frustration; it also provides the basis for their translation into widely diffused forms of intergroup behaviour related either to the achievement or to the preservation of an adequate form of group distinctiveness (1978, 76).

Through this mechanism, individual quarrels in public places such as markets and bars may acquire serious consequences as triggers of spiralling inter-ethnic bloodshed.

Ethnic youth association leaders, who we shall return to, and lawyers were seen by interviewees to have raised the levels of inter-ethnic tensions by agitation and the spreading of propaganda and rumours. As traditional land holders allocate lands in lieu of fees to lawyers and surveyors, lawyers working for chiefs have a strong interest in the preservation of their land rights (Kasanga, 1996). While charges of incitement levied at the educated elites can be interpreted as an attempt to exonerate chiefs and foot-soldiers, they were commonly held and tended to be specific, and the evidence of such rumours that survives points to their gravity.

Perhaps the most devastating example was a forged letter discussing arms supplies, secret meetings and preparations for the conquest of Kpandai and later Yendi, purporting to be an internal communication within the National Liberation Movement of Western Togoland, which

was circulated in leaflet form in Tamale and Yendi in 1993. The 'National Liberation Movement for Western Togoland' had been a secessionist movement active in the mid-1970s, for a time supported by the Togolese government and allegedly involving some Ghanaian Konkomba. By reviving its spectre the letter sought to portray Konkomba as hostile foreigners, thus neutralising their demand for 'traditional self-determination' as citizens of Ghana. Furthermore, its invention of a connection between the Nawuri-Gonja conflict of 1991 with a supposed minority plan to take over Yendi caused the minority-majority divide to be seen as the axis of the 1994 conflict.

According to the Dagomba traditional historian Alhaji Gonje Sulamana Al-Hassan, the Dagomba did not believe that there would be an ethnic war with the Konkomba until the advent of this letter, which led to the connection being made between previous inter-ethnic conflicts and the Konkomba 1993 petitions to the National House of Chiefs and the Ya-Na for paramountcy. The fear of impending war was seen as having led to the stockpiling of arms on both sides, and inter-ethnic harassment:

The youth in Yendi town they started harassing the Konkombas every time they came to market. They started harassing them and warned them: 'If you come out against us we are going to let our women catch you with their bare hands', you understand? Threatening, 'We will chain you and we will whip you, we will do this, and we will do this'. [...] So they [the Konkomba] started acquiring arms.

The interpretation of previous minority-majority 'wars' as connected and the insertion of incidents of inter-ethnic conflict and violence into a minority-majority conflict narrative were clearly critical. Old ethnic stereotypes and insults³⁶ were reported as rife before the outbreak of the conflicts and they were associated with threats of impending war. The argument between a Nanumba and a Konkomba in Nakpayili market over a guinea fowl has attained legendary status; though the story is retold in many versions, the threats of war always feature in some form (cf. van der Linde and Naylor, 1999: 27; Mahama, 2003: 36-37). All minority interviewees saw prejudices against the minority groups as an underlying cause of the war. To quote one man:

the non-chiefly groups actually assert themselves not necessarily because they want to be chief, but they see it to be only way to have respect. So the stereotypes; we are treated as bush-people, we are the savage, we are the worst...

Many interviewees still interpreted the conflicts in terms of minority rebellion or majority attempts to re-affirm the subjugated status of minority groups. However, this study found no evidence of wide minority group participation in the 1994 war on the side of the Konkomba with interviewees disputing any such assistance. It would appear that the perception of a minority-majority axis, which could be used to mobilise support, was false. The Bassare, Nawuri, and Nchumburu did not intervene on the side of the Konkomba, and the fourth majority group of the NR, the Mamprusi, did not come to the aid of the Dagomba, Nanumba, and Gonja, who had practical rather than historical grounds for resentment in that they had all fought the Konkomba in the recent past. Hence, while the perception of minority and majority groups as blocks contributed to the 1994 conflict it was also disproved by it, a fact that, in conjunction with post-war intra-group fragmentation, may have contributed to the post-1995 inter-ethnic peace.

Importantly, perceptions of the relevant categories of group membership and their salience were neither uniform nor static, and seem to have shifted since the conflict. The most acute example of this comes from within the Dagomba ethnic group, whose long-running succession dispute exploded in the 2002 killing of their paramount Ya-Na Yakubu Andani

³⁶ Examples mentioned by interviewees included words indicating 'slave' and sub-human status such as 'people with tails'.

and over thirty of his supporters, allegedly by members of the rival Abudu gate, or royal house. In Yendi, which is Abudu dominated, his death was seen as a consequence of the post-1994 build-up of weapons at his court which had led to a climate of fear and hostility between the factions. No new Ya-Na has been appointed as Andani representatives feel his death was unlawful and he should be replaced from within his clan, so as not to reward murder. Abudu representatives, on the other hand, argue that the Ya-Na died in battle and insist on an Abudu candidate as the kingship is rotational. Both Dagomba fractions now court the favour of the large Konkomba group within Dagbon TC.

