CHAPTER 10

CHIEFTAINCY CONFLICTS IN NORTHERN GHANA: A CHALLENGE TO NATIONAL STABILITY

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Introduction
The chieftaincy institution in Ghana has been rocked by several conflicts due to land litigation, political polarization along gate lines and over succession to the chiefship position. Even though Ghana is characterized more by a condition of stable peace than by conflict (Hughes 2003:11), chieftaincy conflicts have become a disturbing phenomenon in the political landscape of the country. Ghanaians woke up on January 1, 2008 to celebrate the New Year only to hear the beating of war drums at Bawku in the Upper East Region of Ghana. The government immediately imposed a curfew on the town to curb a violent inter-ethnic dispute between the Kusasi and the Mamprusi ethnic groups. The heavy police detachment to the conflict area did not help matters, neither did the appeals from the Members of Parliament from the area. It took a heavy military detachment to the area coupled with the imposition of stringent curfew hours (from 3pm to 7am) before some calm could be restored to the Bawku township and neighbouring areas. The violence in Bawku is a clear reminder to Ghanaians that chieftaincy conflicts in any part of the country is a threat to national stability. The Bawku conflict is one of many such conflicts that have erupted in the country in the last decade. In Ghana, many communities are bedeviled with chieftaincy conflicts that are on the verge of erupting into violence and are likely to result in the destruction of property, injury and death. Dagbon, Wala, Wenchi, Ga, Anlo, Nanung (Bimbilla), Buipe, Yapei, Babato Kese, among others are just a few of the traditional areas that made, and continue to make headlines in Ghana, reminding us of chieftaincy conflicts that occurred in the past, those currently on-going, and others yet to explode in the near future. These conflicts divert the nation's attention and energies from fighting poverty, low enrolment in schools, hunger, diseases and ignorance that are the real enemies of Northern Ghana, the main area of focus of this paper.
Generally, chieftaincy conflicts in Northern Ghana have been categorized into those that are inter-ethnic and others that are intra-ethnic. According to Drucker-Brown (1995: 39):

Conflicts (in Northern Ghana) occur both within and between ethnic groups. Intra-ethnic conflicts are usually 'dynastic' disputes between related groups claiming kingship or chiefship; inter-ethnic conflicts occur most frequently between members of chiefly groups confronted by people they regard as subjects.

In September 2007, the existing rivalry between the B'moba and the Konkomba, two neighbouring minority ethnic groups in the North of the country, turned violent. This conflict resulted in the burning down of numerous villages inhabited by both the Konkomba and the B'moba, and several markets in the area. The violence started following a misunderstanding over money between two women, one from the B'moba side and the other from the Konkomba side at the Jimbali market. Other sources indicate that the conflict started when a Konkomba woman who had sold her charcoal at the Jimbali market lost the money (an amount of two cedis) earned from the sale. The money is said to have fallen off while she was tying it on her cloth. She only discovered the loss when she went to buy ingredients. She traced her steps back to the spot where she had earlier sold the charcoal and two young men who found the money were identified by bystanders. The woman then demanded her money back but the boys insisted they did not take the money. Upon further demands, the boys accepted picking the money but demanded a commission from the 2 cedis before they would hand over the money to her. A quarrel ensued between the two parties. The violence that followed this quarrel was unimaginable. According to official reports, six people died. I was however told that the death toll was much higher. As at 25th September, 2007 (about a week into the conflict) when this author was travelling from Bunkpurugu to Yunyoo, passing through Jimbali, Mangor, and Bimbago, smoke could still be seen from burning compounds. The Jimbali and Mangor markets were completely burnt down. Soldiers were found all along the road, especially from Bunkpurugu to Yunyoo. Some of the victims of the conflict could be seen re-roofing their houses with fresh grasses.

Explanations of chieftaincy disputes are many and varied. According to Ray (2003: 263):

chieftaincy disputes are the conflicts over the political legitimacy of a traditional office-holder or candidate in terms of the selection or deselection processes for that office, or whether or not that office holder has acted properly in that office, or whether or not traditional authority is recognized as being valid by the people involved.

