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**'FOOD TO EAT AND PITO TO DRINK'. EDUCATION, LOCAL
POLITICS AND SELF-HELP INITIATIVES IN NORTHERN
GHANA, 1945-1972**

By Benjamin A. Talton

The efforts of Konkomba western-educated leaders, beginning in the 1950s, to establish political unity and development among Konkombas in order to achieve greater political autonomy and viability were a continuation of the more disparate Konkomba challenges to Dagomba authority during the 1930s and 40s.¹ This small but growing group of teachers and government clerks helped to establish self-help initiatives within Konkomba communities that included farming cooperatives, ending inter-clan feuding and increasing Konkomba enrollment in schools. Their primary goal was to establish Konkombas as a politically viable and autonomous ethnic group so as to end their status as subordinate to the political authority of their historically centralized neighbors, particularly Dagombas. Efforts toward this end became a defining characteristic within the nascent Konkomba ethnic identity. The social and political changes that were the tools for asserting Konkomba political interests, and ultimately challenging the relevance of "traditional" status and authority in local society, helped lay the foundation for the protracted ethnic-based political violence that occurred in the

¹ See Benjamin Talton, "Ethnic Insurgency and Social Change: A History of the Konkomba of Northern Ghana." Doctoral Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2003. Chapter Four.

Northern Region between 1980 and 1994 in which Konkombas played a central part.²

Ironically, as late as the early 1950s, the historically non-centralized Konkomba clans were prone more to internal feuding than asserting common political interests. Yet, during the post-1980 conflicts, Konkombas demonstrated a highly sophisticated level of political organization and unity. Through examining the emergence and activities of the western-educated Konkomba political leadership during the 1950s and 60s, it is possible to reconcile these contrasting trends of disunity and cooperation in Konkomba political history. The early efforts of the western-educated Konkomba leaders to effect social and political change among Konkombas, moreover, offers an alternative to the prevailing view of northern political interests as concerned largely with protecting the "traditional" status of their chiefs and countering southern political hegemony. In addition, examining Konkomba leaders within the context of Northern politics during this period suggests that "northern interests" were more varied and complex than previously reported.³

The nationalist and early postcolonial periods marked the beginning of significant efforts by Konkomba leaders to create political unity out of the historically non-centralized, political disparate, and not infrequently internally combative, Konkomba clans of the Oti river plain. Their efforts toward greater political centralization, demonstrated in its most extreme form in the early 1960s by Isaac Bawa's efforts to create a Konkomba chieftaincy, is symptomatic of the prevalence of British constructed standards of political legitimacy and illegitimacy imposed during the 1930s and

² For a more detailed discussion of these conflicts, see Artur Bogner, "The 1994 Civil War in Northern Ghana: the Genesis and Escalation of a 'Tribal' Conflict," *Ethnicity in Ghana: The Limits of Invention* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2000); N.J.K. Brukum, "Ethnic Conflict in Northern Ghana," *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 4 & 5 (2001); Susan Drucker-Brown, "Local Wars in Northern Ghana," *Cambridge Anthropology* 13, 2 (1988-1989); and Peter Skalnik, "Questioning the Concept of the State in Indigenous Africa," *Social Dynamics* 9, 2 (1983).

³ See for example, Paul Ladouceur, *Chiefs and Politicians: The Politics of Regionalism in Northern Ghana* (London: Longman Inc., 1979).

40s and largely sustained by nationalist leaders and the postcolonial regimes.

British colonial rule had fostered ethnic isolationism through its indirect rule policies, which defined groups that demonstrated a palpable degree of political centralization as politically legitimate and those that did not, such as Konkombas, as politically illegitimate. The latter were subsequently forced under the political purview of their centralized, or politically legitimate, neighbors.⁴ For example, British officials placed the Konkomba clans of the Oti plain under the nominal political control of the Ya Na of Yendi and his divisional *nas*, or chiefs. I describe the Ya Na's control as nominal because much of the history of Konkombas' relationship with the British administration during the colonial period was shaped by Konkomba efforts to challenge the Ya Na and the Dagomba *nas*' claims to authority within Kεpkokpam, or Konkomba territory.

In this article, I suggest that the activities of Konkomba leaders during the 1950s and 60s, which led to increased political unity, are symptomatic of the prevalence of British constructs of local power and authority that remained largely intact through the nationalist and early postcolonial periods. Conforming to the dominant model of chief-centered political centralization, Konkomba leaders sought to make Konkombas more politically viable. Examined in light of Konkomba resistance to British imposed chiefly authority during the colonial period, postcolonial Konkomba leaders' interest in centralization and chieftaincy suggests that Konkombas rejected outsiders imposing these constructs as defining elements of political power. As a result of their growing familiarity with the nature of the local political frameworks in the Northern Territories, and later Northern Ghana, however, Konkomba leaders did not reject these constructs as illegitimate and ahistorical tools for political power in and of themselves. One might argue that Konkomba leaders were simply exercising a certain degree of pragmatism considering the dominance of Akan-style chieftaincy in Ghana. Yet, by conforming to a chieftaincy and ethnic-based political model Konkombas helped to further entrench ethnic-centered political development and chieftaincy as the foundations of local politics in Ghana. In so doing,

⁴ See, Talton 2003.

moreover, Konkomba leaders contributed to the increasing political departmentalization of Ghanaian society along ethnic lines, particularly in the Northern Region.

