

AN ABANDONED PROJECT? THE NUANCES OF CHIEFTAINCY, DEVELOPMENT AND HISTORY IN GHANA'S VOLTA REGION¹

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The present Sambujat chief deals with the Senegalese civil authorities. He passes on information, collects taxes and coordinates the occasional regional services provided by government agencies... He also sees to it that villagers inscribe their children in school. During the last decades as the Senegalese State attempts to bring extension services into the countryside, government agents have relied upon the chief to help settle local disputes over land and cattle when these interfere with the government's mission. In addition, if there is a particularly violent fight in the community, the chief might call in the police. But by and large the chief is a civil servant and not a local authority in internal matters (Linares 1992: 42-43).

But while the Colonial Government took away the power of the traditional rulers and gave them authority in local administration, the Governments of Ghana have generally taken away their authority, except in matters that concern the traditional rulers themselves... Payment of officials of the traditional rulers' offices has been made necessary as a result of Government laws that have taken away the traditional rulers'

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CHIEFTAINCY IN GHANA'S VOLTA REGION

Paul Nugent

control of stool lands and abolished the courts that were the sources of their revenue, and put local and district councils in charge of the revenues that the traditional rulers used to collect under the Colonial Government (Arhin 1985: 108, 114).

These two quotations encapsulate some significant variations in the character of chieftaincy across West Africa. Whereas Olga Linares suggests that chiefs are effectively an instrument of the Senegalese state, the thrust of Kwame Arhin's observation is that the Ghanaian state has stripped traditional rulers of their former prerogatives. It may be possible to link these differing outcomes to the differing legacies of British and French colonial rule.² Yet, as far as Ghana is concerned, the specific characteristics of chieftaincy cannot be reduced to the colonial factor alone. The trajectory of politics since independence has conferred its own peculiarities upon the relationship between the state and traditional authority. This relationship is unusual because of the gulf that has emerged between the formal allocation of power and the practical realities that govern the political system. Hence, while chiefs might appear to have lost their authority, they actually wield a remarkable degree of influence over the political life of the country. In other words, things are not quite what they seem.

That ordinary Ghanaians take chieftaincy very seriously became evident to me over a 15-month stint of fieldwork in the Volta Region in 1985-86. During that time I was attached to the household of Nana Soglo Allo III, the late Paramount Chief of Likpe Traditional Area.³ I was struck not just by the vigour with which disputes over chiefly offices (and a host of lesser ones) are prosecuted, but also by the sheer volume of traffic through the reception area that adjoined my room. And all this in a part of the country where chiefly traditions are deemed to be insubstantial. Since 1986 I have sought to piece together a picture of social and political change in the Volta Region over the course of the twentieth century, working outwards from this one particular area. As it happens, chieftaincy is seldom far from the centre of the frame. This paper pulls together some of the evidence, although there is much more that could be said on the matter. The first section addresses the reasons for the disjuncture between political form and reality. It views events through a markedly historical lens, on the ground that it is impossible really to make sense of chieftaincy in the Volta Region without an

² For a direct comparison of the impact of chieftaincy policies in one region, see Geschiere 1993.

³ I was based in Mate, which is some 12 miles from the commercial town of Hohoe.

adequate appreciation of its origins and mutations through time. The second (shorter) section is speculative. It broaches the question of whether the institution of chieftaincy could usefully be given a more formalized role within Ghanaian political system.

The Rise and Suspended Animation of Chieftaincy in the Volta Region

A discussion about chieftaincy almost inevitably runs up against the dead weight of entrenched assumptions. Over the past two decades or so the dichotomy between modernity and tradition has been seriously called into question. While the concept of modernity appears teleological, that of tradition seems distinctly ahistorical. Which of these two characteristics one considers the greater sin depends partly upon the nature of one's academic craft. Over a decade ago, Terence Ranger (a historian) pointed out that much of what passed for tradition in colonial Africa was, in fact, a recent invention (Ranger 1983: especially 237-260). On the one hand, it was convenient for Europeans to imagine that their governing practices were rooted in a timeless past. On the other hand, strategically-placed Africans (notably chiefs, elders and men) exploited the opportunities that the codification of tradition presented. Ranger's piece (like the others in the same volume) was playing on a paradox. In his recent revisitation of the thesis, Ranger reveals his willingness to part with the joke, accepting that 'invention' is probably too strong a word for a process that was not necessarily fully conscious nor final (Ranger 1993).

But in spite of the clear paradigmatic shifts that have taken place within academia, the concept of a rooted tradition has proved extremely resilient within popular discourse. The fact that Ghanaian chiefs are commonly referred to as 'traditional' rulers is the simplest indication of that fact. Needless to say, the practitioners of chieftaincy are the most likely to insist on the solid traditional foundations of their authority and are the least likely to welcome academic gainsaying. Be that as it may, any attempt to find a place for chieftaincy within the political pantheon has to be based on historical realities rather than on convenient fictions. After all, it does not necessarily follow that 'invented' or 'imagined' traditions are entirely invalid!

