

# An Historical and Ethnographic Commentary on The Northern Conflict

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(1994)

## INTRODUCTION

1994 will go down in Ghanaian history as the year of the Northern Conflict. Billed as “the guinea-fowl war,” because it all started as a quarrel over this animal, the open conflict between the “allied” chiefly tribes including the Dagombas, Nanumbas and Gonjas, against one acephalous (chiefless) tribe, the Konkombas, dominated the Nation’s attention for half a year and permanently changed the lives of over 2 million Northerners. Leaving in its wake at least 20,000 known dead, many more maimed and seriously injured, and over a hundred thousand homeless, it has shocked the nation. Since the Konkombas have carried their wounded and dead deep into the bush the real numbers may never be known.

Even now, six months after the outbreak, wherever one goes in southern Ghana one is met by two recurring sentiments. The first is: “How could such violent ethnic animosity suddenly erupt in Ghana? Ghana has always been peaceful.” The second is: “Let us hope for the best!” Most Ghanaians find it hard to believe what has happened. “It is really not like us!” It calls up suspicion that perhaps we do not know ourselves as well as we thought--especially the dark corners of our own history and where this history is leading us. The second is more than good manners. It is genuine and arises from traditional values found in familiar old proverbs like *{nyame w[ h[* (God will take care of things) and *{nyame Nnay}* (God doesn’t sleep). But here it sounds limp and ineffectual even as it leaves the mouths of speakers. Is Ghana’s ancient wisdom failing us in the face of new problems? Indeed, if we do not know ourselves, how can we hope for the best? How can Ghana build for the future?

The following pages are an attempt to address these sentiments and to understand what is happening to Northern Ghana as we leap into the 21st century. Our main focus, however, is the past. Ghana’s history as a nation is just beginning but it rests on the much longer and varied history of its more than 50 ethnicities. The histories of some of these peoples desperately need to be told at this time. As a result of the blizzard of inaccurate statements, half-truths, and downright lies produced by the

media over these last months concerning the peoples involved in the conflict, the record needs to be set straight. Luckily, the facts are there to do this. Enough research has already been done. It is our intention to present it here simply and clearly. Basing our comments on the writings of scholars, ethnographers, and historians of Ghana, we hope to portray the pertinent historical and ethnological factors leading up to the present situation of conflict in the North. We will also reflect on the ways in which interrelations with the peoples of southern Ghana, with the colonial regime and, in the present time, with national and international political, economic and religious forces have set the stage for the conflict.

The format of our discussion will follow the major issues of the conflict: the populations involved in the conflict, the so-called “minorities” and majorities, their histories, migrations and modes of livelihood, their relations to the colonial powers and to one another as a result of this; the slavery in the pre-colonial period and the inequalities, extortion, and courts of oppression in the colonial period, then the emancipation movement, the religious factor, factors related to land ownership, economic pressures, Northern politics, and finally the war itself, the refugees, and the necessity and possibilities for a lasting solution.

We will point out that the so-called “minorities” in the North are actually a majority and that the colonial invention of ‘chieftaincy’, especially as it is vested in only a few of the tribes, is simply a new and more oppressive form of traditional slavery. Our data shows that the Konkombas are more numerous than the forces allied against them, that they are not Togolese immigrants, but Ghanaian citizens, and that they were settled in northern Ghana centuries before invaders, such as the Dagomba and the Gonja, arrived. The present conflict is not new but has its roots in a long history. Present inequalities go back to 19th century patterns of indigenous slavery, and the extortion in the chief’s court goes back to the colonial era. These unequal power relations have been supported by subsequent Ghanaian governments, sometimes out of ignorance, sometimes just maintaining the status-quo, but very often for the profit and advantage of unscrupulous politicians.

We will show that the majority of the farmers of the North are the indigenous acephalous peoples like the Konkomba. They have been forced to feed and clothe the chiefly groups for centuries and much of the present struggle is to throw off this yoke. If they must have chiefs, the Konkombas say they want their own. But chieftaincy as it has been established in the North is only part of the much larger issue of servitude in a variety of forms. Today the most devastating forms of oppression concern the land.

We will show how the changes in the land tenure system undergird every aspect of the present problem. The historical record shows that the office of “land owner” (*tendana*) was, in the past, solely a religious one. Farmers had rights in the fruits of their labour, not the land. Keeping in tune with land tenure processes that occurred in the South, and with the worldwide process of ‘globalization’, over the past 20 years there has been a gradual move in the direction of private ownership. The political forces directing this movement have been controlled by the chiefly groups, and this has often been at the expense of the acephalous groups.

The monopolization of land by chiefly elites took a decisive turn in 1978 during the Acheampong regime when the new Constitutions vested all lands of the Northern Region in the paramount chiefs and their peoples. After a perfunctory investigation the findings of the committee chaired by the prominent Dagomba lawyer R.I. Alhassan were published in a paper entitled *Brief Legal History of Northern and Upper Region Lands (Statutory Ownership and Tenancy)*.

As a result of this new provision in the Constitutions, those who traditionally had no chiefs, like the Konkombas and the other acephalous peoples of the Northern Region, became landless. There is double irony here in that these peoples are the autochthones, the original inhabitants of the land, and they are still the ones living on the land and producing the food for half the Ghanaian population, who now live in towns and cities.

We will show how the pattern of conflict is not something new. It has been gradually building up and increasing over the years. We will show how from the 1978 change in the Constitutions onward there have been a series of minor conflicts leading up to the latest and most horrific 1994 Conflict.

We will show that nowadays what happens in the North affects all of Ghana. Nowadays if there is a conflict in the North, the whole country is involved, both north and south. It has been clear for some time now that Southerners are affected by northern political and economic affairs. This is bound to increase. Ghana now depends on the North for its foodstuffs, its labourers, and fuels like charcoal and firewood. Conflicts disrupt the flow of goods and services and the costs are now passed down to all Ghanaians, not just Northerners. War affects Ghana's economic and political development. It will set the development progress of the North back at least five years. This is especially in terms of food production, education, and health services. War affects the stability of the region. All the development partners have left. Some may never return. It has affected international trade, education and economic growth opportunities throughout the region. Ghana can ill afford the cost of war. War traumatizes. It causes needless suffering. It damages the self-confidence, the identity, and the psyche of the nation. It affects the overall quality of life.

We will show how the Islamic factor is now affecting Ghana's northern politics, national politics and international politics. One of the less understood but more visible aspects of the conflict is the global Islamic factor. Islam is on the rise in Ghana mainly because of the influence of outside money and power which has coincided with the indigenization of Islam among the northern chiefly groups. While the chiefly groups are moving toward Islam, the traditionalist acephalous groups are leaning toward Christianity.

We will show how the Christianity factor is influencing the issues. Christianity came late to the Northern Region. Missions begun to be established only in the 1950's and 60's. By this time Islam had already been officially linked to chieftaincy and supported by the colonial regime. Culturally speaking, Christianity seemed very strange and too 'European' to northerners. The chiefly peoples, especially the royals, were proud of their heritage, they did not want to leave their rich culture in order to

become a 'Silimi\va', and they did not feel a need to become Christian. So the attempts to establish missions met with great resistance among the chiefly groups.

The Christian missions brought education, health-care and other services for Northerners, chiefly and non-chiefly alike. These were highly valued by both groups and conversion was not necessary to benefit from them. Among the Dagombas, especially, if school children became nominally Christian during their schooling, they switched to Islam when they entered the working world. On the other hand, the children from the non-chiefly groups tended to 'stay' Christian. The social services were perhaps more valued by non-chiefly peoples who tended to live far from the towns where such services were more available. For them the missions were their gate to civilization, their opportunity to 'get their eyes opened!' The schooling and other services offered to these isolated and poorer communities also began to create new awarenesses. Even if most did not become Christian, the help that was given to these neglected peoples did have a remarkable effect on them over time and eventually it led to their emancipation.

Therefore it was only natural for the chiefly groups to see the Christian churches as being more associated with the non-chiefly groups. The Christian churches were targeted by the chiefly peoples, who maintained that they were the allies of the acephalous groups. In fact the churches were neutral but it was the fact of their general association with and support for the non-chiefly peoples that led to this accusation.

We will examine some of the stereotypes surrounding the issues. The stereotypes of Southerners about the North had an important influence on the 'religious factor'. Most Southerners believe that all Northerners are Muslim, so it is quite normal for them to expect Muslim political leadership. This, however, is belied by the facts. Current data (Barker 1986:59), indicates that there are more Muslims in southern cities than in the North. Misunderstandings like this have greatly affected northern affairs and power relations. Muslim leaders can make claims that over extend their actual power, yet they are never challenged by Southerners. In the aftermath of the war, these stereotypes led to such things as the southerners blaming the Konkombas for the war and the atrocities that were carried out by the army against the Konkombas.

The roots of the Northern Conflict go deep and the issues, be they political, economic, ethnic, or religious, are complex and weighty. In a paper like this we can not cover every detail. Our aim is only to help clarify the larger picture in the light of some of the most prominent historical and ethnographic factors--especially those that have been overlooked or have been buried in the debris of partisan politics. We do not intend to offer solutions here. However, broadened perspectives normally elicit new and more enlightened questions. Part of arriving at the right answer is finding the right questions to ask. We hope that this paper raises basic questions that cause all of the peoples of Ghana to carefully and prayerfully reflect on their past and their future together, and from there to arrive at a solution that is truly the "best" for Ghana and all its people.

## POPULATION STATISTICS

The last official census giving statistics of ethnic origin was the 1960 Census published in 1964. It is normally considered authoritative and most estimates today use it. Peter Barker (1986), for example, whom we will be using for most of our statistics, bases his estimates on the 1960 Census with considerations from a wide range of sources including interviews, questionnaires, and church statistics. However, the 1960 Census was, in some respects, extremely inaccurate and in these places it should not be followed. We will propose that the older but more accurate German Census figures of 1910 should be followed in these places.

David Tait, the formal expert on the Konkomba, maintained in the 1950's that he did not know how many Konkombas there were because they did not readily reveal the numbers of their warriors, wives, children or cows, and because they were scattered throughout the inaccessible bush of northern Ghana. If he found the problem daunting with his vast experience and knowledge of the people themselves, one wonders how the 1960 Census could have accurately retrieved this information. We wish to show in this section of the paper that the accuracy of the 1960 Census data on the Konkomba and their neighbours, the Anufo, is grossly inaccurate. The figures are challenged by the German Census of 1910, and the detailed census of the Anufo by Kirby (1986); they do not concur with research done by Froelich before the 1960 Census or the research on Konkomba migrations by Skalnik after the 1960 Census, and they do not tally with the experience of those long working in Konkomba areas, such as missionaries, literacy workers and NGOs.

The following presents a demographic summary, drawn from various sources, of the peoples involved in the conflict. The Anufo figures are shown for reasons of comparison:

### GONJA:

- 1960 Ghana Census (1964): 62,700
- 1984 Barker's estimate (1986) using 1960 Census and growth rate of (100:220): 133,939
- 1994 Our estimate using 1960 Census and Barker's growth rate: 200,908.

### NANUMBA:

- 1931 Census: slightly less than 10,000 Nanumba
- 1960 Ghana Census: 13,700;
- 1984 Barker's estimate (1986) using 1960 Census and growth rate of (100:198): 27,111
- 1994 Our estimate using 1960 Census and Barker's growth rate: 38,181.

### DAGOMBA:

- 1910 German Census: 11,345 German Dagomba  
plus 10,000 British Dagomba = 21,345
- Extrapolations from 1910 Census using Barker's growth rates (100:210)
- 1934: 44,824
- 1958: 94,131
- 1994: 306,397

1960 Ghana Census: 217,640 (186,970 resident in the Northern Region)

1971 Staniland's estimate (1975:32): 267,907

1984 Barker's estimate (1986): 448,150 (growth rate = 100:210)

1994 Our estimate using Barker (100:210): 653,552

1995 Using Staniland's estimate with Barker's growth rate: 562,604

KONKOMBA, KOMBA, "GURMA":

1910 German Census total: 87,831

Kombas: 8,868

Konkomba "under Dagomba control" (in Western Dagbon): 11,028

Konkomba (in Eastern Dagbon and in Togo): 28,461

Gurma (Ghimba, Chamba, Bassari, Nafeba etc.) "under Dagomba control": 39,474

Extrapolations from the 1910 Census using Barker's growth rates (100:227)

1934: 199,376

1947: 336,530 (see below for calculations)

1960: 391,507

1982: 565,635

1994: 1,042,484

1960 Ghana Census: 110,150.

The three northern regions: 86,710

Southern Ghana: 23,440

1984 Barker's estimate (1986): 247,384.

Three northern regions: 162,958;

Southern Ghana: 62,425

Bassari in Ghana: 22,000

1994 Our estimate using 1910 Census and Barker's rates: 1,042,484

ANUFO:

1960 Ghana Census: 14,090 (11,040 in the three northern regions)

1980 Census by Kirby (1986): 30,000 in the 113 villages of Chereponi sub-district in the N.R.

1984 Barker's estimate (1986): 23,294 (in the three northern regions) (100:211)

1994 Our estimate using Kirby's census figures: 38,000 (only the Chereponi sub-district)

According to the area's earliest census published by the German government in 1910 (*Viehbestand im Besirk Sansanne Mangu* R150 FA 3/405: 29ff), there were 11,028 Konkomba and 39,474 Gurma "under Dagomba control" (meaning in Ghana) (N.B. the Germans commonly referred to a large group of peoples closely related to Konkombas and Kombas as "Gurma" or "Paragurma" see Cornevin [1962:30,31,81]. Their descendants today are simply known as "Konkombas") together with 28,461 other Konkomba (meaning those not under Dagomba control or those beyond the frontiers of Dagomba control from Sunson, Demon, and Zabzugu onward including the trans-Oti or Togolese population) and 8,868 Komba (Ghana), totaling 87,831. Those "under Dagomba control" means those on the Ghana side of the Oti river who were actually living in or around Dagomba towns farming for them. In 1910 more distant places like Saboba were independent, having been brought under Dagomba

control only as a result of the British policy of indirect rule in the 1930's. These groups cause a problem because by now (three generations later) many would have become "Dagombaized" and would have forgotten their Konkomba-Gurma language and pedigree. So some of the descendants of 50,502 Gurma-Konkombas, of what is today Ghana, now consider themselves to be "Dagomba". However, all the descendants of 8,868 Kombas of Ghana and 28,461 Konkombas of what is today parts of Ghana and Togo consider themselves "Konkomba".

