

Chapter 3

THE PAST AND PRESENT IN GHANA'S ETHNIC CONFLICTS: BRITISH COLONIAL POLICY AND KONKOMBA AGENCY, 1930-1951

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Introduction

Between 1981 and 1994, a series of conflicts engulfed much of the eastern half of Ghana's Northern Region. In each conflict, Konkombas, a historically non-centralized and politically marginal group, engaged in protracted fighting with one or several of their historically centralized and politically dominant neighbors: Dagombas, Nanumbas, Gonjas, and Mamprusis. The 1981 conflict took place in the Bimbilla District and resulted in over 2,000 deaths and many more displaced. The central claim made against Konkombas was that they continually disregarded their centralized neighbors' traditional authority and status. For their part, Konkombas argued that they had suffered long-term exploitation and subjugation by Nanumba, Dagomba, and Gonja chiefs. In rejecting their neighbors' claims to political authority, Konkomba leadership insisted it was only protecting Konkomba interests and their rights as Ghanaian citizens. The last major conflict, the so-called "Guinea Fowl War" of 1994, was much larger than that of 1981. It is popularly referred to as the "Guinea Fowl War" because of

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reports that the conflict began in a market with a fight between a Konkomba and Nanumba man over the price of a guinea fowl. This dispute precipitated violence that quickly engulfed seven northern districts, six ethnic groups and resulted in an estimated 15,000 deaths (van der Linde and Naylor 1999:27). Naturally, the roots of the dispute between these groups run deeper than a marketplace altercation.

In this article, I examine the origins of violent conflict between the historically non-centralized, or chiefless, Konkomba and their centralized neighbors. I use the example of the 1940 Konkomba attack on the predominantly Dagomba village of Jagbel to illustrate that antagonism between these groups, particularly Konkombas, Nanumbas, and Dagombas, has evolved around conflicting notions of authority and political legitimacy extending to the latter half of the period under British colonial rule. The attack on Jagbel was a consequence, in part, of British policies for maintaining local political control, which as Mamdani (1996) explains, effectively concretized colonial constructs of ethnic identity and imposed them through colonial policy. Ironically, while forcing Africans to adjust to an ethnic-based political framework that defined a group's legal status and its relationships with others as unchanging, the British influenced social and political change as Africans attempted to adjust to this imposed political system. The attack on Jagbel represents the more blatant form of Konkomba rejection of this system. In the aftermath of the attack, however, instead of reforming the local political structures away from an emphasis on ethnic identity as a marker of political status, the British administration upheld the chieftaincy centered political structures that had fomented Konkomba frustration. Konkomba leaders were therefore forced to determine their own means of promoting social and political change.

Colonial Rule and Ethnic Identities

Much of the political structure in which ethnic groups interacted under colonial rule was defined by Britain's indirect rule policies. During the 1930s and 40s, the socioeconomic change that accompanied indirect rule led to an emphasis on ethnicity, or "tribe," over other identities (Iliffe 1979:318). A collection of these "tribes," from the British officials' view, was what comprised African societies, and each "tribe" was distinct, largely isolated and ruled by a chief. As Lentz and Nugent (2000) suggest, as they constructed policy from a misreading of African politics and culture, "the British laid the foundation for today's ethnic identities by imposing a number of 'native states' which they imagined corresponded with established tribal boundaries" (p.9). Yet, shortly after imposing their authority

over what they defined as the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast, the British became generally aware that what they labeled "tribe" did not reflect the political and social realities that they encountered.

It became clear to most British officials that groups such as Konkombas did not fit their tribal model. For those administrators who gained a more detailed understanding of Konkombas, they resembled what Kopytoff (1987) has described as "ethnically ambiguous marginal societies" (p.5). These groups, as he explains, were "apt to annoy the administrator for whom the tribal model—with its essential unity, clear body of customary law, and unambiguous legitimacies—is better suited to the task of maintaining public tranquility" (p.5). Substantiating their theories regarding the "tribal" characteristics of African societies was outweighed by their focus on using "tribal" structures to maintain effective control. The British regarded a diverse peoples and political structures as an impediment to effective control. Therefore, officials attempted to incorporate non-centralized societies, such as Konkombas, into chief-centered political jurisdictions.

Incorporating non-centralized societies into neighboring centralized polities was a strategy that the British adopted in their other colonies as well. In Tanzania, for example, as Iliffe (1979) explains, "the chief obstacles to [Governor Donald] Cameron's social engineering were stateless peoples" (p.330). To satisfy the needs of the British administration and expand their own political authority, Dagomba *nas*, or chiefs, claimed a history of political authority over Konkombas. The British recognized Konkomba clans, consequently, as politically subordinate to Dagombas *nas*. The *nas* served as the representatives of the peoples' interests to the colonial administration and the voice of the colonial administration in the local communities. Therefore, defining Konkombas as a politically subordinate "tribe" and Dagombas as dominant, the British created a political relationship in which Konkombas had no real political or legal recourse. Konkombas commonly responded to their imposed subordination by refusing to respect the power that the British vested in the *nas*. When pressured by the colonial administration to adhere to the Dagombas *nas*' demands, Konkombas began to regard violence as the most effective means of challenging their subordinate status and protecting their interests. Consequently, there was a constant threat of violence that was only checked by the vigilance of British officials who invariably sought to support Dagomba authority. Konkomba individuals and groups, however, continually attempted to assert their political autonomy throughout the colonial period. Konkomba challenges to the British construction of Konkombas as chiefless and, therefore, politically illegitimate influenced dramatic social and political change.