I present three examples from the activities of the Konkomba western-educated leadership during the 1950s and 60s. These examples demonstrate that by the mid-1950s, Konkomba leaders had begun to embrace British colonial constructs of political legitimacy as a means of transforming Konkomba clans into a more politically viable ethnic group, or "tribe". First, I describe the efforts of western-educated Konkombas, particularly as expressed during 1955 through the activities of the Konkomba Improvement Association, to promote education and unity among Konkombas. Second, I present the development initiatives of Isaac Bawa, first Konkomba district commissioner, between 1955 and 1966. One of his goals during his tenure was to elevate a Konkomba *oborr*, or chief, to paramount status. Finally, beginning in 1967, the disputes between Konkomba and Dagomba members of the Zabzugu/Saboba Local Council affirmed political divisions and the distribution of resources along ethnic lines, which helped foster the British colonial legacy of dividing political constituencies into discreet ethnic entities. Again, Konkomba leaders embracing chieftaincy and political centralization in order to gain a more viable position from which to assert their political interests demonstrates the prevalence of British constructed political structures as defining features of Ghana's local political framework.

The Spread of Western Education in the Northern Territories

British efforts to spread western education in the Northern Territories was a central factor behind the emergence of a Konkomba western-educated leadership and, subsequently, rapid social and political change. Similar to most northern groups, however, initially Konkombas fiercely resisted British officials' attempts to enroll their children in schools. Consequently, in each northern district, commissioners had a difficult time finding willing pupils to fill government schools. The difficulties that officials faced in Konkomba areas was due in part to the perspective among most Konkombas that the changes that education would bring to their day-to-day lives were irrelevant in terms of their immediate needs. When

I asked one of my informants the reason Konkombas were so vehemently against sending their children to school he explained that the common view among Konkombas was that "if it does not provide food to eat or pito⁵ to drink, it is not worth pursuing."⁶ With the government failing to provide an apparent incentive for parents beyond avoiding harassment and possible arrest by divisional *nas* or the district commissioner, most Konkombas firmly believed that education was not worth pursuing. Changing this perception became the central initiative of the small but energetic Konkomba educated leadership that emerged in the early 1950s. In the meantime, the district commissioners responded to parents' resistance with force.

In the mid-1940s, for example, Yendi District Commissioner Jones set quotas for the number of students each village was required to send to Yendi Native Administration Primary School. He personally toured the district to ensure the quota was met and enlisted the assistance of the divisional *nas* within Kekpokpam. Not willing to risk their own children, many Konkomba parents sent orphans—usually children who lived in an uncle or another male relation's compound because their parents had died—but often they had no choice but to send their own sons.⁷ Most parents simply ignored the district commissioner or the Dagombas *nas*' orders. Those to whom the order was issued more directly attempted to hide their children, but were often forced to follow orders.⁸ In 1945, with the hope of convincing them of the benefits of enrolling their children in school, the Yendi district commissioner persuaded a group of Konkomba headmen to visit Yendi Primary School.

⁵ Pito is a beer made from fermented millet. It is popular among many people in the northern parts of Ghana. The millet is threshed, and the grain is soaked in a large pot. After four days it begins to germinate and it set out to dry. Next, the grain is ground into a flour and brewed twice over two consecutive days. The liquid is poured into a pot that has yeast sediment. A thick cloth is also placed in the pot to expedite fermentation. The resulting fermented beer is pito. See Zimon Henryk, "Guinea Corn Harvest Rituals among the Konkomba of Northern Ghana," *Anthropos* 84 (1989).

⁶ Interview with Dalafu Omptapii, Tema, 21 March 2001. For a complete list of informants from whom much of the information for this paper was collected, see Talton 2003, 233-234.

⁷ Interview with Mary Bukari, Saboba, 4 January 2001.

⁸ Interview with Daniel Jobor, Saboba, 15 November 2000.

Although they seemed impressed with the school's accommodations, according to JA. Kaleem, principal teacher for Yendi Primary School, one headman expressed to him the reasons for Konkombas' fierce opposition to school:

We [Konkombas] admit that the school is a good place, a home of wisdom where people can be taught how to think and act like 'white people'... that is all good and nice... But we are afraid of one thing. We are inclined to think that such a soft life will weaken the strong blood of our children, and they will become soft like women. God has instilled a very warm blood in us, while in the majority of tribes 'cold blood'. Therefore we believe in hard work, with streaming brows of sweat, nothing passive. Perhaps if our children are brought up in a way which is not befitting to our tribe and heritage, they will in the end, shirk to labour and moreover will be dissatisfied and uncontented [sic] with their home-lives, and will wander about seeking easy-lives abroad, in foreign countries and towns. And how can we account for this before our grandfathers, when we die to meet them in the underworld.⁹

By 1950, however, either through government force or Konkomba acquiescence there were small but growing groups of Konkomba students enrolled in primary and middle schools in Salaga, Gambaga, Yendi and several other northern towns. Of all the northern schools, Yendi Middle School played the most central role in politicizing and educating those Konkombas who would go on to become teachers, ministers and civil servants. Konkomba students came together in the schools in an environment where the idiosyncrasies of clan and subclan were far less important than the more common threads of language and culture. It was in the schools, therefore, that a common Konkomba identity was first adopted by large groups from Kekpokpam.

