

**DECENTRALIZATION IN A PLURALIST STATE:  
ETHNIC IDENTITY, RESOURCE CONFLICTS AND  
DEVELOPMENT IN THE EAST GONJA DISTRICT OF  
GHANA**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Decentralization has often been viewed as a panacea in the democratic articulation of multiple interests in a pluralist state. Others argue otherwise. The manipulative tendencies of the state often lead to inappropriate institutional frameworks that undermine the very democratic principles that decentralization seeks to provide. Using a concrete case of the multi-ethnic East Gonja District of Ghana, the author argues that decentralization does not always provide a framework for the articulation of sectional interests. He then goes on to illustrate how the lack of sensitivity to the issue of multi-ethnicity in crafting the institutional framework for decentralized development has generated unending ethnic conflicts since colonial times to the present. Among the damaging effects of the ethnic conflicts are the recurrent loss of life and property, displacement of the local population, disruption of livelihoods and above all the thwarting of the consensus building processes at both the district and community levels, thereby stalling the implementation of the decentralization process. He concludes that a conscious redefinition of the roles and authority boundaries of the traditional institutions to realign them with the current national decentralized district development framework is critical for the democratic participation of all ethnic and interests groups in this ethnically diverse and conflict ridden district.*

**Key words:** Decentralization, Ethnicity, Conflict, participation, diversity.

**1.0 INTRODUCTION**

The notion that ethnic diversity provides fertile grounds for ethnic violence runs counter to the pluralist theory of the state. This theory posits that although various groups and classes have different interests, diversity itself serves as a wonderful opportunity to expand the

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meaning of life and that if the state recognizes difference and legitimizes its existence, peaceful co-existence can be achieved (Nicholas, 1975; Bowen, 1996). Nicholas (1975: 114) argues that "pluralism is believed to ensure that power is dispersed throughout ...; there is no single group or people able to determine governmental policy." Thus, decentralization of both state political power and administrative functions is one of the ways in which ethnic pluralism, as a natural phenomenon in a state, can be managed (Conyers & Hills, 1984; Rondinelli et al 1983; Ahwoi, 1991; Tetteh, 1993; Hadiz, 2003). The assumed political merit is that decentralization will lead to local self-determination whereby diverse local interest groups exercise their democratic rights in decision-making in local matters that affect their lives directly. The self-governance principle enshrined in decentralization implies that appropriate local administrative structures that will be set up at the local level will be close enough to the grassroots to facilitate the routine decision-making on matters that affect the lives of people at that level. Decentralization, in this sense, becomes a conflict-minimizing framework since legitimate political and administrative structures provide avenues for each group to articulate its interest (Ahwoi, 1991; Friedmann, 1992). Increasingly, decentralization is closely associated with social justice, equity in development, democratic decision-making and the issue of minority rights in pluralist ethnic societies (Ahwoi, 1991; Anderson, et. al., 1998; Wollenberg et. al., 2001; Larson, et. al., 2005).

While acknowledging the potential role of decentralization in enhancing the democratic articulation and consequent minimization of conflicts in ethnically diverse states, decentralization has its own risks. Decentralized corruption, weak lower level administrative structures, elite capture, imbalances in power relations, majoritarian dominance, and destructive competition among different competing interest groups are among the many risks that can undermine the effectiveness of a decentralized development framework in a pluralist state (Friedmann, 1981; Tetteh, 1993; Tamakloe 1993; Hadiz, 2003)



Since 1859<sup>2</sup>, various attempts have been made to design a framework that would address the development needs of people at the local level. Like most countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Ghana has grappled with the problematic issue of how to design and implement a decentralized local development framework suitable for its diverse ethnic and interest groups. The power relationships between the various ethnic groups and the implications for territorial arrangements have been central to such efforts. Despite this long history of such efforts, results are mixed. While there are ethnically diverse districts that are functioning smoothly, others are fraught with conflicts. The entrenched positions taken in such conflict-ridden districts make decentralized development very difficult to implement. The question then is does the problem lie in the ethnic pluralism per se, or the manner in which the decentralized framework is designed and implemented. In this paper, it is argued that, rather than blaming ethnic plurality for the entrenched conflicts in some of the districts in Ghana, attention should be drawn to the process of decentralization. It situates the problem in the manner in which the initial decentralization was conceived and implemented as well as subsequent governments' failure over the years to address the critical issues of the ethnic identity crisis and contested resource claims that emerged because of the initial approach.

The paper is organized into four main parts. In part one, the problem is defined and which is followed, in part two with an overview of key concepts. Part three entails a discussion of the main themes - decentralization, ethnic identity, conflicts and development. It focuses on the evolution of the local government system in Ghana from 1859 up to 1988, when the present decentralized structures were instituted. This review shows that subsequent governments, over the years, have not addressed the problematic issues. An extensive discussion of the Native Authority System and its implementation in Northern Ghana is embarked on, where it is argued that the current entrenched ethnic problems and resource conflicts in some

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<sup>2</sup>Before 1988, the term local government was used in Ghana. In this essay, however, decentralization will be used interchangeably.

districts in the Northern Region stem from the manner in which the native authority areas were created. The discussion also shows how subsequent governments have failed to address the problems emanating from this policy. This is followed by an examination of ethnic identity crisis, contested resource claims and the recurrence of inter-ethnic wars and show that the process of recounting ethnic histories, (referred to here as *ethnogenesis*) explains the spiralling nature of the ethnic crisis in the specific case of the East Gonja District. The effects of two of these inter-ethnic wars on the district's development are examined within the context of decentralization. The fourth part presents a summary of key findings and some policy recommendations for possible government action.

