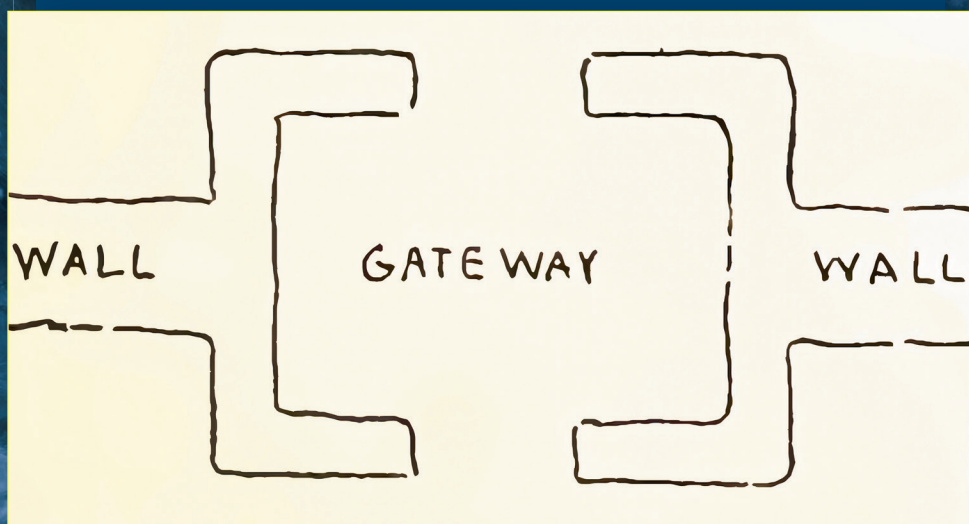


STUDIES IN GLOBAL SOCIAL HISTORY
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AFRICAN THRESHOLDS:
BORDERS AND PLACES
OF PASSAGE IN AFRICA,
C.1450 TO PRESENT

EDITED BY
ETTORE MORELLI



BRILL

African Thresholds: Borders and Places of Passage in Africa,
c. 1450 to Present

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MAP 5.1 Area of study: Ghana-Togo border
SOURCE: DRAWN BY ETTORE MORELLI ON ARCGIS ONLINE

Border Crossing, Strategies of Resistance and Colonial Violence: Narratives from Northern Ghana and Togo (1920s–1940s)

Giulia Casentini

1 Introduction

I propose to observe the effects of colonial border demarcation on local communities in Ghana and Togo, with the aim to reflect on the dynamic relationship between the border and the people, by drawing particular attention to the relationships between centre and periphery in the African colonial space.¹ The analysis revolves around two points: I consider the construction of the border and its movements in history, and then I analyse how the colonial border represented an element of disruption, destabilisation of social and economic local life, but also a tool for resistance to the colonial violence. In our area of research, in fact, border communities could take advantage of the colonial border to escape taxation and detention, and try to avoid the loss or destruction of properties by the colonial authorities.

The contemporary border between the northern sections of Ghana and Togo lies on the Oti River and incorporates all the features of a natural threshold: on the one hand, it can be difficult and dangerous to cross, and on the other hand it is a connector of social and political life. In the local narratives and practices, the river represents more of a hinge than a barrier for Konkomba communities living on both sides: the river attracts people to fetch water, wash clothes, talk and meet to cross it together to reach markets on the opposite side. At the same time, the river fertilises the area when flooding during rainy season, thus constituting a precious, vital element for border communities. Nevertheless, the overflows cause insecurity, damages and threat: during rainy season, indeed, the river becomes too dangerous to be crossed, the floods often isolate riverside villages that can suffer lack of food, drinkable water and basic medical assistance.

1 Igor Kopytoff, 'The Internal African Frontier', in Igor Kopytoff, ed., *The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies*, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 1987, 1–78.

Local stories and myths, narrated also in the first ethnographic accounts of the 1920s by A.W. Cardinall and in the monography on Konkomba written by David Tait in the 1950s, speak about the Oti River in terms of a threshold.² This account of the crossing of Oti River by Konkomba escaping Dagomba control is quite revealing:

They [Konkomba belonging to Kpalba clan], or rather their grandfathers, fled to the river, which was in flood. They could not cross and begged a crocodile to help them. He did so and all crossed safely on his back. The Dagomba came up and, seeing that the fugitives had crossed, considered the river fordable; it was not. So many were drowned. Hence the crocodile to the Palba [sic] is not to be slain or eaten.³

The Oti River was and still is a natural threshold before becoming a colonial border, and the concept of threshold is ritualised by the relationship, in this case, with the totemic animal, the crocodile. This river incorporates the features of *limes* and *limen* described by Raimondo Strassoldo when discussing the ambiguous and ambivalent concept of the border.⁴ Indeed, for Strassoldo the border is 'opening and closure, barrier and conduit, exclusion and contact, *limes* and *limen*, dissociation and association, separation and articulation'.⁵ These polar opposites indicate from one side how the threshold is a necessary element for the production and reproduction of the social order, from the other side how the threshold itself is functional to the relationship between the social system and the environment. The case of Konkomba communities, if understood in the *longue durée*, is particularly revealing of this continuous double function of the border, that in the course of history changes and constructs the dialogical and conflictual practice of social, economic and political relations.

2 Allan Wolsey Cardinall, 'Random notes on the customs of the Konkomba', *Journal of the Royal African Society*, 18, 69, 1918, 45–62; David Tait, *The Konkomba of Northern Ghana*, London, Oxford University Press, 1961.

3 Cardinall, 'Random notes', 46. See the Conclusion of the present volume, 'Places of Passage', for the discussion of a similar southern African stories involving a little girl fleeing from a cannibal.

4 Raimondo Strassoldo, 'La teoria del confine', in *Temi di sociologia delle relazioni internazionali, Quaderni dell'ISIG*, 5, Gorizia, 1979, 133–202.

5 'Chiusura e apertura, barriera e cerniera, esclusione e contatto, *limes* e *limen*, dissociazione e associazione, separazione e articolazione'. Strassoldo, 'La teoria del confine', 133–202. When not otherwise stated, all translations of the chapter are by Giulia Casentini.

The above-mentioned passage from Cardinall's notes discloses another relevant aspect of the relationship between groups in this area of multiple borders: Konkomba were frequently attacked and raided by neighbouring groups, like Dagomba in this case, in a dynamic of constant negotiation of their autonomy and sphere of influence. Therefore, Konkomba revolts are located in a complex regional geopolitical framework. Initially (from the end of the Nineteenth century to the 1920s) Konkomba fought back colonial territorial intrusion as they used to fight back, constantly, the interference, raids, and slave raids of neighbouring kingdoms. The Konkomba tried in various forms to maintain their territorial and political autonomy by inserting colonial powers into a dialectic with the 'others' that was already profoundly structured in their resistance to Dagomba, Nanumba, Anufo. At a later time, from the 1930s onwards, the changing of the colonial policy (especially in British controlled areas) intensified not only the conflict between the Konkomba and the colonial authorities, but also with the neighbouring groups: the British colonial administration, in fact, decided to subordinate Konkomba communities to other more organised kingdoms, due to their lack of recognisable structures of power.

It is clear that the border has played a crucial role in shaping groups' relations, power structures and strategies of resistance in the borderland. Beyond its empiric nature, the borderland brings along characteristics of change and fluidity.⁶ It can become an analytical instrument that permits us to understand some political dynamics that interest the path that leads to the construction of the modern African state. I propose to use the concept of border and borderlands as suggested by Dereje Feyissa and Markus Hoehne: borders are the institutions of inter-state divisions according to international law, while borderlands are the physical spaces along the borders: 'Borders and borderlands mutually define one another – the existence of the border constitutes the borderland. We specifically engage with borders as institutions that can be made use of, and borderlands as fields of opportunities for the people inhabiting them'.⁷ As suggested by Arthur Ijaola Asiwaju, it is relevant to shed light on the practices of African borderlands to enhance our knowledge on the potential of cross-border exchanges, understood also in their historical dimension, and on

6 Ulf Hannerz, 'Flows, Boundaries and Hybrids: Keywords in Transnational Anthropology', *Mana*, 3, 1, 1997, 7–39.

7 Dereje Feyissa, Markus Virgil Hoehne, *Resourcing State Borders and Borderlands in the Horn of Africa*, Max Planck Institute of Social Anthropology, Working Paper No. 107, 2008, 2.

the relevance of the presence of the international border in the economic and social life of borderland communities.⁸

Borderlands are often marginal areas, in which the politics conceived and performed in the centre cannot easily be perceived and understood; these peripheral regions often struggle to feel included in complex and sometimes controversial national identity construction processes. The interaction between different political subjectivities – local groups, traditional chiefs, colonial administrators – and the connection between diverse politics of control and the flux of everyday life that constantly pass through it, make the border a place of paradox and, I would say, a place in which political entities and identity processes are constantly discussed.⁹

For these reasons, and probably many more, borders represent privileged observation points to critically read political transformations, and they must be carefully analysed in order not to fall into the wrong commonplace that Africans have little to do with the practical creation of the contemporary national borders, perceived as a sole legacy of the European colonial action. Many scholars have already moved in this direction; for what concern the construction of borders in West Africa, Pierluigi Valsecchi has, for example, proposed a reading of the process of definition of the southern section of the Ghana-Côte d'Ivoire border as a practice consciously and strategically determined by local African powers.¹⁰ As I elaborated elsewhere, even in the area I am working on there are hints of local interaction and negotiation with colonial powers for the delimitation of the border.¹¹ As highlighted by Paul Nugent, even if this specific border was the product of European colonial interests, it must be recognised that the delineation of the border gave rise to a dynamic in which local communities became central actors of the new change and were able to define and redefine belonging, alliances, political relationships.¹²

8 Arthur Ijaola Asiwaju, 'Borders and Borderlands as Linchpins for Regional Integration in Africa: Lessons of the European Experience', *Journal of Borderland Studies*, 8, 1, 1993, 1–20.

9 Paul Nugent, Arthur Ijaola Asiwaju, 'Introduction: The Paradox of African Boundaries', in Paul Nugent, Arthur Ijaola Asiwaju, eds., *African Boundaries: Barriers, Conduits, and Opportunities*, London, Cassell, 1996, 1–17.

