Journal for the Study of the Religions of Africa and its Diaspora

Religion, Peace and Conflict in Contemporary Africa

Guest Editors
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ABOUT THE JOURNAL

The Journal for the Study of the Religions of Africa and its Diaspora is a peer-reviewed, open-access journal for the academic study of the religions of Africa and the African Diaspora. It will serve primarily as an interdisciplinary journal in which AASR members, but also non-AASR-members, publish the outcomes of their original research on the religions of Africa and the African Diaspora.

The journal will cover the wide range of religious traditions that were founded, were or are found, and exist and operate in Africa and the African Diaspora; and topics useful to scholars involved in the academic study of religions in Africa and the Africa Diaspora, and to a wider readership of academics in the general study of religions.

The journal shall be published as electronic issues only, with up to two (2) issues per year. It will be administered on behalf of the AASR by the Editorial Management Board and the International Advisory Board.

Editor's Note

It gives me great pleasure to introduce and welcome readers to this *Special Issue 3.1* 'Religion, Peace and Conflict in Contemporary Africa,' anchored by our guest editors, Meron Zeleke and George Klute. The peer-reviewed papers that make up this issue were drawn from the international conference *"Religion, Peace and Conflict in Contemporary Africa"* (sponsored under the Volkswagen Stiftung Founding Initiative: Knowledge for Tomorrow Cooperative Research Project) held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in May 2016.

I am delighted that the project research findings shared by the contributors and the robust conversation that took place during this event, to which I was invited as keynote speaker, could be further documented and disseminated. As this is the first Special Issue since the inauguration of the AASR E-Journal, permit me to congratulate both the guest editors and contributors for blazing the trail in this regard. May I also use this medium to encourage colleagues to consider submitting very informing batch of essays, such as these ones for consideration. This forum will continue to create the needed space and opportunity for disseminating African and African diaspora-centred research findings.

My profound thanks once more to our guest editors and authors for enriching and further nuancing the discourse on religion, peace and conflict in contemporary Africa with their research and findings.

I hope that our avid readers will find these rich essays rewarding.

Afe Adogame
Editor-In-Chief
October 2017

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The Drum Wars: The Clash of Religious Groups in a Cosmopolitan City

Justice Arthur[1]

Abstract

Ghana has been lauded for its democratic credentials and stability since its successful implementation of multi-party democracy in 1992. In recent times, this image of stability has come under threat because of a conflict between the Ga traditionalists and some Pentecostal-Charismatic churches. Every year, the Ga Traditional Council impose a 30-day universal ban on drumming and all forms of noisemaking, in preparation for the *Homowo,* festival. On the one hand, the Ga traditionalists justify the noise ban as a time-honoured tradition and a constitutional right. On the other hand, Pentecostal-Charismatic churches generally refused to comply with the ban claiming it is an infringement on their right to freedom of worship. While both groups legitimise their claims with the national constitution, the disagreement between these two groups assumed violent proportions since 1998. The annual clashes have resulted in injuries to people and destruction to church property. Drawing on existing literature and ethnographic fieldwork in Accra and using Azar's (1990) Protracted Social Conflict theory, the focus of this paper is to understand why this conflict has persisted despite attempts by various agents to resolve it. I argue that there are several underlying factors that converge to protract this conflict.

KEYWORDS: Religious conflict; Religion and Sound; Protracted Social Conflict; Conflict in Africa.

Introduction

The religious landscape of Accra, the capital of Ghana like the entire nation shows a multiplicity of religions. This diversity of religions is promoted by the national constitution, which was adopted in 1992 after more than a decade of military rule. The legal framework specifically guarantees religious freedom and thereby prohibits the potential for any state religion. This effectively means the country is theoretically, a secular state but a religiously pluralised one with citizens practising several religions (Quashigah 1999). Despite the open religious market, Christianity, Islam and indigenous religions are the dominant religions and have a special status in Ghanaian society. Of the

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three main religions, Christianity is the religion of the majority of the people.[2] Among the different Christian denominations in the contemporary framework, the Pentecostal-Charismatic groups, which emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s are the most powerful and the least tolerant towards indigenous religions. The exponential growth of this strand of Christianity to date has tilted the religious equilibrium which existed in the country prior to the 1980s to their favour, being the most followed religious group today (Tsikata and Seini 2004: 41-42).[3] The churches adopt a stature of complete rupture from indigenous beliefs expressed through a process of continuous stigmatisation and vilification of indigenous religions. This mentality clearly marks an end to the era of cooperation between indigenous religions and Christianity, which was ushered in by indigenous religion's ability to accommodate other religions and the mainline historical churches' approach to evangelisation usually referred to as *inculturation*[4] and inter-religious dialogue.