## **2.0 CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW**

The four key concepts decentralization, ethnicity, identity and conflict, that provide the framework for discussion in this paper have been understood and employed differently by scholars. This reflects, in a way, the different socio-cultural contexts and the time/place experiences of conflict. Their general meanings and specific use in this paper are explained.

### **2.1 DECENTRALIZATION**

Decentralization is an omnibus term that incorporates different types of transfer of central government responsibilities, functions, and some times, authority and power to lower level structures. It thus becomes difficult to define decentralization in a specific or standard way. In the light of this difficulty, several scholars have attempted various ways of classifying the varied forms of decentralization. Lundgren and Bergeron (2002) identified four forms of decentralization. The first is political decentralization, which entails the transfer of both central government administrative functions and authority to constitute representatives of local level institutions. This form of decentralization is often referred to as devolution (Conyers & Hill, 1984; Friedmann; 1987, Ahwoi, 1991). The second form or type of decentralization involves the mere geographic



spreading out of central government administrative units and functions, without local people's active involvement. This form of decentralization is often referred to as deconcentration (Tamakloe, 1993; Ahwoi, 1991). Sectoral decentralization forms the third category. This type of decentralization occurs in conventionally large government sectors with overwhelming operational tasks, large service areas and populations. Sectors such as health, education and agriculture, which traditionally cover the entire country and population, are normally decentralized. Lower level units report directly to their parent organization, with no strong participation of the local people in the planning and implementation of programmes that affect them at the local level. Integrated decentralization is sometimes used to denote the transfer of central government functions or authorities to multipurpose institutions that are supposed to coordinate the activities of other institutions. The case of the regional integrated development programmes, such as the Northern Region Rural Integrated Programme (NORRIP), set up in the Northern Region of Ghana, approximates this model of decentralization.

The substance of decentralization actually lies in the fact of granting local people the necessary authority and legal backing to take up the challenge of organizing themselves and mobilizing local resources to accomplish their own initiated development. From a pluralist viewpoint, decentralization is a means of harnessing the diverse potentials of different groups of people from different backgrounds, such as ethnic i.e. language, religion, race, or profession, for collective development initiatives for the common good (Nicholas, 1975, Friedmann, 1981; Anderson, et., al., 1998). This ideal notwithstanding, the intriguing power game of the political elite tends to favour the manipulation of the decentralization framework and/or implementation process for their own good. Where this happens, there is bound to be eventual dissent among competing groups with the potential to degenerate into open conflicts. Given the fluidity of the term, some commentators argue that decentralization does not necessarily guarantee participatory development (Bacho, 2001; Hadiz, 2003). Hadiz (2003: 4) argues that, "actual experiences and prob-

lems encountered with decentralization suggest that in practice policy making is influenced by the contest between competing interests". Other mainstream arguments revolve around the idea of the manipulative tendencies of the state.

The role of the state in crafting any kind decentralization is not neutral (Larson & Ribot, 2005). The state may indeed, organize decentralization in a way that suits its purposes and hence compromise the fundamental principle of establishing legitimate local institutions that will facilitate the authentic democratic articulation of sectional interests in a manner that will lead to equity among the competing groups. In the evolving democracies in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), where the mobilization of political support from the populace is a crucial issue, decentralization provides a leeway for governments to either establish a firm grip of groups loyal to their cause or dismember the competing groups that work against their interests.

Apart from the manipulative tendencies of the state, there are also real challenges to authentic decentralization, given the multi-ethnic environments of most countries of sub Saharan Africa. Tetteh (1993) argues that in multi-ethnic countries there is the need to examine the institutional aspects of decentralization carefully. This paper discusses this theme of multi-ethnic interests, conflict and the challenges they pose in Ghana's on-going decentralization process using the concrete case of the East Gonja District of the Northern Region.

## **2.2 ETHNICITY**

Different scholars use the concept ethnicity differently. One school "emphasizes the importance of group identity based on such attributes as a common origin, history, language, religion, nationality, and race --- others contend that ethnicity is symbolic and mythic" (Veney, 1977: 6). In the normative sense, ethnicity is a



harmless everyday word that denotes the natural tendency of classifying people of a given region, society or a nation by such attributes as common historical origin, culture, race, religion or some distinctive characteristic. Ethnicity also implies the tendency of people to affiliate according to these attributes outlined above. What is, however, of importance in the growing discourse on ethnicity are the socio-economic and political processes that are linked with ethnicity. The central issue, then, has to do with what role ethnicity plays in these socio-economic and political processes and their impact on society in general. The quest to address this central issue has drawn various scholars of social science into escalating and wide ranging discourses. Indeed, the meaning of the concept is becoming, increasingly, a blurred maze of arguments and counter arguments.

In the practical realm, ethnicity is becoming more and more an important issue that affects people's lives. The unexpected outburst of ethnic conflicts in Eastern Europe, which led to massive ethnic cleansing, the frequent inter-ethnic conflicts and feuds all over the world, and sometimes with genocidal consequences as witnessed in Rwanda are but a few examples of the ethnic problem today. All these different conflict situations testify to the growing importance of the phenomenon of ethnicity and ethnic identity in the world today. The wide range of differences in the scale of occurrence, actors involved, causes, and the patterns of outcomes explain the growing confusion in the varied ways in which the concept is understood and used. One such way of looking at the ethnicity issue is that of ethnic hierarchies. In ancient societies which were usually small populations made up of people of the same origin, it was not uncommon to see classifications based on status, such as slaves, ordinary citizens and the ruling autocracy, as representing various levels of the societal hierarchy. In modern societies today, which are made up of large populations of people from diverse origins, like in the USA and Africa for example, distinctions based on colour, language, historical origin, among others, provide an important basis for classifying people, sometimes in derogatory terms. These perceived differences, in a sense, negate the egalitarian principles and democratic

decision-making processes that underpin decentralization. Ethnic hierarchy, in the context of this paper, is important because of its negative implication for transparent consensus building within a decentralized framework. It has been argued that ethnic hierarchization has the potential of giving elites from majority groups a leeway to entrench their dominance and to use decentralization to serve their exclusive interests (Hadiz, 2003). It can also be argued that political elites from majority groups can so craft the decentralization framework to give legal backing to majority dominance. These two factors are of relevance to this paper, which is aimed at examining the manner in which the decentralization framework was fashioned out and the resultant asymmetrical ethnic relations and ethnic conflicts in some parts of Ghana.