10 Pierluigi Valsecchi, 'La frontiera come storia. Politiche dell'appartenenza sul confine Ghana-Costa d'Avorio', *Il Politico*, 75, 3, 2010, 101–117. See also his contribution to the present volume, Chapter 3 'No Palaver About 1 or 2 Villages with 10 or 20 Inhabitants' Precolonial Borders and the Ghana-Côte d'Ivoire Frontier (Seventeenth-Twentieth Century)'.

11 Giulia Casentini, 'Il confine come agente di costruzione della rappresentanza politica: il caso di Ghana e Togo settentrionali', *Il politico*, 75, 3, 2010, 118–135; Giulia Casentini, *Al di là del fiume. Storia e antropologia di un confine africano (Ghana e Togo)*, Roma, Viella, 2015.

12 Paul Nugent, *Smugglers, Secessionists, and Loyal Citizens on the Ghana-Togo Frontier: The Lie of the Borderlands since 1914*, Athens, OH, Ohio University Press, 2002.

I would position my contribution under this light, while I propose myself to dig analytically more on the creative use of the border made by those groups historically subordinated, without centralised political structure and therefore, during colonial times, voiceless.

In addition, I would propose a reading of the language used by colonial administrators, both on the French and on the British side, in defining Konkomba communities and producing a de-individualised and de-humanised stereotype that had, and still have, a profound echo on their representation in the media and their ability to speak for themselves. As underlined by Frantz Fanon, colonial language has a fundamental importance to understanding the dimension of being-for-others.¹³ The border perspective allows us to highlight how, despite of the profound differences between British and French colonial systems, the representation of the colonised was very similar, and produced a shared negative label that contributed to the oppression and marginalisation of this peripheral group of people.

In the construction of the research that brought to the writing of this contribution, I focused on archival and ethnographic research, through which I broadly investigated the complex and multilayered relationship of the Konkomba with the border, in a *long durée* perspective. While my broader research considers the Konkomba, the border and their neighbours until contemporary times, by confronting with the role of the border and the colonial territorial partition in the postcolony, here I focus on a specific timeframe, that saw the birth and the consolidation of specific colonial dynamics of control and violence. In 1994, Konkomba communities were at the centre of a civil conflict erupted in Ghana due to their exclusion to land control and political representation, and the border played a crucial role in the escape of displaced people, in the hide of individuals involved in the clashes, but also as a catalyst of political processes and identity construction mechanisms of a borderland group that was, and somehow still is, excluded from the national political dynamics.¹⁴

13 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, New York, NY, Grove Press, 2008 [1952].

14 For an account on the diffuse conflict situation that characterises the Northern Region of Ghana, and especially the Konkomba, see N.J.K. Brukum, 'Conflicts in Northern Ghana', unpublished, 2005; Petr Skalník, 'Nanumba versus Konkomba: An Assessment of a Troubled Coexistence', in Wim van Binsbergen, ed., *The Dynamics of Power and the Rule of Law*, Leiden, LIT Verlag, 2003, 69–78; Jon Kirby, 'Peacebuilding in Northern Ghana: Cultural Themes and Ethnic Conflicts', in Franz Koger, Barbara Meier, eds., *Ghana's North*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 2003, 161–205; Arthur Bogner, 'The 1994 Civil War in Northern Ghana: The Genesis and Escalation of a "Tribal" Conflict', in Carola Lentz, Paul Nugent, eds., *Ethnicity in Ghana: The Limits of Invention*, London, Macmillan, 2000; Susan Drucker-Brown, 'Communal Violence in Northern Ghana: Unaccepted Warfare', in Robert Hinde, Helen Watson, eds., *War: A Cruel Necessity?*, London, Tauris Publishers, 1989, 37–53.

Interestingly, no conflict erupted for the same reasons in the Togolese side, due to various causes among which the French colonial heritage in managing local powers and access to land is paramount. Again, the border acted as a place of passage, and a threshold: a porous place, made to be crossed, and a conceptual line that defined the transformation of the political system of the Konkomba.

2 Konkomba Communities and Their Neighbours

My fieldwork was carried out in villages inhabited by the Konkomba, a group that lives today in some districts of the North-Eastern part of Ghana and the North-Western area of Togo. Following the definition coined by British social anthropology during colonial times, which lasted quite long in anthropological studies and especially in the common local language used by media and often politicians, Konkomba would be an 'acephalous', 'stateless', 'segmentary' group, that is to say that they didn't have centralised political organisations higher than kinship groups.¹⁵ I wouldn't use here this definition, that has a negative, privative connotation ('acephalous' as without head, 'stateless' in this context as without state structures, 'segmentary' as just a part of a whole something); I would rather prefer to define their political system as a diffuse power, by following the suggestion of Jean-Loup Amselle to avoid any crystallisation of typological definitions and move forward to a political anthropology that focus on the forms of power, instead to concentrate on the classification of political systems.¹⁶ A convincing analysis of the relevance of the forms of diffuse, or 'soft power', in their capacity to intersect with neighbouring models and thus welcoming the multicultural, has been recently provided by Marshall Sahlins and David Graeber.¹⁷ This means to highlight first of all the existence of a political system among these societies, and secondly to drive the attention towards their scattered, decentralised, fluid system that allow different centres, defined by the presence of a land shrine and a land priest, to spread power until the encounter with other similar centres.¹⁸

15 Meyer Fortes, Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, eds., *African Political Systems*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1940; John Middleton, David Tait, *Tribes Without Rulers: Studies in African Segmentary Systems*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1958.

16 Jean-Loup Amselle, *Logiques métisses : anthropologie de l'identité en Afrique et ailleurs*, Paris, Paillet, 1999, [1990].

17 David Graeber, Marshall Sahlins, *On Kings*, Chicago, IL, Hau Books, 2017.

18 Giulia Casentini, 'Different Ideas of Border and Border Construction in Northern Ghana: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives', *Ghana Studies*, 17, 2014, 177–202.

Historically, the Konkomba have been portrayed as the periphery of politically centralised kingdoms, like Dagomba, Nanumba, Gonja, Mamprusi, Anufo; being subjected to their economic and political control meant that the Konkomba are still today in a condition of subordination for what concern the access to land and political representation. Konkomba, Dagomba, Nanumba and Anufo are settled in the region included between the medium Volta basin (Black Volta and White Volta Rivers) to the west, and the River Oti, more eastern. These groups have maintained strong relationships and developed heavy conflicts; their history cannot be understood without the presence of other great political entities of Western Africa like Mossi, Gonja and the Asante.¹⁹ Considered a marginal area by the first European visitors, scholars and colonial officers, named 'the hinterland' of more influential political formations,²⁰ it was actually a central node of the regional trade for at least four centuries, and developed centres of Islamic cultural diffusion,²¹ as demonstrated by the flourishing relationships with the Asante merchants active on the long distance (*batani*, pl. *batafo*) who regularly attended northern markets,²² and with Hausa trade networks. In confronting with the theme of frontier areas in Western Africa, Mabogunje and Richards suggest designing a map of the people and political formations conceived as a network, a system of nodes of economic and political power that were connected by a system of commercial ties, patronage, tributary relationships, migration movements.²³ The regional dimension, often relegated into the background in favour of a reading that would privilege connections between the local dynamics and the global dimension, is indeed a crucial perspective that can highlight how some fundamental equilibrium and conflictual choices, historical and contemporary, were shaped.²⁴

19 Ivor Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975.

20 Robert Sutherland Rattray, *The Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1932.

21 Nehemia Levtzion, 'Commerce et Islam chez les Dagomba du Nord-Ghana', *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 23, 4, 1968, 723–743.

22 Kwame Arhin, 'Aspects of the Ashanti northern trade in the Nineteenth century', *Africa*, 40, 4, 1970, 363–373.

23 Akin L. Mabogunje, Paul Richards, 'Land and People: Models of Spatial and Ecological Process in West African History', in J.F. Ade Ajay, Michael Crowder, eds., *History of West Africa*, New York, NY, Longman, 1971; Christine Oppong, 'Local Migration in Northern Ghana', *Ghana Journal of Sociology*, 3, 1, 1967, 1–16; Toyin Falola, Aribidesi Usman, *Movements, Borders and Identities in Africa*, Rochester, NY, University of Rochester Press, 2009.

24 Allen M. Howard, 'Nodes, Networks, Landscapes, and Regions: Reading the Social History of Tropical Africa 1700s–1920', in Allen M. Howard, Richard M. Shain, eds., *The Spatial*

When colonial powers started confronting with local institutions, the identification of trustable political and administrative hierarchies was a crucial requirement in the construction of all their systems of control, and Konkomba's weakness in this sense was perceived as an underlying problem. British colonial system tended to get around it in a pragmatic way, relying on the institutional support offered by the presence of centralised societies: in practice, diffuse power groups were considered as integral part of the sphere of influence of neighbouring groups, and given in their custody for the purposes of the colonial administration. This practice has contributed to the construction of a local discourse based on the legitimacy to the access to land and political rights that would exclude diffuse power groups,²⁵ by exasperating a condition of long, internal conflict that gave rise to a civil war in Ghana in 1994.

However, the historical reality was probably very different. As demonstrated by many relevant studies,²⁶ before European colonization diffuse power groups occupied the interstices of kingdoms of the Voltaic region, while maintaining during time a strong autonomy. They were often raided and occasionally forced to the payment of a tribute in some periods of the year, but they were never totally incorporated in other political realities, nor their tributary condition was systematic. Akosua Perbi reported in her work on slavery in Ghana that Mamprusi, Dagomba and Gonja occupied a strategic position in the regional slave trade and became important slave suppliers in the Northern markets.²⁷ Most probably, the Konkomba were among the communities that were frequently raided. The relationship between different groups inhabiting the area, in particular between the seventeenth and the end of the nineteenth century, was mainly characterized by ongoing political and economic negotiation, often conflictual, and by a great mobility.²⁸ As underlined also by Fabio Viti, precolonial state structures were characterised by a perception

Factor in African History: The Relationship of the Social, Material, and Perceptual, Leiden and Boston, MA, Brill, 2005, 21–140.

25 Pauline E. Peters, 'Inequality and Social Conflicts over Land in Africa', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 4, 3, 2004, 269–314.

26 Jack Goody, 'The Mande and the Akan Hinterland', in Jan Vansina, Raymond Mauny, Louis-Vincent Thomas, eds., *The Historian in Tropical Africa*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 193–218, 1964; Carola Lentz, Richard Kuba, *Land and the Politics of Belonging in West Africa*, Leiden, Brill, 2006.

