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Mamprusi-Kusasi Imbroglia; 1902-2000: A Colonial Legacy or Failure of the Post-Colonial State

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Abstract:

The Kusasi-Mamprusi ethnic conflict in Bawku, a border town located in the extreme Northeastern corner of Ghana, which began in 1957, has become protracted. The two factions have clashed four times between 1980 and 2000. The disagreement has been over who should occupy the Bawku skin(a titled chieftaincy position) as Bawkunaba and control the Bawku land, as land ownership is tied to occupancy of the Bawku skin. Scholarly works on conflicts in Northern Ghana, have traced the root causes to the introduction of chieftaincy by the British colonial administration in the area. The policy that amalgamated smaller states with big kingdoms, created a subordinate-master relationship between the Kusasi and Mamprusi. Proponents of colonial government's complicity argue that attempts by the Mamprusi to maintain the status quo during the post-colonial Ghanaian government, has provoked the recurrent ethnic conflicts between the two groups.

This paper, situated within a broader historiographical context concludes that, though the conflict could be described as a colonial artifact, other dimensions of the phenomenon e.g. the emergence of party politics in the mid-1950s which polarized the society; the actions and/or inactions of post-colonial Ghanaian governments were major contributory factors that created tensions which led to violent confrontations. The partisan approach by post-colonial governments politicized the conflict and encouraged attempts by the factions to appropriate political space and authority.

Keywords: Ethnic, Conflict, Mamprusi-Kusasi, Bawku, Post-Colonial, State

1. Introduction

The Mamprusi-Kusasi conflict mirrors the general phenomenon of ethnic tensions and conflicts that has engulfed the African continent in the last fifty years. In West Africa, Ghana is among the few countries thought to be an exception to this canker. But even this image of Ghana as a peaceful country only masks a festering wound of communal violence, inter-ethnic conflicts and armed confrontations in the Northern part of Ghana. The remote or root causes of these conflicts are largely traceable to the introduction of secular political authority/chieftaincy in areas which, before colonialism, were described as stateless or acephalous. However, the actions or inactions of post-Independence Ghanaian governments such as, the interference in chieftaincy matters more than any factor set the stage for the protracted Mamprusi-Kusasi conflict. The security of the entire country has often been compromised by the scope of unrest, wanton loss of lives and property, waste of the nation's scarce resources and the dislocation of people due to the recurrence of the conflict.

Like most conflicts, the Mamprusi-Kusasi conflict in Bawku is about who occupies the Bawku skin(a titled traditional position) and control the land in the area. The contest for this position has often been between the Kusasi and Mamprusi (the two dominant ethnic groups) in Bawku. The first clash between the two groups occurred in 1957 and between 1980 and 2000 the two groups have clashed five times often with devastating consequences.

2. Theoretical Framework

There are varied views about the root causes of inter-ethnic conflicts that occur in Northern Ghana as a result of disputes over succession to a chieftaincy title or office as in the case of the Mamprusi-Kusasi chieftaincy/ethnic conflict. One school of thought Brukum (2000) traced the genesis of these conflicts to the categorization of societies in that part of the country by anthropologists Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1948) and the British colonial administration into acephalous/non-centralized and centralized groups. Other earlier ethnological studies have also cited these acephalous societies as examples of a segmentary lineage system or those described elsewhere Middleton, and Tait, (1958) as 'tribes without rulers.' The other school of thought Ladouceur (1979) identifies other factors beyond the colonial enterprise. This paper examines the two positions within the context of understanding the causes/sources of conflicts in Ghana in general and Northern Ghana in particular. It begins with an overview of the pre-colonial situation in the area as a background and examines the changes made to the pre-colonial political structures of the Mamprusi and Kusasi by British colonial administration as well as the interventions/interference by post-Independence governments in the conflict. As a historical study, a qualitative methodology was adopted and the data was derived predominantly from archival sources, field oral interviews and supplemented with data from relevant published literature.

3. Geographical Location of the Area and Settlement Histories of the Ethnic Groups

Bawku is located in the north-easternmost corner of Ghana. It is a major town and market centre situated near two international borders; Togo to the East and Burkina Faso to the North with Benin and Niger also not too distant from Bawku. By its strategic geographical location and its commercial activities, Bawku has become a polyglot of immigrants from other parts of Ghana and also from the neighboring countries who settled in the town to take advantage of economic opportunities there. These immigrants viz the Hausa, Moshi etc. came to join the Bimoba, Busansi and Kusasi people, as well as the Mamprusi. However, according to the 2010 population and housing census report of Ghana Bawku is predominantly inhabited by the Kusasi followed by the Mamprusi. GSS(2012).