### **2.3 CONFLICT**

Conflict is part and parcel of every human society, since individuals, groups, clans, classes and different organizations always have competing interests. Conflicts, therefore, will arise when individuals, groups, or nations' interests clash or are seriously threatened by other individuals, groups or nations and for which no agreement between the contending parties is possible except the use of some force to protect that interest. Conflict in this sense goes beyond sheer disagreement based on differing views and opinions or just competition. Conflicts can be latent or open. In the former case, the parties do not openly threaten their opponents, though they usually will express their dissatisfactions in varied forms such as derogatory statements, songs, proverbs, symbolic expressions, attitudes, or subversive underground activities aimed at hurting the opponent. In the open conflict, the opponents are engaged in visible acts such as verbal abuse, physical assault, feuds, pitched battles or jungle warfare involving the use of lethal weapons with the intention to subdue or vanquish the opponent.



Conflict has multiple causes (Watson 2003), and does not just occur. This explains the differences in the way people view and analyze it. There is often a history behind a conflict. It is, therefore, crucial to understand the historical and cultural roots, aims, means and ideologies of conflicts, since the issue of collective identity stems from the perceptions of shared ancestry, history, common interests and the vision of a future destiny. Conflict is also a dynamic process, in the sense that the initial reason(s) why two or more individuals or groups are engaged in a conflict are likely to change as memories fade, new actors join or new situations emerge. Conflict may also start as a mere ill feeling, misunderstanding or wrong perceptions and degenerate into acts aimed at hurting the opponent. The affected opponent(s) will also naturally organize retaliatory counter actions that will eventually lead to a spiral of retaliations and counter-retaliations. As the conflict spirals, it draws in, initially, small circles of sympathizers, and if the calculated reprisals continue, it eventually engulfs wider circles of sympathizers of people sharing common identities with the two opposing parties (Castells, 1999). In this type of spiral conflict development, the initial reasons for the two individuals engaging in the conflict will begin to give way to larger issues of group identity, recall of past collective hurts, or the desire to settle outstanding scores, as the "they" against "us" feelings take roots, grow and catch fire. At this stage of the conflict, rationality exits through the back door and the evil desire to destroy the common enemy takes control of people and directs the course of action. As we can see from this hypothetical example, although the starting point involves only two individuals, the spiral effect of conflict has led to the engulfment of whole groups. Conflict may also begin with the clashing of the interest of two groups who have a rational plan to achieve a given objective. One can distinguish between the two categories of conflicts described above as collective or organized conflict on the one hand, and individual conflict on the other. It will be shown in the case of East Gonja, how the spiralling process of conflict development often results in catastrophic consequences.

### **3.0 DECENTRALIZATION, ETHNICITY, RESOURCE CONFLICTS AND DEVELOPMENT**

#### **3.1 THE EVOLUTION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN GHANA (1859 – 1988)**

Since 1859, there have been various attempts to set up a viable local government system quite distinct from the central government. One can say that local government preceded central government. This is so because, even before the British set up formal administration in 1874, the municipal councils were already established in 1859 in the coastal towns controlled by the European traders on behalf of the crown, although there was not a central government under the *ad hoc* governing arrangements. The passing of the "Municipal Ordinance of 1859 established municipalities in the coastal towns ---- in 1943 a new Ordinance set elected town councils for Accra, Kumasi, Sekondi-Takoradi" (Ghana, 1996:2). After the British colonized what was known as the Gold Coast in 1874, three spatial levels of governance – the seat of the governor of the colony as a whole, the provincial and local (district<sup>3</sup>) levels were established. At each of these three spatial levels, administrative structures were then set up headed by the governor at the apex and Commissioners at the Provincial and local levels. The district level constituted the local level. "This basic structure is what has persisted to date with minor modifications under each successive government based on the dictates of the political circumstances of the day" (Bacho, 2001c).

Between 1874 and 1951 the colonial administration sought to establish a firm control of the three political divisions of the Gold Coast, made up of the Colony, Ashanti and the Protectorate (Northern Territories). The colonial government relied heavily on the traditional

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<sup>3</sup> This level has been called by different names, as will be seen in the analysis that follow under the different phases.



rulers to manage the affairs at the local level. The idea was to use the traditional rulers to curb resistance, control their own people and to cut down on the cost of administration. To guarantee their legitimacy and equip them with the necessary powers to control both their own subjects and other local populations that were brought under their jurisdiction, several ordinances were passed to implement this indirect system of ruling through the traditional leaders. As Bouret (1949: 92) observed, the story of the development of this indirect rule is probably the most interesting phase in the history of the dependency". The Native Jurisdiction Ordinance (NJO) was passed in 1878, aimed at delimiting the area of jurisdiction of each traditional authority area and the accompanying powers (Ward, 1969). This was amended in 1883, 1910 and 1924. It was further improved in 1927 as the Native Administrative Ordinance, which defined broadly the powers of the various traditional chiefs and their councillors under the native administration system. The Native Authority Ordinances of 1932 for the Northern Territories and 1933 for southern Togoland were more comprehensive as will be seen in the section under the native authority system. The Native Treasuries Bills of 1932 and 1936 also empowered native administrators to collect taxes and levies for the purposes of developing their respective Native Authorities. The Native Authorities Ordinances gave the traditional chiefs, up to 1951<sup>4</sup>, a semblance of wide range of powers including administrative and judicial powers with regard to customary issues and revenue mobilization, control and expenditure for the development of their respective native authority areas. These powers were diminished over the years. After 1957, this manipulative form of local government manned by puppet traditional rulers ended as Nkrumah swiftly dismantled the colonial government together with its infamous indirect rule system of local government by chiefs.

