

## CONTESTED HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES: SUCCESSION DISPUTES, CONTESTED LAND OWNERSHIP AND RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN NORTHERN GHANA

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Ya-Na Yakubu Andani II, ruler of Dagbon, was killed in Yendi at the end of March 2002. Some months earlier, in December 2001, there were bloody clashes between the Kusasi and the Mamprusi in Bawku. If this news were not disturbing enough, one can also read time and again in Ghanaian newspapers about clashes between the adherents of the Ahlus-sunna and the Tijaniyya all over the country. Are these incidents mere episodes on the political landscape in northern Ghana or can they be seen as significant signs of societal changes as part of an unstable political-economic structure? Is the political geography the only common denominator of the various bloody succession disputes that have shattered Dagbon especially throughout the twentieth century? Further, are the quarrels about land ownership that have haunted much of the recent past of the relationship between various ethnic groups in northern Ghana also an expression of the political geography of the country? Last, but not least, are intra-religious clashes connected with the political geography of independent, postcolonial Ghana?

For a historian, it seems as if the political geography – the fact that all of these elements of unrest and concern are located and occur in specific geographical locations – is but one factor, and not even an explanatory one. Rather than limiting one's investigation to a narrow analysis of time and space, a historian (or any other person inclined to appreciate a wider perspective) will stress the cumulative factor of history, the carry over of political and economic – societal – patterns if not structures and, most importantly, ideas, habits as well as mentalities, from one historic period, era or reality into another – perhaps even more than only the succeeding one. Thus, as I will argue in this article, that the present political instability in northern Ghana, be it the Yendi Conflict, the Northern Conflicts or the intra-religious clashes, has to be put in historical perspective. Put briefly, I see

the political unrest and instability as a sign of societal insecurity and uncertainty in northern Ghana and my task in this article is to trace the roots of this malaise.

The politicization of history (time) and geography (space) can be seen both in the Dagbon succession conflicts and in the various so-called Northern Conflicts. In the former, two parties, the Andani and the Abudu family, are at odds over the right of succession to the highest political position, namely who has a legitimate claim to be enskinned as Ya-Na or ruler of Dagbon. At stake in the latter conflict (or, more accurately, series of conflicts) is the question of self-representation, citizenship and, ultimately, land ownership. In both cases, time and space are politicized and history has become a contested (but also conflicting) narrative. Different parties put forward different interpretations of History as representing one single truth which the other either misuses or distorts. History, and by extension, geography, is used as a substitute for ideology and political power. However, the historical and geographical narrative as a substitute is fluid and lacking cohesion, resulting in a wide variation of interpretations of space and time. It almost seems as if history and geography are warehouses where anyone who enters takes out what is needed to construct that narrative, blueprint or Truth one needs to propagate for a certain cause. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Andani version of History is different of that of the Abudu one whereas a Dagbamban scholar's version of the political rights of the Konkomba is different to that of a Konkomban scholar.

History has become a part of the modernizing project in northern Ghana, as will be claimed in this article. History is used in shaping, writing and even creating new narratives; it is both used to legitimize and as an ideological tool. I could take my argument even further and claim that history is, in general, part of the modernization project of independent, postcolonial African states. However, my assertion would not be seen as very revolutionary: it is difficult for any post-colonial African state to claim having a history before independence – as a state or a nation. This is not a Trevor-Roper-reborn-argument, but what history that existed before independence was not part of the postcolonial narrative of a certain particular state that emerged as an outcome of the colonial moment. Thus, the history of independent Ghana starts in 1957 and not before that date.<sup>1</sup> The colonial period after 1900 did create a loose political entity, but the three units in the region that were tied to this entity, the Gold Coast Colony, Ashanti (Asante) and the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast, had little in common apart from being

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<sup>1</sup> A similar, more general, argument was raised by Paul Zeleza (2004: 104): "Attempts to stretch the historical personality of the modern nation-state into the precolonial period often ends up in presenting a disparate collection of 'migration' of the different ethnic groups into the 'nation' space [...]. For the precolonial period the discussion of historical processes in a regional and continental context makes more sense than conjuring up 'national' history." See further Zeleza 2003.

part of the British Empire. Before that point, there were myriads of historical processes but no grand story. Again, turning away from a macro to a micro perspective, one can detect long lines of changes, ruptures but also continuities.

One of these long lines of the historical and geographical narrative is the changing relationship between the local and the global. In my reading, the global is represented by the external factor, be it migrating horse warriors, long-distance merchants, Muslim or Christian clerics, the colonial state or the modern, postcolonial government. The external factor can be a contested one or not, but in most cases, it leads to a change in the local society. Thus, the local society never exists in a political vacuum but has to articulate and come to terms with the various external or global factors. However, internal factors, too, shape the historical and geographical narrative. Power relations within a specific society are also shaped by certain individuals and are reflections of their societal, economic and political position and status within the society. Therefore, a reading of the different historical and geographical narratives has to be based on political economy and political ecology, i.e., it has to articulate structural changes as much as it has to take into account the various narratives.

## I. POSTCOLONIAL READINGS OF THE PAST AND PRESENT

News about bloody succession disputes, quarrels about landownership and ultimately political influence as well as intra-religious clashes do not fit in the general picture of contemporary Ghana as being a relatively politically stable West African state. True, the country, which in 1957 became as the first sub-Saharan country to gain its independence, has had a long period of political instability and economic chaos, especially during the 1960s and 1970s. However, since the 1980s Ghana has slowly recovered, regaining at least relative political and economic stability in the 1990s. The presidential elections in both 2000 and 2004 marked the transition of Ghana into a mature democracy.<sup>2</sup> Thus, with this generally rather positive political – and to some extent also positive economic – development during the last two decades, the news from the north is disturbing and does not really correspond to the general image of the country.

