

The Role of Indirect Rule in Instituting Competitive Ethnic Identities and the Emergence of Ethnic Conflicts in Northern Ghana

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Abstract ;

When conflict in Africa is the subject matter, a shallow view of the conflict is usually given. One of the most commonly offered explanations for the problem is to blame Africa for being inherently diverse and heterogeneous. Thus, strife commentators tend to concentrate on narrow issues without referring them to the structural-historical evolution of the African continent. By using examples from Northern Ghana, like the system of chieftaincy and chiefdom, the paper asserts that most of the ethnic tensions in Africa can be traced back to the "indirect rule" policy. In effect, the British colonial style created a system of ethnic stratification that fostered an unranked system of stratification. Hence, we propose that the British colonial legacy is certainly connected to both the frequency and the degree of ethnic conflict since unranked systems stimulate competition between ethnic groups, which can easily spiral into disputes.

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1. *Introduction*

Prior to the nineteenth century, Europe had been nibbling at the edges of Africa, but the interior of the vast continent remained mysterious and enigmatic. European traders stayed close to the coast, where local middlemen supplied them with what they needed. However, by the end of the 19th century, things changed to a more aggressive and expansive form of colonialism. The Industrial Revolution created a need for such expansion, and Africa was the answer to the merchants' prayers. As specialization moved towards manufacturing, scramblers needed raw materials and new markets for their products. This would explain the sudden rush to establish direct military and political control over the entire continent and the hectic demarcation of territory while paying no attention to the natural boundaries of existing cultural ethno-groups.

Although Ghana is considered West Africa's best-governed country and is classified as the 43rd on the Global Peace Index as the most peaceful state; like many other African countries, it has witnessed phenomenal increases in armed conflict, most of which are ethnic disputes and cleavages, whose historical roots are traceable to the colonial policies of British indirect rule specifically; the unranked system of ethnic stratification.

The aim of the present paper is to examine how British indirect rule, with its unranked system of ethnic stratification, led to the emergence of various

competitive ethnic identities (politicised ethnic identities) within Northern Ghana.

2. *Review of Literature*

There are many divergent views, as evidenced by the rising body of literature on ethnic conflicts in Northern Ghana. These opposing perspectives are partly the result of how conflict is studied.

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In his (2007) "Artificial creation of the state and enduring conflict in Africa: Legacies of the indirect rule policy in the

northern parts of Ghana and Nigeria", Bacho explains, through historical analysis of the indirect rule system that was applied in the northern parts of Ghana and Nigeria, that the post-independent states failed to resolve the enduring problems that are believed to breed conflict. For him, those deep-seated conflicts emanated from the historical

processes of the “infamous” Indirect Rule policy. He attributes identity crisis and disputes in the two African regions to the Divide and Rule legacies inherited from the British. These legacies are: “the artificial creation of local governance units, ethnic boundaries, and the rearrangement of ethnic groups” (25). Finally, he recommends that the creation of a safe environment is needed for Africa’s development.

In the Northern Ghana context, in her (2007) “The Overwhelming Minority: Traditional Leadership and Ethnic Conflict in Ghana’s Northern Region” J Jönsson investigates the role that traditional institutions' interactions with the state and the historical development of chieftaincy played in the organisation of NR disputes. By presenting the testimonies of members of all the affected ethnic groups gathered through interviews done by the author in villages in the eastern portion of the NR in July and August 2005, it seeks to convey a nuanced understanding of these disputes. Additionally, it makes use of original sources gathered from interviews and NGOs as well as a thorough analysis of domestic and international publications

on local history, the conflicts, and their likely causes. At the same time, it casts doubt on the perception of Ghana as a peaceful nation free from the horrors of interethnic violence.

Even though there is a plethora of studies on ethnic conflict in Africa in general and in Ghana in particular, a complete grasp of the issue has not yet been attained.

