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# A Concomitant of Conflict and Consensus: Case of a Chieftaincy Succession in Ghana

## Abstract

Ghana is often seen as peaceful, but is faced with many chieftaincy conflicts that result mainly from succession to the throne (skin or stool) for traditional political power. Ghana has more than 230 chieftaincy disputes dotted across many parts of the country. However, the Balsa Traditional Area (*Buluk*) of Ghana has had a stable and resilient chieftaincy succession despite conflicts arising out of the selection of chiefs. In the selection of chiefs, the adoption of a voting system is said to lead to consensus based decision-making which is largely responsible for the non-violent nature of the *Buluk* chieftaincy succession as compared to other areas in Ghana. Using a qualitative methodology, this case study examined in detail the chieftaincy succession system in the Balsa Traditional area of Ghana, both conflict and consensus, and how this has helped over the years to maintain peace and avoid violence. The paper also examines whether this case could be a model for chieftaincy succession in Ghana.

**Keywords:** *Chieftaincy conflicts, Ghana, Balsa Traditional Area, peace and consensus*

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## **A Concomitant of Conflict and Consensus: Case of the Buluk Chieftaincy Succession in Ghana**

**Kaderi Noagah Bukari**

Despite the fact that Ghana has remained relatively peaceful in the midst of a turbulent sub-region and has not had civil war of any sort, there are many violent chieftaincy succession conflicts dotted across the country (although there have been five coups where constitutions were suspended, none of these degenerated into a civil war). The conflicts are intertwined with inter- and intra-ethnic conflicts that mainly revolve around the quest for traditional power (chieftaincy). Hardly a region in Ghana is without chieftaincy dispute. Some of these conflicts occasionally flare up into violence with deaths and destruction of property. The Dagbon, Bimbilla, Bawku, Winneba, and Ga conflicts are all due to chieftaincy – disputing claims to traditional political power. Even the most devastating conflict in the history of Ghana between the Konkomba and Nanumba/Dagomba in 1994/1995 (Tsikata & Seini, 2004; Mahama, 2003), which claimed over 2000 lives, resulted principally from the quest of the Konkomba to have their own chiefs. The Ministry of Chieftaincy and Culture as of May 2010 had a record of 232 reported chieftaincy disputes in Ghana. Abotchie (2006) states that 600 land disputes in Ghana are mainly dominated by chieftaincy disputes. Reasons for chieftaincy conflicts include disputes over rightful succession to stools or skins, control over stool lands and land litigation, political interference, inordinate ambition for power and the lack of accountability and transparency by some traditional rulers (Prah & Yeboah, 2011). The use of the terms “stool” and “skin” represents the symbols of authority of chiefs in the southern and Northern parts of Ghana respectively.

Chieftaincy has been the most resilient Ghanaian tradition to have survived blatant interference and destruction from both colonial and post-colonial governments (Boafo-Arthur, 2006). Chieftaincy remains at the heart of Ghanaian traditions and continues to provide leadership for many people across Ghana. Its establishment predates colonialism. Many of the chiefly/centralized ethnic groups such as the Akan, Ga, Ewe, Mamprusi, Dagomba, and Gonja migrated with elaborate chieftaincy systems to Ghana. Even the originally acephalous or non-chiefly ethnic groups in northern Ghana such as the Konkomba, Bimoba, Balsa, Kusasi, Talensi, and Grunsi all now practice chieftaincy. Thus chieftaincy is very significant in the lives of many ethnic groups and Ghanaians in general. Some of the chieftaincy conflicts in Ghana have roots

in colonialism. The colonial masters in their quest to entrench their rule in Africa established administrative structures that forced many ethnic groups and traditional structures, including chieftaincy, into “cohesive” structures destroying the roots of these traditional structures (Awedoba, 2009). This has resulted in lingering conflicts in many parts of Ghana. Indirect rule, for example, stampeded some traditional areas and merged some ethnic groups in northern Ghana into other ethnic groups to rule them.