He argues that chieftaincy disputes have long been a source of minor and major political struggles for many Ghanaians, although most chieftaincy disputes are settled peacefully by the chiefs' courts, the judicial committees of the Houses of Chiefs, and the courts of the Republic. Other times, chieftaincy disputes become violent, destructive, and disruptive of human life. These conflicts and major struggles have the potential of destabilizing the country, especially when they become violent. When chieftaincy disputes become violent, they result in injury and/or death of people, animals and property, thus resulting in the disruption of the general life of the population.

In his 2002 address to the National House of Chiefs, the President of the Republic, John Agyekum Kufuor said inter alia:

There has always been rivalry in the process of selecting chiefs, but never before has the nation witnessed such widespread usurpers and false pretenders to thrones... Today people who have no proper claim to stools or skins have found their way to these sacred places through very dubious means. The practice means that in many a case the institutional memory and wisdom which are so crucial to the functioning of the chieftaincy get lost. It is not surprising then that cynicism about the worth of the institution is spreading. But more dangerous for society is the violent confrontation that now characterizes chieftaincy affairs throughout the country (Daily Graphic May 6, 2002, quoted in Hughes 2003: 19).

This observation by the President is as valid today as it was in 2002. The violence that characterizes chieftaincy disputes need to be checked because if we have about 300 chieftaincy disputes in Ghana4, and we know the potentially violent nature of these disputes, that is enough to get all Ghanaians worried and concerned. It is therefore necessary that as Ghana celebrates its golden jubilee, social scientists should turn their attention to the Chieftaincy institution that most Ghanaians cherish, yet which has the tendency to destabilize the country.

Ray (1998) sees the legitimacy of political succession as the major cause of chieftaincy disputes in Ghana. He also, however, acknowledges that the custom of rotating the chieftaincy office amongst the several sub-units (called gates) of the royal group can lead to disputes. In societies with the gate arrangement, conflicts arise when one gate feels that it has been by-passed by another gate in an orderly-established

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2 Interview with the Yunyoo Rana and his elders in his palace at Yunyoo, September 25, 2007. The Yunyoo Rana is the Paramount Chief of the Yunyoo Traditional Area in the Mamprugu Kingdom. The B'moba and the Konkomba in Eastern Mamprusi fall under his jurisdiction.
3 The Konkomba, in particular, do not disclose their deaths when in war, and the war was fought in the rainy (farming) season where killings which occurred in the bush and in the farms might not have been reported.
4 See the Statesman, Saturday, December 7, 2007. "In the Central Region alone there are over 200 cases of litigation on chieftaincy, including 120 in the Gomoa District" (Boafo-Arthur 2006: 161-162). Also see the Daily Graphic, November 12, 2007.
system of rotation. This can be one of the explanations for the protracted chieftaincy conflict between the Abudu and the Andani royal families in Dagbon and that of the Wa Chieftaincy Affairs. Indeed, these kingdoms, at the moment have no kings; are polarized along the gate lines and this polarization would continue even if eventually new kings are enskinned. Awedoba criticizes the gate system arrangement by observing that:

"[T]he draw-back to this arrangement is that, as the contest is collectivized in a gate system, failure to secure the office is not perceived as a loss to the individual candidate who failed to secure the endorsement of the kingmakers alone but also as a failure to be suffered by the entire lineage or gate of the candidate since he represents the gate (Awedoba 2006: 414)."

According to Awedoba, gate systems could have more destabilizing potential than in a system where gates do not exist and lineages do not have to sponsor their respective candidates. He also observes that it is possible for factions that arise out of gate systems to continue to exist, and this would undermine the solidarity of the kingdom. The winning chief would also be associated with his gate and might even be inclined to favour members of that gate in local issues where impartiality would otherwise be required. I must also add that following the principle of the winner-takes-all, a successful candidate is most likely to fill vacant chieftainship positions with members of his gate to the neglect of the other gate.

Writing in the mid-1970s, the following statement from Staniland (1975) shows the collective nature of the gate system arrangement as exemplified in the Dagbon chieftaincy succession dispute. He writes:

"The cycle of pseudo-traditional dispute had started all over again, each side passionately invoking the support of custom... Beneath their passions, complains and contradictions, the two sides were united by an untarnished devotion to the status and authority of chieftaincy, the pursuit of which still seemed to be the consuming preoccupation of all Dagomba of appropriate age and rank" (1975: 168) (my emphasis).