Accordingly, the main focus of this paper is to further analyse ethnic conflict in Northern Ghana from a historical perspective, with a particular emphasis on the indirect rule system's contribution to the emergence of rival competitive ethnic identities that would play a role in the ethnic conflict that surfaced on the eve of independence and after.

3. Ethnic Stratification

Social stratification is a universal form of social organisation in which a structure of social inequality is manifested through differences in prestige, power, and/or economic remuneration. Ethnic stratification is one form of stratification. This system of stratification is distinguished when some relatively fixed group membership, like race, religion, or nationality, is used as a key basis for allocating social positions with varying remuneration (Noel 157).

In the case of an inequalitarian, stratified, outcome, the intergroup encounter is characterised by the presence of necessary and sufficient variables that would accelerate the emergence of ethnic stratification. These variables are ethnocentrism, competition, and differential power. Contrariwise, the absence of these variables means the absence of ethnic stratification, and thereby ethnic relations will be equalitarian (157-158).

3.1 Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is one of the many fundamental notions of the folkways that Sumner (1840-1910) concluded in his work. It is a universal feature of independent societies and ethnic groups. As described by Sumner, the concept “is the technical name for this view of things in which one’s own group is the centre of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it.” where it covers inner and outer relations. For him, these relations are bound by the gaze of the other, in which “each group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exalts its own divinities, and looks with contempt on outsiders. Each group thinks its own folkways the only right: ones, and if it observes that other groups have other folkways, these excite its scorn” (Sumner 13).

3.2 Competition

The second variable, which is an additional imperative for the emergence of ethnic stratification, is competition. Competition here alludes to the interaction between two or more social units vying for the same limited resource such as land or prestige. When the members of one group compete over one objective, they will increase the likelihood of its scarcity. Hence, they may strive to promote ethnic stratification in order to effectively exploit the indifferent group's labour and, as a result, optimize objective achievement. (Noel 160).

3.3 Differential Power

Another variable that has crucial relevance for ethnic stratification is differential power. In his work on the theory of race and ethnic relations, Stanley Lieberman referred to the concept of differential power as the superordinate-subordinate distinction. As mentioned, in the period before the emergence of ethnic stratification, there was continuous contact between members of two or more distinct ethnic groups. Lieberman made a distinction between two major sorts of contact: those involving subordination of an indigenous population by a migrant group and those involving subordination of a migrant population by an indigenous racial or ethnic group (309). Always the contact is marked by unequal power so that one can impose its will upon the other. Actually, the fundamental element of the development of any stratification system is differential power. In any case, differential power is critical to the establishment of ethnic stratification, and the greater the differential, the longer the system will last (Noel 162).

2. Ranked and Unranked Systems of Ethnic Stratification

An acceptable definition of conflict is one of the most difficult factors in ethnic

conflict theory. The majority of definitions include an element of struggle, strife, cleavage, or collision (Horowitz 95). Lewis Coser defined conflict as follows; “struggle over values, and claims to scarce status, power, and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure, or eliminate their rivals” (8).

In post-colonial Africa, ethnic conflict has been common and pervasive, and a variety of hypotheses have been offered to explain this phenomenon. The most intricate structural models of ethnic conflict rely on the distinction between ranked and unranked systems of stratification.

Horowitz (1939) distinguished between ranked and unranked systems of stratification as the coincidence or non-coincidence of social class and ethnic origins (22). For him, when the two systems coincide, they will be labelled as “ranked,” whereas when they do not coincide, they will be marked as “unranked.”

In a ranked system of inter-ethnic relations, the cultural division of labour respects and coincides with the social

class and ethnic origins of the people. Indeed, Hechter (1975, 1978) argued that “the cultural division of labor refers to a pattern of structural discrimination such that “individuals are assigned to specific types of occupations and other social roles on the basis of observable cultural traits or markers.” As a result, social mobility for members of subordinate groups is constrained by the ascriptive criteria of ethnic traits (Horowitz 23-25). Thereby, ethnic identity is strengthened and ethnic solidarity is intensified.