Though the Bawku conflict essentially has been a contest for the Bawku skin, it is also a struggle for ownership and control over land. According to the Alhassan Committee report of 1978¹ which deliberated on land ownership in Northern Ghana, one of the bases to claim ownership of land is the principle of first settlers. Consequently, there have been conflicting claims as to which of the two main groups settled in Bawku first.

Oral history about the migration of the Mamprusi traces their ancestor to Na Gbewaawho migrated from Tanga near Lake Chad and settled at Pusiga a few kilometers away from Bawku Yerimea(2009). After his death, three of his sons namely, Tohugo, Sitobu and Mantambu migrated further away and founded the Mamprugu, Dagomba and Nanumba respectively.

However accounts of the Mamprusi presence in Bawku have been dated to the 17th century during the reign of Na Atabia as Nayiri (1690-1741). This appears to be a second wave of Mamprusi immigrants, this time from Nalerigu and Gambaga to the thriving commercial town of Bawku for two reasons. The first was to participate in the Tenkudugu-Gambaga trade. The second and perhaps the most important reason for their return was to maintain a spiritual link with the Gbewaa shrine at Pusiga, the burial place of their ancestor, Na Gbewaa. Indeed, the site of Gbewaa's grave in Pusiga still has a spiritual significance to his descendants who pay periodic visits to the place. The Kusasi who had been at the mercy of Bissa attacks appealed to the Nayiri for assistance. Na Atabia is said to have responded by establishing security/border posts in Bawku, Sinnebaga, Binduri, Teshi, Tanga and Worikambo. These posts were manned by Mamprusi garrison men or warrior princes who kept safe the trade routes that traversed the area and strengthened the lines of communication between Tenkudugu and Nalerigu. With time the Nayiri appointed Mamprusi princes as chiefs in these places which were predominantly Kusasi settlements Syme (1932). This pre-colonial arrangement secured for the Nayiri the prerogative to install a Mamprusi as Bawkunaba. It is unclear whether this move was part of Na Atabia's drive to expand the Mamprusi kingdom. But these Mamprusi chiefs did not seek to exercise political control over the Kusasi and seem to have restricted their leadership roles to their Mamprusi brethren.

Traditions about the Kusasi settlement in Bawku and its neighbourhood are varied. But according to Rattray (1932), when the Mamprusi moved from Gambaga into Bawku, the Kusasi were already in occupation of the area as *tengdanas* (land owners or earth priests). They migrated predominantly from Biengu, Zuiga and settled mainly in the outskirts of Bawku and engaged mainly in crop farming and animal husbandry.

4. Political Structures of Mamprusi and Kusasi Societies

In general, scholars, mainly anthropologists, have described the political structures of pre-colonial Northern Ghanaian societies either as centralized or non-centralized Fortes, and Evans-Pritchard(1948). The centralized political systems refer to those with central authority embodied in chiefs comparable to those in Asante. The non-centralized groups were those that lacked a locus of central political authority and headed by *tengdanas* who could only invoke spiritual and moral sanctions. The Colonial Administration endorsed this view of pre-colonial structure of Northern Ghanaian societies and proceeded to formulate policies based on that.

The Mamprusi fall within the category of those with centralized authority as they came to Bawku with advanced ideas of chiefship with Nayiri as their overlord. This feature of Mamprusi society pre-dates colonial intrusion. They had a hierarchy of chiefs or 'Na' with the Nayiri as overlord and the *tengdanas* operating alongside the Na. As secular rulers, the Nayiri, assisted by his sub-chiefs

1 Report of Committee on the Ownership of Lands and Position of Tenants in the Northern and Upper Regions, 1978 chaired by R. I. Alhassan, 47.

and council of elders enforced law and order through adjudication of cases. The Kusasi, on the other hand, lived acephalous lives and did not acknowledge a centralized political authority headed by one individual as supreme ruler constituting a centre of power that consisted of a court and council of elders, prior to their contact with the Mamprusi and the arrival of the British in Bawku. The societies of these non-chiefly groups were headed by *tengdanas* who were mainly spiritual leaders. They offered sacrifices to the land gods to secure their sources of livelihood and their authority did not go beyond imposing spiritual and moral sanctions on wrong doers. There were other minor immigrant groups such as the Bissa, Moshi, Hausa and B'moba who came to Bawku as traders (Yerimea (2009).

