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Kwame Joseph Sasu & Yaw Owusu-Agyeman

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# When the Chief is Away: Managing a Leadership Vacuum in a Ghanaian Community

KWAME JOSEPH SASU  AND YAW OWUSU-AGYEMAN 

The debate on the relevance of traditional authorities in contemporary societies has been ongoing. However, less emphasis has been given to the effect of the absence of legitimate traditional leaders in some communities. To address this knowledge gap, the current study adopted a qualitative research approach to gather data from 8 participants concerning how the absence of a traditional leader has affected the peace and development of Aburaso in Ghana. Using the applied leadership vacuum concept and the transformational leadership theory as the theoretical underpinnings of the study, the findings revealed that while the absence of a traditional leader has hindered development initiatives, land management, and social cohesion, the leadership succession dispute has also resulted in a continuous conflict and the lack of peace. This study concludes that traditional authorities remain pivotal development actors and recommends establishing robust succession frameworks to prevent prolonged leadership vacuums.

## INTRODUCTION

**A**cross countries of the world, indigenous leaders have played important roles in community development as traditional authorities, despite the advent of modern governance systems (Godden and Cowell 2016; Bitew, Sewenet and Fentahun 2021). In Ghana, the institution, status, and role of chiefs are enshrined in the 1992 Constitution (Adjei, Kwaku Busia, and Bob-Milliar 2017). As Goleman (2017) argue, leadership is critical to everything; societies develop in line with the vision and direction of their leaders. Because traditional authorities are embedded in the local context, they act as crucial intermediaries between external development agents and community members (Eberbach et al. 2017; Meraku 2017; Dansoh et al. 2020).

However, some previous studies have questioned the relevance of unelected traditional leaders (Eberbach et al. 2017). Contrary views point

to the fact that the authority of unelected traditional leaders is rooted in customs rather than popular legitimacy (Baldwin 2016; Keulder 2010). With the establishment of multiparty politics, decentralized governance, and rapid socio-economic change, traditional leaders now compete with other actors, including elected officials, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and religious bodies (Pelizzo, Kinyodo, and Nwokora 2018).

Yet previous studies have shown that in rural Africa, indigenous governance systems are highly regarded for their accessibility, prompt dispute resolution, and safeguarding of cultural values, often in contrast to perceptions of state institutions as corrupt or inefficient (Mathonsi and Sithole, 2017; Koenane 2018). Rather than binary thinking of traditional versus modern, authorities increasingly play hybrid roles - networking externally while retaining local moral authority (Sharamo 2014; Ubink 2007). However, prolonged chieftaincy disputes can produce leadership voids with deleterious community impacts. While research has examined African traditional leadership styles, roles and legitimacy, limited focus has been given to contexts where customary authority is absent altogether. This study addresses this gap through a case analysis of chieftaincy vacuum in Aburaso, Ghana. In exploring resident's perceptions, the current study applies Thrall's (2001) leadership vacuum concept which also explains the adverse effects of the absence of leadership, direction and governance within groups and organizations.

### Aburaso's Chieftaincy Dispute

**A**buraso is a peri-urban town located in the Atwima Kwanwoma District of Ghana's Ashanti Region with a population size of 8790 residents (Ghana Statistical Service 2018). The town has been without a substantive chief for nearly 30 years due to competing claims between royal families over the heir to the late chief (fieldwork 2023). The inability to install a new leader derives from the community's history; much of the population trace ancestry to other ethnic groups, while chieftaincy is reserved for certain royal lineages (Lombard 2018).

This disjuncture between hereditary and democratic legitimacy has fueled tensions between the royal families and community members, erupting periodically into violent clashes. Efforts to resolve the dispute through regional authorities, the judicial system and public hearings have been unsuccessful.

