

EASA 2008

EXPERIENCING DIVERSITY AND MUTUALITY

W004

Mobility, transnational connections and socio-cultural change in contemporary Africa

PAPER

“Socio-cultural and political change in a transnational group: the Konkombas (Ghana/Togo)”

Giulia Casentini

With this short paper I would like to present the Konkomba's political situation and transition in order to reflect on three aspects about the building of the postcolonial state in Western Africa.

The first aspect is based on the role of political traditional institution in the contemporary African state; the second one highlights the relationship between tradition and modernity, in other words between chieftaincy and the state; and the last one wants to investigate the role of the African frontier in building identities and political issues.

The Konkombas have a socio-political structure defined by social anthropology as being “acephalous” or “stateless”¹ due to the absence of an institutionalised chief as the main figure of power. According to E.E. Evans-Pritchard in particular, this kind of political organisation is, apart from the absence of centralisation of the political authority, characterised by the absence of an administrative system and judicial structures², while lineage plays a very important role. Management of the authority as well as territorial control are based on clan and lineages, so much so that we can define these societies as “segmentary systems”³. In reality, even if we cannot state that a political “supra clanic” unit exists for the Konkomba⁴, specific figures of power can be found and are recognisable in the elders (*onekpel*) representing the community, as well as in the earth priests (*utindaan*), who perform the rituals aimed at preserving the fertility and the use of the land.⁵

¹FORTES M. – EVANS-PRITCHARD E. E., *op. cit.*, 1940; EVANS-PRITCHARD E. E., *I Nuer. Un'anarchia ordinata*, Milano, Angeli, 2003; MIDDLETON J. – TAIT D. (eds), *Tribes without rulers. Studies in African segmentary systems*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1970.

²FORTES M. – EVANS-PRITCHARD E. E., *op. cit.*, 1940, pp. 5-6.

³*Ibid.*, p. 284.

⁴SKALNIK P., *The State and local ethnopolitical identities: the case of community conflicts in Northern Ghana*, in “Nouveaux Monde”, no. 10, Genève, CRES, 2002, pp. 141-165.

⁵TAIT D., *op. cit.*, 1961.

The Konkombas are settled along the northern part of the Ghana-Togo border, in a region that had been under the German colonial power until its defeat after World War I.

Subsequently, German Togoland was dismembered into two different protectorates: the most western part was annexed to the British colony of the Gold Coast (the present day Ghana) while the most eastern part constituted the French colony of Togo.

Along the contemporary Ghana/Togo border we can observe a group, the Konkomba people, facing with different neighbouring groups, with two different colonial powers (French in Togo and British in Ghana) and with different postcolonial nation-states. I will try to consider some consequences of these diverse political processes in order to investigate the relationship between the contemporary Ghana and Togo and the access to citizenship rights.

GHANA

In the Northern Region of Ghana Konkomba people has become evident to the public opinion after the explosion of the 1994 civil war.

Actually this conflict is the last and bloodiest episode in a long and never resolved dispute of land ownership, totalling at least fifteen thousand deaths and more than one hundred sixty thousand internally displaced people. From the 1980s, in fact, numerous conflicts have taken place between the “acephalous” groups, in particular the Konkomba people, and the other politically organised populations based on chieftaincy institution, in particular Nanumba and Dagomba.

These clashes have been caused by a strong backing between different groups with regard to two main issues deeply correlated between them. The first refers to the dispute on the ownership and privileged access to the land between Dagomba, Nanumba and Konkomba, the groups with the highest demographic density of the Northern Region of Ghana. The second is determined by the struggle of Konkomba people, politically subordinated to Dagomba and Nanumba, to achieve a political representation recognised on a national as well as local level.

A crucial element in the strategy adopted by the Konkomba to break the framework of subordination to the nearby and hegemonic groups consists in the nomination of chiefs, therefore the acquisition of the *chieftaincy* institution truly independent compared with the Dagomba and Nanumba. Konkomba’s political process to become politically viable pass through the negation of what a diffused convention –with a real debt to anthropological elaboration – indicates as a presumed specific intrinsic characteristic of its own “culture”.

In this context it is clear that both of the problems rotate around the diversity of a political system between groups and the perception of immobility of such differences, generating an ethnic based political discourse that is deeply rooted in the colonial past.

“Stateless groups” and “*chieftaincy*” are ambiguous but important terms to face the conflicting question in Northern Ghana. These are mobile categories subject to constant variations and redefinitions according to the local political scenario.