Many of the acephalous groups in northern Ghana were forced to come under the rule of the chiefly Mumprusi, Dogomba, Gonja, and Nanumba groups. This resulted in conflicts between some of these acephalous ethnic groups and their chiefly masters after Ghana gained independence, when they (the acephalous) requested to rule themselves. For instance, it is the quest of the Kusasis to rule themselves that has sparked the lingering conflict between them and the Mamprusis. It is the same factor that triggered the Komkonba and Dagomba/Namumba in 1994/1995. Democratic traditional institutions, especially consensus based decision-making, are important for the resolution of conflicts and building strong institutions. Democratic practices in chieftaincy succession and practice already existed in Ghana and in many other indigenous African groups before European colonialists introduced direct western majoritarian democracy (Graeber, 2004). Chiefs, for instance, ruled their areas with a council of elders who advised them as well as helped to make laws and pass judgments.

The Bulsa, who administratively occupy two districts (Bulsa North and Bulsa South Districts) in the Upper East of Ghana, according to oral narrations, descended from the Mamprugu Kingdom. Sandema became the most important town and the paramountcy (a derived noun form of the adjective ‘paramount’ and refers to the topmost chief of an area) following the ability of Sandema to mobilize the others in the area in defending and protecting the whole kingdom, especially from slave raiders. Reigning over important towns like Wiaga, Siniesi, Doninga, Kanjaga, Kadema, Gbedema, Uasi, Fumbisi, Bachansi, Chuchuliga, and Gbedemblisi, the *Sandem Naab* (*Naab* is title for a chief among the Bulsa) is the paramount chief with traditional and executive powers of installing chiefs for these towns. Rattray (1932) in his seminal work, *Tribes of Ashanti Hinterland*, described the Bulsa as one of the acephalous groups in northern Ghana, with skillful organizational ability. Unlike other acephalous groups such as the Kusasi and Konkomba and their former “masters,” the Bulsa Traditional Area has remained relatively peaceful with a very stable and powerful chieftaincy system that has existed for more

than a century. The ascension of Ayieta Azantinlow to the Buluk paramountcy in 1931, and his subsequent reign for seventy five years, helped to make the area peaceful and stable with the only chieftaincy dispute in Chuchuliga in 1995 following the refusal of Francis Asangalisa to come to Sandema for his installation as a new chief, claiming the rightful kingmakers are in Chuchuliga and not the *Sandem Naab*, Ayieta Azantinlow (Awedoba, 2009).

Indeed, conflicts have arisen over chieftaincy succession in the area predating Ayieta Azantilow. Even his installment was marred by disputes to his throne from his brother, Amaama. Following the death of Ayieta Azantilow in 2006, a dispute arose between the Afoko family and the Azantilow family mainly over traditional issues as to who has the right to perform some traditional duties and over the rightful succession procedure. Another dispute arose following the *enskinment* in 2012 of Azagsuk Azantilow between himself and Sylvester Atiteng Azantilow as to who really won the contest for the chieftaincy. The mode of selecting a chief in the Bursa traditional area follows “who has the majority” of heads of house owners (*Yeri-nyam*). The system is run such that the electorates (*Yeri-nyam*) stand by the candidate of their choice and the candidate with the majority of *Yeri-nyam* is declared the winner. Candidates must be from the royal family of *Abil-yeri* and their lineage must have at least been a chief. Despite the clarity in the election of chiefs, the system is sometimes fraught with disputes arising from procedural issues and disagreement over the legitimacy of the electorate (*Yeri-nyam*). This was the case of the recent dispute in 2012 when Sylvester Atiteng Azantilow challenged the election of Azagsuk Azantilow, claiming there were disparities in the numbers who voted for Azagsuk Azantilow. Sylvester Atiteng Azantilow subsequently went to court to challenge the legitimacy of Azagsuk’s election.

In spite of the conflicts arising from the selection and installation of chiefs in the Bursa Area, the conflicts hardly degenerate into full-scale violence and the disputants quickly resolve the conflicts and come together. Thus in the end, consensus is built among the groups including the minority who refuse to accept the “election” and there is no state apparatus with coercive force to compel the minority to agree with the decisions of the majority as exists in western majoritarian rule (Graeber, 2004). In *Naab* Ayieta Azantilow’s case, the opponent Amaama dropped his challenge to allow for peace. Again, Sylvester Atiteng Azantilow withdrew his law suits and recognized Azagsuk Azantilow as chief which subsequently led to Azagsuk Azantilow’s recognition by all in 2013. Therefore, the claim of the people of the area has been

that the system of succession and installing a chief is peaceful, democratic and is consensus based decision-making, asserted as “*we fight but in the end we come together.*” Thus, this paper looks at the whole process of chieftaincy succession in the Balsa Traditional Area (*Buluk*), examining conflict and consensus and its peaceful nature as well as its implication, application and prospects for resolving chieftaincy conflicts in Ghana. The paper seeks to answer these questions: what is it that makes the chieftaincy succession in *Buluk* unique and what lessons does it hold for peace and stability in other succession disputes in Ghana?