Firstly we ought to establish a solid basis for determining the Ghanaian Konkombas vs. the Togolese Konkombas, then we will try to separate the Dagombaized Konkombas from those who would have remained Konkomba. Froelich says that in 1941 there are 24,789 Konkombas in Togo and that in 1947 their numbers decreased to 21,689 (1954: 21, 23). Let us begin unraveling the puzzle here.

According to the German Census in 1910 there are 28,461 Konkombas "not under Dagomba control" meaning that at this time many, if not most of them, were living in what is today Togo. By 1947 (using Barker's growth rates) this group would have increased to 109,049. Thus by 1947, 87,360 would have presumably migrated (see migration data below) to Ghana, since, according to Froelich's figures, only 21,689 were Togolese. Taking 1947 as a baseline for establishing (a) the per cent of the Konkombas that are Ghanaian and those that are Togolese and (b) the actual numbers of Gurma-Konkombas who had become "Dagombaized", we can produce the following figures:

21,689 Konkombas in Togo  
 33,977 Kombas in Ghana  
 87,360 Konkombas who had migrated to Ghana from Togo  
 193,500 Gurma-Konkombas/Dagombas in Ghana  
     88,921 Gurma-Konkombas (193,500 - 84,357)  
     84,357 Dagombaized Konkombas  
 155,888 Dagombas (calculating back from 1960 Census)  
 71,531 Dagombas (calculating ahead from the 1910 Census)  
     84,357 = the difference between 5 & 6 (the Dagomba part of the  
     mixed grp 193,500)  
 231,947 = total number of Ghanaian Konkombas in 1947

The Dagomba figures for 1947 are key for interpreting how many of the Gurma-Konkomba had become "Dagombaized". We have no reason to suspect the 1960 Census figures are wrong with respect to the Dagomba. The Dagombas, who mainly inhabit the ribbon formations of towns along the main roads, are more accessible to census-teams. They have always been fully involved in the political process and their leadership was well aware of the importance of population statistics for political representation. However, there are big differences between the figures of the German Census and the 1960 Census with regard to the Dagombas.

Working back two generations from 1960 to 1912 there are 49,351 Dagombas. But the 1910 Census gives the Dagomba number as 11,345. This figure does not include the Dagomba in Western (British) Dagbon which then would have been less than on the German side--probably not more than 10,000. Yendi was the capital of Dagbon,

and at this time Tamale was merely a British administrative centre with few Dagombas. Given the German penchant for precision, it is not likely that they had miscalculated the Dagombas by half. Rather, the difference must be the result of the gradual osmosis of “Dagombaized” Gurma-Konkombas into the Dagomba ranks (this is a common feature of chiefs and chiefless groups, cf. also Kirby 1986:40, fn 67, 68; Crowder 1968:345; Froelich 1954:251).

Matching the German Census figures for Dagombas to Barker’s growth rates (100:210), by 1960 the Dagombas would number 102,668. By comparison the 1960 Census records the Dagomba population as 217,640--more than double this figure. The figures of Harvard historian, Staniland, reflect almost the same difference. According to the 1910 Census, in 1972 there should be 197,676 as compared to Staniland’s 1971 figures of 267,907.

Based on the above calculations, the total number of Ghanaian Konkombas in 1947 would have been 231,947, or more than 90% of the total number of Konkombas at that time. Using these 1947 figures, the total number of Konkombas in Ghana by 1960 would have been 391,507. Froelich says that “the British figures, which are less precise than our own, indicate a total population of 24,000 which makes a total of about 44,000 for the tribe” (Froelich 1954:24). Froelich doesn’t report his British sources but they are “less precise” indeed considering that one year later the Gold Coast Census reports 59,640 Konkombas and 12,489 Bassaris (Manoukian 1952:12).

An ethnographic study of the Ghanaian Anufo, who reside just north of the Konkomba and share the same census phobias mentioned by Tait, offers an additional source for challenging some aspects of the 1960 Census. In 1980, the ethnologist Kirby, conducted a detailed 6-month census of the 113 Anufo villages in the Chereponi sub-district and reported a total of 30,000 Anufo in this area (1986). Using Kirby’s figures together with Barker’s growth-rates of (100:211 for 24 years), in 1960 there would have been 16,848 Anufo in their Ghana homeland, the Chereponi sub-district, alone. By calculating an average of 150 settlers per village, in 15 long-established villages in the rich yam-growing areas of the Nanumba and Salaga districts, by 1960 there would probably have been 2,250 Anufo migrants. Thus, the 1960 Census by accepting only 11,040 Anufo in the three northern regions, would be misrepresenting the northern part of the Anufo population by half.

While we now have a plausible basis for doubling 1960 figures of Konkombas we need to find out where they were located. The greatest numbers can be accounted for by migrations south. Some idea of the extent of the migrations can be got from recent estimates in Nanumba. Skalnik, while doing ethnographic research among the Nanumba, during the first major ethnic conflict involving the Konkomba and the Nanumba in 1981, notes “Contemporary [1981] estimates mention a 125,000 strong population in the Nanumba District and, if true, I suspect that at least two thirds [82,500] are Konkomba.”

Skalnik’s figures for Konkombas would probably be conservative since the Nanumba officials, who helped provide them under wartime conditions, would have wanted to de-emphasize the Konkomba presence for obvious political reasons. He goes on to say, “One can logically suppose that since that time both Nanumba and Konkomba

leaders were aware of the fact that the Konkomba are the most numerous ethnic group in Nanun” (Skalnik 1983). Konkombas in the Nanumba district alone are said to have numbered about 100,000 in 1981. But even following Skalnik’s conservative figures with Barker’s growth rates for areas of Konkomba migrations (100:266), the Konkomba population inhabiting Nanumbaland would have grown to 132,103 by 1994.

Using Skalnik’s figures as an indicator of migration numbers, we are better able to estimate the Konkombas settling in other parts of Ghana’s “yam country”. In Nanung 150,000. In Eastern and Western Dagbon 60,000. In Salaga district 100,000. In Kratchi district 100,000. A reasonable minimum assessment, then, of the Konkomba peoples inhabiting the rich yam-growing area, where most of the skirmishes are presently being fought, bordered by the Tamale-Yendi road on the north, the Volta lake in the south and the west, and by the Togo border on the east should be at least 400,000.

To get a better estimate of the numbers of Konkomba in the Saboba-Chereponi district and Gushiegu-Karaga districts we can make use of the Chereponi data of Kirby (1986). If the Chereponi figures were under-calculated by 50% we may reasonably suspect that the Konkomba population of the Saboba-Chereponi district and the Komba population in the adjacent Gushiegu-Karaga district are similarly under-calculated for the reasons mentioned by Tait. Given the fact that the Konkombas and Kombas living in these areas inhabit land 3-4 times larger than that of the Chereponi sub-district (1,100 sq. km.) (while being about the same population density) we can expect that the Konkomba and Kombas here will be 3-4 times the Anufo population of 38,000. Thus we can expect at least 150,000 in the Saboba part of the Saboba-Chereponi district and a further 150,000 Konkombas of the Nafeba-Komba-Gbimba clans in their homeland territory of the Gushiegu-Karaga district. These figures are more than supported by the 1994 figures of Kombas (169,596) and Gurma-Konkombas (304,705) extrapolated from the 1910 Census. Migrations south can account for the big differences in the case of the Gurma-Konkombas.

This brings the total to 700,000. If we allocate 50,000 each to Eastern Gonja, Brong Ahafo, northern Ashanti, and parts of northern Volta Region, and 50,000 to the major southern cities, Accra and Kumasi we arrive at a contemporary figure of 950,000 for Ghana’s Konkomba population. This is not far from our 1910 Census extrapolations to 1994 of 1,042,484.

- In Nanu\ : 150,000.
- Western and Eastern Dagbon south of the Tamale-Yendi road: 60,000.
- In the Salaga district: 100,000.
- In the very popular Kratchi district of the Volta Region: 100,000.
- Bi-Tsabob Konkombas in the Saboba district:150,000.
- Gushiegu/Karaga district:150,000.
- Eastern Gonja, Brong Ahafo, Northern Ashanti: 50,000.
- Southern cities (Accra & Kumasi): 50,000 .
- Total 950,000.

## KONKOMBA MIGRATIONS

While Peter Barker situates the Konkomba homeland in the Oti-plain, N. Ghana, he points out that they are found all over the North. “The Konkombas’ homeland is the plain of the Oti river -- an area up to 50 km wide and 175 km from north to south; it follows the north-eastern border of Ghana from near Nalerigu to near Bimbila. It covers parts of Nalerigu and Gushiegu-Chereponi districts, and nearly all of Saboba-Zabzugu district. However Konkomba migrant farmers have spread out over an area ten times the size of their homeland--from Yendi in the north and Nkwanta in the east and from Kintampo and Atebubu in the south-west, and covering parts of Northern, Volta, Brong-Ahafo, and Ashanti regions” (Barker 1986: 170).

The pre-Independence migrations from French Togo to the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast were greater than was supposed in the past. Froelich ascribes the decrease in Togo’s Konkombas to migrations into what is today Ghana. “These last eight years in the Oti canton have witnessed a great emigration with some families moving south to Bassari and others moving to Kete Kratche in British Mandated Togoland” (1954:24). Froelich links the southward movement of Konkombas with the relative peace of the colonial administration which stopped slave-raiding (1954:252-253). While leaving no doubt as to the Western origins of the Konkombas, Froelich sounds quite prophetic when he says “When peace returned the Konkombas began to migrate southward, a movement which continues to this day, to found new villages among the Gonja right up to Salaga. Perhaps if this continues, the Konkombas will retake the lands of their forefathers to the West.”

In the light of Froelich’s figures and our calculations that in 1947 a maximum of only 10% of all Konkombas were Togolese, the extremely damaging yet widely publicized accusation by B.A. Fuseri, a Dagomba M.P., that the Konkombas are “aliens from Togo,” would have little validity. Before Ghana’s Independence all those involved in the plebiscite (which included all Konkombas in British and French Togoland) were given the opportunity to move to the country of their choice and become full citizens of Ghana or Togo. It is no secret among the Konkomba that more went over to Ghana than to Togo. We have no accurate figures of Konkomba migrations into Ghana after Independence, but it is unlikely that the ratio of those migrating south was more weighted in favour of the Togolese than the Ghanaians, in other words it is unlikely that less than 90 per cent of the migrants were Ghanaian. If 50% of all Konkombas were migrating, at most only 4-5% of these migrants could be Togolese.

One of the most popular places to settle was Nanumba district. Skalnik (1985), who did ethnographic work there, says, “The influx into Nanun is the result of migrations from the impoverished lands north of Yendi over the past 60 years.” The Konkomba are farmers not itinerant herdsman. But every three or four generations they are required to move on to form another settlement due to the poor soils of Northern Ghana which become impoverished in 70-80 years of tillage even with crop rotation and fallow periods. The Konkombas needed land and the Nanumbas and Gonjas needed workers of the land, but although a co-dependancy was established the benefits were typically one-sided. Skalnik (1985) indicates a more political reason for the welcome mat in Nanumbaland: “They were well received by the Nanumba chiefs

because it has always been a good sign and blessing for a chief to be the leader of more people.” This blessing came in the form of taxable overproduction--a factor which we will explore in the following sections.

## **DAGOMBA HISTORY**

Froelich quoting Tamakloe (1931) says, “The first Na, or chief of the Dagomba, is descended from one called ‘the red hunter,’ named Tohagiye, who lived in a cave in the country of mali [this would be “Melle” southeast of Fada N’Gurma, not the Mali Empire in the west]. In 1100 or 1200 his descendants arrived in Mamprusi and founded the kingdom of Dagbon. Biemmone, one of the first chiefs then founded Karage [Karaga]. Bogoyelgo left Sitoba to found Bagale, then Sunson on the borders of Konkomba territory” (Froelich 1954: 33). “Little by little he overcame the barbarians and became their chief, the second chief of Sunson left that place and set himself up further north to better control his subjects the Konkomba” (Froelich 1954:32). Tamakloe (1931) errs in his chronology according to most recent scholars including Levtzion (1971:198), Fage (1964:182, 187) Iliasu (1961:104) and Ferguson (1973) who put the consolidation of the Dagomba and Mamprusi states at the middle to the end of the 15th century.

Tait says, “. . . it was the Dagomba who expelled them (Konkomba) from what is now eastern Dagomba” (1963:4). He dates the invasion of western Dagbong from the reign of Na Sitobu supposedly occurring in the early sixteenth century (1963:4). In eastern Dagbon the invasion went through Gushiegu, Sunson, Yendi, Zabzugu and south to Bimbilla. At first the invaders killed the earth priests but later in the conquest of eastern Dagomba there was “apparently much less slaughter of earth priests” (Staniland 1975: 6). “Their oral history indicates that some of the ‘sub tribes’ (of Konkombas) were pushed by the invading Dagbamba eastwards from their original territories, which even included the contemporary capital of the Dagbamba: Yendi or Naa Ya” (Skalnik 1985: 7).

Regarding the move to the site of the present paramouncy at Yendi there are two prominent theories. One theory blames the Gonja threat. Levtzion maintains that by 1700 Dagombas moved to Yendi “under pressure of the Gonja” (1971:87) (cf. also Tait and Tamakloe 1931: 23-24, 27). Froelich quoting Tamakloe (1954:33) says, “In order to escape the threat of the Gonjas, Na Luro in 1554-1570 constructed a new capital at Yendi in Konkomba territory, a place called Tchare, and expelled the Konkomba who were there; these founded the town of Wangbun on the route to Demon.” Rattray says that the new Yendi “was formerly a Konkomba settlement called Chare” (Rattray: 1932:564, fn. 1). Levtzion calls it “Tsheli” (1971:87), Froelich “Tchale” (1954:247), (also see Staniland [1975: 5]).