Similarly, in Nanun, following the death of the Bimbilla-Na Abarika Atta II in 2003, there is competition for the kingship between the candidates of the two royal gates, the Nakpa-Na Alhaji Salifu Dawuni II and Dasana Andani, which erupted into civil unrest as recently as January 2006 leading to a curfew being imposed but no casualties. Members of the two rival gates argue for the sanctity of the principle of rotation, and against the royal credentials of the Nakpa-Na, respectively. The Dagbon chieftaincy crisis has fed into the Bimbilla dispute as the Andani house feel marginalised after the death of the Ya-Na and perceive the government as partial.

Some of those interviewed connected intra-majority fragmentation with the rising success of minority group elites. The majority group power vacuum was seen as contributing to minority group members securing high-profile positions and appointments. Examples mentioned included the appointment by President Kufour of a Konkomba as a cabinet minister and the increasing number of Konkomba MPs. As one man put it:

unfortunately for them, in 2002-2003 the issue fell out of their hands. Once the Dagbon crisis started it completely opened the floodgates for the government to do whatever they wanted [...] otherwise the government had to consider either a Dagomba, or a Gonja, or a Nanumba, you know that kind of combination.

Such perceptions were not only held by minority group members. One Gonja interviewee spoke of the Nawuris as having made a mistake by alienating the Gonja; since they no longer fielded one candidate in Kpandai they now had to accept a Konkomba MP. Similarly, in the interview with the Nakpa-Na and his court, the Konkomba MP of Bimbilla was described as result of Nanumba disunity, since there had been two Nanumba candidates, one for each party.

The death of the 1994 Gonja paramount, Yagbonwura Amantana I, and his replacement by the former Kpembewura Doshie Bawah Abudu I, who was the Gonja Divisional Chief over the area disputed by the Nawuri in 1991-1992 and badly affected by the 1994 Konkomba war, has also contributed to the current stance of Gonja traditional leaders. Konkombas have not been allowed to resettle in West Gonja District, only east of Salaga, away from the Gonja heartland, and interviewees saw the Gonja as now stressing a wider Guan identity³⁷ and their separate historical origins from the other NR majority groups. The potential for majority alliances is hence currently much weaker than during the 1980-1994 period.

The existence of a minority alliance was not only disproved by the 1994 conflict, it has also been made less likely by inter-minority tension between indigenous communities and Konkomba settlers. A 'minority consciousness' seems to have been floated and rejected. As Isaac B Sukpen, ex-chairman of KOYA, explained:

³⁷ The Guan label covers a number of Ghanaian ethnic groups with related languages. It has only recently been elaborated as an ethnic identity, with the formation of the Guan Congress in 1981 sparked by the view that Guan speakers are the 'aborigines of Ghana'. Its latest meeting was hosted by the Gonja traditional leadership in Damango in 2004. The Gonja emphasis on a Guan identity as indigenous is interesting as it is held in conjunction with pride over a Gonja history as warriors and invaders.

After the '94 conflict, when we went to Accra to meet, all these minority tribes we were together: Konkombas, Nawuris, Bassares, Bimobas, and the Vaglas... Because in the NR there are 16 tribes, and only four of them consider themselves to be the majority so the rest are supposed to be minority. So we were meeting together as minorities, but I don't know what happened then. That disintegrated.

Factors mentioned in connection with the failure of a minority consciousness to catch on included diminishing post-conflict NGO funding for inter-ethnic projects and a lack of enthusiasm amongst ethnic leaders for the elaboration of such an identity, with KOYA leaders expressing concern over the demographic associations of the label.

Instead of seeing tensions between large minority and majority blocks, the NR is currently locked into a number of smaller conflicts, which are not so much the fallout of the previous conflicts as related problems no longer interpreted within the old conflict narrative. That is not to say that the previous wars have not contributed to inter-ethnic tensions. Most interviewees reported a post-conflict decrease in inter-ethnic marriages, hidden feelings of fear and distrust and the need to avoid sensitive topics of conversation when interacting with members of formerly hostile groups.

15. The Role of 'Traditional' and 'Modern' Inter and Intra-Ethnic Associations

The most prominent type of ethnic organisations in the NR are the so-called ethnic youth organisations, youth in this context referring to a socio-political category incorporating non-chiefly leaders, rather than biological age. Their history in the region can be traced back to associations formed around the first institutions of higher education in the North, mainly teacher training colleges, in the 1950s (Lentz, 1995; Talton, 2003b). In the beginning these were inter-ethnic as the number of NR students was too small³⁸ for ethnically homogenous associations and interests were interpreted in terms of lobbying the South for more resources to be invested into the North. As the number of NR students increased and inter-group conflicts of interest over where development projects should be sited emerged, these associations splintered into groups representing narrower ethnic interests.