Many Konkomba students at Yendi Middle School felt that Dagombas looked down upon them and often harassed them simply because they were Konkombas. Each Friday at 2:00 p.m., the school held 'tribal meetings' in which students of each 'tribe' had time to

⁹ NRG 8/4/14 Letter from J.A. Kaleem, 24 February 1945.

meet and hold activities in their local language.¹⁰ These meetings allowed Konkombas to commiserate and devise ways to raise the dignity of the Konkomba student body. As Carola Lentz has demonstrated, 'tribal meetings' were common among schools in the Northern Territories and formed the genesis for the national ethnic organizations that became popular during the 1960s.¹¹ It is not clear from the data if school administrators or the students decided who or what constituted a tribe and who belonged to it. However, students evidently controlled the meetings' agendas. In the early stages of the Konkomba gatherings, students simply took the opportunity to socialize with their fellow Konkomba students, but over time the meetings grew increasingly formal.

Older students such as Isaac Bawa, Nakoja Namuel, Samson Mankron and Budale Bikaem, joined in a few years by others such as Daniel Neina Jobor, became leaders in the Konkombas student meetings, advising them on academic performance and proper school etiquette. Many students whose fathers were constables were raised outside of Kεpkεpam and, therefore, were not necessarily fluent in Likpakpam (Konkomba) or familiar with Konkomba cultural practices. The student leaders helped teach them Konkomba dances, songs and other practices of general importance to Konkomba life.¹² These cultural lessons, together with the singing and dancing that often dominated the meetings, helped to standardize Konkomba culture within the Konkomba student body. The bond that many of the Konkomba students formed was not weakened by clan or subclan affiliation, even among those students who came from feuding groups. The feuds that often took place among Konkomba clans in Kεpkεpam did not carry over into relationships between Konkomba students at Yendi Middle School. Although clan and sub-clan identities were not entirely erased, for many students they were outweighed by the consciousness of being a Konkomba and a minority within the school.¹³

¹⁰ Interview with Anthony Bukari, Saboba, 16 November 2000.

¹¹ Carola Lentz, "Unity for Development' Youth Associations in North-Western Ghana," *Africa* 65, 3 (1995), 397.

¹² Interview with Anthony Bukari, Saboba, 16 November 2000.

¹³ Interview with Daniel Jobor, Saboba, 15 November 2000.

As with so many other aspects of life, girls were largely left out of the early efforts to recruit Konkomba students. Generally speaking, girls' access to education in the Northern Territories improved slowly compared to the Colony and Ashanti. There were several obstacles. For one, not all the schools were co-educational. Those that were, did not always provide accommodations for female students. In which case, girls had to either travel daily to school, which would often entail a long trek through the bush, or seek accommodations with a family close to the school. In the case of the latter, the girl's family would have to be in a position to provide all of her food. At home, parents and elders, who commonly made the decision whether to send a child to school, regarded boys as the potential wage earners. Therefore, they were the first choice if it was agreed that a child should be sent to school.¹⁴ Marital practices were another obstacle. Many groups in the Northern Territories commonly betrothed girls at birth, and a strict protocol guided the relationship between the future bride's family and her in-laws until the girl reached the age to leave her parents' home to live with her husband.

The marriage protocol differed from clan to clan, but generally when a female child was born, the families of young men or the young men themselves, between the age of twenty and twenty-four, usually offered pots of pito and guinea fowls to the child's parents as a sign that they were interested in marrying the girl.¹⁵ If the young man approached the parents, he brought a guinea fowl as a gift for the mother and firewood to heat water to bath the newborn. If the gifts were accepted, the potential groom's family assumed that the girl's parents were considering the man as a future son-in-law.¹⁶ For the next four or five years, he worked several days on his future in-laws' farm. During this period, whenever the mother brewed pito she invited him to drink with the family and, in turn, he would leave a gift. When the girl reached at least five years, the man or his family would begin making payments to the child's parents.¹⁷

¹⁴ Interview with Mary Bukari, Saboba, 4 January 2001.

¹⁵ Tait, *The Konkomba of Northern Ghana*, 93.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Interview with Mary Bukari, Saboba, 4 January 2001.

The primary form of payment was guinea corn, for which Tait describes the common method used:

[The payments were] called respectively 'They beat corn,' 'They send corn,' and 'They tie corn.' The first payment, 'They beat corn,' should be of two baskets of guinea corn in grain, paid when the girl has passed infancy; two to three years later the second payment is made, 'They send corn,' a payment of two or three baskets of corn. The year after, the series of payments known as 'They tie corn' begin; these are tied bundles of heads of corn, in the first year one bundle, in the second year two bundles and so on up to ten bundles in the tenth year.¹⁸

Throughout this period, if the young man was someone who the parents had known previously, he might also send sacks of millet as a gift to the girl's family, which the mother used to brew pito. Again, she would invite the man to drink with the family. This continued every year until the girl matured. At which point the man declared, "I think my wife is grown."¹⁹

If the father and the *unikpel*, or elders, agreed, the mother purchased cooking utensils, clothing and other necessities that the girl would need to take care of her husband. Before the girl left her parents' compound, her father slaughtered a cow, smoked the meat and packed it for her to take to her in-laws. After staying with an elder female in-law for a short time, the groom's grandfather announced that the girl was ready to move in with her husband. If the grandfather so decided, he gave the girl to a different male relative or took her as his own wife because she married the family, not simply the man.²⁰ As Tait explains:

First, Konkomba say that 'a woman does not marry one man.' Indeed, a girl is sometimes betrothed not to a specific husband but to an elder who, when the girl is old enough to marry, will give her to whichever of his sons is old enough to marry. The practice

¹⁸ Tait, *The Konkomba of Northern Ghana*, 94.