Levtzion cites the Gonja invasions as occurring at the beginning of the 16th century (1971:6), which seems to be accurate. However, Yendi-Dabari (Old Yendi) excavations reveal that “the old Dagomba Capital was abandoned ca. 1700” (Levtzion 1971: 6). Thus if about 200 years intervened before they finally moved, it hardly seems possible that the Gonjas were much of a threat. Considering that Muslim traders from Hausaland had already started to settle in Yendi by 1650 (Levtzion 1971:

87) we have an important clue to another reason for resettlement, the “trade factor.” Staniland (1975: 6) following Phyllis Ferguson (1973), links the move to the east from Yendi-Dabare to present day Yendi, with the shift in trade routes to the east through Hausaland (1973: 3, 87, 89-90) and situates it during the reign of Andani Sigili in the first half of the eighteenth century (1973: 192).

After the move, in 1713 the Gonjas were decisively defeated near Zan by Na Zangina (Levztion 1971: 88,89). Na Zangina had received his early training under Muslims and when he later became the Ya Na Muslims became a permanent fixture of the chief’s court. Levztion links the Gonja defeat with Na Zangina’s conversion to Islam. Dagomba war lords feared the Gonja Muslim clerics and their trans-territorial God, Allah. The introduction of Islamic rites and protective charms by Na Zangina was considered an underlying cause of the Dagomba victory. Two factors here are relevant for our later discussion of the religious factor: Dagomba Islam is relatively new, even among the chiefs, and it was introduced by outsiders--Hausa traders--for whom Islam had provided by means of conversion a refuge from slavery and a means for economic improvement and social mobility. This is unlike the Qadariyya Islam of the Gonja Muslim class which has its roots in the kingdom of Mali. Gonja Islam was a religion of the Nobles. It consisted of a class of professional clerics whose work closely linked them to the chiefly courts. No slaves or commoners were allowed any part of it.

A composite linear picture of key events in the complex historical development of the Mole-Dagbon and Mande (Gonja) states would then be as follows:

- 1430-50 Mamprusi established and “Black Dagombas” (Gurma) invade Eastern Dagbon, while other Mamprusi/Dagomba offshoot-groups invade Western Dagbon.
- 1450 Dagomba consolidation with Na Nyagasi; also of establishment of Mossi and Gurma states.
- 1600 Yendi-Dabari, and Wa established
- 1500 - 1650 Rise of Gonja, Daboya established opposite Yendi-Dabari
- 1700 “Old Yendi” deserted, Yendi established
- 1713 Gonja defeated by Dagombas
- 1744 Dagbon defeated by Ashanti
- 1750-1900 Periodic raiding of acephalous peoples for slaves
- 1874 Ashanti defeated by British (anarchy in the North, slave-raiding increases with Babatu and Samori)
- 1900 Pax Britannica established in the North
- 1932 Indirect rule: new powers for old states

## **KONKOMBA HISTORY**

The earliest we hear of Konkombas is through the accounts of invaders. The first invasions of chiefly peoples into Konkombaland seem to have been the so-called “Black Dagombas,” or “Adites,” Gurma horsemen who possessed iron technology and drove the Konkombas southward and eastward. Froelich got his information from the Gushiego Na in April 1943: “There are two sorts of Komba: the ‘Black Dagomba’

who are descended from Gurma raiders who accompanied earlier Dagomba raiders, and the autochthones whom both these raiding groups met” (1954:33). This occurred at same time as other Dagomba invaders moved southwest of Mamprusi. The western invasions were:

“accompanied by a considerable degree of violence towards the indigenous population. The killing of the Earth priests at the time of Chief Nyagasi’s conquest of western Dagomba is most unusual; in Gonja the Earth priests of the previous inhabitants were retained by the Mande invaders. In Eastern Dagomba the Konkomba were driven from their lands; the same appears to have happened in Eastern Gonja, for the Konkomba and Nanumba are said to have formerly lived in the vicinity of Salaga. In Western Dagomba, however, the Earth priests were said to have been killed and a proportion of the original inhabitants became absorbed in the political system of the conquerors, who still refer to them as *Tin-bihe*, children of the land” (the reference here is to Duncan-Johnstone [1932:7] in Froelich 1954:33).

The Gonjas too encountered the Konkombas as they raided eastward. Staniland (1975: 5) says:

“Having appointed his son chief of Daboya, Jakpa moved south to attack the Dagomba, defeating (and killing ) Na Dariziegu in battle at Yapei. . . Raiding continued, with Konkombas being taken as labourers to grow food for Gonja chiefs” (see also Jones [1962:41-42]; Wilks [1971: 357,362]; Tamakloe [1931: 191ff.]; Fage [1964:180]).

“But by 1543 [cf. also Jack Goody (1954)] the Gonjas fought the Dagombas and invaded up to the lands of the Konkombas who resisted their advances and remained independent. Chief Jakpa of the Gonjas, established his kingdom in Dagomba lands and founded Kpembou [Kpembu]. Then he campaigned against the Konkombas. He attacked the frontiers of the Bassari and raided Bo and Tashi, where the inhabitants had taken refuge in the mountains but lost their herds. The Konkombas were then attacked, and though there was great carnage the tactics of the Gonja were superior to that of the savages who were put to route and made prisoners along with their flocks; then Jakpa returned to Salaga. . . The Konkomba captives were placed in N’Chumuru, Salaga and Nanumba to farm and build the city of the Kpembu chief” (Froelich 1954: 33).

Froelich distinguishes six main divisions of Konkombas: the Komba, Nafeba, Gbimba, Bi Mankpimb, Bi Tchabob and Bi Tchambe (Bassaris). Each of these main groupings is composed of many sub-clans. He says: “The Konkomba constitute a good example of a population in migration, or better, meandering. In the last century they left the bottomland of the Oti and penetrated eastwards into what is now French territory; the Kombas, the old allies of the Chakosi, were established in their present position south of Mango by 1850. The Bi-Tchabob in general by 1875, and those of Takpamba by 1900, the people of Nakpando by 1910 and in the south the Chaltib and the Kpaliba by the mid-twentieth century” (Froelich 1954:18). “For economic reasons (soil infertility) the French Konkombas move south to the territories of the Bi Tchambi (the Bassari) across the rivers Katcha and the Mo. Those of British

Togoland are moving toward Kete-Kratchi.” According to elders of the Bi Mankpimb (Froelich 1954:31), they maintain that they are the true autochthones and that “God created the Konkomba in the areas of British Togoland which they don’t occupy any more.”

Froelich describes the Konkomba clans who inhabited the areas around Yendi before the advent of the Dagomba. He says that the Samboultib of the BiMankpimb clan were originally around Sambou, next to Mion on the Yendi road. They were chased out of Sambou to present Sambuli on the Yendi-Saboba road through Demon (see Froelich 1954:241).

Froelich says that especially in eastern Dagbon there developed a system of mutual aid and dependence between the invaders and the autochthones.

“The Komba are a homogenous group who live at Bogole, or Gushiegu. It was burnt by Na Nyagase who massacred the elders and the earth priests. Since that time our spirits of the earth have not been guarded by the earth priests, who died without sons, but by the old men. Nyagase founded ‘Goushi,’ which became Gushiegu; and the Kombas have become as slaves of Wogou-west. The chief of the Kombas who was conquered by Na Nyagase was called ‘Kogbong’; their descendants are still the chiefs to this day since the Na named Kofogo as the chief of warriors (the Kambong-Na) and his descendants rule even now” (Froelich 1954:246).

Because of the greater interaction between the original autochthones and this first wave of Gurma invaders there occurred a kind of homeostasis which, in turn, influenced their identity as a group. To this day the Kombas of Gushiegu-Karaga district are more friendly toward their chiefs than are the other Konkombas.

Regarding the autochthones of western Dagbon less is known with any certainty. Froelich says that, “It seems that the Chamba are the forefathers of the Kpaliba of the Tamale, Yamalga, Kpalba, Mionkouli and Kpabia (southwest of Yendi). Their dialect of Dagomba is the same as that of the Kpaliba; their original territory is next to that of the Kpari-li (a dialect of Kpaliba) which is between Konkomba and Guan” (Froelich 1954:247).

In both eastern and western Dagbon there seems to have been a great deal of migrating and interacting among groups of Guans, Konkombas and Dagombas. As an example of this, Froelich’s notes on the movements of the “Chamba” clan are revealing:

“The Bi-Chambi in British Togoland are centered around the canton of Yelzori and can be divided into two groups: the autochthones and the invaders; but it is difficult to determine who are the autochthones; they are called ‘Nanumba’ though it is not at all clear whether they are those who we know to be from Bimbila, they have adopted the language, the customs and practices of the Dagomba and no longer speak their old language; they are not the type of Gurma-Konkomba who seem to be attached to the Nanumba of

Bimbila but rather of the ancient Guan stock from whence come the Nawuri” (Froelich 1954:247).

“The Chamba maintain that their ancestors have come from two directions:  
a) From the North East, as a result of the Chakosi raids. The Kombas recognize among other things a common parentage with them, and thus with the Konkombas of Nambiri and Kpaliba whom they drove off and whose women they captured. These Kombas having thus crossed the river, settled in the north in around Tcham and are called the Ba-Kpili and Bassari. Others went by the mountains and reached Yelzori, settled among the Nanumbas toward the southeast of their territory and united with them.

b) From the North East the Kombas followed the Dagombas in their war against the Bassari during the time of Na Abdulai. The Chamba said that the chiefs of Tchens (Natchamba, in French Territory) is allied to the Dagomba royal family and through the maternal line. One rational explanation is that Na Abdoulai gave one of his daughters in marriage to his Komba chief of warriors who would become the chief of the Chamba (Tche-Na), and found Tcheno. . . The Chamba tribe was cut in two by the borders of 1922. . . On the British side the Chamba lived in the region of Yelzori with Nakpali, Gbounkpali and Nagini Yili, Sieni, Kouyoungi, Ngali-Yili, and thus Kworli, with Sangba, Yagi-Yili, Wogalogi and Tchaga-Yili” (Froelich 1954: 251).

Froelich comes to the conclusion that the history of the Konkombas and Dagombas was almost inextricably entwined. The immigrants were of two types, Dagombas and Gurmas, though the real difference is obscure. The former established themselves in the West and the latter in the East (the so-called “Black Dagomba”). The autochthones, of the eastern population were either absorbed by the “Black Dagomba” or pushed south. According to Froelich, the probable order of the migrations is: Gbimba, Bi-Mankpimb, Bi-Tchabob, Komba and finally Nafeba. A second branch of the Komba mixed with the indigenous populations migrated toward the southeast mixing with the Lama-Kabre and this is the origin of the Bi-Tchambe (see Froelich 1954:251). The conquest of western Dagomba was more violent. Then the conquest of eastern Dagbon by the western Dagomba after 1700 also followed the more violent pattern against the Konkombas and Guans, though the descendants of the “Black Dagomba” were absorbed into greater Dagbon. After the Ashanti conquered Yendi in 1744, necessitating organized slave-raiding, Gushiegu and Sunson, originally established by the “Black Dagomba,” became slave-raiding outposts of the kingdom.

## **THE COLONIAL REGIME AND INDIRECT RULE**

Chiefs served as agents of British power in other parts of their empire and so it was in northern Ghana. Skalnik says,

“Nowhere in the Voltaic area was any monarchy formally abolished. The African states were severely controlled in their politics, economy, and ideology, but they did not cease to exist legally. Initially the Europeans attempted to rule the colonies directly and neglected the pre colonial state

systems. Eventually, however, the European administration realized the need for the collaboration with the ruling class, without which there would be no effective administration or viable economy in the Voltaic area” (1983).

The British, therefore, needed the chiefs and supported them. In Ghana, they always sided with the traditional rulers over the acephalous peoples like the Konkombas. There was simply no existing machinery among the Konkomba for British overrule, so it had to be invented.

“The Konkomba are among those ethnic groups classified as segmentary or acephalous, who were without a state and were chiefless. The colonial administration and post-colonial regimes, not only in Ghana, were known for siding with those groups which had chiefs and ‘states’ and centralisation of political office. These groups were, at least to some extent, partners with the Europeans. The ‘anarchic’ tribes such as the Konkomba could not be partners” (Skalnik 1983).

Konkombas were troublesome to the colonial regimes. Froelich says: “In the face of Konkomba hostility the Germans maintained fortified garrisons at Kidjaboun and Oripi. Relations worsened continuously and at the least provocation the Germans pursued the Konkombas, encircled them and exterminated them mercilessly. At one battle around Iboudou the Konkombas lost more than 1,000 warriors” (1954:34). The severity of the problems caused by the unruly clans can be still seen today in the severity of the punishments the Germans meted out to them. Old Konkomba men can still show you their right hands, thumbs severed--a foolproof method for limiting armed resistance with the bow and arrow.

They were constantly feuding among themselves. Froelich mentions:

“the murder of a corporal and two foot soldiers at Yendi in British Togoland, April 1916, and in December 1916 another murder at Wapuli when a telegraph line was cut down. Following a series of inter-clan murders around Kountoul the British officer in charge of Yendi burned Tchagbani and Kountoul. Then, turning against their clan enemies the people of Kountoul burnt Samboul after the English officer had left the place” (1954: 34).

They also fought their Dagomba “rulers” from time to time.

“In 1944 the Benafiab, who live around Wapul, rebelled against continual extortion. One of the Dagomba sub-chiefs of Sunson, the Dzagberi Na, had long extorted from the neighbouring Benafiab. Those Konkomba living near Dzagberi raided the house of the chief and killed him, his elders and his wives” (Tait 1963: 10).

The perpetrators were caught and punished and the Wapul-Saboba road was constructed by Konkomba forced labor. A Police station was then established in Saboba to keep order.