27 Akosua Adoma Perbi, *A History of Indigenous Slavery in Ghana: From the 15th to the 19th Century*, Accra, Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2004.

28 For a detailed reconstruction of the political relationships in the area from the seventeenth century onwards, see the collection of locally produced documents translated from Arabic and interpreted in Ivor Wilks, Nehemia Levtzion, Bruce M. Haight, *Chronicles*

and management of borders and frontiers as mobile, fluid, porous places of encounter, but also conflict, between different influences of power.²⁹ We have little information about the pre-colonial dynamics of the region, despite, perhaps, the translation from the Arabic of the *ajami* manuscripts contained in the Chronicles from Gonja.³⁰ We can intersect these narratives with the first ethnographies of the area, and we find out that the response of the Konkomba to the raids organised against them by their neighbouring groups were confronted through the socio-political instrument of the *mantotiib*, that is the obligation of people belonging to the same kin to offer support in case of difficulties, conflicts, but also when performing a ritual over land or a funeral.³¹ The institution of the *mantotiib* is crucial for the functioning of society with diffuse power like the Konkomba. As convincingly pointed out by Benjamin Talton, there is a profound tie that connects those belonging to the same clan and to the various lineages, so much so that everyone is involved in case of an offence perpetrated to someone of the same kin. In case of retaliation, indeed, feuds that arose can reach great dimensions and eventually involve entire major lineages.³²

By constructing fixed boundaries between different political kingdoms of the Northern regions and including forcibly diffuse power groups, colonial powers actively contributed to the progressive loss of autonomy of the latter. During colonial times, for example, centralised groups continued to carry out raids to search for slave and semi-slave labour force among political entities on their margins, but in the eyes of colonial administrators these practices were understood as forms of tax exaction, and indeed legally recognised. From the beginning of the twentieth century, Konkomba suffered increasingly from these incursions, legitimised by the colonial power. In addition, the imposition of the new colonial border between the French and the British divided in two halves their territory and brought about disruption in their everyday lives.

from *Gonja: A Tradition of West African Muslim Historiography*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986.

29 Fabio Viti, 'Centro e periferia negli Stati dell'Africa precoloniale', in Pierluigi Valsecchi, ed., *Africa tra Stato e società. Scritti in omaggio a Gianpaolo Calchi Novati*, Milan, Franco Angeli, 2009, 13–32.

30 Wilks, Levtzion, Haight, *Chronicles from Gonja*.

31 David Tait, *The Konkomba of Northern Ghana*, London, Oxford University Press, 1961; Benjamin A. Talton, *Politics of Social Change in Northern Ghana: The Konkomba Struggle for Political Equality*, New York, NY, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

32 Talton, *Politics of Social Change in Northern Ghana*.

I have analysed the causes that underly the local conflict, with particular attention to the Konkomba community who is redefining its own political status in order to cope with political changes and challenges produced during colonial and post-colonial phases. Thus, I have worked with Konkomba in both sides of the border and investigated their contemporary relation with the territorial partition and the historical path that led to it, by analysing documents from the colonial archives.

3 The Movement of the Border

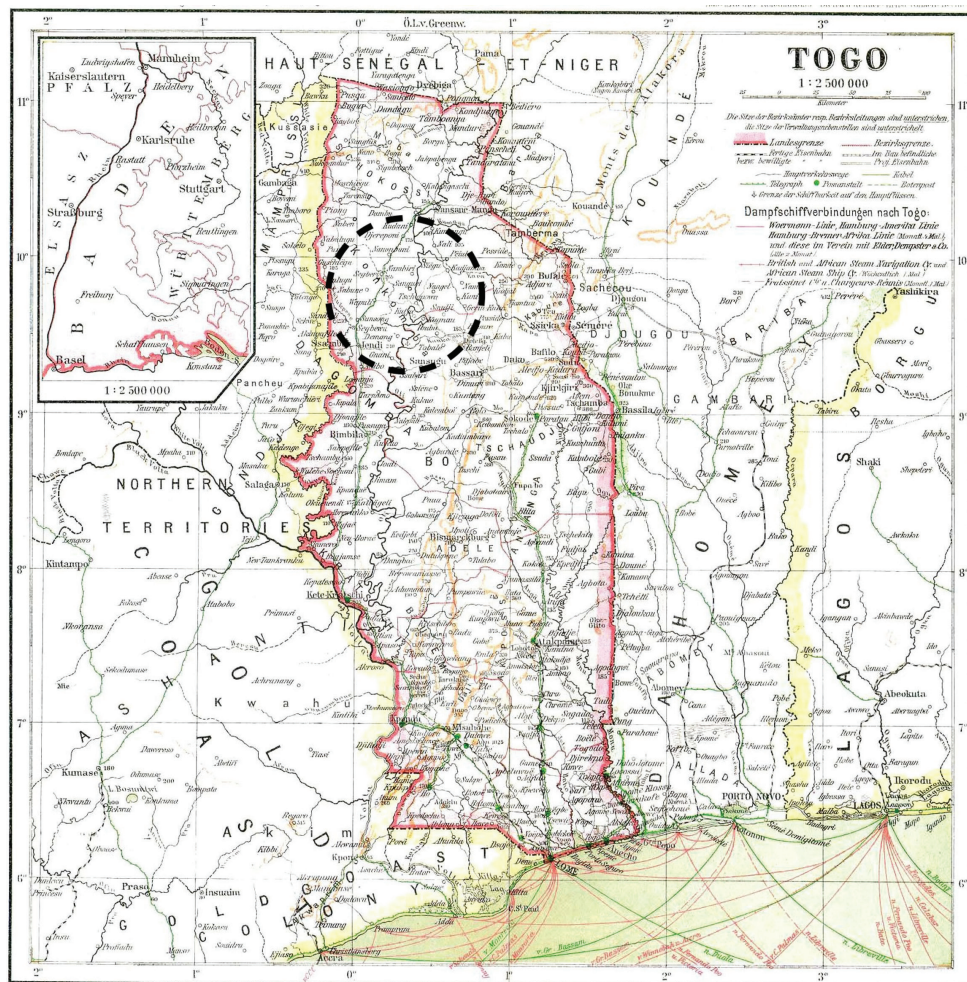
The construction of the contemporary border between Ghana and Togo lasted a long time, from the ratification of the first agreement between Germany and Great Britain on 14 July 1886,³³ to the nomination of a Border Demarcation Commission in 1972, when it was necessary to go back again to that process due to the reunification struggle of the Ewe, located in the coastal area.³⁴

From 1886 to 1914 what is now the eastern part of Ghana together with modern day Togo constituted a single colonial possession under German control, Deutsch Togoland, that was subsequently divided in two Mandates of the Society of Nations after the German defeat in the First World War. The Mandates were entrusted respectively to Great Britain (west) and France (east), that had occupied the German colonial possession during the war.³⁵ The border between the new colonial powers was defined in the Anglo-French agreements of 1919, while the Mandatary condition was ratified from the Society of Nations on 20 July 1922: the western part was called British Togoland and was annexed to the British colony of the Gold Coast, and the eastern part, which was wider, constituted the French Togoland. From 1946 the two Mandates were administered as Trust Territories under United Nations auspices.

33 The German colonial power declared a Protectorate on coastal Togoland in 1884, while the definition of the northern part of the border happened some years later.

34 The Ewe were included at the end of the Nineteenth century under the German possession, and the divided in two halves between French and British Togo. They have made claims for reunification since decolonisation. See Ulrike Schuerkens, *Du Togo allemand aux Togo et Ghana indépendants*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2001; Dennis G. Austin, 'The Uncertain Frontier: Ghana-Togo', in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 1, 2, 1963, 139–145; Paul Nugent, *Smugglers, Secessionists, and Loyal Citizens on the Ghana-Togo Frontier: The Lie of the Borderlands since 1914*, Athens, OH, Ohio University Press, 2002; Chiara Brambilla, 'Confini, cartografia e identità: l'esempio della frontiera coloniale tra Ghana e Togo', *Bollettino dell'Associazione Italiana di Cartografia (AIC)*, 123–124, 2005, 271–282.

35 Akin Olorunfemi, 'The Contest for Salaga: Anglo-German Conflict in the Gold Coast Hinterland', *Journal of African Studies*, 11, 1, 1984, 15–24.



MAP 5.2 German Togo, 1886–1914

Legend: dashed circle = Konkomba territory

SOURCE: PAUL SPRIGADE, M. MOISEL, 'TOGO', IN *DEUTSCHE KOLONIALLEXIKON*, LEIPZIG, VERLAG VON QUELLE & MEYER, 1920

In 1957, British Togoland became independent as integral part of the new state of Ghana, while French Togoland got independence in 1960 with the name of Togo.³⁶

36 Leo J. de Haan, 'Partition of the German Togo Colony: Economic and Political Consequences', *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism*, 15, 1–2, 1988, 33–41; Schuerkens, *Du Togo allemand aux Togo et Ghana indépendants*.