In traditional polities where there are gates, people are born into the gates, over which they have little or no control, and which, like external facts determine their daily lives. Commenting on the Abudu-Andani divide in Dagbon, Anamzoya (2004) posits as follows:

"Abudu and Andani have become the everyday ways of thinking, acting and feeling which are external to the individual, but into which the individual is born which then direct, shape and control his everyday behaviour...[I]n the Durkheimian sense, Abudu and Andani have become social facts. These social facts are not only limited to Yendi society but to the entire Dagbon society, and indeed to non-Dagomba societies where Dagomba find themselves (Anamzoya 2004: 184)."

Most chieftaincy disputes are only limited to one particular traditional area or region and have not yet threatened the stability of the state (Tonah 2007: 3). Nevertheless, these disputes are generally a symptom of the absence, inadequacy or breakdown of procedures for resolving them. Though isolated, these conflicts are persistent and sometimes bloody, and whilst not geographically spread over a wide area, they have proven difficult to resolve (Hughes 2003) and, therefore, have the potential to destabilize the country. According to Lund (2003: 588), the inability of the state to put communal violence (chieftaincy and inter-ethnic conflicts) definitively to rest, or deal with it in appropriate institutional fora is a threat to the central state authority. This paper renews the call for the government to give more attention to conflicts in the north of the country. These conflicts should not be viewed merely as "northern conflicts," but as sources of internal instability of the Ghanaian state, which if not nibbed in the bud can lead to general instability in the country.

**Chiefaincy Disputes in Northern Ghana**

Northern Ghana consists of the administrative regions of Northern, Upper East and Upper West Regions. It is more or less coterminous with the area that used to be called the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast during the colonial era. Northern Ghana is chosen not because it has the highest number of chieftaincy disputes in Ghana. Instead, it is because of the very destructive nature of chieftaincy in the north of the country, in particular, the Northern Region. Contrary to popular opinion, poverty cannot be an explanatory factor for the extremely violent nature of chieftaincy conflicts in the Northern Region. Indeed, the Northern Region is not the poorest region in the country; it can even be considered the richest in Northern Ghana. The region had (as at December 2007) the least number of cases pending before the Northern Regional House of Chiefs, compared to other Regional Houses of Chiefs countrywide. Out of the sixty-three chieftaincy cases pending before the National House of Chiefs (appealed from the ten regional Houses of Chiefs) at the close of 2007, the Northern region had the least; one case. Nevertheless, the region has recorded the most destructive inter- and intra-ethnic conflicts in the last decade and half. These are the Dagomba/Namumba-Konkomba conflict of 1994 and the Dagbon chieftaincy conflict that reigned in 2002. Both of these conflicts have not been resolved; the Dagomba people have not yet selected a new Ya Na (king) to replace the late king, while the Konkomba are yet to..."
secure a seat for their paramount chief in the Northern Regional House of Chiefs, a major demand of the Konkomba that led to the conflict with the Dagomba/Nanumba. The Konkomba thus still have no representative (paramount chief) in the Northern Region House of Chiefs whose presence in the House will not only show their independence, but who will assume the role of enskinning other Konkomba sub-chiefs, without the interference of the Dagomba and Nanumba ethnic groups.

The last three decades have seen Northern Ghana experiencing numerous violent intra-and inter-ethnic conflicts. These violent conflicts have largely been as a result of chieftaincy and land disputes. However, the widespread enmity and animosity that existed and continue to exist between the so-called 'majority' ethnic groups (that is, the Mamprusi, Dagomba, Nanumba and Gonja) and the 'minority' groups (the Konkomba, Nwuri, Vagla etc.) continue to contribute to these violent conflicts. For instance, the Konkombas fought the Nanumbas in 1981, 1986 and 1994 (Akurang-Parry 2003; Bogner 2000; Skalnik 1983, 1986, 1994). The Gonjas fought the Vagla in 1981 and the Nanumbas in 1991 (Bukum 2001, 2005). There have also been numerous conflicts between the Mamprusi and the Konkomba in Bawku (Lund 2003) in the Upper East region of Ghana. In the Upper West Region of Ghana, fierce fighting, sometimes accompanied by legal tussles, have characterized the competition for the high traditional offices in Wa (Wilks 1989; Seidu 2007; Tenkorang 2007) and Nandom (Lentz 1993). The 1994 Konkomba-Dagomba conflict has been the most devastating of all conflicts in Northern Ghana (Bogner 2000; Akurang-Parry 2003; Tongah). In this particular conflict, for the first time, all the major centralized states in the Northern Region of Ghana (with the exception of the Mamprusi) came together to fight the hitherto non-centralized states who had also come together and formed an alliance to maintain their stance; that is, the right to own land in the area, and more especially, to enskin their own chiefs. Furthermore, Northern Ghana abounds in numerous intra-ethnic conflicts such as those among the Dagombas in 1969 (Sibidow 1969), in 1987 (Mamprugu 2002), and in 2002 (Anamzoya 2004, 2008; MacGaffey 2006). Similarly, conflicts have broken out among the Gonja in 1992 at Vapei, and in 1994 at Daboya (Bukum 2005). These have also been internecine conflicts amongst the Nanumbas.