In the political climate of the late 1970s, when political parties were banned and police permission, only granted to officially recognised organisations, was required for meetings, ethnic youth associations flourished. This was also the period of the 1978 Alhassan Report, which saw minority associations reacting against the vesting of the NR lands in the majority group chiefs by campaigning for the elevation and recognition of their own chiefs. Ethnic youth organisations contributed to ethnic identity formation, as the relevant social identities of students became not the village or family networks that they had left behind but an ethnic identity constructed around language, culture and regional origin.

Ethnic youth associations see it as their role to actively reinterpret traditions, put on festivals, and to link up migrant workers living far away from their perceived ethnic homeland through the integration of existing migrant's associations. Less elitist than the literates' societies that were their predecessors, they seek to further the development of their entire ethnic group rather than serve as a club for its educated members. Importantly, this has led to a view of membership as ascriptive: leaders regard their entire ethnic group as defined by them as 'automatic members' by birth, in contrast with 'active members', who register membership and pay contributions (Lentz, 1995).

³⁸ In the mid-1950s five or six Northerners had attended secondary school, over 200 were trained as teachers, and one was attending university (Lentz, 2002). The NR then included what was to become the Upper West and Upper East Regions.

There are important interpretational dangers in accepting ascriptive membership as a basis of analysis, however, including the risk of seeing all ethnic propaganda as emanating from these associations rather than from the individual initiative of journalists and academics, and of letting a hegemonic ethnic narrative obscure the many competing voices within the groups. Ethnic youth organisations, led by no more than three or four dozen activists, are often rent by leadership battles between metropolitan and rural intellectuals and by division over the nature of the ethnic identity they should represent.

Within-group tensions derived from the ethnic categorisations of these associations are also common, manifesting themselves as a mismatch between attempts to operate as a unified political force and member perceptions of the relevance of other social identities. An example of this is the attempt by KOYA to centralise the traditional leadership structure and habitation patterns of the Konkomba, in opposition to strong clan loyalties and popular Konkomba perceptions of a cultural ethos of freedom and independence. This was reflected in one interview with a KOYA organiser who complained that their relative military success had made their members feel 'too free'.

The NR youth associations must not be confused with ethnic militias, however. Some of them (like BAYA) actively distanced themselves from the conflicts and helped to keep their ethnic groups out of the war, and all were crucial in the 1995-1996 peace process. The role of these associations is fundamentally dual: while the ethnic identity of the group is highly valued and seen as something positive, it is affirmed through discourses that are often exclusive and strident. Recurrent themes include the portrayal of land as having been won 'through the blood and sweat of our ancestors' making the yielding of 'an inch' unthinkable. Whether or not the logistical support of these organisations was harnessed in the war, mobilisation around such identities has been crucial to the NR conflicts, as well as to positive education drives.

Attempts were made even before the conflicts to counteract the increasing ethnicisation of youth organisations by creating inter-ethnic associations based on a regional unit rather than ethnic descent, with little success. As mentioned, the Gonja Youth Association was launched in this spirit but came to be perceived as a vehicle for Gonja hegemony, symbolised by its name change to Gonjaland Youth Association which led to the withdrawal from participation of all minority groups that had land claims within West and East Gonja Districts. It was not until after the 1994-1995 war that a successful umbrella organisation, NORRYDA, was created to provide an institutional context in which the groups could come together and cooperate in the interest of the peace and development of the region.

NORRYDA, the Northern Region Youth and Development Association, was fondly remembered by many interviewees as having come to the villages to 'preach peace' and was seen to have played a vital role in changing the orientations of youth organisations in the immediate aftermath of the 1994-1995 conflict. NGO funding for NORRYDA tapered off, however, as the situation stabilised and concerns over accounting deficiencies and internal leadership struggles emerged, and it is no longer seen as active. Following the inability to incorporate minority traditional leaders within the existing chieftaincy structures, other potential inter-ethnic associations are scarce in the NR.

At a local level, ethnic youth associations tend to cooperate with chiefs, reinforcing their legitimacy as ethnic leaders to rural members to whom they might not otherwise have been close. Their relationship with youth leaders in some ways reinforces the standing of the chiefs, the associations' legitimising discourses linking the role of chiefs with community development and portraying them as ethnic symbols. Sources of power deriving from the symbolism of tradition and the resources of youth, such as physical strength and modern education, are not simply mutually reinforcing however; inter-generational tensions and power struggles were evident in many of the interviews.

As previously mentioned, many interviewees, including traditional leaders, blamed the educated elite for misleading the people. Conversely, despite their emphasis on 'tradition', ethnic youth leaders stressed their superior importance in guiding the chiefs and leading the youth. This is, to quote a youth association organiser;

because we are the youth and the youth fight, the old men don't fight. We the youth write long letters, no old man writes a letter.

The emphasis on the writing of letters demonstrates the importance of formal Western education to status, a phenomenon that has come to threaten the standing of the often illiterate³⁹ chiefs. Chiefs have reacted to this both by emphasising the superiority of tradition over education and by trying to reconcile the two sources of power.