At this point one can detect already various historical and geographical narratives that exist in contemporary Ghana. One is the meta-narrative of the independent country. Such a narrative stresses the (supposed) coherence of Ghana, fixed by internationally guaranteed borders. This narrative is, to a large extent, based on a nationalistic reading of history and geography, although a very specific and state-centred one. As in other independent African states, the official project

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview, see Leith & Söderling 2003.

at independence was to create political unity and to lay the foundation of what might be termed "Ghanaianness". National unity was a political project where, as in Europe, the educational sector was to play a crucial role: compulsory universal education was to replace the different educational systems.<sup>3</sup>

However, this meta-narrative of unity is a problematic one. The political and economic unity of Ghana is in many ways a chimera. At independence, the African political leadership took over a divided country: the relatively rich south including the former Gold Coast colony and the Ashanti (Asante) protectorate as well as the – by every standard – economically backward protectorate of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast. Although the Nkrumah government tried to bridge the gap between the north and the south, both the political economy and the political ecology of the country as well as global political and economic changes worked against the attempts of the Ghanaian government. Not surprisingly, the official meta-narrative was to undergo several changes following independence. Whereas at beginning of independence there was an optimistic reading of the colonial legacy – the building of a new society using colonial foundations – this perspective soon changed into a negative one. This negative reading challenged the optimistic reading of the modernization process: the structures that had been put in place by the colonial state had not enabled but retarded African initiatives and progress. Such claims were already put forward during the latter period of Nkrumah's government and gained academic sanction through Walter Rodney's influential story about the African farmer who entered and left the colonial moment with a hoe in his/her hand. Nkrumah's failed modernization project and the inability of succeeding Ghanaian governments to generate solid economic growth, political stability or to meet the expectations of Ghanaian citizens were increasingly explained as being caused by distorted political and especially economic national and global structures. The outcome was what could be labelled as the imperialistic narrative: poor economic and political development were first and foremost blamed on colonial policies and the succeeding neocolonial or neoimperialistic world order.

At stake in the official meta-narrative is the position of the state. Following Herbst (2000), one could claim that independent Ghana is a typical postcolonial state. At independence, Nkrumah took over the colonial administrative, economic and political structures, including the colonial army and the colonial borders. Nkrumah and subsequent Ghanaian leaders introduced a wide range of political and economic reforms that aimed to make the postcolonial Ghanaian state the central vehicle for both political and economic progress. This attempt at creating a

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<sup>3</sup> Bangulo Bening 1990: 198; Tsikata & Seini 2004: 19; also Kimble 1963. On nationalist history, see Falola 2001. Examples of the Ghanaian meta-narrative are, among others Adu Boahen 1975; Buah 1980; Okyere 2000.

“strong” state was a break with the earlier “weak” colonial state, especially with regard to the relationship between the political authorities and the people inhabiting the area within the borders. Following Mamdani (1996), one could claim that the “strong” postcolonial state tried to represent itself as serving and looking after the interest of its *citizens* and not, like the “weak” colonial state, controlling and caring for its *subjects*. However, at a certain point Nkrumah’s “strong” state turned against itself and already during the 1960s came under heavy attack (Armah 1968).

In addition, Nkrumah’s and the official meta-narrative were challenged by other narratives, among others, an Asante narrative that came into conflict with the official meta-narrative. In fact, one reading of the political history of independent Ghana stresses the tug-of-war between two major political blocks, namely the Nkrumah-Rawlings tradition and the Danquah-Busia-Kufour tradition. These two political traditions are closely interlinked with competing ideas of leadership, economic strategies and, to a large extent, political outlook. Whereas the Nkrumah-Rawlings tradition can be seen as representing the idea of the “strong” state, blended with radical and sometimes even socialistic rhetoric, the Danquah-Busia-Kufour tradition comes close of being conservative.<sup>4</sup> But whatever grand narrative there is of these two political traditions, one can easily detect a competing approach to history and geography. It could be argued that, at the bottom of the debate, is the question of ethnic-cum-national representation: what is the position of Asante in modern Ghana? Whose political tradition should be acknowledged in the meta-narrative – that of the Fante and the Mankessim Declaration of 1869? What about the Ewe and the Togolander nationalism? What about the issue of the conflicting narratives in the north, an issue that I will discuss later in the article? Not surprisingly, voting and political activity in Ghana is closely tied to ethnic particularity: Nkrumah’s CPP (Convention People’s Party) and Rawling’s NDC (National Democratic Convention) are seen as bulwarks against Asante nationalism, whereas the NLM (National Liberation Movement) and Kufour’s NPP (National Patriotic Party) are regarded as articulating Asante interests.<sup>5</sup>

Another example of contesting historical narratives was the dispute between the Ghanaian (Nkrumah) government and the chiefs about the latter’s position in the independent state. When Nkrumah took over as prime minister of the then Gold Coast government in 1951, his ministry replaced a British colonial one but

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<sup>4</sup> Nugent 1999: 287–319; Paul Nugent, personal communication, May 2003. Also Hughes 2003. Oelbaum (2004: 245, 262), again, defines the Nkrumah-Rawlings traditions as populist and the Danquah-Busia-Kufour tradition as liberal. See further Jay Oelbaum 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Nugent, personal communication, May 2003. Also Hughes 2003; Oelbaum 2004: 247, 250–251. §

built on British-laid colonial political and economic structures. Within the British colonial setup in the region, political power was divided on the local and regional level between the British colonial officials and the co-called Native Authorities and the Native Administration. Termed as Indirect Rule, this system of dual political structures was first established in Northern Nigeria at the beginning of the twentieth century, and was introduced in the Northern Territories in 1932 and in Ashanti and the Colony in 1935.<sup>6</sup>