Contrastively, in an unranked system, people are defined as cross-class, because stratification does not consider the social class and ethnic origins of the stratified people. Unlike the ranked stratification, the cultural division of labour is disassembled or never exists. As consequence, a pattern of competitive ethnicity emanates.

Table 1. Ranked and Unranked systems of ethnic Stratification

Ranked System of Stratification (Vertical)	Unranked System of Stratification (Horizontal)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on the cultural division of labour • Ethnic identity has emerged as a consequence • Ethnic identity is reinforced + ethnic solidarity is intensified. (National identity) • Non-violent ethnic challenges. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The cultural division of labour has been dismantled or never existed. • Competitive ethnicity/ identity has emerged as a consequence • Foster competition between ethnic groups. (Competitive ethnic identity) • Ethnic conflicts and collisions.

So According to these models, the frequency, intensity, and forms of conflict should differ depending on whether inter-ethnic relations are ranked or unranked. Thus, we can say that different colonial

styles lead to different ethnic conflict outcomes. Structured variations did not appear randomly across Africa. They can be traced back to colonial institutions and

their impact on the pattern of inter-ethnic relations in colonial states.

5. *British Colonial Style and Ethnic Stratification*

5.1 *The British Indirect Rule: Adaptation and Decentralisation*

Frederick John Dealtry Lugard (1858) is widely regarded as the designer of the administrative system of indirect rule. "... self-development can be best secured to the native population by leaving them free to manage their own affairs through their own ruler [...] under the guidance of the British staff..." (Lugard 94). In his book, *The Dual Mandate in Tropical Africa* (1922), Lugard outlined the policy's principles. According to him, Britain had two responsibilities in tropical Africa: "efficiency and economy" (96). To effectively govern Africa, he proposed two administrative principles: decentralisation/adaptation and continuity. Decentralisation was promoted at all levels of government, and the idea of ruling the natives through their traditional chiefs was emphasized in his book. Except in critical areas such as taxes and military forces, the function of British staff, in his opinion, was to provide guidance rather than orders. The second principle he considered "vital in African administration" was the principle of continuity (102). This principle, like decentralisation, was applied to every

department and office. Lugard argued that because the African "is slow to give his confidence [...] to the newcomer," the British should therefore rely on traditional institutions and authorities (103), thereby

preserving "continuity" with the past and facilitating African governance.

Lord Lugard wrote his book after retiring from colonial service in the Northern Nigeria Protectorate in 1919, where he could draw on his practical experience with indirect rule. "... I have ventured to make a few suggestions as a result of experience, in the hope that they may be found worthy of consideration by the "men on the spot" -insofar as the varying circumstances of our Crown colonies and protectorates may render them in any degree applicable," he said (5). *The Dual Mandate in Tropical Africa* was published in 1922 and quickly became a standard reference for all British administrators in Africa. As a result, indirect rule spread quickly to other British African colonies.

5.2 *Divide and Rule Policy*

One of the major tenets of indirect rule is to keep indigenous social structures intact. Bourret asserts that "one of the aims of the British Government is to rule, as far as possible, through the agency of indigenous institutions" (47). In preserving pre-colonial social institutions, the British used a "Divide and Rule" policy by maintaining opposing traditional structures of control and even by inventing new ethnic groups that never existed before. In doing so, they sowed the seeds of hatred among communities just to prevent any anti-colonial alliances that would challenge British hegemony (Mason et al 479-489).

Indeed, Morrock suggested four basic tactics of “divide and rule” policy: “1) the creation of difference within the conquered population; 2) the augmentation of existing differences; 3) the channelling or exploitation of these differences for the benefit of the colonial power, and 4) the politicization of these differences so that they carry over into the post-colonial period” (130). As a result, the British built ethnic conflict into their system where Existing ethnic divisions were institutionalised.