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: in section two, the concepts of conflict and consensus are explained and theorized; section three presents the methodology and study area; section four discusses the history of chieftaincy in Ghana and an overview of chieftaincy conflicts in Ghana; the empirical results and discussions are examined in section five, and section six draws a conclusion for the paper.

### **Theorizing Conflict and Consensus**

Conflict occurs when two or more parties pursue incompatible interests or goals through actions that the parties try to undo or damage each other. The parties may be individuals, groups or countries. The parties’ interests can differ over access to resources, the control of political or traditional power, their identity and values or ideology. The realization of these needs and interests by people can lead to conflict. The pursuit of incompatible interests and needs by groups or individuals could lead them to engage in conflict that can be violent. In the case of *Buluk*, conflict is often about who actually won the contest of the chieftaincy-the contest for traditional power. Extractions from Weber’s conception of power are important for our discussions here. Weber (2010) notes that the ability to possess power derives from the individual's ability to control various “social resources.” In societies such as *Buluk*, power is traditional, meaning chiefs derive their power from tradition and customs to have social resources such as land and social respect. The power and “perks” associated with position of the chief such as control over land, royalties and government/state recognition have often motivated the contest for chieftaincy and thereby the conflicts. To Weber (2010), the distribution of power between the typical groups of a community participating in this distribution is done through “social order.” This social order is achieved thus through consensus-building.

Similarly, Graeber’s (2004) conceptualization of counter-power in societies such as that of *Buluk* is worth noting. Graeber (2004) argues that counter-power:

...emerges from the fact that all social systems are a tangle of contradictions, always to some degree at war with themselves. Or, more precisely, it is rooted in the relation between the practical imagination required to maintain a society based on consensus (as any society not based on violence must, ultimately, be) – the constant work of imaginative identification with others that makes understanding possible – and the spectral violence which appears to be its constant, perhaps inevitable corollary. (p.35)

Graeber thus emphasizes the contradiction of social systems whereby consensus-building is used to counter violence and helps to maintain society. Basically, the *Buluk* chieftaincy system takes this form as described by Graeber where the contestants engage in conflict, but the society is maintained in the end through consensus. Consensus is generally about a compromise and reaching an agreement. Consensus theory assumes that societies have an inherent tendency to maintain themselves in a state of relative equilibrium through the mutually and supportive interaction of their principal institutions (Larson & Wikström, 2001). To this end, Graeber & Grubacic (2004) argue that the point of consensus process is to allow a group to decide on a common course of action through a process of compromise and synthesis, until one ends up with something with which everyone can live. Thus in a consensus, everyone agrees on an issue and people work together to maintain society. Importantly, Log (2001) states that within social systems (Log calls them social fields), “any order that does emerge is the result of struggles, negotiations and accommodations that take place between competing parties” (p. 241).

Ghanaian chieftaincy systems in many spheres are hinged on consensus-based decision making. Ghanaian traditional societies, especially Akan (Fanti and Asante) already, for instance, had the democratic tenants in their traditional chieftaincy system including consensus-building and consultation by the chief to rule. The selection of chiefs is done through consensus-building, and the chief rules through the constitution (rules set by the society) of his people (Casely-Hayford, 1903; Sarbah, 1906; Rattray, 1929; Danquah, 1961). The Asante chieftaincy system, Rattray (1929) notes, had elaborate rules and code of conduct through which the chief must rule his people, and these were binding on every chief. In effect, traditional chieftaincy systems were consensus-based in nature.