However, it was only in the Northern Territories where the system of Indirect Rule was to fully develop. Especially in the Colony, the chiefs came under heavy attack by a group that could be labelled as “Young Nationalists”, among others Nkrumah, who criticized the chiefs for merely being the tools of the colonial authorities and for being interested in guaranteeing the status quo in their realms. The bottom-line of the critique of the “Young Nationalists” was that they regarded themselves – not the chiefs – to be the agents of modernization: the chiefs were the guardians of traditional political, societal and economic structures and the British colonial state had based its existence in the region on a close relationship with the chiefs. Thus, in the narrative of the “Young Nationalists”, the chiefs represented a force counter to modernization. With Nkrumah and his CPP taking over political power in the Gold Coast in the 1950s, the situation changed drastically. Though Nkrumah took over the political structures of the colonial state, he changed the colonial dual system by dismantling the Native Administrations.<sup>7</sup>

## II. CONTESTED HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES IN THE NORTH: THE YENDI CONFLICT 2002

Both the colonial authorities and the chiefs created historical and geographical narratives to reflect their political positions. The colonial narrative can be labelled as a macro-narrative: it was the story of an external dominant force that brought stability and order. It was a narrative that dealt little with local inhabitants but rather with the activities of a benevolent yet amorphous “state” and its officials. This macro-narrative was very predominant in the Northern Territories. When arriving in 1899, the British representatives found nothing but political chaos and disorder, namely a region which had been ravaged by slave raiders. Their reading of the political landscape was a critical one but at the same time an ideological one. Peace and stability, which eventually would lay the foundation for societal development, was the motto, but how could this end be achieved when the colonial authorities in Accra simultaneously declared that not a penny was to be spent

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<sup>6</sup> Apter 1955: 133. See also Rathbone 2000; Tsikata & Seini 2004: 15–17.

<sup>7</sup> Rathbone 2000. Also Brempong 2001.

on the economic and political development of the north? Following the colonial macro-narrative, the solution was cooperation by engaging the local chiefs and their administrations. Consequently, the local rulers of Dagbon, Gonja, Mampurugu and Wa were tied to the colonial administrative structure and were recognized as authorities with a limited political influence. However, the colonial reading of the political landscape soon proved problematic. When first asked by the colonial representatives, the local rulers would seriously argue that they controlled several ethnic groups, but on further investigations several decades later, during the 1920s and 1930s, the British authorities realized that their first reading of the political geography had been superficial: few of the different ethnic groups in the north acknowledged the rulers of Dagbon, Mampurugu or Wa as their overlords. Though the colonial macro-narrative was thereby challenged, it was never dropped or changed.<sup>8</sup> Instead, as will be argued later in this article, it was taken over by the postcolonial authorities – and the so-called chiefly groups in the north.

Before turning to the conflict between the so-called minorities or stateless societies and the centrally governed groups in the north, I shall discuss the historical and geographical narrative of the northern chiefs during the colonial and postcolonial period as it goes some way towards explaining the Yendi Conflict. In both cases, the central issue was (and is) legitimacy of political authority. At the end of the nineteenth century, surveys conducted by the European colonial powers – Britain, France and Germany – painted a dualistic picture of the political landscape in the so-called Voltaic Basin. George Ekem Ferguson's investigations into the Asante hinterland were of key importance for establishing the British colonial narrative. He identified centralized kingdoms – the Mossi kingdoms, Dagbon, Mampurugu, Nanumba, Wa and Gonja – which existed side by side with so-called stateless or acephalous groups. From a colonial perspective – British or other – only the centralized kingdoms were of importance since they had identifiable rulers with whom one could negotiate and sign treaties. Thus a link between the local rulers and the colonial authorities was established, either by signing treaties or by conquering and imposing loyal candidates as new rulers, as the Germans did in Yendi in 1900.<sup>9</sup>

Seen from the perspective of the local rulers, the colonial situation was problematic but also challenging. At an early stage, colonial officials became aware of the complex system of political authority and especially the rotation of political offices and so-called gates. In all of the kingdoms, succession to the highest office, namely that of the ruler, the Ya-Na in Dagbon, the Nayiri in Mampurugu, the Yagbumwura in Gonja, the Wa-Na in Wa or the Bimbila-Na in Bimbila, was a

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<sup>8</sup> See further Ladouceur 1979; Lentz 1998; Hawkins 2002.

<sup>9</sup> See further Arhin 1974; Staniland 1975; Weiss 2001: 83–110.

complicated process and was usually followed by succession disputes and even open clashes between contesting parties. According to the colonial perspective, the succession disputes brought instability and disorder and should be regulated. Therefore, British colonial authorities decided to lay down written constitutions for the various kingdoms during the 1920s and 1930s which, among other things, were to solve the issue of succession. Thus the number of contesting gates or families was codified in each kingdom. In Dagbon, the gates were limited to two: the Andani and the Abudu families and the office of the Ya-Na would rotate between these two families. However, the new constitution did not solve the succession conflicts. Instead, it brought in a new element, namely the colonial state and its successor, the postcolonial state, as a new external factor in the process.<sup>10</sup>