5.3 Unranked system of stratification and Competitive Ethnicity

Previously, we explored the term “competition” as an imperative variable for the emergence of ethnic stratification. In her policy, Britain encouraged competition among the different ethnic communities within a colony by cultivating factional rivalries. Horowitz asserts that “building colonial administration on a substructure of ethnic government helped insure that disparities would be interpreted through the lens of ethnicity” (150).

Britain adopted an unranked system of stratification which fostered rivalries among colonial subjects. For example, neighbours or hostile ethnic groups were grouped together in the same colonial territory. In a multi-ethnic territory, the British would frequently select one of the smaller minority groups, if not invent a new one, to receive education, so they promoted a segregated educational system favouring local elites like

mulattos², sons of local chiefs, and relatives of wealthy African merchants over the larger ethnic groups. That groups came to dominate the colonial civil service and police/military forces.

Such systematic exploitation of ethnic differences and rivalries led to the emergence of ethnic identity. Because of historical contentions between ethnic groups, the construction of a national identity that demonstrates a sense of solidarity among people has been difficult in Anglophone Africa. Thus, Anglophone fellow citizens showed greater attachment to ethnic identity vis-à-vis national identity, which is a significant requirement for building a sustainable state free from ethnic fractionalization (Ali et al. 7).

5.3 Unranked System of Stratification and Post-colonial Conflict

The British preservation of the “so-called” indigenous authority structures and local institutions -like colonial chieftaincy in Ghana- suggests an unranked system of stratification. In doing so, each ethnic group was able to retain its own elites, preventing the formation of a single dominant ethnic

group. With the coloniser’s departure, a pattern of competitive ethnicity emerged where each ethnic group wanted to dominate the state’s institutional machinery. According to Olzak “competitive theories argue that as ethnic groups come to compete and increase their access to a similar set of political, economic and social resources,

ethnic mobilization will occur” (362). This implies that, as the British kept the traditional authorities and institutions intact, in a way that advances their interests, it was easy for the ethnic groups to effectively mobilize for collective action. As a consequence, parties (groups) excluded from control of the country's state may nonetheless organize their members for collective action, including both aggressive and non-aggressive opposition actions (Mason et al. 481).

6. Ghana as a Case Study

6.1 Chieftancy in Ghana

Before colonial times, like in many African countries, societies in Ghana were heterogeneous³ made of small chiefdoms in which the social

organisation was based on land and family lineages where tribes co-existed in

well-defined boundaries (Lentz and Nugent. 5). In certain ways, traditional

economic and social patterns can be linked to the political maturity of the Africans. For instance, under communalism, people owned all the land and the means of production. Ownership by the masses was strongly present. All have a need for and a habit of working. When a specific piece of land was granted to a person for his own use, he was not permitted to do as he pleased with it because it remained the community's property. Counselors had tight control over the chiefs and had the power to dismiss them (Kwame Nkrumah 13).

With the advent of colonialism new contradicting policies to the existing networks were introduced, ergo communalist socio-economic patterns began to break down. Eventually, communal ownership of land was outlawed, and "customary laws" were used to determine who owned the land.

Under indirect rule policy, traditional structures were legitimatised and artificially preserved just to facilitate colonial exploitation, as Julia Jönsson, found when researching the subject of the preservation of indigenous institutions and chieftancy in Ghana:

Despite traditional leadership's claim to draw on pre-colonial sources of legitimacy, the colonial period has become an historical touchstone. Demands are typically validated by reference to colonial laws and documents, and opposition to structures seen as having originated with or been reinforced by the British is still cast in the language of the independence struggle (6).

In “preserving” the existing decentralized network of traditional authorities and institutions, the chiefs were empowered through the system of “Indirect Rule” in which they became the paramount authority at the level of the local government where they controlled all means of production including lands and labour. These “tribal headsmen” were used as paraphernalia and paid agents for the colonial administration to ensure tax collection, the administration of natives

the organization of forced labour, and the exercising of political and social control.