¹⁹ Interview with Mary Bukari, Saboba, 4 January 2001.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

shows that the marriage relation is not conceived primarily as one between individuals but as between a woman and a kin group.²¹

The customs that surrounded Konkomba marital practices included a considerable financial investment for both families involved. Beyond financial interests, there was a great deal at stake that families were not willing to risk for the sake of sending their child to school. Girls whose parents did enroll them in school were often forced to withdraw after a year or two in order for them to join their husband's family.²²

The most active advocates for increasing Konkomba girls' enrollment in school were first generation Yendi School Konkomba alumni who returned to Kεkpokpam as teachers and civil servants. Yao Wumbei was the first among this group. In 1951, the Education Administration of the colonial administration sent him to Saboba to open Saboba Primary School, the first government school in Kεkpokpam. For three years he remained the school's only teacher and administrator, enduring the difficulties of recruiting students in the face of aggressive resistance from Konkomba families. Undaunted, Wumbei successfully recruited three girls for Saboba Primary School during his first tour through the Konkomba hamlets and villages around Saboba.²³ In 1954, two Yendi School alums, both Konkombas, joined him. The first was Nakoja Namuel, soon followed by Daniel Neina Jobor.

So, by 1954, there was a small but growing group of Yendi School graduates working in Yendi and Saboba; some of whom had been leaders among the Konkomba students. Their experience at the Yendi School had helped to foster within them a sense of Konkomba identity and a regard for all Konkombas as one group. Many had also become acutely aware of what they believed to be the exploitation and political subordination that all Konkombas of the Oti plain suffered at the hands of the Dagomba-dominated local government and the Dagomba *nas*. Several, such as Namuel; E.A. Yani; Jobor; Mankron; and Johnson Bilidou an ex-serviceman, began holding

²¹ Tait, *The Konkomba of Northern Ghana*, 84.

²² Interview with Yao Wumbei, Saboba, 7 March 2001.

²³ Ibid.

meetings on ways to increase Konkomba social and political development.

In 1955, as these meetings progressed, those involved formally organized themselves as the Konkomba Improvement Association, charged with promoting Konkomba unity and development as their central cause. From their perspective, inter-Konkomba feuds and Konkomba marital practices rendered Konkomba unity impossible. Changing Konkomba marital practices, however, would be an extreme challenge that would take years to accomplish. So, they devised a strategy to change the status of women in Konkomba society and to increase Konkomba social and political development: increasing girls' access to education.

The Konkomba Improvement Association

The Konkomba Improvement Association was similar to other self-help organizations formed in West Africa to promote education and development. The first ethnic-based civic organization in the Gold Coast/Ghana was the Asante Youth Association, founded in 1947. 'Youth' did not refer to the age of its members but to their political status within Akan society. Youth were part of the political structure of 'chiefs,' 'elders' and 'people' and formed the non-title holding segment, which allowed them to define themselves as the representatives of the commoners. The youths, as a social and political category owed its origins to *nkwankwaa*, a Twi term that has been translated as 'young men,'²⁴ or commoners.²⁵ By the mid-nineteenth century, as Jean Allman describes, *nkwankwaa* was emerging as a petite bourgeoisie that aggressively guarded against the Asantehene's interference in their economic activities.²⁶

A common characteristic of youth associations was the aim to further unify their respective ethnic groups and contribute to their social, economic, and cultural development. "On the one hand," Carola Lentz explains, "the associations want to mobilize the rural population, especially for 'self-help'; on the other, they wish to

²⁴ Allman, *The Quills of the Porcupine* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 32.

²⁵ Rathbone, *Nkrumah and the Chiefs* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), 23.

²⁶ Allman, *The Quills of the Porcupine*, 32.

obtain a hearing for local interests in regional and national political arenas."²⁷ Non-Akan Ghanaians, including northerners, adopted this social category to fill a political void within their social structures, as they were integrated more deeply into Ghana's social and political framework. Thomas Hodgkin explains that the growth of local ethnic-based organizations during the inter-war period and the years that followed facilitated the growth of political parties. Local associations served as training grounds for the new nationalist elite. For example, the Convention People's Party, the political party that dominated the Gold Coast's transition to independence and politics in Ghana's first republic, depended to a large extent upon the support of the 'young men' or commoners. Its origins, moreover, lay in the Committee on Youth Organizations, a national umbrella organization for youth associations.²⁸

One of the groups that modeled itself after the Asante Youth Association was the Northern Youth Association (NYA). It was founded in the mid-1950s by a number of lawyers, civil servants, businessmen and politicians to voice northern interests in the years leading to independence. One of the challenges the NYA encountered was that these interests and concerns varied widely. As a result of the region's social and political diversity, many northern groups, such as the Nanumbas, Bimobas and Dagartis, formed their own ethnic-based youth associations during the 1950s and 60s to represent what they considered to be exclusively ethnic interests. These associations helped to broaden political perspectives beyond kingship and village, which allowed the educated leadership to mobilize and manipulate important segments of the population.²⁹ Of all the northern groups, the Konkombas' efforts to organize an ethnic-based organization had the most profound influence on local politics.