## THE VALIDITY OF CHIEFTAINCY IN THE COLONIAL NORTH

Many of the problems affecting modern day northern Ghana have their roots in these colonial power relations. Due consideration should be given to these historical factors. Tait says that during the colonial era the chiefs continued to rule through the European powers, and in some cases their power was greatly extended, though their claim to power was not a valid one. The Konkombas, though actually better fighters, lacked the organization and the war technology that the British needed in their appointed rulers:

“With the imposition of British rule the power of Dagomba chiefs in eastern Dagbong was strengthened and the claim of the Dagomba to rule the western Konkomba was upheld. It is very doubtful if their claim had much validity. As recently as the 1920’s there was sporadic fighting between Konkomba and Dagomba of adjacent villages. In this sort of fighting the Konkomba could more than hold their own and today, man for man, it is hardly too much to say that the Dagomba fears the Konkomba. But Konkomba had no form of regimental system, no co-operation of segments on a wider than tribal scale and could put nothing into the field comparable to the Dagomba cavalry. Equally, the Dagomba had no administrative system or standing army with which to control those Konkomba whom they neither absorbed nor expelled. The eastern chiefdoms of Zabzugu, Sunson and Demon are, even today, Dagomba outposts in a predominantly Konkomba territory and Sunson village, at least, is still separated from Konkomba settlements by a stretch of empty bush” (Tait 1963: 9).

The Dagombas did not so much rule the Konkomba as they thought of them as a kind of resource pool of slaves.

“Along the Eastern front of the Dagomba advance no precise boundaries were established comparable to that on the west against the Gonja State, but a number of military chiefdoms were created as outposts against the Konkomba and Basare on whom periodic slave and other raids were made” (Tait 1963:10,11).

Skalnik (1985) also points out that “The British allowed the Dagbamba to dominate the Konkomba by implanting Dagbamba chiefs in Konkomba territories.” Konkombas were also appointed as Dagomba sub-chiefs, but as Tait (1963:11) says, they were “of very little importance for the most part, unless they are also elders.” Tait concludes that “The riverain Konkomba, at least, and probably all the Konkomba except those in the chiefdom of Gushiego, never admitted Dagomba rule” (1963:10).

It seems, then, that the chiefly peoples, exercised very little control traditionally over the Konkomba. Dagomba/Nanumba/Gonja suzerainty over the Konkomba was not traditional but part of a plan put in place by the British to control the Northern Territories. Staniland says, “the Dagomba pushed back the Konkomba and established divisional chiefs among them” (1975:4). However, “despite this assertion of suzerainty, the Dagomba kingdom seems never to have exercised close control over the Konkomba: administration took the form of slave raiding and punitive

expeditions. The Konkomba were by no means assimilated. Relations between them and the Dagomba were distant and hostile: there was little, if any, mixing by marriage” (Staniland 1975:4).

Today, after almost two generations of independence, the centralized political controls, established by the British and maintained by the Chiefly groups, are beginning to collapse. The Konkomba-Nanumba conflict, the Vagla-Gonja conflict, the Kusasi-Mamprusi conflict, the Nawuri-Gonja conflict and now the massive Konkomba/ Komba/ Bassari/ Nawuri/ Nchumuru vs. Dagomba/ Nanumba/ Gonja conflict are all strong indications of a major shift in the balance of power. The alliance of such traditional enemies as the Gonjas and Dagombas and the firm rejection of a call to arms by the other two traditional ruling groups of the North (the Walas and Mamprusis) is an indication of how major this shift is. The Walas are a minuscule island state in an ocean of acephalous peoples. The dwindling numbers of Mamprusi would be immediately beset by clamoring Tallensi, Grunsi, Nabdum, Kassena, Komba and B’Moba. Risking the anger of their brothers from Dagbon, they’ve chosen to remain quiet for the moment.

## SHRINE CUSTODIANS AND LANDOWNERS

The claim of the Dagombas and Gonjas that they are the “landowners,” or that “the land is for them” is sometimes translated by the word “*naam*,” or chieftaincy, and sometimes by “*tindana*” (ritual landowner). In the past, neither of these terms ever meant “ownership” in the Western idea of private property--though this is precisely the way it is being presented and interpreted via the media today. On the contrary, the concept of *naam* hinged on political power exercised by the use of force--usually through a superior military organization and technology including the all-important use of cavalry (see Skalnik 1989 and Goody 1971).

The office of *tindana* or ritual landowner (custodian of the earth shrine), which was the highest office held by the autochthones, the original acephalous inhabitants of Northern Ghana, exercised only a religious primacy. Their authority ultimately rested in the ancestors themselves. The *tindana* were, and still are, the intermediaries between the veil of the seen and unseen worlds. Cardinall sees great significance in the ubiquitous spread of this religious “landowner.” “But apart from this divergence of dialects, there is one great similarity in all these tribes. And this is the institution of the *tindana* (Moshi, Mamprussi, Dagomba, etc.), *tigatu* (Kassena), *tengyonya* (Builisa), *tensoba* (Moshi)” (Cardinall 1920: 15-16). He sees a “primacy” in the office of *tindana* as relating to farming matters and day-to-day living on the land. This primacy extended even to the Ya Na himself.

“At Yendi, for example, the Na of the Dagomba preserves to this day the cap, gown, and necklace which were the insignia of the principal *tindana*, whom his forefathers slew. But the Na has never dared to arrogate to himself the duties of the *tindana*. In fact, he humbles himself before him and appears disguised as a poor man when occasion arises for him to visit the *tindana*. For the latter not only owns the land, but by reason of his ownership is the only one who knows or is known to the spirit of the land. And it is worship of the earth-

gods that is common throughout the country. It is said that there is no place without a *tindana*, and to this day when people move into uninhabited country, owing, perhaps, to the poverty of soil in their own, they obtain the land from the *tindana* who is nearest to the site of the new settlement” (Cardinall 1920:19).

He goes on to say:

“The distinction, therefore, is an important one between a *tindana* and a *naba*. The former cares for the religious observance of the people, the latter was in process of developing into a political head, when the advent of the white man interfered with and accelerated the slow process of evolution” (Cardinall 1920: 21).

There was an attempt to combine the offices in western Dagbon. Here the office of ritual headship was assumed by the invaders who slew the original *tindana* and usurped their functions. “These traditions (drum histories) agree in that the first arrivals of these chief-families seized and slew the *tindana* of the land and thus came to them their over lordship” (Cardinall 1920:16). However, all over Gonja, and in eastern Dagbon and Nanumba these ritual heads along with their people were assimilated into the state system at the level of “Commoner” status. Here the two roles remain distinct, though there was, until very recently, a certain priority given to the ritual landowner when it comes to allotting land to farmers.

Although chiefly peoples claim the land is “for them,” even those of western Dagbon who combined both offices under chiefship, have not been “landlords” in the Western or even feudal meaning of the word. Goody informs us about West African landlords: “Although there were no landlords, there were of course lords of the land--the local chiefs of centralized states, who, from the standpoint of food production, were in a sense carried by the rest of the population” (1971:31). “Politically, chiefship tended to be over people rather than over land; these a leader had to try to attract as well as restrain” (Goody 1971:30). “In African labour requirements led to slavery but not serfdom; trading towns like Kano and Bida in Northern Nigeria, or Salaga and Bole in northern Ghana, were surrounded by villages of slaves which supplied the ruling and commercial groups” (Goody 1971:30 fn. 20). Here again, we must stress that until very recently land was not viewed as an economic entity. As Skalnik maintains, “wealth served non-economic goals almost exclusively. It was a source of prestige and a means for paying and feeding an army. Nor was land considered as an economic interest; the jurisdiction of any ruler over his territory did not imply ownership of land. His authority was viewed only in terms of political (i.e., organizational), moral, and ideological authority” (Skalnik 1983).

The historical record also testifies that chiefs traditionally did not allocate land in the North. Staniland quotes H.A. Blair, “the most knowledgeable of British D.C.s in Dagomba,” on this question as saying: “Right of control is vested in the Ya-Na, for the decision of boundary dispute between Chiefs, but not for the apportionment of land outside Yendi sub-division. Similarly sub-divisional Chiefs have no right to apportion land to persons except within their own towns. . . The Chief does not grant farming land to individuals. He is considered not to have any right over farms. . .

*Tindamba* still have power over Chiefs and are feared” (quoting from Assistant D.C., Dagomba, to D.C., Dagomba, 13 Aug. 1936 [N.A.G.T., ADM 2/15]. Staniland 1975:16).

Nowadays these concepts are changing. The primacy of the *tindana* in distribution of land to farmers only applies far in the bush, away from district and regional centres where the chief claims this right. In the towns and cities where land is sought for building, commerce or industry, it is the regional governmental bureaucracies that count. The key to understanding this transition is the conceptual shift from land as the patrimony of the ancestors, to land as “people” (who could be coerced), to land as a scarce economic resource. Coercive power is now being exercised not with the cavalry of nobles but through governmental bureaucracies over which chiefs a disproportionately strong influence.

### **HORSES, CHIEFS, SLAVES AND LAND**

Land was not a scarce resource in pre-colonial Northern Ghana. Goody says “under such conditions neither individuals nor kin groups bother to lay specific claims to large tracts of territory, since land is virtually a free good” (Goody 1971:29), and “. . . ties of subordination rose not out of shortage of land but as the result of purchase or conquest, thus giving rise to slavery rather than to serfdom” (1971:31). “The pay-off was in human booty, captives to be sold as slaves. Booty was indeed part of the productive system of the ruling class. A measure of this close interdependence of cavalry and raiding is the situation that obtains today in the eastern Gonja capital of Kpembe, the twin city of Salaga. A cavalry headquarters at the end of the last century, it now boasts of only one horse; yet on the wall of every entrance-hut hangs the dusty and disintegrating harness that tells of former glories” (36) (see also Braimah and Goody 1967). It is noteworthy that Kpembe was one of the first Gonja villages to be destroyed by the Konkomba in this conflict.

It is no wonder that the Konkomba homeland is the Oti plain which is noted for its flooding each year. “Because such acephalous peoples (as Grunshi, Konkomba, LoDagaa and Talensi) were regarded as pools of manpower and could do little to resist the incursions of their centralized neighbours, they tended to occupy land which was difficult of access, especially to horses” Goody (1971:57). Some “straddled across a major river, like the LoDagaa and the Konkomba” (Goody 1971:57).

Thus horses, chiefs and slaves went together as the primary components of coercive power in the Western Sudan. Goods and services had to be produced to pay for imports of horses in the Voltaic states. “The horses were then used to capture more slaves to pay for more horses; this human booty was the men of the Earth” (Goody 1971:72). The Chiefly peoples, the Dagombas and Gonjas, owned and strictly controlled this “means of destruction.”

Of course this was not a closed circle. For the 170 years between 1744 and 1874 the majority of the slaves went south to Kumasi, and from there to the coastal forts for trans-shipment to the Western hemisphere. Rattray maintains that the Ashanti demanded 2,000 slaves annually (Rattray: 1932:564). Cardinal reinforces this: “The

tax I was told, amounted to the annual payment of 2,000 slaves. Though J. Dupuis, the British Consul at Kumasi in 1821, records more modest figures in his *Journal of a Residence in Ahsantee* that ‘the Dagomba capital Yendi, and other large towns of the country, pay as an annual tribute five hundreds slaves, two hundred cows, four hundred sheep and cloths, and that smaller towns are taxed in proportion’“ (quoted in Cardinall 1920:9).

### **CHIEFLY EXTORTION AND COURTS OF OPPRESSION**

One of the strongest complaints voiced by Konkombas and other acephalous peoples today against the chiefly peoples is the excessive extortion. This too has its roots in history. In the 19th C. periodic raiding and the extraction of tribute and revenues was very important for maintaining chieftaincy. Although colonial rule put an end to the raiding, there evolved a system of paying heavily for the office of chieftaincy, then using the office to collect tribute of various sorts and to extort the peasantry especially through the traditional court system. Tait describes the adaptation as follows:

“Relations between the two peoples have long been hostile and remain so today. Dagomba ‘rule’ was limited to sporadic raids to obtain the slaves needed for the annual tribute to Ashanti. Today, sporadic raiding continues in a different form. From time to time collectors are sent into Konkomba territory to collect corn which is sold in the markets to raise money. When the YaNa was fined in the District Commissioner’s court in 1950, no fewer than two lorry loads of sorghum were collected in the Saboba region alone on the grounds that, ‘The European says it has got to be paid’. In the same year some Konkomba were stopped by Dagomba on their way into Yendi market and their headloads of new yams taken, on the ground that they had paid no tribute to the YaNa. In Dagomba the tribute of New Yams is only a ritual payment made by a certain chief who lives not far from Yendi. There appear to be no grounds for supposing that there was ever any traditional payment to the YaNa devolving on all who inhabit Dagbong or enter the Yendi market. Of these particular yams one headload went to the District Commissioner’s interpreter, one to the sergeant of police in Yendi, and the rest to the YaNa’s household. The total value was about 18 pounds sterling. It is rare for a Konkomba to appeal to the District Commissioner though instances of this sort of extortion are frequent” (1963: 9).

Citing the case of Nanumbaland today Skalnik points out that there has been little change in the patterns of extortion from Tait’s time to the present.

“The Konkomba leaders accepted the conditions of the Nanumba chiefs of paying allegiance to the latter. They were expected to supply annual labour for the chief’s farms, they had to bring their cases to the chief’s judicial courts and they were obliged to bring a hind leg from the first animal slaughtered at funerals or killed in hunts” (1985).

With the colonial peace the competition for political control did not decrease but was exercised more covertly through intrigue and payments which soon became a

profitable source of revenue. In this regard Skalnik says, “But probably the most important source of revenue for the ruler and influential chiefs and ministers was the corrupt practice in political competition, for the office had to be both won and bought” (1983). Konkomba, Vagla, Nawuri, and Anufo subchiefs must even now pay dearly for their offices. This in turn necessitates a system of heavy fines and tributes passed down, ultimately, to the farmers, who are the Konkombas and the other acephalous peoples.

Besides tribute in the form of livestock and produce from farms, the royal lineages exacted fees for judicial proceedings. According to Skalnik, this directly follows a system already established in the 19th C.

“The capitals in this period were surrounded by villages of captives, foreigners, and dependents of commoners. It was not rare for commoners to seek aid at the royal court when confronted by the misrule of chiefs and the raids of young nobility (raids continued until the end of the nineteenth century)” (Skalnik 1983).