The intolerance of the Pentecostal groups toward indigenous beliefs culminates in a very complex relationship between the two groups and this plays out in their everyday interactions in the city. This paper focuses on the *Homowo*[5] festival, which I argue, is a microcosm of the broader relationship between the two parties. Although the Ga[6] have several celebrations including twins' festivals, *Odwira* (yam festival), special naming and burial celebrations, the annual *Homowo* is the most important festival on the Ga traditional calendar. It is an agricultural festival celebrated to thank the gods and ancestors of the Ga people. *Homowo* serves as a reminder of the perseverance of their ancestors in the face of the dire famine that beset them in the past owing to the arid conditions of the Accra plains (Ozanne 1962). The *Homowo*, highlights the union of the Ga people both as a family unit and an ethnic group. It is a time when the Ga diaspora returns to its ancestral homes in the towns along the Accra coast to share a meal with their living relatives and ancestors. It is a time when family disputes are settled and ethnic solidarity is displayed in line with Emile Durkheim's notion of the integrative role of the traditional ritualistic gatherings (1995). Thus, the festival has historical, cultural and religious significance to the Ga. Accordingly, any impediment to the celebration of *Homowo* is viewed as an affront to the entire Ga ethnic group.

Even though the climax of the *Homowo* is in August and early September, the celebration begins in May. The celebrations move from one Ga town to another beginning with *Ga Mashie* (Central Accra). It commences with the planting of the corn and millet in a secluded field by the Ga high priests (*Wulɔmei*, singular *Wulɔmɔ*). After

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[2] According to the 2010 population and housing census, 73.3% of the population is Christian whilst 17.0% and 4.9% of the citizens are professed Muslims and traditionalists respectively.

[3] 29.6% of the national population profess to be adherents of the Pentecostal-Charismatic churches.

[4] *Inculturation* here refers to what Chibueze Udeani defines as "the concept for the penetration and taking roots of the Christian message and the springing up of a Christian life in a way that accepts the uniqueness of the particular culture". Add reference

[5] *Homowo* literally means 'hooting at hunger' in the Ga language.

[6] The Ga people are an ethnic group, the indigenes of the present day cosmopolitan city of Accra. Politically, the Ga people have a decentralised administration centred on seven major communities or towns namely Ga Mashie (Central Accra), Osu, La, Teshie, Nungua, Tema and Kpone. The seven Ga towns or settlements have independent and distinct leadership but with similar governance structures and customs. All these settlements can be found along the coast but every town owns other settlements further inland, which come together with the coastal towns to form present-day Accra. Every town has its principal priests (*Wulɔmei*) and chiefs (*Mantsemei*) but the three chief priests of Ga Mashie (Central Accra): Nai *Wulɔmɔ*, Sakumo *Wulɔmɔ* and Korle *Wulɔmɔ* are generally accepted as the three principal priests of the entire Ga state.

to pay a fine in order to retrieve their instruments. On the other hand, if they face opposition, then they fight back to repel the resistance, which sometimes ends in bloody encounters. Despite successive Ghanaian governments employing several strategies to mitigate or intervene, this conflict[9] has endured to the extent that it has become a stain on Ghana's credential as a peaceful state in an often-troubled West African sub-region.

While the conflict has both religious and cultural aspects, there are other underlying triggering factors which makes it difficult for its nature to be strictly defined.[10] According to some of my informants however, the real motivation behind the violent clashes is economic and political rather than a religio-cultural one, because the majority of the Ga youth mainly involved in the violence are not driven by religious motives. However, most of these informants were Christians and obviously "people who identify themselves as religious sometimes argue that the real motivation behind so-called religious violence are, by definition not religious" (Cavanaugh, 2009:9). It is important, though, to stress that religious motivation is at the forefront of the encounter between the two groups. Having said that, it is equally significant to note that other factors such as social, economic and political come to play in these confrontations. While it is difficult to detach, "the religious from economic and political motives in such a way that the religious motives are innocent of violence," the question really is, how important are the factors outside of religion and culture? (Ibid: 5). Are they so crucial we no longer want to classify the conflict as a religious one? How do they contribute to the intractable nature of the conflict? Drawing from a year-long participatory field research and existing literature, this paper examines why the conflict has protracted. Let us now look at the theoretical considerations that informs the analysis.