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<sup>4</sup> *Following the promulgation of the 1951 Local Government ordinance, thereby changing the Local government Bill.*

Nkrumah's ardent drive to build a unitary nation and to speed up socio-economic development was the cardinal considerations for the quick replacement of the Native Authority System with a representative form of local government in 1951. The new local government that was set up comprised two-thirds elected representatives and one-third nominated traditional leaders. Unlike under the Native Authority System, where the traditional chiefs operated as lifetime chairmen, the sitting chairmen of the local councils were democratically elected based on the principle of merit. In order not to incur the displeasure of the traditional rulers too early by doing away with them completely, the head chief of each traditional council was still made the nominal president. Traditional councils were also created. There was, thus, a clear distinction between the traditional councils made up of the traditional leaders of the respective ethnic groups and the local councils, which were purely local public administrative structures. After independence in 1957, the Local Government Act of 1961 was promulgated leading to a complete shift away from the traditional rulers in the affairs of formal local government to purely public administration. After the 1966 coup, which overthrew Kwame Nkrumah and his CPP government, local government had a chequered history, assuming the form of a de-concentrated civil administration. In 1988, however, government took a bold decision to devolve both administrative functions and authority to the local level (Ahwoi, 1991). The institutional framework was also provided to ensure full-scale decentralization down to the community level.

From the brief overview, one can say that decentralization in Ghana has gone through a tortuous process. As Bourett (1949: 47) rightly comments, "among the various political problems of the Gold Coast, one of the most important - (is) -that of local administration...." The native authority system implemented in the Northern territories in particular, has proved detrimental to decentralized development.



### **3.2 THE NATIVE AUTHORITY SYSTEM: ETHNIC REORGANIZATION AND CONFLICTS**

The practice of governance using indigenous institutions was developed by the Romans to govern their conquered subjects in ancient times. This adopted and applied by Lord Lugard in Northern Nigeria. Other British colonial governors such as Sir Donald Cameron in Tanganyika modified and perfected it for similar purposes. Bourret (1949: 47) observed that in many British colonies "one of the aims of the British Government is to rule, as far as possible, through the agency of indigenous institutions". Bouret's observation is confirmed by Governor Sir Ramsford Slater's<sup>5</sup> declaration during the Legislative Council debate in 1930. Slater argued that the essential aim of the indirect rule policy "is the development of an African society able to participate in the life of the modern world as a community in its own right." He also saw it as a "system by which the tutelary power recognizes existing African societies and assist them to adapt themselves to the functions of local government ... such a policy requires the utilization, to the fullest extent, of the indigenous Africa institutions in administering the colony." Although the British openly stressed the need for the development and preservation of indigenous institutions, the real reason was different. As Kimble (1963: 487) observed about the then Gold Coast Colony, "in the north the Government had from the beginning been attempting to work through the chiefs, not so much out of respect for native institutions as for the sake of administrative convenience." The administrative convenience, referred to here, has to do with British unwillingness to meet the cost of administration and development in the North (Benning, 1999). On the whole "strategies employed by the colonial officials to pursue the contradictory objectives of exploitation and social order with limited material resources created new sources of confusion over what constituted legitimate rules and who

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<sup>5</sup> Sir Ramsford Slater was governor of the Gold Coast from 1927-39. He succeeded Sir Gordon Guggisberg, who had already succeeded in bloating the position of traditional rulers in the Legislative Council.

had the right to enforce them" (Berry, 1993: 38). Berry's view is that this policy aggravated the ethnic tensions in most parts of Africa.

The passing of the Native Authority Ordinance for the Northern Territories in 1932 officially legitimized the local government institutional structure that recognized the paramount chief and their ancillary of divisional, village chiefs and headmen in defined territorial areas as the pivot of the local government institution. The ordinance "... gave the chief commissioner...the right to appoint any chief or group of chiefs as the native authorities, and placed in their hands the duty and power to provide good government" (Buorret, 1949: 100). The chiefs assumed executive, judicial, and financial powers to reorganize their native authority areas for socio-economic development. Drawing from their executive powers, they were to administer also the so-called public lands and forest (in addition to their own traditional lands) within their areas of jurisdiction. This means that all the lands of the people within their native authority jurisdiction came legally under their control. This has been one source of discontent among the ethnic groups constituted under the paramount chiefs of these artificially created mini empires. With their judicial authority, they could make byelaws and administer justice on minor crimes. These powers gave them effective control over all the people under their jurisdiction.

The territorial arrangement was also another problematic aspect of the Native Authority System. Although the proposed institutional framework was clear and sought to promote local development within each Native Authority area, its practical implementation encountered a number of teething challenges. The first challenge was the fact that in the Northern Territories, there were numerous ethnic groups, with different forms of indigenous governance systems other than the known structured indigenous chieftaincy systems in the southern part of Ghana, where the indirect rule revolved around chiefs. Thus, the conception that the different ethnic groups all invariably come under one strong paramount chief or the other as per-



taining in the south was seriously in error, as each ethnic group had its own territorial boundaries, even where they had some relationship with some other centralized paramount chiefs. The colonial administration also misconceived of the vast stretches of empty lands in the Northern Territories as no man's lands. These misconceptions informed the colonial government in its approach to the implementation of the Native Authority System in the Northern Territories.