Education as well as traditional qualifications are now seen as desirable attributes for chiefly candidates, a trend reflected in the suggestion of prominent Dagombas to send the future Ya-Na to university in the USA, since 'there will come a time when if you are not a graduate you cannot be a Ya-Na'. The educated elite may also be co-opted by the granting of non-hereditary titles such as 'development chief'. More generally, modern chieftaincy has become associated with the discourse of development and cultural authenticity.

As Ghanaian chiefs are no longer formally responsible for building roads, collecting taxes or acting as the primary level of the justice system, they have articulated a new role for themselves as conduits of grassroots development, and in the post-war context, as peace builders, despite issues of traditional leadership being at the heart of NR conflicts. The image of the chief as the link between an external power and the people has been recast as traditional leaders and their institutions campaign for development projects from the state, NGOs and international institutions. This strategy has been successful enough for this discourse to be taken for granted within Ghana, and for the WB to have granted development assistance directly to the court of the Asantehene⁴⁰, but has also created tensions.

As previously mentioned, Ghanaian chiefs receive little or no income from the state, and the inter-ethnic conflicts of the NR have problematised the paying of tribute. NR chiefs can no longer depend on their position for their source of income and their popular authority is threatened by perceptions of their practices as extortion and corruption reported by some interviewees. Modern chiefs are one of many sources of power, their importance and functions in inter-ethnic community relations especially contingent on the image that they can or try to project of themselves.

Chiefly power over development is both contested and mediated by the provisions of NGOs and the state, as is their role as guardians of tradition by formal education, and their moral authority by the increasing popularity of Christianity and Islam. Modern churches and mosques do not serve to bring together majority and minority group members providing conflict-defusing associational ties (Varshney, 2002) however, as these groups are predominantly Muslim and Christian, respectively. Similarly, the continued importance of animistic beliefs, though it may have made this divide less significant in the conflicts, does not bridge the different groups, as they often perform different symbolic functions within this field and their cultural traditions are mostly separate.

The Konkombas decision to create their own trade networks for yams rather than relying on majority middlemen also contributed to the decrease in inter-ethnic links in the run-up to the conflicts. In February 1994, as the NR inter-ethnic conflict raged, the Konkomba yam market in Accra, symbolic of Konkomba economic activity and organisation, became the focus of

³⁹ According to NORTRAD (2002: 8), only 30% of the chiefs in the NRHC are literate.

⁴⁰ The World Bank-sponsored Promoting Partnership with Traditional Authorities (PPTAP) project was initiated by the Asantehene Otumfuo Osei Tutu II in June 2003.

much newspaper speculation about the group and its role in the war and was repeatedly attacked. Press articles reported the Konkomba as responding with threats of joining their 'brothers' if not protected by the state (Ankamah, 1994). In fact, state weakness and ambiguity in a climate of fear was brought up by many of the interviewees in this study as a factor contributing to the conflicts, with people arming themselves for their defence.

16. Negotiating Power: The State, NGOs and NR Conflict Levels

The large number of weapons in the NR, ranging from machetes (known in Ghana as cutlasses), single-barrel guns and bows and arrows for hunting, to more sophisticated small arms and AK47s, in combination with the 'traditional' nature of conflicts with their emphasis on magic or 'juju' (Prince, 1994b), was seen as having contributed to the gruesome nature of the recent conflicts, with most interviewees agreeing that inter-ethnic tensions had led to an 'arms race' in their build-up. The violence of the 1994-1995 war was not only on a much larger scale than previous conflict, it was also notable for vivid displays of violence, with bodies dismembered and heads displayed near the Shell station in Tamale and to the national press. At the start of Kufour's presidency an amnesty for illegal weapons was declared but few weapons were collected; this was seen as a result of the continuing climate of insecurity rather than as due to the lack of compensation.

Some majority and non-Konkomba minority interviewees regarded President Rawlings and his government as partial and saw his speech made at the Tamale Secondary School in 1991, allegedly containing the phrase 'nobody was born with land' (Prince, 1994a), as having 'inspired' the 1994 conflict; this was disputed by Konkomba informants who stressed the conflict's origin in issues of discrimination. The inflamed nature of inter-ethnic relations and the volatility of the symbolic language of tradition meant that almost any political statement could be interpreted as evidence of bias, a problem not only for politicians but also for government peace negotiators. A vivid example of this is provided by one commentator's (Mahama, 2003) extensive gloss on the remark of a government peace delegation to a Konkomba chief 'that they did not want to dictate a solution' as evidence of bias.

In this light, the failure of the commissions of enquiry established after the conflicts to publish their reports becomes more understandable. While many interviewees and commentators believed that the implementation of the recommendations of these reports could have stopped the wars, allocating blame in ethnic conflict would almost certainly lead the government to be seen as partial. Unsurprisingly then, most interviewees regarded the present government as wanting to stay out of chieftaincy matters, especially following the politicisation of the Dagbon crisis which led members of the Andani gate to publicly accuse the NPP government of bias, blaming senior Dagomba members of the Kufuor Administration of complicity in the death of the Ya-Na⁴¹.