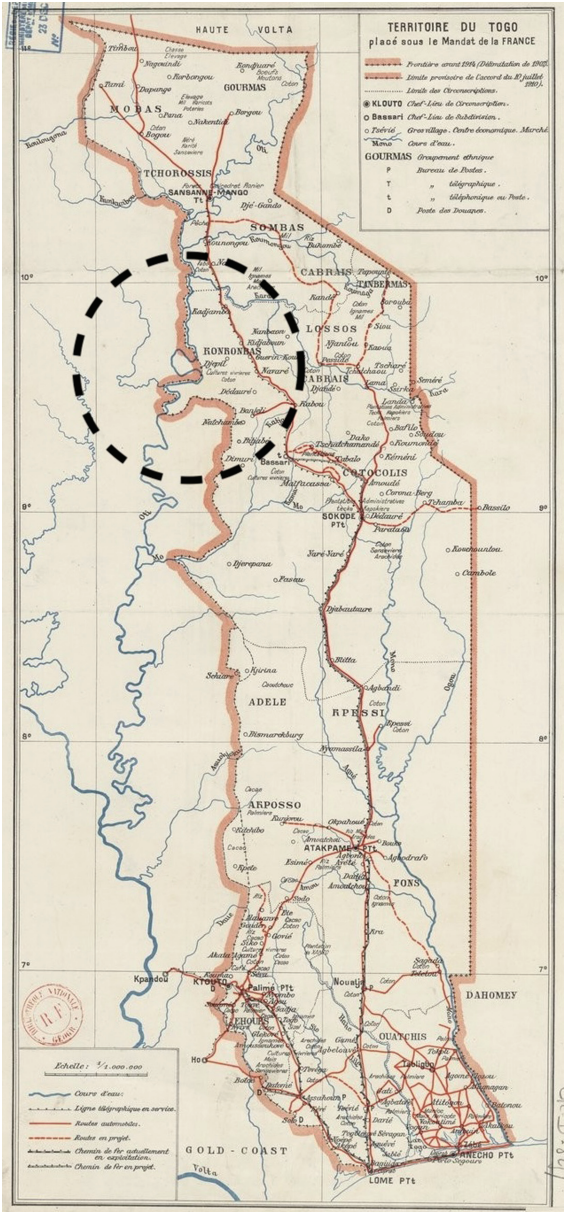


MAP 5.3 Konkomba territory in German Togo, 1902

SOURCE: PAUL SPRIGADE, 'KARTE VON TOGO', BERLIN, E. VOHSEN, 1902, BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE, DÉPARTEMENT CARTES ET PLANS, GE C-3168 [DETAIL], AVAILABLE ONLINE AT [HTTPS://GALLICA.BNF.FR/ARK:/12148/BTV1B53060536W/F3.ITEM.R=TOGO.ZOOM#](https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/BTV1B53060536W/F3.ITEM.R=TOGO.ZOOM#) (LAST ACCESSED ON 14 OCTOBER 2024)

It is particularly interesting to note that the movement of the border brought about new disruptions: during German colonial occupation the Konkomba were together under the same territorial possession, while with the partition in two Mandates they were divided. The villages located in the westernmost part of their territory were put under British control, and the others under French jurisdiction. The debate on the layout of the new border lasted many years and interested not only the two colonial powers controlling the area, but also local chiefs and figures of power.³⁷ Konkomba communities, for their part, were not considered among those groups that colonisers, especially the British, wanted to or needed to confront with in managing the partition. The movement of the border, though, would appear quite frequently in the colonial documents regarding various issues concerning Konkomba territory, proving that the

37 Olofunfemi, 'The Contest for Salaga', 15–24.



MAP 5.4 French Togo, 1922–1960.

Legend: dashed circle = Konkomba territory

SOURCE: ‘TERRITOIRE DU TOGO PLACÉ SOUS LE MANDAT DE LA FRANCE’, NO AUTHOR, PARIS, 1925, BIBLIOTHEQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE, DÉPARTEMENT CARTES ET PLANS, GE D-8257, AVAILABLE ONLINE AT [HTTPS://GALLICA.BNF.FR/ARK:/12148/BTVIB84586497.R=TOGO?RK=64378;0](https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/BTVIB84586497.R=TOGO?RK=64378;0) (LAST ACCESSED ON 14 OCTOBER 2024)

border had the power to shape not only colonial strategies but discourses, rhetoric, representation and imagination, which definitely reverberated on local perceptions, narratives, and resistance.

4 The Konkomba and the Colonial Administrations

The administrative strategies put in place by colonial powers, British and French, were different under many aspects, and profoundly influenced the shaping and reshaping of relationships between groups and the territorial administration.

The British government ruled more indirectly than the French administration, which followed a centralised administrative project that came with a transformative republican ideology and had more administrative resources.³⁸ British colonies, instead, employed less administrative effort and devolved more power to local authorities when centralised institutions existed.³⁹ In this sense, the partition of German Togoland after World War I provides an interesting case to analyse the impact of British and French colonisations on a territory that was previously under the same, German colonial rule.⁴⁰

Initially, from 1914 until the 1930s, the administration of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast, including the northern section of British Togoland, followed the system of the direct rule, conceived in opposition to the indirect rule, already applied successfully in the centre and southern regions of the Gold Coast. In the opinion of the British administrators, in the northern part of the colony it wasn't possible to rely on the management of structured and politically organised kingdoms comparable to the Asante. Local kingdoms seemed to lack centralisation, the authority of local chiefs was perceived as fragmented and ineffective, to the extent that British indirect rule appeared to be not functional for the area.⁴¹ For this reason, the initial strategy of colonial

38 Carl Müller-Crepon, 'Continuity or Change? (In)direct Rule in British and French Colonial Africa', *International Organization*, 74, 2020, 707–741.

39 Arthur Ijaola Asiawaju, 'The Aleketu of Ketu and the Onimek of Meko: The Changing Status of two Yoruba Rulers under French and British Rule', in Michael Crowder, Obaro Ikime, eds., *West African Chiefs: Their Changing Status under Colonial Rule and Independence*, Ife, University of Ife Press, 1970, 134–161; Michael Crowder, *West Africa under Colonial Rule*, London, Hutchinson, 1968.

40 Denis Cogneau, Alexander Moradi, 'Borders that Divide: Education and Religion in Ghana since Colonial Times', *The Journal of Economic History*, 74 3, 2014, 694–729.

41 Robert Sutherland Rattray, *The Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1932.

control was based on the widespread presence of British colonial administrators in the management and the political reorganisation of the relationships between different groups. Here, the comparison with the warrant chiefs in Igboland and its complexities is useful and interesting.⁴² The case of warrant chiefs speaks about a situation in which British colonial authorities shaped chieftaincy in a political space previously organised as a diffused power society. This has caused a severe disruption in Igbo's social and political structures, by inserting a coercive figure of power that, simply to answer the colonial interests and needs, exerted a considerable degree of violence, coercion, and eventually corruption.⁴³ Nevertheless, as noted by many authors,⁴⁴ the absence of chiefs did not mean that Igbo society was egalitarian; in any case, though, the imposition of arbitrarily nominated chiefs responding to the colonial power caused a considerable crumbling of their local governance. Indeed, warrant chiefs were not accountable to their kin, they were often perceived as civil servants and, even more often, as mere instruments of the colonial power so much so local revolts and attempts at dismissal took place. If one tries to compare this with the Konkomba condition, very challenging points can be raised and confronted. It is the division of the Konkomba under two different colonial powers that allow, in my opinion, a fruitful comparison and a fertile discussion. My hypothesis is that Konkomba communities were never fully forced to abandon their social and political structures, and this has allowed them to re-organise, where necessary, by keeping their system. This is due to a variety of factors, not least the scarce interest that all the colonial administrations had in the arid, poor and unproductive North. Nevertheless, I believe that the actions undertaken by different colonial powers and the relationships that the Konkomba had with their neighbours profoundly shaped their current path to a political recognition, especially in Ghana. In French controlled areas, chiefs were nominated to help French administration, but if we observe the chiefly structure of Konkomba communities in Togo today we can see that the elders and the *utindaan*⁴⁵ still play a central role in taking decisions. The chief does exist, but he cannot move without proper consultation with other figures

42 I thank one of the two anonymous reviewers for the suggestion to elaborate on the comparison between the Konkomba case and the more famous colonial creation of warrant chiefs in Igboland, Nigeria.

43 Femi Adegbulu, 'From Warrant Chiefs to Ezeship: A Distortion of Traditional Institution in Igboland?', *Afro Asian Journal of Social Sciences*, 2, 2.2, 2011.

44 See, for example, Godfrey N. Uzoigwe, 'Evolution and Relevance of Autonomous Communities in Precolonial Igboland', *Journal of Third-World Studies*, 21, 1, 139–150, 2004.

45 Earth priest in Likpakpaaln (Konkomba language). This very important figure of power superintends the management and the rituality over land.

of power. A different situation took place in British controlled areas, where chiefs were used much more consistently to act on behalf of colonial administration. The Konkomba were put under the control of chiefs belonging to other groups, while they could keep entirely their own system based on diffuse power, where kin relations were central in the management of power and the role of elders and *utindaan* wasn't discussed or challenged by British colonial administrators.⁴⁶

Indeed, it was only in the 1930s that the British decided to exploit the administrative structures of local kingdoms in the Northern Territories, too. In this phase, a new kind of specific colonial violence took place, that is to say the territorial partition for administrative purposes and for the exploitation of natural and human resources through the mandate of local powers. Colonial governmentality expressed here a series of contradictions: the passage to a system that was perceived to be/conceived to be closer to local cultural and political specificities did not allow for a less coercive control but produces a simple reconfiguration of powers that actually reinforced local conflicts. It was a power device that increased existing imbalances and created new ones, affecting mainly those populations that did not respond to the standardised vision of the colonial powers: populations that are not organised according to the centralised model, like the Konkomba.

French administrators, instead, by following the model of the direct colonial administration, opted for a different kind of territorial partition and management. They chose a system based on the centralisation of power and aiming at a division of the land that followed more the administrative needs than alleged 'ethnic' needs.⁴⁷ This means that, contrary to the British system that focused on the recognition of local kingdoms and the mandate to them of some administrative aspects, the French colonial project highlighted the direct intervention on local political administration, often ignoring and overcoming local authorities. As affirmed by Delafosse, talking about the direct administration, 'we have to intervene discretely, apart from economic questions in which we

46 Nowadays, due to the relevance of the chieftaincy institution in Ghana that is recognized and regulated by the 1992 Constitution, the Konkomba are working towards the construction and definition of their own chieftaincy, with a chief (*ubor*) nominated among elders of different clans and the maintenance of the figure of authority of the *utindaan*.

47 The institution of the *Afrique Occidentale Française* (AOF) and of the *Afrique Equatoriale Française* (AEF) were examples of this system of territorial division and restructuring that respond uniquely to colonial administrative needs. Schuerkens, *Du Togo allemand aux Togo et Ghana indépendants*.

will direct the chiefs, who are poorly prepared for this role'.⁴⁸ Despite a certain hostility towards local structures of power, the French colonial administration depended on local intermediaries to collect taxes, enlist forced labour, recruit soldiers and maintain the local infrastructures. For these purposes, chiefs were appointed based on their loyalty to the French colonial power rather than their precolonial status. They were stripped of their traditional authority and converted into colonial agents under the supervision of the *commandant de cercle*.⁴⁹

Obviously, both Great Britain and France had the same goal, namely the maximum administrative efficiency, but they reached it by following two different paths and putting in place two different mechanisms of control and understanding of local relationships.