Chiefs and the minimalist state

Arguably the most fundamental quirk of the colonial state was its adoption of the minimalist assumptions on which it was erected. Given that the British colonies were supposed to be self-financing, resources were always strictly limited. There

CHIEFTAINCY IN GHANA'S VOLTA REGION

Paul Nugent

was insufficient money to service much more than a shoestring administration and even less was available for what we would now call development expenditure. The greater part of what is now the Volta Region was a League of Nations Mandate (and later a United Nations Trust Territory), whose ultimate destiny was uncertain. For that reason, the British authorities were reluctant to commit themselves to more than a basic minimum of public expenditure. In 1922 Major Jackson (then the Commissioner of the Eastern Province) was quite candid about Government priorities:

From the financial point [of view], the Mandated Area of Togoland is costing the Gold Coast a very large amount annually, whereas the Revenue is very small, therefore until such time as we introduce means of increasing Trade generally, it is not advisable to expend large amounts in Togoland which could with advantage be expended in other parts of the Colony.⁴

Some money was allocated to road-building in order to reduce an embarrassing dependence upon the Lomé-Palimé railway, but extreme parsimony remained the hallmark of British rule. In 1942, Governor Burns pronounced himself shocked at the obvious neglect of British Togoland, which he suspected was a deliberate policy on the part of his predecessors in office.⁵

In the light of these facts it is hardly surprising that chieftaincy assumed the importance it did. The hub of the colonial administrative system was the District Commissioner (DC), who was responsible for a wide range of executive and judicial duties. The DCs sometimes achieved a good working knowledge of indigenous languages and cultures, and even their histories. This was especially true of Captain C.C. Lilley, who stamped his personal authority on the Ho and Kpandu Districts, where he served between 1920 and 1938. But since the Districts were substantially larger than they are today, and since there was less administrative backup, the DCs were normally stretched to the limit. In practice colonial administration was an exercise in firefighting. A particular community might be left under the effective control of its chief until something went awry - as it periodically did - at which point the DC would rush in to patch things up.

⁴ Major F.W.F. Jackson, Commissioner of Eastern Province, Koforidua, to Record Officer, Ho, 13 October 1922, Ghana National Archives (Accra) (henceforth GNAA) ADM 39/1/299 "Togoland Roads General".

⁵ Alan Burns, Governor of Gold Coast, to Mr. Dawe, Colonial Office, London, 6 December 1942, in PRO, CO 96/776/5, "Post-War Development of Mandated Territory: Togoland".

Chieftaincy in the Volta Region was a matter of some concern to the British authorities. Whereas the colonial state was able to batten onto existing chiefly institutions in Ashanti, there was less to work with across most of the Volta Region. For the first European administrators, German and British alike, the political map of the area must have been extremely confusing. For a start, the region was highly diverse, both culturally and linguistically - a feature which is not always properly understood to this day. The southern half was mainly populated by Ewe-speaking peoples, who were interspersed with a series of smaller linguistic groups in the Kpandu area, notably the Nyangbo, Logba, Tafi and Avatime. North of Hohoe, there was an even more complex patchwork of peoples, made up of the Nkonya, Bowiri, Lefana, Akpafu, Santrokofi, Lolobi and Likpe. Further north still, speakers of Akan languages rubbed shoulders with groups such as the Krachis, the Adele and the Nchumuru. While political boundaries sometimes followed these ethno-linguistic markers, this was not always the case.

In general the region was characterized by low levels of political centralization. Although the Ewe shared a common story of migration from Notsie, they did not inhabit a single political unit (Amenumey 1986). The Ewe were mostly divided up into small polities, each made up of no more than a few villages. Although the heads of these units are today referred to as chiefs, there is a strong suggestion that their powers were rather more circumscribed in pre-colonial times. Verdon has presented a plausible case to the effect that the first stools amongst the Abutia Ewe date from as late as around 1870, and that the individual villages were still virtually autonomous at the time of the German takeover (Verdon 1983: section 2).⁶ The principal exception to this rule is the Anlo state, where the Awoamefia presided over a political system of some size and complexity. The Peki claimed to have exercised suzerainty over many of their neighbours to the north, both Ewe and non-Ewe. This claim was founded upon the leadership provided by Peki in the revolt against Akwamu in 1833 and in the Ashanti wars of 1869-1874 (Welman 1925: 11-19; Brown 1974; Amenumey 1986: 82-83). Although Peki may have exercised a degree of influence in the sub-region, this certainly never amounted to overlordship.

By contrast, the Buem state was certainly a functioning political entity. Yet it is not entirely clear where sovereignty ended and influence began. A memorandum from 1945 claims that a federation had been established under the leadership of Nana Aburam of Borada, which covered the Lefana, the Akan, Akpafu, Lolobi,

⁶ In the case of Likpe the evidence suggests that the stool of Mate (which became the basis of the Paramountcy) was preceded chronologically by the existence of a 'fetish'. See also Brydon 1981.

CHIEFTAINCY IN GHANA'S VOLTA REGION

Paul Nugent

Bowiri and Likpe 'peoples' (historically a vaguer term than it is assumed to be these days).⁷ It is probable that the last four simply acknowledged the dominance of Buem, although even this is denied in Likpe, whereas the first two were part of the actual polity. The organization of that state is also somewhat unclear. There is some evidence to suggest that the elaborate hierarchy of wing chiefs, which became a point of controversy in the 1940s, was actually a recent innovation and that villages had previously owed direct allegiance to the Buem Paramount Chief.⁸ Finally, it should be noted that the Dente oracle (or rather its priest) exercised some authority over the middle reaches of the Volta River after 1874. The reach of his authority, although loose, did, however, far exceed that of the Krachi chief (the Krachiwura) (Maier 1983: Chapter 6.).

The colonial authorities desperately needed in their early days to find local intermediaries and proceeded to confer recognition upon designated chiefs, thereby imparting a level of authority and a degree of uniformity which had not hitherto existed. In their section, which became the eastern quadrant of the Gold Coast Colony, the British authorities sought to consolidate the existing power bases of Anlo and Peki. In German Togo the authorities were less consistent in their approach. In Krachi they executed the Dente priest and then, having failed to win over the Krachi chiefly establishment, relied heavily upon Muslim intermediaries (Maier 1983: Chapter 8). In Buem the Germans were apparently content to consolidate the authority of the Omanhene until 1907, when they conferred a separate status upon Tapa, Teteman, Akpafu, Santrokofi and Bowiri. After their takeover of the western half of German Togo was confirmed by the League of Nations some time after the end of the First World War, the British authorities asserted that German policy had been disruptive and they then attempted to transplant the chieftaincy policy which they had already perfected in the Colony. The major drawback, as they saw it, was the excessive fragmentation of the political map. In 1922, there were 68 Divisions (or chiefdoms) in Southern British Togoland, each of which was divided into a number of sub-Divisions. Since sub-Divisional chiefs were entitled to their own tribunals, Lilley estimated that there were some 234 of these in the Ho District alone.⁹ From the viewpoint of

⁷ "A brief history of the Twi peoples of the Buem State", an enclosure in GNAA ADM 39/1/567 "Buem State Native Affairs".

