

# Peacebuilding in Northern Ghana: Cultural Themes and Ethnic Conflict

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## INTRODUCTION

### **Groups with chiefs versus groups without chiefs**

A great many of the more recent conflicts in Africa have taken place between neighbouring ethnic groups of the Western Sudan that have been closely linked historically, geographically and culturally. Many of these neighbouring peoples share the fact that one of them is a state system, and the other is typically organised as an acephalous or segmentary system around clan or lineage heads and other leaders, but not chiefs. In short, one group has chiefs and the other doesn't<sup>1</sup>. During the colonial era, in both British and French West Africa, the groups with chiefs typically ruled or administered their neighbours without chiefs according to the dictates of 'Indirect Rule' (see Eyre-Smith 1933; Ferguson and Wilks 1970; Goody 1954).

Although this system was convenient for the colonial administrators, it was quite damaging to the local peoples and their peaceful relations. Skalnik (1987) maintains that the seeds of opposition were sown by the colonial and post-colonial regimes, which imposed the idea of a European state on the traditional systems. In the case of the Dagomba/Nanumba group in N. Ghana, for example, he says that they were never that kind of state because they didn't rule their Konkomba subjects and the Konkomba were never completely acephalous for they had political heads and could organise themselves for war.

Here in N. Ghana, the opposition between the chiefly and acephalous peoples was strengthened with the imposition of chiefs, and reinforced by the establishment of various controls and the introduction of taxes by the colonial powers. The colonial records are replete with complaints by junior officials, political officers and those who frequented the field, that the system fostered the political and economic oppression of the non-chiefly groups. In his ethnographic work on the Konkomba of Northern Ghana, Tait (1961) cites many examples of this. These oppositions continued and were reinforced in the post-colonial period up until the first major ethnic conflicts began in 1981. From this point on, the intensity of opposition increased and the conflicts became more organised. In 1987, after a series of conflicts, the Konkomba petitioned the government for their tribal independence for their own paramount chiefs. When this was rejected, they petitioned again in 1993. It was the rejection of this second petition by the Northern House of Chiefs that launched the 1994 Northern Conflict. All it took to spark the fighting was a quarrel over a guinea fowl<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Conflicts also occur, of course, between two or more acephalous agriculturalists like the Konkomba and the BiMoba, and between pastoralists and agriculturalists, and such conflicts are a way of life among certain groups of pastoralists in Eastern Africa. In each case the pathways interact differently and the cultural themes are also different. This study focuses on the conflicting pathways between chiefly and non-chiefly groups in Northern Ghana, especially the Dagomba and Konkomba.

<sup>2</sup> To play down the gravity of the war, which caused considerable embarrassment to the government, the news media called it the 'Guinea Fowl War'.

Our interest in Skalnik's point is not so much to blame Indirect Rule for the conflicts in Northern Ghana, as it is to look for a less oppositional culture of interaction between chiefly and non-chiefly groups that can provide a better basis for peacebuilding. Ethnic conflict, as we now see it in Ghana and much of West Africa, is more a bi-product of the European concept of state, and forces in the modern world that are an outgrowth of this, than it is the result of unyielding oppositions within the traditional African systems and relations. Rather, what has happened is that the deeper unities have been overlooked or taken for granted. We now need peacebuilding vehicles that are more culturally connected and cognizant of these larger structures, and we would be best served in this quest to direct our attention to the basic unities within and between these traditional pathways.

### **Interrelated pathways**

Thinking of the two groups as interrelated pathways rather than separate polarities helps the peacebuilding task in two important ways. Firstly, it allows peacebuilders to emphasise the points of unity rather than division. They are no longer compelled to think of chiefly and non-chiefly peoples as political polarities but, as is quite visibly the case (see plates 3 and 4), very similar peoples who have lived side by side for centuries in a complementary unity, a symbiotic asymmetrical relationship<sup>3</sup> notwithstanding. The forefathers of the Konkomba performed certain specialised functions related to farming, hunting, war and Earth shrine rituals, while the forefathers of the Dagomba/Nanumba performed others related to chieftaincy, dispute settlement and tasks<sup>4</sup> such as the organising of markets<sup>5</sup> that brought together peoples at the inter-clan and inter-tribal levels.

Secondly, this way of thinking makes it possible to bring together what appear to be simultaneously opposed and complementary cultural pathways. It is more adaptive, more flexible and it offers a broader base of integration for peacebuilding than oppositional thinking. Instead of seeing chiefly peoples and non-chiefly peoples as two extreme systems, peacebuilders can begin to see both as part of a larger common system, or as Skalnik (1987) suggests, 'one system with two or more poles.'<sup>6</sup> Even though the two 'poles'<sup>7</sup> may be the main locus of each identity, they are not mutually exclusive. Furthermore this kind of focus brings into view the unities and commonalities. We can see that each group shares a number of common systems or 'cultural themes'<sup>8</sup> in which they both participate in different ways or at different points on a spectrum in accordance with their different pathways.

### **Looking for unities in cultural themes**

We will maintain here that the ways chiefly groups participate in the cultural themes are different from, and often opposed to, the ways the non-chiefly groups participate in the cultural themes. It is this difference that creates the negative synergy in the theme, that produces disharmonious relations and that provokes the conflicts that we often see between these two groupings. These oppositions may be addressed and the tensions reduced by emphasising the unities in the cultural themes, rather than the differences. In this way a negative synergy can be changed to a positive synergy and a 'war-culture'<sup>9</sup> to a 'peace-culture'<sup>10</sup>.

This proposition is based on anthropological research<sup>3</sup>, which was followed up and 'tested'<sup>4</sup> in a peacebuilding workshop<sup>4</sup> that made use of a new enactment genre called 'culture-

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<sup>3</sup> The results of this research have been summarised in an unpublished report to Catholic Relief Services-Ghana (CRS) entitled 'Indigenous Peacebuilding in Africa: Adding the Cultural Dimension' (Kirby 2001).

drama. Before discussing the methods and the results of the research, we shall briefly introduce the connection between culture and peacebuilding and the immediate stimulus for this research, the 1994 Northern Conflict. We shall return to the importance of 'culture-drama' in the conclusion.

### **Culture and the peacebuilding process**

The major theoretical approaches to peacebuilding do provide for the systemic and cultural dimensions in the peacebuilding process (see Assefa 1993), but the cultural dimensions have not yet been well integrated into the systemic<sup>5</sup>. The widely acclaimed authority on peacebuilding, J.P. Lederach, goes one step further than most. He outlines four stages in what he terms 'conflict transformation' in his book *Building Peace* (1997). These are: (1) dealing with the immediate crisis, (2) re-establishing a working relationship between the conflicting parties, (4) dealing with the systemic issues underlying the conflict, and back to (3) finding a way to introduce the systemic issues so as to uphold, reinforce and strategically build on the mutual relationships established in stage two. In stages four and three he includes cultural factors, and although he does not integrate them into the systemic issues as thoroughly as they need to be, he sets the stage in a way that this can be done. In our opinion, Lederach's 'transformational' model offers the best available theoretical framework for integrating the cultural dimension.

### **Lederach's four stages in peacebuilding**

Lederach's first stage is occupied with such necessities as obtaining a cease-fire, establishing security, disarmament, seeing to the refugees, relief aid, etc. This may last for one to two years. The second step is relationship building: getting the two groups to talk with each other, to interact and work with each other, to live together and begin life over again. This can occupy peacebuilders for twice as long as the first stage. From here, Lederach has us jump to the fourth stage, the systemic stage, where the focus is on transforming the systems of injustice and oppression that produce the conflict. It aims at unravelling the deep-seated structural incongruities and imbalances that are built into the system – into the traditions, the cultures and their history of involvement. It aims at redressing the deeper issues of structural injustice and inequality. From an anthropological perspective, it seeks to change whole cultures and their pathways – especially the areas where the two pathways are joined.

Lederach's reason for anticipating the fourth stage is to arrive at a clear vision for the path that the peace process must follow if it is to result in what he calls a 'peace system'. This is the most difficult level to achieve in peacebuilding, and it requires coordinated and sustained efforts over a long period. He warns that progress may be uneven, there may be regressions, and if the final goal is not clearly visible, and if real changes are not made, relations will regress to open conflict. Without sustained efforts and real changes in the system, the people will continue to live in what he calls a 'war system'. Between the second and the fourth stage there exists a huge gap that needs to be bridged by a sustained intermediate process. This is what Lederach calls 'the subsystem level'. Here, with eyes clearly focused on the peace vision projected by the fourth stage, the in-depth work of peacebuilding begins.

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<sup>4</sup> The 'culture-drama workshop' which was held near Accra, March 2002, brought together ten Dagomba and ten Konkomba for one week to use dramatic enactments as a means to transform their cultural pathways. It was also sponsored by CRS-Ghana and has been described in a 'workbook' (Kirby 2002b).

<sup>5</sup> Two who have begun this process of integration from a theological perspective are David Augsburg (1992) and Robert Schreier (1998). Schreier looks at the cultural issues from a theology of reconciliation and Augsburg presents a wealth of practical ideas and anthropological insights related to patterns of mediation and reconciliation in and across different cultures. Both have been a great help in developing this project.

### **The “third stage” from a cultural perspective**

According to Lederach, the work of bridging the gap in the third stage begins with the key question: *What are the systems that continue to produce war and prevent peace, and how can they be transformed?* From a cultural perspective, the “systems” are cultural pathways and the points of contact that produce war and prevent peace are the shared “cultural themes.” Lederach’s “peace-system” is a “peace-culture” and his “war-system” is a “war-culture.” Transforming the cultural themes is a matter of changing the interaction from a negative synergy to a positive synergy. The cultural themes need to be researched and brought to the surface. Social, historical and cultural analysis, all need to be applied. But the research, itself, needs in some sense to anticipate what a “peace-culture” might look like. It should, therefore, begin by looking at the cultural themes that they have in common and by stressing the unities amidst the many differences.

## **THE SERIOUS PROBLEM OF ETHNIC CONFLICT IN NORTHERN GHANA**

### **The case of the “Northern Conflict”**

In 1994, Ghana experienced its most violent and destructive ethnic war ever. All of the Northern Region was swept by the violence, which left up to two hundred thousand homeless and tens of thousands wounded and emotionally scarred. It is difficult to get accurate statistics because so many died in the bush, but some estimate that up to 10,000<sup>6</sup> died (van der Linde and Naylor 1994) while others report twice that number (Katanga 1994a). In any case, it was horrendous in every way and those who were on the scene, and were lucky enough to have escaped with their lives, pray that they might never again witness such terrible destruction<sup>7</sup>. Perhaps it eluded the world press because it occurred at the same time that television screens were focused on the Rwanda holocaust. But the violence, destruction and human suffering of the 1994 Conflict have permanently marked the national psyche and have drastically changed power relations in Northern Ghana.<sup>8</sup>

### **A pervasive and enduring problem**

Today, almost a decade later, Northern Ghana still lies under the pall of this destruction, loss of life and suffering. This is not to say that there has been no progress in building peace. Much effort and considerable progress has been made by NGOs, religious organisations, and peacebuilding teams, especially the NPI and WANEP<sup>9</sup>. Six peace meetings were held in Kumasi ending in the “Kumasi Accord” peace agreement and the formation of NORYDA<sup>10</sup> to keep peace efforts going on the ground (see Assefa 2001). Yet in spite of the gains, those close to the situation all agree that the war is not yet over. The main issues of land and chieftaincy have still not been dealt with. Many say that it can happen again and, if it does, it will be with even greater violence and destruction. Today the situation in Northern Ghana reflects an even wider West African crisis. The conflicting cultural pathways of peoples throughout this region of sustained ethnic and religious violence urgently need to be addressed. The time is long overdue for those involved to begin to deal with the systemic issues from a cultural perspective.

<sup>6</sup> Van der Linde and Naylor (1994) quote this figure from the National Mobilisation Program.

<sup>7</sup> I include myself in this number. For more than a month I was under siege at TICCS in Tamale by gangs of rogues and ruffians who brandished the body parts of their victims while they looted and burned with impunity. The police and the armed forces were nowhere to be seen.

<sup>8</sup> For more details from different perspectives see Assefa (2000), Katanga (1994b), and van der Linde and Naylor (1994).

<sup>9</sup> Nairobi Peace Initiative (NPI) and West African Network for Peace (WANEP)

<sup>10</sup> The Northern Ghana Youth and Development Association (NORYDA) was termed a “new structuring of political life in the Northern Region” (see Assefa 2001).