Two approaches facilitated the organization of the numerous ethnic groups in the Northern Territories into Native Authority Areas. In the non-centralized indigenous systems of government that relied on the priest kings, such as the Dagaaba, Issala, Nabdam, Talensi, Kusasi, Nakanne, Grusi and Builsa, chiefs were created, thus ignoring the indigenous Tendana (priest-king) system of governance. In areas where there were already centralized indigenous systems of government, such as among the Gonja, Mamprusi and Dagomba the non-centralized ethnic groups were regrouped under these (Bourret, 1949; Ward, 1959; Kimble, 1963). Another curious difference was the names given to the various Native Authority Areas. In the northwestern part of the Northern Territories, the tendency was to name Native Authorities after the capital towns such as Wa, Lawra and Tumu. On the contrary, in those parts where the centralized states existed and other ethnic groups were brought under them, the practice, even to date, was to name them after the major ethnic groups such as the East Mamprusi and West Mamprusi, East Dagomba, West Dagomba, East Gonja and West Gonja Native Authorities (Buoret, 1949). These nomenclatures have persisted up to date where we still have East and West Mamprusi Districts and East and West Gonja Districts. It is not still clear what the exact motive of this deliberate inconsistency in the naming of Native Authority Areas after ethnic groups instead of names of towns as pertained in the northwestern corner was, although inconsistency is characteristic of the British colonial administration. British policies all over its colonies have never been uniform and consistent. Policies, laws and institutional structures were formulated and applied based on the

prevailing circumstances, specific interests of the colonial administration on the spot, and even to a limited extent, the whims and caprices of the individual colonial administrator. With regards to its land policy for example, there was outright state appropriation of lands in the cool temperate lands of southern Africa, the temperate highlands of Kenya and the oil rich lands of Nigeria's Niger Delta (Omoweh, 1998), while at the same time allowing traditional landlords to keep their lands in other parts of Ghana such as the Gold Coast Colony and Ashanti. So was the case in the matter of the establishment of the indirect rule system and the manner of the demarcation of Native Authorities boundaries in the Northern Territories of the then Nigeria and Gold Coast Colonies.

The manner of the territorial rearrangements especially the regrouping and restructuring of ethnic boundaries and relations have resulted in a number of devastating problems for some ethnic groups. One important problem was the splitting of some ethnic groups into different administrative areas. In the East Gonja and Krachi Native Authorities Areas for example, the Nchumuru were split into both the Krachi and Gonja Native Authority Areas. In the Krachi Native Authority Area, the Nchumuru were only one of the seven different ethnic groups: the Krachi, Pai Akrosu, Tepa, Ntrubu, Sadjuati, Adele and then the Nchumuru. Of the 119 settlements that constituted the Krachi Native Authority, the Nchumuru settlements were 18, i.e. 15.1 percent. The effect is that in the Krachi Native Authority areas, the Nchumuru, naturally, became minorities due to the split, and therefore had less bargaining power. Another important effect is that the ethnic groups that were placed under other ethnic divisions have never been happy about their lost sovereignty and try to show their dissatisfaction anytime the opportunity arises. According to Benning (1999: 57), the chief of Nanjuro complained to the United Nations Visiting Mission to the Northern Territories in 1949 that:

...he was placed under the Gonja chief of Kpembe in 1935 and was directly subservient to the Simkpewura. Since then his people had



not known any freedom and had no recognized status in the Kpembe division. Not only were they regarded as strangers who could not participate in any traditional ceremony but they had to make farms free for Simkpewura who also demanded the hind leg of every animal killed by hunters on Nchumuru lands.

Due to their feeling of loss of freedom and inability to participate as equal partners in the local development effort, which the native authority system supposedly set out to do, the Nanjurohene and his people had no option but to request the then Commissioner to reunite them with their kin in the Krachi Native Authority. In their request they argued that they were a part of the Krachi lands long before German colonisation and will, therefore like to be included in the southern Section of Togoland.

It was not only the Nchumuru, the Nawuri were equally embittered by their subjugation under the Gonja as expressed by the headman of Kpandai. In his complaint, he intimated that:

... since he and his people were placed under the Gonja in 1933 they had been oppressed and had worked free on the farms of their overlords, in addition to paying tribute. While Gonja customs were strange the Kpembewura installed his brother at Kpandai to rule over them instead of their own natural ruler (Benning 1999: 57).

These disturbing complaints by the Nawuri and Nchumuru chiefs and their people support the main thesis of this paper that the recurrent wars and conflicts stem from the feelings of subjugation and perceived loss of identity of the "minority" groups brought under the "major" ethnic groups and the bitterness stemming from the loss of control of their vital resource - land and all that there is in it. These problems have persisted to date and no adequate solutions beyond sheer admonitions have been provided by successive 'governments even after independence, as will be shown in the ensuing section.