While Great Britain incorporated British Togoland in the Gold Coast colony and administered it following the system already in place in the rest of the territory, France, that was managing a new separate colony, had to submit more rigidly to the rules of political management of Mandates, that were different from those in place for ordinary colonies. Indeed, French Togo had a kind of administrative autonomy that, even if just relative, brought to a different management compared to the other colonies of the *Afrique Occidentale Française* (AOF).

The first Commissioner of the French Republic, Paul Auguste François Bonnacarrère, opposed firmly to the annexation of Togo to Dahomey, understanding that the new territory was bringing peculiar issues that needed to be managed separately, as for example its recent history of territorial formation, its geopolitical characteristics and, last but not least, the mandatory condition. In 1934, after the resignation of Bonnacarrère, Togo was inserted in a unitary colonial project with Dahomey, in which the Governor of Dahomey was in charge of covering all the duties that were in the hands of the Commissioner of the French Republic in Togo. The joint rule proved to be a failure and was finally dismantled in 1936. At that point, Togo was put under the general governor of the AOF and brought back to its previous autonomous administrative condition.⁵⁰

48 Maurice Delafosse quoted in Schuerkens, *Du Togo allemand aux Togo et Ghana indépendants*, 77.

49 Müller-Crepon, 'Continuity or Change?', 707–741.

50 Cathérine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *L'Afrique Occidentale au temps des Français. Colonisateurs et colonisés (c.1860–1960)*, Paris, Éditions La Découverte, 1992.

For what concerned the territorial organisation, the French kept the same system adopted during German colonial control, which actually continued in the use of names and of the borders of the administrative districts.⁵¹

The way in which colonial powers managed and perceived local realities is fundamental to understand territorial changes and how border drawing and imposition had an influx on the lives of people inhabiting the area. British and French administrations were not only the product of different colonial models, but also of a diverse conception of the role that local groups could have in the economic development of the colony. A rich archival documentation allows us to reconstruct the specific contingent goals of the diverse colonial administrations in our area of interest, that was lacking natural and agricultural resources if compared to the most southern parts.

British colonial policy was essentially aimed at political and territorial control, due to the difficulties already experienced in managing the different groups of the area, especially the north, while the French system seemed to be oriented towards a valorisation of the limited agricultural potentiality intended to maximise taxation. British administration dedicated a lot of energies in the management of Konkomba communities in the attempt at containing what they believed to be a conflictual and destabilising force, that could disrupt the administrative efforts already implied in the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast. The brief incursions in the villages happened only in the case of litigations, murders, disorders. The District Commissioner was always accompanied by a chief, normally from the neighbouring centralised Dagomba, who helped with translation (the Konkomba, at the time, rarely spoke English, and even more rarely British administrators learnt Likpakpaaln, their language), who positioned himself as an 'intermediary' between colonial power and the peripheral Konkomba communities, acquiring a higher status. As observed by Franz Fanon in relation to the use of language in the colony, the 'native' officers were mainly interpreters; they served to convey to their fellows the master's order, and they themselves enjoyed a certain status.⁵² The marginal geographical position of Konkomba villages, enhanced by their exclusion from the communication routes built by following a project that put first the productive Southern and Central regions, reduced to a minimum the colonial interest for

51 The Togolese districts, in the first phase of the French colonial administration, were Lomé, Anécho, Atakpémé, Sokodé, Sansanne-Mango, Klouto. Contemporary Togo is divided in five Regions (Région des Savanes, de la Kara, Centrale, des Plateaux, Maritime), which are divided in 30 Prefectures, plus the Municipality of Lomé. Our area of study is located in the Région des Savanes, Prefecture of the Oti.

52 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, New York, Grove Press, 2008 [1952].

the area, and the local perspectives to enter the regional agricultural market.⁵³ Order and discipline seemed to be the fundamental aspects necessary for the rational and productive management of the colonial 'periphery'.

The *rapports annuels* of the French administrators in Northern Togo, instead, took place with regularity and followed a precise and constant structure: description of the path followed, population census, mapping of the rural production, updates on eventual issues (conflicts, epidemics, famine, etc). Particular attention was dedicated to the agricultural production of Konkomba communities, and consequently political quarrels in the villages were defined as 'serious' because they often implied the stealing of crops and the decreasing of the production. In a small colony like Togo, it seemed necessary to economically exploit every possibility, also in remote and destitute areas like the North of the country. The Konkomba appeared as a community difficult to manage, but their great dedication to yam cultivation contributed to produce a shared perception in French colonial administrators, who defined them 'great workers, more savages than rebels'.⁵⁴ Taxation in French controlled area was very high, and it became one of the first reasons why many people left their villages in French Togo to join their families and move into British controlled areas.

This was the case of the family of P.D., who is today resident in Saboba, Ghana, but was born in the colony of Togo in 1940s. P.D. remembered that his father moved in the Gold Coast just few years after his birth:

Following my father stories, the things that they did [in French controlled area] were not good. They taxed people too much, you had to pay for everything: if someone died, if your son had to get married. And they pretended communal work, that means that you had to work for free, to plant trees and things like that. Here in Ghana [sic], it wasn't like this, there was freedom. [...] In Togo, if you couldn't pay, they beat you.⁵⁵

According to Benjamin Talton, migration towards British controlled territory was more frequent than the one towards French colonial possessions, due to the French policy of recruitment of semi-slave labour force, compulsory

53 Paul Ladouceur, *Chiefs and Politicians: The Politics of Regionalism in Northern Ghana*, London, Longman, 1979; N.J.K. Brukum, 'Studied neglect or lack of resources? The socio-economic underdevelopment of Northern Ghana under British rule', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, New Series, 2, 1998, 117–131; Paul Naameh, 'The State and Development in Northern Ghana, 1892–1966', MA Thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London, 1993.

54 Archives nationales, Lomé, Togo, APA, 117. Doc. N°273. Mango, 2.

55 Giulia Casentini, conversation with P.D., Saboba, Ghana, 6 December 2009.

agricultural work, and heavy taxation.⁵⁶ In my opinion, though, the phenomenon was more complex and involved at the same time communities that were living on both sides of the border, enhancing a constant movement in both directions. This happened, and happens also today, because the reasons behind this transborder mobility were and are numerous and related not only to colonial violence and pressure, but also to various aspect of the communitarian life: people usually move to buy and sell in local markets, to visit families and to get married, or they flee after having committed a crime, to avoid an arrange marriage, to escape conflict, or external control. Moreover, as we will see, British colonial control was different but as coercive as the French one; Konkomba individuals frequently decided to flee from the British side, too, and colonial documents demonstrate this.

5 The Colonial Perception and the Invention of the 'Konkomba Attitude'

Notwithstanding the different strategies adopted by colonial powers, the Konkomba suffered historically from the same stigma in front both French and British administrations: their reputation as a violent, savage, backward, uncontrollable group, already reported by the German colonial power, continued during the Mandate period and remains, somehow, vivid also in contemporary times. Colonial administrators' reports offer various elements to understand their relationship and their prejudice towards Konkomba communities, describing an attitude characterized by lack of collaboration with the colonial authorities, sometimes with the use of violence, in which we can recognise a resistance to the colonial presence and to the imposition of colonial apparatus of control such as taxation, semi-slave labour recruitment, limitation to the mobility, and the intrusion in local conflicts and feuds.

It is exactly the presence of the border that allows us to consider the condition and the action of Konkomba from two points of views, the British and the French one. This double instrument of observation is analytically inspiring because it permits from one side to evaluate the consequences of two different colonial managements on the same peripheral group, and from the other side to analyse the strategies used by Konkomba communities to hinder the colonial project, often using the opportunity represented by the border.

⁵⁶ Talton, *Politics of Social Change in Northern Ghana*.

Frantz Fanon analysed thoroughly how the colonial power worked towards the 'correction' of the colonised subjects to make them fit into a social environment of the colonial type, in a perspective that assumed a 'systematised negation of the other, a frenzied determination to deny the other any attribute of humanity'.⁵⁷ As we shall see analysing colonial documents, the de-humanisation and reduction to a lower status compared to Europeans and to other local kingdoms were some of the elements that characterised the construction of the colonial idea of the Konkomba, that was functional to the legitimisation of coercive and violent measures adopted against them.

The Konkomba constituted an anomaly in the eyes of colonial powers and numerous documents report about the difficulties in managing and ordering such a complex group. In the informal diary of the Chief Commissioner for the Northern Territories (CCNT) Cecil Hamilton Armitage (British Gold Coast), in November 1917, we read that:

The Konkomba are a singularly interesting tribe [...] They can be aptly described as 'the Irish' of Togoland: pure love of fighting for fighting's sake is at the bottom of most of the disturbances that occur, and the young Konkomba has recourse to his bow and poisoned arrows as joyously and light-heartedly as the Irish man to his 'shillelagh'⁵⁸. He sets little value on human life and a remark made by a Konkomba with regard to a farm dispute is typical of his attitude towards it – better a few dead men than an empty stomach.⁵⁹

The tone of these considerations, dating back to the 1917 – when Eastern Togoland hadn't been occupied yet by Great Britain, but there was already in place a negotiation with the Ya Na –⁶⁰ was maintained and even emphasised many

57 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York, NY, Grove Press, 2021 [1963], 182.

58 'Shillelagh: a thick, heavy wooden stick, often with lumps on the surface, traditionally used in Ireland as a weapon.' *Cambridge Dictionary Online*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/shillelagh> (last accessed on 6 October 2024)

59 Public Records and Archives Administration Department of Ghana (PRAAD), Administration (ADM), Accra, Ghana, ADM 56/1/177.