## RESEARCH INTO CONFLICTING CULTURAL PATHWAYS

### The research

From the cultural perspective, peacebuilding at the third level is a process in which the conflictive cultural themes are brought into harmony both within the groups themselves and between them. The need to achieve this deeper harmony at the third level of peacebuilding led me to conduct research on conflicting cultural pathways that exist between chiefly and non-chiefly peoples of Northern Ghana, particularly the Dagomba and Konkomba.

### The methods and procedures

Over the years, as I have watched the growth of armed conflicts between the chiefly and non-chiefly groups in the North, I have become increasingly involved in peacebuilding activities, and I have tried to bring in the cultural perspective. I have conducted hundreds of ethnographic interviews and have kept extensive notes on the subject. Twelve years ago I stumbled on the idea of using a dramatic format<sup>11</sup> as a means to build peaceful pathways internally on deep cultural foundations. From that time onward I began to focus on points of conflict and unity within shared themes.

In 2001, with financial support from CRS, I was able to dedicate myself full-time to this research. Using participant-observation methods and interviews, I worked for six months on such unifying elements as ‘non-chiefly’ pathways among chiefly peoples and ‘chiefly’ pathways among non-chiefly peoples. I was interested in comparing the interacting roles and interdependencies of the ‘Earth priest’ (*tindana*) and chief, especially among the Dagomba, and the ‘proto-chiefly’ roles of the ‘market heads’ and their relationship to the ‘Earth priests’ among non-chiefly peoples, especially the Konkomba. I found that a broad range of organisational structures and institutions supporting the idea of chieftaincy exists among the non-chiefly peoples, such as the Konkomba, and a similar range of traditional institutions associated with segmentary lineage systems, which are normally identified with non-chiefly peoples, exists as an integral part of state systems, such as the Dagomba<sup>12</sup>.

Then, over the next six months, I interviewed national leaders, officials, politicians, members of the armed forces, tribal leaders, spokespersons, and villagers of both chiefly and non-chiefly Northern groups, in order to elicit their views on the points of unity and conflict and, in general, their views on issues surrounding the ethnic conflicts. Putting the results of these interviews together with the earlier data on the mixed chiefly and non-chiefly pathways led me to roughly formulate a number of ambiguous conflictual-unitary themes.

The ‘chiefly’ Dagomba and ‘non-chiefly’ Konkomba were chosen for more focused observation and analysis. The ways these two groups relate ideally demonstrates the shared themes. They constantly interact, they share a common history of co-dependence, adjacent or overlapping geographical boundaries, and a wide range of cultural contexts and institutions. I pursued the themes and attempted to articulate them further by conducting informal and structured ethnographic interviews among opinion leaders, religious leaders, townspeople and villagers. I also conducted interviews with focus groups and various sub-groups. These interviews concentrated on such issues as: the meaning of peace and war, patterns of negotiation, ‘fight’ versus ‘flight’, patience versus hotheadedness, reconciliation and resolution, the spirit world and the material world, and the growing divide between ‘sacral

<sup>11</sup> I worked with a psycho-dramatist to help resolve culture-based conflicts in mixed culture Religious communities in Ghana. Together we tailored some techniques of psychodrama to address cultural issues.

<sup>12</sup> I am in the process of preparing a series of articles showing these relationships.

thinkingø and ÷secular thinkingø. As the new information came in, I narrowed the focus of the interviews. Eventually four themes emerged and I selected one of the themes, ÷hit-manø vs. ÷run-manø or ÷fightø vs. ÷flightø for more intensive analysis. I then sought out the differences in values and behaviour between the two groups by comparing their interpretations of a number of proverbs about conflict themes.

### **The findings: four cultural themes**

The information from the structured interviews suggested that there are at least four cultural themes and that a negative synergy is experienced between the two groups with regard to these themes. One group was found to be more at one end of the scale, while the other group was more at the other end. Broadly speaking, these themes also seem to apply to other peoples throughout Northern Ghana, and among chiefly and non-chiefly peoples across the Western Sudan.<sup>13</sup> This, however, should be verified by more intensive research. For easy reference I refer to these themes metaphorically as:

1. ÷Hit-peopleø vs. ÷Run-peopleø (Aggression vs. Compliance or Avoidance)
2. ÷Big-menø vs. ÷Small-menø (Chiefs vs. Family heads)
3. ÷Land-peopleø vs. ÷Earth-peopleø (Landlords vs. Earth Priests)
4. ÷God-peopleø vs. ÷Earth-peopleø (Profane vs. Sacred)

### **Some provisos**

While these metaphors of the extreme positions on a scale of differences are catchy and economical, it should be stressed that we are not saying by this that one extreme is ÷goodø (and those that choose that extreme are ÷goodø) or that the other extreme is ÷badø (and similarly those who choose that extreme are ÷badø). It should also be stressed that both extremes apply to both groups, but not to the same degree. We are saying that, along the gradations, ranging from one extreme to the other, the responses of one group, as a whole, are more toward one extreme and the responses of the other fall more toward the other extreme. In the rest of this paper I attempt to describe these ÷cultural themesø in terms of how the two cultures typically relate to each other and what this means for peacebuilding.

## **HIT-PEOPLE VS. RUN-PEOPLE**

### **Patterns of aggression and submission**

The first theme involves patterns of aggression and submission. My early data showed that these patterns were significant and I wanted to confirm whether or not one group tended to be more aggressive and the other more submissive, which is what the unstructured interviews seemed to predict. Each extreme was associated with a number of characteristics. At the ÷hitø extreme were the ÷provocateursø and ÷agitatorsø while at the ÷runø extreme were those who, as a whole, tended to submit to provocation or tried to avoid it. The Dagomba tended to have highly developed strategies of provocation and the Konkomba highly developed strategies of avoidance. The former tended to live in close quarters, in towns and cities, while the latter typically lived in isolated hamlets of a few dispersed compounds. The former tended to agitate and be more disruptive while the latter tried to avoid agitation and disruption. The former favoured ascribed privilege and status while the latter tended to disregard or ignore it.

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<sup>13</sup> Through field research I was able to verify that the themes generally applied to the Gonja and Nawuri, the Gonja and Vagla, and with greater variation between Mamprusi and Kusasi, Mamprusi and Builsa, and Mamprusi and BiMoba. I was also able to find, in a quick review of the literature, some of these themes among other chiefly and non-chiefly groups in the Western Sudan. But here the differences are greater and more intensive field research would be needed for verification.

### The ‘kicking-leg’ proverb

In order to probe deeper into the *-hit-manø* versus *-run-manø* theme, my assistants conducted interviews on the meanings of certain proverbs about conflict. The key proverb was interesting, first of all, because, although it was very similar in both Dagbani and Konkomba, it had a slightly different connotation or bias in each language. In Dagbani it was: *øWhen someone kicks your leg and you donø kick back, it means that you are not strong (or your leg is not strong)ø* (*A kpee yi tabig’a, k’a bi tabig’o labsi, nyin’ belaa m-bi kpema*). All the Dagomba (and other members of local *-chieflyø* groups whom I also asked, such as the Gonja, Mamprusi, Nanumba and Anufo) were familiar with this proverb or a variation of it.

In contrast to the *-chieflyø* peoples, some of the *-non-chieflyø* peoples (Nawuri, for example) did not have the *-kicking legø* proverb. The main group under consideration, the Konkomba, however, did. A few Konkomba simply confirmed the Dagomba version, but most had a different version that went like this: *øWhen someone kicks you and you donø kick back, it means that your leg is shortø* (*Uni ya liesi, aya ka lie uda kan nimo ke ata le afo*).

### Dagomba interpretation

Routinely, those interviewed<sup>14</sup> were asked to interpret the proverb. Most of the Dagomba interpreted it to mean that if someone offends you, provokes you, or challenges your authority, your strength, your rights etc. in some way, you are obliged to retaliate in a similar fashion, and show your strength. If not, you lose face and admit to being *øweakø*. This is the archetypal *-hit-manø* perspective.<sup>15</sup> Besides this dominant<sup>16</sup> interpretation, two other lesser interpretations were also given. Some of the informants<sup>17</sup> opted for *øpatienceø*, saying that it was better not to retaliate immediately; one should always wait and look more deeply into the matter first. Sometimes what you first think is a provocation is actually a mistake or even a misdirected attempt to help. Some<sup>18</sup> also said they *ødidnø agreeø* with this proverb and that it was always better to *øshow kindnessø* and never to respond with violence. This indicates a realisation that the proverb itself has a certain inherent bias in favour of the *-hit-manø* extreme.

### Konkomba interpretation

The Konkomba also responded with these three basic interpretations. But, in contrast to the Dagomba, the majority of them offered interpretations that were clustered more at the *-run-manø* extreme. Some of them even changed the proverb’s inherent bias by saying: *ø . . . it means your leg is not strong.ø* They<sup>19</sup> thought that it is good to *-back offø* and they defended this by insisting that it is simply good sense to back off until the time is right or until the leg

<sup>14</sup> The structured interviews included 60 Dagomba and 60 Konkomba. The Dagomba interviewees included mostly adult men from Tamale and the villages around Tamale, between 30 and 60 years old, in three categories: literate clerical workers, non-literate farmers, and labourers. Roughly half were Muslim, which corresponded with the general Dagomba population. About 20% were Christian and 30% followed traditional religion. It was very difficult to interview women on this topic and we were only able to interview 7. The Konkomba interviews were held in the Saboba area. Interviewees were also aged 30-60. There were about 20 Christians and 40 traditionalists, half of whom were teachers, clerical workers and petty traders and half non-literate farmers. There were only 4 women; all were literate. We attempted to interview other non-literate Konkomba women but their responses were inexact and we decided to drop them.

<sup>15</sup> Of course there are submissive chiefly people and aggressive non-chiefly people, and at certain times and under certain circumstances all chiefly peoples can be submissive, and at other times and circumstances all non-chiefly peoples can be aggressive.

<sup>16</sup> Most of this dominant group were younger (30-40) and uneducated.

<sup>17</sup> These tended to be the most mixed and balanced group regarding age, gender, status, religion, and education.

<sup>18</sup> Most of these were older but otherwise a mixture of variables.

<sup>19</sup> Most of these tended to be older.

becomes strong. The kicked person who backs off is not necessarily a weak person. One should not retaliate unless pressurised or sure to win. Similar to the Dagomba, there were also some<sup>20</sup> who held to a middle perspective. They insisted that *opatienceo* was necessary. One should neither *-hit* nor *-run* but patiently wait until a course of action becomes clear. And, of course, there were some<sup>21</sup> who said that they *o*did not agree with the proverb and insisted that one must always retaliate to show one's strength and not weakness.

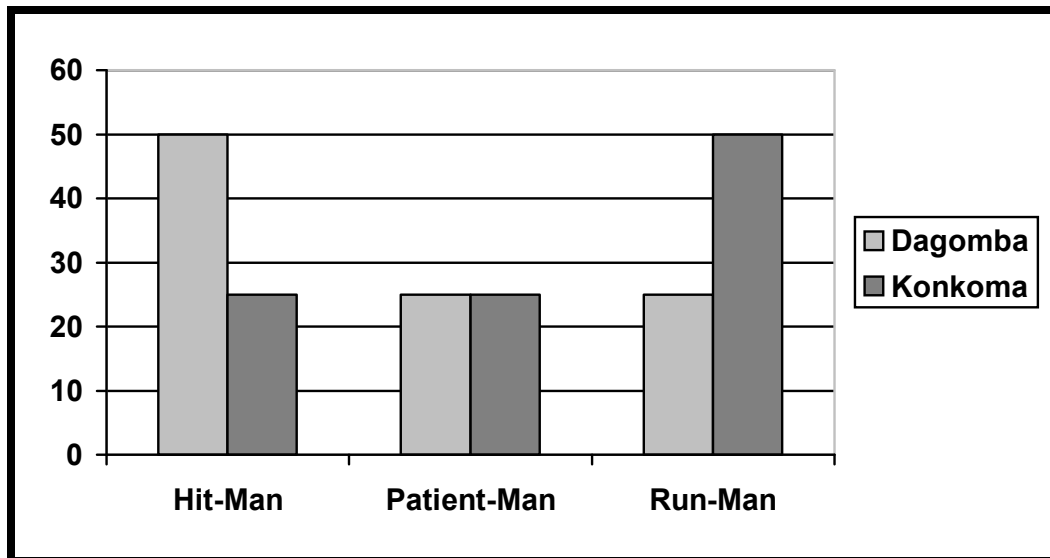


Figure 1.  
Graph Comparing Dagomba and Konkomba Responses to  
*-Hit-man* versus *-Run-man* theme

### Overall results<sup>22</sup>

About half of the Dagomba opted for a *-hit-man* perspective, one-fourth for the middle perspective of *-patient-man*, and one-fourth opted for the *-run-man* perspective. The Konkomba were more or less the opposite, with about half of them opting for *-run-man*, one-fourth for *-patient-man*, and one-fourth for *-hit-man*. It was clear that the sub-identities of the Konkomba clustered more to the *-run-man* side and those of the Dagomba clustered more to the *-hit-man* extreme. Thus, as we shall see, both groups need the other group to help them integrate and the mid-range or the *-patient-man* perspective, where the two groups are most balanced, offers a common cultural base upon which to build the new *-peace-culture*.