Through the written constitutions, the colonial and postcolonial authorities claimed to establish a momentum towards discipline and order in the local succession processes of the kingdoms. The particularity of each kingdom and its political structures was mostly acknowledged, but with one crucial exception, namely the prohibition of the use of violence. This had been the case especially in Dagbon, where different gates, i.e., members of the royal family who were in charge of one of the four key towns in Dagbon (Mion, Karaga, Tolon, Savelugu) and who thus were influential kingmakers. According to Dagbon political procedure, a Ya-Na could only be chosen among those persons who had held one of these four gates. As the election of the Ya-Na was a "winner-takes-all" situation, especially as all vacant gates would be filled by a Ya-Na with members of his family and allies, the conflicting parties would engage in bloody fights before a new Ya-Na had been installed. From a local Dagbani perspective, the rationale of this process of selection was obvious: the strongest – or at least the most influential – candidate would be enskinned, and contesting parties would be eliminated. Thus, although the succession strife temporarily brought a high amount of political and military instability, if not chaos, once the new ruler consolidated his rule, he would be able to regain full political authority and thereby pave the way for stability in Dagbon society again.<sup>11</sup>

Dagbon political history is therefore a series of periods of political stability interspersed with political disorder and insecurity. Not only colonial authorities remarked about the seemingly irrational succession procedure in Dagbon. Local commentators, such as the Hausa Muslim scholars and who wrote accounts of Dagbon history, also noted the intervals of stable regimes and bloody successions.<sup>12</sup> Other local authors, such as E. Tamakloe, who served both the German

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<sup>10</sup> Ferguson & Wilks 1970: 326–369.

<sup>11</sup> Ferguson & Wilks 1970. Also Skalnik 1975: 177–193.

<sup>12</sup> Pílaszewicz 2001.



and the British colonial authorities, highlighted a similar tendency in his treatise on Dagbon history.<sup>13</sup> Last, but not least, local *lunse* or court praise-singers, in their oral repertoires gave a similar presentation of the political history, namely one where sons of a strong ruler could fight for years over becoming Ya-Na.<sup>14</sup>

Following Skalnik (1978), one could retrospectively regard the Dagbon succession system as a sign of an early state. Being based on oral tradition, each time a ruler died, the whole process of eliminating contesting candidates had to be renewed since any member of the royal family who held an influential position either in Yendi or in any other town of Dagbon was theoretically eligible provided that he was at the moment holding one of the key political posts of the kingdom and that he had gained a large enough retinue. The Dagbon colonial constitution was therefore an external attempt to codify certain rules of succession, i.e., to make the succession process more transparent and less violent. The disarmament of the local armies further strengthened the position of the external authority as the colonial state thereby evolved as the sole party who could forcefully interfere in local disputes. Thus, the colonial constitution of Dagbon was not an “invention of tradition”, it was rather a reinterpretation of political tradition and the external codification of certain aspects of local political tradition.<sup>15</sup>

However, the colonial constitution had not solved two structural problems. One was to stabilize internal dynamics: the succession process was still a winner-takes-all situation and there was no clear idea about the position of the royal family who was not currently in power. The other problem was the relationship between the colonial and the traditional state. As long as the colonial state was a weak one it needed “strong” local authorities through whom the colonial state could impose its vision of “stability and order”. Such a situation could change over the decades, provided that the colonial economy would have enabled the colonial state to take a more direct lead in the provision for economic development in the territories. However, British colonial policies in the Northern Territories were curtailed due to the lack of economic investment and a general political disinterest in the region. Thus, the colonial state remained extremely weak throughout the colonial period, whereas the local traditional state evolved as the key motor of economic and social development. As long as the colonial authorities were outsiders, the political as well as societal impact of local “native” authorities was to increase.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Tamakloe 1931.

<sup>14</sup> See further Benzing 1971; Ferguson 1973.

<sup>15</sup> A similar argument of a “continuation of (political) tradition” is made by Lentz 2002. Also Lentz & Nugent 2000.

<sup>16</sup> Brukum 1998; 1999.

When the colonial state was replaced by the independent state, there was at first an attempt by the latter to establish itself as a strong state in the north. However, such a policy resulted in a situation where previous rivalries among the two contesting families not only were articulated in the tug-of-war in Dagbon but also in their alliance to national political parties. When one family sided with Nkrumah's CPP, the other family would back the opposition parties, the MAP (Moslem Association Party) and especially the NPP (Northern Peoples' Party). As an outcome, the Andani faction was to evolve as a pro-CPP and later pro-NDC group, whereas the Abudu were known for their ties with the Busia and Kufour platform.<sup>17</sup>

What happened during the postcolonial period was a politization and escalation of the succession crises in Dagbon. The colonial authorities can be criticized for interfering in the local disputes, but in general their object was an internal one, namely to create stability based on what was perceived as the "correct" interpretation of local political tradition. The postcolonial authorities lacked such a perspective. This was due to the fact that politicians who represented Dagbon in Accra were closely tied to one or the other of the contesting families. On the other side, those politicians, who had nothing to gain from being involved, had usually less inside knowledge about local politics and traditions than the local colonial authorities had had. Therefore, one could even claim that, whereas the colonial state was a relatively neutral player, the postcolonial state is not. This situation is clearly understood by the local contesting parties, and therefore local political disputes have increasingly become national affairs.

However, it could be argued that the postcolonial state has been a very weak one with regard to its capacity for mediating in the Dagbon succession crises. Compared to the British colonial authorities, who imposed their will and their vision of political tradition upon local actors, the postcolonial state has not been able to fully stabilize political tension in Dagbon. This has been evident since the 1969 succession conflict. The crises in 1969 triggered government and army actions, but their interference did not create a stable situation. The Abudu faction lost their claim and an Andani contestant was chosen Ya-Na by the kingmakers.<sup>18</sup> When Kufour's NPP came into power in 2000, a problematic situation emerged in Dagbon where state authorities were known to be tied to the rival faction. Though it is both unproven and very unclear, a general rumour in Dagbon in 2002 was that there was a Abudu-led and NPP-backed conspiracy against the ruling Ya-Na, Yakubu Andani II. The escalation of political violence that followed in Yendi and the eruption of open fighting and the killing of the Ya-Na in March 2002 are still

<sup>17</sup> Fayemi, Jaye & Yeebo 2003, esp. p. 64; Tsikata & Seini 2004: 36.