The interpretational volatility of the rituals of chieftaincy (Gilbert, 1994) was also evident in government attempts to harness traditional authority as a conflict-resolution resource following the conflicts. A government 'traditional' peace ceremony was arranged in Salaga (BADECC, 1996) to mark the reconciliation between the factions of the 1991-1992 war, the legitimacy of which was compromised not only by arguments over which group had the right to perform the sacrifice to the earth gods, and the failure of the Nawuriwura to attend, but also by the fact that the fowl offered by the Konkomba died on its breast rather than on its back. The assembled crowd interpreted this as the offering not having been accepted; evidence that the Konkomba were still secretly hostile. The ceremony was almost aborted in the presence of then-President Rawlings and was concluded in an atmosphere of continued distrust.

⁴¹ Three of these have resigned as a result: Alhaji Andani, the Northern Region Minister; Lt. Gen. Hamidu, National Security Advisor; and Alhaji Malik Alhassan, Minister of the Interior.

Views on the role of local and national politicians more generally ranged from perceptions of them as being affected by the conflicts like all ethnic group members to actively inciting tensions in order to gain votes. In February 1994 the debate in the Ghanaian Parliament about the conflict had descended into threatening and insulting language, in which Konkomba had been branded 'aliens'. The Konkomba MP for Saboba, Moses Bukari Mobengba, was temporarily suspended by the NDC for his rejoinder: 'as long as we are not given that peace [paramountcy status], there shall be no peace'. It echoed Rawlings' post-coup broadcast on December 31, 1981: 'so long as there is no justice... I dare say there shall be no peace', fuelling press speculation and suspicions. The politicisation of chieftaincy was mentioned as a problem by elite interviewees and many others saw alliances between political traditions or parties⁴² and the rival fractions of intra and inter-ethnic disputes as negative, especially in relation to Dagbon crisis, without positing a conceptual distinction between political and traditional power.

The state and NGOs played important but not always harmonious roles in the aftermath of the conflicts. Simultaneously with the wars, NGOs, including the Red Cross, Oxfam, Action Aid, the Catholic Relief Service and World Vision, launched their relief efforts. During the largest conflict, in April 1994, the NGOs decided to co-ordinate and formed an umbrella organisation, the Inter-NGO Consortium. This organisation gradually shifted from providing immediate relief to reconciliatory rehabilitation projects and organised an alternative peace process to that of the government Permanent Peace Negotiation Team (PPNT).

The Inter-NGO Consortium requested the assistance of a conflict resolution NGO, the Nairobi Peace Initiative. In keeping with Varshney's (2002) finding on the importance of inclusive temporary associations in limiting the damage and spread of inter-group conflict, it built on the trust of the warring factions gained through the relief effort to arrange a series of workshops bringing together 'voices of reason', people of high standing who had links with the other side, to discuss the issues in a calm environment. The workshops were gradually expanded to include a wide range of influential ethnic leaders, including chiefs and youth association representatives, and culminated in the signing of the 1996 Kumasi Peace Accord.

This process was almost entirely separate from the government initiative, as they concentrated on different levels. While the activities of the PPNT consisted in separate negotiations with the top leaders of the ethnic groups, generally conceived as the highest chiefs and ethnic youth association representatives, the leaders of the civil society peace process sought and gained permission to operate at the local level in the villages affected by the fighting. The two processes were not so much complementary as in competition, the PPNT being accused of shuttle diplomacy and the government refusing to officially recognise the 1996 Accord, amidst acrimony over having been sidelined. The NDC government's refusal to associate itself with the successful peace process left a legacy of bitterness among participants and contributed to the failure to institutionalise the provisions of the treaty.

Interviewees testified to continued mistrust and tension which, although ameliorated by NGO peace initiatives⁴³, has yet to find a legal resolution through mutually acceptable provisions regarding land and chieftaincy rights. As Nana B.M. put it:

As for conflict with gun, that one is gone and past, but actually the conflict is not finished [...] it is now with pen.

⁴² In Ghana two political traditions are often distinguished, the Danquah-Busia tradition including the ruling NPP which is seen as more conservative, and the Nkrumaist tradition to which Rawlings' NDC was seen as aligned.

⁴³ Post-conflict attempts to defuse tensions include culture-drama workshops aimed at disproving antagonistic ethnic stereotypes; see Kirby (2004).

In light of the past effect of conflict narratives, such a development is far from risk-free. The accounts of the wars that circulate in Ghana have been anything but neutral: the only two books to have been written on the 1994 conflict (Mahama, 2003; Martinson, 1994) attribute its causation entirely to the Konkomba and invoke offensive stereotypes.