I use the example of the 1940 Konkomba attack on Jagbel, a predominantly Dagomba village within Kekpokpam, or Konkomba territory, to demonstrate the connection between colonial era disputes between Konkombas and their neighbors and the conflicts of the 1980s and 90s. The attack on Jagbel was the first of a series of large-scale disputes between Konkombas and their neighbors in which political status, as related to political authority and ethnicity, was contest-

ed. It was the only large-scale, ethnic-based violent confrontation during the colonial era and the last confrontation of that nature until 1981. Nonetheless, conflicting claims to political authority continued to be an issue throughout the post-colonial period and was a central feature in the conflicts between 1981 and 1994. Essentially, these latest conflicts are a continuation of collective Konkomba challenges to their subordinate status that began with a section of the Bimokpem clan's attack on Jagbel. The attack is also significant for the policies that the British imposed upon Konkombas in its aftermath, which ultimately influenced changes in the nature of intra-Konkomba relations and relationships between Konkombas and their neighbors. These changes were products of the British administration's efforts to reinforce its control over Konkomba areas so as to prevent future Konkomba attacks. Toward bringing the widely scattered Konkomba subclans under more effective British control, officials began to deal with Konkombas as a homogenous group within a defined political space.

As late as the early 1940s, there was little political relationship between Konkomba clans, and feuding between subclans continued to be widespread. In the 1950s, as a result of the expansion of education and exposure to the political culture other groups in the Gold Coast, Konkomba western-educated leaders began to regard political centralization as a prerequisite for ending Konkomba feuds and gaining social and political equality in relation to their neighbors. Therefore, they sought to construct a political identity among Konkombas that more closely resembled that of the historically centralized groups in the region. In so doing, they attempted to reverse Konkomba political status to politically viable from politically disenfranchised. Similarly, during the colonial and postcolonial periods, political identities among the centralized societies had begun to evolve around upholding chiefly authority and therefore the political status quo. By 1981, Konkombas were largely united behind a western-educated leadership that sought to assert Konkomba interests locally and nationally, which were invariably in direct conflict with the interests of their centralized neighbors (Talton 2003).

Although scholarship on the recent conflicts has connected them to political relationships under colonial rule and the formation of broad-based Konkomba ethnic consciousness, there is little discussion in the literature on the relationship between post-1980 conflicts and earlier disputes. Generally speaking, scholarly analysis of the recent conflicts has been limited, despite the continued influence of ethnic-based tension between Konkombas and their neighbors and the persistence of ethnicity as a central factor in the region's politics. Evidence of the ongoing problem of ethnic conflict has been demonstrated most recently in clashes between Konkombas and Nanumbas in 2002, which disrupted voting at Kpaturi, near Bimbilla, in the Northern Region during parliamentary elections (Kassim 2002). Skalnik (1983:24) explains such violence as a product of the state's inherent weakness. The modern state in Africa, he argues, lacks the capacity to address the needs of its citizens. Consequently, individuals and groups have sought alternative means of protecting their interests. Nanumbas mobilized around *naam*, or

the institution of Nanumba chieftaincy, and Konkombas mobilized around their movement to gain social and political autonomy from their centralized neighbors. According to Skalnik, the notions of "state" and state power are imposed from the outside and fail to reconcile differences in centralized and non-centralized societies.

While Skalnik examines the 1981 conflict in the context of the evolution of politics in Nanun, or the Nanumba kingdom, Bogner (2000:198) explains the 1994 conflict as a product of Konkomba efforts to assert their numeric strength and growing economic clout that became apparent in the Northern Region during the 1980s. Yet, any analysis of these conflicts must account for previous disputes between these groups, which requires more than a cursory glance at the events of the colonial period. Failing to establish a broad context for the conflicts that includes interethnic relations in the colonial period influences a perception of the recent disputes as products of their immediate contexts as opposed to a long-term power struggle between the groups involved.

In addition to the influence of the colonial period, the regimes of post-colonial Ghana helped to foster ethnic discord in the Northern Region by failing to fully dismantle the local political structures that the British colonial regime had created. As Herbst (2000) explains, after independence, African leaders recognized that "if the states, with their colonial power gradients, were to change, the new leaders would have to give up many of the newly tasted benefits of power and face considerable uncertainty about their own fate and the fate of their nations" (p.97). Although Kwame Nkrumah, who became Ghana's first president in 1957, attempted to contradict the trend that Herbst outlines, his nationalist policies could not eliminate chieftaincy as the primary representative of local political power in Ghana (Rathbone 2000). With respect to land tenure, northern chiefs saw their authority expanded with President Hilla Limann's 1979 Land Tenure Act, which placed all northern land under the authorities of the chiefs. Power, therefore, continued to be associated with chieftaincy, and powerlessness with non-centralized groups. The postcolonial state's failure to eliminate British imposed political inequality, moreover, increased the politicization of ethnicity and the spread of chieftaincy as the primary symbol of political currency among historically non-centralized groups. As Mamdani (2001:36) argues in his study of ethnic and political identities in Rwanda, this phenomenon created individual ethnic citizens, as their membership within an ethnic community determined their social, economic, and political rights. In Ghana, the manifestation of political identities is demonstrated in its most extreme form in the Northern Region and is best illustrated in the relationship between Dagombas and Konkombas.

