

G. Casentini

University of Siena,
Italy

Labelling, appointing and naming as political tools.
Legacies of British colonial language in Northern Ghana

“African Development: Possibilities and Constraints”
Acts of the XI Conference on African Studies, Russian Academy, Moscow, 2009

With this brief paper I would like to introduce a critic analysis on the role of the British colonial power with regard to the crystallization of ethnic identities and the building of new political subjects.

I suggest that groups' competing vision of political issues, as the access to land and political representation, are channels to ethnic based political conflicts and I would like to demonstrate that these conflicts must be considered in their historical context in order to discern the myriad factors that contribute to them.

Furthermore, I would like to focus on some aspects of Ghana's current political life which reflect the exportation and appropriation of political models put in place by British colonial policy, offering very interesting exemplification to more general questions about the building of postcolonial state in Africa.

British colonial policy played an undeniably critical role in the formation of modern ethnic identities and inter-ethnic relations by inscribing group identities into colonial law and, consequently, rendering these identities legally static.

One of the most significant consequences of British rule in Northern Ghana was that it defined the local societies in term of a “tribal model”. Within this model, chieftaincy was central in determining a group's political status.

The dichotomy between “stateless groups” and “chiefly groups”, traced during the colonial period, is still today a viable model in Northern Ghanaian political life,

so much so one of the so-called stateless groups, the Konkomba people, is fighting for acquiring chieftaincy institution.

The case study is provided by the situation of chaos characterizing the Northern Region of the country, affected by recurrent explosion of so called inter-ethnic violence since the 1980s.

I concentrated my research on the so called “Guinea fowl War” of 1994. The name refers to the episode that sparked off the conflict: a dispute over a price of a guinea fowl between a Nanumba and a Konkomba at Nakpayili market near Bimbilla, located in the south-eastern part of the Northern Region.

The Guinea Fowl War is the last and the bloodiest episode in a long and never resolved dispute of land ownership and access to political representation, which involves the major populations of the region, Dagomba, Nanumba, Konkomba, totalling at least fifteen thousand deaths and more than one hundred sixty thousand internally displaced people.

My analysis highlights the problem of a postcolonial state where, despite current upholding of participative democracy, access to resources and political representation is still deeply tied to the so called traditional institution of chieftaincy as it was during the colonial era.

Dagomba, Nanumba and Konkomba are mainly farmers and share the same territory, the same villages and the same markets from centuries. They speak different languages and they have different socio-political systems, but they are socially, politically and economically interconnected since pre-colonial times.

Dagomba and Nanumba traditionally descend from the same ancestor, they both speak a *Mole-Dagbani* language, and they often refer to themselves as one single population.

They probably arrived in the present day Northern Region in different waves of migration, culminating with the last one around the end of the XVIIth century.

Dagomba and Nanumba have a centralised and hierarchic socio-political structure, based on *naam*, which is today identified in chieftaincy institution. *Naam*

represent the power and the territory in which the power is exerted. These two elements are embodied in the figure of the two paramount chief, the Ya Na for the Dagomba and the Bimbilla Na for the Nanumba.

The Konkombas speak a *Gur* language, and they were probably settled in the area before the arrival of this Dagomba migration. They are organised according to a structure defined as being “acephalous” or “stateless”, owing to the lack of a recognised chief or king as a centralizing figure of power. From the Europeans colonial administrators and anthropologists’ point of view, this type of political system was characterised by a lack of central political authority, by a lack of an administrative system and judicial institutions. Lineage plays a fundamental role in the socio-political structure of these societies, so much so the social anthropology has defined them as being “segmentary systems”, as Evans-Pritchard and Fortes suggest.

Following dagomba and nanumba customary law, Konkombas are “traditionally” subject to the paramount chiefs’ decisions, which have to give their consent with settlement and allocate them land to live on. Konkombas must also give part of their harvest as a tribute to the paramount chiefs, and pay chiefs and sub chiefs to solve civil disputes.

On account of their lack of a supralocal organisation, in fact, in the centuries before the colonial period the Konkomba became the object of a weak form of hegemonic or military control, and of slave hunting, on the part of their neighbours, above all the Dagomba.