Since the 1990s, Northern Ghana has been afflicted by numerous chieftaincy disputes. Today, the centralised kingdoms of Dagbon, Nanum, and Wala have no kings (Seidu 2007; Tenkorang 2007). Undoubtedly, there are real tensions in these kingdoms which could turn violent at the least opportunity, especially during the celebration of local festivals and during political campaigns. At the same time, the kings of Gonja and Mamprugu are battling with internal and external crisis respectively; the Gonja kingdom is bedeviled with three potentially destructive chieftaincy conflicts, whilst the Mamprusi and the Kusasi are locked up in a continuous struggle over the control of the Bawku skin. The Gonja have also locked horns with the Mo people over the ownership of Babata Kese.

**Chieftaincy and Inter-Ethnic Conflicts in Northern Ghana**

Although chieftaincy disputes largely occur within an ethnic group, that is, they are intra-ethnic disputes, they may also be inter-ethnic, in which case they occur between two or more ethnic groups. This is the case in those parts of the country where members of an ethnic group are engaged in a struggle to have the ability to choose and enskin their own chiefs, without having to seek the permission or authority from a neighbouring, more powerful group. Thus even though Northern Ghana has witnessed the most violent succession disputes in post independent Ghana, especially amongst the centralised traditional states, most of the inter-ethnic conflicts that have pitched the centralised states against their hitherto non-centralised neighbouring groups, also have some connections with chieftaincy. The strained relationship between the centralised states and their non-centralised neighbours was partly a creation of the British colonial policy. According to Wilks (1989: 165) the policy of the British “was to maintain any Paramount Chiefs that existed and to gradually absorb under these, any small communities scattered about.” In the system of traditional political organization where hierarchical power structure existed, the colonial agents like the Commissioner or the District Commissioner occupied the highest rank in the hierarchy. In non-centralized societies that opportunity did not exist. Having noticed the usefulness of centralized power structure in colonial administration, the colonial administrators created, or in the words of Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, made “use of any person who can be assimilated to the stereotyped notion of an African chief” (1940: 15). Traditional areas were organized into districts and administered with the help of District Commissioners. Traditional areas found to be large enough to constitute districts were duly constituted and recognized as such. Otherwise, it was either added to a bigger one or amalgamated with neighbouring ones to form viable units. “The problem created was that some chiefs lost their sovereignty to those powerful kingdoms they found themselves under” (Anamzoya 2004: 44). For those ethnic groups without rulers, they were either ruled directly by these powerful centralized kingdoms, or chiefs were appointed for them. They were also expected to refer their cases to the courts of the kings who were their rulers. For instance, the Kusasi people came under Mamprusi rule, the Konkombas under the Dagomba and the Nanumba, while the Vagla and the Nanumbas came under the Gonja. In all these cases, the 'minority' ethnic groups were expected to pay homage to their new rulers, farm for them, help build and roof their houses, have their chiefs enskinned by the new rulers or to be ruled by chiefs selected and enskinned by their overlords. The 'minority' groups were also obliged to send the hind leg of every animal killed to the king, or to have their cases heard in the court of their 'masters' where court fines were appropriated by these new rulers and their elders. This master-servant relationship created animosities between the two groups and accounts for the desire for freedom and emancipation amongst the subjected groups. Thus, even after Ghana had gained independence from the British, some ethnic groups were still under the domination of their more powerful neighbours. Indeed, the conflicts between the Kusasi and the Mamprusi (Lund 2003); the Nanumba and the Konkomba (Bogner 2000; Skalnik 1983, 1986); the Nanumba and the Vagla (Bukum 2000-2001), and the war between the Konkomba, Vagla, Nchumuru, and Basare on one side, and the Dagomba, the Nanumba, and the Gonja on the other in 1994 (Akurang-Parry 2003;
Julia 2006, 2007; Mahama 2003) were all attempts by the 'minority' to gain freedom from their 'masters', with one key issue being the quest to have the ability to choose their own chiefs. The following cases further illustrate the continuity and enduring nature of chieftaincy succession disputes and chieftaincy-related disputes in Northern Ghana.