<sup>18</sup> On the 1969 conflict in Yendi, see Ladouceur 1972; Staniland 1973, in addition to Ferguson & Wilks 1970 and Staniland 1975.

blurred with accusations from both sides against the other's actions and political alliances.<sup>19</sup>

What seems clear, however, is a general misreading of the escalation of the conflict. A basic problem that can be identified is that the colonial Dagbon constitution did not solve the succession disputes. Although the constitution codified a political praxis which limited the contesting parties to two families, it opened up a new problem, namely that of what to do with the family that was not in power. Whereas the previous system eliminated possible claimants, the new model introduced a kind of "shadow cabinet". However, with the "winner-takes-all" policy still in force, a rotational model would only be effective if the external monitoring authorities – the colonial state – were not tied to the contesting parties. This was no longer the case during the postcolonial period. Instead, the state became – more or less against its will – incorporated into the conflict. Put differently, for the last thirty years a local political narrative has been able to superimpose itself on the national narrative. The outcome was the 2002 Yendi Conflict and the instability of the state to regain the upper hand in the conflict. Neither of the two contesting factions are willing to back down from their positions and as long as the murdered Ya-Na has not been buried, the selection process of a new ruler cannot begin.

What is needed at this point of the conflict is a critical analysis by all involved parties on local political tradition as well as the role of the state. Seen from an outside perspective, the situation in Dagbon is not unique and the prevalent political tradition should not be viewed as a closed chapter in the historical development of political rule in Dagbon. What comes into mind is the situation that prevailed at the time of the nomination of Zangina by the Nayiri, the ruler of Mampurugu, as Ya-Na in about 1700. The lesson from history is that succession crises in Dagbon have been earlier solved by outside mediation – and interference – and that rules of succession can (and must) be changed. Gates can be eliminated or closed, especially if the argument focusses on the benefit of the subjects or, in the modern world, on the rights of the citizens. The constitutional foundations of monarchies have changed in various parts of the world so why not also in Dagbon? The state, too, has to open its mind to new solutions: a colonial constitution is a postcolonial remnant in a modern, independent society. If it no longer responds to the changed political and societal structures, then there is a need to renegotiate the constitution.

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<sup>19</sup> For an analysis of the causes and consequences of the 2002 Yendi Conflict, see Hughes 2003: 58–63, and Tsikata & Seini 2004: 33–37.

### III. REREADING HISTORY FROM BELOW: CLAIMS FOR REPRESENTATION AND LAND OWNERSHIP IN THE NORTH

The Yendi Conflict is but one example of contesting political and geographical narratives in northern Ghana. A much more problematic issue are the so-called Northern Conflicts, i.e., the various disputes between so-called majority and minority groups over political representation and land ownership. The Northern Conflicts must be regarded as a complex conflict in the sense that one can identify different levels and sets of competing geographical and historical narratives. On one level is the desire for political recognition by various ethnic groups in the north. Another is about landownership, and both claims are closely interwoven.

As I noted above, one is able to detect a macro-narrative, namely that of the creation of colonial structures which established a close link between the kingdoms and the colonial and subsequent postcolonial authorities. The colonial outline of two different sets of societies in the north, the kingdoms and the stateless societies, was the result of the lack of colonial personnel's acknowledgement of the centralized states' claim to rule over the stateless societies. Such an outline suited the colonial perspective. Though British colonial authorities were aware of the fact that these societies had come under heavy pressure during the precolonial period due to the slave raids orchestrated by the kingdoms, the development of autonomous political structures for the acephalous societies was felt to be problematic. In some regions, where the nominal overlordship of the kingdoms was regarded as nonexistent, British actions resulted in the "invention" of native rulers and the establishment of a rudimentary Native Administration. With the introduction of Indirect Rule in 1932, the Northern Territories were finally divided into societies with rulers and ethnic groups without representation. Among the latter was a wide range of different ethnic groups, especially in the Northern Region, most notably the Konkomba. In fact, the Northern Region consisted of only four main Native Authorities, the rulers of Dagbon led by the Ya-Na, the rulers of Mamprusi, the rulers of Gonja as well as the ruler of Nanumba.<sup>20</sup>

The establishment of Native Authorities and Native Administrations had far-reaching consequences in terms of taxation and land ownership. Though British investigations had pointed out that a common feature in the north was the nonexistence of the concept of individual landownership, the control of land was transferred to the Native Authorities. Furthermore, although the British authorities were aware of the religious and symbolic position of the earth priests, the tindanas, as the ritual owners of the land, their position was overlooked when the new

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<sup>20</sup> Ladouceur 1978; Bening 1995; Brukum 2000–2001; Der 2001.