The Konkomba Improvement Association did not seek to begin to redefine Konkomba identity through literature, as other groups in Africa such as the Yoruba of Nigeria and the Kikuyu of Kenya had

²⁷ Carola Lentz, "Unity for Development," 395.

²⁸ Thomas Hodgkin, *African Political Parties* (New York: Penguin Books), 47.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

done.³⁰ The educated leadership galvanized Konkomba ethnic and political consciousness by spreading awareness of the Konkombas' political status relative to their centralized neighbors. Their initiatives were rather modest at first. They sought to increase Konkomba enrollment in schools; lay the foundation for future development; and end inter-Konkomba fighting, which, from their perspective, allowed neighboring groups, particularly the Dagombas, to continue to exploit them. The desire for increased access to education was common in many communities after World War II. Individuals and groups had begun to regard education as an asset to the group as well the individual. The link between education and social mobility grew increasingly clear as leaders began to understand the extent to which education increased the community's capacity to defend its interests.³¹

To build greater influence among Konkombas and to bolster Konkomba political legitimacy generally, members of the Improvement Association worked in cooperation with the *unikpel* and the *oborrs* as much as possible. Members consulted them on various initiatives the Improvement Association planned to undertake and updated them on recent regional and national events. It was particularly important that they involve the *unikpel* and the *oborrs* in their main initiative, increasing the number of Konkomba girls that were enrolled in school, which was part of their larger goal of changing Konkomba marital practices. The Improvement Association recognized that changing Konkomba marital practices, a common source of discord between Konkomba families and subclans, would be a formidable task that would take a considerable length of time before producing tangible results. Therefore, its members worked toward two alternatives. The first was to persuade Konkomba families to send their daughters to school. The second was to convince them to allow their daughters to marry someone their own age. The Improvement Association also took on issues that

³⁰ See, for example, E.A. Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria, 1814-1942* (London: Longman, 1966) and Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (London: Vintage Books, 1962).

³¹ Crawford Young, *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 28.

shaped the day-to-day quality of life among the Konkombas of the Oti plain. For example, they lobbied the administration of the Yendi District to improve the markets and roads in the Konkomba areas. As a result, the government constructed market stalls and butcher shops in the markets at Saboba, Wapul and Nabul.³²

By creating a proactive civic organization that included membership from a variety of clans, the Konkomba Improvement Association ushered in a new era of Konkomba political involvement. However, it was only active for a little over a year. Its membership consisted largely of civil servants who had little control over where the government assigned them to work. Approximately a year after the Improvement Association began its activities, the government transferred many of its members away from Saboba. To compensate for the north's relatively small educated and professional class, civil servants were moved around a great deal. Consequently, there was not a large enough educated population to sustain the Improvement Association's membership base. Nonetheless, by gaining influence among *unikpel* throughout the Oti plain in its short existence, the Konkomba Improvement Association, together with the efforts of the colonial administration that had intensified in the 1940s, made great gains toward ending Konkomba feuds, increasing girls' enrollment in school and representing Konkombas social and political interests outside of Saboba. During the decade that followed, many of the association's former members remained active in Konkomba politics in one form or another.

For example, in 1959, Isaac Bawa, Namuel, Jobor, Mankron and Bilidou launched an initiative to end the practice of Konkombas paying tribute to the Dagomba *nas* whom the British had given authority over their villages and hamlets. They argued that as long as Konkombas continued to pay tribute to the *nas*, Dagombas would continue to treat them as second-class citizens. Konkombas, they further claimed, would remain subject to exploitation and perpetually disenfranchised and as Ghanaian citizens, moreover, Konkombas should not be subject to the demands of chiefs. The men petitioned the district administration to legally end the practice. However, the

³² "The Historical Background of the Konkomba Youth Association," Unpublished pamphlet of the Konkomba Youth Association (n.d., circa 1994).

Ya Na had considerable influence in the regional government. Furthermore, it is likely that Dagombas, who dominated positions within the district administration, which was based in Yendi, had little interest in helping to diminish the status of the Ya Na and the *nas* in Kekpokpam. The group did not receive a response to its petition. Nonetheless, with the support that they received for the petition from Konkombas in and around Saboba, the men successfully persuaded the Bichabob clan to stop performing annual labor on the Sunson Na's, or Dagomba chief of Sunson, farms.³³ This was a small victory but noteworthy nonetheless. Konkombas were beginning to follow the educated leaders' initiative and regard themselves as part of a larger group with common interests and concerns. Their effort was only the first in a series of instances in which Konkomba leaders would organize around a specific issue to challenge Dagomba authority and move Konkombas toward greater political centralization.