### Biased proverbs

If the Dagomba are the *-hit-people* and the Konkomba are the *-run-people*, the reasons for this can be found in the cultural dynamics of each group and the shared dynamics between the two. First of all, it is significant that the proverbs themselves are biased. The Dagomba proverb *-expects* a *-hit-man* interpretation and the Konkomba proverb *-expects* a *-run-man*

<sup>20</sup> These tended to be a balanced group. No significant variables.

<sup>21</sup> Most of these tended to be young persons.

<sup>22</sup> Although none of the themes were really quantifiable, the *-hit-man* versus *-run-man* theme was slightly more so. Ethnographic research is not an exact science. Therefore, I present this quantification, not to show exact correlations, but because the graph offers us a clearly visible pattern of opposition and complementarity between the two groups.



interpretation. In fact, the Dagomba often added: 'Wouldn't that person kick back?' and the Konkomba added: 'Wouldn't that person wait and see?' each emphasising the 'obvious' logic of their own cultural perspective.

### **Why the Dagomba 'hit'**

It is well known from the literature (Staniland 1975) that Dagomba multiply aggressive strategies for achieving higher status, power and economic control. They, especially the Royals, are constantly 'agitating' among themselves, so they are relatively immune to the agitations of others. They express themselves forcefully and confidently because they know exactly when to 'hit' and when to 'run' and because interactive conventions (e.g. 'Fall and fall makes the dog play sweet') and the presence of chiefs prevent the 'give and take' process from getting out of hand. Although the Dagomba 'hit' within the bounds of numerous socially structured constraints and norms, a certain amount of agitation beyond these constraints is not only possible, it is even necessary to test the laws and provide strong leadership and charisma.

They also have many ways to handle conflict other than the crude and wasteful Konkomba *lex talionis*, an eye for an eye, and tooth for a tooth<sup>23</sup>. Chiefs can intervene and cool matters down, and they can demand fines and compensation as the debt-payment.

### **Why the Konkomba 'run'**

The Konkomba do not have chiefs and, up until very recently, they did not need to have them. Their interactions with other peoples, including other Konkomba outside their clan, have always been very limited. They are able to handle disputes between extended families and even clans without going to war, but because of their fragmented segmentary lineage systems, they are not able to handle them between major subgroups (some call them 'tribes') like the Komba and Chamba, let alone with other ethnic groups. Conflicts at this level in the past could only be resolved by war or avoidance (see the discussion in Naden 1984).

Up until now, mediation was neither necessary nor possible beyond the level of the clan or the basic social unit. This is because at this level its rights and freedoms are held in common and it cannot be indebted to itself. In any case, there were no chiefs or spokespersons to handle such mediation<sup>24</sup> and few conventions<sup>25</sup> or procedures to follow. Each clan, with its elder as head, was and still is a free entity unto itself (Tait 1958), and their freedoms could not be infringed upon by another group without incurring a debt. Thus all the conventions

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<sup>23</sup> I take the opportunity here to clarify what might appear to be a contradiction between *lex talionis* and the 'run-man' stance of the Konkomba. 'Run-man' does not necessarily mean peaceful and meek, for vengeance can be postponed, just as 'hit-man' does not necessarily mean obsessively violent and impulsive for one may strike in a cool, calculated fashion. As will be shown, it relates more to the quest for freedom.

<sup>24</sup> In my research I found that among non-chiefly groups in certain cases 'market heads' took on some of the functions of chiefs. They settled market disputes, could exact fines or retribution payments which were used to buy sacrificial animals to intercede with the market shrine which was derived in most cases from the Earth shrine. They could also call down the sanctions of the market/Earth shrine against those who break the taboos of the shrine. Taboos normally included theft, violent assault, and selling certain types of produce or animals, with which the shrine was associated, in the market. I concluded that the market 'master' was a kind of proto-chief, and that if the colonial era had not intervened; they would have developed into chiefs. This idea was first proposed by Cardinall (1920).

<sup>25</sup> As with the 'market heads', I also found a number of proto-conventions regarding mediation in the so-called 'joking' relations and in various types of 'go-between' or 'friends' who helped arrange marriages between clans among both non-chiefly and chiefly peoples. Among chiefly peoples they survive as a cultural anachronism that goes back to a time, before they were assimilated, when they had no chiefs.

governing their relationships come down to one basic rule of thumb – respecting each other’s freedom. The Konkomba –run to preserve freedom – their own and that of others.

### **Why the Konkomba say they “don’t know how to live in towns”**

When I asked Konkomba to tell me why the “Northern Conflict” occurred, many of them said: “It is because of our animals.” At first this response seems very general and stereotypical, but it points to a deeper reality. The Konkomba do not tie their animals but let them have their freedom to roam about. They say, “When you live too close to people and your animals eat their crops, it brings trouble.” For the Konkomba, it is unthinkable to tell another person what to do or to constrain him or her to your will. They relate in the same way to their domestic animals. They let them go free and unhindered. Thus the obligation to preserve freedom extends to all living things. Indeed, it is a law of nature.

### **“Short legs” is a fact of life**

In the past, if there was a quarrel among the Konkomba or if one group attacked the other, their strict code of debt-payment demanded retribution in kind. Even now, if one of their group is killed, then one from the other group must also be killed to repay the debt. If women or cows are stolen, they must be replaced. No amount of mediation absolves the debt. It may take some time, but it will be paid, even if it has to wait until the next generation.

In this social setting debt-avoidance soon becomes a top priority. The elders are constantly on the lookout to avoid potential –debts and infringements on the rights and freedoms of other clans, sub-tribes and tribes. They live isolated, far in the bush and they build their settlements just out of arrowshot from each other in order to avoid such infringements. They stick to their own business and are concerned only with their farming. They are constantly going to diviners in order to remember past debts or foresee and avoid new ones. Such might be incurred by attending communal functions such as funerals, festivals, or even markets (Kirby 1986). This strategy of –preventative running is like a shadow behind the scene directing their responses to everything, including the –kicking leg proverb above.

But there is also –defensive running – when their freedoms have been infringed upon. For Konkomba, –defensive running is pragmatic. Having –short legs has been a fact of life. Both groups recognise that one must be weaker and the other stronger. Life is full of inequalities, greater and lesser capabilities. Being weaker is disadvantageous but nothing to be ashamed of. History has assigned them the weaker role. For eons they have been too weak, too small, too unorganised, too ill equipped and too fragmented to take on any of the –chiefly groups. They have always discretely withdrawn. But now that role has changed. If the series of conflicts over the last 20 years has shown anything, it is that, when it comes to war, the Konkomba are no longer weak, fragmented and disorganised.

Although the –kicking-leg proverb was more about –defensive running, the responses were strongly influenced by the underlying strategy of –preventative running. For the Konkomba any kind of “agitation” has a –shameful tinge because it constrains others’ freedoms. For the Dagomba, being weak in itself is shameful, but for Konkomba hitting first is shameful; acting the bully is shameful. It is because of this that Konkomba often appear to be submissive, dull or unresponsive. They are unable to distinguish between taking a pro-active stance on an issue and aggressive agitation, or standing up for their own rights and retaliation<sup>26</sup>. This also

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<sup>26</sup> For this reason the government directive against aggressive agitation and retaliation in the Region also effectively prevents any kind of positive civil action or civil disobedience against unjust laws.

becomes a problem because not to retaliate is shameful, unless it is 'defensive' running, and the fact is they no longer need to be defensive. So, they are trapped by their own pathways.

### **The world is closing in on them**

Avoidance was, and still is, the main Konkomba strategy for preventing conflict. In the past it served them well but it is no longer effective. Yet, it is still built in to their cultural pathways. Social and environmental pressures are forcing them out of their isolation, but they do not yet have the social and cultural institutions to deal with intimate social contact. The world is closing in on them. Not only has the population increased<sup>27</sup>, their former relationship with the land is under attack. The good farmlands are being depleted and they cannot press further into the 'bush' because there is almost no 'bush' left. Worst of all, they are denied entitlement or land ownership.

They are caught in a dilemma. They are internally conflicted because, now that they are strong, retreat has become shameful. They know that they are no longer weak but they do not know how to use their new strengths appropriately. There is great internal pressure to stand and fight. But they do not know how to 'fight' the most important battle of all, which is to change their own pathways. They now say, 'Our eyes have been opened.' They understand their political rights but they do not know how to exercise them. Each new political or economic retreat adds another resentful memory. The memories keep accumulating. And periodically there is a violent outburst of pent up feelings, which only worsens conflict potential. It is no wonder they say, 'We are being pushed up against a wall.'

They epitomise their overall dilemma by saying that they 'don't know how to live in towns.' But they need to learn. They need to adjust their pathways to the changing world. They need to learn how to balance their need for freedom with the increasing constraints of the modern world. They must learn to live with others if they want to prevent future wars. And the Dagomba are the best people to help them.

### **Blind spots and cross-cultural miscommunication**

In a cultural theme like 'hit-man' versus 'run-man' there is always an amount of cross-cultural miscommunication and misunderstanding going on. When the Dagomba are 'agitating' they are not usually aware of their aggression. It is implicit. For them it is experienced as 'normal'. It is programmed into their pathways toward achieved status. Nor are they very sensitive to the opposite pathways of the other group. Dagomba are not consciously aware of the Konkomba pathways, particularly their need to be free of all constraints. When they see the Konkomba 'take flight' it is interpreted from their own perspective and it appears to be out of fear or weakness. These mutual blind spots lead to the cross-cultural miscommunication.

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<sup>27</sup> Konkomba have been leaving their 'home' districts northeast of Yendi for the past 40 years in search of fertile farmlands. It is estimated that they are now more numerous than the original settlers in the vast tracts of land south of Yendi and Tamale down to Lake Volta. Since Konkomba live far in the bush it has been notoriously difficult to get accurate census readings. The preliminary results of the 2000 Census have just been released (see Benoni Okine, *Daily Graphic*: 29 Dec. 2001) but there are already protests (31 Dec. 2001) of over-counting some groups and undercounting others. The Census puts the Dagomba at 16.5% of the population, pushing them over the 3 million mark. This seems incredible considering that the entire Northern Region has only 1.8 million inhabitants and considering that they were only 217,000 in 1960 (Ghana Census 1964). Some observers close to the scene told me that most of those doing the counting were Dagomba and they counted large numbers of Konkomba in the bush as Dagomba. More realistically, they should be between 700,000 (see Barker 1986:129) and one million. According to one commentator (Katanga 1994a: 19), the Konkomba are now well over a million, half of whom are outside the Northern Region, mostly in Brong-Ahafo and Asante Regions.

### **Why the Konkomba seem “touchy”**

When the Konkomba perceive the Dagomba as  $\bar{o}$ pushing $\bar{o}$  them or  $\bar{o}$ disturbing $\bar{o}$  them, they are not aware of the culturally conditioned Dagomba  $\bar{a}$ need $\bar{o}$ to agitate. When they move deeper into the bush, they are not aware that it signals to the Dagomba that they are weak. On the other hand, Konkomba are very sensitive to the presence of anything that upsets the balance of equitable relations. Dagomba would say  $\bar{o}$ overly-sensitive $\bar{o}$  or  $\bar{o}$ touchy $\bar{o}$ . Elders are constantly guarding against any infringement on cherished freedoms. They are fearful because once the confrontations start they will not end until there is complete devastation. Thus their  $\bar{o}$ over-sensitivity $\bar{o}$  is in itself a protective device, a strategy of avoidance.