Not only has the contestations persisted across generations, rather, they have also become further entangled with partisan politics, resource conflicts, and distrust between traditional institutions and local government (Walters

et al. 2021; Adjei, Kwaku Busia, and Bob-Milliar 2017). The stalemate leaves Aburaso without clear traditional leadership or mechanisms for selecting a new chief, resulting in a long-running governance void.

Similarly, unresolved chieftaincy disputes have been observed to have a paralyzing effect on local governance and development across Africa especially Sub-Saharan Africa. These disputes have been a major setback to national development, causing security challenges and hindering progress.

### Absence of a Transformational Leader

**T**ransformational leadership theory, developed by James MacGregor Burns focuses on leaders who inspire followers to achieve extraordinary outcomes and develop their full potential (Burns 1978; Giddens 2018). African traditional leaders perform such functions as transformational leadership in their jurisdictions to push local development as evidenced in a study on the impacts of chieftaincy in Ghana by Abotchie (2006). The study further revealed that about 81% of community development projects were initiated by chiefs, who mobilized resources and labor for infrastructure like basic amenities. Scholars argue transformational leaders are vital for community development as they can powerfully catalyze collective action, spearhead projects, and build social capital through their charismatic authority (Avolio 2010). However, the leadership vacuum resulting from the unresolved succession dispute has deprived Aburaso of an authority figure who could provide transformational leadership to foster development in the community.

#### *Leadership Vacuum Concept*

**L**eadership has been defined as a process of influencing others to achieve common goals (Yukl 2012; Dubrin 2009). Leadership roles include facilitating change processes, offering guidance, empowering teams to resolve issues, and fostering collaborative initiatives. Transformational leadership explains the capacity of leaders to identify necessary changes, develop a vision, inspire individuals, and revolutionize organizations in order to attain outcomes that surpass the current state of affairs (Giddens 2018).

Some critics contend that traditional leadership methods, which uphold hierarchical structures, might demonstrate paternalistic or hegemonic tendencies. Decentralized, emergent, and shared leadership provide options that prioritize collaborative and grassroots procedures, allowing every member to contribute. However, traditional authorities

in Ghana have fused top-down leadership approach with bottom-up participation method (Abotchie 2006).

The transformational leadership approach aligns with descriptions of chiefs spearheading development as change agents rallying community action. Research emphasizes their function in accelerating initiatives by communicating attractive visions, convincing participation, and raising communities beyond self-interest toward communal progress (Abotchie 2006; Avolio and Walumbwa 2014). This capacity for transformation suggests that traditional authority in rural Ghana play a crucial role in facilitating advancement. For instance, Chiefs serve as important intermediaries between the State, Non-Governmental Organizations, and the citizens, mediators in conflicts, and as agents of development (Owusu-Sarpong 2003).

To Thrall (2001) the leadership vacuum concept represents the absence of effective coordination and guidance from leaders significantly limits the capabilities of groups. The 30-year deadlock in appointing a new leader in Aburaso exemplifies the consequences of a lack of authority. The absence of acknowledged leadership has caused a halt in communal efforts that rely on the supervision of the chief. Factional disputes have also escalated without mediation. Applying a transformational lens underscores the significant role chiefs can play in promoting development by organizing collective effort toward common objectives. The absence of a traditional leader poses a threat to the proper functioning of the institution. The succession crisis demonstrates that even in modernized settings, the inability to reinstate legitimate traditional leadership can significantly impede community progress.

This study explains why the prolonged traditional leadership void in Aburaso has resulted in barriers to collaborative action, worsening conflicts and stalled development initiatives. Further, the current study emphasizes the ongoing significance of transformational leadership that involves the participation of traditional authorities at the community level.