In recent times these chiefs’ courts have become particularly onerous to Konkombas because of changes in values and attitudes concerning marriage. Konkomba marriage has been intergenerational. This means, a young man is betrothed to an infant girl and works for the girl’s family until she grows up. By the time she is grown he is close to forty and in contemporary open society the girl usually prefers her young lover and often chooses to run away with him. This leads to extensive arbitration and social turmoil as the husband’s family, having worked for years, has been jilted, the family of the girl is indebted to the husband’s family, the lover’s family is usually unable to pay compensation, and the eloped couple ends up ostracized from the community. “In Nanun the monopoly of arbitration is in the hands of the Bimbilla Naa, his elders and other chiefs” (Skalnik 1983:20). These traditional courtiers have found it extremely profitable to prey on this type of situation.

“The authorities in both instances (chiefs and governmental magistrates) were not really familiar with the intricacies of Konkomba marriage custom but they knew very well that the Konkomba are ready to give anything for the solution of their disputes. This was used to the arbitrators’ advantage as they usually demanded some material remuneration (in money or kind) from *both* sides in the dispute. According to some informants a large source of income for the court of the Bimbilla Naa came in those years from such ‘arbitration’s’. Similarly the lay magistrate often without really solving the dispute to any side’s satisfaction, took bribes from all. One of the magistrates became infamous when he married the Konkomba girl who was the subject of a dispute between two Konkomba men, leaving both of them empty-handed” (Skalnik 1983:20).

## **KONKOMBA EMANCIPATION MOVEMENT**

In addition to the extortion and tribute the Konkombas were subjected to demeaning forms of ethnic discrimination. Skalnik points to the ethnic suppression of the

Konkombas as one of the factors leading to the 1981 uprising: Their position “within the fabric of all ethnic groupings in the district was evidently the lowest”, few attended schools, they worked hard but experienced no change in their standard of living, “they were viewed as savages, uncivilized ‘bush people’ and despised. . . The Nanumba certainly did not fear the Konkomba, they rather looked upon them with condescension” (Skalnik 1983: 19).

In the 1970s a small group of modern Konkomba educated elite consisting of successful businessmen and teachers emerged to form the Konkomba Youth Association (KOYA). Aside from serving as a general impetus toward modernization and self-improvement among the Konkombas, according to Skalnik, they also initiated reforms in the system of chieftaincy in Nanumbaland which eventually led in 1981 to the Konkomba-Nanumba conflict. According to Skalnik, KOYA pointed out the exploitation involved in the judicial treatment of marital disputes and proposed two measures (1) to reform traditional marriage customs and abolish child-betrothal, (2) to establish their own arbitration of marriage disputes which would be based on Konkomba customary law and to reduce the number of cases coming before public scrutiny which they were regarded as shameful (see Skalnik: 1983:20).

That popular Konkomba activism should arise in Nanumba rather than elsewhere is due to its special demographic circumstances. Skalnik points out, “In Nanun, the Konkomba were in a very special situation because they were obliged to obey Nanumba customs and regulations while they were actually a clear majority in the district” (1983). By the late 1970’s the machinery for Konkomba arbitration in Nanumbaland was established under chairmanship of Ali, the Konkomba headman chosen by them to handle disputes without Nanumba authorization. The Bimbilla Naa demanded it be stopped. By 1980 the district chairman of PNP under the direction of the Bimbilla Naa forcefully evicted Ali. As a result Konkombas boycotted customary Nanumba courts, refused to pay tribute, and refused to trade with the Nanumba yam buyers who acted as middlemen in the extremely lucrative yam business. Then all that was needed was a small spark to ignite a full-scale tribal war.

Today KOYA leaders are far more organized and powerful than is assumed by either the government or the chiefs. Despite their often simple dress and straightforward talk, they speak directly for more than a million of their own people, and indirectly for the other acephalous peoples who stand to gain if the Konkomba eventually win their rights to their own chieftaincy and farming lands. Directly or indirectly their supporters would probably be 60% of the northern population. Yet they have little say in the national government and no say in the “house of chiefs”. For them the war is a way to be heard--perhaps the only way. Quick, decisive mediatory action by the government would probably have been accepted by KOYA. But, probably due to a miscalculation of the Konkomba strength and tenacity, this did not happen. Now that the government has lost its credibility among them, only a highly respected and impartial third party can bring the two factions together. In this regard, in May 1994, at the request of the government, the Asante-hene who, besides being the sovereign chief of the most numerous and politically powerful group in Ghana, is a lawyer of considerable legal talent, invited both parties to sit down to try to arrive at a solid

basis for negotiating. The chiefly groups, however, categorically refused to sit down or negotiate with the Konkombas.

## **THE RELIGIOUS FACTOR**

Increasingly the political elements of the conflict are being given religious labels. A plethora of recent newspaper articles name the Gonjas and Dagomba/Nanumbas “Muslims” and the Konkombas as “Christians.” The pastor of the Presbyterian church in Salaga was murdered by Gonjas at the outbreak of the war. As an Nchumuru, the Gonjas saw him as an enemy, not a pastor. The Catholic church and mission compound at Yendi was burnt and looted. Virtually every church building and organization in Tamale was searched and its pastors threatened by mobs led by prominent members of the Dagomba Muslim community. In the first four weeks of hostilities, as roving bands of “station boys” murdered, burnt and looted their way through the streets of Tamale unhindered, a common outcry was that “the churches are supplying arms to the Konkombas!” Many church personnel took the implied threats seriously and left the city. Others stayed on fearing for their lives until some measure of calm was restored.

In the wake of this outburst of hostility directed against church organizations and personnel including other chiefly peoples who happened to have been Christians, divisions widened between Christians and Muslims whatever their ethnic origins. Without doubt some within the chiefly groups’ leadership foster such divisions, using religion as a political tool. The widespread promotion of rumors indicates that those disseminating them are well-organized and understand the importance of propaganda. During the tense early days of the conflict such rumours were enough to convince even the most discerning Dagombas and Gonjas. As their leaders denounced the churches, the rural folk found the rumours plausible and believed them in the heat of the moment despite the evidence of the many church-sponsored development projects among them.

Like other factors, the religious one cannot be understood outside of its historical and ethnographic context. Firstly it is important to know the actual numbers and percentages of Muslims and Christians concerned. According to the 1960 Census Muslims are 12 % of the population. By the late 1960’s Trimmingham claims it is 18% (1968:43), and Barker estimates that in 1984 it is 17 % (1986:59). Estimates (based on Barker’s 1984 percentages) for the Muslim population of the four groups concerned in the conflict are now as follows:

### **Gonja:**

Traditional: 50%

Muslim: 44% (88,000)

Christian: 3%

### **Dagomba:**

Traditional: 42+%  
 Muslim: 50+% (325,000+)  
 Christian: 1+%

#### Nanumba:

Traditional: 85%  
 Muslim: 5% (8,000)  
 Christian: 2%

#### Konkomba:

Traditional: 92%  
 Muslim: 0  
 Christian: 6 %

While both the Gonjas and Dagombas have strong Muslim elements, they also are strongly Traditionalist. The difference is that the nobles are mainly Muslim while the “commoners” of both groups are Traditionalists. The Nanumbas are almost all Traditionalists. Levtzion maintains that one of the possible reasons for the non-conversion of the Nanumba to Islam is “the constant contact with such pagan peoples as the Konkomba, the Krachis, and the Gonja *Nyamasi* (commoners)” (1971:123). The other two chiefly groups with high concentrations of Muslims are the Mamprusi 14+% with a 1984 population of 105,500 and the Walas at 50+% with a 1984 population of 83,094. The Muslim populations of the other northern groups are negligible.

The percentage of Muslims in Ghana would have grown throughout the 1960’s as indicated by Trimingham (1968:43). Then, in the 1970’s as many as 2/3 of Ghana’s Muslims left due to the ‘Aliens Compliance Order’ (see Dretke below). But by 1984 Barker puts it at 17%. Due to the indigenization of Islam 1970’s losses would have been equalized. Today more and more of the chiefly peoples are becoming openly Muslim, but even so, the North is far from being Muslim. According to Barker a decade ago, “. . . the proportion of Muslims in the Northern and Upper Regions was not much above the national average” (1986:59). Today, it would have grown but not significantly. Using Barker’s percentages for the most strongly Islamized tribes of the North in 1984 applied to the 1994 figures we have: 50+ per cent of Dagombas (325,000), 5 per cent of the Nanumbas (8,000), 44 per cent of Gonjas (88,000), 14 per cent of Mamprusis (15,000), and 50 per cent of the Walas (41,000). These plus the few Muslim converts from among the acephalous groups would make the total number of Muslims among Ghana’s indigenous Northern population of slightly less than 500,000, or about 3 per cent of the population. But even if all the chiefly peoples were Muslim their total numbers in 1994 would only be 1,150,000 or about 7.5 % of Ghana’s population, which is less than half the estimated Muslim percentage for the country.

What makes the Muslim population seem greater is partly that this select group is the most politically powerful group in the North and partly that most Southerners in Ghana believe that all Northerners are Muslims. One of the most important reasons for this wrong impression is that the Zongos of southern cities, where Northerners are

normally obliged to live when they are in the south, are, in fact strongly Muslim. A six-week fact-finding survey of Muslim populations in Ghana by Dretke found that “the largest concentration of Muslims in Ghana is in Accra, followed very closely by the Muslim community in Kumasi. Tamale, and some smaller cities like Wa and Yendi, have sizable Muslim communities, but the heavy Muslim populations are in the largest southern cities, including also Cape Coast and Sekondi-Takoradi”(1970, 1979).

We should keep in mind that when we speak of Islam among these chiefly groups we are not speaking of a very orthodox Muslim system of beliefs and action. Staniland says, “The significance of Na Zangina’s conversion (1714) was that it entailed the attachment of Muslim officials (*limamnema*) to the court at Yendi and to the courts of lesser chiefs” (Staniland 1975:6). Having mixed with the autochthones they were influenced by their religious beliefs. “Animism and the cult of ancestors thus permeated Dagomba culture, but they were partially complemented or supplanted by Islam” (Staniland 1975:16). The 1960 Census indicated that 42 per cent of Dagombas were animists and 53 per cent were Muslims, (with only .05 percent Christian). However Staniland makes it clear “that Islam still is strongest in the towns and at the courts of the king and his chiefs; it has not penetrated village culture to the same extent, and even within the ruling class the two forms co-exist and blend” (Staniland 1975:16).

Over the last decade this “blended co-existence” has been increasingly more difficult to maintain. In the 1980’s educated nobles were given a kind of tacit ultimatum to become openly Muslim and stop straddling the fence--being Christian to Christians and Muslim to Muslims. Today it is virtually impossible for a Dagomba or Gonja to succeed in business or politics unless he is openly Muslim--though this is less true of the smaller chiefly groups like the Nanumba or Mamprusi. Incidents like the Fire-festival rioting in 1991, when Muslim youth rampaged through Tamale destroying Christian beer bars and “lotto” stalls (though it should be noted that the mobs tactfully spared Dagomba and Asante establishments), and the frequent rumours that Muslims will attack Christians on their holy days are also making it increasingly difficult for non-Muslims to live normal lives in the predominantly Muslim centre of Tamale. These signs indicate that major changes in Muslim-Christian relations are coming. They are the result of a coincidence of two factors: the new wealth, power, and prestige of Islamic states, and the indigenization of Islam in Ghana.

## **NEW ISLAMIC PRESTIGE AND POWER**

Fundamentalist Islamic countries, through their Muslim missionaries to Ghana, have committed no small amount of their resources and money to the establishment of an Islamic culture in northern Ghana. Because of this, Peter Barker issues a stern warning to Christians (especially evangelical Protestants) not to take “the rising tide of Islam” lightly:

“Tamale in particular is becoming an important Muslim centre. Saudi Arabia and the gulf states are channeling oil wealth into promoting Islam in Africa, and in recent years a series of new Muslim institutions has appeared on the

scene. In Tamale alone there are over a dozen Muslim missionaries at the present time” (1986: 60).

He goes on to count the promotional endeavours: “Five Sunni Scholarships yearly for Arab countries.” “Nuriya Arabic/English Central School . . . Tamale has Egyptian missionaries.” “The Wahhabis, sponsored by the Saudi-Arabian government, give scholarships. . . Their school, the Anbariya English/Arabic School and Islamic Centre is the largest educational campus in northern Ghana. It has 1,500 students, impressive buildings, and ample transport including a tractor.” “Others include the Imamia Mission of the Shi’ites. The Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission has four or five Pakistani missionaries in Tamale. They are now establishing elementary and secondary schools in the north” (Barker 1986:60). If we are to read the signs as Barker does, a wave of Islamic militancy is sweeping Ghana. It is funded by oil, instructed by fundamentalists from prestigious Arab and Asian countries, and the flames are fanned by old ethnic rivalries.

Unlike the old Islam, the new varieties introduced by the Muslim missions are all extremely anti-Christian and militantly pro-Islamic. Much of the rhetoric, the preaching and the literature are solely aimed at discrediting Christianity. Its exclusivist influence has been felt in mass demonstrations against Christian establishments in Tamale and it exercises its militancy there in every aspect of the Northern administration. The most recent example is the disproportionately high number of Muslims on the staff of the new Northern University in Tamale. As in Nigeria, the stakes are high, and once the North has a paper majority, Islam will have unprecedented political leverage.

## INDIGENIZATION OF ISLAM

Aside from external influences, there are also important home-grown factors that should be considered in the upsurge of Islam. The most important of these is the current indigenization of Islam. Now Dagombas and Gonjas are starting to see Islam as part of their tribal identity. Among the Gonja, and to a lesser extent the Dagomba noble classes of chiefs’ children (though not among commoners or slaves), Islam has long been a possible option, involving not so much a formal conversion as a decision to live more in accord with Islamic belief and practice. However, in pre-colonial times most chiefs preferred not to be limited by such constraints.