## **Chieftaincy Succession in Ghana – Historical Perspectives**

Chieftaincy has remained the most enduring Ghanaian traditional institution that has existed for centuries. With a very turbulent history, it has survived all forms of manipulation, interference and attempted destruction in Ghana's history from colonial, post-colonial and military governments. Many scholars who write on chieftaincy in Ghana argue that unlike other African countries like Uganda, chieftaincy in Ghana has remained resilient and strong in the midst of robust challenges and has never collapsed despite blatant attempts to destroy it (Owusu-Mensah, 2013; Brempong, 2006; Nukunya, 2003). The history of chieftaincy predates the coming of European colonialists. Chiefs then managed the day to day administrative, political, social, economic organization, and life of the societies and ethnic groups. Chieftaincy in pre-colonial Ghana was the main system of government and political organization. During the colonial era, the British colonial administration, in a bid to consolidate its power, restructured and integrated some aspects of chieftaincy to fit into the colonial administration (Owusu-Mensah, 2013). The introduction of indirect rule for instance curbed the powers of chiefs as chiefs who opposed the British colonial powers were deposed for their favorites who supported colonial policies. The British colonialists saw that ruling without the chiefs was impossible and therefore included them in legislative councils and used them to enforce laws and collect taxes from the people.

Chieftaincy suffered much uncertainty and interference in post-colonial Ghana. Although constitutional provisions and acts have guaranteed and safeguarded the chieftaincy institution in post-colonial era, the interference from post-colonial governments has been immense. For example, Nkrumah (the first post-colonial president of Ghana) and his Convention Peoples Party (CPP) government attempted to control the institution by intentionally targeting chiefs who opposed his regime. Nkrumah enacted the Chieftaincy Amendment Act which in effect gave power to the Minister of Local Government to recognize persons before they were deemed chiefs. Some chiefs were disposed and new paramountcies were created by the CPP government. Other governments equally interfered in the chieftaincy institutions. Interestingly, the entrenchment of democratic rule and the expansion of state powers since the return to civilian rule in 1992 have not lessened the importance of the chieftaincy institution in most parts of Ghana (Tonah, 2012). People in many parts of Ghana still look up to chieftaincy for leadership, and support for the institution is strong throughout the country.



The 1992 Constitution of Ghana has clearly defined the identity of chief by outlining the process of the *enskinment* and *enstoolment* (the process of being made a chief) in Ghana in accordance with the customs of the said traditional area. In the definition of a chief, the 1992 Constitution of Ghana in Article 277 states that:

... 'Chief' means a person, who, hailing from the appropriate family and lineage, has been validly nominated, elected or selected and enstooled, enskinned or installed as a chief or queen mother in accordance with the relevant customary law and usage.

(Republic of Ghana, 1992)

The constitution also recognizes the customs of the area as very important in the selection of chiefs. The 1992 Constitution again in Article 270 (3a and 3b) gives clear guidance in the ascension of a person to a stool or skin of a particular traditional area. It reads:

(a) the determination, in accordance with the appropriate customary law and usage, by a traditional council, a Regional House of Chiefs or a Chieftaincy Committee of any of them, of the validity of the nomination, election, selection, installation or deposition of a person as a chief;

(b) a traditional council or a Regional House of Chiefs or the National House of Chiefs to establish and operate a procedure for the registration of chiefs and the public notification in the Gazette or otherwise of the status of persons as chiefs in Ghana. (Republic of Ghana, 1992)

Although the selection and the installation of chiefs for every traditional area are always based on the customs of that area, candidates for the position of the chief must first come from the royal family whose lineage by custom has the right to be chiefs and have been chiefs before. The onus to select a person rests upon the kingmakers. Whilst there may be disputes regarding the legitimacy of candidates to the occupancy of a stool or skin, disputes could also arise over the legitimacy of the kingmakers. The kingmakers are people whose backgrounds are deeply rooted in the traditions of the area. They (kingmakers) also inherit their powers to select and install chiefs from their lineage who were once involved in that. The 1992 Constitution makes provision for the establishment of Traditional Councils, Regional and National Houses of Chiefs for the determination of the validity of the nomination, election, selection, installation, or deposition of a person as a chief. Thus, when kingmakers select and install chiefs, their

recognition and acceptance as chiefs must be validated by the Traditional Councils, Regional, and National Houses of Chiefs.