The Dagbon Skin Affairs

The Dagbon chieftaincy dispute in the Northern Region of Ghana has gained much attention and notoriety in the literature, with various explanations being given for the conflict. Studies that employ a historical perspective to understand the conflict (Sibidow 1969; Mahama 1987) try to establish a relationship between the dynamics of Ghanaian politics and the Dagbon succession crisis. Others, in tracing the history put much emphasis on the dynamics of the Ghanaian politics and the Dagbon politics (Ladouceur 1972; Sinnland 1975; Mumuni 1975). Besides the Politico-historical perspective, some authors have traced the conflict to the difficulty of ascertaining the true customary way of selecting and enskinning a Ya Na (Anamzoyo 2004, 2008; Wilks and Ferguson 1970). In all the literature accessed by the author, the elite in Dagbon have been singled out as playing the role of dragging the Dagbon politics into national politics, or vice versa. The ability of the traditional elite in Dagbon to play politics with the Dagbon conflicts results, in my view, from the absence of codified rules regulating the mode of succession to the kingship. The situation has been aggravated by two structural weaknesses of the Dagbon political system. These weaknesses are the inability of the founders of the kingdom to provide a time-tested procedure for choosing a Ya Na as well as the absence of an institutionalized method of removing a Ya Na from office. The following will give us a clear picture of the Dagbon chieftaincy conflict.

Post-colonial Governments and the Dagbon Conflict

Available literature shows that every post-colonial government in the country, with the probable exception of the Limann's government, was forced to intervene in the Dagbon chieftaincy dispute. The intervention of Ghana's first president, Dr Kwame Nkrumah, resulted in the setting up of the Opoku Afari Commission to look into charges the Andanis had preferred against the then Ya Na (Na Mahamadu Abdulai III) and the subsequent enactment of a Legislative Instrument (L.I. 59) of 1959 (Mahama 1987: 67). The regime of the National Liberation Council (NLC) which toppled the Nkrumah government was pressurized by the Abudu family to repeal L.I. 59. The NLC set up the Mate Kole Committee in 1968 which recommended the revocation of L.I. 59. The Busia Government in 1969 implemented the recommendations of the Mate Kole Committee. Part of the findings of the committee annulled the enskinment of Na Andani III (earlier enskinned in 1968) and the subsequent enskinment of Na Mahamadu Abdulai IV (Government of Ghana 1969a, 1969b). On 13th January, 1971, Col. Acheampong overthrew the Busia government in a military coup. Subsequently, under pressure from the Andani family, the Acheampong government set up the Ollenu Committee in 1974, whose findings overturned that of the Mate Kole Committee, sanctioned the removal of Ya Na Mahamadu Abdulai IV, and posthumously recognized the enskinment of Na Andani III. His son (Ya Na Yakubu Andani II) was subsequently enskinned as the Ya Na (Government of Ghana 1974; Mumuni 1975). After this, the Acheampong government passed SMC Decree 299, which denied the Abudu gate the right to appeal against the findings of the Ollenu Committee. General F.W.K Akuffo, who came to power briefly in 1978, was persuaded by the Abudu gate to sign a decree repealing SMC 299. This he did by signing SMC Decree 238, thereby repealing SMC 299, to enable the Abudu gate appeal against the findings of the Ollenu Committee. The June 4th uprising brought Fit. Lt. J.J. Rawlings to power in 1979 and in that same year, his attention having been drawn to the Dagbon chieftaincy conflict, signed AFRC Decree 32. The Third Republic (1979-1981) under the Limann administration did not take any major decision with respect to the Dagbon conflict. However, in 1981, Na Mahamadu Abdulai IV filed a motion in the Court of Appeal challenging the validity of AFRC Decree 32 which had repealed SMC 238. In a unanimous decision the Court of Appeal declared AFRC Decree 32 invalid. By this decision, Na Mahamadu Abdulai IV proceeded with an appeal challenging the findings of the Ollenu Committee. The Court of Appeal upheld the motion of Na Mahamadu Abdulai IV. Almost immediately, the late king (Ya Na Yakubu Andani II) appealed to the Supreme Court. On the 17th December 1986, the Supreme Court of Ghana in a famous decision overturned the decision of the Court of Appeal and restored the findings of the Ollenu Committee. By implication, Ya Na Mahamadu Abdulai IV lost the legal battle and hence became the ex-Ya Na, whilst Ya Na Yakubu Andani became the substantive one.