In spite of these differences in political organization, the two groups lived peacefully prior to colonial intrusion as the Mamprusi chiefs did not seek to exert political control over the Kusasi. The Kusasi *tengdanas* operated alongside the Mamprusi chiefs playing different roles (Rattray (1932).

5. British Colonial Policies and Implications for Mamprusi-Kusasi Relations

The genesis of the Mamprusi-Kusasi ethnic conflict in Bawku has been traced to the British colonial policy in the Northern Territories (coterminous with present day Northern Ghana). In the first place, the Colonial Administration inherited a structure in which land was vested in the hands of chiefs who held it in trust for their subjects.² This made land a very valuable commodity especially as its value appreciated with time. Furthermore, the restructuring of traditional institutions in Northern Ghana by the British Colonial Administration prior to the introduction of the indirect rule system in 1932 which took the form of amalgamating smaller/acephalous ethnic groups with bigger/centralized kingdoms, termed paramountcies and headed by paramount chiefs, eventually created subordinate-master relationship between the bigger states and the smaller non-centralized polities. For example, the amalgamation of the Kusasi and Mamprusi in 1932 created a subordinate/master relationship between the two as the Kusasi were subsumed under the Mamprusi (Ladouceur 1979 & Lund, 2003). The determination by the Mamprusi to maintain this colonial arrangement even after the exit of the British set the stage for persistent tensions that could escalate into conflict.

Other events immediately before and after Ghana's independence also pushed the two groups to the point of violent confrontations/clashes. For instance, the emergence of an educated Kusasi elite and the formation of the Kusasi Youth Movement whose agenda among other things was to press for a reform of the traditional governance structure, further heightened the uneasiness within the ranks of the Mamprusi royal elite. From its formation in 1954, the movement used its meetings as a platform to highlight the plight of the Kusasi, especially after 1932,³ as a politically and socially marginalized group, in order to galvanize Kusasi ethnic solidarity against the perceived enemy, the Mamprusi.

The emergence of party politics in the early 1950s and the posturing of the Kusasi and Mamprusi deepened the polarization of the Bawku community. Whilst the Mamprusi, with the influence of the Nayiri (Mamprugu overlord), supported the Northern People's Party (NPP) which was seen as a chiefs party, the Kusasi guided by their mostly urban educated elite and influenced by Kwame Nkrumah's ideas of liberation, threw their weight behind the Convention People's Party (CPP).

6. Post-Colonial Governments and the Eruption of the Conflict

However, the above factors alone could not have ignited the clashes as the interferences/interventions by post-Independence Ghanaian governments largely pushed the factions to the point of physical confrontations and eventual clashes beginning with the first clash in 1957.

In December 1956, in the face of the heightened polarization, the Bawkunaba Na Awuni (a Mamprusi) died creating a vacancy for the Bawku skin.⁴ Whilst the news of his death caused uneasiness among the Mamprusi, it triggered off Kusasi anxiety to actualize their aspirations by having one of their own enskined as Bawkunaba for the first time. The declaration of the Bawku skin as vacant and the process of selecting the successor coincided with the inauguration of Ghana's independence with Kwame Nkrumah as the first post-independence head of state in 1957. In June of that year, the candidates (mainly Mamprusi royals/princes) converged at the Nayiri's palace in Nalerigu for the ceremony to determine and enskin a successor to the Bawkunaba. Though a number of princes from the four gates⁵ to the Bawku skin showed interest, Nyorugunaba Yerimiah Mahama and Sagabunaba Belko Abugri were the front runners of the contest. The Nayiri declared Yerimiah Mahama as the winner and successor to the Bawku skin.