Native Authorities were established or when the political structures of the old kingdoms were codified. Last, but not least, by defining the stateless groups as “minority people”, the colonial – and also postcolonial – vocabulary created an image that the centralized states were the majority of the population in the north. Various censuses, however, pointed in a different direction: those groups that were termed minorities constituted the majority of the inhabitants in the Northern Territories – and still do so in contemporary Ghana.<sup>21</sup>

The case of the Konkomba clashes highlights the escalation of the conflict. Being regarded as unruly and troublemakers by both the colonial and the Native Authorities, the Konkomba were placed under the control of the Ya-Na and the Dagbamban chiefs of Sunson and Zagbeli. Some (British) colonial authorities even acknowledged the Dagbamban version of history, namely that the first rulers of Dagbon had, on their arrival in the area (Toma or Western Dagbon), slain all tindanas or married their daughters. Through this act, Western Dagbon was regarded as “pure” Dagombaland, whereas Eastern Dagbon, including the Yendi region, was a different case. Here the ritual authority of the local tindanas was preserved, but politically the Konkomba were regarded as being subjugated to Dagbamban rule. A Konkomba reading of history argues that the Dagbamban version is fiction: no Konkomba group is said to have regarded the Ya-Na as their overlord.<sup>22</sup>

The establishment of colonial boundaries confused the situation even further. When Dagbon was divided between the British and the Germans, Eastern Dagbon and, with it, the majority of the Konkomba were placed under German colonial rule. After the First World War, when former German Togoland was divided between the British and the French, Eastern Dagbon was united with British Dagbon. However, the making of a colonial geographical landscape resulted into the politization of geography. Following the new colonial division of indigenous inhabitants and alien groups, the Konkomba were begun to be regarded by both Dagbamba and Nanumba as alien immigrants and foreigners.<sup>23</sup>

The outcome was two different historical and geographical narratives. A good example of the Dagbamban narrative is the presentation of Ibrahim Mahama’s account of the Northern Conflicts.<sup>24</sup> According to him, the Konkomba had no claim to landownership or political self-representation since they were foreigners,

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21 On the issue of colonial (mis)interpretations of stateless societies and the role of the Earth Priests, see Lentz 2003, and Grischow 1998. On colonial censuses in the Northern Territories, see Weiss 2005. On minorities in contemporary Ghana, see E. Gyimah-Boadi & Richard Asante 2003.

22 Tait 1961.

23 Talton 2003.

24 Mahama 2003.

their "homeland" being in Togo. Such a perception is heavily criticized by the few Konkomba intellectuals, such as Justice Katanga. They rightly point out the politization of the argument and the subjective interpretation of the historical geography of the region.<sup>25</sup> However, there is more at stake than just two subjective versions of political geography. It could be argued that the Dagbamban position rests on a British position, i.e., one that takes into account the situation in Western Dagbon, whereas the Konkomban position has a German twist in the sense that one of its central documents is the 1908 hut-count (Hüttenzählung) in German Dagbon. This document has either not been known to Dagbamban historians or it has been deliberately disregarded. (See *Appendix I*.)

The German census is interesting, despite its pitfalls. A critical analysis of the document reveals the vague nature of the German undertaking: how many huts were not counted and what were the foundations for the German assumption that a certain number of people would inhabit one hut? Though the count must be regarded as a mere estimate, the document as well as other archival sources indicate some interesting points. First, though the Dagbamba constituted one of the major ethnic groups, there were more Konkomba living in the Jendi (Yendi) Sub-District. Second, the matter of granting the Dagbamba a leading role in the German colonial administrative setup was questioned not only by some German Residents but also the Basel Missionary Society which had established itself in Yendi in 1913. This critical position was reflected in the discussion between the missionary representatives and the German authorities about which language should be taught at the missionary school. Though Dagbangli and Hausa were to be preferred at the moment, both the missionaries and the German authorities were fully aware of the fact that neither language could ever become a functional lingua franca in northern Togoland. Instead, it was thought that by siding with the Konkomba and other groups, a more suitable alliance between colonial subjects and the German authorities could be established. However, before 1914 not much was done mainly due to the fact that the realpolitik of the German authorities echoed British colonial praxis, basing their rule on a working relationship with the kingdoms.<sup>26</sup>

The relationship between the Konkomba and other groups became problematic during the colonial period. Reading British colonial files, one gets the impression that both the colonial authorities as well as the local rulers regarded the Konkomba as disturbing elements. Time and again riots and clashes were reported, either among quarrelling Konkomba groups or between the Konkomba and their neighbours. Such events seem to have fortified the negative perception about the

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<sup>25</sup> Justice Katanga, *An Historical and Ethnographic Commentary on The Northern Conflict*, unpublished paper, n.d.. A copy of the paper is filed in the Basel Missionsarchiv, Basle.

<sup>26</sup> Weiss 2005.

Konkomba as being freedom-loving, unsettled and dangerous bushfighters.<sup>27</sup> But there was also another narrative in the colonial files, namely that of the Konkomba being superior yams farmers who, since the 1930s, started to settle in sparsely populated areas.<sup>28</sup>

Eventually, the expansion of the Konkomba farmers into Nanumba and Eastern Gonja was to lead to the bloody clashes in the 1980s and the Guinea Fowl War in 1994. One crucial factor behind the conflicts was the 1978 Land Law, according to which all issues of land ownership and usufruct were placed under the authority and control of the Native Rulers. This meant that no Konkomba had a right to land and their alienation became legal. However, in some areas in Eastern Gonja and especially in Nanumba, the Konkomba already constituted the majority of the population and started to claim the right to local representation and land ownership, thereby questioning the authority of the local rulers. In Eastern Dagbon, too, Konkomba political groups, especially the Konkomba Youth Association (KOYA), started to rally for the establishment of an independent Konkomba Native Authority. The strained relationships in the Northern Region burst into open violence in 1994, leaving at least 2,000 persons dead and about 100,000 refugees.<sup>29</sup>

The Guinea Fowl War never made big headlines in the news. At the time, the international media were more concerned about the escalation of the conflict in Rwanda, and, at the national level, the conflict seemed to strengthen southern Ghanaian preconceptions about the north. Seen from a southern standpoint, the Northern Conflicts did not challenge the stability of the state, though state authorities on a regional level generally branded the Konkomba and other “minority” groups as the troublemakers. Government reaction – when it came – resulted in military intervention: the minority groups had challenged both the geographical and political status quo. Though the parties in the conflict were able to engage in peace negotiations, which resulted into a cease fire and, eventually, an unstable peace treaty, government authorities were criticized for having neglected an important aspect of the conflict and the following peace process, namely the religious dimension.<sup>30</sup>

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27 Tait 1961; Katanga 1994: 10–11.