During colonial rule the notion of “conversion” even became rather distasteful to these nobles, when large numbers of freed slaves found new identities in Islam. The Hausa Muslim communities welcomed them as “*tubafo*” (converts Ar. *tauba* meaning repentance). Dagomba and Gonja nobles, however, came to see such groups as political and economic threats, and thus sought ways to strengthen their own brand of Islam. Dretke (1970) sees the “Aliens Compliance Order” as the strongest factor in bringing about this native Ghanaian Islam. As a result of the order he says “two-thirds of the Muslims in Ghana left.” This leads him to predict that, “the leadership of each Muslim community will be noticeably different as Dagomba, Gonja, and Wala imams replace Hausas, Yorubas and Wangaras. This means also that the influence of Hausaland upon Islam in Ghana will considerably diminish. In short, there will be

many new efforts to indigenize Islam to Ghana.” This is exactly what has been happening over the past decade.

The strong ethnocentrism of the chiefly groups is a key factor in the indigenization process. Their traditions are greatly valued, chieftaincy is prized, their drum-histories give them a feeling of civilization-depth far beyond their neighbouring groups. Their elaborate forms of etiquette, the pomp and ceremony associated with chieftaincy, their heritage of law and jurisprudence, their skills at war and organizing their captives, their rich material culture, art, weaving, even literature were all influenced by centuries of contact with Islamic culture. Dagombas called the Germans, who conquered them at Adibo “red monkeys” and, though later they were more submissive, their estimate of the British was not much higher. It is no wonder that they spurned attempts by the colonial administration to educate them--sending their slaves to be educated in their place. This history is very recent. The first educated Gonja and Dagomba nobles are living and active in governmental positions. Christian missionaries, and today’s African Christian churches, still represent the infringement of an alien culture. The fact that the tribes they formerly enslaved have readily joined the ranks of Christians is to many of them simply a proof of the inferiority of this culture.

It should now be clear why the chiefly groups are considered “Muslim” and why this is nowadays opposed to Christianity. But the reasons for considering the Konkombas “Christian” with less than 6% of their population practicing that religion, is not so apparent. In answer to this, two areas are worthy of closer inspection: (1) the emancipation of the acephalous peoples through Christian schooling, (2) the possibility of greater Christian sympathy for oppressed peoples.

The Churches, have been particularly active in developing the North--through schools, clinics, water projects, agricultural projects and literacy. Although these services have been offered equally to all groups, the “backward” and isolated acephalous groups like Konkombas have benefited more (i.e. have come further than other groups because they were more underdeveloped than them). Education and literacy, in particular, have been the main factors in their political and economic emancipation. In addition to this, those Konkombas who have the highest political visibility, such as the members of KOYA, businessmen, teachers, etc. also tend to be Christians--just as those with the highest visibility among the chiefly groups tend to be Muslims.

The acceptance early on of modern education by acephalous peoples has borne fruit in the disproportionately high leadership rate among such strongly Christianized northern acephalous groups as the Dagartis, the Kassenas and the Fra-fras. As the churches grew in the North, it was from among the acephalous peoples that they recruited their native leadership. In the Roman Catholic Church, even now there are no Gonja and only two Dagomba priests, for example.

There has also been a tendency on the part of pastors, medical workers and Christian educators to be more sympathetic toward the poorer and more politically oppressed acephalous groups. The Catholic Church in Ghana, for example, has taken as its express purpose to make a fundamental option for the poor, and to the task of promoting peace and justice here. This fundamental option has been reinforced by

donors abroad wishing to help those most in need. Such choices are always difficult and often quite vulnerable. But, in any case, many of the choices were already made for the churches by unilateral aid and other government-sponsored projects which passed their resources and services through official government channels which are controlled by the chiefly groups at the local levels. This aid in monetary terms vastly outweighs anything the churches could give. Ironically, by accusing the churches of helping the Konkombas, the chiefly groups are inadvertently acknowledging their role in the suppression of these groups.

To sum up, the reasons for the hostility expressed by Dagombas and Gonjas against the Christian Churches are more politically, economically and culturally based than religious. However, new alliances with Islamic states are blurring the boundaries between economics, religion and politics. Christian Churches do not side with the acephalous groups, but due to the suppression by chiefly groups, they often tend to be sympathetic towards their needs and through education the churches have helped emancipate them.

### **THE MODERN POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE NORTH**

Political changes alone cannot explain what is occurring now in Northern Ghana, nor can they clarify why it is happening now, as opposed to 35 years ago at Independence. Goody accounts for this change: “The economic rights of the African rulers over land meant less than those of their European counterparts. When their military power was destroyed by the European conquests of the latter part of the nineteenth century, they had little to fall back upon except ritual status, ethnic loyalty and collaboration with the new dispensation” (Goody 1971:73). “The extension of cash crops and market production, which the penetration of European commercial and political activity brought with it, combined with the introduction of technical advances, increased the value and scarcity of land” (Goody 1971:73). “The chief himself was rich not in land, but in goods and services, which were not all for his own benefit” (Goody 1971:74). Colonialism meant the continuation of services without incoming goods. In Asante, “The chief turned to private accumulation through trade or farming, leading to the necessity of drawing a more radical distinction between private and state property; formerly the chief’s property had been state property” (Busia 1951:204).

In the 1930s, the test of the chief’s new authority, in Ashanti, focused on political rights in land held by the chief versus the economic rights of entrepreneurs wishing to grow cocoa. Cocoa represented a new type of farming which demanded ownership of the land as well as of the crop. The interests of free Asante cocoa entrepreneurs eventually won out insuring a quick and painless transition to private ownership.

In the North, due to “indirect rule” and a governmental policy aimed at producing cheap labour for the South, followed, after Independence, by a series of governments which kept the colonial equation firmly in place, this evolutionary pattern is only now surfacing. It is also extremely significant that in the South the colonial regime and subsequent Ghanaian governments were always strongly suspicious of chiefly power, especially in Asante, whereas in the North chiefs have always been supported.

It is against this political and historical backdrop, focusing ever more keenly on land, that the new lines of power are beginning to materialize. Skalnik (1983) says of the Nanumba, “The traditional ruling classes are trying to continue playing a decisive role in the modernization process, as party politicians and owners (i.e., as members of a ruling exploiting class)”. The political fulcrum for the new mode of exploitation, came as a trade-off for votes. Acheampong needed a block of votes to push through his UNIGOV. Just like Nkrumah before him, he went to northern chiefs for help. The trade-off was land. The North was to provide the voting power in exchange for vesting ownership of the northern lands in the chiefs.

In a letter from the representatives of the Konkombas of Northern Ghana, (Ubor Bejilah II signing for the Saboba chief) addressed to the Asante-hene, the authors single out this transaction as the root of the present turmoil. It stated that in 1976 Northern chiefs joined forces with the UNIGOV concept headed by Gen. Acheampong. As a result of the move it was agreed to vest the Northern lands in the skins if the entire North was swayed to vote massively for UNIGOV.

Following this the Issifu Alhassan Committee was formed, among other things, to receive the representations from the various ethnic groups from the Northern Region as to their claims to lands. The claims of Konkombas and of other acephalous groups were blocked, Konkomba leaders maintain, by the two most influential figures on the committee, R.I. Alhassan and Ibrahim Abdulai, who are Dagombas:

“We and our allied clan the Bassares and the Nawuris made a representation laying claims to our ancestral lands but this automatically was dismissed for no apparent reasons. Nana, we are not surprised because most of the members of this Committee were from the areas in which our suppressers come from. Nana, reading between lines we knew that their aim was to use the Acheampong Government to abolish our claim to our ancestral lands for the first time in history. The lands in the Northern Region were therefore vested in the skins by the 1979 Constitution for the first time. . . we think that it would be the most serious mistake to use the Constitution as a ploy to deprive us of our possessions. For several centuries we have never paid for any piece of land for any economic activity and we do not hope to pay for it in the near future for this area of the former British mandated Togoland.”

The law was passed on January 14, 1978 before most realized its importance. It did not take long before it was tested in the Konkomba-Nanumba conflict. But Skalnik says that it was the Limann regime that really began to implement the new law. “The Third Republic of Limann for the first time in the modern history of Ghana recognized that land tenure is vested in the ethnic groups and their authorities which happen to be historically dominant in any particular area”(1983). Thus political domination by the chiefly groups in the North had subtly come to mean land ownership. This radical new step probably seemed quite mild and acceptable to the majority of Southerners.

The fact that it got ratified in the Ghanaian Constitutions without a hitch could mean that it was ‘railroaded’, as is suggested above, but it is more probable that Southerners simply misunderstood the issues. Most Southerners still think of the North in colonial

terms, i.e. the government rules through the chiefs. This law only seems to make government land the land of the chiefly peoples which sounds quite acceptable to Southerners because, in their experience, chiefs represent the people. To some this might even have seemed a step forward in dismantling the old colonial structures. They certainly didn't realize that wars would be caused by it. Skalnik says in this regard:

“Previous modern legislation's [before Limann's government] did not recognize the ultimate rights over land where no private land ownership existed (which was the case of the whole Ghanaian North). The colonial and post-colonial state held that the land is under the custody of the state which gave the state unchecked powers to undertake any public projects without consulting the people living on the land where the project was to be undertaken. I suspect that the Nanumba-Konkomba conflict may have been stimulated by this constitutional recognition of 'traditional' land rights” (1983:23).

The case of the Konkombas and other acephalous peoples is made easier if rights in the land will be judged to stem mainly from use (as also happened in the South) rather than political controls. But then the case for Chiefly peoples is lessened. E. Goody says of the Gonja that they do not take part in the annual dry season migrations to the yam growing areas to hire their services as do the Konkomba and other acephalous farming peoples. What she says of the Gonja can be equally applied to the Dagomba and Nanumba.

“This is at least in part due to the negative view of farming which is shared by the ruling and Muslim elements, and which seems to have also influenced the commoner peoples to some extent. This attitude seems responsible for the failure of the Gonja farmers to take up the opportunity offered by the growing market for foodstuffs in the south. Instead it is largely the immigrant LoDagaa and Konkomba peoples who supply the lorry-loads of yams which head for Kumasi and the coast. . .” (E. Goody 1973:23).

In the 25 years since her research, Konkombas have become the yam-growers for all of Ghana.

The task of the Konkombas will be made easier still if alliances with other acephalous farmers and the southern entrepreneurs are pursued. In the North today it is not the cocoa producers, but the yam-growers who are the new entrepreneurial class. Ownership is not a result of natural factors, as it is with cocoa production, but of purely economic factors, such as the scarcity of the land coupled with such yam-industry sophistication as “yam futures” whereby Konkomba farmers are given advances for next years' yam crop (which presumes stability of land-tenure) by Asante middlemen (and women) entrepreneurs.

The northern aristocracy, already in the 1970's, had made an abortive bid to become the new northern agricultural entrepreneurs through the introduction of large-scale mechanized farming of field rice. Analysts (e.g. Shepherd 1978a) had no trouble pointing out such standard causes of failure as rampant inflation, poor management

and logistics, but overlooked were the deeper causes such as the internal rivalries between the Dagomba commoners, whose land was usurped, and the nobles who wished to control the process. In the end, thousands of acres of rice were burnt every year by Dagomba commoner families [not Konkombas] who had been pushed off their land. Thus the venture failed, but the Dagomba commoners, being less interested in commercial farming, have continued to produce at only a subsistence level. So the agricultural over-production for the South has gone by default to the “stateless,” formerly enslaved peoples. Politically-based efforts to control this production or tax it have been initiated by the nobles, but as the markets are enlarging they are drawing more powerful middlemen from the South, thus breaking the hold chiefs had over their former “slaves”.

A more successful entrepreneurial venture on the part of the nobles has been in the areas of national politics and law. Here the latest generation of nobles now exercises their traditional competitive spirit. Lawyers and politicians are now successfully manipulating law and political factors to coerce and extort their fellow Northerners even as their fathers used chieftaincy. It is up against this sort of entrepreneurialism that the case for minority rights becomes truly daunting.

### **CHIEFLY POLITICS IN DAGBON**

It should come as no surprise to those acquainted with Dagomba and Gonja politics that chieftaincy enters into and influences every issue no matter how great or small. The Northern Conflict is, of course, a hotbed for such politicking. In a remarkable paper signed by one B.M. Salifu of Yendi, being circulated among Konkombas in the aftermath of the conflict, particular reference was made to the ways in which the long-standing feud between the two Dagomba chieftaincy “gates” (descendants) of Abudulai and Andani was actually behind the whole affair. Salifu, who is purportedly unaligned but obviously sympathizes with the Abudu’s, gives the “inside story” from information leaked by “a supporter of Andani’s gate”.

He puts the blame for the entire affair on the current Ya-Na Yakubu III from the Andani gate. First it is rumored that the Andani supporters spiritually killed the Abudu gate’s next in line for the chieftaincy, Yakubu Tali, the Tolon-na, in order to strengthen the position of their man Yakubu, who had been earlier deposed by the High Court in Accra. The fact that he was reinstated after successfully appealing his case “made the rumour come true”, according to Salifu. Then the Abudu gate’s next in line, Mohammed (already en-skinned and deposed as Ya-Na), died shortly after Yakubu Tali. Thus, Salifu says, “the second Pot of Abudu’s gate was also broken.”

The “Last Pot” of the Abudu gate was considered by the Andani’s to be the supposed alliance of Abudu’s with the Konkombas. The Andani supporters, it is maintained, discovered this secret alliance when their Ya-Na Yakubu appointed one of their own to be Gushiegu chief and deposed the old chief B.A. Yakubu. Yakubu refused to give up the chieftaincy and was supported by numerous Konkombas in a pitched battle outside Gushiegu against the Andani supporters who had come to remove him. This confirmed the Andani’s in their view that the Konkombas were their enemies along with the Abudu’s.

Later in 1993 when the Konkombas wrote their letter to Ya-Na Yakubu and the house of chiefs asking for their own paramountcy, Yakubu took it as the chance they were looking for “to break the Last Pot of Abudu’s gate (the Konkombas) in Dagbon.” He then ordered “the writing of anonymous letters indicating that, the Konkombas want to fight Dagombas for land. This would be a good trick to convince Abudu’s gate supporters to help them fight the Konkombas.” Other points of the plan were that the Gonjas and Nanumbas were to form an alliance with them and that the Andani politicians could benefit by the war because it would reduce the strength of the NDC party enough to make them lose in the 1996 elections. Finally, that the proposed war would end once and for all the division of chieftaincy in Dagbon putting power permanently in the hands of the Andani’s. Salifu maintains that the anonymous letters did not convince all the Abudu’s, but when read at the house of chiefs convocation in December 1993, the Gonjas and Nanumbas quickly agreed to the alliance and the war against the Konkombas was decided.