This however did not signify an end to the search for a successor as a second version of the contest by the sole candidate of the Kusasi, namely Abugrago Azoka was underway. Part of the sequence of events that led to the imbroglio was the spontaneous protests by some of the Mamprusi princes at the Nayiri's palace as soon as Yerimiah Mahama was declared the winner.⁶ The disappointed Mamprusi princes and the Kusasi Youth Movement sent separate but similar (in content) petitions to the government agent at Gambaga protesting against Yerimiah's enskinment and catalogued the reasons for their actions. The Mamprusi princes argued that, Yerimiah was too old, physically weak, partially blind, unpopular and therefore the most unqualified candidate for the skin, citing

2 This structure was also inherited and upheld by post-colonial governments.

3 They complained of maltreatment by the Mamprusi between 1932 and 1957.

4 Interview with Alhaji Akalifa (Mamprusi spokesperson) in Bawku, March 12th 2012.

5 The four gates are the Na Mahama, Na Azangbeogo, Na Abugri and Na Awuni gates (all descendants of Na Mamboda)

6 Interview with Iddi Wuni (Mamprusi royal) 12th March, 2012 in Natenga- Bawku.

parts of the Mamprusi traditional constitution to support their argument.⁷ Both petitions by the Mamprusi princes and the Kusasi Youth Movement faulted the process of nominating Yerimiah Mahama as lacking transparency and being at variance with the established traditions in vogue since the Kusasi conference of 1931.

They asserted that:

“It has always been the custom in olden days for the chiefs and people of the Kusasi District and the heads of all the communities in Bawku town to elect the person they thought worthy of being their chief and by tradition and custom, the candidate elected was then sent to the Nayiri for the investiture. Records in the government agent’s office, Bawku will reveal that this system was carried out during the installation of the late Na Bugri and Na Yakubu...Na Wuni was ... nominated and installed by the Nayiri after consultations with the heads of all the communities in Bawku town and the 17 villages.”⁸

They were also unanimous in their call for the establishment of a separate Kusasi District Council with its own traditional council in Bawku.

Quite unknown to the disappointed Mamprusi princes, the Kusasi Youth Movement went beyond their joint disapproval of Yerimiah as the Nayiri’s choice and enskined AbugragoAzoka as Bawkunaba using the chiefly regalia still in the possession of the Mamprusi princes. The parallel enskinment of YerimiahMahama and AbugragoAzoka as Bawkunaba amounted to enthroning two kings in one kingdom thus creating an imbroglio.

The apparent inappropriate response and the poor handling of the situation by Nkrumah’s CPP government led to first ethnic clashes between the Kusasi and Mamprusi in 1957. The clash was precipitated by the parallel enskinment of AbugragoAzoka as Bawkunaba with the open support of the Kusasi Youth Movement, in defiance of Nayiri’s choice of Yerimiah for the same skin.⁹ The near chaotic situation which resulted in casualties on both sides as well as destruction of property caused acting governor general, Lord Listowel, in consultation with Nkrumah, to appoint a Committee of enquiry. It was chaired by S. D. OpokuAfar and given the mandate to investigate the cause(s) of the clashes and make recommendations to government.¹⁰

If Nkrumah’s lack of decisive action led to the first clash, his subsequent seeming partisan posture towards the factions polarized the Bawku community. The reaction of the Mamprusi to the clashes as well as the committee’s findings was predictable. In the first place, the Mamprusi faulted his decision to constitute a Committee of Inquiry, describing it as political or executive interference in what they thought was a purely traditional matter especially as the Nayiri was already initiating steps to resolve the impasse.¹¹ They accused Nkrumah of having been the hidden hand behind the troubles in the Northeast since the formation of the N.P.P. (perceived as a chiefs’ party) as an opposition party to Nkrumah’s C.P.P.

The strained relations between Nkrumah and the Mamprusi chiefs generally reflected his relations with chiefs in Ghana owing presumably to their opposition to the C.P.P. Hence most scholars on Ghana’s political history have often portrayed him and the C.P.P. as being hostile towards chiefs and the chieftaincy institution. The Mamprusi in particular have traced the genesis of the Mamprusi-Kusasi conflict to Nkrumah’s anti-chieftaincy posture towards areas in the north that have a strong tradition of chieftaincy. In the words of the Mamprusi spokes-person in Bawku:

“if Nkrumah and his C.P.P had not come into existence, the Kusasi-Mamprusi conflict may not have occurred ... Nkrumah started using our own boys and brought Dugunyelli to be their leader. They went about consulting the Kusasi so that as soon as Yerimiah (Mamprusi) is enskined, they should object to it and stage a protest.”¹²