Theoretical reflections

To ascertain the conundrum of why violent conflicts were prevalent in some religiously and ethnically plural societies while being absent in others of such composition, several theoretical conceptualisations have been employed to study the sources of social conflicts in multi-ethnic settings in Africa. Three prominent ones are Stewart's (2008) 'horizontal inequalities,' Collier's (1998) 'concept of greed' and Zartman's (2005, 2008) 'need, creed and greed'. First, Stewart asserts that the causes of violent conflicts and wars are horizontal inequalities (HIs), which she defines as 'inequalities in economic, social or political dimensions or cultural status between culturally defined groups' (2008: 3). Accordingly, she argues for policies of affirmative action against all forms of horizontal inequalities (political, social and cultural) between identity groups in a nation-state as that will lessen the HIs and consequently, the possibility of conflict. But to deal with HIs as independent variables is problematic because as pointed out by Brown and Langer (2010), identities themselves may be shaped by inequalities, becoming less prominent as inequality is reduced and *vice versa*. This theory nevertheless has been used to study conflicts in Ghana and Nigeria in recent times (Langer and Ukiwo 2008; Asante 2011). Second, Collier suggests that 'greed' rather than 'grievance' leads to wars and other violent conflicts in multi-communal settings. In that sense, he is arguing that these conflicts take place when it is financially or sometimes militarily rewarding – that is, his interest is in the economic aspects of civil wars and other internal conflicts. Collier cites

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[9] Conflict is here defined as 'the pursuit of incompatible goals by different groups.' Ramsbotham et al, 2011, 30.

[10] In this paper, I follow an approach that sees religion and culture as two separate entities but constantly interacting with each other.

ethnic, religious and even racial groups. Traditionally, the city stretches from the *Densu* River in the west to the *Laloi* lagoon in the east (Field 1937: 1-3). Present day Accra unlike other big cities such as Kumasi and Sekondi-Takoradi, has become the most ethnically heterogeneous city - a melting pot of different cultures, religions and lifestyles. It is a microcosm of the entire country with almost all the ethnic groups represented. This unique status has been facilitated by several factors such as a complex history of pre-colonial settlements, colonial and post-colonial administrations, territorial expansion, influx of migrants and commerce (De Witte 2016: 3). According to the recent population census, the Akan are the dominant group in the Greater Accra region followed by the Ga-Dangbe, who have a first-comer status and are indigenous to the region (Ghana Statistical Council 2012:40).[11]

Obviously, all the ethnic and racial groups who move to Accra also come with their religion and diverse cultures. For example, most of the ethnicities coming from the north of Ghana are predominantly adherents of Islam and are found in the Muslim dominated settlements within the city. The Akan and the Ewe people from southern and middle Ghana are mainly Christians with some traditionalists among them. The Indian population are mainly Hindus who worship in the city's main Hindu temple on the Odorkor-Kaneshie main road. The majority of the native Ga people are Christians, but a significant number of them especially those who live in the traditional coastal areas also follow the Ga indigenous religion, known as *Kpele*. Accordingly, the Greater Accra region is a multi-communal area with residents from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. While the traditionalists recognise the fact that Accra is a multi-communal city, they also insist on their customs being adhered to by the various groups in the city. This is because they believe the dominant Akan groups follow their traditional customs in the comparatively homogeneous Akan areas like Kumasi but tend to ignore Ga traditions when they locate to Accra with the reason that Accra belongs to all Ghanaians.[12] Thus traditional beliefs are presumed by the traditionalists to prevail over the differentiated landscape of the city of Accra.

Although Fearon and Laitin (1996) have argued that the majority of all ethnically heterogeneous communities are not violent, Samuel Huntington (1996) in his 'clash of civilizations' disagrees and posits that there is an inevitable likelihood of violent clashes involving communities with multiple racial, ethnic and cultural differences. Despite agreeing with Fearon and Laitin, Stewart argues that conflicts of a violent nature within multi-religious and multi-ethnic societies are on the rise in the African continent (2008:3). Azar also posits that the communal content of a society is one of the conditions which needs to be met in order for a PSC to emerge (1990:1-3). Accra's multi-communal status is rather complicated as it has been influenced by external factors such as the colonial legacy of land alienation through a European style land tenure system, foreign to the local notions of land usage, which has led to communal anxieties within the traditional areas of the city. Large tracts of land which were expropriated from the Ga by the British colonial government to develop the city have not been returned to the families by the post-colonial administrations, even after the leases expired. Rather, successive governments in the fourth republic (1992 to date) have sold these lands to the political elite and government sympathisers. Land issues have therefore become an area which has fuelled this conflict especially as the powerful Charismatics overlook the allodia custodians, to acquire lands for their ever-expanding ministries. This, coupled

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[11] Per the Census figures, while the Akan make up 1,528,177, the Ga-Dangbe constitutes 1,056,158 of the population of the Greater Accra Region.