## METHODOLOGY

To explore experiences of the chieftaincy void, a qualitative case study approach was utilized involving in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions with some Aburaso residents. For an in-depth qualitative study, 8 participants were purposively selected to reflect diverse views across age, gender and roles. They include the Assemblyman, a unit committee member, women's leader, the youth leader, a sub-chief, an elderly woman, an elderly man and a young woman. Assembly and unit

committee members possess oversight of development initiatives and represent community interests. Including clan heads and the women's leader captured leadership perspectives. Additionally, some youth, women and elders provided varied responses that are linked to their generational and gender outlooks. The 8 respondents were randomly grouped into two focus groups. The use of interview and focus group discussion guides were aimed at eliciting perspectives into impediments stemming from the long-running leadership vacuum, how it compares to periods with engaged chiefs, adaptations used and perceptions of key issues needing resolution. Such questions included: what roles do chief play in this community? How has the long-running leadership vacancy affected local governance and development? What disputes have arisen due to the absence of chief arbitrate? What informal coping strategies have members used to address the leadership void? What issues should be resolved before a new chief can be installed? What risks exist if the leadership void persist?

This interviews and focus group discussions aimed to collate diverse insights into the impacts of the chieftaincy void in the community and how it has affected governance, dispute resolution, development projects and cultural preservation. As active community spokespersons encompassing an array of standpoints, these participants offered detailed experiences that reached saturation. The research also required balancing depth against risks of stoking tensions between the opposing royal factions vying to ascend the throne. Therefore, by selecting widely-trusted figures, the researchers were able to obtain diverse perspectives from across the community.

The findings provide crucial perspectives into day-to-day impediments that demonstrate why resolving the vacuum with inclusive succession structures matters to Aburaso's peace and prosperity. The narratives of these community authorities and members who have endured nearly 30 years without a traditional leader lend insight that can inform the development of policies to strengthen succession processes and to sustain the smooth functioning of the community. Thus, Aburaso serves as a comprehensive case study that examines the consequences of power vacuums in a community. It encompasses crucial elements of prolonged battles for succession including rising conflicts and hindered governance. The effects of on leadership vacuum especially on small communities suggest the urgent need for efficient leadership succession systems to prevent positions from remaining vacant for such a long time that it disrupts community unity and advancement.

As part of a project work in a PhD program, ethical approval for the research was obtained from the Ethics Committee for Humanities of the university of Ghana. Informed consent was gained from all participants, emphasizing voluntary participation, privacy protections, and the right to

withdraw. Furthermore, interviews and group discussions followed ethical guidelines which also ensured that questions were non-leading and did not include sensitive topics that could cause participants distress. Respondents were assured of utmost confidentiality, anonymity and secured data storage.

Thematic analysis was applied to identify key patterns in the qualitative data. The two researchers took turn to read and re-read the transcripts to familiarize with the data. For each step the corresponding researchers mutually agreed to ensure intercoder reliability. Further, data from interviews were compared with responses that were generated from the group discussions to enhance validity. Coding was used to categorize opinions relating to the research questions on traditional leadership roles, perceived impacts of the prolonged vacuum, and the coping strategies used in the absence of a chief. Comparing and relating the codes allowed dominant themes to emerge inductively. Also to ensure that the identity of participants was blinded, pseudonyms were used in place of the original names of participants.

## FINDINGS

The study confirmed the significance of traditional authority in offering supervision for development initiatives, resolving conflicts, mobilizing communal labor, and safeguarding the traditions and culture of the community. This aligns with Dansoh et al. (2020) on the interfacing role of chiefs. However, the three-decade leadership void has hampered these functions.

Most significantly, lacking traditional oversight of land allocation and records has resulted in haphazard development and an upsurge in boundary conflicts in the community. Relatedly, the absence of customary dispute resolution mechanisms has meant interpersonal conflicts often escalate to the police and courts, straining social relations. This could be properly understood in the comments of a respondent below:

What is the need for a chief? I have never seen a chief in this community since I came here in 2014. Anytime we hear there is going to be a new chief then there is conflict in the community which sometimes leads to bloodshed. ... besides this, these chiefs are fond of selling lands to multiple buyers and engage in dirty rituals which spiritually affects the development of the community [Akosua Achiaa].