Criticism of Nkrumah and the C.P.P government must however be guided by an informed awareness of Nkrumah’s frustration with the chiefs and the limited choices at his disposal. The perceived impatience of Nkrumah and his government towards the chieftaincy institution and some chiefs in particular was not without foundation.¹³ Apart from his personal frustration with the chiefs, there were tensions and growing agitations against certain traditional rulers by their subjects, the most prominent were found in

⁷ See the NRG8/2/214, J K G Syme(1932), *The Kusasi: A Brief History*, 110. According to the Mamprusi constitution, blindness or partial blindness (as in the case of Yerimiah) disqualified a person from becoming Bawkunaba.

⁸NRG8/2/138, Petition by Mamprusi princes, op. cit.

⁹ The clashes began first among the Mamprusi princes at the Nayiri’s palace in Nalerigu right after the announcement of Yerimiah as Bawkunaba. But fighting became more intense in Bawku and between the Kusasi and Mamprusi when news about the rival enskinment of AbugragoAzoka broke.

¹⁰ The Committee report and the reactions of both factions have been discussed in the earlier part of this chapter

¹¹NRC8/2/138, Telegram from Mamprusi state council to the territorial office in Tamale, 22nd October 1957, Interview with AlhajiSeiduAkalifah (Mamprusi spokesperson) in Bawku on 12th March, 2012.

¹² Interview with AlhajiSeiduBugriAkalifa in Kpatinga,(Mamprusi) in Bawku on 27th March, 2012.

¹³There had been a hang-over of the perception that, chiefs were in league with the imperialists maneuvering to delay the granting of independence owing to the fines they collected at the Native courts/tribunals. Abuses of the tribunal through dubious fines have been a subject of controversy in many parts of the Gold Coast. Again many of the C.P.P activists including Nkrumah and KroboEdusei had no royal descent and hence were in no mood for any compromising relationship with the chiefs. Some chiefs had become unpopular with their subjects. Nkrumah onlyexploited these pre-existing local grievances against some chiefs to his advantage.

AkyemAbuakwa,¹⁴ Asante¹⁵ and the Northern Territories.¹⁶ In the particular case of the Nayiri, even before Nkrumah appeared on the political scene in 1950, there had been a number of grievances and complaints by the Kusasi and Frafra youth against him and Bawumia, the Mamprusi State Council's Clerk. The Kusasi were seething with feelings of maltreatment at the hands of Mamprusi royals and Nkrumah sought to exploit these as well as the agitation by the Kusasi educated elite for political advantage especially after the formation of the N.P.P.

The Kusasi Youth Movement and the Kusasi elite had continually criticized the colonial administration and the Nayiri for imposing Mamprusi chiefs on them;¹⁷ and the C.P.P. using Dugunyelle, a Bissa, rallied the Kusasi Youth and elite into action. When Dugunyelle, Secretary of the Kusasi Youth Movement, joined the C.P.P, he mobilized the other members e.g. ImoroAyarna, AyeboAsumda into a more formidable force. Their continued agitations culminated in the desired change in June, 1957 with the enskinment of AbuguragoAzoka as Bawkunaba.

Certain political decisions and actions taken by the CPP government further lent credence to Mamprusi accusation of political bias in favour of the Kusasi. Apart from his perceived role in the enskinment of the KusasiBawkunaba in 1957, which led to the clashes, the government's creation of the Upper Region in 1960 with separate Kusasi and Frafra district councils made them independent of the Mamprugu District council. Though the creation of these separate councils were part of the requests contained in the petition by the Mamprusi princes in 1957, Mamprusi opinion leaders viewed it as a ploy to reduce the Nayiri's jurisdiction and undermine his authority as a punishment for his rejection of the CPP.¹⁸ Thus from the 1960s, the Ghanaian state governed by Nkrumah's CPP apparently lost the moral credibility to proffer any mutually acceptable solution to the Bawku crisis.