⁸ Letter from John Duncan, Assistant District Commissioner, Kpandu, to Mead, District Commissioner, Ho, 13 January 1947 in GNAA 39/1/572 "Native Affairs Buem State".

⁹ Ghana National Archives (Ho) (GNAH) DA/D78 "Handing Over Notes by Captain Lilley".

the administration, this was bound to result in confusion. In order to tidy things up, therefore, Lilley and his colleagues embarked upon the infamous policy of amalgamation, which has left its mark until the present day.

The objective was to merge these Divisions into a smaller number of States, which would be better placed to adjudicate customary disputes (through their State Councils) and to carry out the functions of Native Authorities in the Indirect Rule tradition. The latter were expected to raise local taxes, which would be paid into Native Treasuries and used to support local development activity. Whereas the Divisional Chiefs would sit on the State Councils and retain their separate courts, those of the sub-Divisional chiefs would be closed down. A number of additional guidelines were prescribed. Firstly, the decision to amalgamate under one chief had to be voluntary and required the unanimous consent of all the sub-chiefs in a particular community. Secondly, the new States were expected to be geographically contiguous and large enough to be viable. Thirdly, it was asserted that an amalgamation would only be endorsed if 'binding native customs' had been performed. Finally, and most importantly, the heads of the new States were not to be installed as full Paramount Chiefs, but were merely to enjoy the status of first amongst equals.¹⁰ By 1931, 44 Divisions had successfully been amalgamated into four new States: namely Buem (the least artificial creation), Avatime, Akpini and Asogli. By the time of his retirement in 1938, Lilley was able to boast that only 14 Divisions remained unaffiliated to a State. Krachi, which was in a separate District, became the centre of a state in its own right.

Despite Lilley's triumphant tone, doubts began to be expressed about the methods which had been employed. Whatever the formal guidelines, officials had intervened actively in the process, often pressuring chiefs to accept the leadership of their rivals and sometimes scuttling autonomous efforts at amalgamation. Moreover, it soon transpired that the Headchiefs were behaving as if they were substantive Paramount Chiefs. In February 1939, the Commissioner of the Eastern Provinces made his own reservations known:

I feel that the idea of amalgamating various divisions has somehow and somewhere gone wrong... I feel that to have made one chief paramount over all the others who have hitherto been independent is unsound and must lead to friction for a very long time.¹¹

¹⁰ "Memorandum on Amalgamation in British Togoland, 1944", in GNAA 39/1/545 "Amalgamation of Divisions in Togoland Under British Mandate".

¹¹ Letter from the Commissioner of Eastern Province, Koforidua, to District Commissioner, Kpandu, 8 February 1939, in GNAA ADM 39/1/305 "Quarterly Reports Kpandu District".

CHIEFTAINCY IN GHANA'S VOLTA REGION

Paul Nugent

The political point was not lost on the unamalgamated Divisions, seven of which petitioned the Governor in 1941. In their submission, they pointed out that to join a State meant subordinating themselves to an alien Paramount Chief. In several cases, the language of ethnicity was deployed in defence of their autonomy. The Nkonya, for example, refused to amalgamate on the grounds that they were Guans with their own distinct history and identity. More generally, the recalcitrant Divisions defended their independence on the grounds that they had always been autonomous and wished to remain so.

There was some sympathy for the position of the refractory Divisions at the centre. In the wake of a fresh petition in 1945, Governor Burns went as far as to suggest that the administration might be repeating the mistakes of south-eastern Nigeria, where ill-advised chieftaincy policies had culminated in the Aba riots of 1929.¹² However, in the estimation of local officials there could be no serious policy review, since that would invite disaffected chiefs to secede from the States which had been so painstakingly constructed. The only concession which they ultimately accepted was the application a diluted version of the policy to the unamalgamated Divisions. In 1949, Gbi, Ve and Likpe came together to form an Atando Native Authority. This was not a State, but more of a federation in which the presidency of the Native Authority rotated between the three headchiefs.¹³ A similar compromise subsequently brought Santrokofi and Nkonya together in an Ayonkodo Native Authority. Anfoega, however, continued to hold out against British policy until the end and was punished by being denied access to whatever development funds were available in the terminal phase of colonial rule. Since Anfoega was not part of a Native Authority, the administration refused to offer grants-in-aid to local schools. Furthermore, the Anfoega authorities had no statutory right to raise local development levies of their own. In 1951, Anfoega provoked great annoyance when it took its case to the newly installed Leader of Government Business, Kwame Nkrumah. By this stage, however, the political map was about to be rescrumbled.

¹² Letter from Burns to Creasy, Colonial Office, London, 9 December 1944, in PRO CO96/780/4 "Adjustment of Boundaries of Administrative Districts Between Gold Coast Colony and Mandated Area."

¹³ This did not mean that the innovation was uncontroversial. It sparked a bitter dispute in Likpe (Nugent 1991: chapter 3).