As already noted, perceptions of the legitimacy of inter-group relations are not static but dynamic. Negative experiences of conflict, changing patterns of block mobilisation, increasing Konkomba political participation and Ghana's current era of stability and economic improvement have all decreased the perceived desirability and viability of violent change. The conflicts took place in periods of economic instability and democratic transitions, confirming the dangers of perceived state ambiguity and weakness (cf. Akwetey, 1996). Routes to ethnic prestige other than chieftaincy have opened up to minority elites, creating incentives for rather than against compromise, and the struggle over the creation of new districts has moved into a discursive arena if not into a narrowly political one. Yet there is a danger in depending on ameliorating circumstances rather than institutionalised procedures to avoid conflict, and as we have seen, there are a number of outstanding issues between the groups.

Further inter-ethnic conflict in the NR has been avoided through a combination of the NGO peace negotiation and sensitisation effort and other positive external factors. Basic risk factors, such as the tying of land ownership to ethnicity and neo-traditional institutions and the ethnic exclusiveness of these institutions, have not been resolved, and most of the potential inter-ethnic organisational links have faded. The Regional and National Houses of Chiefs, charged by the constitution with dealing with 'traditional' disputes, have proved unable to accommodate the demands of minority group chiefs for representation and become an arena for inter-ethnic dialogue. Similarly, they have so far failed to resolve the ongoing intra-ethnic disputes of Dagbon and Nanun that also threaten the peace of the NR.

The Ghanaian state finds it difficult to deal with 'chieftaincy conflicts'; there is a tendency to withdraw to be seen as non-partisan, and for over-dependence on military operations coupled with ineffective investigative commissions leading to conflict freezing (Skalník, 1986). A non-interventionist stance, while aimed at being neutral, also leaves the state with insufficient institutional capacity to intervene proactively, and the power of conflict narratives and symbols causes any government position to be interpreted as partial in the heat of a conflict. There is an urgent need to draw on the perspectives of local actors to promote more permanent solutions to NR conflict that are sensitive to the regions specific historical background.

17. Learning from Past Strategies: Military Intervention and Commissions of Inquiry

The two main strategies of Ghanaian governments, military intervention and investigative commissions, have been shown not to be effective in their current form. This is not to underestimate the importance of the military in stopping conflicts, which is uncontested, although it is important to scrutinise the mandate and conduct of the military missions employed so as to ensure against future retaliatory raids targeting civilian villages. The role of the military in preventing conflict is more limited, however. The threat of military intervention did not avert past violence and while the presence of soldiers may discourage open conflicts, it does not contribute to their resolution.

At best a pro-active military response can help to establish a climate of safety; as we have seen, the perceived failure of the state to provide such a climate is related to its inability to disarm factions. Many of the interviewees who had lived through the conflicts complained that it took days for the military to intervene and of the endemic problems with low-level corruption and capacity of the NR police. The many police roadblocks that have been put up in the NR to stop the circulation of arms have all too frequently become a means of extraction, threatening the perceived legitimacy of these local forces.

Commissions of enquiry into the NR conflicts have been similarly flawed. Apart from the fact that they operate after or during the conflicts, their conflict-prevention capacity is limited by the need for governments to appear neutral, which militates against the likelihood of their reports forming the basis of government white papers that are acted upon, or even published. As we have seen, perceived government neutrality is threatened by the salience of conflict narratives in the build-up to large-scale violence, and by the particular volatility of discourses of tradition which are highly symbolic, emotive and sometimes dependent on rituals beyond official control, as with the unpropitious death of the sacrificial fowl at the 1996 Salaga peace ceremony. The role of government commissions can be conceived more narrowly as mainly satisfying the need of the parties and the public for the government to be seen to be doing something, but even as such their potential is ambiguous. There is a palpable danger in disappointed hopes of policy intervention and justice disproving the viability of yet another discursive route out of violence.

The historical legacy of colonialism, when the chiefs of some ethnic groups wielded considerable practical political power, and the ambiguous political and legal functions of traditional leaders in the post-colonial period in conjunction with a two-party system, can be seen to have contributed to the threat of politicisation of traditional conflicts. On the other hand, there is a wider issue of whether the citizens of Ghana want to look to the government to define the proper role and jurisdiction of chiefs. One of the strengths of Ghanaian politics is the national, as opposed to ethnic, character of its parties, which limits the perceived bias of governments to rumours and prevents local inter-ethnic conflicts from being translated to the state level and escalating into all-out civil war. Similarly, the increasing political inclusion of NR minority groups has helped to safeguard against a repeat of the conflicts along minority-majority lines. Such lessons of inter-ethnic inclusiveness and interaction must be brought to bear more specifically on institutionalised state conflict-prevention structures.