Participants also reported a decline in collective action, as the chief would previously discipline those failing to contribute their labor for

initiatives like road clean-ups or school construction. Some felt unable to undertake community projects without the chief's ritual endorsement. The younger participants expressed little interest in restoration of a chief, but most elders strongly supported appointing someone to fill the vacant role and reunify the fractured community.

Respondents highlighted some duties of the chief as very sacred and religious which can only be exercised by him to bring development to the community. A unit committee member noted:

The presence of a chief brings fear, reverence, and understanding into the community. The absence of a chief breeds bullies and litigants. Hence, the role of a chief is very important [Akwasí Adu].

This confirms the work of Ndima, (2017) that traditional leaders are viewed as the community's spokesmen and as such are charged with a crucial duty of harmonizing local customs and traditions with the principles of the country's constitution.

## EFFECTS OF THE ABSENCE OF A TRADITIONAL HEAD

It was evident from the interviews that the absence of a chief in Aburaso community has contributed to poor record keeping and documentation management which has had several detrimental effects on community development. This has led to land disputes which bred unacceptable individual approaches such as haphazard development and the usage of "land guards" who are organized criminal group employed to protect land and property through the use of violence. The absence of a leader in the community to direct the affairs of the community leads to unavoidable situations such as delayed decisions and disagreements.

The group discussion with the assemblyman and committee members revealed the varied problems faced by the community. Matters relating to land disputes remain unresolved because some demanded further consultation with the Asantehene (Overlord of the land). Equally, cases relating to cursing were difficult to resolve because it demanded traditional rituals which could only be performed by the chief.

The Assemblyman alluded to this challenge:

There was a time we need to construct a bridge. Traditionally, we needed to pour libation to the river before we start work but since we didn't have a chief to do that, we had to get a traditional priest from elsewhere to perform this rite. This cost us a lot of money that



could have been used to support the project. Even at that, we were told the rite was not worthy because the priest was not qualified to do the rituals. So might have do perform another one later before construction is done [Yaw Boakye].

When asked to compare their experiences of the present to the past where there was a chief, some elderly respondents remarked that previously (when there was a traditional leader), there was social cohesion as compared to now where there is no chief. Some participants also noted how the previous chief had used his influence to mobilize communal labor and successfully lobbied government to build the basic school, toilet facilities and erection of electricity poles to facilitate electricity connectivity. Excerpts below reflect the review of a participant:

... But it is almost impossible now to bring people together for any activity. The assemblyman and committee members tried that for some time, but it did not work. Some of us stopped because defaulters were not punished for not turning up. We need a chief to help the assemblyman to enforce these activities in the community [Yaw Barimah].

In the case of traditional leadership families and individuals who disobeyed the chief's and the community's laws were subject to sanctions. This stopped societal vices including profanity, elderly abuse, stealing, and immoral behavior. Some respondents also cast a slur on the modern way of conflict resolution. In contrast to the technical procedures in formal courts which are intended for punishment rather than social healing, prior studies (Braithwaite 2014; Murambadoro, Wielenga, and Batley 2020) have argued that traditional tribunals encourage processes of reconciliation. The traditional tribunal system supports the value of mended social ties in serious situations that affect the family and the larger society. This is highlighted in the submission of an elderly respondent:

Interfamily conflicts that could have easily been resolved by the traditional authority headed by the chief now find its way to the court. The court cases often take much longer time to be addressed as compared to the mediation or adjudication process by the traditional rulers. Resultantly, family ties and social bonds are ruptured due to these protracted litigations [Akua Boamah].

Amidst several challenges faced, the assemblyman intimated that decision making process between committee members are easy and fast when compared to some neighboring towns with chiefs. This assertion was

corroborated by the old assemblyman who recounted some delays in decision making as a result of inherent bureaucracies in the traditional system.