In 1929, the British colonial administration appointed William Jones as chief commissioner of the Northern Territories with a mandate to formally implement indirect rule as the method of administration in the region. Iliffe (1979:319) points out that, in theory, chieftaincy was not necessarily the central institution within indirect rule. The system of administration might consist of a chief, council or some combination. In the Northern Territories, however, British officials

invariably defined each Native Authority as a chief. Jones and the British administration regarded chieftaincy as the only truly legitimate "tribal institution" and made it the principle element of indirect rule in the Northern Territories.¹ In so doing, he re-affirmed the British definition of a "tribe" as a centralized political entity and non-centralized societies as politically illegitimate, thereby conferring a particular political status to certain ethnic groups in an environment in which the nature of political power had previously been in flux and strongly contested. It was also in line with the British perspective of African society as inherently static and resistant to political change. Consequently, the British granted chiefs greater control than they previously possessed, primarily through placing them in charge of taxation and the use of Native Administration police (Ladouceur 1979). As part of implementing indirect rule, British officials also brought non-centralized societies under the more formal authority of their centralized neighbors.

With regard to Konkomba clans, specifically, Jones argued that it would be futile to attempt to create any institution such as chieftaincies or councils among them because "the Konkomba will not be rushed into the acceptance of anything which has not the sanctions of his forefathers."² As District Commissioner Williams of Yendi argued, "There would undoubtedly be a great difficulty in collecting taxes in Konkomba by the Dagomba, and for some years they would undoubtedly resort to the customary bow and arrow rather than pay."³ Ironically, fully aware of the Konkombas' aggressive resistance to Dagomba rule, the administration continued to impose Dagomba *nas* over Konkomba clans because it remained politically convenient to sustain such a policy.

In 1932, the British administration formally defined the centralized polities as Native Administrations through the Native Authority Ordinance and the Native Tribunal Ordinance. The Native Authority Ordinance empowered the chief commissioner—with the governor's approval—to "appoint any chief or other native or any group of natives to be a Native Authority for any area," and increased the chiefs' authority over the people.⁴ In addition, it outlined provisions through which a Native Authority could establish statutes for maintaining law and order within the jurisdiction. Native Authorities did not have a European staff of their own. Instead, they employed Africans trained by specific government departments such as Sanitation, Veterinary Services, and Agricultural, to aid in the Native Administrations' daily operations. This was an expedient means of placing the responsibility for the infrastructure of colonial administration in African hands. One of the British government's goals was for Native Administrations to function as agencies for the supply of local services to its jurisdictions so the colonial government would be relieved of that responsibility.⁵ Native Administrations were to be maintained financially by taxes that individuals and groups paid to the local chiefs in the form of tribute.

Through the 1932 ordinances, Dagomba control over the Konkomba clans became enforceable by colonial law, making it illegal for Konkombas to refuse to respond to a *na*'s summons or demands for tribute. In return, the Dagombas were

to represent Konkomba interests to the colonial administration, despite the lack of incentive the government provided for them to do so. Meanwhile, by granting Dagombas the power to collect taxes, tribute, and control of the distribution of government resources in Konkomba areas, the British provided the *nas* with greater means through which to benefit from their positions of authority. In the first period of British rule in the Northern Territories the *nas* exercised little actual power over Konkombas and even feared, in some instances, entering Konkomba areas (Talton 2003:85). With indirect rule, however, the power that the *nas* exercised grew excessive and frequently exploitive. Under the guise of enforcing tax laws, Dagomba *nas* and their subchiefs often exploited the surrounding Konkomba clans. If Konkombas refused to comply, they faced the threat of paying heavy fines or being imprisoned by the district commissioner. Beginning in the 1930s, therefore, Konkombas began to regard Dagomba authority as linked to British power. To challenge Dagomba authority they could no longer simply disregard the *nas*' demands. As their attack on Jagbel demonstrates, Konkombas began to regard violent resistance as their only viable option for protecting their interests.

While Dagomba political identity evolved to reflect their control over Konkombas, the legalization of Dagomba authority influenced Konkomba identity to evolve around challenging their subordinate status. The historically disunited Konkomba clans began to identify the Dagombas as their common subjugator and Dagomba exploitation as their common plight. Their growing sense of powerlessness combined with widespread desire to assert their autonomy, led Konkombas to begin to directly challenge Dagomba authority, which in itself was an indirect challenge to British rule. One of the earliest and most salient examples of Konkomba responding to their subjugation and exploitation was the Konkomba attack on Jagbel in 1940.

