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Konkomba

Profile

Some 500,000 Konkomba (Ethnologue, 2003) live in the north of the country and many are Muslims. Having religious leaders rather than paramount chiefs, they have limited political power and land rights.

Historical context

Konkomba have been marginalized in Ghana by virtue of not having paramount chieftancy (Nas). However, Dagomba, Gonja and Nanumba have their own long established chieftancy system and claim suzerainty over the Konkomba and the land which the Konkomba farm. Fundamental disagreement over issues of land and political representation have led to bloody clashes between Konkomba, Nanumba and their Dagomba allies.

Gonja support Nanumba and Dagomba, while neighbouring groups with a similar decentralised organization such as Basari, Nawuri and Nchumuru, side with Konkomba. Nanumba, Dagomba and Gonja claim Konkomba as their subjects, that is, strangers who settled in their land and have paid tribute such as brides, free labour, crops and livestock for centuries. Konkomba say they were regarded as 'subjects' only because Dagomba and their allies occupied ancestral Konkomba land. Konkomba claim to be indigenous to north-east Ghana and north-west Togo, a claim supported by historians and anthropologists. Dagomba royal history says Yendi, the seat of the Ya-Na (president of the Dagomba Traditional Council) was a Konkomba town when they captured it. When tracing their ancestry, Konkomba invariably say they came from a hole in the ground while the Nanumba, Dagomba and Gonja find their forebears among the cavalry-led groups who plundered their way south from what is now northern Burkina Faso.

Having no paramount chiefs means Konkomba have limited political power and land rights. They are not represented in the Northern Region House of Chiefs which is a major political institution taking key decisions in development and distribution of government largesse. National institutions recruit from the chiefs and northern government members are from Nanumba, Dagomba and Mamprusi. Konkomba, however, feel that they are being unjustly excluded from having a chieftancy title, and they now seek a paramountcy of their own. They felt aggrieved that the National Democratic Congress (NDC), which they had backed in 1992, failed to respond favourably to their request. The mid-1990s saw a severe rise in the number of casualties suffered as a result of violent conflict between Konkomba, Nanumba and Dagomba. A dispute at a marketplace over the price of a guinea fowl escalated into fierce violence centred on the town of Bimbilla in 1994-1995. The fighting claimed an estimated 2,000 lives, displaced 200,000 and destroyed over 400 villages.

Violence over land and political representation flared anew in 2002, this time between Konkomba and Nawuri; several people were killed and hundreds displaced. President Kufuor declared a state of emergency in the north, which was lifted in August 2004.

Current issues

Despite the de-politicization of ethnicity in Accra, the colonial legacy of chieftaincy retains the potential to cause conflict, especially in the north. In January 2006 fierce fighting erupted between rivals for the vacant Nanumba chieftaincy, leading to scores of woundings by gunshot and machete. Land prices have risen in recent years, raising the stakes for Konkomba and other northern communities already at loggerheads over control of territory.

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