What Salifu’s paper really reveals is the inner workings of Dagomba politics. It is clear that the allied chiefly groups are not as united as is popularly believed. It is possible that the Ya-Na did all that Salifu says, but, when examining motives, it is equally plausible that the accusations in the paper are a veiled overture aimed at discrediting the Andani’s in the eyes of the Konkombas, who are more than ever a force to be reckoned with.

One has an immediate sense of the political intrigue surrounding the whole issue. Anyone knowing Gushiegu’s history realizes that it is the only chiefdom (see Tait’s statement above) where the Konkombas accepted Dagomba rule. This probably goes way back to alliances with the so-called “Black Dagomba.” But that alliance only involved the Kombas and the Gushiegu-Na--no other Konkombas, no other chiefdoms. However, by suggesting that there were broader alliances between the Abudu’s and Konkombas, the paper makes such alliances sound plausible, even desirable, as a bulwark against the Andani’s. In doing so the paper introduces some new possibilities: even the hint of such an alignment starts to create the mood for positive negotiations with at least one faction of the Dagombas. If such ties never existed before, it is now possible that due to the paper something may be starting.

## **THE GOVERNMENT’S REACTION TO NORTHERN CONFLICTS**

Since Independence, the various Ghanaian Republics have continued the British policy of supporting the chiefly groups in their claims over the acephalous groups. This pattern predictably resulted in new northern land tenure laws in 1978. As a result, the ruling groups of northern Ghana expected governmental support. One of the de-stabilizing factors in the recent conflicts between acephalous and the ruling peoples is that this support was not forthcoming--at least to the extent it was expected by the chiefly groups. With the outbreak of war between the Nanumbas and Konkombas in 1981 the government was unable to take action. Although the Nanumba suffered defeat and serious fatalities in Kpasaland the whole incident was hushed up. Skalnik writes:

“The Bimbila clash was publicized as a minor incident (eight dead) but the major conflict in Kpasaland [where hundreds of Nanumbas were killed] was completely hushed up by Ghanaian authorities. Reasons for this included executive weakness of the state apparatus such as lack of or slow communication and poor technical support on the part of the Ghanaian Police (this included lack of firepower, arms and fuel for their vehicles). However, perhaps the most important factor was the failure of the state to realize that the inclusion of Kpasaland into the orbit of Nanumba traditional area also meant ‘modern’ matters like armed incidents might break out and would require prompt action from the police and other state agencies. It was an evident miscalculation based on a widespread fallacy, shared by the politicians, which divorces ‘traditional’ issues from the ‘modern’ ones, the well-known dualist trap” (1985:17).

But neither the 1981 war nor the government’s lack of response came as a surprise to many. As early as the late 70’s the signs of uneasiness were present. Skalnik notes that there were “seventeen cases in which blood was spilt for ‘traditional’ reasons (1979-1981) in the Northern Region alone” (1985:17); and the arrival of more conflicts was predicted: “I contend that the imbalances of the colonial and post-colonial periods lead inevitably to conflicts like the Nanumba-Konkomba war” (Skalnik 1985:19). In purely political terms he explains the conflict as follows:

“The innovations together with conservatism, remained side by side at peace as long, and only as long, as the imported state functioned well. When it ceased to do so, as happened in Ghana for various reasons since the mid 1970s, the old conflicts were revived and new ones added. . . Local competing political feelings in ethnic guises won over the almost defunct state nationalism” (Skalnik 1985:19).

The hostilities lessened, but nothing was done about the root causes. Justice Lamptey headed the commission of inquiry but the 31st December takeover caused the work to be suspended and eventually shelved permanently. The outbreak of the next major conflict--this time between the Gonjas and Nawuris--signaled the need for another attempt at a solution, through the Appiah Committee. The Konkombas had joined forces with the Nawuris to defeat the Gonjas and oust them completely from Kpandai district. So it was their second victory and that did not go unnoticed. The results of this committee’s work, which were released strategically during the latest conflict, were that the Nawuris and Nchumurus of the Northern Region should be granted their claim to the land and to their own paramouncy. Nothing was said of the Konkombas but the implications were obvious. No white paper has yet been produced but if the government accepts these findings, the Alhassan committee’s conclusions and current Northern Regional land tenure policy will effectively be overturned. After an initial outburst of opposition from northern politicians, however, the government-controlled newspapers and broadcasting have kept silent.

As Skalnik mentions above, the Nanumbas along with the other chiefly groups had long been allies of the state machinery in controlling the North so they were outraged and felt betrayed by the Ghanaian state at their defeat in 1981. It was possibly even more of a shock to the Dagombas when governmental forces shot into the midst of a

crowd outside a Tamale bank in March 1994, killing 12. However, the fact that the government took immediate action to compensate the families of those killed by the military in Tamale whereas no such compensation has yet been offered any Konkomba family shows clearly that although the traditional alliances may be eroding they have not completely disintegrated.

## **TASK FORCE ATROCITIES**

If the shooting at the Tamale bank constitutes an infuriating breach of trust for the Dagombas, the Konkombas too have reasons for being disappointed at the government's reaction. Eye-witness accounts of beatings, torture, and mutilation, extensive loss of life and property, due directly to the soldiers and not to the conflicting parties are now common in the North. One Catholic priest in the war zone reported nursing the wounds of three of his altar boys who were strafed by a Ghana Air-Force plane while riding their bicycles through the bush. Two survived but the third whose leg was almost severed by aircraft fire bled to death in the priest's arms.

Numerous Konkomba villages from Salaga to Bimbilla, Bimbilla to Kete-Kratchi, and from Zabzugu to Tatale have been reportedly attacked and burnt by the Task Force. In a letter of 21st March, 1994 addressed to the Commander of the Emergency Task Force from the Konkomba Youth Association, the Military Task Force was openly accused of attacking and burning Konkomba settlements in "Chamba, Loloto and Lugni, just to name a few in the Emergency Zone". An earlier letter written the 16th March, 1994 by representatives of the "Chiefs and people of Konkombaland" to the Minister of Defence at Burma Camp, Accra states the situation:

"After the framing of the Konkombas in the above affair [a reference to the media coverage of the alleged murder of an army officer and two military personnel by Konkombas in the Salaga area], the military with the connivance of District Secretaries went round and burned Konkomba settlements. Such settlements include Nabul, Yapala, Nashiek and Naglun in Yendi district, Dame, Kpangen, Jiwol, Laplie, Yakpirdu, Sakpale, Tindang and Zooyili in Gushiegu-Karaga district, Lugni, Chamba and Tinjinabani in Bimbilla district. Others are Sabonjida, Loloto, Kuwani, Yakubupe, Jiradadogo and Namork in Gonja East district, and Kpassk, Nbuldo, Binchado, Gmagbedo, Tibundo, Kohiyili, Sakpalebani and Gnyanda in Zabzugu-Tatale district. It must be stressed that such burnings have been accompanied with the killing of innocent civilians. Yet there was a total news blackout of these diabolical activities of the military and District Secretaries."

Elements of the Task Force were also sent to the Kete-Krachi district of northern Volta Region ostensibly to keep the conflict from "overflowing" into this Region. Some of the worst atrocities have been experienced here some time after the height of the conflict. As a result of rumours and allegations of atrocities in this area a two-man delegation was appointed by the jointly-led government and KOYA negotiation team on peace talks to investigate the allegations. Their findings which were addressed to government Ministers and officials on May 30, 1994 included reports of random harassment and arrests of Konkombas, beatings and torturing of Konkombas

and general burning, looting and extortion of Konkomba wealth and properties, and forced labour such as re-roofing of houses allegedly burnt by Konkombas. Among the more intolerable assaults were the following:

“One Bibari Nakpando from Kyeinkyein was tied to a military vehicle and dragged until he died. . . Niani Tekayi from Sabonjida was beaten by the Task Force until he became unconscious, he died in Police cells at Kete-Krachi . . . One Tingortob has become blind as a result of torturing he received at the hands of the Task Force, another man Baakanbi Jabulb is now paralysed from the waist down due to beatings and kicks to the spine. . . several other have broken limbs. . . A group of Konkomba who came to spend the Dambai market were rounded up, beaten mercilessly, locked up in cells and made to go through the degrading and inhuman ordeal of drinking others’ urine. Their relatives had to pay heavily to ‘bail’ them.”

The findings go on to mention burnings including the village of Boafri Nmala and houses at Zongo Macheri, and the extortion of extremely large sums of money. Any Konkomba with distinct tribal marks was arrested on sight. A pregnant woman at Wuyai was shot by incensed soldiers for refusing to take them to her husband’s farm far in the bush. Far from being isolated instances the violence directed against Konkomba civilians was organized and ordered from above. The Task Force commander, who despite an assumed name was identified as a Nanumba, is reported as actually directing the brutalities. The reprisals had the support and complicity of the local police as well. Statements from the Task Force officer not only admit to the atrocities but attempt to justify them as a part of a wider plan of oppression. Lt. Fifi Amisah is quoted as saying that it was done to “teach them that there was law” and that “sometimes people perished when law and order is to be restored; because they have to use brute force to cow down the people.” The KOYA investigators make special note that “the Military Task Force arrived in the district at a time when there was no conflict and all the road blocks had been removed by the first police contingent sent there with the cooperation of the Konkombas.”

As a result of the findings KOYA appealed, stating that they “would be grateful if the government could intervene to save the Konkombas from their present horrible plight in the Kete-Krachi district and to compensate the victims as was done in Tamale.” Thusfar no compensation has been given but the officers directly responsible for atrocities have been transferred.

The above letters also make it clear that the military is disarming the Konkombas but not Dagombas or Gonjas. While a certain amount of calm has been effected by their armed presence in the main towns of the conflict zones, it is quite apparent that Konkomba towns like Saboba and Wapul are under “arrest” while the Dagomba and Gonja towns of Zabzugu, Yendi, Gushiegu, Bimbilla and Salaga are being protected against Konkombas. Under such conditions, the presence of the Task Force will not lead to any lasting solution. Far from creating the atmosphere of trust needed for reconciliation and compromise, the governmental forces seem to have increased the polarization, mistrust and hostility in both camps--though the Konkombas have suffered more, and it is remarkable that they are not demanding compensation or attempting to avenge their losses at the hands of the military.

Even by the admission of its officers the Task Force has been using punitive measures in an attempt to bring about peace and up to now this has only served to make matters worse. The signs point to a mishandling of the whole affair. Despite the sensitiveness of the ethnic issues involved, the government appointed a Dagomba, Alhaji Mahamma Idrissu, the national chairman of the Task Force Committee. From the Konkomba point of view the Task Force appears to be more of “an occupational force” than a peace-keeping one. Reports from the R.C. missionaries at Saboba maintain that when lorry loads of crack Task Force soldiers first took command of Saboba they fully expected to meet with armed resistance. Later when it became obvious that this was not the case, they explained that they had been misinformed that the Konkombas were “foreigners,” they were “wild” and that “they were well armed and trained by the Togolese military”. “Now,” says the priest in charge, “every soldier in the Task Force wishes to be sent to Saboba since it is the most peaceful of all the conflict zone towns.”

With little hope of understanding or support from the national government, or the South in general, Northerners of each group now seem to be more deeply entrenched than ever in their opposing views. The KOYA says they do not want war but their backs are to the wall. They are being treated like aliens in their own country. They must have access to the main roads and the towns of the north just like everyone else. Therefore, despite the “paper” peace agreement signed in Accra on June 9, 1994, there has been an extension of the state of emergency and the Task Force remains in the combat zones. The “state of peace” is mocked by the fact that an airforce plane had to be sent to take the four Konkomba representatives to Accra for the signing because they could not pass through any of the towns held by the allied chiefly forces. Despite the signing of a document none of the parties actually sat down together, let alone negotiated a settlement. The allied forces state openly that they do not want reconciliation and are unwilling to budge one inch from previous positions. Rather, the situation has gotten worse. It is rumoured that the Dagombas are using their considerable political clout and manipulation of the media to press that Konkombas be restricted to the areas surrounding Saboba and that a permanent military base be established in Yendi to “maintain the peace”. Naturally, Konkombas see this as a prison camp solution. One must assume under such circumstances that the peace accord is a farce. Dagombas under the continued protection of the Task Force can strengthen their position by a widely-publicized but empty peace accord, while the militarily superior Konkombas have much more to gain by continued fighting than by acceding to chiefly demands.

## **REFUGEES AND THE AFTERMATH**

Since the rains have come to the Northern Region, both sides have, at least temporarily, laid down their arms. The Konkombas are spread throughout the bush and have already begun farming. Since they are the major yam producers for the country, production levels will probably not be seriously affected by the war. Some Dagombas are returning to their burnt-out settlements closest to Yendi. But they fear to farm too far into the bush away from the protection of the soldiers.

Most of the Dagombas living in Karaga, Gushiegu, Yendi, Zabzugu are not farming but staying put in town under military protection. They are afraid to venture out. The same is true of the Gonjas in Salaga and the Nanumbas in Bimbilla. This has already begun to affect the prices of livestock and some food supplies in the North, and as food becomes scarcer during the growing season the problem will get worse. Most of those living in the above-named major towns, however, are not farmers but artisans, clerks, teachers, government officials etc. who do not farm anyway. They and thousands of displaced Dagomba commoner farmers who cannot return to their villages for fear of reprisal will be in serious trouble by next dry season. Those who have taken refuge in the Tamale area will likely become an increasing burden on the government, though the Gonjas who have resettled toward Damongo and Bole in the West will be able to start new farms this year.

The Task Force and some NGO's are helping these refugees but the aid is too little to sustain them over a longer period. Konkomba refugees from Western Gonja have fled to Brong Ahafo and some are receiving assistance from NGO's such as the Catholic Relief Services. But many more refugees have fled into the old Northern Asante trading and war outposts like Ejura creating a spectacle reminiscent of the slavery days that are ironically, at least partially, at the root of these problems. Local Asante and Brong farmers go to the market and "pick" able-bodied Konkombas whom they wish to employ on their farms for the price of the simplest food and shelter.