Chiefs and the expansionist state

During the 1950s Ghana charted a new course which was to have profound consequences for the institution of chieftaincy. This manifested itself at two levels. First, the colonial precept that new political institutions would grow organically out of chiefly structures, was unceremoniously scrapped. The British had lost faith in the ideology of Indirect Rule, while the nationalists were not inclined to share power with those who had functioned as an adjunct of the colonial state. With effect from 1951, therefore, power was to reside with elected politicians rather than with those who occupied traditional office (Arhin 1985: chapter 6). The old Native Authorities were replaced by elected local councils, in which chiefs held no position after 1954. The accompanying loss of control over stool lands was less of a blow since most chiefs, with the exception of the Buem Paramountcy, had no such lands. At the same time, the Native Courts were closed down in favour of an integrated judicial system. At the centre, the Legislative Assembly assumed primacy (that is, until it was swamped by the executive), while the various Houses of Chiefs were relegated to oversight of custom and chieftaincy. Having vied for position within a pecking order, the chiefs of the Volta Region found that the rug had been pulled from beneath them.

These changes did not, however, elicit a unified response. Many chiefs attached themselves to the Togoland Congress, which clothed its politics in a traditionalist mantle. Others, like Togbe Tepre Hodo III of Anfoega, actually became stalwarts of the Convention People's Party (CPP). Whereas loyalty to the CPP brought its personal reward, inveterate opposition to the governing party sometimes led to destoolment. In the pre-war period, chiefs had been removed on some rather curious charges and so it was not difficult to engineer the downfall of those who adhered to *Ablode* (the slogan of the Togoland Congress, which was pushing for unification of British and French Togoland as opposed to union with the Gold Coast).¹⁴ In 1958 Togbe Gabusu IV of Gbi (Hohoe) was forced into exile and destooled in his absence. And in Ho the Government took advantage of a longstanding dispute to depose the pro-*Ablode* chief from Dome and transfer the stool to the Bankoe clan. This blatant chicanery weakened the institution of chieftaincy in as much as it reduced any freedom of movement that incumbents had previously enjoyed. The chiefs were left in no doubt that their tenure was dependent upon toeing the political line. During the period of CPP government in the 1960s candidates for chiefly office in Likpe found it necessary to emphasize their party credentials in their curricula vitae, since that was held to be an important criterion in the grant of Government recognition. (On the

¹⁴ My favourite case was the chief who was accused of crystal-ball gazing with 'Mohammedans'.

CHIEFTAINCY IN GHANA'S VOLTA REGION

Paul Nugent

'Cipipification' of Likpe, see Nugent 1991: Chapter 4.) Needless to say, it was (as in colonial times) this stamp of official approval which conferred chiefly authority: a candidate might enjoy unanimous local support, but only became a chief once he was actually gazetted.

The second transformation was more striking and yet more subtle in its effects. Prior to the 1950s, the colonial state had always displayed greater interest in issues of order than in those of development. In that sense, it could be dubbed an 'administracy'. The election to office of the CPP brought a dramatic departure from this entrenched pattern. Arguably, the departing colonial authorities set the ball rolling, but it was the Nkrumah regime which turned developmentalism into a kind of ideology in its own right. Although Nkrumah was always strictly attentive to matters of political control (some would say obsessively so), what was different was the way in which he brought development to the forefront of the public agenda. Whereas colonial officialdom talked in terms of the slow incremental effect of community efforts, the CPP promised a rapid rise in living standards through the agency of state power. In the case of the Volta Region, an additional sub-text was at work. The CPP strategy for defeating the Togoland unification movement turned on the offer of large sums of government money for road-building and other projects. All the evidence suggests that special favour was shown to communities which rallied to the party. These instrumental appeals struck an obvious chord amongst communities which had been previously penalized for their resistance to the amalgamation policy. Not surprisingly, then, Anfoega became a key CPP stronghold.

Developmentalism impinged upon the chiefs because it had the effect of shifting the focus of activity away from the villages and towards the District and Regional centres. The chiefs had comparatively little influence at those levels and were consequently reduced to the role of spectators in the development game. Since the party was posing as the benefactor to the nation, it also imagined that it was entitled to call the shots at the village level. Although chiefs were sometimes active members of the Town and Village Development Committees (T/VDCs), the DCs exercised discretion in the appointment of their executives. In many areas, therefore, these Committees represented a local counterweight to chiefly authority (Amonoo 1981: Chapter 6).

By the mid-1960s the institution of chieftaincy had been considerably weakened. Simply put, there was no niche for the traditional authorities within the new dispensation. Nevertheless, a genuine popular interest in chieftaincy affairs remained. The fact that disputes continued to erupt with such regularity is proof enough of that fact. The fundamental reason is that chieftaincy evoked something more than a mere concern for material advantage. Maxwell Owusu (1970) has made some insightful observations about Akan political culture and the way in

which this was tapped by the CPP machine. However, he was viewing politics through the ideological lenses of the 1960s. Contestants surely did not fight costly court battles over comparatively minor stools because of any expectation that material rewards would flow from them. The stakes were of an altogether different order. The colonial period had left an enduring legacy in the form of ranked traditional offices: from linguists, through village chiefs to Paramountcies. Although these posts might not have conferred much real power by the 1960s, they placed families, clans and villages in a notional hierarchy. Since the hierarchies existed - and often rankled - there were inevitably some people who wished to alter the order of precedence, while there were others who were equally determined to preserve it.