Since the establishment of the Dagbon Kingdom in the early 13th century it had not
instituted a well defined and generally accepted system through which a Ya Na could be selected, and to which references could be made. Earlier in history, it was might which formed the basis of succession. A reigning Ya Na could be chased away by a rival claimant, or be killed in an open combat. Later, the rule that the senior-most surviving son of the deceased Ya Na must succeed to the Nam was established. Then the soothsaying method was adopted and later abandoned after the selection of Na Gungobi in 1627 because according to the elders, by choosing Gungobi (the younger of two princes), the soothsayers had gone wrong (Duncan Johnstone and Blaire 1930). Then Gungobi’s successor (Na Zangina) was chosen by the Nayiri, the king of the neighboring Mamprusi ethnic group. Afterwards, the Ya Na was selected from among the occupants of the three gate skins of Mion, Karaga and Savelugu. This new method was used in selecting four subsequent Ya Na, and covered a period of about half a century. Afterwards, the idea of soothsaying resurfaced as a means of choosing the Ya Na. In 1948, a Selection Committee consisting of four elders and the seven most senior divisional chiefs was formed, as a body responsible for selecting a Ya Na. After 1974, the Higher Courts of Ghana decided on who became a Ya Na.

This brief overview of the different methods of selecting the Ya Na since the Dagbon kingdom was founded in the 13th century clearly indicate the absence of a clear pattern of succession to the kingship position. It was in recognition of this fact that Ferguson and Wilks (1970: 34) declared earlier that they “shall not be concerned to determine the ‘real’ rules of succession in Dagomba: There are none; but only changing patterns of succession”. Five years later, Staniland wrote “in present circumstances it is virtually impossible to talk about a ‘proper’ procedure of selecting a Ya Na, since there are conflicts over several crucial elements of the selection” (1975:22).

The absence of clear rules of succession also explains why all committees and commissions of enquiry formed by different governments since independence to enquire into the Dagbon conflicts have had as their first mandate the task of ascertaining the custom and the customary procedures in selecting a Ya Na.

Most chieftaincy disputes in Ghana today are difficult to resolve because there are often no written documents to fall on to clarify the contention of the disputants, and thus ensure that a judicial decision enjoys wide acceptance. One of the biggest challenges facing the Judicial Committees in the Houses of Chiefs in Ghana is how to ascertain what is the actual and proper enskinning or the enstooling procedure. The Houses of Chiefs in Ghana are the official courts (guaranteed by the 1971 Chieftaincy Act, Act 370, and the 1992 Constitution of Ghana) for resolving chieftaincy disputes. Most succession disputes pending before these Houses of Chiefs in Ghana are not about the legitimacy of the contestants but whether a particular contestant or chief was properly appointed by the appointing authority, and enskinned or enstooled according to the appropriate rules within that traditional area. In the first place, the appointing authorities (the kingmakers), the enskinning and enstooling procedures, the time allowed for a complete confinement of a candidate during the period of installation, and the acts that constitute the actual enskinment or enstoolment processes are not properly codified. It is difficult to tell which acts are considered the most important and primary and those considered secondary. These acts are normally fluid and thereby open to manipulation and debate. Secondly, these acts that make one a chief or a king are shrouded in secrecy and the elders responsible for such acts are very unwilling to reveal them. Further, the most important act performed on a candidate for him to be considered a king is controversial and its nature debatable from one section of a traditional area to the other. These are the recipe for the recurrent violent chieftaincy conflicts in Northern Ghana.