28 Weiss 2003.

29 On the 1994 Guinea Fowl War as well as other Northern Conflicts during the 1980s and 1990s, see Artur Bogner's thorough analysis “Gewaltkonflikte und der Wandel sozialer Fremdheit in Nordghana” (1998). Shorter analyses are provided in Akwetey 1996, Bogner 2000, and Tsikata & Seini 2004: 29–32. See also Brukum 1995.

30 Kirby 2003.

#### IV. AN ADDITIONAL NARRATIVE: THE RELIGIOUS FACTOR?

A common stereotype among southern Ghanaians is that the south is predominantly Christian whereas the north is Muslim. However, this is fiction – the north is not Muslim though Islam has gained a firm position in the Northern Region, especially in Dagbon, since the 1980s. In fact, a substantial part of the Ghanaian Muslim population is living in the big cities in the south according to both the 1960 and the 2002 census. On the other hand, the southern stereotype does, in some respect, reflect the history of Islam in the country. Prior to the colonial period, Muslim traders and scholars had settled in the northern kingdoms – but not among the stateless people. For the stateless people, Islam and the Muslims were part of the negative image of the kingdoms: they were actively engaged in either slave hunting or slave trading.<sup>31</sup>

The colonial period further highlighted the division between Muslim and non-Muslim entities. The colonial administration, as well as the Native Authorities, needed literate personnel and engaged Muslim scholars as clerks and scribes. This was especially the case in the Northern Region, where both so-called foreign Muslims, i.e., Hausa scholars, and local Muslims, such as Dagbamban Muslims, were involved in the bureaucracy. Again, in the northernmost regions, the contemporary Upper West and Upper East Region, a different policy was pursued. Here Catholic, and later Protestant, missionary societies had opened schools and could satisfy the need for educated personnel. What followed was the slow process of the religious demarcation of ethnic groups: the “majority” groups and the kingdoms were identified as Islamic, whereas Christian missions were active among the minority groups. However, before the 1960s, most of the people in the north were neither Muslim nor Christian, being still the adherents of Traditional African Religions.<sup>32</sup>

The religious factor was to gain momentum due to the educational policy (or rather, its absence) in the north. Muslim parents regarded missionary and government schools as a threat to their culture and self-identification as they feared that their children would become Christians and therefore decided to provide their children with only Muslim education. In the kingdoms, too, though the majority of the population were not Muslim, Muslim education rather than modern Western education was perceived as more suited to and in accordance with local tradition. A different picture emerged among the stateless societies: here Western education was perceived as a vehicle and an opportunity for social improvement.

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<sup>31</sup> Levtzion 1968; Der 1998.

<sup>32</sup> Ryan 1996; Kirby 1998.



The outcome was the marginalization of the Muslim population and those children who had only a Muslim education: their skills and education was not needed in the colonial society, nor was it needed in modern Ghana.<sup>33</sup>

Whereas the religious factor did not play any major role in politics during the colonial period – apart from the clashes between the adherents of the Ahmadiyya and the Tijaniyya in Wa during the 1930s<sup>34</sup> – religion has become politicized in contemporary Ghana. One example of this is the obvious Islamization of Dagbon, Nanumba and Mampurugu since the 1960s. During the expulsion of “aliens” and “foreigners” by the Ghanaian authorities at the end of the 1960s, many Hausa and Yoruba Muslims had to move to Nigeria.<sup>35</sup> The result of this act was the indigenization of Islam in Ghana. Whereas especially Hausa scholars had been the pillars of the Muslim communities before, indigenous Muslims took over the leadership of the communities. At the same time, Middle Eastern countries started to send financial aid to Muslim groups in Ghana. A turning point was the 1983 famine in northern Ghana when Muslim Aid groups were prominent in establishing themselves in the north. As Kirby notes, over the next two years, the situation in Dagbon radically changed and by 1985 almost everyone identified him- or herself as a Muslim. The positions became solidified during the Guinea Fowl War: among the combatants, the conflict was also perceived as a clash between Muslims (the Dagbamba, the Gonja and the Nanumba) and non-Muslims (the Konkomba and the Nchumurru).<sup>36</sup>

Despite the increasing religious split in the north, most observers do not regard an outright inter-religious conflict to be imminent. The main reason for their assumption is that the Muslims, the Christians or the adherents of African Traditional Religions would not politically gain from such a conflict and that the first mentioned are at least officially backing the secular constitution of the Ghanaian state. However, as was the case in the Guinea Fowl War, the religious factor can be mobilized in political conflicts. Contemporary Ghana has time and again been shattered by intra-religious conflicts, especially within the Muslim community. The usual background for the intra-religious conflicts within the Muslim community is a dispute about the leadership of the local community and the local mosque. Such disputes have caused fights among members of the Tijaniyya, the Ahmadiyya and the Ahlus-Sunna (or Wahhabiyya).<sup>37</sup> Though these clashes are usually localized ones, they are part of a more serious debate about who has the right to interpret what is wrong and what is right. Further, the disputes between the

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<sup>33</sup> Sey 2001; Owusu-Ansah 2002; Mumuni 2003.