All sides argued their cases in terms of evident historical truths. The veritable Babel of traditions frequently bewildered well-meaning officials seeking to reach the bottom of particular stool disputes. On the whole, though, it has to be said that the Nkrumah regime was disinclined to tamper too much with the system that had been created during the colonial era. Despite some early anti-chieftaincy rhetoric, it does not appear as if the CPP regime ever contemplated the Guinean option of outright abolition. On the contrary, it manipulated local divisions to its own political advantage. As is well known, those contestants who lost out under the CPP were able to turn the tables on their opponents after the fall of Nkrumah. Strange as it may seem, though, the coup was probably less important for the future of chieftaincy than other more long-range developments

Chieftaincy and the incredible shrinking state

By the time of the 1966 coup, the penetration of rural society by the CPP was already becoming more halting. Over the course of the following decade, the process of political decay greatly accelerated, for reasons which have been recounted many times before. As far as chieftaincy is concerned, it is important to mention the effect of two related occurrences. The first is the abject failure of the developmentalist vision. At bottom, this came down to the fiscal crisis of the Ghanaian state, which was increasingly unable to cover its own costs of reproduction (largely in the form of wages), far less meet the ambitious targets set by Nkrumah. Whereas the promise of tarred roads and running water was one which rural communities could have regarded as plausible at the start of the First Republic, it appeared increasingly unrealistic as the crisis deepened. It is true that the Busia regime attempted to breathe life back into the rural development agenda, but this had virtually no impact upon the Volta Region. Having voted for the wrong party in 1969, the Region in fact received a reduced share of government expenditure. Hence, whereas Government-financed community water projects virtually doubled during the Busia period, the rate of construction fell by 30% in

CHIEFTAINCY IN GHANA'S VOLTA REGION

Paul Nugent

the Volta Region (Smock and Smock 1975: 248). During the 1970s the Acheampong regime kept up the rhetoric of state-led development, as a perusal of the government newspapers would illustrate, but it was incapable of delivering on its pledges.

The second factor was the hardening of the administrative arteries. A demoralized bureaucracy functioned in an increasingly arbitrary fashion at all levels of the system. The local government machinery, which had ceased to represent communities directly, became distanced from the rural population. During the 1970s, people in Likpe looked upon the Jasikan District Council with cynicism, as a body which was only too eager to tax them, but which provided no local services in return. Although the Police were supposed to be responsible for law and order, they were not easily accessible from the villages and, it is said, sold their services to the highest bidder. As is well-known, the rot extended all the way to the heart of Acheampong's ruling council. When road contracts were handed out in the Volta Region, the beneficiaries were frequently the friends and mistresses of council members, who pocketed the advances and failed to carry out the work. When Major-General Utuka (a member of the governing Supreme Military Council and a son of Likpe) tried to ensure the completion of the Hohoe-Kute road, he ran up against the then Regional Commissioner. It is alleged that the contract had been awarded to the mistress of the Commissioner, and that the latter warned Utuka that if he did not drop the case his people would be blacklisted from any future projects (see further Nugent 1991: 209-215). This case proved one very simple lesson to the people of Likpe: that even a powerful patron could be ineffective when the most basic administrative procedures had broken down.

The dislocation of state institutions, from the national to the District level, effectively forced rural communities back upon themselves. In particular, the T/VDCs underwent a renewed lease of life. Whereas they had once been constituted on District authority, the T/VDCs were now appointed and operated by the villagers themselves. A common pattern was that each of the clans in a particular village would select a member to serve on the Committee. These T/VDCs performed much routine work, such as the clearing of the roads, the maintenance of village markets and the repair of school buildings. Yet they also embarked upon more ambitious community projects. In Likpe, for example, an entire Secondary School was constructed through local levies, bolstered by remittances from Bakpele (people of Likpe) working outside the area and some assistance from the Canadian High Commission. Although hyper-inflation tended to eat into local savings, the Likpe T/VDCs continued to plan new projects into the 1980s. The chiefs played a variable, but normally significant role, in these community initiatives. They beat gong-gong in order to ensure maximum turnout on communal labour days and they enforced penalties for absenteeism. In many

cases, they also chaired the T/VDC as well.

It is tempting to interpret these developments in terms of a reassertion of traditional authority in the face of state paralysis. However, the functionalist assumptions which underpin some writing on this subject (e.g. Azarya and Chazan 1987) give grounds for caution. There is no evidence of a conscious attempt to withdraw from the state, and there is good reason to question whether there was a neat reversion to traditional practices. It may be more helpful to think in terms of a reconstituted role for chiefs, departing in significant respects from pre-colonial, colonial and early post-colonial precedents. This view is based upon two principal observations. Firstly, it is striking that, whatever the level of state decay, chiefly offices continued to be validated with reference to external authority. During disputes incumbents and their challengers both concentrated on convincing government of the veracity of their claims. This was not merely because the Ghanaian state reserved the final word for itself, but also because rural communities had no accepted mechanism for settling claims. Precisely because local histories are often so hotly contested, they are not easily amenable to internal solution. If the post-colonial state provided little else, it did offer arbitrations. Local factions continued, therefore, to conjure with history in order to improve their standing within an existing hierarchy. To cite one small example, when the senior Likpe chiefs started to claim Guan origins in order to validate their claims to a Paramountcy in the mid-1970s, a section of the Agbozome village proceeded to argue that it was entitled to its own stool since it represented an Akan minority group (Nugent 1991: 219-220). Such claims stretch the bounds of plausibility, but the protagonists were well aware of the fundamental ignorance of central authority on these matters. Governments were also aware of that fact and tried to shift some of the responsibility for resolving chieftaincy affairs onto the Regional Houses of Chiefs.

The second observation is that the centre of gravity of a revitalized chieftaincy lay in the villages rather than at higher tiers. At the level of the Region, the House of Chiefs was important to those who sat in it - and maybe to those who thought they should sit in it - but it impinged comparatively little upon popular consciousness. The reason was that it did not discharge many functions which were regarded as particularly significant. Chieftaincy contestants understood that it was government Ministries rather than the House of Chiefs which they had to convince of the strength of their claims. If the House had performed other useful functions, few would have known about them, since it did not actively publicize its deliberations. During the 1970s the Acheampong regimes probably found a greater use than anyone for the House of Chiefs. At the time of the secessionist scare the governing National Redemption Council (NRC) turned for public support to the traditional authorities. The then President of the House of Chiefs, Togbe Adja Tekpor VI of Avatime, and Togbe Adeladza II of Anlo obliged by condemning the

CHIEFTAINCY IN GHANA'S VOLTA REGION

Paul Nugent

activities of the secessionist movement. They were probably behind a resolution which was passed at an emergency meeting in March 1976, which distanced the House from the behaviour of some chiefs and endorsed government measures to deal with the threat (Daily Graphic, 16 March 1976.)