One of the main weaknesses of past commission and negotiation teams such as the PPNT was that they did not bring the groups together face to face. The 1994-1996 NGO peace effort set a new precedent through its strategy of facilitating inter-ethnic links and initially circumventing high-profile ethnic leaders, whether youth association leaders or chiefs, whose strident rhetoric was contributing to antagonisms. Hence the Kumasi peace process was able to recreate and strengthen the kind of inclusive civil society links shown by Varshney (2002) to be conflict-defusing, and in the words of one NGO worker 'move the discussion from positions to interests'.

While many post-conflict NGO projects have tried to build on this understanding to create ethnically inclusive forums contributing at the individual and local level to reconciliation and trust, such initiatives are small scale, have experienced capacity and funding problems and cannot shift fundamental state incentives for and against conflict. These larger problems of perceived discrimination, insecurity, underdevelopment and access to power and prestige were highlighted by the interviewees.

These problems implicate the state in creating inter-ethnic tensions as well as defusing them through military response and reconciliatory measures. While the conflict-freezing strategy of military intervention coupled with commissions of enquiry has been unsuccessful, the answer is not for the state to throw itself into the melee, however. Rather state institutions such as the judiciary and the military were valued by interviewees for their perceived neutrality. The state needs to shift the incentives of actors, including chiefs and other ethnic leaders, away from violent forms of group competition to more productive discursive forms.

18. The Impact of Traditional Leadership and Institutions on NR Conflict

Shifting incentives away from conflict involves re-imagining the categories fought over along more peaceful lines. As we have seen, the link between incidents of large-scale NR violence

and chiefs does not consist simply in traditional leaders acting as ethnic leaders inciting conflicts, or even contributing to their resolution. A chief is what a chief does; some chiefs are more influential than others and those that use that influence for purposes that vary between chiefs and over time. Chiefs are actors, not a structural feature determining the nature of tensions, and as local leaders they are often very sensitive to the opinions of their people and other influential figures including ethnic youth association leaders, lawyers and prominent intellectuals.

However, traditional leadership institutions and the tie between these, land rights and ethnic status emerge as a more structural cause of inter-ethnic tensions along minority-majority lines in the region. The struggle over the future and nature of the National and Regional Houses of Chiefs remains crucial to such conflict, especially in a situation where the traditional institutions that are the object over which groups disagree are charged by the 1992 Constitution with solving conflicts over 'tradition'.

The issue of land rights is related to the issue of whether the government should define the role of chiefs. While it may seem undesirable to construct ethnicity as a determinant of rights to land, any move towards vesting the land in the state would be highly controversial. This is not just because chieftaincy has become ever more closely associated with land rights, imagined as an ethnic birthright, but because of the fundamental question of who people trust with the land that provides their livelihood. As opposed to the state, chiefs are local, sensitive to local pressures and even attack. Chieftaincy has also shown itself to be highly adaptable, and at a local level customary systems of land use still function in the NR.

As we have seen, tradition is not an objective historical inheritance to be uncovered and agreed upon. This is equally true in the case of intra-ethnic succession disputes as in inter-ethnic tensions. The ethnic groups of the NR have diverse traditions that must be reconciled and re-imagined in order to form the basis of an integrated homogenous institutional structure, and different strands and interpretations of history yield different overall pictures of what is authentically traditional. Whether or not to undertake a process of reconstruction of the traditional basis of the Northern Regional House of Chiefs, and whether land should be vested through this institution, is an issue for Ghanaian public debate.

The current attempt to incorporate divergent traditions within structures formulated on the basis of the traditional hierarchies of the majority groups also merits discussion as it has its own risks. Majority group members may regard the evolution currently undergone by the system as all too rapid, and dispute the authenticity of chiefs that have only recently been re-made in the image of their traditions. Similarly, there are concerns that the traditional leaders of minority groups are not entering these institutions on an equal footing with the chiefs of other groups and that the perceived authenticity of their traditions is threatened by the adjustments necessitated by incorporation into systems that were formulated on the basis of other cultural backgrounds, African and European.

Membership in traditional institutions promises to grant minority groups national status and recognition as part of the cultural inheritance of Ghana. If these institutions were inclusive they could also act as another arena of inter-ethnic interaction and debate, an institutional safety-vent for minority-majority group tensions and a link to power between minority leaders in the NR and influential Southern chiefs who have a high national and international profile. The fact that the land-rights of the NR have been vested through these institutions provides a very powerful disincentive for their existing members to admit new applicants however, and hence divest themselves and their people of what has come to be regarded as their inheritance. This makes the issue of what constitutes an appropriate relationship between traditional and state institutions and its legal implications a crucial question.

That the state has been unable to set up adequate institutional peace negotiation structures is a common observation (Lund, 2003; Skalnič, 2002; Akwetey, 1996) but it should have become clear that incorporating traditional structures in an attempt to acquire such

capabilities is no straightforward project. Simple solutions in terms of providing conflict-resolution training for chiefs will not succeed if the neo-traditional system is held by one party to be illegitimate and part of the objective of the struggle. This is true at the local level where the judicial functions of majority chiefs have been contested, at the meso-level where the state-recognised hierarchies are under challenge, and at the regional and national levels at which access has been sought for a long period.