### **Chieftaincy Conflicts in Ghana**

Conflict theorists have always seen conflicts as inevitable in human existence and so is the quest for traditional power in Ghana. Chieftaincy conflicts occur when two or more parties/candidates whose quest to rule over a traditional area is fraught with disagreements over the legitimacy of one of the candidates to succeed; disagreements over the process or procedure of selection and installment; or disagreements over the legitimacy of one or some of the kingmakers. Chieftaincy conflicts are serious conflicts as control over chieftaincy means control over land, natural resources, and other properties within the community. Kendie and Akudugu (2010) observe that most of the chieftaincy and ethnic disputes in Ghana's rural areas are about access to land and the power that this confers on owners – traditional political power. Others view it as a defense over the identity of peoples' lineage and family and therefore see conflicts over chieftaincy in the light of ethnic boundary maintenance (in the primordial and instrumental sense) (Gurr, 1993). Gurr argues that identity, especially ethnic identity arising from a primordial or instrumentalist perspective, is an important motivating factor for people's mobilization, and so it is for power and for that matter chieftaincy. People's contest for chieftaincy positions, especially in northern Ghana, has been to maintain the status (identity) of their families and lineage because of the prestige associated with such an office.

Most violent conflicts in Ghana are predominantly chieftaincy-related and are usually mingled with ethnic issues either within the same ethnic group or between two different ethnic groups. The northern part of Ghana has particularly witnessed these chieftaincy conflicts with very violent confrontations that have resulted in loss of lives and destructions of property. In 2002, the king of *Dagbon*, *Ya Na* Yakubu Andani II, and 40 of his followers were killed following fighting with a rival gate, the *Abudus*, due to long-standing struggles to the *Dagbon* skin (Tonah, 2012; Mahama, 2009; Olawale, 2008; Tsikata & Seini, 2004). The *Dagbon* case is an intra-ethnic conflict within the same family (*Andani* and *Abudu*) over issues of the rotation of the skin between them. Similarly, Bawku in the Upper East Region has witnessed one of Ghana's most devastating inter-ethnic chieftaincy conflicts between the Kusasis and Mamprusis ethnic groups with uncounted loss of lives and destructions of property (Bukari, 2013; Kendie & Bukari, 2012; Lund, 2003). On June 19, 2014, the overlord of the Nanung Traditional Area, Naa

Andani Dasana, along with three others, was killed in Bimbilla over an intra-ethnic rival claim to the skin (Myjoyonline.com).