The creation of the Upper Region weakened the bond between the Nayiri and the chiefs of the erstwhile satellite Mamprusi 'colonies' in Frafra and Kusasi. In 1972, the Mamprugu traditional council wrote to invite the Frafra and Kusasi chiefs to a meeting. In his response, the registrar of the Upper Regional House of chiefs reminded the Nayiri that the Frafra and Kusasi districts were outside his jurisdiction:

*"As much as I am fully aware of your customary ties with the Frafra and Kusasi traditional council area chiefs, it is also a fact that, those territorial Districts do not fall within the Northern region administrative control... The Upper Regional house of chiefs is appealing to you to assist it help you maintain your traditional link with chiefs in the Upper Region, though administratively and conveniently, you wholly belong to the Northern Region"*¹⁹

This response was a signal that the Nayiri had lost control over Kusasi and some Frafra chiefs as a result of the separation of their district councils in 1958 and the creation of the new region two years later.

From 1960 till his overthrow in February, 1966, Nkrumah became increasingly intolerant and high handed in dealing with dissent and his party supporters at the grass roots level took advantage of the situation to become lawless. There were reports of harassment of N.P.P members (mostly Mamprusi) led by local supporters of the C.P.P in Mamprusi and Kusasi areas. Chiefs who supported the N.P.P were threatened with destoolment. C.P.P members in South Mamprusi led by a group called the 'South Mamprusi Youth' continued to fuel resentment against the Nayiri.²⁰ Parliamentarians who rode on the back of endorsement by certain traditional authorities in the 1956 elections defected to the C.P.P to protect such chiefs.²¹ Indeed, by 1960 Nkrumah and his government had come to be likened to a beast of uncertain temper that needed to be approached with utmost caution and open opposition to the regime was viewed as shortsighted folly. His perceived hostility towards the Mamprusi in the Bawku chieftaincy and ethnic divide made it difficult for him to be seen as an impartial arbiter in the impasse.

On 1st August 1962, Nkrumah narrowly escaped an assassination attempt at Kulungungu near Bawku. Three of his close associates namely, TawiaAdamafio, AkoAdjei and Coffie Crabbe were arrested and detained on grounds of suspicion of having orchestrated the

¹⁴JarleSimensen "Rural Mass Action in the contest of Anti-Colonial protest: The Asafo movement of AkimAbuakwa, Ghana"*Canadian Journal of African Studies*, vol. 8, No 1 (1974), 25-41. In AkyemAbuakwa there was rivalry between the so called commoners(asafocompany) and the traditional elite, over various allegations including misappropriation of stool resources, misuse of power and abuse of the tribunal system through the extortion of exorbitant tribunal fines. Some of the allegations were however fabrications and politically motivated.

¹⁵Rathbone, op. cit.,22.KroboAdusei who had been punished a number of times by the Native Courts in Asante for opposing the Asantehene, was a ready tool in the hands of Nkrumah who empowered him to challenge traditional authority sometimes with impunity.

¹⁶Dennis Austin, "Elections in an African Rural Area" *AFRICA:Journal of International African Institute*, Vol.13, No.1(1961),1-18. Nkrumah usually picked candidates who enjoyed massive support against local anti-C.P.P chiefs and against whom people had grievances. Local rivalries arising out of personal jealousies and age old rivalries between Anafobissi&Abagnabissi lineages in Bongo was used by Nkrumah and his C.P.P candidate for Bongo, W.A. Amoro to their advantage.

¹⁷Though a Bissa by ethnicity, Dugunyelli's membership of the Kusasi Youth Movement greatly improved their level of activism.

¹⁸Interview with IddiWuni (Mamprusi opinion leader), Bawku, 12th March 2012

¹⁹NRG8/3/82 Letter No. UHC/8SF.4/129 from registrar, Upper Region house of chiefs to the Nayiri, 27th March 1972.

²⁰Ladouceur, op. cit.,126.

²¹MumuniBawumia was among the first to cross carpet to the C.P.P in 1958. See Ladouceur, op.cit., 168 for details of others who followed suit.

attempted assassination.²² Though Nkrumah survived the attack, one life was lost and several others were injured.²³ At the local level, some relatives of Yeremiah, the Mamprusi prince in Bawku and a number of Mamprusi opinion leaders who were declared prime suspects were forced into exile in Burkina Faso. This incident worsened the already strained relations between Mamprusi and Nkrumah and the C.P.P.