### **3.3 ETHNOGENESIS, IDENTITY CRISIS, CONTESTED RESOURCE CLAIMS AND INTER-ETHNIC CONFLICTS**

One of the negative by-products of the restructuring of the ethnic territorial boundaries and ethnic power relations during the colonial period in the East Gonja District is the growing consciousness among the various ethnic groups in the district of the need to re-establish their ethnic legitimacy and control over land. In this struggle for legitimacy, ethnic history has become an important tool in the reconstruction and definition of each ethnic group and its identity vis-à-vis other ethnic groups. This passion with ethnic historical origins, which has always been ignored by all governments, is the core of the recurrence of inter-ethnic conflicts and the struggles to control the land and its resources in the district. The 1991/1992 Nawuri-Gonja war depicts this ethnogenic drama and the contested claims and counter claims over land ownership and its associated identity problems. The 1991/92 and 1994/95 conflicts will be used to illustrate the intricate nature of inter-ethnic conflicts and their effects on development.

What triggered off the 1991/92 Nawuri-Gonja war was the fact that the Gonja youth in Kpandai printed on their T-shirts the inscription, intended for their meeting, "The Gonja Land Youth Association". The Nawuri interpreted the phrase "Gonja Land" to mean the Gonja were claiming Kpandai land as their property. They therefore tried to prevent the youth from wearing the T-Shirts with the inscriptions "The Gonja Land Youth Association" during their meeting in Kpandai with the explanation that Kpandai was not a Gonja land. They said the meeting could only proceed on condition that the Gonja youth delete the word "land" from the inscription on their T-shirts leaving it to stand as "The Gonja Youth Association". The issue of the old hatred between the two ethnic groups and the Nawuri constant quest to extricate themselves from the dominance of the Gonja since colonial times were the underlying causes.



Land, like any other property, can be acquired in several ways. Throughout human history, the principle of first settler, whereby the first settler will claim ownership of any unoccupied land he has come to meet. It is also a well-known fact that dominant groups have usurped the ownership rights of weaker groups through conquest as witnessed in the case of the extermination of the Red Indians of North America and the aborigines of Australia by the Europeans. As society evolves, institutions have also been devised to effect transfer of land ownership rights from land owning groups to previously non-land owning groups. Most parts of the East Gonja District lands have gone through these three types of ownership described. The contentious issues with the land among the various ethnic groups are that: (1) historically some ethnic groups were the first settlers in some defined areas and therefore, by the first settler principle claiming ownership of the land; (2) there were also some points in time when some of the ethnic groups had some encounters with other ethnic groups and lost their lands in the process, such as the case of the Gonja claiming their founder Ndewura Jakpa<sup>6</sup> either overwhelmed the first settlers and their lands taken away from them or made peace arrangements with them and became the secular rulers while the original people maintained their status as the owners of the land and the priest-kings (Tendana) performing religious functions (Ward, 1969; Kimble, 1963). In addition, through the native authority system, the regrouping of tribes under paramount chiefs and empowering them to control them and their lands, was an institutionalized transfer of rights to the paramount chiefs. These unresolved historical processes that have occurred in the area will need to be carefully analyzed and amicably resolved by all stakeholders, otherwise peace will forever remain elusive in the district.

According to the Nawuri oral tradition, Okpanpo founded Kpandai long before colonization. Due to an inter-tribal war in the pre-

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<sup>6</sup> *Oral Traditions of the Gonja, as narrated by the Gonja chief of Jentilpe, 17<sup>th</sup> July 1995 (see Bacho and Bumbie, 1995).*

colonial era, some of the Nawuri moved northwards, through Keta Krachi, crossed the Oti River to their first settlement area called Ketare about 50 kilometres east of Kpandai. At Ketare a great wall of defence was built around the town under the leadership of Nana Attara, the first ruler. Ketare was derived from the name Attara. At Ketare, a courageous hunter by name Okpanpo Daare also went on a hunting expedition to the present day Kpandai where he eventually built his hut. After the collapse of the great wall of Ketare, according to oral tradition, some of the people moved to join Okpanpo the hunter. The name "Kpandai," they claim, is a Nawuri word meaning "hunter Daari's house" which is derived from the name Okpanpo Daari. According to the oral tradition, many years after Kpandai was founded, the first settlers to join the Nawuri were the Gonja, followed by the Kotokolis, the Bassares. According to oral tradition, the first Gonja man who arrived in Kpandai was a mallam and as a result, any time he forecast a good fortune and the hunters killed a bush animal, he was given a piece of meat. Thus, his nickname was "Kunungluwura" which means "chief of meat." As time went on, he became the chief of Kpandai settlers with the title Kunungluwura. The Kpandai area before the First World War was under the jurisdiction of Germany. When Germany was defeated in the war, the area became part of the British Protectorate, known as the Northern Territory. With the Native Authority Ordinance, the British placed Kpandai under the Kpembe paramount chief. The Kpembewura then installed<sup>7</sup> one of his sons as the Kpandaiwura and empowered him to rule the people and exercise control over the lands and people, including the Nawuri who claim to be the indigenous people of the area and other minor ethnic groups. Since then, Kpandai remained under the Gonja traditional council until the 1991/92 Nawuri-Gonja war when the Gonja chief, together with his people, escaped to Kpembe.

The Gonja, who are believed to be the latecomers claim they ac-

<sup>7</sup> The term "enskinning" is used for chiefs in the northern part of Ghana because as part of the installation process they have to be seated on the skin of an animal, usually a cow skin.



quired the land from the indigenes through conquest. Several historians have pointed out that the manner of the Gonja immigration into their present settlement in northern Ghana is that of a band of marauding soldiers of fortune under their legendary leader, Ndewura Jakpa, who by virtue of their experience in inter-tribal combats, slave raiding and the possession of superior weaponry and horses, often descended on unsuspecting tribes, overwhelmed them and imposed themselves on them. Such was the case with their encounter with the less organized and militarily weaker tribes like the Mo, Nchumburu, Nawuri, Safalba, and Vagla among others, who were occupying the area for many centuries before their arrival (Rattray 1932; Ward, 1969, Bouret, 1949; Kimble, 1963). Thus the argument that the territories now inhabited by Nawuri, Gonja, Nchumburu and others "was invaded some four or five centuries earlier by a mass migration from the northeast is not true" (Bourete 1946: 92).