### **Egalitarianism and the new reasons for avoidance**

Konkomba do not interfere with the pathways of others. By the same token, they do not want their pathways to be interfered with. In the past, if this happened, they would make a quick assessment and, if they were too weak, they would usually beat a hasty retreat. To respond was too dangerous and self-defeating. But times have changed. There is no place to retreat to and no longer any need to retreat. This  $\bar{a}$ push-pull $\bar{o}$ effect is moving them ever deeper into the conflict zone. They are no longer able to avoid others because the world is closing in on them and at the same time, if they are  $\bar{a}$ hit $\bar{o}$ they have little hesitancy about hitting back because of their new strength. New circumstances have pushed their avoidance neurosis into a  $\bar{a}$ cultural psychosis $\bar{o}$ for now it enormously heightens the probability of conflict and destruction.

### **Irresponsible warriors**

The Konkomba have a well-earned reputation for being fierce warriors. A Brigadier whom I interviewed, who had served as a peacekeeper in Sierra Leone, Liberia and N. Ghana, said that he had great respect for the Konkomba and that they were far better warriors than the Dagomba. If the army had not intervened, he was convinced that  $\bar{o}$ the Konkomba would have utterly defeated the chiefly groups $\bar{o}$ . I would respect his views in military matters but his assessment of motives is less than accurate. This is clearly shown by his use of the word  $\bar{o}$ defeat $\bar{o}$ . I would prefer to use the word  $\bar{a}$ devastate $\bar{o}$  for after the war the Konkomba went back to their farming oblivious to the meaning of  $\bar{a}$ victory $\bar{o}$ . They had no wish to  $\bar{a}$ conquer $\bar{o}$ or  $\bar{a}$ rule $\bar{o}$ . Nor did they use it for political gain. They were only interested in retaliation, in repaying the debt. Perhaps the greatest tragedy of the war is that they are so apolitical that they have been unable to translate their military advantage into concrete, positive political and systemic changes. In this sense they are irresponsible as warriors, for this only lays the foundation for senseless, repeated conflict.

### **Long-term versus short-term self-preservation**

The colonial records are full of references to the  $\bar{o}$ fierce $\bar{o}$  Konkomba killing each other over women, cows and land. After one particularly gruesome attack at Zagberi, the British forced them to build a road by hand to remote Saboba so that a police station could be erected to hold them in check (Tait 1961). How is it then that Konkomba say they prefer to take flight rather than to fight? When does their obligation to retaliate outweigh their need for avoidance? When does flight turn to fight?

Here we must first distinguish between long-term self-preservation and freedom, which is the concern of the elders and ancestors, and short-term self-preservation and  $\bar{a}$ respect $\bar{o}$  which is the concern of the warriors. The long-term and short-term self-preservation needs are constantly in tension $\bar{o}$  the latter are more insistent but the former are more important, and

here the elders have the last word, the *veto*. When the group's life, sustenance and freedom are threatened, the option will favour avoidance and override debt-collection. It is better to *run* and risk some losses than to retaliate and incur greater losses. But when they are *pushed against the wall* when the very principle of freedom is threatened, when both short-term and long-term welfare coincide, it always leads to *fight*. The critical mass seems to be reached when there is little to be gained by avoidance or when the combined weight of frustration, vengeance and the real possibilities for successful retaliation overcome the need for avoidance. In the minds of the Konkomba this combination was achieved, perhaps once and for all, in 1994.

Since 1994, the Konkomba are convinced, and they are probably justified in this, that they can take on all the major chiefly groups of the North at once and *win*. This unalterably changes their avoidance pattern because war is no longer quite the same threat to their long-term welfare. The army is still a deterrent and the elders still have a veto here, but not to the same extent as before<sup>28</sup>.

According to the post-1994 Konkomba perspective, therefore, the only real reason to *run* from provocation at the inter-tribal level, is no longer out of fear of being defeated or out of self-preservation but only out of a horror of war and its inherent threat to any kind of freedom. Real development can only come to the region if the people can successfully change their cultural pathways and begin to build a *peace-culture*. Therefore those concerned with development and peace need to appeal to this horror of war and their need for freedom.

### **Saving face and losing face**

What is appropriate and respectful behaviour in one culture may be inappropriate and shameful in another. In order to understand the power of the *hit-man* vs. *run-man* theme for those involved, we should consider for a moment the power of face-saving and social roles. History has assigned the Dagomba the stronger *hit-man* role. For the Dagomba, being weak is shameful and out of character. It is a matter of losing face. They have an image to uphold. As so many of them put it when they went off to meet their deaths during the 1994 Northern Conflict, *‘If we do not fight we are returning home to eat faeces. We are useless.’*

### **The power of roles**

In the African context, there is great social pressure to conform. Stress is on the social identity over individual identity. This makes it extremely difficult to distinguish between what people do and who they are. They *are* the role; the role *is* them. There is little flexibility. *‘A rotten log cannot change into a crocodile!’* *‘A crab cannot give birth to a bird!’* The preferred role is clearly shown in the *standard* response in the chart above. It is also shown in the bias of the proverb. When Africans take on a social role it implies a set of prescriptive patterns of behaviour – a set of *do*s and *don*ts. It is a matter of moral urgency to comply, not merely of preferences. There is not much leeway. If the role is to *hit* then the Dagomba must assume that role. The same is to be said for Konkomba *running*. For a *hit-man* not to hit, or a *run-man* not to run is not only shameful, it is immoral. It brings about loss of face and identity. Thus, for the *chiefly* peoples, running is *‘eating faeces’*. It is denying their very identity. It is more powerful than the fear of death. Whereas, for the

<sup>28</sup> Before 1994 the Konkomba almost never took up arms against the army but now the spell has been broken. Because of the reprisals they suffered at the hands of the army during the 1994 Conflict, and because they were able to overcome soldiers in a number of engagements, there is no longer the same reluctance to fight the army. As far as responsible peacebuilding is concerned, this is a turn for the worse in every respect.

non-chiefly peoples ðhitting firstö is the most shameful crime for it thwarts the most basic rule in their egalitarian world: respecting each other's freedom. Better death than this! When Konkomba run, it is not because they are afraid; it is because they are preserving their integrity, their very identity.

### **The power of enactment**

Against such odds, how can the power of unity be activated and exercised? How can the negative synergy be transformed into a positive synergy? This will be discussed at length in Part III, but here we can introduce the key notion that it can be done through the enactment genre of 'culture-drama'. The two groups need to be brought together to experience their commonalities in as many situations as possible. They can experience the full power of unity in 'culture-drama'. Then, what is begun in drama can move into the community. From here the institutions of each group, especially chieftaincy, need to initiate and sustain the situations of unity.

### **Freedom from cultural neuroses**

The conflictual relations between the Konkomba and Dagomba point to neurotic patterns within each of their separate pathways that prevent development. Among the Dagomba there is a great disparity between their ideals and what they actually do. Proverbs sing the praises of the chief as one who serves his people with nothing for himself (e.g., 'The chief's guinea fowl is the one in the bush'). Yet, nowadays, chiefs are selling the land of their people and using the profits to enhance their own power and prestige. The Konkomba place less emphasis on ideals and greater emphasis on realities. There is no great disparity between their ideals and their actual behaviour, and they have no problem holding their wealth in common. Their problem is that the wealth is frozen. No one can presume to use it for any kind of development or change.

### **Envisioning a common path for transformation**

The foregoing analysis has been offered to help us to begin to envision a common pathway toward a 'culture of peace' and to impress on us its absolute necessity as an alternative to war. To change these patterns is the work of generations, not years. But with a new pathway in focus we can begin to take concrete steps to bring about change. This pathway should involve a dual 'give and take' less 'hitting' from the 'hit-people' and less running and more constructive negotiation on the part of the 'run-people'. The 'hit-people' need to encourage the 'run-people' not to run away, but to learn how to live in close communities, to take a stand and negotiate, to accept some limitations to their freedoms for the common good, and to be pro-active when necessary without breaking into extreme violence. The Dagomba need to help the Konkomba to learn how to be chiefs.

### **The right hand washes the left**

As they say, 'the right hand washes the left.' One group needs to help the other. The Konkomba and Dagomba are structural opposites. Thus they have a mutual responsibility in building the 'peace-culture'. Each group is equipped to help the other over their cultural blind spots and neuroses. They are each able to see what the other group cannot see about themselves, and they are each able to offer models of opposing sub-identities that can help the other group to be more balanced, integrated and free. The Dagomba can help the Konkomba to learn how to exchange certain unhealthy freedoms for healthy interdependencies, mutual trust and harmony, and how to establish and build their own institutions of chieftaincy. But before the Dagomba can offer a healthy model of chieftaincy to the Konkomba they must reduce the dissonance between their ideal understanding of

themselves and the reality. The Konkomba can help them do this. The Dagomba need to learn more about their own sub-identities from the Konkomba. They need to be more sensitive to the freedoms and constraints of the Konkomba, and Konkomba need to be less sensitive to what they consider constraints, whether real or imagined, on their freedoms. They can and must learn from each other.

#### BIG-MEN VS. SMALL-MEN

**‘Big-men’ = chiefly, ‘Small-men’ = non-chiefly**

The second cultural theme involves power pathways. ‘Big-men’ versus ‘small-men’ could almost be construed as a universal cultural theme. ‘Big-men’ control ‘small-men’. They delegate, ‘send’ manipulate and squeeze ‘small-men’. In short, ‘big-men’ own ‘small-men’. When ‘small-men’ are empowered, it is by the grace of ‘big-men’. ‘Big-men’ give orders and ‘small-men’ follow. ‘Big-men’ do ‘big work’, they dictate and rule; ‘small-men’ do menial work, they serve and are ruled. ‘Big-men’ enjoy favour and privilege; ‘small-men’ are burdened and often oppressed. ‘Big-men’ wield authority; ‘small-men’ are authorised. ‘Big-men’ are the patrons; ‘small-men’ the clients. ‘Big-men’ give and receive respect; ‘small-men’ give respect and receive favours. Since colonial times, the chiefly groups as a whole have assumed the role of the ‘big-man’ in relation to the non-chiefly groups who have assumed the role of ‘small-man’. These roles are now being challenged.

#### A plethora of chiefs

All societies in Ghana make use of the ‘big-man’ system, but perhaps none so pervasively as the Dagomba. In Dagbon, the Dagomba traditional state in Northern Ghana, chieftaincy (*naam*) is an overwhelmingly central symbol. Virtually everyone in Dagbon is or can be a chief of something. While spending some time learning Dagbani in a village near Tamale, I was encouraged by the people to take up the title *õSamba Naaö* (chief of the strangers). There are many such chieftaincies that are available to untitled Commoners. My colleague at TICCS, Fr. Kofi Ron Lange, was recently made *õMaligu Naaö* (chief of peacemakers). At present he has only the title or access to this chieftaincy. If he wants to enjoy the full prestige, dignity and power of the office he must be *õinstalledö* or *õenskinnedö* by a higher chief *õ* something that would entail certain responsibilities and expenditures. The expenditures are for the sacrificial animals, gifts to the installing chief, throwing a party for his guests, and buying the regalia, the emblems of his office.

#### Achieved status

Both the Dagomba and Konkomba have ‘big men’ and ‘small men’. The difference is the system by which they become such. As in all state systems, the Dagomba combine ascribed and achieved statuses. But they stress the achieved. Even certain ‘officially’ ascribed statuses (e.g. certain high level inherited chieftaincies) are ‘achievable’ under the right conditions or with enough money or power. The Dagomba learn how to climb the hierarchical ladder at an early age. It is not unusual to see young Dagomba boys, who are Royals, giving orders to women and others who are below their rank. There is great competition for status and high office, especially among the Royals. This has led to endless internal conflicts between the two main chiefly families in Dagbon the *õAbudusö* and *õAndanisö* (Staniland 1975), and most recently to the shocking murder of the Ya Na.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> The murder of the Ya Na, King of Dagbon, who is of the Andani *õgateö*, along with at least 40 of his entourage on March 26, was allegedly committed by members of the Abudulai gate. It was a particularly grisly and vengeful act because the attackers cut off his head and right arm and carried them jubilantly through the streets of Yendi, in an attempt to discredit him as a chief—to make it, metaphysically speaking, a *õbad deathö*,

Among the chiefly groups, the hierarchical structures are far more elaborate and refined. Status must be shown through signs and symbols of high office and marks of respect, such as removing foot-ware and squatting while greeting a chief. The elaborate hierarchies necessitate rules, which make status-acquisition stable and predictable over time. This tends to promote the status quo. But nowadays things are changing. Today the competition for positions of status is getting out of hand. Rich 'small men' are becoming 'big men' overnight, and poor 'big men' are suddenly losing their influence and power. These pressures are threatening the stability of the entire system.