Again, at the level of the Division and above, chieftaincy does not seem to have undergone the same revival. In fact, many traditional councils had virtually ceased to function by the mid-1970s, largely because of the divisive legacy of British policy. In Nkonya, there was no sign of a reconciliation between the chiefs of Ahenkro and Wurupong, both of whom claimed the Paramountcy for themselves. In Ho also, the dispute between Dome and Bankoe continued to sour local relations. In the area I know best there was a curious proliferation of claims against Nana Soglo Allo III, which reduced the Likpe Traditional Council to a state of paralysis by the middle part of the decade. Some villages refused to accept the authority of the Paramount Chief, while others talked about seceding from Likpe altogether. Whereas competition for office had once kept an interest in traditional council affairs alive, there now was clear evidence of alienation from the entire structure. There were few forces which were able to pull such communities together. Although the traditional councils sometimes helped to plan joint projects, the communal labour and the additional levies were normally raised through the T/VDCs. Across Likpe, then, self-help initiatives had constantly to run the gauntlet of local tensions. The principal occasion for fund-raising was the annual Easter rally, held in rotation between the villages. During the 1970s, every single rally was marred by the refusal of one or more villages to participate. While noting that Likpe was divided against itself, it is important to stress that it was by no means unique. There were other communities in the Volta Region, and outside it, which were characterized by even more bitter disputes.

Of course, villages frequently had their own internal tensions. The difference was that people ultimately had to live with each other at this level, whereas the traditional area was more of an abstraction. By assisting in the fulfilment of essential activities, the traditional authorities demonstrated that they still had a useful role to play. As I have already suggested, the chiefs assisted the T/VDCs in enforcing tax and communal labour obligations. Where the chiefs were well-educated or had been successful in business prior to enstoolment, they were able to explore the possibilities of external assistance for community projects. To some extent also, they were able to compensate for the shortcomings of the judicial system, and a case of theft, for example, was more likely to be referred to a chief than to the Police. Although chiefs' courts had no legal sanction, they upheld a moral order in accordance with community sensibilities. They were no less important as local arbiters. For example, a village chief might intervene to smooth over a particularly acute marriage dispute. I have also encountered instances where chiefs mediated in disagreements between villagers, on the one side, and

the Border Guards (and later the Militia) on the other. I suggest, then, that the decade of the 1970s witnessed not merely a revival of chieftaincy, but more specifically a reassertion of village sovereignty. The obvious difference from Verdon's pre-colonial polities is that the village chiefs occupied stools which were validated by the Ghanaian state.

The subtle processes outlined above were possibly oblique to most of the urban population - or at least those who did not keep one foot in the village. This may explain why urban radicals miscalculated so badly at the start of the revolution in 1982. One of the greatest challenges for would-be revolutionaries was to spread the message from the barracks and workplaces to the countryside. With scant respect for what lay in front of them, the radicals portrayed chieftaincy as an almost feudal institution in which the stool-holders wielded absolute power. The first set of Guidelines for the People's Defence Committees (PDCs) lumped chiefs along with landlords, absentee farmers, discredited politicians and smugglers as groups of people who could not be allowed to establish PDCs (Legon Observer 1982). (I have examined the unfolding of contradictions within the revolution in Nugent 1995: Chapter 2.) The intention was that the PDCs would assume control of village affairs at the expense of outmoded traditional authority. When the PDCs failed to catch hold, the leadership of the National Defence Committee accused chiefs of obstructing the course of the revolution.

As far as the Volta Region is concerned, both the diagnosis and the prescription were wide of the mark. On the one hand, it was quite false to portray most chiefs as village potentates. They controlled no material resources by virtue of their office, while their influence varied greatly with force of personality. Some chiefs were effectively ignored by the T/VDCs because they were regarded as inept. Those who commanded authority did so because they were able to carry a substantial body of opinion with them. On the other hand, there is no overwhelming evidence to suggest that the chiefs were bent on blunting the impact of the revolution. In May 1982, a senior Volta Region chief was allegedly implicated in the murder of four PDC activists, but the details of this case have never come to light (Yeebo 1991: 142). Cadres of the Regional Co-ordinating Committee became embroiled in a dispute at the Kpedze Secondary School, which involved Togbe Adja Tekpor.¹⁵ But it is not certain that this had anything to do with his position as a chief. In Likpe the chiefs apparently actually helped to kick-start the PDCs. They interpreted Government statements to mean that every village was compelled to form a PDC of its own. They beat gong-gong to inform

¹⁵ "Oath of struggle till final victory by the P.D.C.s and W.D.C.s of Ho on the 1st monthly anniversary of the 22nd September action" (document in my possession).

CHIEFTAINCY IN GHANA'S VOLTA REGION

Paul Nugent

people of this fact and often played an active part in the selection of the first executives. In Likpe-Kukurantumi, the members were chosen at the house of the chief and their names were then submitted to a village meeting for ratification. In Bala, four members were chosen by the people of the village, while the chief and elders added three members of their own.