Rattray (1932) also argued that in most of northern Ghana, there was an agreed upon dual system, whereby a priest king (Tendana) representing the indigenous people or first settlers functioned as the custodian of the land and performed religious functions, whereas the invading group with their secular rulers assumed responsibility for the day-to-day governance. Rattray (1932) intimated that because of this dual system, one often heard a secular chief say, "the people belong to me, and the land belongs to the Tendana". This symbiotic institutional arrangement of priest-king and secular king co-existed in those parts of the Northern Territories that were invaded. On the other hand, the priest kings ruled those areas that were not invaded. According to Kimble (1963: 489), these arrangements "continued undisturbed --- until the more revolutionary invasion of the Whiteman with his preconceived ideas", that led to the restructuring of the states, ethnic power relations and the introduction of secular chiefs instead of the priest kings (Tendana) in areas where purely secular rulers did not exist.

This intriguing history of claims and counter claims is the basis of the entrenched gruelling animosity between the so-called minority

ethnic groups such as the Nchumuru, Nawuri, Konkomba and others on the one hand and the Gonja, which most often degenerates into catastrophic ethnic violence as witnessed in 1991/92 and 1994/5 inter-ethnic wars.

### **3.4 CONFLICT AND DEVELOPMENT**

The recent conflicts in the district enumerated above had immediate devastating consequences and as well long-term development impact on the people in the district. The sudden large-scale destruction that usually characterized these wars resulted in massive losses, especially homes and property leading to the large-scale displacements of people (Bacho and Yidana 1995; Bacho and Alima, 1996). In the Nawuri and Gonja war of 1991/92, it was estimated that 78 people lost their lives, while the Gonja chief and his people fled Kpandai and have since been in exile in Kpembe, the traditional capital of the Gonja in the East Gonja District. Bacho and Yidana (1995) have also estimated that the 1994/5 conflict "engulfed directly six administrative districts –Gushiegu/Karaga, Yendi, Saboba/Chereponi, East Gonja, Nanumba and Zabzugu/Tatale, but had widespread effects on the country as a whole. It left over 200,000 displaced people involving more than 30,000 households and 442 settlements burnt down. Of the 442 settlements burnt down, the East Gonja share of the loss was 47 constituting 10.6 percent.

While the immediate impact is devastating enough, the real long-term development impact, with the disruption of the livelihoods systems of the population and economic infrastructure and the social fabric that hold people together for mutual supportive development is enormous. In all the conflicts that occurred, apart from the direct massacre of people, the most targeted were people's livelihood systems, such as corn mills, food barns, tractors, livestock, farm and processing implements and other tangible property. At the community level, boreholes and schools were also targeted as a way of ensuring that the basic economic and social infrastructures of the enemy were destroyed at the end of the conflict in 1995, about 88 ba-



sic schools were completely burnt down and the teachers fled leading to the collapse of the system for sometime. When the schools were eventually started, it was not easy to get children from the different ethnic groups to attend the same school (Bacho and Alima, 1996).

### **3.4.1 AGGRAVATION OF MUTUAL DISTRUST AND LOW COOPERATIVE SPIRIT**

Apart from the physical destruction enumerated above, one deep-seated consequence of the ethnic wars is the destruction of the social fabric and the emergence of a pervasive mutual distrust among the various ethnic groups. Even before the war, the various ethnic groups distrusted each other. This situation was aggravated by the war. The gruesome manner in which each ethnic group inflicted pain on the other through the ruthless massacres is just too deep and devastating. Mutual trust and consensus, which are the very pillars on which decentralised development rests, have been seriously undermined by the events of these conflicts and wars. The mistrust has resulted in a situation of fear, disrespect for each other and non-cooperation. There are also pervasive perceptions, among the weaker groups, of unjust allocations, discriminatory, punitive and exclusionary tendencies of their opponents in power. The weapons employed by the weaker groups include, sabotage, withdrawal and non-contribution. For the example, withholding of revenue is a weapon used by the Nawuri in Kpandai to register their protest against the perceived injustices from the District Assembly. Given this type of situation it has become difficult to mobilize people and to build consensus in this conflict endemic district, be it at the district level or community. Reports from the community studies undertaken by FIDS<sup>8</sup> from 1999-2002, revealed that in the Nkanchina community, for example, where the community comprises quite a mix of ethnic groups; Gonja, Nchumuru, Battor, Konkomba, Basari, among others, consensus building is a problem. The students tried to obtain the community's ranked priority development needs and found that "although the process of identification of the needs of the

various interest groups separately was quite easy, getting the overall community's priority needs through consensus building with all the ethnic groups at a meeting was not easy. While the Nawuri for instance opted for a separate district, the other ethnic groups, mostly migrants, felt a separate district was not necessary. Hence opinions began to be divided mainly on ethnic lines when the people were put together to identify their needs but not necessarily reflecting the priority needs of the community". The student groups that worked in communities with mixed ethnic groups, reported similar experiences.

### **3.4.2 ETHNOCENTRIC POLITICS AND DISTRICT DEVELOPMENT**

Ethnic politics in a pluralist society is inevitable, since each group must necessarily project itself and lobby for its interest to be catered for within the larger framework of district development. Viewed in this light, ethnic politics is desirable and should even be encouraged to engender healthy competition. It is when micro-politics assumes a negative ethnocentric dimension and its pursuance is without regard for factional interests, issues of justice, equity and democratic representation that it becomes a dangerous political weapon. Incidentally, it is in the second sense that discussion on ethnocentric politics in this section of the paper pursues. Since the creation of the East Gonja District in the colonial times, the issue of the struggle between the various ethnic groups has emerged and sometimes assumed dangerous dimensions. Unfortunately, no permanent solutions have been found over all these years.