### **Ascribed status**

Like all non-chiefly societies, the Konkomba have ascribed, but very few achieved, statuses. Traditionally there were no chieftaincies and very few positions of high office in these egalitarian societies (Froelich 1954 and Tait 1958). Religious and other specialists such as Earth priests, diviners, the custodians of certain powerful shrines and traditional healers, only have status in ritual situations. There are only two hierarchical levels: 'those who can send'<sup>30</sup> others and 'those who can be sent by others'. These are multiplied infinitely. The eldest of the elders has authority over those younger than him. An older brother is higher in status and can 'send' a younger brother; a father can 'send' a son; a son can 'send' a grandson; an elder twin can 'send' a younger twin; and so on. Gender, age, descent and sometimes spirit-election are the only criteria for determining who sends whom.

### **Ascribed status and the new elites**

In non-chiefly societies the 'pecking order' may not be apparent to outsiders, but everyone in the clan knows exactly who is over him or her and who is under who is older and younger in a real or classificatory sense. Although there are a few symbols of ritual office, for example the diviner's 'bag' and the elder's animal skin mantle, these are not symbols of rank. Aside from those marks of respect and obligation that all juniors owe their elders, no unusual signs of respect are offered; no special treatment is given to anyone. The social group is small enough that everybody knows whom he or she can 'send' and who can 'send' him or her. This makes life stable, predictable and manageable within the small group. But nowadays new, non-traditional statuses, outside the traditional cultural framework, are achieved (e.g., the 'assemblymen' and other local officials who are elected or appointed). Although these offices are still relatively few, they are increasing and are beginning to affect the overall system. They are preparing the way for chiefs.

### **Power struggle in Dagbon**

Today, on the fringes of Dagbon where the Dagomba and Konkomba meet, the 'big-man' versus 'small-man' positions are being contested as never before. In a recent quarrel over the positioning of a new market and the appointment of the 'chief of the witches'<sup>31</sup> in Ngani, a

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and thereby to prevent his funerary rites from being performed, eliminate him from the ranks of former kings and disqualify his sons (see *Daily Graphic*, Thursday, 28 March, 2002 and Noretta 2002).

<sup>30</sup> 'Send' is a general term relating to any subservient task done on behalf of someone who is older.

<sup>31</sup> There are a number of so-called 'witch villages' in Northern Ghana (Gambaga, Patinga, Ngani and Kuku), which seem to have originated, or at least were encouraged, during the colonial era, as an alternative to lynching those accused of witchcraft. In recent years witchcraft accusations have increased dramatically and they often lead to the accused being severely beaten or even killed by outraged villagers, neighbours and relatives of the accused. The witch villages are traditional sanctuaries for witches where it is believed that the witchcraft in the accused persons 'dies' or remains under the control of the Earth shrine of that place. The witches normally live in a sector of the main town around the traditional Earth shrine. In the case of Ngani, the priest or priestess of the shrine is 'elected' by the shrine spirit but usually comes from the family of the Earth shrine custodian. The



village on the periphery of Dagomba territory<sup>32</sup>, the Dagomba insisted on passing everything through the chief. But the Konkomba, who are the original settlers and who are in the majority, insisted on letting the Earth priest choose the market plot and the òwitch chiefö. According to their custom, this office is not a òchieflyö one at all but rather a form of Earth shrine custodianship, and it is under the jurisdiction of the Earth shrine, not the Dagomba chief.

In the end, when the Dagomba candidate for òthe chief of the witchesö went to assume the new role, her sacrificial fowl died face down rather than face up, indicating the shrine's rejection. This was òproofö to the Konkomba that not only was the Dagomba candidate unacceptable, but that Dagomba chiefs did not have the right to appoint an Earth shrine custodian. This was a direct challenge to the primacy of Dagomba chiefs, whose ancestor chiefs killed and appointed their own Earth priests (Duncan-Johnstone and Blair 1932). The Dagomba chief of Ngani and his colleagues at Yendi bristled with indignation. Dagomba war cries were heard and the Konkomba prepared for battle. Tensions reached such a high state that a government team led by the then Minister of Interior, Malik Yakubu, was rushed in by helicopter to cool things down.

### **New elites and “development contractors”**

The complementary roles of òbig-manö versus òsmall-manö are played out in shared concrete situations of decision-making regarding power relations, especially in the distribution and management of resources and services. Today the stakes are higher than ever before. Besides the many means for providing chiefs with money, power and prestigeö such as inducting labourers, judging cases, levying fines and fees (Skalnik 1983), the newest and largest source of money and power is now òdevelopment aidö. Formerly the interest of the chiefs was limited to regional and national politics (see Ladouceur 1979) but now their controls over regional and national politics have become the means for securing funding from international NGOs and bilateral donor agencies. òBig-menö and chiefs are becoming òdevelopment contractorsö<sup>33</sup>, businessmen, and building contractors to catch the windfall pouring in from International NGOs, development organisations, and governmental ministries with IMF and World Bank financing, while òsmall-menö and their mentors complain that these services are for the poorest of the poor. The òbig-menö and chiefs who do not òcatch onö to the new system seem to become more impoverished while the new elite òsmall-menö who come to control these resources<sup>34</sup>, are suddenly more powerful than chiefs.

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positioning of the market was on the surface the more important issue. Each group wanted the market in a different place. The main issue, of course, was not the place but the authority of the one who chooses the place.

<sup>32</sup> Ngani is one of several traditional Konkomba towns, which has a Dagomba section and a Dagomba chief. The Dagomba support the chief as the central authority and the Konkomba support their Earth priest. In the conflictual situation at Ngani we find a microcosm of the relationship between Dagomba and Konkomba as a whole. It demonstrates all of the cultural themes.

<sup>33</sup> For example, a number of Dagomba politicians, including the vice-president, own construction and contracting businesses, and the ex-Minister of Interior, who recently resigned over the murder of the Ya Na, is the head of a peacebuilding NGO with financial assistance from the German government. It also seems that the Dagomba chief at Ngani was not without his material reasons for wanting to consolidate his authority over that of the Earth shrine custodian. The village of Ngani is the main source of river sand for the whole district and some big road construction contracts have recently been issued for that area.

<sup>34</sup> The example that comes to mind first is Bugri Nabu, an opinion leader for the Konkomba, a rich contractor and politician, who started out as a òloading boyö for Ghana Airways in Tamale.

### Conflictual language

Another important source of provocation in the -big-manø vs. -small-manø theme is conflictual language. The two groups are named and confirmed in their roles through jokes, slurs, name-calling, and in body language. Today much of the language used by the -chieflyø groups still evokes memories of superior-inferior positions of a former, more openly oppressive era. This goads and provokes the -non-chieflyø groups more than ever before. The Anufo, for example, who are another chiefly group north of Yendi, still call the Konkomba *õbungbefõõ* which means, *õthe buttocks are exposed uselesslyõ* (a reference to the fact that in the recent past the Konkomba did not wear clothes whereas the -chieflyø peoples had looms, wove cotton and put on clothes). The Dagomba call them *õKpankpa åõõ*<sup>35</sup> (lit. *õYou [that] Konkomba!õ*). It implies that they are the superior group and the Konkomba are their inferiors. In daily language there are frequent references to the former master-slave relationship and often the very tone of the language is discriminatory: *õWho are you to me?õ* *õYou are our slaves.õ* *õAm I a Konkomba that I should have to pay 'lampo' (taxes)?õ* *õWho are you!õ* *õI am a Dagomba, the land is for me!õ*

### A tribe within a tribe

In Dagbon, the -big-manø versus -small-manø theme reduces the Konkomba to a *õminorityõ* sub-group within the tribe. It disregards the autonomous character of ethnicity. This is made easier by the weak ethnic identity of the Konkomba, who in many ways appear to be very similar to the Dagomba (see Plates 3 and 4). A stronger Konkomba ethnic identity would be a powerful equalizer here. The Dagomba, of course, recognise the Konkomba language and culture as different from theirs but they do not give them the same respect as they would give to another chiefly group, nor do they relate to them as a distinct ethnicity. Their language and culture are more often regarded as a lack of any -realø language or -realø culture. To the Dagomba, their -realø identity is at the lowest rung of the Dagomba incorporative hierarchy. If they want to advance, they need to start at the bottom and climb the hierarchical ladder slowly, according to the implicit rules of Dagomba society: by showing *õrespectõ*, by intermarriage (which is always one way: Konkomba women marrying Dagomba men), by fostering their children with higher ranking Dagomba families, by first taking on low level responsibilities within the Dagomba system, by plying chiefs for favours, by buying low level chieftaincies, but above all, by speaking, thinking and acting like the Dagomba (see Kirby 1998b).

### Lack of ethnic identity

In the past it was very difficult for the non-chiefly groups to resist assimilation. If they wanted to -move upø in the world, it could only be along the Dagomba path. They didnø have a choice. To them it was simply *õthe way things areõ*; it was the only path to progress. Underneath this phenomenon was the inability of the chief-less peoples to form a strong ethnic or -tribalø identityõ one that could interact as an equal with a state society. The only way they could be recognised at all was by taking on a new identity within a chiefly group.

In the past they had clan and -sub-tribalø identities but not a -tribalø one. Language was not a strong -tribalø identity qualifier because of the enormous number of small dialectical

<sup>35</sup> The Parliamentarian for Saboba, Nayon Bilijo, while speaking at our culture-drama workshop, told a story of something that happened a few years earlier when he was a Minister of Government, of some Dagomba youth using this word quite unconsciously while he was being introduced to take the chair at an official function at Tamale. Everyone laughed, and even though it pained him to hear it, he held back his anger because it was such an unconscious act on their part. He merely mentioned that the time is past for using such expressions because many would take offence.

differences. Nor was territoriality, because of their tradition of migrating in search of more fertile fields. Formerly, their weak extra-clan identity made it easy for them to be assimilated into state systems. At first they would have dual identities and then, after a generation or two, the weaker, non-chiefly cultural identity would gradually disappear.

### **Literacy and ethnic identity**

Over the last quarter of a century this has changed because of education and especially because of indigenous language literacy. The various Konkomba clans and sub-tribes have now become aware that their language, all dialectical differences aside, is essentially the same. The same has happened among other non-chiefly peoples. Many non-chiefly groups now share a common Bible. They realise that they can read and write, communicate and be mutually understood in their common language. I have heard one literacy worker excitedly remark: 'Now even God speaks to us in our own language'<sup>36</sup>. The most active and buoyant literacy project in Ghana is with the Konkomba. Furthermore it is the only one that is completely self-supporting<sup>37</sup>. All this has been enormously confirming. A common language means they are one people.

Although the Konkomba sense of identity as a people having their own language and customs is still somewhat amorphous and highly situational,<sup>38</sup> nowadays it is developing fast. They are no longer required to identify with the nearest dominant chiefly group in order to fit in or be recognised. Instead of being low status members of a chiefly group they can be themselves: Konkomba, Nawuri, Vagla, Moba, etc.

### **Educated elites versus non-literates**

Today most of the educated elites of the non-chiefly groups are pressing their fellow tribespeople to opt for being themselves, for discovering their own cultural identities. To those from the chiefly groups this is very difficult to understand and accept. They honestly feel that the lowest rung of their own Dagomba identity is much preferable to any other identity the Konkomba may have or wish to choose indeed, it is their only real identity. From their perspective it seems as if those at the lowest levels of their society are suddenly trying to break the rules of respect and rise above their correct status. It seems that they want to become chiefs and big men without going through the process that everyone else in Dagbon has to follow.

### **Non-chiefly peoples now want their own chiefs**

Among the non-chiefly peoples, from a traditional perspective, the only time that chiefs were useful was when there was a wider inter-clan dispute to settle or activity to arrange something that could not be done by a clan head or elders. Their hierarchies were limited to family, kin and clan, and only very recently have they begun to include their own chiefs. The chiefs, whether appointed by the chiefly groups or elected by the people, are under-utilised. But, as the larger world invades their small reality, as pressure on the land increases, and as the already scarce resources further diminish, they are more and more constrained either to fit themselves into the lower rungs of the state hierarchies or to develop their own comparative system of chiefs and achieved statuses. Modernisation is bringing the issue to a head.