Attack at Jagbel

By 1940, Konkombas in the vicinity of Jagbel had grown accustomed to the British giving orders through the Jagbel Na (Dagomba chief of Jagbel) and, therefore, tended to follow his instructions lest they be visited by the district commissioner and fined. Most of the Jagbel Na's instructions, however, did not come from the British but from himself, unbeknownst to either the district commissioner or the Konkombas. For example, he took advantage of the British practice of using communal labor by routinely forcing the Konkombas of the surrounding hamlets to work on his farms. On other occasions, he confiscated their cattle under the pretense that the British were fining them for what was most likely no offense at all. Although the Jagbel Na's behavior toward Konkombas was not unusual for *nas* in Kekpokpam, by the eve of the Konkomba attack on Jagbel, Konkombas had grown increasingly frustrated by these and other manifestations of the Jagbel Na's continued exploitation.

In September 1940, during the annual bovine pleura-pneumonia vaccinations, officers from Veterinary Services went to all of the villages and hamlets in the region. There were several diseases that were major threats to cattle in the Northern Territories including pleura-pneumonia and rinderpest. By 1930, it was estimated that more than half of all Konkomba cattle had died from rinderpest over the previous years.⁶ The colonial administration began to combat these diseases in 1932 through its Veterinary Services Department. It administered a vaccination annually, which helped to reduce the number of cattle that fell ill. From its inception, Konkombas had for the most part been cooperative in this process.

On Wednesday, September 4, 1940, F.K. Binka, a veterinary assistant, visited the Konkomba hamlets around Jagbel with a Native Administration veterinary inspector and a cattle guard to inoculate the cattle. After Binka completed his rounds, the Jagbel Na sent two representatives to go to Nyenbunpile—a Konkomba hamlet near Jagbel—and order those who had not had their cattle immunized against rinderpest to pay a fine. Vaccinations against rinderpest, however, were administered during a different time of year and called for a different vaccine than the one Binka had just completed. In addition, it was not official policy for sub-chiefs to deal with immunization delinquency on their own. Usually, when a veterinary assistant found non-immunized cattle he reported the problem to the veterinary officer or the district commissioner.⁷

Nonetheless, Haruna and Musa arrived at Nyenbunpile on September 5th and approached three men, Larune, Nibala, and Kodile, and ordered them to pay a fine of one cow for failing to have their cattle immunized for rinderpest. The men did not challenge the fine and delivered the cow to the Jagbel Na. Then Haruna and Musa left the hamlet only to return shortly after to inform the men that their payment of one cow was insufficient. They explained that the Jagbel Na now demanded that the cow be replaced with a bull or they would be reported to the district commissioner (Talton 2003:122). A bull was of significantly greater value than a cow. Having it confiscated would have likely been a considerable financial setback for the owner. The men refused to release the cow and a brief quarrel ensued but was quickly broken up. But as the men left Nyenbunpile, some Konkombas shot arrows at them from the bush but missed and the men safely made their way back to Jagbel.

On Friday, September 6th the Jagbel Na sent a message to the district commissioner in Yendi, informing him that Konkombas had attacked two of his messengers. Four days later, Constable Bukari Kanjara arrived at Kodile's compound with the Wulana, the *nas'* principal assistant, and eleven others to inquire about the shooting and make arrests. The Konkombas had taken seriously Haruna and Musa's threat of returning with the district commissioner and feared being arrested and fined. Therefore, before the entourage reached Nyenbunpile, a large party of Konkombas confronted them, to which the entourage responded with a hasty retreat to Jagbel without making inquiries. In the days that followed, the Konkombas evidently sent word to fellow clansmen to join them for an attack on

Jagbel. According to the Chief Commissioner Jones' reports, those who had taken part in the attack came from villages as far as fifty-five miles away.⁸

On Tuesday, September 10th, a large force of Konkomba men gathered at Nyenbunpile. The group advanced toward Jagbel, led by Jangbugja, a relative of the man from whom the Jagbel Na demanded the cow and a man of great influence among the Konkombas of the area. A large section of the Konkomba force surrounded the village, preventing any of its residents from escaping while the main body advanced toward the Jagbel Na's compound. Apparently, the Jagbel Na noticed the advancing Konkomba men and managed a brief escape, running several yards from his compound before being struck down by an arrow. Jangbugja had so well organized his fellow Konkombas that they only killed the Jagbel Na; some members of his family; and Bukari Kanjara. All other residents were allowed to escape. When it was over, Jagbel had been demolished and its people scattered. Knowing that the British would come in support of the Jagbel Na, Jangbugja fled south toward Bimbilla and was never captured (Talton 2003:123). In the end, approximately twenty people were either dead or injured; there was no evidence of any Konkomba casualties.⁹

The British officials accepted the Dagomba narrative of the attack, which omitted that the Jagbel Na had attempted to illegally confiscate a Konkomba man's bull. In fact, the Jagbel Na's role in the affair had been completely sanitized, which led the British to the conclusion that the attack had been unprovoked and that the Konkombas had been angered only by their feeling that the veterinary officers had intruded upon them. This version spread through Dagbon and Kεkpokpam angering many Dagombas and causing *nas* to fear that they may suffer the same fate as the Jagbel Na (Tait 1961:7).