60 The Ya Na is the paramount chief of the Dagomba kingdom, that at the time was divided in two halves by the border between German and British colonial possessions. It was reported in colonial documents that the Ya Na worked closely to the British administrators to see his territory reunited under the same colonial power, since the partition brought instability and internal conflicts. On the specific case of the Ya Na Abdulai see Martin Staniland, *The Lions of Dagbon: Political Change in Northern Ghana*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975; Ladouceur, *Chiefs and Politicians*; Casentini, 'Il confine come agente di costruzione della rappresentanza politica', 118–135.

years later, in 1940, when in occasion of a fight among Konkomba in Zegberi, the CCNT W.J.A. Jones affirmed:

The Konkomba truly reverted to a state of savagery. For twenty-five years they have been a festering sore on an otherwise healthy administrative body. At times there were reasons to hope that the sore would yield to normal treatment; [...]. I am now convinced that only by drastic treatment will it permanently be cured. To change the metaphor, we must cease to treat the Konkomba as naughty, but amusing, children. Leniency they do not understand; they consider it to be a sign of fear.⁶¹

British colonial control had not loosened in all those years; it rather assumed an even more intrusive form especially for what concern the local political dynamics, with the consequence of exacerbating relationship between groups and different figures of authority. Fanon profoundly elaborated on the semiology constructed by colonial power (in his case, French in Algeria) that defined the mental backwardness of the colonised and justified strong decisions and actions brought by the administration. In this construction, the reference to a 'childlike mentality' is paramount.⁶²

Very similar in the tone was the report of the French administrator Léon Victor Bauche, who in 1923 referred to Bonnacarrère, Governor of French Togoland, and to the results of his inspection in the north of the country:

M. le Capitaine Lucien, Commandant de cercle de Sansanne-Mango [...] m'a fait connaître l'incident récemment survenu dans le voisinage et causé par des auteurs de troubles du petit groupement Konkomba de Nantolé (Njatul). Vous voudrez bien trouver sous le présent pli copie des rapports officiels sur cette affaire dont l'origine sans aucun portée politique est un crime de droit commun qui dégénéra en rébellion ouverte [...]. Les Konkombas de notre zone [...] on depuis trop longtemps abusé de leur réputation d'enfants terribles et déclaré qu'ils n'admettaient pas l'immixtion de notre administration dans leurs querelles sanguinaires vidées par vendettas, successives et préméditées après libation de bière de mil.⁶³

61 PRAAD, Accra, ADM 11/1/1801, Case No. C.S. 310-3485/93/28 S.F.4.

62 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 224.

63 Archives nationales, Lomé, Togo, APA, 117. Doc. N°673. Mango, 2, 'Mr. Captain Lucien, the *Commandant de Cercle* of Sansanne-Mango [...] told me about the recent incident caused by some riotous youths belonging to the little Konkomba group of Njatul. You will see

Again, in 1932, the *Commandant de Cercle* of Sokodé, Paul Louis Mahoux, said about an episode of conflict happened in the Konkomba village of Takpamba:

Nous sommes en présence d'une population pour qui la vie humaine est très peu de chose et dont la coutume exige impérieusement que le sang soit vengé dans le sang.⁶⁴

The first interesting aspect regards the similarity drawn by both French and British colonial powers between the Konkomba and children. This expression clearly explains the paternalistic attitude that does not refer to the Konkomba as a group with its own political subjectivity, its own system of relationships, and ultimately its own strategy to resist the colonial control. To assimilate them to children means to deprive them of their agency, their legitimacy of thought and action, and their political decision, that is recognised, by contrast, to adults. Europeans are the only ones to consider themselves 'adults', which in practical terms means that they invest themselves of the authority and power to intervene in local dynamics through 'severe' measures. By refusing to recognise the agency of Konkomba communities, however, they failed at understanding the equilibrium of powers that underlie these episodes described as 'without political significance'. The reference to the lack of political intention in the episodes of violence carried out by the colonised is identified also by Fanon as a crucial element of the colonial machine, aimed at eliminating any possible element of reflection on individuality and social freedom conceived in the local sense.⁶⁵

The constant reference to 'futile reasons' that would push the Konkomba to a constant and open fight, due to their temper 'naturally' directed towards the pleasure in bloodshed, is another sign of the incapacity and unwillingness to understand local political dynamics, which is a direct consequence of the paternalistic attitude already considered above.

It is frequently reported that the Konkomba are used to resort to violence, both during colonial times and in contemporary episodes like the 1994

in the official report that this incident has no political relevance, it has been caused by a civil offense which has degenerated in an open rebellion. [...] The Konkomba living in our area [...] have taken advantage of their reputation of *enfant terribles* for a long time, and they declared that they won't tolerate any interference of our administration in their bloodthirsty and premeditated feuds, accomplished after millet beer libation'.

64 Archives nationales, Lomé, Togo, APA, 117, Doc. N°266. Mango, 2, 'We are in front of a population that treats human life with little respect, for whom their customs imperiously requires that bloodshed must be revenged through bloodshed'.

65 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*.

conflict. David Tait, who produced the first ethnography of Konkomba communities, published in the 1950s, accurately described how violence is used by Konkomba communities on various occasions; in his analysis it is clear that violence is a constitutive, not disruptive, element of the society.⁶⁶ However, as affirmed by Fabio Viti, we cannot forget that war and violence are political choices, the outcomes of internal negotiations and of the consultation of supranatural entities. The use of violence cannot be analysed as an ecological imperative; we must consider, though, that all the societies can be violent or warlike if they are called to defend themselves and offend, without understanding these actions as integral part of their own 'culture'.⁶⁷ Indeed, in addition to the need to manage internal disputes, the Konkomba, due to their diffuse power political structure, have historically been in a constant position of defense against more organised and structured neighbouring populations (Dagomba, Nanumba, Anufo). Moreover, as suggested by Michel Izard, in a region where hunting is a highly valued activity, where groups must protect themselves from slave raids, and where the recruitment of mercenary militias is common, everyone is armed, and ready to use weapons.⁶⁸ The encounter with colonial powers represented for sure another oppressive element to fight with the choice of violence.

Colonial occupation changed profoundly also the political relationships between local groups, introducing a hierarchy of values that sets aside the last place for those who were not useful to the colonial administration, who became considered as 'children', deprived of agency and political authority. However, as we have seen, Konkomba's use of violence was placed in an already conflictual framework, that was highly exasperated by the colonial experience.

6 Practices of Colonial Control and Violence

Before the end of the First World War, the British moved eastwards to occupy portions of German Togoland and started establishing relationships with Konkomba communities. Attempts at managing this peripheral and scattered group were oriented to stem violent episodes, and to establish a relation based on a kind of persuasive subjugation. By reading the personal diary of the Chief

66 David Tait, 'The Political System of Konkomba', *Africa*, 23, 3, 1953, 213–223; Tait, *The Konkomba*.

67 Fabio Viti, ed., *Guerra e violenza in Africa occidentale*, Milan, Franco Angeli, 2004.

68 Michel Izard, 'Parlare di guerra in antropologia', in Fabio Viti, ed., *Guerra e violenza in Africa occidentale*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2004, 23–37.

Commissioner for the Northern Territories (CCNT) Cecil Hamilton Armitage, we can understand of what these attempts to include the Konkomba in the British colonial project of occupation of German Togoland consisted, and which rhetoric was in use at that time. In 1917, Armitage took note of some relevant aspects of his patrol of Konkomba territories:

I scored my most effective point when I asked the young men themselves if they wanted the Germans back again. Following on the invariable outburst of dissent, I told them that if such were the case, they must help us to win the war. I then paused, while the young men looked anxiously at each other: evidently fearing that a demand for recruits was about to be made. In the midst of a tense silence, I then informed them that there was only one way in which they could help us, and that was by refraining in future from killing their own brothers and from indulging in blood feuds: by generally keeping the peace and by giving the District Political Officer no trouble. The look of relief that passed like a wave over their faces [...] and they promised that in the future everyone would be on his best behaviour to help to win the war. I then told the Elders that if any of their young men's blood became so heated that they must need cool it by fighting, they should send them to the DPO, who would hand them over to me at Tamale when I would make real soldiers and men of them. [...] I concluded by pointing out their cowardice and folly in fighting with and killing their own brothers, when thousands of white men were laying down their lives in order to secure freedom and peace in the world.⁶⁹

The rhetoric used by the CCNT is clear: he tried to manipulate reality to his advantage, making Konkomba communities to believe that the defeat of the Germans in the war in Europe would have brought the liberation of Konkomba territories under German control, by exploiting a persuasive and paternalistic dialectic that was typical of the colonial system in that historical period.⁷⁰ This colonial dialectic had no shame in openly revealing its own exploitative and racialised project: Armitage's words disclose precisely how the colonial administration perceived local groups. Local authority is completely overpassed,

69 PRAAD, Accra, ADM 56/1/177.

70 N.J.K. Brukum, 'Studied neglect or lack of resources? The socio-economic underdevelopment of Northern Ghana under British rule', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, New Series, 2, 1998, 117–131; Badjow Tcham, 'Le pays Konkomba : l'impossible pacification (1896–1946)', in Nicoué Lodjou Gayibor, ed., *Les Togolais face à la colonisation*, Lomé, Presses de l'UB, 1994, 151–211; Talton, *Politics of Social Change in Northern Ghana*.

local customs in dealing with crime is totally unacknowledged, and indeed if a young man committed a violent act only the colonial power would have the capacity to manage it. Moreover, here Armitage underlined the idea through which the only valuable expressions of courage and force are those directed towards the war efforts in Europe, recalling other works reflecting on the recruitment of African soldiers for the First World War, in which the rhetoric around the disciplining of the warrior instinct and the exploitation of other 'typical' characteristic of some groups is analysed.⁷¹

In 1915, an ordinance on the regulation of punishments in case of robbery, murder, and noncompliance with colonial law in the Protectorate of the Northern Territories, stated:

Where within any village or district a person is unlawfully killed, or dangerously wounded by unlawful attack, or the body is found of a person believed to have been unlawfully killed, the Governor may impose a fine on all or any of the inhabitants of such village or district of the member of any tribe or community resident in therein unless they can show that they did not take part in the commission of the offence and either.⁷²

In composing this regulation, the certainty of assuming that there is unlawful, and consequently lawful killing is evident, where by 'lawful killing' they define only the act perpetrated by the colonial power.

This ordinance would be systematically employed in Konkomba areas, where the colonial administration imposed extremely harsh punishments that penalised groups and not (allegedly guilty) individuals. Communities were punished as a collective body, and everyone became responsible for any crime – in the British conception of crime – that was perpetrated in their territory. With these measures, Konkomba subjectivity was denied, once again: there was no attempt to understand and interpret the reasons behind diffuse rebellions, there were no individuals responsible for committing a crime but entire communities to be quelled with violence and the destruction of properties and livestock. Here is empirically evident what Frantz Fanon said about the fight of the colonised: 'Colonialism has not simply depersonalised the colonised.

⁷¹ Joe Harris Lunn, "Les races guerrières": Racial Preconceptions in the French military about West African Soldiers during the First World War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 34, 4, 1999, 517–536.