<sup>34</sup> Wilks 1989.

<sup>35</sup> Eades 1994.

<sup>36</sup> Kirby 2003.

<sup>37</sup> Hughes 2003; Tsikata & Seini 2004.

Tijaniyya and the Ahlus-sunna are part of a general struggle between “pure” Islam and “local” Islam, between a “modern” and a “traditional” Islam. Whereas the spread of the Ahlus-sunna in Ghana is part of a general politization of Islam (or, rather, Islamization of politics)<sup>38</sup> and the spread of political Islam into West Africa, the adherents of the Tijaniyya stress a moderate approach and defend their sufi interpretation.<sup>39</sup> However, though the clashes between the Ahlus-sunna and Tijaniyya might be regarded as trifles, their impact on the local level is usually not trifling at all. For example, during the clashes in Bole in 2002, about one thousand persons had to flee.<sup>40</sup>

The intra-religious clashes, too, can be interpreted within the framework of disputing narratives. State authorities, especially the Muslim Vice President Aliu Mahama, constantly urge the Muslim factions to solve their animosities in peaceful ways. From his perspective, the Muslim subgroups are challenging the official meta-narrative of contemporary Ghana as a stable and peace-loving nation. However, such a narrative misses the point of the disputing parties: their narrative is not about the nation but the rightful interpretation of the norms of the Islamic faith; it is about different readings of history and about opposing party’s geographical space.

## V. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

A complex situation prevails in contemporary northern Ghana. The calm on the surface is an illusion. One can find traces of several problems that can easily erupt and cause turbulence. The issue of land ownership and the question of political representation have been and will be difficult problems to solve. Each party has its own interpretation of the background and the roots of their dilemma and each group is putting forward their own agenda for solving their particular problems. The conflict is not limited to the grassroots level. Apart from local communities and local ethnic or religious groups competing with each other, the Ghanaian state is involved as a third, and usually not very impartial, party.

As elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, the root cause of the conflicts is poverty. But poverty, too, is politicized if contesting parties refer to their miserable conditions as an explanation for their actions. Poverty in northern Ghana is about power-relations: some groups have more influence than others, the “majority”

<sup>38</sup> Hodgkin 1998.

<sup>39</sup> Hunwick 1997.

<sup>40</sup> “Two Muslim sects clash”, at: <http://www.mclglobal.com/History/Mar2002/05c2002/05c2r.html> (14.3.2002); “Northern conflicts displace five thousand”, at: <http://www.mclglobal.com/History/Apr2002/04d2002/04d2r.html> (5.4.2002).

people have better access to political authorities than most of the “minority” people, rich people get their voices heard, the poor do not. Power-relations are gender-relations: most women are disempowered.

History and geography are also politicized in northern Ghana. Conflicts over landownership are examples of the politicization of geography blended with different narratives of the historical past. One group claims a certain area as their own by referring to a past as conquerors, warriors and rulers over subjects, another disputes such a claim and argues that the claimants never controlled or ruled an area or that the land had been taken away from them in the first place. History has emerged as a legitimizing narrative and is used as a political ideology.

History is a contested space in contemporary Ghana – and elsewhere. History is seen as an imperialistic projection from the perspective of the disempowered whereas it represents a myriad of possible stories for an outsider. At one stage, the colonial authorities created one story, one that to some extent was taken over by the postcolonial state. However, before the colonial version of history, there existed other versions: that of the Muslim scholars, that of the local *lunse* and griots, that of the elders, that of those whose voices were not heard in the community. All of these versions of history existed side by side, yet some versions were more visible and louder than others, especially the ones of those in power. But those in power never remain so forever and thus history changes anew.

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### Appendix I.

Copy of German hut and population census in northern Togo, 1908 (Völker- und Hüttenzählung 1908, Bezirk Mangu-Jendi), filed in Basel Missionsarchiv, Basle, D-1,87, No 122)

	Ortschaften	Gehöfte	Hütten	Bemerkungen
Reich Jendi	47	107	4,004	
Guschiegu (Dagomba)		465	1966	
Guschiegu (Konkomba)	71		351	
Kulpanga	13	104	282	⌈ In den Hauptorten
Gnali	14	204	664	⌋ dieser Landschaften
Kunkon	18	113	315	sind Dagomba und
Demon, Palba	24	265	810	⌋ Konkomba vermischt
S.Song, Nakpambone	16	135	468	
Wapuli	21	197	757	
Segberi	14	117	396	
Dagomba u. Konkomba	238	2,819	10,031	Davon 6355 Dagomba und 3676 Konkomba

Konkomba bezw. Kpunkpamba unter Dagomba Herrschaft: 1176 Gehöfte

Selbstständige Konkomba zusammen: 250 Ortschaften / 3413 Gehöfte / 9487 Hütten

### Zusammenfassung

	Ortschaften	Gehöfte	Hütten	Einwohner	Prozent
Dagomba	⌈	1,643	6,355	13,345	6
Konkomba	⌋238				⌈
(unter Dagomba-herrschaft)	⌋	1,176	3,676	11,028	
Konkomba	250	3,413	9,487	28,461	⌋21,5
Kpunkpamba	186	804	2,956	8,868	⌋
Diakossi- Nadyago-Stämme	165	1,753	8,807	18,494	8,2
Kumongu, Dyie Legwol	68	836	3,269	8,172	4
Moba	336	5,895	20,288	60,864	27,1
Gurma	211	3,984	13,158	39,474	17,5
Manyamli	15	86	311	777	0,3
Kusasi	36	1,237	4,397	13,191	6
Namba	35	1,872	4,578	13,734	6
Taberma	10	1,180	4,072	8,144	3,6