Besides, in many traditional areas in Ghana the procedures that govern the selection and installation of a person to chiefship positions are guided by time-tested customs. If the selection procedures are not maintained, but keep changing as noted in the Dagbon conflict, it becomes difficult to establish over time that time-tested custom, which everybody can stick to as the custom. This normally results in the creation of multiple versions of the customs which further create conditions for disputes over succession to a chiefship or kingship positions.

The Nanung/Bimbilla Chieftaincy Dispute

Bimbilla is the traditional capital of the Nanumba people of Northeastern Ghana. The Nanumba speak the Nanuli language, a language similar to Dagbani. They have a centralized system with the Bimbilla Na as the King. In 1999, the King of Bimbilla, Na Aburika, died. His funeral was performed in 2003. After the performance of the funeral and according to Nanung custom, a king should be selected and enskinned immediately. As a result, two princes emerged vying for, and claiming that they have been elected by the appointing authority and enskinned by the appropriate enskinning authority. This raises the questions of: Who is qualified to be selected as Bimbilla Na? Who selects and enskins the Bimbilla Na? Who constitute the appropriate authority in the Nanung Kingdom? Which enskinning acts are the most important acts that constitute the prerequisites to legitimizing one’s enskinment?

There are two royal gates to the Bimbilla kingship; Bangyili (Bangle’s gate) and Gbugumayili (Lions’ gate). These gates are royal houses from which kings of Bimbilla are selected in rotation. The current dispute is, however, between members of the same gate, Gbugumayili. Thus, unlike the Dagbon conflict, it is an intra-gate dispute. The question of who is qualified to be chosen as a Bimbilla Na has polarized the Nanung kingdom. The disputants are Nakpa Na Salifu Dawuni and Mr. Andani Dasana. I am referring to them by their present positions since the matter is still unresolved, though they both claimed to have been enskinned with each calling himself Bimbilla Na.

Birth Right Versus Title Holders

Mr. Andani Dasana (the eldest surviving male son of Bimbilla Na Dasana Andani, 1959-1981) and his supporters are arguing that Nakpa Na Salifu Dawuni is a great grandson and is, therefore, not qualified to become the king of Bimbilla. The position held by Mr. Andani and his supporters is that, in Nanun custom, only sons and grandsons are qualified to ascend to the Bimbilla Skin. The Nakpa Na Salifu Dawuni, on the other hand, holds the view that being a Nakpa Na (the highest gate skin from the
I) is a prerequisite to the occupancy of the Bimbilla Skin.15

However, the most contentious issue appears to border on the elder(s) responsible for the selection of a Bimbilla Na. The question of who chooses the Bimbilla Na is as controversial as the question of what constitutes the selection process for the kingship position. Interviews at Bimbilla with the contenders and some of the kingmakers revealed that there are nine kingmakers who are responsible for the selection and the enskinning of the Bimbilla Na. They are: The Juo Na, the Wulehi Na, Dibsi Na, Langiri Na, Chichegu Na, Jilo Na, Kpatihi Na (or Kpatihi), Gambugu Na and Joli Na.

Out of the nine kingmakers, three (the Juo regent, Jilo regent, and Juo Na) are supporting Nakpa Na and the remaining six have thrown their weight behind Mr. Andani Dasana. The two major arguments of Nakpa Na Salifu and his supporters are that: he is the occupant of the Nakpa skin, and claims the Juo Na (who has chosen him as Bimbilla Na) is the nominating and enskinning authority. However, his opponent, Mr. Andani contends that succession to the Bimbilla Skin is reserved for direct sons of a former king. 'No grandson has ever ruled Bimbilla', he declared. Both his father, Bimbilla Na Andani Dasana (1959 to 1981), and his grandfather, Bimbilla Na Abdulai were former Nats of Bimbilla.