Some 2,000, mostly educated, Konkombas, teachers, professionals and students were held at Kamina barracks, Tamale since the calamity broke out the end of January. By the end of March they were moved to the army barracks at Sunyani. Many found places to stay with relatives and friends in the South but by mid-May the remainder was forcibly transferred to Saboba in spite of the fact that most of them did not come from this place. These were mainly women and children. Able-bodied men and professionals have by now either found their way to remote northern farming villages or to southern cities.

The problems of the Konkomba refugees are vastly different from those of the Dagombas and Gonjas. Since the major administrative centres etc. of the North are in their hands, the Dagombas and Gonjas have no trouble traveling or moving about. Likewise the relief aid intended for refugees can actually get to them--though this does not mean that it always does. Quantities are known to have been misappropriated or hijacked by the distributors themselves or profiteers. Relief foods are being openly sold in Tamale market. It is rumored that the Task Force has been less than fully accountable in its distribution of relief aid. Nevertheless the Dagomba and Gonja refugees are receiving meager food aid and other items, and the students are getting re-settled; the teachers, nurses, and other professionals are receiving back-pay and starting to get their new appointments.

The Konkombas, however, cannot move about. They cannot pass through any administrative centre or they risk being killed. They have no access to any of the important services offered by such centres: banking, housing, hospitals, piped water and electricity, postal services, telephones, fuels, stores for food, supplies and provisions. Their homes and storage bins were burnt and their livestock slaughtered by Task Force soldiers. Their wounded were carried off to die painful deaths in the

bush without any medical care. Here they must stay and become completely self-sufficient or somehow go to the South. If they stay in the bush they can be attacked at any time and without provocation by the military or by Dagombas and Gonjas.

As of June, 1994, some, in particular those who were re-settled in Saboba by the Task Force, began to receive refugee aid. However, most are without help of any sort. They have no way to get agricultural inputs or farming supplies, seeds, hoes, fertilizer to start their new farms. No medical teams follow them to the bush, no high-ranking diplomatic missions, no reporters! All governmental-controlled aid must pass through the local government's channels and this is entirely in the hands of the Dagombas and Gonjas. The majority of Konkombas remain silently in the bush without adequate supplies trying desperately to produce next year's crop.

Even if the administrative machinery controlled by the Dagombas and Gonjas actually allotted help for the Konkombas, it could not reach them. Until June, no one, not even rescue workers or missionaries, could pass through the communications hub of Yendi without the express permission of the Ya-na, the chief of the Dagombas. The parish priest of Saboba reported having been kept waiting for permission for four hours before it was finally granted. Others bringing medical aid to Konkombas have not been allowed to pass through and have had to reach Konkomba settlements either by passing through "the top" via Mamprusi territory or through Togo. Even the Konkomba elders, chiefs and the leaders of KOYA who were asked to meet with government officials and with the Asante-hene to discuss peace have had to pass through Togo to reach the south since they were prohibited from moving along the main arteries and through the administrative centres.

Educated Konkombas have no choice but to move south. There has already been a massive exodus of all Konkomba professionals: virtually all students, teachers, nurses, and government employees of every kind have gone to southern towns and cities and either await reposting or are searching for new jobs. Most have lost family members. All have lost their homes, their possessions, their friends, their jobs and most, if not all of this year's salary. Large numbers of skilled craftsmen, carpenters, masons, plumbers, mechanics and drivers have also joined the exodus. But except in isolated cases (such as the Catholic Relief Services working through Wenchi Catholic Mission or the Konkomba students of St. Charles Secondary School, Tamale, who were accepted by St. Francis at Navrongo, and those who were sent back to Saboba) these refugees are not being reached by the aid agencies and missions.

## **UPDATE**

Many cases of diversion of food and medical supplies being distributed under the direction of the Task Force.

Thousands wounded Konkombas turn up at Saboba Health Centre each week; one Baptist female doctor trying to do the impossible; little help from the government.

Beginning of July two Bassari were murdered in broad daylight downtown Tamale while waiting for a lorry to transport their newly bought grinding mill. The murders

were allegedly ordered by the Dagomba warlords, lawyers Mumuni and Mohammed Iddrisu. Both policemen guarding the Bassaris were also attacked. One fled, the other was admitted to Tamale hospital. Nothing was reported on Ghana news. Isolated incidents of killings.

On Sept. 8 fighting broke out in Zabzugu again. Still no Konkomba/Bassari is allowed in Yendi or Tamale but Dagombas are trading in Saboba as of Sept. 10, 1994.

It is rumoured that 50,000 Konkombas are being prepared to launch a massive attack on Yendi (pop. 20,000) but it was leaked to Task Force and preparations were stopped. Rumours of the possibility of a "big attack" on Yendi are still very strong in Tamale. Dagombas and Nanumbas stick close to the main towns for fear of being attacked in the bush by Konkombas. They are not able to go to their farms. The harvest will be meagre this year.

Beginning of September 1994, a Bassari mob rushed on a Dagomba merchant in Tatale market. The man was able to take refuge in the Catholic mission where he was treated and clandestinely taken to a hospital in Togo.

Reports from Saboba now (Sept. 10) indicate unwillingness to accept anything less than Yendi town as Konkomba.

Reports of 'Field training' for Dagombas and Gonjas in "bush" near Daboya by "White men" (Saudi's or Iranians?).

AK-47s are allegedly being sold in Tamale at 300,000 Cedis each (300 USD); suspected Arab involvement. Government seems to be standing by while it is rumoured that Islamic fundamentalists increase their involvement in internal affairs of the North. Rumours rife that all Dagomba villages are being systematically armed.

## **CONCLUSION**

The "Northern Conflict" is the latest and most tragic of a series of conflicts that have occurred over the past ten years between chiefly and chiefless peoples in northern Ghana. In a bid by both sides for the title of "landowner" understood in the new sense of owner of private property between 20,000 and 35,000 people have lost their lives and over a hundred thousand have been made homeless. One side bases its title on historical conquest followed by traditional suzerainty; the other on their numbers, on residence and on use. This review has tried to give some ethnological and historical depth to these opposing claims and to introduce some of the other concomitant issues like demographics, the religious factors, and peoples' stereotypes. However, these alone cannot help us to evaluate whose claim is more important, more just, more "natural" or in any way more acceptable.

If we are to follow the precedent established in the South for determining Northern land tenure, the decision might go in favour of those actually on the land using it. There is a certain natural justice and expediency in this, for one does not cut off the hand that feeds him. This would, however, alienate those in power, the chiefs, and

this is not likely. Ownership could also follow the chiefs--a pattern which was anchored to the constitutions in 1978--by which the majority would be dispossessed of their land and ethnic wars would, no doubt, continue.

Another solution is to give all ethnic groups their own paramount chiefs of equal rank. This would perhaps minimize the extra-ethnic extortion but the problem would then be how to determine territorial jurisdiction. Where does one set the boundaries where none existed traditionally? How would the rich yam-growing areas be allotted? At the moment, the under-populated rich farmlands of the middle belt are being claimed by the chiefly groups. Could these vacant lands be held in trust by the National government as open farmlands to be claimed for settlement by any aspiring Northern farmer for the price of registration? These and many other possibilities await at the political bargaining table. But the chiefly groups are not likely to begin moving toward conciliation as long as the government continues to do their bidding. Any "peace accord" signed under such circumstances will only serve to postpone a final brutal conflict--which, it is rumoured, both groups are seriously preparing for by purchasing modern weapons and ammunition illegally from the Task Force.

Picking up the pieces of the war, we will, hopefully, be able to learn something from our more obvious mistakes. The experience of Southerners, in land-tenure is misleading when applied to the northern case. Ownership of Asante land was claimed by "free" citizens of the realm, while there is, here, an additional complication of conquest, servitude, and slavery. The government can not solve the problem by "cowering the people down" as has been attempted.

The northern situation demands to be understood in all its complexity and here Northerners have a right to quote to Southerners their own proverb that the eyes of the stranger are big but he sees nothing. The decision is a weighty one. At its heart lies the credibility of the nation-state, the constitution and system of law. At risk too is Ghana's internal stability and its reputation abroad--which, in the end, means international support or the lack of it. But the greatest risk is to divide and alienate the peoples of Ghana. All her peoples must feel that they each play a participatory role in the formation and development of the country; in their own destiny. None are to be excluded from this process whether it be through prison camps or state-defined "homelands".

Yet that role has long been denied the chiefless peoples of the North and they are now aware of this fact. The decision involves much more than land but freedom from servitude in many forms. Buried deep beneath the surface is the issue of Ghanaian identity--moving from seeing each other as "slaves" or "masters" of this or that group to acknowledging that we are one people, with a common destiny. We cannot legislate this, but we can learn to cherish our cultural diversity while we forgive the injustices of the past; hopefully too, we can learn when it is necessary to lay aside cultural differences to build for a united future.

In such perilous times it is just and insightful statesmen rather than politicians that are needed. For as long as the national government remains on the level of party politics and factional interests, or if it neglects the central issues or defers judgment in a bid to please both sides, the greater the chances of continued open conflict and even more

widespread divisions between the acephalous and centralized peoples; indeed, between Northerners and Southerners--with irreparable consequences to the nation.

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## Summary

### **Population update:**

Gonja: 200,000  
Nanumba: 40,000  
Dagomba: 650,000  
Konkomba: 1,050,000

### **Are Konkombas Togolese?**

90 per cent of Konkombas are Ghanaian. Like the Ewes, the Konkombas are partly in Ghana and in Togo. Probably less than 4 % of Ghanaian Konkombas are post-Independence migrants from Togo.

### **Who was there first?**

Konkombas were among the original inhabitants of Northern Ghana. Later raiding groups arrived: Dagombas entered 1450; Gonjas entered 1550, Ashanti entered the North in 1744, Chakosi in 1750.

### **Did the Dagombas rule the Konkombas before Colonial times?**

No. They raided for booty and slaves.

### **How did they get control of the Konkomba?**

The British placed the tribes with chiefs in charge of those who had no chiefs. They ruled the Northern Territories through them and supported them with local '*dansanda*' West African Rifles.

### **Did the chiefless peoples like the Konkomba ever accept the imposed chiefdoms?**

No. There were constant flairs against Dagomba authority throughout British rule and up to the present time.

### **What happened after Independence?**

It was in the interests of Ghanaian governments to continue to work through northern chiefs keeping the chiefless peoples subordinated.

### **What is happening now?**

The more numerous chiefless peoples have been emancipated by education and politicized by the "youth associations", and for the first time in history they are uniting to oppose the chiefly groups.

### **Why are they only doing this now?**

Land is becoming a scarce resource in the North and the legal basis on which to determine ownership is disputed because in the North chiefs never owned the land and never ruled chiefless peoples but rather subjugated them. Education has made Konkombas aware and KOYA has organized them.

### **How did cocoa-farmers in the south get land ownership?**

Through a combination of three factors:

- (1) cocoa which represents a long-term investment of capital and labour demanded land ownership.
- (2) The British fostered the rise of an entrepreneurial class in Asante.
- (3) Chiefs served all their free citizenry so, really, the land belonged to them.

**On what is each group basing its claim to the land?**

Chiefless peoples say they were on the land first and they are the ones actually farming the land. Chiefly groups say it is theirs by conquest; they are the “landowners” (*tendana*).

**Doesn't the “landowner” own the land?**

The term *tendana* refers only to ritual stewardship, *naam* to political controls. Chiefly groups in pre-colonial days never owned land. They were interested in controlling people and what they produced. But now the land is a scarce resource and has acquired great economic and political value in itself.

**Who is actually farming the land?**

The vast majority of the farmers are from the chiefless groups. The nobles and Muslims of the chiefly groups are chiefs, clerics, politicians and traders, their “commoners” do subsistence farming.

**How did the findings of the ‘Alhassan Committee’ change land tenure in the North?**

It led to legislation placing the ownership of land in the hands of the ethnic groups who were the ‘traditional’ rulers during the colonial era.

**Why is this unfair to the majority of Northerners?**

For the majority of Northerners, chieftaincy was an invention of the British colonial administration. The four tribes who had chiefs controlled the 30 odd groups that had none. They did not rule them or serve their interests. Yet this law gives them control over the land and thus, gives them economic and political control over the people of the land, just as it was during the slave-raiding days of the past.

**Who is right?**

Something the nation must decide.

**Is the Task Force keeping the peace?**

The military presence is viewed by Konkombas as an “occupying force.”

**How has the conflict religious overtones?**

The chiefly groups are being associated with Islam and the chiefless groups are being associated with Christianity. There are four reasons for this: (1) Literacy and education offered to all by the churches has particularly helped emancipate the chiefless groups whose leadership is mainly Christian. (2) Gonja and Dagomba are each about 50% Muslim with heavy concentrations in the royal classes. The indigenization of Ghanaian Islam, which has occurred as a result of the Aliens Compliance, gave Muslim leadership to Dagomba and Gonja nobles and Muslims. (3) Wealthy and powerful Islamic states are exerting a strong influence on the politics of Islam in Ghana by providing the indigenous Muslim tribes with new prestige and power. A side effect of the alliance is that nobles can no longer be both Muslim and

Christian. (4) Chiefly groups have a rich cultural heritage linked to Islam and are strongly resistant to Western culture and, therefore, also to Christianity.

**Are all Northerners Muslim?**

No. Southerners have this impression because they see that the majority of Northerners who live in the south live in the Zongos and they are mostly Muslim. Indigenous Ghanaian Muslims are mainly 'royals' belonging to the 4 main northern chiefly tribes (Dagomba, Gonja, Mamprusi, Nanumba). The 1960 Census gives the Muslim percentage as 12%. According to Barker, now it is 17-18 %. Most of these are living in Southern cities.

**Do Northern politicians play on stereotypes Southerners have of Northerners?**

Yes. Northern politicians are mostly Muslim Dagomba and Gonja chief's sons. They encourage the stereotype because it confirms their right to power in the minds of Southerners. Southern stereotypes of Northerners are a key factor in perpetuating the war.