The government expressed a sense of dismay and was at an apparent loss as to what had inspired the Konkomba to carry out the attack on Jagbel. Describing the events, Jones wrote:

My description of the scene at [Jagbel] does not; [sic] I fear, convey a true idea of the hideousness of the crime; its frightfulness and barbarity could not be exceeded. Defenseless people, innocent of any wrong to the Konkomba, were pursued and shot while trying to escape... 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.¹⁰

The British would not learn of the significant details that were missing from the Dagomba version of the attack until February 1941, five months after the fact.

On October 8, 1940, Chief Commissioner Jones and Governor Arnold Hodgson began to discuss ways to establish a firmer control over the Konkomba areas and prevent future disturbances. These initiatives, and those that followed over the next seven years, evolved into a formal "Konkomba Policy." The policy began as a way to end inter-clan fighting and future attacks against Dagombas.

Ironically, the Konkomba policy laid the foundation for greater Konkomba independence from Dagbon. In addition, creating a policy that was directed at all Konkomba clans collectively resulted in the administration contributing to the development of a Konkomba political identity.

In one of the first measures of the Konkomba policy, Jones enacted the Peace and Preservation Ordinance, which, in specific Konkomba areas, made carrying bows and arrows illegal. The chief commissioner placed the Dagomba Native Authority in charge of enforcing this law and empowered the Native Tribunals to adjudicate persons known to be in violation of it, with the possibility of imprisonment "for a term not exceeding three months or [of] a fine not exceeding two hundred shillings."¹¹ By the first week of October 1940, officials had seized and destroyed a total of 4,600 bows and quivers. By October 9th, forty-seven Konkombas were convicted of taking part in the attack on Jagbel. "I would say," wrote Jones, "that the action agreed upon and already partially taken will, I am convinced, result in the pacification of the Konkomba country. They are now learning the futility, and the unpleasant consequences of flouting authority and taking the law into their own hands."¹² This initial government response to what they perceived as increased Konkomba recalcitrance further marginalized the Konkombas and rendered Konkombas living near Dagomba outposts vulnerable to the *nas* exploiting them.

Adding to the Konkombas' sense of insecurity was the British administration's decision to open a police station in Kekpokpam. Ironically, while establishing a greater police presence in Konkomba areas brought the British more deeply into the day-to-day lives of Konkombas, it also allowed Konkombas to begin to deal with British officials directly as opposed to being represented by Dagombas *nas*. After much deliberation, British officials decided that Saboba was the best location for a police station. Saboba, with a 1931 population of approximately 629, was not the largest Konkomba village (The Gold Coast Census Report 1948:309). Sambul's population during the same period was approximately 936 and growing (p. 294). British officials were attracted to Saboba because it was in the geographical heart of Kekpokpam and was easily accessible from Yendi (Talton 2003:131). Consequently, Saboba evolved into the Konkombas' *de facto* political "capital" thereby giving a shared sense of political interests. Notions of a shared political space and common interests would begin to spread more rapidly among Konkombas after British officials gathered details of what actually provoked the Bimokpem clan to attack Jagbel.

The director of Veterinary Services was the first to present conclusive evidence behind the Konkomba attack on Jagbel. He had decided to launch his own investigation because Dagomba versions and subsequent government reports placed his office and the conduct of his employees at the center of the events surrounding the attack. He contended that the relationship the Veterinary Services had fostered with the Konkombas over the previous decade contradicted the theory that the Konkombas were against the government imposing upon their cattle.

The director explained that since 1932, when Veterinary Services began immunizing Konkomba cattle, it had worked vigorously to educate cattle owners on the purpose of immunization. In addition, as recently as spring 1940, an assistant district commissioner and a veterinary officer toured Kekpokpam, informing residents of the dangers posed by rinderpest and pleura-pneumonia. Therefore, the director argued, it seemed unlikely that Veterinary Services' visits to Konkombas near Jagbel would have angered them.¹³

Although early on in their investigation, the administration grew convinced that the Konkombas had not allowed Veterinary Services to carry out its vaccination work,¹⁴ the director's investigation proved that Veterinary Services had been able to do so "with all possible help from the owners, which is not surprising as the annual visit of the pleura-pneumonia vaccination unit is routine."¹⁵ He surmised that what the Konkombas resented was not the Jagbel Na's assisting the government in carrying out its duties with regard to livestock but his own punitive measures, led by his desire to exploit his position of authority. He explained:

My experience and that of my staff is that the only people who are not well received are the Dagomba overlords and their servants. The Dagombas regard the Konkombas as serfs, as beasts of burden to catch all the Dagomba cattle at immunization camps and if possible, to be exploited.¹⁶

Countering earlier pronouncements regarding the Konkombas' allegedly subhuman disposition, he argued that:

I do not think that the [Jagbel] riot is an isolated incident caused by the innate savagery of the Konkomba but that it, the 1939 Kugnau trouble, and other cases, are part of a coherent whole, of a smoldering resentment against the Dagomba, which blazes into sudden flame after long provocation. The numerous Konkomba emigrants from this very area, who settle in Nanumba, Gonja and Krachi, appear to lose suddenly their vicious savagery and it seems to be exhibited only in Dagomba.¹⁷

The director's investigation and consideration of the British administration's initial response to the attack led him to advocate for the administration to change its relationship with Konkomba clans. He argued that a change in policy would be the only effective means of bringing them under its control. He proposed that creating a Native Administration school for Konkombas might "yield more benign results than a dozen police patrols."¹⁸ The administration accepted the director's findings on the Konkomba attack but did not initially consider his suggestions for changes in British policy toward Konkombas. British officials did, however, begin to re-evaluate the administration's relationship with the Konkombas.