## COPING STRATEGIES

In coping without a substantive leader, multi-sectoral collaborations have emerged between assembly representatives, clan heads and churches to drive development. While these informal institutions have emerged, they seem to lack the authority and skills to exhibit full transformational leadership. This highlights how residents of Aburaso have adapted informal coping strategies rooted in community solidarity to provide some sort of security in the absence of a chief. But some participants overwhelmingly described these stopgap measures as poor substitutes for a traditional leader who is expected to provide direction, ensure the preservation of the culture of the people and mobilize members of the community for developmental projects. A participant shared his experience on how the community had developed strategies to mobilize members for community development programmes in the wake of the traditional leadership vacuum:

We had to go extra mile and fight for the building of a 6-unit classroom block for the community. After several challenges with the traditional factions as to who is the rightful custodian of the land, we eventually had to ignore all factions and go ahead and build with the help of the Methodist Church in the community. A team of young men continuously stormed the project site until the police was engaged to protect the place. As a committee member, I was personally attacked a couple of times. Fortunately, the contractor was a classmate, so I was able to urge him on to complete the project on time [Kwabena Annor].

The inability of the community leaders to resolve the chieftaincy dispute in Aburaso has clearly been perceived to have had detrimental effects on community development and cohesion. In the absence of strong leadership, residents have had to rely on informal collaborative efforts between assembly representatives, clan heads, and churches. However, they feel that these temporary alliances lack the authority and capacity for transformational leadership that a chief would provide. As evidenced by the struggles of the development committee to build a classroom block, the opposing factions and lack of centralized authority led to delays, extra costs, and even violence. The participants believe that until the succession dispute is resolved and a new chief is officially installed, the community

will likely continue to face such challenges. Appointing a chief would not only provide formal authority but also preserve important cultural knowledge and traditional leadership that currently not in existence. Resolving the long-standing leadership vacuum in Aburaso is seen as crucial for enabling more effective development and reducing conflict.

## DISCUSSION

The current study lends empirical support to the leadership vacuum concept proposed by Thrall (2001). In line with the model, participants linked Aburaso's blocked development, heightened conflicts and disengaged citizens to the absence of coordinated leadership. This expands the applicability of the leadership vacuum concept to rural African communal settings marked by polarized succession politics. The leadership vacuum in Aburaso, caused by an unresolved succession dispute, shows how traditional authorities are still important for rural African communities, especially for peace, culture, and community development. The findings of the current study also reinforce conclusions of contemporary relevance of traditional authorities' (van Wieringen 2020; Ubink and Duda 2021). Despite modern governance, commerce, and religion in Ghana's peri-urban areas, survey participants stressed the importance of traditional institutions to fill leadership gaps that hinder local problem-solving and collective mobilization. This highlights the complementarity of traditional and modern systems, rather than their competition (Mmusinyane 2009; Sharamo 2014) in ensuring community development and the promotion of peace.

However, unresolved chieftaincy disputes can adversely affect traditional leadership roles and also hamper development. This study argues that protracted vacuums produce legitimacy gaps that become hard to reconcile due to competing claims and counterclaims among chieftaincy groups. Much as leadership transitions in companies or nations can breed uncertainty, the absence of succession frameworks in chieftaincies can spur disorder and institutional dysfunction at the community level. Similar dynamics are seen with unresolved chieftaincy disputes paralyzing local governance and development across Sub-Saharan Africa, for instance in Nigeria and South Africa (Ukase and Abraham 2016). The prolonged nature of some disputes over traditional leadership roles fuels divisions and complicates reconciliation efforts. Policymakers across Africa continue to grapple with reforming succession processes and integrating traditional authorities into modern governance frameworks.