Konkombas, Local Politics and Chieftaincy

The Konkomba Improvement Association was the first broad-based Konkomba civic organization. It laid the foundation for Konkomba involvement in more mainstream Ghanaian politics by beginning to layout and political agenda and promoting a Konkomba political identity. This identity centered on developing Konkombas politically so as to achieve greater autonomy vis-à-vis their historically centralized neighbors. In the 1960s, as Saboba came to be identified increasingly as the Konkombas' political "capital" elements within the Konkomba leadership believed that Konkomba interests would best be served and their political gains best protected if Konkombas developed a more formal chieftaincy. Under British colonial rule, the relationship between Konkombas and British officials evolved around Konkomba challenges to British officials attempts to impose the power of Dagomba *nas* over Konkomba clans in order to more fully integrate Kekpokpam within the British political sphere. It was the British colonial administration that defined chieftaincy as the primary means of asserting local political power and legitimacy. The efforts of a faction of Konkomba leaders to embrace chieftaincy as a

³³ Interview with Anthony Bukari, Saboba, 2001.

means for Konkombas to gain greater political development and prestige demonstrates the extent to which the colonial model of local political power remained a defining political model into the postcolonial period.

In 1957, after Kwame Nkrumah was elected Ghana's first president, he took office determined to eliminate what he believed to be the country's last vestiges of ethnic loyalty and replace it with a national consciousness. As he had written in 1946, Nkrumah believed in an independent Gold Coast where "all provincial and tribal differences should be broken down completely."³⁴ Nkrumah's efforts were rooted in the notion that national unity was indispensable to modernity. Like many other nationalist leaders, he had been influenced by a conviction that "triumphant anticolonial nationalism" would force loyalty to a particular culture to pass away in favor of nationalism. This notion derived from the belief that nationalism was natural to the industrial world. The United States, and its self-perpetuated image as a "melting pot," became the standard bearer for this ideal.³⁵ By contrast, the centralized polities represented forces of division because they reinforced ethnic sentiments and had exerted pressure for a federal government as opposed to national unity.³⁶ While Nkrumah, and other nationalist leaders, argued that the sentiments that bound people to these polities were primordial artifacts,³⁷ they underestimated the influence of ethnicity as a social and political factor in local society.

While Nkrumah sought to reduce the influence of ethnic loyalties, some of his initiatives aimed at leveling developmental disparities between groups indirectly helped to promote ethnic antagonism. With regard to the Konkombas of the Oti plain, for example, Nkrumah formally elevated Saboba to district status. Since 1947, it had been a sub-district of Yendi. In changing Saboba's political status, the Nkrumah administration further weakened the Dagombas'

³⁴ Smock and Smock, *The Politics of Pluralism* (New York: Elsevier, 1975), 227.

³⁵ Young, *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism*, 7.

³⁶ Smock and Smock, *The Politics of Pluralism*, 225.

³⁷ Crawford Young, "Case-Studies in Cultural Diversity and Public Policy," *Ethnic Diversity and Public Policy: A Comparative Inquiry* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 4.

capacity to exercise political influence over Konkombas. Yet it continued the British practice of promoting contradictory approaches toward the Konkombas. Through one process, Nkrumah strengthened the Konkombas as an ethnic group by granting them a legitimate political space from which to advance their interests. Through another process, the administration allowed the 'traditional' structures of political authority to remain in tact and continue to influence regional politics. Consequently, Konkombas continued to have to compete with, and in many instances rely upon, the Dagombas for government resources. Nonetheless, in 1958 when Nkrumah named Isaac Bawa, a Konkomba, as the commissioner of the Saboba district, Konkombas instantly became directly connected to the national political structure and acquired greater control over resources to undertake development projects in Konkomba villages. Through this dramatic process of national integration, Konkomba leaders developed a sense of their place as Ghanaian citizens; yet this feeling was tempered by their growing ethnic consciousness.

Ethnic and national consciousness existed side by side among most groups in Ghana during this period. The Konkombas are noteworthy for the extent to which they adopted a nationalist and ethnic-centered discourse to articulate their demands for social and political change. Although Konkomba leaders remained highly critical of ethnic chauvinism throughout the postcolonial period, through their efforts to effect social and political development, they inevitably participated in ethnic politics. This apparent double standard resulted from the fact that postcolonial local political structures remained centered on ethnic categories, much as they had during the colonial period. Therefore it was most practical to organize along ethnic lines in order to gain access to and control over political and natural resources. Konkomba leaders' focus on issues directly related to Konkombas and the relative isolation in the north, left most out of the major nationalist activities of the 1950s.

In his capacity as Saboba District commissioner, Bawa demonstrated the ways ethnic and national consciousness existed simultaneously. On one level he undertook projects that were expected of a district commissioner, such as paving and widening the roads between and within the major villages in the district. Better roads increased access to their markets, which in turn strengthened

the district's economy and the Konkombas' general financial health. He also helped bring schools to the larger villages. At the same time, however, Bawa undertook initiatives aimed at making Konkombas a more politically viable ethnic group within the region. Although Bawa was part of an administration that worked to reduce the chiefs' political influence in all parts of the country, he argued that adopting chieftaincy was essential in order for Konkombas to gain social and political equality within the region and the nation as a whole. Bawa's enthusiastic embrace of chieftaincy was out of step with Nkrumah and the Convention Peoples' Party (CPP) platform and inconsistent with the Konkombas' political structure.

President Nkrumah perceived chiefs as barriers to his goal of national unity. He argued that chiefs exercised political influence while having little relationship to the individualism and modernizing corporatism that were essential for development.³⁸ Considering the role that chiefs played in local politics in Ghana, however, Bawa considered chieftaincy essential for the Konkombas to establish a position from which to compete with the region's major ethnic groups.