The dichotomy of the chiefly structures and that of the so called stateless societies have come under increasing challenge with the intervention of British colonial power.

When the chiefly groups were first asked by the colonial representatives about the relationship between them and other groups, the local rulers argued that they controlled several populations. The British administrators, therefore, divided the Northern Region in different areas of influence under the authority of chiefly groups, putting under their control all the other groups without a recognisable chief, as the Konkombas.

Implementation of an external power, the colonial one, whose position of authority found its expression in the nomination of chiefs⁶, but most importantly in the definition of groups that such chiefs belong to, played an important role in the construction of identity, the manipulation of concepts of ethnicity and, consequently, in the exasperation of relations between the various groups up until the civil conflicts in 1981 and in 1994.

Close to the process of independence that carried use of political tools as the concept of citizenship and equality of rights, some important topics started to involve the élite of all groups from the North, in particular the politically and economically subordinate populations: who has the right to occupy and work the land? Who has the right to handle its use? And consequently: who is autochthonous in Ghana? Who can take advantage of the citizenship rights?

With the independence, apart from the first period in which Nkrumah tried to control the power of traditional chiefs, no relevant changes has been introduced in the political role of chieftaincy. As a matter of fact, the presence of two parallel institutional logics, the governmental one and the traditional one, has not been able to overcome the dichotomy chiefly/stateless, relegating the latter in a subordinate position.

It is interesting to see, in fact, that the Konkomba re-discuss their position and organise their political battle with the specific objective of achieving recognition of a *paramount chief* within the framework of the structure of “traditional” power and not with the objective of controlling the apex of district functions in the local government system of the Republic of Ghana.

This political choice suggests a strong persistence of inheritance of the British construction of the local authority that, as we can see, remained partially intact during the post-colonial period. In reality, as far as the Konkomba are concerned, the only way of becoming politically viable is to comply with the model founded on the decision-making power of the chiefs.

⁶AMSELLE J-L., *Logiche meticce. Antropologia dell'identità in Africa e altrove*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1999; FABIETTI U., *L'identità etnica*, Roma, Carocci, 2002.

At this point it is necessary to bring together the intuition of M. Mamdani and consider if we are in the presence of a “bifurcated state”⁷, in which he points out a difference in political action and language between the civil and so-called traditional society. The first is about rights and citizenship while the second is about tradition and client. In my opinion, the situation of the Northern region of Ghana is inserted in a much more complex space, in which political debates on citizenship are discussed through the so-called traditional system, the *chieftaincy*, emphasising the problems related to dichotomy suggested by Mamdani. It is clear that, in our case, traditional and civil power are two communicating elements within one setting in which the élite groups now use the first and then the second in order to reach visibility and power on a local political level.

TOGO

In Togo the role of *chieftaincy* institution has been and is still very different from the role attributed in Ghana.

According to the colonial politics of *assimilation*, the French tried to build an administrative uniformity and refused any model of bureaucratic pluralism. Consequently, the chiefs nominated by the colonial authorities acted as simple administrative intermediaries in order to operate on the territory without the need to pass through the traditional authorities. In this perspective, practically anybody could be elected as a chief, as long as they swore total loyalty as a future French citizen. The traditional chief was in charge of collecting taxes and duties and recruiting individuals for forced labour and soldiers for the French army and keeping a civil register. It is not surprising that the leaders were not very popular and in constant conflict not only with their superiors but also with their “subjects”.⁸

The French tried to modify this policy only after the Thirties when the first signs of opposition to the colonial government were clear. They attempted to adapt the nomination procedures of traditional chiefs to the various local constitutions even if the majority of the cases were too late for any real change.

In reality, on the eve of independence, the chiefs were not, as far as the French administration was concerned, only an instrument to diffuse orders but they also played a different role of public service and they represented the French authorities.

The strong opposition to the traditional *chefferie* found in the French colonies, close to independence, is therefore understandable.

In reality, along the course towards emancipation from the colonial policy, it was not possible to ignore or eliminate the capillary role of the chiefs in local administrative management. They were

⁷MAMDANI M., *Citizens and Subject: contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996.

⁸ROUVEROY VAN NIEUWAAL, E.A.B. VAN, *L'État en Afrique face à la chefferie. Le cas du Togo*, Paris, Karthala, 2000.

legally and politically integrated into the new independent states. Togo is not an exception: the traditional chiefs are still officials who answer to the central authority.