The subordinate position of the Konkomba was notably radicalized during the colonial period, as we will see, giving rise to ever worsening relations between neighbours, and giving rise to the production of new political categories.

It’s just the Konkomba’s critic on the so called “Dagbon and Nanun traditions” that was one of the major causes of the conflicts that erupted in the Northern Region.

The first fights in the 1980s were caused by several clashes over the rights of Nanumba and Dagomba chiefs, over their claims to homage and tributes, and above all the question whether it was permissible for the Konkomba to settle their dispute

among themselves, rather than running to the Nanumba and Dagomba chiefs for mediation. The Nanumba and Dagomba chiefs accused several prominent Konkomba of assuming chiefly rights in acting as judges in dispute among settlers. The settling of dispute out of court is one of the most important sources of income for northern chiefs, if not the most important. It is customary to bring dispute before the chiefs first, who receive court fees and fine payment in cash or in kind.

The situation got worse when, in 1994, the Konkomba leaders demanded for an independent paramount status for their chief of Saboba, with the aim to emancipate themselves completely from Dagomba and Nanumba traditional sovereignty.

So, what is “customary law”? And what is “tradition”?

The “tradition” to which Dagomba and Nanumba chiefs refers to when they say “Konkombas want to go against our tradition” or “the main cause of the war was the critic on Dagbon and Nanun tradition”, is not a static concept rooted in a timeless past.

The customary law, that should grant respect to the so called tradition, was built, invented and reinvented during the colonial era, and during the post colonial period as well.

The pre-colonial political relationship between Konkomba clans and Dagbon changed as Dagbon’s political status evolved, a trend that continued during the colonial and post-independence periods. Dagbon’s political expansion between the XVth and XVIIth centuries direct affected Konkomba clans by forcing them to migrate eastward and find new settlements and social formation.

The outpost that Dagomba established during 1700s and 1800s to raid slaves allowed Dagbon to exercise some political influence in Kékpokpam, but the vast majority of Konkombas remained politically autonomous.

During the closing decades of the Nineteenth century, European powers began using their military advantage to gain political control over the lower Volta basin. Their invasions were part of a larger social and political disruption that began in the

region toward the end of the Eighteenth century, and included the slave raids of Samori Ture and the Zabarimas, particularly under the leadership of Babatu.

They launched raids against the peoples to the north and west of Dagbon, causing widespread displacement and political disruption, occasionally in the service of the Ya Na but often independently. These activities caused forced migrations, slavery and the weakening of political powers among certain polities.

Although European invasions and the consolidation of German, French and British power over the region was part of this process of social disruption, the changes that their presence produced were far more dynamic and far-reaching.

German political power in the lower Volta basin was brief, roughly eight years, until 1916. Although German conquest was particularly violent in the Konkomba and Dagomba areas, it is likely that these groups responded to the German forces as simply one of myriad groups launching incursion in this period. Dagomba, Nanumba and Konkomba, in fact, seem to have fought against German somehow together.

After the end of the World War I and the defeat of the German troops, the German Togoland was divided in two portions, and the British gradually assumed the control of the western part, that became formally part of the British jurisdiction in 1920 as a Protectorate.

The British method for establishing effective control in the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast, revolved around their notion of what constituted a “legitimate tribe”. A central feature of their policy was to organize local societies around British conceptions of pre-colonial “tribal” structures.

From the very beginning British officials sought to establish effective control over the region through African authorities, a prelude of the indirect rule systems.

In areas where there was a dearth of suitable chiefs to be co-opted, British officials sought to create them by appointing individuals who seemed to possess local prestige and authority.

The local political authority encompassed in this relationship established a framework in which old and new African rulers could easily exploit those groups that British officials labelled as their political subordinates.

The use of African chiefs to aid in colonial administration, however, gave those unprecedented powers over their own societies and, in many cases, neighbouring groups.

The British believed that once incorporated into the colonial administrative structure, politically viable “traditional” rulers would serve to check the rise of politically assertive, educated African leaders by reinforcing a distinct African political sphere and confining them to it.

In order to realize this project, the colonial administrators would ensure the loyalty of the leaders of the most politically viable groups in the region. So, British colonial power appointed the rulers of chiefly groups “custodians” and managers of the land they wanted to administer.