Indeed Nkrumah's meddling in the Mamprusi-Kusasi affairs created a precedent for subsequent governments of Ghana to make similar biased interventions, which led to ethnic polarization and made the dispute intractable. In February, 1966 the C.P.P. was overthrown in a military coup ushering in a new regime, the National Liberation Council (NLC) led by Colonel E. A. Kotoka. The Mamprusi were elated about this change for a number of reasons. First of all, the coup leaders and the new regime were anti CPP and perceived sympathizers of the Northern Peoples Party (NPP). Again, the change of regime offered prospects of better fortunes for the Mamprusi as a number of Mamprusi leaders who were members of the N.P.P. were given various political appointments.²⁴ Their newly acquired power enabled them to lobby for changes in the Bawku traditional set up favourable to the Mamprusi. They appealed to the N.L.C. to rectify what they described as an anomaly in the 1958 enskinment of a Kusasi Bawkunaba. The N.L.C., perhaps without a critical evaluation of the situation granted the request of the Mamprusi by enacting the Chieftaincy Amendment Decree 1966 (NLCD 112)²⁵ which deskinning Abugurago Azoka I and enskinned the Mamprusi prince Adam Azangbeo as Bawkunaba.²⁶

The situation became even more complicated when the new Bawkunaba proceeded to deskin all sub-chiefs enskinned by Abugurago, who himself petitioned against his deskinning but did not receive any response.²⁷ Petitions by the deskinning sub-chiefs to be allowed to contest for re-election were swiftly dismissed by a meeting of the Mamprusi Sub-Area Traditional Council. For example, the deposed chiefs of Kpikpira, Kusanaba and Zebilla were reminded that:

"...chiefs are born not created,"²⁸ adding that, it was only the C.P.P. regime that allowed people who were not of royal ancestry to become chiefs in the Kusasi area. In their places Adam Azangbeo either re-enskinning those chiefs who were deskinning by Abugurago or enskinning new ones who were loyal to him. The scenario of 1958 thus repeated itself whereby each canton, with the exception of Kusanaba and Sapeliga, had two chiefs.²⁹ That situation naturally renewed tensions.

But the governments of the Supreme Military Council (SMC) headed by I.K. Acheampong and Peoples' National Party (PNP) of Dr. Hilla Liman did not interfere in the matter. For example, the Attorney General and Commissioner for Justice (of Acheampong's government) indicated an address in 1973 thus:

"...chieftaincy is so important to Ghana that no government can afford to do without it. The policy of the government in dealing with chiefs would be that of 'non-interference' in chieftaincy affairs. The government in dealing with the chiefs would only be guided by its obligation to ensure an orderly and peaceful government and justice and fair play"³⁰

The policy of letting "sleeping dogs lie"³¹ did not however satisfy the Kusasi. As Rathbone notes about chieftaincy struggles in Ghana, "Losers appear to have been rarely reconciled to the outcome; instead losing factions simply bided their time to reassert their case and then exact revenge upon their enemies if successful."³² The Kusasi did not let the opportunity to restate their case pass them by at the inception of the new regime of Dr. Hilla Liman in September 1979.

Like the Supreme Military Council government (S.M.C.) of Colonel Acheampong, the government of the People's National Party (P.N.P) showed a similar disinclination to meddle in matters it considered to be purely traditional.³³ Dr. Liman however suggested the possibility of creating a fifth gate for the Kusasi so that the two factions would occupy the skin on a rotational basis since the Kusasi were in the majority in Bawku.³⁴ The Nayiri reportedly declined even to comment on the suggestion. However, three decades

²² Denis Austin, *Politics in Ghana 1946-1960*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 410. See also Richard D. Mahoney, *J F K Ordeal in Ghana*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1983), 175.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ They included Adam Amandi and Imoro Salifu, former members of the N.P.P.

²⁵ Interview with James Abungus (Kusasi) at Bolga, 28th March 2012. The decree also lowered the rank of the Bawkunaba to divisional chief thus restoring the Nayiri's supremacy.

²⁶ This was done after the funeral of Yeremiah Mahama who had died earlier, was performed

²⁷ PRAAD NRG9/2/13 A Petition- Facts about the Kusasi-Mamprusi Affairs, 15th November 1966.

²⁸ PRAAD NRG9/2/13 Minutes of the Second Session of the Mamprusi Sub-Area Traditional Council, 25th August, 1967.

²⁹ The chiefs of these two cantons were not deskinning in 1958 because they were CPP supporters. The chiefs of these areas were not affected by the changes in 1966 and 1983. Even in places such as Zebillah, Pusiga, Tanga and Binaba which are predominantly Kusasi have two opposing/parallel chiefs.