⁷² Public Records and Archives Administration Department of Ghana (PRAAD), Northern Regional Archives (NRG), Tamale, Ghana, NRG 8/2/21, Ordinance No. 20 of 1915, Chapter 80.

The very structure of society has been depersonalised on a collective level. A colonised people is thus reduced to a collection of individuals who owe their very existence to the presence of the coloniser'.⁷³

In January 1915 the District Commissioner W.E. Gilbert went to the Konkomba village of Sambul to suppress a dispute, which had arisen 'without any apparent reason', between two sections of the village, causing the death of three people and the injuring of other 18. The DC was accompanied by the Dagomba chief of Demon⁷⁴ and 15 officers of the police force, and the day after also the Commandant Arthur Massey, from the Northern Territories Constabulary, joined the patrol. The conflict was a great cause of concern; Gilbert managed to collect 4,000 poisoned arrows that were burnt by colonial authorities.⁷⁵

In those years, the Konkomba issue was at the heart of the management problems of the northern regions also in French Togo. In 1932 the *Commandant de Cercle* of Sokodé, Paul Luis Mahoux, sent to the Commissioner of the French Republic in Togo the report of a complex case of feud that caused the death of two people in the Konkomba village of Takpamba, and involved also other villages located in the British part of Togo. After having meticulously described the case, and hoped for a resolution of the conflict in collaboration with the British District Commissioner of Yendi, Mahoux wrote some general considerations on the management of the problems continuously caused by this population:

J'estime que nous ne devons ni ne pouvons tolérer qu'une bande de 200 forcenés ivres de fureur et d'alcool puissent impunément assassiner deux hommes même par représailles immédiates. [...] Les deux victimes n'ont participé ni de près ni de loin au meurtre de Sanja ; seul leur tort aux yeux des gens de Takpamba était d'être originaires du village où le crime a été perpétré. Il serait évidemment conforme aux règlements de se saisir de ces deux cents individus et de les traduire devant la juridiction compétente. Mais est-ce possible ? Je ne le crois pas. [...] A mon avis le seul coupable réellement responsable sans cette affaire, c'est la bande entière considérée sans son ensemble et non tout ou partie de ses éléments constitutifs pris individuellement. [...] Une sanction préjudicielle a déjà été prise par l'Administrateur, Commandant de Cercle de Mango : une

73 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 219–220.

74 This is one of the first reported example of the British colonial strategy to put Konkomba communities under the control of more structured neighbouring groups, like Dagomba in this case.

75 PRAAD, Accra, ADM 56/1/300, Case No. 77/67/1925.

punition de prison a été infligée à chacun des Chefs des Soukhalas⁷⁶ du Village et à chacun des Chefs des autres agglomérations. [...] Je vous demanderais, en conséquence, Monsieur le Commissaire de la République de vouloir bien, conformément aux dispositions des articles 21, 22 et 23 du décret du 24 mars 1923 déterminant au Togo, l'exercice des pouvoirs disciplinaires, infliger au Canton de Takpamba (Cercle de Mango) une contribution collective de 3.000 francs [...]. Il est certain enfin que si nous, le Blancs, n'étions pas là, cette affaire serait loin d'être terminée.⁷⁷

It is difficult to imagine which could have been the perception of Konkomba communities in front of the operation of colonial control and violence. The contemporary narratives, that are based on the memories of the forefathers who were present during colonial times, are still resentful and reveal, at the same time, a kind of resignation towards a system of control that, through the joint venture between colonial administrations and local chiefs,⁷⁸ who were mainly Dagomba in our case, considerably reduced the space of action and political claim of Konkomba communities.

7 Practices of Resistance

The Konkomba had little bargaining power: they had few possibilities to defend themselves from colonial intrusion and, probably even less, from the

⁷⁶ 'Compound', 'section'.

⁷⁷ Archives nationales, Lomé, Togo, APA, 117, Doc. N°266. Mango, 2. 'I think that we cannot tolerate that a bunch of 200 mad individuals, livid with fury and alcohol, could assassinate two people for retaliation with impunity. The two victims [...] didn't participate to the killing of Sandja; they are just wrong, in the eyes of the people of Takpamba, of being from the village in which the crime was perpetrated. It would comply to regulation to capture these 200 individuals and summon them in the competent jurisdictions. But is it possible? I don't think so. [...] In my opinion, the responsible of this case is the entire gang, considered as a whole, and not just a part of its elements considered singularly. [...] A preliminary sanction has already been applied by the Commander of the Cercle of Mango: to imprison all the chiefs of the soukhala of the village [Takpamba] and all the other chiefs of the neighbouring communities involved. [...] I would consequently ask, Mr. Commissary of the Republic, to be allowed, following the disposition contained in the articles 21, 22 and 23 of the decree of the 24 March 1923 on Togo, to impose a collective sanction of 3,000 francs on the canton of Takpamba (cercle of Mango). [...] It is certain, however, that if we, the Whites, weren't here, all these problems would be far from being resolved'

⁷⁸ Carola Lentz, 'The Chief, the Mine Captain and the Politician: Legitimizing Power in Northern Ghana', *Africa*, 68, 1, 1998, 46–67.

collaboration between European powers and local kingdoms. Nevertheless, they were able to carry out a generalised resistance to the colonial practices of control and exploitation.

There is a widespread tendency to use the term 'resilience' in describing the forms of adaptation that border communities put in place during colonial times, in the transition to the postcolony and also in contemporary times. Wandji, for example, elaborating on the Cameroon-Gabon frontier, affirms that people living in the borderland deployed many strategies to tolerate or circumvent the presence of imposed borders on their territory, by maintaining their livelihoods, communal ties, and social organisation: all these practices can be described as resilient, and the border should be considered as their trigger.⁷⁹ Border communities, then and today, have had to constantly reassess their geographical imagination, engaging in subtle forms of 'resilience' because these are strategies matching the nature of the threats they perceive.⁸⁰ Assuming that every border has a peculiar historical and social path, I doubt that the colonial control imposed on Konkomba communities via the colonial border was widely perceived as subtle, and I challenge the idea that their strategies to carry on their lives could be just described as resilient.

I would use, instead, the term 'resistance', by borrowing the distinction proposed by Cindi Katz between resilience and resistance. The feminist scholar, drawing into her fieldwork in rural Sudan, prefer to define as 'resilience' those strategies that imply productive adaptation to a changing context: in particular, she refers to the practices of adjustment to deforestation and pasture deterioration by the community decision to radically expanding their terrain of work, by allowing, in less than two decades, young people to remain in the village and find a remunerative activity. Practices that might be understood as 'resistance', instead, refer to those actions consciously directed at altering a condition that people recognised as oppressive.⁸¹ This is the reason why I choose to talk about resistance, even if we are not in front of an organised, structured activity directed towards a specific project like the suppression of the border, or the defeat of the colonial powers. What I definitely recognise in the strategy implied by Konkomba is the conscious action to cross the border to alter the oppressive condition in which they found themselves in,

79 Dieunedort Wandji, 'Rethinking the Time and Space of Resilience beyond the West: An Example of the Post-colonial Border', *Resilience*, 7, 3, 2019, 288–303.

80 Wandji, 'Rethinking the Time and Space of Resilience beyond the West'.

81 Cindi Katz, 'Social Systems: Thinking about Society, Identity, Power and Resistance', in Nicholas Clifford, Sarah Holloway, Stephen P. Rice, Gill Valentine, eds., *Key concepts in Geography*, London, SAGE, 2009, [2003], 236–250.

characterized by heavy taxation, capillary control of their mobility, detention, severe hindrance of their social habits.

The strategy represented by the defensive war, used during the first phase of the German occupation, seemed to be abandoned in favour of mild and sporadic armed attacks, and a more frequent use of the escape and the refusal to collaborate. Cornerstone of this practice of resistance is the colonial border, which provided great opportunities for independence to the Konkomba communities inhabiting the frontier.

Certainly, the decision to abandon offensive tactics was greatly due to the widespread control under which the villages were placed. During the patrolling of the villages, colonial authorities destroyed systematically all the arrows, bows and weapons that they could find, jeopardising also the possibility to carry on hunting activities, which as mentioned was very important for the livelihoods of Konkomba communities. Most probably, though, there was also a question of political expedience: the clear military superiority of the colonial armies made armed resistance unproductive. Moreover, armed resistance itself could not assume organised and structured dimension due to the diffuse power political system of the Konkomba. Their division in clan scattered around the vast territory, that initially constituted a potential limit in their organised response against colonial powers, eventually became an important instrument of resistance.

In a report dated June 1935, by the *Commandant de Cercle* of Mango, we read:

Le recouvrement a été particulièrement très difficile en pays Konkomba où de nombreux indigènes abandonnent encore leur soukhala pour se réfugier en brousse lors de l'arrivée d'un fonctionnaire.⁸²

This report is one of numerous similar documents attesting the escape of Konkomba individuals or, sometimes, entire lineages to avoid taxation, forced labour recruitment, destruction of properties, detention.

In 1927, Gilber reported about a fight between two sections of the Konkomba villages of Kuntuli and Tschegebani. The Dagomba chief of Demon called the DC Gilbert to set the fight, but when the latter arrived the villages were deserted. Gilbert could arrest only 6 men, then he sent a message to invite everyone to come back to the villages to be judged, but his plea remained unattended:

82 Archives nationales, Lomé, Togo, APA, 30, Doc. N°1638. Mango, 2, 'The [tax] collection was particularly difficult in Konkomba countries, where numerous indigenous abandoned their soukhala to hide in the bush as soon as they know that an official is arriving'.

At 7 a.m. on the 3rd as no one came to me I went there and burnt their compounds (33) and some yams and corn, and also burnt the Headman of Tschegebani's compound. [...] I am convinced that if I had not burnt the compounds and food the other sections would have fought, sooner or later.⁸³

Colonial reports of the 1920s and 1930s recounted internal fights in the Konkomba communities living the borderland, highlighting a crucial aspect of the border as a barrier but also as an opportunity. French and British colonial administrators tried to establish a system of control which limited the trans-border mobility of their subjects, with the aim to grant the governability of their territories. By analysing some village litigations, we can better understand what the colonial border imposition may have meant for local communities.