<sup>36</sup> The words of a Nawuri catechist, who is active in literacy training.

<sup>37</sup> My informant is in the literacy program of the Ghana Institute of Languages, Literacy and Bible Translation (GILLBT) in Tamale.

<sup>38</sup> Perhaps the most recognised situational instance of their organisational ability is their readiness to assemble for war and the fact that they have common rules of warfare.

### **Land tenure and paramount chiefs**

This pressure is now becoming intense. It is being exerted in different ways and degrees in different places. In the Northern Region extreme pressure is being exerted via the land tenure system. In the South the idea of 'custodianship' over the land changed to 'ownership' quite naturally because of cocoa. By the 1920s, the mass production of cocoa had replaced slash and burn subsistence agriculture. But it took so long (7-10 years) for the trees to begin to produce that in order for the farmer and his family to enjoy the full fruits of their labour the cocoa farm needed to be inherited.

In the North, however, the idea of land 'ownership' is still very new. It was introduced in a legal sense with a change in the Constitutions in 1978. The change stipulated that the land of the Northern Region is to be held by the paramount chiefs on behalf of their own people. But no provision was made for the groups without paramount chiefs. Peoples without them are, even now, legally landless (see Skalnik 1983). For the Konkomba and other so-called 'minority groups' who are attached to the land, this is unimaginable and untenable. As more of them are being educated, taking on new achieved statuses, forming their own hierarchies, constructing their own identities and building their own status ladder, as it were, they are also seeking their own paramount chieftaincies.

### **Dancing pathways**

A positive synergy in the 'big-man' vs. 'small-man' theme, will require the balanced and harmonious interaction of both roles - like two dancing partners: one taking the lead and the other following - to produce something beautiful. Changing to a positive synergy may also mean changing dance steps or even changing the lead, but always to a balanced effect.

Today the authority of chiefs is being abused and usurped by those with wealth and power. The power and prestige that formerly were given only to chiefs are now on the auction block, offered to the highest bidder. The elites and the educated Commoners of the chiefly groups are seeking high status without responsibilities. The 'small-man' is usurping the 'big-man's' role but without the traditional constraints of healthy, bonded relationships. This 'dance' whether it is led by the chiefs or the non-chiefly elites, is always out of step. Here too the Dagomba have much to learn from the Konkomba. The language of suppression will give way to one of mutual respect and pride only when the Konkomba identity is fully developed and expressed. And the Konkomba need the help of the Dagomba to achieve their new identity.

## **LAND-PEOPLE VS. EARTH-PEOPLE**

### **The material economy versus the spiritual economy**

This brings us to the third cultural theme, which involves clashing economic pathways. It concerns two dimensions of the physical world. The 'landlord' role emphasizes the ownership and control of physical property, while the 'Earth priest' role emphasizes metaphysical 'ownership' or the power to influence the 'Earth' its bounty, and its power to nurture and sustain life. The chiefly groups have taken role of 'landlords', or 'owners of the land', those who hold political and economic rights in the land, while the non-chiefly groups have always held the ancient ritual and metaphysical roles of the first settlers. They hold the earth on behalf of the Earth spirits but do not 'own' land as such. They remain the custodians of the Earth spirits, who in their view are the only real landowners. The Earth spirit, or the 'Earth' as a spiritual force, controls the rain and the fertility of the soil, and nourishes the crops and animals. It provides for the good fortune, health and sustenance of those occupying the land, and for the well being of the flora and fauna, and all living things

on the land. The non-chiefly peoples do not own the land because it is not theirs. It belongs to the Earth, the ancestors, and the Creator.

### **“The land is for us!”**

Land-people and Earth-people refer not just to the two central figures of the landlord-chief and Earth shrine custodian and the two opposed worldviews that they each represent. They also include two groups of peoples that identify with these figures and worldviews – the people of the land and the people of the Earth. One group and its worldview accents the visible, material world, while the other group accents the unseen world of the spirits.

The Dagomba call themselves the landlords or owners of the land. “The land is for us,” they say. “It is ours by conquest.” The term owner can mean master in the sense of the principal or one in charge, as in the master of the bicycles meaning a bicycle repairer (see Naden 1984). But it does not mean that he or she could do anything they want with the bicycles. Among the Dagomba the chiefs are the masters of the land but, at least traditionally speaking, they could not do anything they wanted with the land.

### **Master of the land and master of the people**

The *olandö*, in former times referred to the aegis of rule, the kingdom (*naam*) in both its conceptual and geographical senses. But above all, it referred to the peoples ruled. The geographical and material sense was unimportant. Although there was always the potential for the *olandö* to be understood in this way, this potentiality was not actuated until quite recently. Nowadays, the sense in which it means the master of the physical property has become more important than master of the people. Now some chiefs have taken the land to be their own property to dispose of as they please: to farm, or to give away, or sell. They are also buying and selling chieftaincies with this in mind<sup>39</sup>. In effect, they are beginning to operate out of a new symbolic understanding or myth of ownership and land, which is being created in our time.

### **Land as ‘people of the land’**

Jack Goody (1971) speaks of the pre-colonial West African states as not being interested in land as such but rather in the people who tamed the land, who worked it and made it productive. Chiefs sought control over people, not the land. The elders say: “Knowing the people is more than having land (*a mi niriba n-gari a mi tinsi*). Land was regarded as limitless and free for all but quite useless without labour. It was people’s skills, labour and connection with the spirit world that made the land life-giving, productive and useful. The desirable commodity was people, not land, and this required a balance of physical and moral controls. Today the balance is off. The emphasis is reversed.

### **Land as property**

Over the last 45 years, with the coming of African Independence and modernity, these perspectives have radically changed. Now as property land has become valuable in itself. (see Kirby 1998a, 1998b). Chiefs and Royals are selling it to the general public, to NGOs and to other interested parties from all sides. Politics and development issues follow the profitability of land. Educated elites and urban Commoners also conspire to gain a share of the profits. All of this goes on much to the annoyance of the Dagomba Commoners who are

<sup>39</sup> As a case in point, the chief of Tamale, the Gulkpe Na, has been dead for four years without a replacement because the interim chief, the Regent, is getting rich with land sales while he waits for the bids of claimants to go higher. The next Tamale chief stands to make a fortune from the sale of land. So numerous claimants have come forward with their offerings. The highest offer will win.

still in the villages working the land. To them the Earth is still a sacred entity, much as it is to the non-chiefly peoples.

### **The need for legal title**

As a result of these influences, today land use is increasingly being made contingent on formal ownership, and in many places, the chiefs, not the Earth priests, have the legal title to the land. In Ghana, the state does not recognise the claim of the Earth priest over the land as an economic claim, but only a ritual claim. However, it does recognise the economic claims of the chiefs (see Skalnik 1983). The problem is that there are still large areas of the Northern Region, inhabited by non-chiefly peoples, where land matters are under the aegis of Earth priests. In these areas, so as not to be left without any legal title to the land, the people are now trying to get their own chiefs. They also wish to maintain their own ethnic identity, so they are trying to develop their own cultural forms of chieftaincy. In many cases<sup>40</sup> they are choosing to combine both earthly and spiritual powers, instead of opting for the more secular chiefly structures of the chiefly groups.

### **Money versus relationships**

The changeover from land understood primarily as people and as the aegis of rule or kingdom to land as property, an economic resource to be bought and sold, represents a major, unsettling change from the traditional economies of relationship to a modern monetary economics. The traditional economy values relationships including ritual relationships with the sacralized Earth and places its trust in the ancestors. The modern economy values material goods and land as a commodity, puts its faith in science, and its trust in production. This change has set up a conflictual dichotomy between the new and the old, between dependency on the seen world versus the unseen world between science and religion, and (often) between the fulfilment of short term needs versus the fulfilment of long term needs, that is summarised in positions of land-people versus Earth-people.

### **Curators of the Earth**

The non-chiefly groups are the original settlers of the land. They antedate the state systems. It has been demonstrated on linguistic evidence, for example, that Konkomba peoples were spread throughout the eastern half of the Northern Region long before the arrival of the state peoples (see Strevens 1955). They are the custodians of the sacral Earth. In many places, when the chiefly groups need to pacify the Earth spirits, they still call upon the non-chiefly groups to do it for them. When misfortunes arise, in times of drought, famine or epidemics, they turn to the Earth priest for help. The non-chiefly peoples know the spirits of the Earth. They are the curators of the land (see Kirby 1986 and Tengan 1991). In their view the forefathers of the chiefly groups may have conquered the non-chiefly peoples, but they didn't win the land from non-chiefly peoples because it was never theirs to give (see Kirby 1998b). It was not land, but rather people who were conquered, and, according to Goody (1971), they were just driven further into the bush. They were raided but never ruled.

### **A sacred ecology**

To the Konkomba and Dagomba peasants alike, it is the life-giving productivity of the earth that is important. They are interested in the earth's fertility and its fertility proceeds from the Earth. To them the earth is not a commodity but the basis of a fragile relationship between

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<sup>40</sup> I found this to be especially so among the Komba living between Gushiegu and Nalerigu in Mamprusi territory. Since the 1994 conflict they have been rejecting the chiefs appointed by their Dagomba and Mamprusi overlords and appointing their own chiefs. In many cases the new chief is the younger brother or son of the Earth shrine custodian.

people and the elements, the ancestors and the spirit world. To them an older law still applies. Land ought not to be bought and sold. It cannot belong to any person or group of persons as such. Farmers own only their labour and their crops, not the land itself. To them, land or the earth made into a commodity for buying and selling is still unimaginable (Kirby 1998a).

### **A moral issue or survival issue?**

From the perspective of the peasants and those attached to the land, the buying and selling of land is a moral issue. It seems like a lie or outright theft, for the land does not belong to them, but rather to the Earth and the ancestors. It is against their sensibilities, their custom, the will of the ancestors, and it is against the will of the Earth itself. To do so is to play with danger. There will be serious consequences. The fragile balance must be maintained or life will cease. And yet, as good farmland becomes scarcer and more valuable, more costly and less accessible to the peasants who are working the land, it becomes a survival dilemma. As more and more move out of subsistence farming, as they flood into the towns and cities looking for salaried jobs, old sensibilities fade and new priorities emerge. Liberated from the land, they are enslaved to money. For them, too, it is a matter of survival. With hunger on their doorsteps they will take their chances with the anger of the Earth.

### **Entrepreneurs and individualists on the rise**

Linked to the changeover in the basic concepts of land, are the freedoms that arise from individualism and modern capitalism. These processes are occurring among all the ethnic groups, although the chiefly peoples have a head start, as it were. The North is ideal for large-scale production of field rice, cotton, shea-nut and cashews. Ghana's first attempt at the mass production of rice in the late 60s and early 70s ended in disaster when the Commoners of the chiefly groups rebelled. They needed their land for food production, and resented the big profits that the Royals were taking away, so in the end the Commoners burnt the rice farms.<sup>41</sup>

Now, thirty years later, under pressure from the World Bank, IMF and other international donor/debtors, the government of Ghana is again emphasizing the production of cash crops, especially in the North – but with a crucial difference. Now it is on a more modest scale and the organisation and management is broader-based. It consists of educated farmers and local entrepreneurs belonging to both the chiefly and non-chiefly peoples, Royals and Commoners. On a recent visit to Saboba I was amazed to find a number of new cashew plantations. One of the plantation owners is a Konkomba businessman who lives in London but returns to Ghana twice a year to supervise his holdings.

### **New models for land and chieftaincy**

In forming a new 'peace-culture' there are different models of chieftaincy available. The model of the Akan states in Southern Ghana, for example, is very different from the kinds of chieftaincy in the North. Akan chieftaincy is still fundamentally based in the metaphysical relations with the Earth – although, given today's economic and political trends, this does not always appear to be the primary concern of the modern Akan states. In the South, state formation grew out of the spiritual links to the Earth (see Cardinal 1920). As the legend puts it, 'the Asante people came out of a hole in the ground.' Today the Akan are trying to return these moral foundations. They are searching for ways to accommodate the modern social,

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<sup>41</sup> The farms that were burnt by the annoyed peasantry were located around Nasia and Jimli in Dagbon, and around Katanga in Gonja.

political and economic trends to the metaphysical foundations of chieftaincy. They are turning towards the old ritual relations with the Earth. Any vision for a chieftaincy that nurtures rather than exploits, needs to recognise these ritual foundations.