Many Konkomba leaders were ambivalent about chieftaincy. Konkombas generally regarded chiefs as a source of exploitation and divisiveness, yet since the closing years of British rule many had begun to support raising the legitimacy of the *oborrs*. Still, most were adamantly opposed to creating a Konkomba paramount.³⁹ However, there was a small group of Konkomba leaders, including District Commissioner Bawa, which embraced chieftaincy as the most salient symbol of Ghanaian politics and, therefore, a means for Konkombas to gain national respect and political legitimacy.

One of Bawa's main obstacles in developing Konkomba chieftaincy was that despite the efforts of the Improvement Association, *oborrs* historically did not have any real political prestige among Konkombas. The *oborrs* of the larger villages such as Kpalb, Saboba, and Sangul, who did in fact carry some political influence, had little respect for each other and often competed for influence in Kekpokpam. Saboba's status as the Konkombas'

³⁸ Rathbone, *Kwame Nkrumah and the Chiefs*, 3.

³⁹ Interview with Dan Ngula, Accra, 5 April 2001.

political capital added to the competition between the *oborrs* because many believed the government would eventually recognize a Konkomba paramount. With the district headquarters in Saboba and most recognizing Saboba as the political center of Kekpokpam, it was widely believed that the Uchaboborr would be the natural choice. The Sangulborr, however, argued that the Sangultiib had *oborrs* long before any other Konkomba subclans and, therefore, he deserved to be paramount. Others discounted the Sangulborr because he was 'enskinned' by the Sunson Na, not the Ya Na.⁴⁰ That the rivalry between the *oborrs* did not erupt into a conflict between contesting parties was a testament to the lack of interest most Konkombas had in chieftaincy. Bawa made little progress elevating chieftaincy during his tenure. In 1966, he lost his position in the coup that drove Nkrumah from office. The National Redemption Council that took over the government brought Saboba back into the Yendi District.⁴¹ The issue of Konkomba chieftaincy died out until it was revived again in the 1980s.

The regimes that followed Nkrumah's did not share his perspective of chieftaincy and ethnicity. The NLC and Kofi Busia's Second Republic that followed it, was determined to reverse Nkrumah's policies. In fact, the role that ethnicity played in Ghanaian politics increased between 1966 and 1972.⁴² For the Konkomba of the Oti plain, the continued primacy of ethnicity heightened their determination to eliminate Dagomba control over resources that flowed through Kekpokpam, which was difficult considering the level of influence Dagomba politicians had in the regional administration. A growing Konkomba educated class, combined with a larger sense of disenfranchisement based on their ethnicity, created an environment ripe for ethnic-based political conflict.

⁴⁰ Interview with Anthony Adams Bukari, Saboba, 28 March 2001.

⁴¹ Interview with Dan Ngula, Accra, 5 April 2001.

⁴² Joshua Tetteh, *Ethnic Conflict and Development Resource Allocation*, Doctoral Dissertation, American University, 1998, 82.

The Zabzugu-Saboba Dispute

The disputes between Konkomba and Dagomba members of the Zabzugu-Saboba Local Council beginning in 1967 presents a third example of groups operating within the British constructed paradigm of local power and authority. The issues at the heart of the conflict between Konkomba and Dagomba leaders, moreover, demonstrate the extent to which Konkombas evolved a political consciousness and identity. The Zabzugu-Saboba Local Council was a product of the Northern Regional Administration's efforts in 1967, under the direction of the NLC, to reduce the number of local councils in the region. It amalgamated the Saboba and the Zabzugu local councils. Local councils were the governing bodies that facilitated government development projects and the distribution of resources in each district. Zabzugu was a predominantly Konkomba district in Kekpokpam, but Dagombas dominated its local politics. Saboba, on the other hand, was almost entirely Konkomba. The two councils were merged as the Zabzugu/Saboba Management Committee to assume the responsibilities of both councils. The Dagomba controlled Regional Administration designed the structure and makeup of the Management Committee, which placed the Konkombas at a severe disadvantage.

Conflicts emerged between Konkomba and Dagomba members of the Management Committee soon after it was inaugurated. Konkomba leaders took issue with the Regional Administration's decision to place the Management Committee's administrative office in Zabzugu, the smaller of the two towns. They also raised their concerns regarding the number of Dagombas represented on the committee compared to Konkombas. Despite the Konkombas' numeric strength in the two districts, Dagombas occupied nine of the eleven seats on the Committee. Konkombas viewed this disparity as the Dagombas' attempt to retain the political control over Kekpokpam they gained under colonial rule but had begun to lose during the Gold Coast's transition to independence. They argued that the Dagombas' ability to exercise such disproportionate control over the Committee resulted from the fact that they dominated regional politics. Indeed there was little that the Konkomba leaders could do beyond voice their concern because the ultimate decision rested with the Regional Administration.