The British maintenance of local institutions and the "so-called" indigenous structures, points to an unranked system of stratification where the cultural division of labour is disassembled or never existed. In colonial Ghana, for instance, the colonists' patriarchal, hierarchical, and political-secular worldview, as well as their predilection for organizational structures that could fit into this mould, had a significant impact on structuring the society, further, it had severe consequences like ethnic conflicts and cleavages. In this respect, people whose political structures were seen through this prism as chiefs were regarded as superior. A stance reinforced by cultural Darwinist discourses and the handy justification that they might be more easily incorporated into an indirect rule superstructure (Jönsson Kopytoff qtd. in Jönssonb 6).

6.2 Legitimising the Chiefs' Power

As indirect rule became an official policy, autochthonous chiefs were formally defined as native authorities through the 1932 Native Authority Ordinance which gave legal backing to the chiefs' rule. The Native Authority Ordinance was a colonial system of local government administration. The decree was issued by the British to "appoint any chief or other native or groups of natives to be the authority for the area."⁴ In this respect, a unified local government system was established in Northern Ghana (Gold Coast), urging the chiefs to keep law and

order, including collecting taxes for the colonial government. The colonial administration was able to strengthen chieftaincy as an adjunct to its own

administration through a variety of means. Empowerment of the chiefs was remarkably seen in official documents, for instance in the Confidential Minute it was stated that: "To make the Chiefs an integral part of the machinery of Government with well-defined powers and functions recognised by Government and by law and not dependent on the views of an executive officer."⁵

Strengthening the institutions of chiefship in Northern Ghana did not just stop here. The colonial government created a council for the chiefs. In 1946, the Northern Territories Territorial Council was established in order to train the chiefs "first to advance beyond local affairs to matters that affect all and then play a role in the colony-wide affairs."⁶

All in all, the Native Authorities were appointed rather than democratically elected. As a result, the individuals chosen did not speak for their people, but rather for the colonial authority (Egbe 115).

6.3 Competitive Identity and Ethnic Conflict

The political structure -unranked system of stratification- of the British colonial administration that was developed around "tribe" and "chieftaincy" produced a kind of competitive identity among groups, clans, and tribes, which led to severe

ethnic conflict in the post-colonial period; "the contest for worth and place" as

Horowitz notes, "is the common denominator of ethnic conflict among unranked group" (186). On purpose, the British supported the emergence of politicised ethnic identities and the use of symbols and strict terms that would define the political status of groups. Political legitimacy was granted to groups whose hierarchies met British criteria of tribe and chieftaincy. Those who did not were basically disenfranchised. In effect, "In order to render effective the indirect rule policy" as Jönsson argues, "the British administration encouraged the formalisation of tradition, its adaptation to the indirect rule structure's requirements, and the homogenisation of ethnic identity" (8). The Guinea fowl war (also known as the Konkomba–Nanumba conflict) in Northern Ghana is perhaps the best example of the antagonistic nature of inter-ethnic relations left by the British policy that persisted under postcolonial governments in Ghana, which resulted in longer-lasting violence between 1980 and 1994.

7. CONCLUSION

The reason behind ethnic strife is not merely due to the diverse and heterogeneous nature of Ghana, as is frequently implied by conflict analysts. Alternatively, this paper departs from this constrained understanding of the conflict. It posits that ethnic disputes and the antagonistic nature of inter-ethnic relations are a result of the "indirect rule" legacies left behind by the British. By

using a historical analysis of the political structure of the British "indirect rule" policy that was developed around "tribe" and "chieftaincy" in Northern Ghana, it concludes that adopting a system of unranked stratification, i.e., "keeping" the existing decentralised network of traditional authorities and institutions, produced a politicised competitive identity that gave rise to entrenched disputes and revolts.

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³ Based on nuclear and extended families, lineages, age sets, secret societies, village communities, diasporas, chiefdoms, states and empires

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⁴ Native Authority (Northern Territories) Ordinance, section 3

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⁶ N.T.C., First Session, 16 December, 1946, p.2