### **An interactive confluence of cultural pathways**

If we were to envision an interactive confluence of cultural pathways in a peace-system, it would have to combine the concepts of 'land' and 'Earth' in an accessible and balanced way for both cultures. The people of the land need to take on more of the qualities of the people of the Earth. They need to be more curators of the land and their people and less despoilers; while the people of the Earth need to learn to enter the modern world, to think in a more material way, more in terms of property, profits and losses, and, regarding causality, more in terms of scientific facts than spirit agencies. But old ways die hard. Conflict, poverty, piecemeal development and the pressures of sheer survival make progress sporadic. For example, even the educated farmers still can't seem to help themselves from selling their crops cheaply at harvest time and later in the year having to sell their animals in order to buy back their crops at inflated prices. Both groups need to work together for their mutual development. Both the spiritual and material economies need to be blended.

## **GOD-PEOPLE VS. EARTH-PEOPLE**

### **The two dimensions of the spirit world**

A fourth theme involves metaphysical pathways. The terms 'God-people' and 'Earth-people' refer to two philosophical dimensions—the universal and the particular. They refer to the two cosmic dimensions—the sky and the earth. They also have religious dimensions. The universal God's association with the sky and the 'tribal god's' association with the earth are central themes of African religion. Since ancient times peoples throughout Africa and the Middle East have experienced a mixture of these two spiritual dimensions—the spirit of the Sky<sup>42</sup> and the spirit of the Earth—as expressions of God's transcendence and immanence.

### **Universal God and tribal god**

In West Africa, the term 'God-people' has been used to refer to those, especially Muslim clerics, who specialised in their relationship to the transcendent God through the 'book' the written word. The chiefly peoples are associated with the Sky and the 'Sky God' while the non-chiefly peoples are associated with the earth, the 'Earth spirit' and the 'tribal God'. Both the Konkomba and the Dagomba have a word for God but the concepts behind this word differ. The Konkomba call God *õUmbworö* (lit. õmaster or õlord, õ as in master or lord of the universe). There is a universal element to it, but it is not a Sky God. It is primarily linked to their Earth-bound existence. It is a 'tribal God'. In contrast to this, the Dagomba word for God is *Naawuni* (õSky Chief). It is connected with the Sky God, the universal God.

### **The immanent and transcendent**

The 'Sky people' or 'God-people' are the people of the sky, the overarching firmament. Their God is transcendent. They experience Earth spirits as 'children' or the offspring of God, and the earth as matter, as a means to reach the transcendent, but also a limitation, an impediment. They look to the sky for life, meaning and sustenance. The 'Earth-people' are attached to earth. They are tied to the ancestral spirits, the 'Earth spirits'. They experience the earth as 'Earth', a sacred physical expression of a metaphysical reality. Their God is

<sup>42</sup> There has always been both a tension and a certain complementarity between the two. For Ancient Israel it was between the Earth god, Yahweh, and the Sky god, Elohim. They are the two aspects of the one God—the tribal and universal (see Loewen 1986) and the entire history of the Israelites can be summed up in terms of their relationship at different times and places with these divine polarities.



immanent. They look to the Earth as the source of life-giving power, a visible symbol of the unseen world, and the source of all life and fertility anchored in the soil. For them the 'Sky God' is a distant, unknown Creator<sup>43</sup> for everyday needs not very necessary.

### **Complementary and conflictive world-views**

These two orientations to the spirit world, the universal God and the tribal God, are at the same time complementary and conflictive. The 'Sky' and the 'Earth' are personified spiritual and moral presences that have cosmic dimensions. They embody two distinct worldviews and sets of relationships in the unseen world. The Sky God points to vertical relations, the 'tribal God' to horizontal; one is transcendent, the other immanent. From ancient times, peoples' association with 'Sky' made possible long distance travel, conquest, trade and the new ideas, new inventions, and the new products that came with this. From early times, chiefly peoples looking to 'Sky' were freed to traverse the spiritual and physical boundaries of the land, to move through the fixed geographical islands of clans and small hostile tribes, to trade, raid and establish new chieftaincies.

The 'Earth-people' or non-chiefly peoples, on the other hand, were and still are attached to the soil, the horizontal plane. Even when they migrate to new farmlands they are subject to the 'Earth' spirit of their new geographical confines. They are nourished and sustained by 'Earth' and by nature, but they are also limited by its territoriality. These limitations have etched themselves into their way of life and their worldview. They are limited by the local geography, the local spirits, the ancestors and by their horizontal cosmology with its limited vision, its idea of destiny, and its broad view of the past and narrow window on the future. They are caught up in life's cycle and cannot break out of this cycle by themselves. They need the help of the 'God-people' (see Kirby 2002a).

### **God-people and chieftaincy**

The intimate connection between the idea of a universal God and the concept of chieftaincy and state is not new. It has to do with peoples' needs for systems of explanation, prediction and control in a wider world (see Horton 1993:375 and 1975). Raiders and traders needed a geographically broader-based God, a moveable God, a God not limited to one place, nor devoted to one people. The interests and activities of the Earth deities were limited to their well-defined territories, and to the fertility and harmonious existence of those who inhabited these places. These limitations did not apply to the universal God, whose domain was the overarching vault of the sky. His transcendent interests and activities could not be limited by the affairs of the earth, by time or place or by any preferences for peoples and tribes living in particular times and places. The transcendent domain of the Sky God was trans-territorial and trans-tribal. It extended to all places and all peoples. As the elders say: 'God likes everyone' interpreted: 'God's blessing is offered to all impartially' (Plissart 1983:250, #2023). Thus the Dagomba and those attached to the Sky God were not as hampered by territorial constraints, taboos and local Earth deities, as were the Konkomba.

The universal God of the Dagomba is intimately linked to their concept of chieftaincy. If the Akan chieftaincy comes forth from the earth, the Dagomba chieftaincy comes down from above. The *naam* made it possible to incorporate new groups, new territories, and new deities within an overarching political, economic, familial and religious framework. It engendered an essentially new way of understanding their relationship to God and the lesser

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<sup>43</sup> The universal God is only needed for solving the typical trans-territorial problems like drought and widespread epidemics (see Kirby 1986).

spirits. The Dagomba, like others with centralised state systems in West Africa, had come to link the principles of political supremacy embodied in the *naam* to the overarching principle of God's supremacy. In God (*Naawuni*), the rulers of Dagbon had discovered an essential ally and a model for their political supremacy. It articulated what seemed to them a self-evident truth: that the world is hierarchical. Just as God had authority over the lesser deities, rulers were naturally superior to Commoners or conquered peoples.

The elders say: 'God has killed and the Earth gets to eat.' In this proverb Plissart tells us: 'Allusion is made between the heaven and earth, commoner and ruler duality. Commoners and Konkomba are asked to sacrifice to the Earth and the ancestors, for protection. But the ruling estate worships the spirit of the chief, *naa wuni*. This spirit is connected with the sky: *wun taɲɔ* (lit. God's stone) rather than the Earth. Dependants may make claims but it's the master who provides' (Plissart 1983: 391, #3574). To have the 'Sky God on one's side was all that was needed. By this connection they had mastery over all those who were attached to the earth, those bound by the Earth shrines, circumscribed by mountains, rivers and valleys and the onus of territoriality. Thus we find in the concepts of mobility, hierarchy and transcendence the source of this complementary relationship between the universal God and chieftaincy (see Kirby 2002a).

### 'God-people' and Islam

Across the West African savannahs 'God-people' have long been associated with Muslim clerics (see Levtzion 1968). In Northern Ghana the Gonja state gives us a good example of the influence of these clerics (see Goody 1973). Their three 'estate' system, consisting of Royals at the top, the Muslims in the middle, and the Commoners at the bottom, became a kind of model for the role of Muslims within other Northern state systems like the Mamprusi, the Dagomba and Nanumba. These itinerate 'God-people' attached themselves to chiefs and kings by offering their prayers and amulets for victory in battle, success in trade, and power over the spirit world. They also offered their literate skills as scribes, clerks and historians. With their service came a new vision and unbridled spirit as immense as the sky. The chiefly peoples became associated with the 'God-people' and subdued the 'Earth-people' Non-chiefly peoples who sought to become 'God-people' sacrificed their ethnic identity in doing so, for only the chiefly peoples could be 'God-people'.

### Islam in Dagbon

Dagomba links to Islam began much later than those of the Gonja. They trace back to Ya Na Zanjina, who established a Muslim enclave at his court early in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (see Wilks 1965). But, as with the Gonja, only the Royals could convert to Islam<sup>44</sup> and until very recently they didn't 'convert'. There was no need to. They were already considered 'honorary Muslims'. The Muslims remained an elite clerical class of professional holy men, amulet-makers, court advisors and scribes until the colonial era. In the early 1900s, it was the freed slaves who first converted to Islam. Then by the 60s and 70s Dagomba Commoners began converting to Islam in small numbers trying to access higher rank and privilege. In the late 80s and early 90s, almost by common agreement, the chiefs and Royals turned en-masse to Islam. Their conversion was politically motivated. By the 90s the youthful Commoners from the distant villages began joining the fundamentalist missionary groups from Saudi Arabia, especially the *Ali-suna*. Over the last fifteen years the Dagomba

<sup>44</sup> When I first met the Ya Na in 1975, I thought that he was Muslim because of his long flowing robes. But when I asked him about it he and his whole entourage laughed uproariously. He then told me that no Dagomba chief could ever be a Muslim because of the sacrifices he must make to the various shrines. Today the standard response of most Dagomba chiefs is: 'We Dagomba chiefs are Muslim and have always been Muslim.'

have increasingly been converting to these new brands of Islam. In doing so they are no longer maintaining their traditional religiosity but are moving toward a new religiosity and new ways of achieving status.

### **Christianity in Dagbon**

In more recent times, Christianity has also been on the rise in Dagbon. Christian missions only got started after WWII. But by the early 60s mission schools and clinics were established in the main towns in the Northern Region (see Kirby 2002a) and they began to attract converts among the school children. As a whole, the Christian converts were mainly from among the Dagomba Commoners and the non-chiefly peoples. It was all part of what they called 'getting your eyes opened' or entering the modern world. And for the Konkomba there was an additional advantage - it enabled them to raise their status, become 'God-people' and enter modern life without losing their ethnic identity.

Although the Christian missions divided their attention almost equally among chiefly and non-chiefly peoples, the mission among the non-chiefly peoples has been credited as more successful. This is because, in spite of the relatively few converts among the Konkomba (only about 8 per cent are Christian), they have exercised a disproportionate influence on their people for they are the educated elite and the new leaders.

The impact of Christianity among the Dagomba has not been as obvious as it has been among the Konkomba. Only about 2 - 3 per cent of the Dagomba population are Christian (Boi-Nai and Kirby 1998). The low percentage has been mainly due to chiefly politics, the perception that Christianity is a European religion and the influence of Islam. But Christianity has had a greater influence on Dagbon than these statistics suggest. Over the last 40 years a continuous stream of Dagomba school children have been baptised as they went through Christian schools. But as soon as these educated youth left their villages, where most adhere to traditional religion, to seek employment, marriage or just accommodation in the towns and cities, where the Muslims are in the majority, they were forced to become Muslims. As a result, I estimate that as many as 25 per cent of the Muslim Dagomba are very favourable toward Christianity. This group is very influential because they are educated, they are at the middle range of society and a large proportion of them are women. They are opinion leaders and in a position to influence both those at the grass roots in the villagers and those in leadership positions in local and national government (see Kirby 2002a).

Overall, the number of Christians in both groups is increasing and, as they enter the modern world, their new unbounded worldview is leading to a greater sense of control over their lives, to the creation of ascribed statuses and, especially among the Konkomba, to a desire for greater organisation and their own brand of chieftaincy.

### **Religious conversions**

The conversions to Christianity and Islam since Independence have been for a mixture of social, political and economic reasons. Religiosity, too, has entered in, but this needs to be seen from a cultural perspective. West African Islam has always been rooted in an African religiosity and it has accommodated traditional practices. Until very recently, 'conversion' did not require a change in religious culture. But now this is changing. The new fundamentalist missionaries, especially the *Ali-suna* groups (including the *al Qaeda*), militantly endorse a version of Arab culture and religiosity (see Seidu 1989). This is bringing about severe divisions in the Islamic community. Many Muslim converts are ambivalent towards the new Arab culture-based fundamentalisms. They want the international alliances,

the prestige and status, the new global identities, the development aid, and the political and economic advantages that the new missionary sects bring but they also want to keep their own African religiosity.