Within a year, however, disputes between Konkomba and Dagomba members of the Management Committee essentially caused it to cease functioning as a governing body. The main point of contention was what the Konkombas perceived to be the absence of any significant development projects in Konkomba areas. The two Konkomba members accused the committee of bias and negligence because, while ignoring Konkomba areas, it continued to support projects in predominantly Dagomba villages in and around Zabzugu. According to complaints filed with the Regional Administration, the Konkomba representatives expressed their grievances to the board on several occasions but the Dagomba members disregarded them.⁴³ Consequently, the Konkomba members resigned from the committee and joined with Konkomba leaders in Saboba to form the Town Development Committee as an alternative administrative body. This new organization argued that the Management Committee was incapable of serving Konkomba interests and contended that its very structure was an injustice to Konkombas.⁴⁴

In April 1968, members of the Development Committee listed several grievances in a petition to the Regional Administration Office in Tamale against the Dagomba members of the Zabzugu/Saboba Management Committee. They charged the Management Committee with failing to provide basic amenities for the Saboba District despite Saboba contributing a larger percentage of the Management Committee's budget through taxes. From the Konkomba standpoint, its location and composition demonstrated that the government was operating from ethnic chauvinism in favor of Dagombas.⁴⁵ The Konkomba leaders argued that Saboba was more deserving of being the location for the committee's administrative office because of its size and its amenities. As they pointed out, the Saboba District's population was 30,000 compared to 15,000 in Zabzugu. Furthermore, Saboba had 17 primary schools; a catholic secondary school; a modern police station, which housed a Border

⁴³ NRG 8/5/276, Memo to Region Chief Executive, Region Office Tamale from the District Administrative Officer-in-Charge, 14 April 1968.

⁴⁴ NRG 8/5/276, Minutes of 23 August 1968 Meeting of the Town Development Committee.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Guard in addition to regular units; and government veterinary and agricultural offices. From their perspective, therefore, the Konkomba leaders regarded the controversy over the Zabzugu/Saboba Management Committee as symptomatic of the government's overall disregard of the Konkombas. They claimed that Konkombas were migrating to areas south of Kekpokpam such as Kpandai, Salaga, Nanumba, Damanko and Kete-Krachi. Therefore, the Development Committee suggested that the government restore Saboba's autonomy as the Saboba Local Council.⁴⁶

While political oppression may have influenced some Konkombas to migrate away from Kekpokpam, however, the vast majority of Konkomba migrants were influenced by greater farming opportunities to the south. For their part, the Dagomba members of the Management Committee argued that they had not supported any development projects in Konkomba areas because Konkombas had been uncooperative with collecting taxes, which had caused the Zabzugu/Saboba Management Committee to be one of the poorest councils in the region.⁴⁷

The dispute continued until the 1969 election, which brought Kofi Busia and his Progressive Party to power and began Ghana's Third Republic. Saboba subsequently regained its independent local council and the Konkomba elder statesman, Johnson Bilidou, became its clerk. The conflict over the Zabzugu/Saboba Management Committee highlighted three issues around which Konkombas were beginning to organize. The first was the belief that Dagombas were deliberately suppressing Konkomba political advancement because of ethnic chauvinism. Second, the Konkombas' lack of a recognized and respected centralized traditional authority hindered their political standing as an ethnic group in local and national politics. Finally, although they conceded that soil erosion was a significant factor, Konkombas began to argue during this period that the ongoing large-scale migration of Konkombas to districts farther south was part of an effort to move away from Dagomba exploitation. These three themes would continue to form the center of Konkomba politics as it

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ NRG 8/5/276, Memo from Principle Local Inspector, 24 April 1969.

heightened the Konkombas' level of political mobilization and gained access to greater means of political representation.

Conclusion

The model that the British colonial administration constructed to define politically legitimate and therefore dominant groups in the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast marginalized groups such as Konkombas, which lacked a formal system of centralized political authority. The British attempted to incorporate these groups into the political structure of the more politically centralized neighbors. As the history of the Konkomba clans during the period of British colonial rule demonstrates, the best laid colonial strategies did not necessarily become effective policy. Konkombas actively resisted the imposition of Dagomba political control, although in a very fragmentary manner. Although highly decentralized, Konkomba resistance prevented Dagombas *nas*, and therefore the British colonial administration, from fully incorporating Kekpokpam into their administrative sphere until well into the 1930s. As Chief Commissioner Jones described in 1940, to the British administration, Konkombas were "a festering sore on an otherwise healthy administrative body."⁴⁸

Although the British colonial administration was relatively slow establishing effective control over Konkomba clans, British officials were remarkably successful imposing their notions of what constituted "traditional" power and authority. Consequently, by the nationalist period, African groups had largely conformed to British definitions of political legitimacy, namely chieftaincy and political centralization. Therefore, what British officials had established as the centerpieces of local political control, centralization and chieftaincy, remained largely intact well into the postcolonial period. While Konkomba clans challenged British efforts to force them under the centralized authority of the Ya Na, by the 1950s they had, for the most part, embraced centralization as a means for attaining the status of political legitimacy. The result was dramatic and radical social and political transformation among Konkombas to a highly

⁴⁸ NRG 8/2/88, Letter from the CCNT to the Director of Veterinary Services 18 September 1940.

organized and politically assertive ethnic group from a highly fractious and internally combative collection of clans.

As I have demonstrated in this paper, toward effective such change, Konkomba western-educated leaders conformed to the model of political legitimacy imposed by the British colonial administration. In so doing, Konkombas leaders reflect the failure of Ghanaian nationalist and postcolonial leaders to construct an alternative to the British model of local political authority. The efforts of Konkomba leaders to focus inward on specifically Konkomba developmental initiatives, including the creation of a Konkomba chieftaincy, must be viewed as a product of the larger Ghanaian political environment in which chieftaincy and ethnicity have been sustained as the primary tools for asserting political interests in local society.

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