The PDCs faced a difficulty in carving out a niche for themselves. Many of the activities which they were supposed to engage in, such as the enforcement of price controls and the eradication of smuggling, threatened to make them extremely unpopular. Since the youth were often the most directly implicated in 'economic crimes', they were the least likely to embrace a zealous PDC. There was more to be gained from attempting to assert control over the community development agenda. But since the T/VDCs and the chiefs were normally well-entrenched, it was not easy for the PDCs to push them aside. In Likpe, the PDCs (discussed Nugent 1991: 293-301) scored one significant success. In Agbozome, the youth had become exasperated with the intense bickering between the three chiefly factions in the community. They therefore established their PDC, with representatives from each side of the village, and proceeded to reactivate the development initiatives that had been held in abeyance. They were so successful that they managed to bring the leaders of the three factions together to form a Grand Council, and also to breathe life back into the moribund TDC. In most cases, however, the PDCs made a play for power and were decisively rebuffed. In the village of Mate, for example, the former Chairman (later a chief in his own right) explained how the PDC had been put in its place:

We tried to abolish the TDC. We were not giving them a place. We gave them the impression that they no longer had a role. We should rather tell them what to do. But it didn't work because Nana Soglo was very strong. His argument was that the TDCs were set up under Nkrumah's regime and were still going, so they could not be abolished just because a new government came to power.¹⁶

The PDCs were, therefore, asked to perform a support role for the T/VDC. In short order, all interest in the PDCs evaporated. By the mid-1980s the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (the successors to the PDCs) had been reduced to an empty shell, without members or even leaders at the village level. This appears to have been the general pattern (e.g: Tetteh-Wayo 1986; Effah 1985: Chapter 5; Nugent 1995: Chapters 2 and 3). This outcome is significant because it suggests that rural folk were in no particular need of

¹⁶ Interview with Nana Oforite Dzahene, Likpe-Mate, 28 September 1986.

mobilization from above. It also demonstrates that chieftaincy still retained considerable legitimacy at the village level. Whereas many of the cadres in Accra regarded chieftaincy as hopelessly hide-bound and repressive, the flexibility and responsiveness of the institution were arguably its greatest assets.

What Future for Chieftaincy?

During the second half of the 1980s, the governing Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) looked set to introduce some far-reaching political reforms of its own. Out went the goal of forging an entirely new social order on the foundations of egalitarianism. Into the breach stepped a form of neo-traditionalism which harked back to the ideology of colonial rule. The most obvious similarity was an insistence on the virtues of a minimalist state. In their speeches PNDC officials exhorted Ghanaians to recover their pride in self-help, instead of relying upon the state for all their needs. If Captain Lilley had paid a visit from the grave, he would no doubt have applauded loudly! The fact that Alhaji Mahama Iddrisu, a member of the PNDC, even set out to draw a distinction between Indirect Rule and current policy is an indication that the Government itself was only too aware of the similarities (Ghana n.d.a: 10-11). Even more striking was the PNDC insistence upon hatching organic political institutions out of indigenous traditions, rather than trying to transplant foreign models in Ghanaian soil. The echoes of speeches made by many a colonial Governor are so obvious that it is remarkable that they have not been commented on before.

The National Commission on Democracy (NCD) became the leading exponent of this neo-traditionalist outlook. Its chairman, Justice D.F. Annan (also a PNDC member) summarized the NCD position in the following revealing terms:

We feel that a truly democratic system should take into consideration our tradition, history and culture. We must measure the performance of the modern political system since independence against our traditional system and see whether the modern period could not have been improved by an interrelationship with the traditional system. Attention must be drawn to certain socio-cultural values, such as consultation, voluntarism, participation, consensus and self-reliance which we cherish as a people, but which we seem to have failed to integrate into the political order. (Ghana n.d.b. I deal with these issues in Nugent 1995: Chapters 3 and 4.)

In spite of these ringing declarations, the Rawlings regime was remarkably reticent about involving the chiefs in its plans. It is true that durbars, attended by

CHIEFTAINCY IN GHANA'S VOLTA REGION

Paul Nugent

Rawlings and his retinue, became an important element in the public relations strategy of the PNDC. But very few chiefs were directly associated with the Government. Naa Polkuu Konkoo Chiiiri II, the Nandom Na, served on the PNDC until his death in 1984. Thereafter, the experiment was not repeated with the exception of the appointments of E.G. Tanoh and Nana Akuoko Sarpong to Secretarial portfolios - including Chieftaincy Affairs in the latter case. The only other chief to play a visible public role was Nana Oduro Numapau II, who served on the Interim National Election Commission at the time of the 1992 elections. It might be argued that one should look to the constitutional position of the chiefs, rather than to specific appointments, for a guide as to the orientation of Government. The reforms of the late 1980s did set aside a place for chiefs within the structures of local government. However, they were only one of the groups to be covered by the clause permitting Government to appoint one-third of District Assemblymen (Ghana 1987: 2). As a result the representation of chiefs was still weaker than in 1951. As far as national government was concerned, the final NCD report extolled the virtue of indigenous political culture, but did not come out very strongly in favour of a second chamber of Parliament for the traditional rulers (Ghana 1991: 38-39). It has to be said, however, that there was no great enthusiasm for such a provision within the Consultative Assembly either. Indeed, one detects a certain ambivalence across the political spectrum towards an enhanced political role for the chiefs.

There is a case to be made for the selective restocking of chiefly powers. In areas where stool lands exist, there is something to be said for restoring control to traditional councils who are more likely to be familiar with local land tenure. Perhaps some limited judicial responsibilities could be also revived, since the Police and courts hardly seem to operate outside the main towns. The argument in favour of a second chamber of Parliament should not be lightly dismissed either. It is often thought that this would clash with the principle of democracy. While this might be true of an elitist institution such as the House of Lords in Britain, a Ghanaian chamber of chiefs might be more in touch with rural opinion than the elected Parliamentarians, who tend to live and work in the cities.