³⁰ Quoted in Kofi Frimpong, "The Joint Provincial Council of Paramount Chiefs and the Politics of Independence, 1946-58", *Transactions of Historical Society of Ghana*, Legon, (1973) 79-91.

³¹ E.B. Boahene, secretary to the S.M.C. government as quoted by C. Lund, op. cit.

³² Richard Rathbone, op. cit., 93.

³³ Hilla Liman was accused of being too close to the Nayiri. His advisor on chieftaincy affairs, Dr. J. S. Nabilla, himself a Mamprusi royal, was suspected to be the brain behind the Nayiri's stance.

³⁴ Interview with James Abungus (a Kusasi youth/opinion leader) at Bolgatanga, 28th March 2012.

after the P.N.P. regime, IddiWuni (a Mamprusi) in hindsight believes that, Kusasi-Mamprusi relations may have improved if the Nayiri had considered the suggestion.³⁵

The accession to power by Flt. Lt. Jerry John Rawlings in December 1981 presented another opportunity for the Kusasi to attempt to effect a change in their fortunes regarding the occupancy of the Bawku skin.³⁶ The Kusasi identified with the Provisional National Defense Council (P.N.D.C later N.D.C.) because most of its key actors were drawn from the ranks of the Nkrumahist old guards, and were hopeful of a favourable outcome. The appeal to the various regimes for change in their favour represented attempts to appropriate power by the factions, especially so as the political parties appear to be their patrons.

Among the Northern elite who associated themselves with the P.N.D.C revolution was John Ndebugre, a Kusasi intellectual and a prominent figure in the Bawku skin affair³⁷ successfully lobbied for the reversal of the NLCD 112 decree of 1966. PNDCL 75 of 1983³⁸ was passed which deskinned Adam Azangbeo and the eighteen divisional chiefs and re-enskinning all the chiefs who were deskinned in 1966. AbugragoAzoka II was also enskinned as successor to his father who had died early in 1983. The effect of these kaleidoscopic changes was to perpetuate the politicization of the Bawku skin affair which was began by Nkrumah and the C.P.P., the first post-independent government of Ghana.

7. Conclusion

The somewhat arbitrary amalgamation of Kusasi with the Mamprugu state in 1932, to some extent, accounted for the progressive deterioration of relations between the Kusasi and the Mamprusi as it created a relation of authority and subjection between the two ethnic groups. Seeking to perpetuate that relationship even after the exit of the British colonial administration in 1957 made conflict inevitable.

With the formation of the Kusasi Youth Movement in 1954 and the influence of Nkrumah's ideas of freedom and liberation, the Kusasi became emboldened and assertive and started agitation to change the traditional order established by colonialism in Bawku which held them hostage to a slavish political 'pact' that is lost in the haze of history. The poor handling of the issue when it erupted in 1957, the posturing by Nkrumah and subsequent governments perpetuated the conflict, making it intractable. The practice of political regimes influencing the replacement of the Bawkunaba led to extreme polarization of the community and the politicization of the conflict. The persistence of political patronage encouraged leaders of the various ethnic factions to appropriate political space and power hoping to enjoy some leverage that would aid their course. Thus, every regime change came characterized by impatience on the part of one faction and anxiety on the part of the other. The net effect is the near entrenched perception that the two largest political parties in Ghana were the patrons of the two factions in Bawku, a situation which consistently undermined efforts to resolve the conflict.

8. References

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³⁵ Interview with IddiWuni (a Mamprusi and retired educationist) at Bawku, 27th March 2012.

³⁶ Ghana's politics, since the 1950s had been dominated mainly by two traditions viz. Nkrumaism, which emerged as a political philosophy and the Busia/Danquah. Succeeding governments have often been associated with one or the other of them.

³⁷ Interview with James Abangus (Kusasi youth/opinion leader), 28th March 2012, at Bolgatanga.

³⁸ PNDCL 75, Chieftaincy (Restoration of status of chiefs) Law, 1983. Kusasi elite argued that, NLCD 112 caused an anomaly by setting aside the Supreme Court ruling of 1958 which upheld the findings of the Afare Committee report on the matter. So what PNDCL 75 did was only to rectify that anomaly.