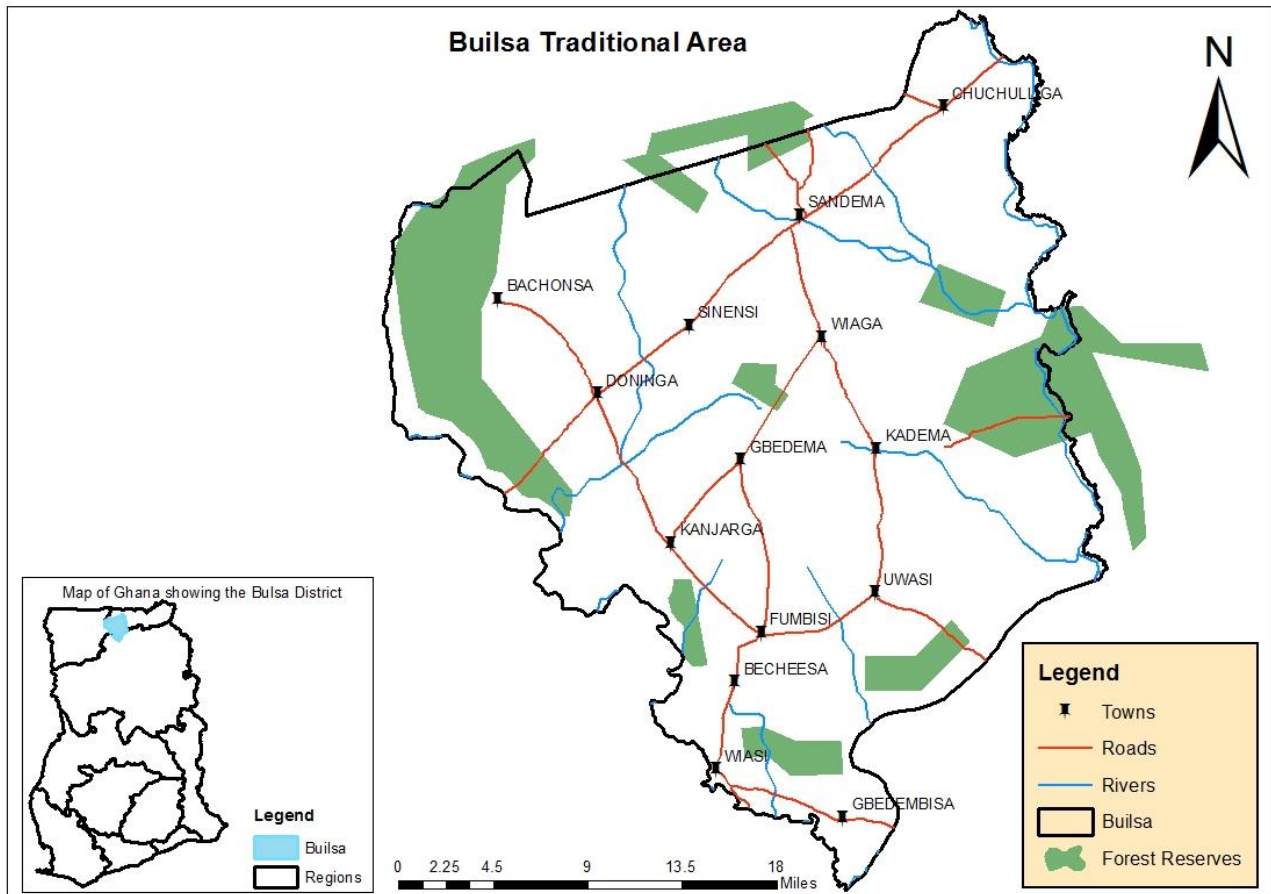
The causes of chieftaincy conflicts often range from several underlying issues, but most are basically over the legitimacy of one of the candidates to the skin/stool, the process or procedure of selection and installment, or the legitimacy of one or some of the kingmakers to do the selection and installation of chiefs. In areas where the chieftaincy is rotational between gates such as among the Dagomba and Namumba, conflicts have often arisen over which gate it is to ascend to the skin. However, several factors tend to exacerbate chieftaincy conflicts. These include easy access to arms in many parts of Ghana; weakening of and failure to use indigenous mechanisms in resolving conflicts; and the politicization of chieftaincy conflicts where rivalry to the skin/stool are fought along political lines mainly, especially between the two major parties in Ghana, the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and National Democratic Congress (NDC) (Anamzoya & Tonah, 2012; Anamzoya, 2009).

### **Study Area and Research Methods**

The study area, the Balsa Traditional Area, is located in the north-western part of the Upper East Region of Ghana. It is called *Buluk* by the people. It is bordered to the North and East by the Kassena-Nankana District, to the west by the Sissala District, and to the south by the West Mamprusi District and Kassena-Nankana East District. The traditional area is made up of two administrative districts namely Balsa North and Balsa South Districts. It covers a total land area of 2,220km<sup>2</sup>. Sandema is the seat of the paramountcy making the *Sandem Naab* head chief of the Balsa Traditional Area with the power to install and confer chieftaincy titles on chiefs from towns like Fumbisi, Gbedema, Chuchuliga, Wiaga, Siniensi, Kanjaga, Doninga, Kadema, and Uasi (see **Figure 1**). The area is prominently made of the Balsa ethnic group who speak a common language, *Buli*. According to the 2010 Population and Housing Census of Ghana, the area has a total population of 92,991 (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012).

Data for the paper was taken between August 2013 and February 2014. The paper adopts a qualitative approach with in-depth focus on the views and perceptions of some of the leaders of the area through a case study method. The qualitative approach was used both in the data gathering process and analysis where ethnographic methods such as in-depth interviews (eight), a group discussion and field observations were applied. For the analysis, the interviews were transcribed, and a content analysis of the transcribed data was completed. The case study

allowed a detailed and in-depth study of the topic. The respondents were purposively sampled and interviewed face-to-face in Sandema and Wiaga. They comprised a group interview with the paramount chief of *Buluk* and his elders (ten) in Sandema, two opinion leaders, a divisional chief, one sub chief, two elderly women, and two of the 2012 contestants to the Sandema skin. The sampling took into consideration knowledge of the respondents on the chieftaincy system in the area. Additionally, some secondary literature on the Buluk chieftaincy was used for the analyses. These include media reports, anthropological literature and various research articles as we will see below.