[12] Nuumo Ogbamey III, Interview with Sakumo Wulɔmɔ by author, Accra, Sep 25, 2015.

advocates, the GTC, the priests and the Ga elite as a collective one, it becomes even more important to address it since it borders on the identity of the people as a group. Azar (1990:9) argues that grievances of this nature, that is, those resulting from need deprivation and expressed collectively, if not redressed by the appropriate authorities, 'cultivates a niche for a protracted social conflict.' In this case, the lack of universal acceptance of the Ga language as the dominant language in the multicultural and multi-ethnic environment could be interpreted as need deprivation. The GTC's argument, though, is that their language, their cultural practices and religion, which distinguish them from all other groups in Ghana should remain vibrant in their traditional homeland. It becomes even more crucial because these sentiments are expressed collectively with undertones of ethnicity at the heart of it and always in relation to the treatment of the Akan groups by the authorities.

Furthermore, along with access and acceptance needs, there are security needs also at the centre of the clashes. Azar refers to material needs or infrastructural variables for physical security, nutrition, housing and so forth (1990:9). One of the critical security needs that has been expressed in this conflict is the lack of proper housing within the traditional Ga settlements because of widespread poverty within these communities. Most of the Ga youth involved in the annual fracas with the Charismatic churches are unemployed or lack economic opportunities, which contributes to the situation where some of them attack churches and extort money from them without the consent of the Ga priests or the traditional council. Accordingly, the ban period basically becomes a 'harvest time' for these unemployed youths to use as an avenue to make a living. Thus, the youth unemployment, housing deficit, and other security needs in the traditional areas constitute the ground for the Ga youth to foment the chaos that finally leads to a PSC. This then brings us to the centrality of the nation-state's role in these ongoing clashes.

The Role of the State

According to Azar, state governance and the role of the state are fundamental factors in either frustrating or satisfying individual or identity group needs. In a protracted social conflict, a dominant social group's monopolisation of power restricts the ability of the state to meet the needs of all social groups (Azar 1990: 10). While the monopolisation of power by one particular social group might not apply to Ghana, it is significant here to look at how different Ghanaian governments have dealt with the grievances expressed by the Ga traditionalists. From independence in 1957, the Ga nationalist groups such as Ga Steadfast Association (*Ga shifimo kpee*) were formed to protect the general interest of the Ga people on such critical issues as lands and resistance to the dominance of the Akan majority group. The government of Kwame Nkrumah adopted several means to deal with these Ga groups. First, since the group was deemed xenophobic by government, perhaps because they aligned themselves with the opposition parties, the government adopted legislation such as the Avoidance of Discrimination Act (1957), which forbade the formation of parties along regional, religious and ethnic lines; and the Preventive Detention Act (1958), which gave the state the right to detain anyone deemed a threat to national security for five years without trial. This legislation was introduced as a measure to control and coerce groups like the Ga nationalists (Quarcoopome 1992:49). Second, the Kwame Nkrumah led government also formed a counter Ga nationalist group, *Ga ekome feemo kpee* (Ga Unity Group) to nullify the effect of the *Ga shifimo kpee* and to confront its use of violence to express the grievances of the Ga-Dangbe people.

International connections

The fourth underlying source of the conflict is what Edward Azar refers to as *international linkages*, that is, the economic, political, and military relations that keep PSC laden states economically and/or politically dependent upon states that are richer and stronger than themselves (Azar 1990: 10). Ghana's economic dependency on the Bretton Woods institutions: the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank for so many years has been criticised as a source of stifling economic growth (Kanbur 2002). The country has been on and off IMF programmes since the resumption of the multi-party democracy in 1992. As recently as April 2015, the country went back to the IMF for a three-year extended credit facility to stabilise its economy.[14] These facilities usually come with conditions that are arguably harsh on the local economy because they normally include austerity measures meant to instil fiscal discipline. These measures have often led to high taxation and recently, a freeze on employment especially in the public sector. This makes the country almost always unable to create adequate employment opportunities for its citizens and consequently, dependent on the more powerful Europeans and North Americans who control the Bretton Woods institutions for grants and aid (Boafo-Arthur 1999a, 1999b). This state of affairs coupled with corruption leaves many people in poverty especially in places like Accra where there is keen competition for jobs and housing. Additionally, unemployment leads to a general increase in frustration among the youth not only in the Ga areas but also in other parts of the country. Nevertheless, in the traditional areas of Accra, we see unemployment as contributing to the increase in the number of Ga youth involved in the attacks on the churches during the period of the ban.