Although Dagomba lives were lost and many Konkomba were turned into exiles, while others languished in British prisons at Tamale and Yendi, there was a positive outcome, from a Konkomba perspective, to the attack on Jagbel. It forced the British to take a serious look at them, their political situation, and their relationships with the Dagombas. A palpable expression of this new outlook was a restructured policy toward the Konkombas. Another, more lasting product of this affair was that the aftermath of the events presented the first signs of an emerging Konkomba political consciousness. A Konkomba political consciousness was first demonstrated in the efforts of Kpalborr Djar to create a multiclan Konkomba council and the Konkomba support that he received.

Upon close examination of the events of 1940 and 1941 it became evident to British officials that their model of political incorporation and indirect rule had failed, at least with regard to the Konkombas and Dagombas. They responded to this apparent breakdown in administration by developing a new policy toward Konkomba clans based on a direct assessment of the Dagomba-Konkomba relationship. That assessment made apparent the need to resort to native councils. Prior to the attack on Jagbel, however, the British focus on chieftaincy had prevented officials from seriously considering councils as an alternative to chiefs. Yet, chieftaincy had grown so central to their colonial policy that after a brief consideration of reforms the British chose to uphold their former system, despite its flaws. Therefore, although Konkombas managed limited political gains while the administration debated the efficacy of creating a Konkomba council, Konkombas ultimately remained legally subordinate to their centralized neighbors. In reality, however, they were rapidly redefining their own status.

Konkomba Political Agency

Although the Konkomba attack on Jagbel is a minor event within the overall experience of Africans under British rule in the Northern Territories and British West Africa generally, it is significant when examined within the context of ethnic relations, or, more specifically, the relationship between the colonial government, African society, and ethnicity. It marks the beginning of a new relationship between the colonial government and the historically non-centralized Konkomba clans, which ultimately set a new course for the ways in which Konkombas interacted with their neighbors and each other. Its significance therefore is not so much in the details of the actual attack but in the behavior of the groups involved—Dagombas, British, and Konkombas—in its aftermath. By asserting their own political identity and interests, Konkombas began for the first time to respond as a group to the political parameters and social categories that the British administration had constructed. Furthermore, the disputes between Konkombas and the historically centralized and politically dominant Dagombas during this period helped lay the foundation for the more violent and widespread ethnic-based political conflicts of the 1980s and 90s.

The Konkomba initiative to gain greater political control influenced the colonial administration's decision to consider creating a Konkomba council. Djar, who was the Kpalborr, or headman of Kpalb, led this movement toward a Konkomba political reorientation, which seems to have been inspired, to a large extent, by widespread disdain among Konkombas in the Konkomba villages around Demon for Demon Na Mahama. The British had enforced the Demon Na's authority over the relatively large Konkomba villages of Kpalb, Kuntul, Chagbaan, Sambul, Kungau, Kuncha, and Botun, as well as several smaller Konkomba villages, as part of the Demon Sub-Native Authority. Consequently, Mahama had formal authority over a predominantly Konkomba population of approximately 5,093 people (The Gold Coast Census of Population Report 1948:294). However, Konkomba resistance to his authority rendered Mahama incapable of carrying out his administrative duties, including collecting taxes, within Konkomba villages and hamlets. Consequently, Djar took on many of Mahama's administrative responsibilities, which led to an intense rivalry between the two men. Despite his lack of direct influence among Konkombas, Mahama was reportedly able to use his official position as Demon Na to exploit Konkombas and obstruct their efforts to seek recourse with the district commissioner (Talton 2003:136). The district commissioner and the Ya Na knew of Mahama's activities and occasionally took measures to curtail them.

Therefore, in March 1945, the *unikpel*, or elders, of the Kpalbtiib and neighboring Bimokpem clans formed a council of headmen, led by Djar, and petitioned the Ya Na to formally recognize Djar as *na* of Kpalb, independent of the Demon Na's authority (Staniland 1975:212). The Ya Na honored their request and formally "enskinned," or instituted, Djar as *na* (Talton 2003:137). Djar then lobbied the British administration to support the Konkomba council as the political and legal authority within Konkomba areas formally under the Demon Na's jurisdiction. Konkomba attempts to create a Konkomba council was a precursor to the Western-educated leadership efforts in the 1990s to promote Konkomba chieftaincy. Both processes illustrate the irony of Konkomba resistance. While they challenged the structures of local society, they attempted to incorporate those very structures as part of their political system. Through incorporating these elements, moreover, Konkomba leaders were working toward reforming local political structures. This phenomenon illustrates the ways that individuals and groups are forced to conform in order to effect change. Historically, councils, like chieftaincy, were not part of Konkombas' political structures. Nonetheless, both became essential vehicles for asserting Konkomba interests. Djar's efforts, therefore, represent a radical break from Konkomba politics and the beginning of a legacy of Konkomba leaders working within the prevailing political structures to seek recourse.