The current study provides an empirical support to the leadership vacuum concept (Thrall 2001) by demonstrating its applicability in a peri-urban African settings that is marked by polarized succession politics. The long leadership vacuum in Aburaso supports previous research on traditional authorities' role in local administration, development, and peacebuilding (Mmusinyane 2009; Sharamo 2014). Paralysis from unresolved disagreements emphasizes dangers of destabilization, demonstrating greater dysfunction in Sub-Saharan Africa when succession failures leave vacuums without alternative frameworks (Ukase and Abraham 2016). These findings underscore the need for codified, context-sensitive succession procedures to maintain governance and continuity. Installing accepted leaders can provide vital coordination. On the contrary, the absence of a legitimate traditional leader could lead to transitional vacuums, and social fragmentation amid escalating conflicts and a lack of social cohesion. Policy reforms should thus cement succession processes and interim local arbitration provisions to sustain functionality when positions suddenly turn over. Spaces for multi-stakeholder negotiation can also mitigate future contests by balancing modernized democracy with traditional continuity. This study stresses that ensuring smooth leadership transitions and succession planning must be governance priorities before disputes culminate in developmentally disastrous vacuums.

## CONCLUSION

While traditional authorities in contemporary African communities navigate complex transitions, they are perceived as indispensable to local governance, development and cultural preservation. This study has revealed that succession disputes and Leadership Vacuum can destabilize communities. In particular, leadership vacuum hinders community resource management, social cohesion, and participatory growth. However, rather than accepting leadership instability and division as inevitable, communities could adopt conflict resolution processes that are based on cultural values. For instance, traditional mediation processes that are embedded in the chieftaincy hierarchy and structure of communities, divisions and paramountcy could be used to resolve disputes. In such cases, the role of traditional elders and council of chiefs could be utilized to ensure that disputes are resolved based on cultural values and practices. Local adaption of such historic techniques to balance continuity and democracy may help resolve the conflict without unfavorable thinking. Installing a legitimate chief from below and above may sustain functionality during transitions better than importing external succession models.

In conclusion, the challenges in Aburaso demonstrate the need to combine traditional and modern leadership transitions to handle complex transformations in 21st-century Africa. Succession frameworks that incorporate cultural wisdom, while also promoting modern participation, have the ability to maintain social cohesion during periods of leadership transitions.

While the National House of Chiefs, Regional Houses of Chiefs, and local Traditional Councils can control and recognize chiefs' positions, including enstoolment or enskinning and destoolment or deskinning (Owusu-Sarpong 2003), protracted chieftaincy disputes require extensive engagements and mediational processes to resolve. To address the leadership vacuum in the current study context, the Regional House of Chiefs should facilitate inclusive community talks with all chieftaincy groups, local government, youth/women leaders, and elders to establish trust. Also, the chieftaincy groups should identify priorities for the selection of a new chief while they negotiate a power sharing succession plan. Also, there is the need for an interim traditional leadership committee to be established to fill the gap created by dispute until chieftaincy succession terms are established. The interim leadership committee could among other things ensure that the processes for mediating land are documented while they also resolve disputes among individuals and families. To prevent youth violence, the local government office should increase civic education and mentorship programs to prepare them as change agents during the transitional vacuum. Finally, clan heads should be trained to apply culturally-based best practices to install traditional leaders and manage chieftaincy disputes to strengthen leadership succession procedures.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## ORCID

Kwame Joseph Sasu  <http://orcid.org/0009-0003-1097-2030>

Yaw Owusu-Agyeman  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6730-5456>

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Joseph Kwame Sasu, Doctoral Student, Department of Adult Education and Human Resource Studies, School of Continuing and Distance Education, University of Ghana, P.O. Box LG 31, Accra, Ghana. E-mail: jksasu002@st.ug.edu.gh

Dr. Yaw Owusu-Agyeman, Senior Lecturer, Department of Adult Education and Human Resource Studies, School of Continuing and Distance Education, University of Ghana, P.O. Box LG 31, Accra, Ghana. E-mail: yowusu-agyeman@ug.edu.gh; yoagyeman8@gmail.com