Therefore, the formal introduction of indirect rule in the Northern Territories in 1932 further increased chiefly powers.

Firstly, conferences were held at which the “constitutions” of the so called “majority tribes” were written. The most important of these were Gonja, Dagbon, Mamprugu, Nanun and Wa, and it should be pointed out that no one of the so called “minority tribes”, such as the Konkombas, Nchumuru, Vagla and so on were invited to any of these conferences, neither were efforts made to write their “traditional constitutions”.

At these conferences the divisional chiefs, the elders and the earth priests were compelled to recognize the authority of the paramount chiefs of the chiefly groups and pay them homage.

In addition, these chiefs were given tribunals at which they could try all cases except the criminal ones, and they were also given treasuries into which they collected taxes supposedly to be used for the development of the “Native Authority” areas.

During the 1930s, the British colonial power achieved what was to serve as the centre of their administrative agenda in the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast: incorporating all the small and scattered non-centralized groups into the political structures of the five groups recognized as centralised, Gonja, Wa, Mamprugu, Nanun and Dagbon.

Pre-colonial relations seem to have been negotiable. But, as we have seen, the colonial period formalised ethnically segregated “traditional” political structures, allowing domination to become more exploitative.

This has brought about the marginalization in terms of control of the land and in fact the political exclusion of those populations that were lacking chieftaincy institutions.

All these labels, “chiefly” vs. “acephalous”, “majority groups” vs. “minority groups”, became integral part of the local political language, rising to the status of crucial tools in order to establish who should be included in or excluded from citizenship rights.

Ghana after independence, achieved in 1957, has not been able to overcome this dichotomy, which kept helping to relegate the so-called “acephalous” societies in a condition of political, social and economic subordination.

The centrality of chieftaincy in modern Ghanaian politics gradually led to direct changes in the “minority groups’ political status, above all the Konkomba people. It must be pointed out, in fact, that chieftaincy today represents local political power and, since the passage of the 1979 Land Tenure Act, also land ownership.

During the first two decades of Ghana’s independence, the Konkombas emerged as a politically conscious ethnic group with an educated political elite, united under the umbrella of KOYA, the Konkomba Youth Association.

Although Konkombas has achieved political recognition through the presence of Konkomba politicians holding national office, much of the political class remained dissatisfied with what they perceived to be unjust Dagomba political influence over Konkombas. Many Konkombas leaders began to argue that central their problems

was that they don't have nationally recognised chiefs. So, although they comprised the second largest group in the Northern Region (data from 1960 census), the nation still regarded them as a "minority group".

Therefore, in the 1970s, chieftaincy and Konkomba political autonomy formed the centre of Konkomba politics and, consequently, conflicts with the leaders of the centralized groups. In fact the latter gave rise to a campaign against the rights of Konkomba people to emancipate themselves, in name of the "tradition".

The fact that Konkomba's political elite fought, and is actually still fighting, in order to change their socio-political status and obtain the recognition of a Paramount Chief is a fundamental issue to understand the effect of the central position of the chieftaincy institution in the Ghanaian contemporary political landscape. This has led to the creation of two different levels of representation in the local political arena, and consequently of two different way to access to resources.

As we have seen, land tenure is still today in the hands of the chiefs, and in fact in the hands of chiefly groups. The failure of the modern Ghanaian nation-state in creating a new system of representation, different from the so called "traditional" one that has been directly inherited from British colonial policy, has led to the delicate and complex political situation that is now affecting the Northern Region of the country.

It is still evident, in a modern African democratic state, the deep distinction between citizens and subjects. Citizenship seems to be strictly connected with the so-called tradition, represented by chieftaincy institution, and it seems that the only way to be politically viable in contemporary Ghana is to pass through the traditional system of representation.

The Konkombas' struggle for political power represents a dramatic change in the Konkombas' political framework from the three decades earlier. These changes would inevitably lead to greater conflict between these groups, as the Ghanaian government fail to enact a program for effectively integrating all of the groups into the Ghanaian political structure on an equal basis. In fact, Konkomba's attempts to

assert their new political identity and their interests during this period would have culminated in the largest outbreak of ethnic-based political violence in the history of Ghana.