Djar proposed bringing one factious clan, Bimokpem, under the leadership of the *oborr*, or Konkomba headman, of a neighboring clan, the Kpalbtiib. This was attractive from the British perspective because it might influence the

Bichabob, Binafeb, and other Konkomba clans of the Oti plain to form similar councils and finally make indirect rule among Konkombas possible. The district commissioner agreed to allow Djar to establish the Konkomba Council to operate on a six-month probationary period.¹⁹ And on March 27th, in spite of the Demon Na's objections, the Ya Na announced his support of the council. Djar's embrace of the chieftaincy as an effective means of exercising political authority demonstrates the tenuous nature of ethnic characteristics. Anthropologist David Tait visited Kpalb during the 1950s and noted that Djar lived to some extent like a Dagomba *na*, with a horse—which was very rare among Konkombas—and medicines prepared and sold by Dagomba *mallams* on his clothing (Tait 1961:11).

Djar's efforts to create a Konkomba council are unique not only because he independently developed alternatives to the political incorporation model as the British applied it, but also because he sought to create the first multiclan Konkomba political entity. This was a significant step in the development of a Konkomba political consciousness and in changing the British perspective toward the Konkombas. It was rare for a Konkomba to challenge a Dagomba Na and get away with it, and it was unheard of for him to do it continually. In terms of a political impact, Djar's council did not influence actual direct political change as much as it helped to transform Konkomba political consciousness from being centered on intra-Konkomba relationships to a focus on the relationships between Konkombas and Dagombas. While British officials began to consult Djar on matters related to the Kpalbtiib and Bimokpem, beyond his initial introduction of the Konkomba council very little materialized. Djar's overall influence waned after a short time as well. He continued to be an influential Kpalbtiib well into the 1970s and maintained an active rivalry with the Demon Na but failed to evolve into an overall force for change among Konkombas. The true force for change would emerge in the 1950s when the first generation of Konkombas to enroll in schools began to join the class of Gold Coast civil servants. In the meantime, the British administration took on the project of creating a Konkomba council, which would also be short-lived.

Moved by the precedent that Djar set and still shaken by the events surrounding the Konkomba attack on Jagbel, the colonial administration for Eastern Dagomba began to devote considerable energy resolving, once and for all, the conflict-ridden political relationship between Dagombas and Konkombas. On July 3, 1946, A.W. Davis, the Yendi District commissioner held a meeting with the Ya Na, Sunson Na, Demon Na and Djar about developing a plan for future Konkomba political development and autonomy. In September 1946, in a letter to the Colonial Secretary in Accra, Acting Chief Commissioner Guthrie Hall formally announced the colonial administration's change in policy toward Konkombas. He acknowledged that the British strategy for pacifying Konkombas through force had failed and that the government's neglect had subjected them to Dagomba exploitation. Hall declared that the government's new strategy would bring peace and stability to Konkomba country by fostering a sense of responsi-

bility and gradually building a local government. To cultivate this new relationship, Hall announced that the government had appointed James Anderson as the first assistant district commissioner for Yendi, to be stationed in Saboba.²⁰ In light of the previous thirty years of relations between the Konkombas and the British colonial administration, creating a Konkomba sub-district was a significant event. It made it possible for the British administration to deal with the Konkombas as a group rather than as separate villages, hamlets or individuals. Furthermore, with a sub-district, Konkombas had a collective political space for the first time, which became a center for shaping their evolving political identity.

Subsequent change, however, would be left largely to Konkomba initiatives. From the British perspective, chieftaincy was entrenched as the only legitimate local political institution. While Anderson and other British officials recognized that there was little legitimacy in enforcing Dagomba control over Konkombas, it remained the official policy. Alternatives were regarded as politically and financially inexpedient. The British therefore abandoned plans for a Konkomba council and other projects slated for Konkomba areas, because it would call for increased political and economic investment in Konkomba areas. Furthermore, there was disagreement among some administrators of whether a Konkomba council would be effective. In fact, the government began to pursue alternatives to the council. It even prepared to station an elder from Sunson in Saboba to represent Konkomba interests to the administration, much to the alarm of the *unikpel* and *oborrs*. Anderson even resumed the practice of touring Konkomba hamlets and villages accompanied by a Dagomba *na*.