Besides the impact of the austerity measures imposed by international financial institutions on the country, there is what I refer to as *'external insiders'* whose presence have a direct effect on the conflict over the noise ban. That is, the role played by the various Ga associations in the diaspora, who although outside the country, still inspire bodies like the GTC and the Ga-Dangbe Council to stand up for the right of the Ga people in matters such as land issues and enforcing the ban. There are Ga associations in many cities across North American and Europe who are constantly bringing the land issues and the noise ban into public discussions. They do that by sponsoring leaders of the Ga traditionalists and other Ga pressure groups and encouraging them to stand up for the cause of the Ga people. Due to the resources they pour into the activities of the pressure groups, their impact on the whole conflict is enormous and this very much fuels the clashes.[15]

Conflicting Parties and the State: Significance of Actors' Actions

The question really is how these four underlying sources, unlike the overt sources of the conflict, contribute to the protractedness of the same. In that sense, Azar argues that for any one of the underlying sources, which he calls, *clusters of preconditions for a PSC*, to start off overt conflicts, it will be dependent on the process dynamics, that is, communal actions and strategies; state action and strategies and the built-in mechanisms of conflict (Ramsbotham 2015:116). That suggests that any one of the underlying sources can trigger conflicts but the likelihood of protracting the conflict is dependent on how the

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[14] https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2015/cr15103.pdf, Accessed Apr 15, 2016.
[15] https://www.gadangmeinternational.org, Accessed Apr 16, 2016.

Additionally, some state institutions like the Ghanaian Police Service have not shown the interest required from a law enforcement agency. Despite the heated nature of the clashes on several occasions, the police either refused to make any arrests or they released culprits without pressing charges, usually after the intervention of senior government officials. This situation breeds impunity as culprits are allowed to go scot-free. A senior police officer at the police headquarters, however, revealed that since this conflict is religious they do not want to be seen to be taking sides and therefore, once the cases are reported they try to deal with it at a community level. As a result of this, although the conflict has been lingering they have no records of incidents of the clashes.[17]

Besides, successive governments have approached the conflict differently since 1998. The first NDC government led by Jerry Rawlings, which had a Ga native, Nii Okaija Adamafio as the minister of interior politicised ethnicity to make political gains in the traditionally Ga dominated areas of Accra such as Ga Mashie, Osu, La, Teshie, Nungua and Tema. This is a form of an instrumental cooption which worked for the Ga traditionalists as well as the NDC as a party. The John Kufuor led government shifted emphasis on the noise ban from one of religious to environmental protection by employing civil servants as a task force to abate noise nuisance. This shifted the focus from the government to local assembly by-laws and therefore, the government could not be accused of taking sides. However, because of the winner-takes-all political practice that is prevalent in Ghana, this change of focus away from government can be understood as a type of repression rather than an accommodation of the conflicting parties. To put it differently, the shift to clamping down on noise pollution was the government's way of employing legal means to contain an otherwise sensitive subject for both the traditionalists and the churches. This repressive approach by the NPP ultimately led to a reduction in the clashes between 2002 and 2008. This demonstrates that there have been fluctuations in the clashes depending on which political party is in power. For instance, from 1998 to 2001 the clashes were more intense, then it subsided between 2002 and 2008 and then from 2009 to 2016 it was reinvigorated, although not to the same intensity as the first period. These periods however, coincide with the NDC-NPP-NDC political regimes, which shows clearly that when the NDC is in power, the clashes are more intense, perhaps because they are friendly to the Ga traditionalists since they dominate in the traditional areas, occupying most parliamentary seats.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have looked at how some covert factors have combined to protract the conflict over the noise ban between the Ga traditionalists and Charismatic churches in Accra, Ghana. I have argued that the following factors have contributed considerably to the enduring nature of the conflict. First, is the need based grievances expressed collectively by the Ga people, such as identity related concerns including the growing perception among them that their culture, religion and language are under threat. Also, the state's inability to address the land question, poor housing conditions, youth unemployment and poverty in the traditionally Ga neighbourhoods of Accra. Second, the political elites' penchant to use the conflict for propaganda purposes including politicisation of ethnicity for political capital. Therefore, while this conflict has nominally been considered religio-cultural based, we see that, it also reflects an intersection of

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[17] DCOP Ampah-Benin, *Interview with the head of Ghana Police Public Relations Director*, Jan 15, 2015.

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