19. Towards A Communal Re-imagining of Tensions: Defusing Traditional Conflict in the NR

With only a shallow understanding of the context it would be easy to misapply constructs and overlook the vital connections between the nominally separate Ghanaian state spheres of traditional and political authority, and the multiple significances of the contested issues. In the search for authenticity, local relevance and financial savings, chiefs' courts and traditional methods of conflict resolutions may seem very attractive resources; a dangerous approach if the struggle over which traditions are privileged is not taken into account.

The complexity and interconnectivity of traditional, political and economic issues characterising these conflicts, which have been described in academic discourse as 'tribal' (cf. Bogner, 2000; Timura, 2001), is crucial to their comprehension. We have seen that understanding traditional conflict is not a case of elaborating a completely new theory or falling back on generalisations, of exchanging the delegitimised term 'tribal' for the equally non-specific and non-explanatory 'traditional'. This complexity is demonstrated by the role of economic factors cited as contributing to the wars, which appear confounding in isolation.

If a group has recently settled on land recognised as belonging to others, their sudden ideological refusal to pay rent only becomes clear in the context of a legitimising discourse of anti-feudalism where such contributions are seen as tribute. Likewise the availability of land and the understanding of majority chiefs that their importance is augmented by the number of people they control explain why the breaking of traditional links which some see as feudal violates the substantive points of a perceived mutual agreement. Such acts can then be interpreted as rebellion when accompanied by the appointment of chiefs, the authority of which has come to be connected with their ownership of land.

Questions of which categories are relevant to actors must be asked in relation to any type of conflict. Understanding the identity categories used in discourses of mobilisation means understanding along which lines conflicts are likely to break out, as well as how they can be re-imagined peacefully. In Ghana specific historical and modern legal and political circumstances have contributed to violent conflicts being structured around chiefs and tradition. Who constitutes a chief, what legal and symbolic prerogatives chiefs should enjoy, what traditions to privilege and which criteria should be used for state standards of authenticity have all been the objects of struggle.

While the realisation that economic issues are also issues of prestige is important to understanding and dealing with conflicts such as these, the connections between the violence and underdevelopment, in making the perceptions of inequalities and grievances sharper and providing the unemployed men acting as foot-soldiers, has additional implications. Economic development can dissipate inter-ethnic tensions, but can also contribute to them through the intensification of land use increasing the salience of formal land rights, and perceptions of discrimination arising from the siting of projects.

Ghana is a developing country with very limited state resources, the allocation of which must be debated and justified; state money that is invested in chiefs is money that is not invested elsewhere. There is an argument for supporting chiefs as local leaders, to coordinate with state development activities and gain the leverage to encourage positive trends, and

preclude activities that could contribute to tensions by providing chiefs with a formal source of funding.

Though there is good reason for investing in peace-building measures, the returns on such investments in terms of the contribution of a climate of stability to growth in production and investment and the safeguarding of existing resources against the destruction and 'development in reverse' of conflict are difficult to quantify. Hence the importance of public debate in highlighting the significance of pro-active measures and in deciding within what institutional framework such measures should operate. Currently international NGOs and small local initiatives are prominent in the arena of traditional conflict prevention in the NR, more so than the traditional institutions empowered by the 1992 Constitution, raising problems of accountability to the Ghanaian public and the lack of an overall strategy and structures.

Inter and intra-ethnic disputes with their origins in the struggle for chieftaincy positions are destabilising large parts of Ghana today and threatening the country's development. The Houses of Chiefs could have a vital role to play in settling these disputes but only if they are balanced, representative, credible and efficient. They would require more funding to undertake the traditional settlement procedures they have been charged with and could take on, but a precondition for such investment is that they have the trust and support of all of the people. One way for the Ghanaian state and its citizens to deliberate on these issues and reach a satisfactory agreement could be the coupling of public debate with a procedure modelled on the framing of the Constitution, which was arrived at through meetings of popular representatives.

The causation of the NR wars has been shown to be processes attributable to many underlying tensions and perceptions that may or may not be factually true or verifiable through numbers. Instrumentalist identification of static risk factors and structural incentives for conflict are not enough in understanding their occurrence, since truth, like tradition, is constructed (Clifford, 1986: 6). This has practical implications in that it underlines the importance of paying attention to the spread of antagonistic conflict narratives and relevant conflict categories, in the NR of Ghana as elsewhere.

While large-scale inter-ethnic conflict along minority-majority lines does not look likely at present because of the change in actors' perceptions, it would be dangerous to rely on the current intra-ethnic fragmentation to safeguard the NR against conflict, since new alliances or perceived alliances, along gate, regional or other lines, could be created as long as underlying tensions are not given safe outlets. The next group to find a voice with which to articulate demands, overwhelming the Ghanaian state capacity for conflict resolution, may not be the minorities.

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