Nowadays, Christians, too, are divided on the cultural issue. In the former era, Christian missionaries usually required of converts an outer 'cultural' change to testify to the inner spiritual change. A European Christianity generally viewed African religiosity as backward or 'evil' and demanded that it be rejected. Although this approach succeeded with many peoples, it did not succeed among the Dagomba (see Kirby 2002a). Now some fundamentalist Christian sects are pressing this approach even further with the complete rejection of African religiosity and culture, while others, especially the Catholics<sup>45</sup>, are trying to reverse this in order to rebuild Christianity on an African religiosity. This acceptance of African religiosity is striking a familiar chord with both non-chiefly peoples and chiefly Commoners (see Kirby 2002a).

### **African religiosity vs. Western secularism**

The 'God-people' vs. 'Earth-people' opposition reflects the more general tension that exists between secularism and religiosity in our modern world. The new 'God-people' are often irreligious; they are the secular agents, the representatives of the material world order. Their school training, their future perspective and 'hands on' approach toward development and problem-solving have greatly reduced the influence of 'destiny' and the 'witchcraft mentality'. Through their influence, both groups are coming to see the value of education, science and modern medicine, and they getting the help they need to enter the modern world. But they are losing touch with the spirit world. The new 'Earth-people' on the other hand, whether they are from the chiefly or non-chiefly groups, tend to be the agents and influences for a traditional worldview and an African religiosity, with links to the ancestors and a reliance on the spirit world.

### **New commonalities**

As with the other three themes, the two seemingly opposed orientations of God-people vs. Earth-people are not disconnected polarities. The Dagomba say: 'There is something of what is up in what is down' [and vice-versa, for the proverb is used either way] (*Dim be zuggsaa dim be tinga*) (Lange 1998). The two orientations cut across both ethnic groups. 'Earth-people' include both Dagomba Commoners and ordinary Konkomba. 'God-people' include Dagomba Royals and the educated elites together with Konkomba educated elites. In them are joined the other seemingly opposed orientations such as: the universal God vs. tribal God, Islam and Christianity vs. African Traditional Religion and the opposing worldviews: the vertical vs. horizontal, the sky vs. the earth, transcendent vs. immanent, and the sacred vs. the profane. All these sets of orientations cut across the two ethnic groups.

The new commonalities are bridging the gap, fostering a union of opposites, and new identities are forging new alliances. Non-chiefly Christians are forming a new 'God-people' and, in this way, bridging the gap between themselves and chiefly peoples and Muslims. Dagomba Muslims, educated in Christian schools, are silently bridging the gaps between Muslims and Christians, as well as between chiefly peoples and non-chiefly peoples. The

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<sup>45</sup> Following up the momentous changes brought about by the Vatican II Council, the Catholic Bishops of Ghana have been slowly fostering a process of inculturation. On the grounds that any form of Christianity which demands a cultural conversion before a faith conversion is not following the 'incarnational model' and is therefore unchristian, they are putting increasing emphasis on African belief systems as the starting point for an African Christianity.

Catholic Church's stress on inculturation is helping to bridge the gap between Christians, adherents of African Traditional Religion and the more traditional Muslims, as well as the worldview gap between the vertical and horizontal, the transcendent and the immanent, the universal God and tribal God.

### **Mutual assistance**

In religious matters, as in politics and economics, both groups need to learn from each other. The Dagomba need to learn from the Konkomba to recognise the importance of the religiosity of the Earth and its moral principles. They need to lessen the hold of power politics and materialism in their lives. The Konkomba can learn from the Dagomba how to look to the sky and seek its expansive freedoms, how to break out of the traditional cycle, how to broaden their relations and live with others beyond the homestead. Together they can seek the knowledge of the -Skyø i.e. science, freedoms from ignorance and disease, without despising their own indigenous knowledge and the spirit world. Together they can reduce the oppositions at the roots of conflict and bridge the gaps in their cultural pathways. Together they can build a new set of identities (see Boi-Nai and Kirby 1999).

### **The Sky and the Earth in a 'peace-culture'**

No vision for a future -peace-cultureø is complete if it cannot accommodate the religiosity of both cultural pathways, that of -Sky-peopleø and the -Earth-peopleø. The vision needs to recognise the place of a universal God and endorse the global freedom that this brings. But at the same time it needs to recognise the place of the -tribal godø with its deep African religious roots, its intimate connection to the -Earthø and the ancestors, and its moral doctrine of 'abundant life'<sup>46</sup>. The relationship between these two must move from conflict and mutual destruction to co-existence and mutual assistance. This movement toward a new -peace-cultureø involves bridging a series of gaps: the gap between tradition and modernity, the seen and the unseen worlds, the religions of nature and those of the book, a tribal god and a universal God, and the -Earthø and the -Skyø. This bridging process, as we have shown, needs to make use of the pre-existing unities. It only needs to be activated and directed. It is peacebuilding at its best, for it lessens the conflictive relations between the non-chiefly and chiefly groups at the deepest levels of identity and motivation.

## **FORMING THE NEW PEACE CULTURE**

### **Times are changing in Dagbon**

Formerly, the Dagomba were the -big-menø -hit-menø -land-menø and -God-menø. Times are changing and so are the cultural themes. The unities and divisions in these cultural themes no longer follow ethnic lines. The new -big-menø are the educated elites. Education has brought high status, prestige and power to within everyone's grasp (see Kirby 2002a, 1998b). It has become increasingly precarious to pursue the old agitator role, for it brings a -war-cultureø to its logical conclusion both internally, with the constant fighting between the Royal gates, and externally in terms of the wars with other tribes, especially the Konkomba. The new -hit-manø must learn to agitate for human rights and freedoms. Today, the Dagomba are caught between two economies, a materialistic one vs. one of relationships with its roots in the spirit world. It is in the light of these transitions that the moral influence of Christianity and Islam must ultimately be assessed. And here, too, it is their unities and not their differences that will offer the best bridges toward the new peace-culture.

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<sup>46</sup> Catholic theologian, Laurenti Magesa (1997), holds that research into African religiosity has uncovered enough commonalities to now speak of 'African Religion' as a 'world religion' with the principle of 'abundant life' as the foundation of its moral code.

### **Times are changing in Konkombaland**

Formerly, all Konkomba assumed the basic roles dictated by the four cultural themes: 'small men', 'run people', 'Earth people', and people of a 'tribal god'. Now this is changing. Now the educated elites, too, have access to high office. Without passing through Dagomba ethnicity, they too are becoming 'big men'. The once clear differences between 'hit' and 'run', the entitled and disenfranchised, are now full of ambiguities. Now educated Konkomba are aware of their 'democratic rights', which are announced in the Constitutions but have not been fully integrated into social structures. They are starting to realise that they have more options than before: that they need not suffer provocation meekly or 'run away' or even go to war, and that they can respond in accordance with the law.

Now, too, they can opt for their own ethnic identity. Their low self-esteem has been raised. They are not just a nameless people at the lower rungs of Dagomba society. They have their own Konkomba language and identity. They are proud to be Konkomba. They say: 'Even God speaks our language in the Bible!' Now, through Christianity, Konkomba are experiencing what it is to be 'God-people' too, with all that this implies for freedom of movement, of choice, expression, and the freedom to change or to master their own fate. Now they do not have to become Dagomba in order to attain to these freedoms. Now, too, they can begin to form their own kind of chieftaincy. They can choose to live in a 'peace-culture' instead of a 'war-culture'.

### **New alliances for peace**

Diverse roles make for diverse identities. They make it possible for both groups to form new alliances, new identities and sub-identities, which freely cross-pollinate each other and criss-cross ethnic barriers. The educated elites of both groups identify with each other, interact with each other and move together freely. Non-chiefly Muslims identify with chiefly Muslims. The Muslims who have a Christian school background are responsive to Christians. Elite Muslims easily form alliances with elite Christians, and vice versa. Creating such interconnecting networks is crucial for preventing polarization, for reducing the tensions between ethnic groups and for building a balanced new world that is no longer focused on the conflicting pathways of opposing ethnic groups. All of these multiple new connections are already building a new 'peace-culture'. They are seedlings waiting to be nurtured.

As chiefly and non-chiefly peoples begin working together under the influence of these mixed pathways, they can learn to form a synthesis consisting of new, less conflicted, 'hybrid' pathways. In the 'hit-man' vs. 'run-man' theme the Dagomba can learn about their own sub-identities from the Konkomba. They can learn to be more sensitive to the freedoms and constraints of the Konkomba, and Konkomba can learn to be less sensitive to the constraints on their freedoms. For a positive synergy to be activated in the 'big-man' vs. 'small-man' theme, like two dancing partners creating a work of art, it will require the balanced and harmonious interaction of both roles. The people of the land need to go back to the Earth, to be curators of the land, not despoilers; and the people of the Earth need to learn to enter the modern world, to take charge of their identity and destiny. Both groups need to work together for their mutual development. Both the spiritual and material economies need to be blended.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Transforming cultural themes**

In West Africa, ethnic conflicts seem to be the order of the day. Many of these conflicts are between chiefly and non-chiefly groups. Much of the effort to address conflict stops with

military control— halting the violence, disarmament, caring for wounded and refugees etc. In some cases the peacebuilding process gets beyond the exercise of these basic controls to rebuilding relationships between the conflicting parties. But rarely does it consciously tackle the deeper culture-based systemic issues that are so clearly dominant in ethnic conflicts. Yet if this is not done ethnic conflicts will return, again and again, to consume Africa.

We are least aware of our own cultural pathways and their influences, so without special training it is very difficult for peacebuilders to factor these into a peacebuilding process at the systemic level. The foregoing analysis was produced to respond to this need for systemic cultural change. Our research approached the —culture— of ethnic conflict is based in the premise that the cultural pathways themselves are in conflict. In the case of the conflictual Dagomba-Konkomba pathways, we uncovered four shared cultural themes, which manifest negative synergies, and we tried to show how these themes systematically create and sustain conflict between these two groups. Within each theme there is the potential to move from a negative synergy to a positive synergy. This is so because the opposing poles are also complementarities. We examined each of these themes, and one of them— the —hit-man— vs. —run-man— theme— in greater detail, in order to understand how one group can help the other to change, and how together they can transform the entire culture of interaction into a —peace-culture— through mutual self-help.

Although such cultural analysis is quite necessary as a foundation for change, and it even leads us to more appropriate methods for bringing about these changes, in itself it is not enough. Peacebuilding is not a theoretical matter. It occurs in real life, in open society, and between cultures. Furthermore, it does not simply happen; it is —built— by the peoples involved. The object of peacebuilding activities is not to suppress war; it is a new way for people to live together. This must be learned, and as in all learning activities, direction and process are needed.

There are several problems here. The processes and vision that are necessary for transforming the themes from a negative to a positive synergy need to be initially learned in a closed and nurturing environment. Because we are not usually aware of our cultural pathways we must first be introduced to them, learn to recognise them, learn to overcome our denial, learn to accept them, then we must begin to act in new ways— first making the necessary internal changes to our own culture or —integration— and followed by making the external changes in relation to the other culture, or —synthesis—. Continuity is also a problem. There need to be some who have an overall vision of the process, who see the final destination and have some understanding of how to get there. A special group or groups are necessary who have already, in microcosm, experienced the —peace-culture— and the process of getting there. Having had this experience they can begin living in the light of the vision and according to the process required. They may then lead others to follow the same pathways.

The process can be achieved through culture-drama and the vision through culture-drama workshops. Further discussion of this new enactment genre is available elsewhere (Kirby 2002b) but it has been introduced here to point out that the results of this kind of research are not merely —interesting theories— but can be applied to effect concrete changes for the betterment of life.

## Plates

- Plate 1. The Mionlana, a Dagomba paramount chief, at the workshop.  
 Plate 2. Konkomba workshop participant dressed in a Dagomba chief's ceremonial smock, the symbol of his office.  
 Plate 3. Dagomba man relaxing in his compound  
 Plate 4. Konkomba man relaxing in his compound  
 Plate 5. Market scene in Tamale  
 Plate 6. Buying and selling enactment: a conflictual context  
 Plate 7. Author talks with Muslim participants

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