But if the institution of chieftaincy were given a greater role, certain side-effects would very likely ensue. Firstly, the chiefs might attract more of the blame for the malfunctioning of the state machinery. One of the advantages of chieftaincy since independence has been precisely its distance from the state. The rash of destoolment actions during the colonial era, when chiefs were accused of misappropriation of stool revenues and of arbitrary behaviour, serves as a reminder of what could lie in store.

Secondly, if real powers were to be attached to chieftaincy, it is likely that competition for offices would become more frantic. In the Volta Region, as

elsewhere, chieftaincy status is a political time-bomb waiting to explode. It would be difficult to avoid reopening the whole knotty issue, which successive regimes have only made more complicated. But perhaps it is time that the legacy of amalgamation policy is confronted any way. In 1956 the Van Lare Commission investigated chieftaincy in the Volta Region and recommended the recognition of a number of Paramountcies. The working definition of a Paramountcy was a stool which did not owe allegiance to any other stool. In these terms, the chiefs of Krachi, Peki, Anlo, Buem, Avatime, Ho and Kpandu enjoyed an unambiguous status. The rest consisted of chiefdoms which had either been forced to come under another stool or which had successfully defended their independent status. With respect to the former, the Commission recommended leniency in cases where compulsion had been employed. Hence, the Awudome chiefdom was allowed to break away from Peki on the grounds that it had not willingly accepted its Paramountcy (Asem n.d.: 32-33). But in former Southern Togoland, the amalgamated Divisions were held to have sworn binding oaths of allegiance, in spite of contemporary British assurances that they were not tying themselves to a Paramount Chief. By contrast, those Divisions which had resisted amalgamation to the end - namely Anfoega, Gbi, Likpe, Ve, Nkonya and Santrokofi - were accorded Paramount status.

After the fall of Nkrumah the National Liberation Council passed Decree No. 112 of 1966 which purported to downgrade those chiefdoms which had been wrongfully elevated by the Nkrumah regime (Asem n.d.: 33; Ghana 1976: 14, testimony of Nana Soglo Allo III, Thursday 29 January). This meant that Awudome and the old rebel Divisions forfeited their Paramount status. The waters were then muddied by a Legislative Instrument of 1974, which permitted the latter to become full members of the House of Chiefs, but without restoring their Paramount status (Ghana 1976: 14, testimony of Nana Soglo Allo III, Thursday 29 January). The tangle might still have been resolved by the Committee of Enquiry into Volta Region Chieftaincy Affairs, which sat under the chairmanship of Nana Agyeman Badu in 1975/76. Predictably enough, the Committee was bombarded with elaborate historical claims which would have been extremely difficult to verify, since they invariably stretched back to the nineteenth century and earlier. The Committee was probably aware that the existing arrangements were unfair to certain Divisions, but it also knew that the Acheampong regime would not confer Paramount status on all of them.¹⁷ Eventually, the lack of an

¹⁷ Nana Agyeman Badu made it clear at one point in the proceedings that the membership of the Houses of Chiefs in other Regions averaged a total of 28, and stated: 'This is to impress upon you that perhaps we may not be able to recommend too much increase in the present membership of the Volta Region House of Chiefs'. See GNAA ADM 5/3/215 "Proceedings of the Committee of

CHIEFTAINCY IN GHANA'S VOLTA REGION

Paul Nugent

obvious way forward led to the report of the Committee being buried altogether.

The present arrangement remains extremely controversial. The 15 permanent members of the House of Chiefs continue to fight in defence of what is now a Paramount status: these are the chiefs of Avatime, Anfoega, Asogli (Ho), Anlo, Buem, Gbi (Hohoe), Kete-Krachi, Akpini (Kpandu), Likpe, Peki, Nkonya, Santrokofi, Tapa, Ve and Awudome. In 1986 the permanent members petitioned the PNDC Secretary for Chieftaincy Affairs in an effort to prevent a Divisional Chief from being elected President of the Regional House of Chiefs,¹⁸ a possibility which was clearly interpreted as the thin end of a wedge. For their part, the Divisional Chiefs continue to insist that the present arrangement is unfair to them. An objective non-participant might conclude that they have a reasonable case. The matter is presently under review and will probably remain so for some time. It seems clear, however, that chieftaincy in the Volta Region will be unable to serve any higher purpose for as long as it bears the stamp of British amalgamation policy. The reluctance of successive governments to get to grips with the colonial legacy in the Northern Region does not bode well for its southern neighbour.

Conclusion

Ghanaian chieftaincy is somewhat like one of those half-built storey houses that can be found in towns across the country. Nobody can quite recall what the architects intended when they started. Nobody is inclined to pull the existing structure down, since it meets the needs of people on the ground floor (in this case, the village). Equally, nobody is sure how the structure could be completed, or even whether it is worth doing so. This is especially true of the Volta Region, where the institution of chieftaincy was essentially fabricated before 1950. The Germans and the British created chiefs between them and then, in the inter-war period, the latter established strict hierarchies of traditional rulers. These were never even intended to be especially faithful to historic power relations. Having created an edifice with some obvious design faults, the colonial authorities smartly departed from the scene. Because their Ghanaian successors put their eggs in other political baskets, the anomalies have remained to the present day. This brings me to my overall conclusion: that, while chieftaincy is arguably indispensable at the village level, the rest of the structure may be too rickety to support anything more

Enquiry into Volta Region Chieftaincy Affairs", 96th sitting, 5 August 1975, p. 27.

¹⁸ Letter from fifteen Paramount Chiefs to Chairman of PNDC, dated 10 March 1986 (copy in my possession).

elaborate. Although it might make sense to start from scratch, it is doubtful if any Government would take such a bold step. The balance of political forces is such that the chieftaincy project seems destined to remain uncompleted for the foreseeable future.

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Paul Nugent

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