Of great interest is the report dated 5 February 1923, regarding a litigation happened in two Konkomba villages under French colonial administration that reverberate in some sections of the Konkomba village of Saboba, under British jurisdiction. The Deputy Chief Commissioner for the Northern Territories, from Tamale, informed that:

Two Konkomba villages on the French side of the Oti River [which correspond to the border] have been fighting, and the Saboba people have been joining in. The French Commissioner informed Mr. Gilbert of this, and Mr. Gilbert has information that some French Konkombas are on our side of the River.⁸⁴

The report made by Mr. Gilbert, District Commissioner of Yendi, on the 7 February was more precise and unveiled relevant particulars:

Two villages Boman and Nalun under French administration fought over a woman on or about the 25th of last month. The Saboba people are divided into three sections: Main, Nalongni and N'jenga. The Main and Nalongni sections are related to Nalun, and N'jenga to Boman. The Main section hearing of the fight got their bows and arrows and went over to help their relatives, but very soon after crossing the river they met the Nalun people running to Saboba. They returned with them and did not fight. The N'jenga people, fearing reprisal, ran away and their corn

83 PRAAD, Accra, ADM 56/1/399, Case No. 2/6/1926.

84 PRAAD, Accra, ADM 56/1/300, Case No. 55/48/21.

and yams were, to a certain extent, looted by people from the Manin and Nalongni sections.⁸⁵

It is evident here that, even if the border has brought disruption and profound changes in Konkomba territory, it did not prevent them to move, cultivate lineage ties, perpetuate their social and conflictual communal life. Colonial administrators could take note of this, fine them following the 1915 Ordinance for the chaos caused to the colonial order but could not really stop their mobility and their creative use of the border, which express a conscious, organised effort to escape colonial control through the practice of the *mantotiib*.⁸⁶

While patrolling the villages, colonial administrators could not help but take note of the continuous mobility of some sections, on both sides of the border. In 1935, the French reported that:

Aucun exode m'a été signalé dans les divers cantons visités à l'exception de deux soukhalas du village de Namou (Canton de Takpamba) qui sont parties en Gold Coast pour rejoindre leurs parents.⁸⁷

In 1923, Gilbert, on the British side of the border, went to talk to some villages to prevent the movement of people, due to the notice received from the *Commandant* of Sansanne Mango:

I proceeded to Nambiri and held a palaver with all the local people and warned them that they were not to join their relatives from Nanguel in the fight [...] The following two days I visited as many villages as possible near the frontier to see that my orders were carried out. I was informed that all French subjects had returned across the Oti River (the Anglo-French boundary). [...] The Nanguel people are related to most of the Konkombas living between Saboba and Nambiri, and if they are allowed to stay on this side, I am afraid that there is a possibility of the Kidjabons people coming over.⁸⁸

85 PRAAD, Accra, ADM 56/1/300, Case No. 82/48/21.

86 See Section 2 for a thorough explanation of the practice.

87 Archives nationales, Lomé, Togo, APA, 30, Doc. N°1638. Mango, 2. 'No exodus has been reported in the various canton that we visited, apart from two soukhalas of the village of Namou, in the canton of Takpamba, where all the inhabitants left to join their families in the Gold Coast'

88 PRAAD, Accra, ADM 56/1/300, Case No. 73/13/19.

While reporting on the livelihood conditions of Konkomba, the *Commandant de Cercle* of Mango wrote in 1935:

En ce qui concerne le canton de Takpamba, la tournée effectuée dans les divers villages m'a permis de constater que les Konkombas ne sont pas pauvres et se livrent volontiers aux travaux de champs. De très vastes surfaces ont été plantées en ignames. Mais là encore, ils manifestent leur désir d'indépendance absolue et se refusent à sortir de chez eux pour aller vendre leurs produits. Tout au plus quelques-uns d'entre eux, très rares, vont jusqu'à Kandé. Les autres tentent d'écouler leurs produits sur les marchés de Takpamba, fréquenté par quelques acheteurs de Mango, de Katchamba et de Tanga.⁸⁹

It seems that, actually, the resistance of the Konkomba communities is inherent in their socio-economic and political structure. Their everyday practices made them 'resistant' to colonial control and management. There was no aspect of Konkomba life that could productively dialogue with colonial projects and power structures: they were too quarrelsome, not very productive, too scattered on the territory, not organised.

As Fanon wrote, 'the colonised's indolence is a conscious way of sabotaging the colonial machine; on the biological level it is a remarkable system of self-preservation and, if nothing else, a positive curb on the occupier's stranglehold over the entire country'.⁹⁰

The colonial gaze could not see beyond its structures of control and its contingent goals. By doing so, it failed in grasping fundamental aspects of the life of their subjected communities. What French administrators read as a 'refusal to collaborate' in the economic prosperity of the colonial possession was simply a diffuse practice that has been in use until recently: Konkomba communities harvest great quantities of yam, corn, red millet that are normally sold in major markets by other individuals, mainly Anufo, Dagomba, Mossi traders. It was not a Konkomba duty to sell products in bigger, distant markets. They are

89 Archives nationales, Lomé, Togo, APA, 30, Doc. N°1638. Mango, 2. 'For what concern the canton of Takpamba, during the patrolling I realised that Konkomba are not poor and gladly dedicate themselves to agriculture. They plant yam in large portions of land. But yet, they manifest their desire of absolute independence, and they refuse to leave their villages to sell their harvest. At the most, some of them, very rarely, go to Kandé. The others try to sell their products in the market of Takpamba, attended by some traders from Mango, Katchamba and Tanga'.

90 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 220.

mainly farmers, especially in this historical phase, tied to a social, economic and ritual role that revolves around land.⁹¹

8 Conclusion

While analysing the clash/encounter between diverse management strategies and different conceptions of space, we entered in the local debate regarding the colonial territorial partition, and we could consider the consequences brought about border definition on local political equilibrium from a critical point of view.

The construction of the border involved colonial powers and, to some extent, local powers, but only those organised and structured peoples with a recognisable chiefly hierarchy. Ultimately, those peoples were perceived by colonial powers as 'legitimate'⁹² occupiers of the land. Groups organised with a diffuse power structure, like the Konkomba, were considered as peripheries of neighbouring kingdoms, deprived of any active role in the restructuring of the geographical map of the region and in the construction of a new spatial system born from the discussed and conflictual encounter between the European colonial model and the different landscapes conceived locally. Wyatt MacGaffey noted that the colonial classification had the responsibility of crystallising this juxtaposition, from the one side glorifying the centralised system of organised kingdoms, from the other side celebrating the 'stateless' for their presumed ontological freedom from the despotic potential of organised structures.⁹³

Notwithstanding, Konkomba communities, who found themselves in the colonial borderland after the territorial division between Great Britain and

91 In the last decades, Konkomba have organised themselves in expanding their own control over their yam production and have established trade points in important southern Ghanaian markets, like Old Fadama in Accra (also known as Agblobloshie). Nowadays, indeed, they are not only farmers but also traders, adjusting to the current need of the market and asserting, once again, their independence. See Giulia Casentini, 'Partecipazione politica, mobilità e appartenenza: il ruolo dei migranti di ritorno in Ghana', in Selenia Marabello, Umberto Pellicchia, eds., *Capitali migratori e forme del potere. Sei studi sulle migrazioni ghanesi contemporanee*, Roma, CISU, 2017, 103–124.

92 Robert Sutherland Rattray, anthropologist and British colonial administrator, first in India and then in the Gold Coast, defined as 'legitimate' those groups with a centralised structure of power, with a chief at the top, that proved to be useful to the management of the colony. Rattray, *The Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland*.

93 Wyatt MacGaffey, 'The Residue of Colonial Anthropology in the History and Political Discourse of Northern Ghana: Critique and Revision', *History Compass*, 8, 6, 2010, 431–439.

France, could exploit the presence of the new border in many ways, often to their own advantage. From its definition in 1919 onwards, the border took on different meanings in the political and socio-economic life of borderland villages. More precisely, it was perceived as a limitation and as an opportunity, representing simultaneously in two, opposite ways the effects brought about an external imposition on local communities.

The ambivalence of the border, *limes* and *limen* highlighted by the analysis of Strassoldo is here crucial to understand these dynamics.⁹⁴ The border has a double significance in the life of the local communities and is a fundamental element of the relationship between people and the space. A border that is at the same time 'barrier and connection' is an instrument of the restructuring of the relationships between communities and their territory, in a process in which borderland groups think and construct their identity also in relation to the position of the border and the social, political, and economic events that revolve around it.⁹⁵

This contribution aims at positioning the Konkomba experience, their actions and reactions to colonial order, at the centre of the regional picture representing the border and its perils. I argue that, far from being 'a-historical' or backwards, crystallised in the colonial representation, the Konkomba have done more than just navigating the colonial storm. Through their activity of resistance and constant determination of the self, they have indeed contributed to the shape of the local narrative on the border, its forms and the possibilities arose around it. As testified by the seminal work of Jean Allmand and John Parker on Talensi historical and contemporary identity, a detailed and attentive study demonstrates that the so called 'stateless' populations do not comply with the stereotype of a 'people without history',⁹⁶ immobilised in space or time by the 'tradition' that colonial officials and western scholars landed upon them. Konkomba communities have proven to be able to cope with the challenges brought by colonial occupation, to resist to some imposition and to be resilient to some other structural changes, like the historical heritage of a double colonial occupation, making them partly francophone, partly anglophone, partly Ghanaian, partly Togolese, all Konkomba. These contemporary multiple identities are not discussed, not confronted. The Konkomba have actively and consciously incorporated them all and navigate the contemporary world by embodying their own multiplicity.

94 Strassoldo, 'La teoria del confine'.

95 Strassoldo, 'La teoria del confine'.

96 Jean Allmand, John Parker, *Tongnaab: A history of a West African God*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2005, 215.

While working with Kabre communities in Northern Togo, Charles Piot observed that the border perspective is a privileged point of observation of communities in transition because it could help breaking the epistemological division between tradition and modernity, local and global.⁹⁷ Borders, as sites of profound and dramatic changes, are not just the symbols and places where these changes take place, but also the agents causing them.⁹⁸

Konkomba communities make the border into a threshold as a space to go through, the significance of which for local communities revolves precisely around the possibility to cross it. For them, a homogeneous community divided by a border that used to be and is still quite porous, the border itself exists because it can be crossed, because it represented – often in their recent history – an instrument of resistance, escape, trade.

97 Charles Piot, *Nostalgia for the Future: West Africa after the Cold War*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2010.

98 Hastings Donnan, Thomas Wilson, *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and the State*, Oxford, Berg, 1999.