The second argument of Andani Dasana is that it is the Kpatihi Na, and not Juo Na, who selects the Bimbilla Na by putting the regalia on the candidate. According to him, it is the putting of the regalia that legitimizes ones position as a Bimbilla Na. Finally, he argues that the nine kingmakers in Nanun constitute an Electoral College and whoever has the majority votes of these kingmakers becomes the Bimbilla Na. He rejects the position that the Juo Na has a final authority in deciding who becomes the Bimbilla Na. Clearly, there are several conflicts with respect to the selection procedure. Since 1999 when Na Abarika died, many attempts have been made to resolve the dispute. The resolutions of a judicial committee formed by the Nanumba Traditional Council to resolve the dispute has been rejected by Mr. Andani and his supporters, and subsequently thrown out by the Tamale High Court on the basis that the Nanumba Traditional Council lacks jurisdiction to sit over a matter involving the Bimbilla Na (Nanung paramountcy). The Nayiri, the king of the Manprusi, acting as a "big brother" to the Bimbilla Na invited all the nine kingmakers in August 2006 to find an amicable settlement to the problem. His solution which favoured Mr. Andani was rejected by Nakpa Na, his supporters and his legal counsel on the basis that the Nayiri did not officially write to inform the Northern Regional House of Chiefs (where the case is currently pending) before undertaking the amicable resolution. Also, that the actual disputants were not part of the exercise.

Unfortunately, like many Northern chieftoms and kingdoms, there is not much documentation on Nanung as a kingdom, coupled with the fact that the customary procedure of selecting and enskinning the Bimbilla Na remains undocumented. Such knowledge exists only in the memory of the "praise singers" some of whose knowledge has been questioned. The Bimbilla chieftaincy dispute, like many of its kind, offers us the opportunity to appreciate the complexity of such disputes in the country, and the task that awaits those who are mandated to adjudicate and resolve such disputes. It also brings out new dimensions to the problems of resolving chieffaincy succession disputes: it is not simply about the eligibility of the candidate but also about the installation authority and the acts that constitute proper acts of installation.

The Nalungni Case

The Nalungni case provides us an excellent example of a state policy, which was mainly implemented to cool down the tempers of the conflicting parties with nothing being done afterwards to permanently resolve the ethnic conflict. This chieffaincy dispute occurred in a small village in the eastern corridor of the Northern Region, not far from Saboba, the capital town of the Konkomba Saboba was one of the towns elevated to paramounty in the early 1990s by the Ghanaian state but has not received a Legislative Instrument to set up its own Traditional Council. The grandfather of the current Sunson Na, Na Shani Hamidu II, is said to have created the Nalungni skin and enskinned the first chief around 1920. Sunson Na's father enskinned the late chief and now it is his turn to enskin a new chief. Thus the Sunson Na, a divisional chief under the Ya Na (the king of the neighbouring Dagomba) used to enskin the Chief of Nalungni. The Sunson Na also was the enskinning authority of the Chief of Saboba, now the head chief of the Konkomba people. The mass elevation of chiefs to paramounties in the 1990s affected both the Sunson Na and the Saboba Chief. Logically, the Sunson Na might not be able to enskin the Saboba Chief since he is now of a paramount status. And if the Saboba Chief is of paramount status, then he is also qualified to act as the appointing authority of all chiefs under him. This is why it was difficult for some of the Konkombas to understand why the Sunson Na should still enskin their sub-chiefs when they now have a paramount chief. That was the question in the Nalungni chieffaincy dispute whose first hearing I happened to witness in the Northern Regional House of Chiefs on September 10, 2007. One can hazard the way the settlement would go finally, and of course the consequences, especially when we consider the fact that all the panel members of the judicial committee sitting on the case are Dagombas; the chairman himself (Mion Lana) being a potential Ya Na. The Registrar (of the Dagomba Traditional Council) who was recording the proceedings is a Dagomba, and Billiam Moses Joseph (the chief appointed by the Sunson Na) was playing it safe by always bowing to the Dagomba chiefs (the judicial committee members) as they went in and out of the hall in the course of the judicial proceedings. He and his supporters also bowed and continued bowing till all the Judicial Committee members filed past when they were going out for break and when the case was finally adjourned around 5pm that day. Though this conflict has not turned violent, the state does not have to wait till it does so.

Kusasi-Mamprusi Conflict

The account of the Kusasi-Mamprusi conflict in this section is taken from Sustainable Peace Initiative-SPI- Report (2007:43-8). Through empirical studies, the SPI has detailed the numerous conflicts in Northern Ghana. According to the report, the contention in the Bawku Chieffaincy Conflict is about who has the right to enskin a

15 There are two gate skins to the Bimbilla paramountcy: Dokam and Nakpa. If it is the turn of Gbugumayili, the chief occupying the Nakpa skin is automatically qualified, and the chief of Dokpan is made the king if it rotates to the Bangyi gate. Both Nakpa and Dokpan are paramount skins.