Over the years, successive governments have always avoided taking bold decisions beyond the usual superficial palliative solutions such

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<sup>8</sup> *FIDS stand for Faculty of Integrated Development Studies (University for Development Studies). The faculty sponsored student groups to study all aspects of the East Gonja District, as part of their practical community training from 1999-2002.*



as admonitions to address problems of the moment as shown in the in case of the 1998 crisis that emerged with the refusal of the Nawuri to have their councils inaugurated as part of the East Gonja District (See Box 1).

**Box 1: Effects of Long-standing Dispute Between Gonja and Nawuri over the ownership of Kpandai**

*"The Northern Regional Security Committee (REGSEC) and the East Gonja District Assembly have resolved an impasse over the inauguration of four area and town councils in the district, which nearly degenerated into an ethnic conflict. The impasse, attributed to the long-standing dispute between Gonja and Nawuri over the ownership of Kpandai lands, has prevented the inauguration on two previous occasions. The Nawuri had insisted that the inauguration of the councils would undermine their demand for a separate district for Kpandai area. The REGSEC, however, met with chiefs and opinion leaders to resolve the stalemate. Following REGSEC's intervention, Mr Sam Nasamu Asabigi, Deputy Northern Regional Minister, led members of the REGSEC and the East Gonja District Assembly to inaugurate the disputed town and area councils of Kpandai, Nchanchi, Katonwule and Ketejeli. Mr Asabigi called on all parties to co-operate to ensure development in the area. He said the creation of the area and town councils will pave the way for effective mobilisation of resources and the implementation of strategic objectives in line with the new local government system. He cautioned that this objective cannot be achieved if there is no peace and stability in the area".*

*(Source: "REGSEC, Assembly Defuses Tension at Kpandai". Ghana News Agency, Saturday, 12-9-98.)*

As will be seen in the attempted solution by the REGSEC and the East Gonja District Assembly, these appeals and admonitions failed to address the most fundamental issues of the conflicts. The recurring complaints of the Nawuri and other affected ethnic groups have been the matter of the loss of their lands, subjugation, fight for a political space and unbalanced development. It will be interesting to examine the grievances of the Nawuri for example during their meeting with the UN Togoland mission in 1949 and their petition to the government after the 1991/92 and 1994/95 conflicts.

In 1949, the Nawuri headman complained to the UN Mission that "the Nawuri area, with about two thousand inhabitants, was denied educational facilities and as a result there was not a single literate person from there. The people detested the rule of strangers. They

wished to join the Krachi in the move to the south” (Benning, 1999: 57). Nearly 53 years later, the acting Chief of Kpandai<sup>9</sup>, Nana Ayadong, and his subordinate chiefs and followers, Nana Adelbam, Odikro of Kpandai, Yakubu Piki, Mbowura, Elder and Okyeame Donkor and the elected Assemblyman for the Nawuri electoral area reiterated the very grievances that their predecessors enumerated in the formative years of the creation of the Native Authorities and the problems emanating from the creation of boundaries and regrouping of the various ethnic groups. Nana Ayadong and his supporters argued, “the Kpandai area alone is inhabited by about 150,000 people scattered over a large tract of arable land, but we are so deprived and marginalized. Due to the neglect by the East Gonja Assembly, feeder roads in the entire Kpandai area, which is the most prominent yam growing area in the country, are seriously impassable, a situation that makes it impossible for them to be able to transport their farm produce to market centres outside the area. There are times when there are no movements of vehicles in the area for a week or more. The situation is increasing poverty in the area” (GNA, 2002).

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

Decentralization is often presented as a straightforward political process that naturally leads to the democratic participation of local people in the development process. It is argued that the manner in which the state structures and implements a decentralization programme is critical for the democratic participation of all interest groups. This is particularly compelling in a state with diverse groups of people. The paper examined local government/decentralisation attempts since the colonial period to date and argued that the Native Authority Ordinance which led to the reorganization and deliberate subjugation of some ethnic groups under oth-

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<sup>9</sup> *After the 1991-92 Nawuri-Gonja war, the Gonja chief responsible for the Kpandai division, installed by the Kpembewura, fled to Kpembe leaving his skin vacant. It for this reason that Nana Ayadong is regarded as an acting chief, although the Nawuri do not view it that way.*



ers has been the fundamental cause of the incessant agitation by the affected ethnic groups for their identity, political space and to regain control over their lost lands. After independence, the various governments have also failed to take bold decisions to address the problems of land ownership, ethnic territorial and political space and the relationship between the traditional authority system and the decentralized district structures.

The entrenched conflicts between the various ethnic groups have affected development in the district. The lack of mutual trust among the various ethnic groups has undermined greatly the democratic consensus building processes that the decentralized development framework seeks to accomplish. Resource mobilization has been severely constrained since people are not willing to contribute towards the overall planned district development projects. The emergence of ethnocentric feelings and politics has led to narrow concerns with one's immediate ethnic group interest, while the frequent outburst of interethnic wars has resulted in massive destruction of lives, property, livelihoods and displacements of people.

Government will need to go beyond merely appealing to the various ethnic groups to stop fighting and take a bold decision to address the underlying critical issues of landownership and political participation of all ethnic groups through a participatory process. Government will also have to support the NGOs peace building initiatives in the Northern Region as a whole.

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