As far as the Konkomba are concerned, this type of administration has had important consequences. Today, in fact, the Konkomba villages in Togo are run by a Konkomba chief recognised by the government. This role can be covered on several levels, *chef du village*, *chef du canton* and *chef du prefecture*. The first two functions are “traditional”, this means that they are elected according to the traditional system (therefore from the elderly members of the clan of the village, the same clan that, for the Konkomba of Togo, the chief belongs to). The third is an administrative function that depends directly on the central government.

In this system the strong level of centralisation of the government is clear, so much so that the traditional functions and those of government nomination do not constitute, as in Ghana, two parallel systems of power management but they represent different levels of the same administrative system, with the government that directly controls the traditional chiefs.

In the Ghanaian case, characterised by an administrative decentralisation, as well as in the Togolese one, based on a strong political centralisation, the institution of chieftaincy seems to be necessary to be politically represented.

A Konkomba elder in a village in Ghana told me “we don’t care about chieftaincy, we don’t understand why should we feed a chief and an institution which has nothing to do with us and which doesn’t represent us. But if it is the only way to be politically represented, ok, we want the chieftaincy”⁹. At the same time a Konkomba chief in Togo explained me “look, the French came here and declared that they only wanted to deal with our chief. So we had to choose one. The *chefferie* was imposed on us as the French needed it in order to administrate the region”¹⁰.

The relevant point, here, is not only related to the fact that the *chieftaincy* is still a successful model for political administration in both of the contemporary states of Ghana and Togo despite the deep historical and political differences that characterise them, but is also connected to the difficulties of the two nation-states, in particular Ghana, to find a system that could grant the extension of equal access to resources for all citizens.

THE BORDER

In the Northern Region of Ghana the relationship between different groups is strongly affected by subordination, with the exclusion of the population without recognised chieftaincy institution from the political and economic life of the country.

⁹ M. T., Lepusi (Ghana) 17/01/2006.

¹⁰ B. M., Takpamba (Togo), 03/05/2008.

The anti-Konkomba propaganda is based on the principle of non-autochthony of this stateless people, that are said to come from “outside”, in this case from Togo. This is why I would like to introduce the last reflection on the border and its role in the process of shaping and re-shaping identities, as the first step of my work in progress on the Ghana/Togo border.

First of all, an idealisation of the German colonial period is very clear and, in the stories told by the Konkomba, especially the Ghana groups living a much more precarious political condition, has become a mythical past in which all of the Konkomba lived together, united, free to decide politically and economically and in some way immune from the Dagomba control. This is clearly one of the results of the activities of the Konkomba élite in the last ten years for the construction of a strong group identity.

As far as the Konkomba are concerned, there are currently two different levels of representation for this geographical border. The level of perception that I will call “family and economic” speaks of a porous border, a reality that is constantly crossed by family relations (many people have brothers or sisters living on the other side, in Konkomba villages) and the possibility of launching free economic exchanges between the various Konkomba markets in Ghana and in Togo.

The Konkomba of Ghana and of Togo continue to consider themselves as the same population, they speak the same language and have constant contacts between the villages, creating a movement of men and goods that can be clearly seen on the market day.

From a “historical and political” point of view, however, the perception of the border is different. All leaders and *utindaan* that I spoke with in Ghana and in Togo are perfectly aware that, ever since the colonial period, the presence of the border and the political events experienced by the two different governments have had clear implications on their lives. One of the chiefs of Saboba said to me “we are all brothers, this is true, but I really would not feel comfortable in Togo if I had to live there. You know what, the English colonisation here and the French colonisation there, the varied local political management system that we currently have... all of this has contributed to the creation of two different realities and I feel much more comfortable here, my history is different, I am a Ghanaian Konkomba”¹¹.

This point has a dual importance. First of all, it clearly highlights the political construction that wants to de-legitimize the autochthony of the Konkomba through their presumed origin from Togo, using the border as a political tool. The words of the leader lead us to believe that there is no point in tracing back the course of history in order to define ancestral belonging: what counts is that, despite all of the historical and political manipulations, the Konkomba are living inside the boundary of a nation-state of which they want to become an integral part. Secondly, this point allows us to stop and reflect on the importance of the contemporary African state that it is clearly perceived as a real entity, not only a mere construction brought by the colonisation. The

¹¹ A. K., Saboba (Ghana), 28/04/2008.

Konkomba, in fact, during this African political season in which ethnic characteristics appear to be exploding, don't have the political goal of forming the Konkombaland, uniting all the Konkomba people and bypassing the Ghana/Togo border. Contrary, they want to have a space within the system of representation of the state that they currently belong to.