Colonial Rule and Postcolonial Conflicts

The events near Bimbilla during the 2002 parliamentary elections demonstrated the persistence of ethnic tensions in Ghana's Northern Region. The conflicts between 1981 and 1994 have been cited as the source of this continued ethnic antagonism. The history of the relationship between Konkombas and their neighbors, however, suggests that these disputes must be examined in their historical context to determine their root cause and build sustainable peace. Such an examination of the transformation of ethnic identity and relations reveals that ethnic tension is an extension of local political structures in which historically centralized groups are legally defined as politically dominant and non-centralized as subordinate regardless of each groups' level of actual political and economic power. Consequently, legal status may not accurately reflect an individuals or group's political capacity. Konkombas historically have been a collection of politically disparate, chiefless subclans, prone to prolonged episodes of violent feuding between them. For the sake of political expediency, therefore, they are placed under the administrative jurisdiction of their centralized neighbors, the vast majority falling under the authority of Dagomba political authority. Their status was defined under British colonial rule and left largely unchanged by postcolonial

governments, despite Konkombas themselves undergoing rapid and dramatic change through which their political structure and level of social and political unity conformed to mirror Ghana's politically dominant ethnic groups. Yet, the status quo remained largely unchanged and Konkombas remained defined as subordinate and marginal. Herein lies a major source of tension.

The British administration constructed non-centralized societies as politically illegitimate and therefore tangential to the political structure of the Northern Territories. The first large-scale manifestation of ethnic tension was the 1940 Konkomba attack on the village of Jagbel. The attack on Jagbel was the first incidence of large-scale violence between Dagombas and Konkombas, since the advent of European colonial rule. The attack and its aftermath are the most salient examples of the consequences of the colonial state constructing and enforcing political relationships. In 1947, having accepted that their efforts to enforce formal Dagomba political control over Konkomba territories contributed rather than stifled Konkomba recalcitrance, the British decided to develop a plan for greater Konkomba political autonomy and self-sufficiency. Perhaps if they had continued with this new policy toward Konkombas a more congenial relationship between Konkombas and Dagombas might have developed. However, shortly after beginning to lay the foundation for a political structure that would grant Konkombas greater access to political resources, the British administration, reluctant to compromise its chief-centered approach to ruling its territories, reverted (once again) to supporting the failed policy of Dagomba authority in Kekpokpam. Nonetheless, their focus on Saboba, however briefly, as the Konkombas' political center was a significant step toward Konkomba leaders adopting the established political structure to build greater Konkomba political viability and claims to a greater share of the government's resources. Therefore, the disputes between the Konkombas and Dagombas during this period helped lay the foundation for the more violent and widespread ethnic-based political conflicts between the Konkombas and their centralized neighbors in the postcolonial period. The historical relationship between the Konkombas, Nanumbas, Gonja, Dagombas, and Mamprusis demonstrates that common perceptions of citizenship rights in Northern Ghana continue to be based upon notions of political power and legitimacy that British colonial officials constructed during the 1920s, 30s, and 40s.

Consequently, in order to protect their interests, non-centralized groups had to adopt a chief-centered political structure. Konkombas gradually conformed to the dominant political system until the late 1970s when a faction within their leadership advocated for asserting Konkomba paramountcy. Ghana's postcolonial regimes maintained the British administration's stance toward non-centralized groups and did little to reform local political systems to allow for greater political equality between groups.

Konkomba history during the late colonial and the postcolonial period is marked by a series of conflicts between Konkomba leaders and the leadership of the historically centralized polities. The conflicts between 1981 and 1994 are an extension of these conflicts, only differing in terms of the scale of violence

involved and the level of organization exhibited by all of the parties involved. The failure of the postcolonial state to reconstruct citizenship based upon residency and not on attachments to historically centralized or chief-centered groups while promoting notions of ethnic equality has produced a political environment in which there are competing notions of citizenship rights.

NOTES

- 1 NRG 8/2/28, May to September 1930.
- 2 NRG 8/2/28, May to September 1930.
- 3 NRG 3/4/3, February 3, 1930.
- 4 ADM 47/32, January 30, 1932.
- 5 ADM 47/32, January 30, 1932.
- 6 NRG 3/4/3, February 3, 1930.
- 7 NRG 8/2/88, March 18, 1941.
- 8 NRG 8/2/88, September 17, 1940.
- 9 NRG 8/2/88, September 17, 1940.
- 10 NRG 8/2/88, September 18, 1940.
- 11 NRG 8/2/88, November 2, 1940.
- 12 NRG 8/2/88, November 2, 1940.
- 13 NRG 8/2/88, February 28, 1941.
- 14 NRG 8/2/88, September 17, 1940.
- 15 NRG 8/2/88, March 18, 1941.
- 16 NRG 8/2/88, March 18, 1941.
- 17 NRG 8/2/88, March 18, 1941.
- 18 NRG 8/2/88, March 18, 1941.
- 19 NRG 8/4/94, 1947.
- 20 NRG 8/2/206, September 6, 1946.

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- _____. 8/2/88, Report on Konkomba Disturbances by the Director of Veterinary Services, March 18, 1941.
- _____. 8/2/99, Letter to the Colonial Secretary, Accra, from W.A. Jones, Chief Commissioner, October 17, 1940.
- _____. 8/2/206, Letter from Guthrie Hall, Acting Chief Commissioner, to Colonial Secretary, Accra, September 6, 1946.
- _____. 8/4/94, Informal Diary of the District Commissioner Eastern Dagomba, 1947.