**Figure 1: Map of the Bulsa Traditional Area**

Source: Author's Construct, 2014

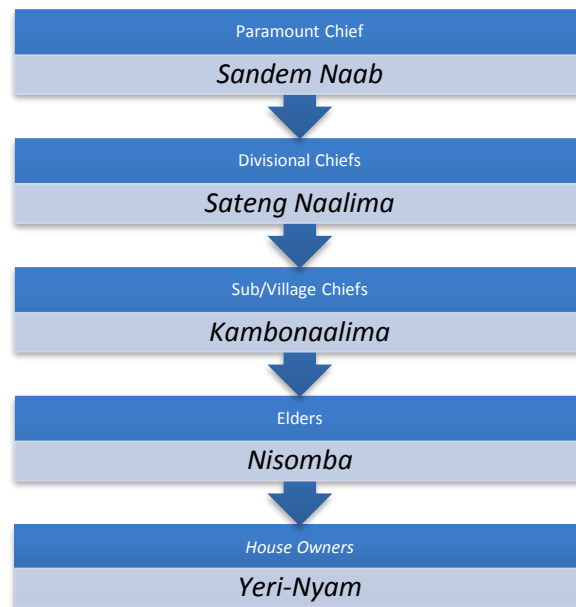
## Results and Discussion

### Chieftaincy in the Bulsa Area

The Bulsa belong to the *Mole-Dagomba* (a Gur linguistic group) group who are found in northern Ghana. Much of the history of the Bulsa area is through narratives. The popular narrative (based on oral history through my interviews) has always been that the Bulsa area was founded by *Atuga* who is believed to have been a descendant of the Mamprusi Kingdom (see also Schott, 2001). *Atuga* was then a son of the Mamprusi king. The Mamprusi by then already practiced chieftaincy. The narrative says that following a quarrel with his father the *Nayiri*, *Atuga* set off and finally came to the present day *Buluk*. When *Atuga* came he had met people already present in the area. Following victory in wars and the organizational ability of the *Atuga* lineage, the family soon rose to prominence and became the chieftains of the four towns of Sandema, Wiaga, Siniensi and Kadema which were named after the children of *Atuga*. An aspect of the narrative has it that Sandema rose to prominence as the most important town and seat of the paramountcy following the warrior-like qualities of chiefs of Sandema. Kröger (2012) observes that records show it was in 1912 that Sandema became the paramountcy. Kröger (2012) states further that “On April 15, 1912, Ayieta was approved as Paramount Chief of the ‘*Kanjagas*’ (Bulsa) by C.H. Armitage, then Chief Commissioner of the Northern Territories. The relation between Ayieta and the British, at least in the beginning, was not always without tensions” (p. 48).

The successful defeat of *Babatu*, a notorious *Zambarima* slave raider, in 1897 made the *Sandem Naab* in competition with Kanjaga from Southern Bulsa, the leading Bulsa chief and the paramount chief (see also Kröger, 2012). The hierarchical set-up of the chieftaincy in *Buluk* (presented in **Figure 2** on the next page) shows that the *Yeri-nyam* who are at the bottom have the power to select chiefs.

The first three in **Figure 2** (paramount, divisional and sub-chiefs) belong to a political category. They come to office by elections and/or nominations. The last two (elders, in the Buli meaning of *kpaga* and *Yerinyam*) belong to the lineage system. They come to office by their status of seniority without elections and they have a tremendous religious significance.



**Figure 2: Hierarchy of the Chieftaincy Set-up of Buluk**

Source: Author's construct, 2014.

Historically, although a number of chiefs of Sandema have always existed, Anankum was the first chief of Sandema to be documented in the British records. *Abil* was said to be the first chief of Sandema, and it is from the *Abil* lineage that all chiefs of Sandema have emerged. Contestants for the Sandema chieftaincy therefore all come from *Abil-yeri* (*Abil's* house). After *Abil*, many chiefs like Anaguna and Ateba emerged. Anaankum, after his victorious battles against *Babatu*, was recognized as the most prominent Balsa chief, but was never installed as an official paramount chief. However, written sources of paramount chiefs are: “Ayieta Ananguna, 1905 to 18 May 1912, who was made paramount chief on 23 September 1911; Afoko, 11 December 1912 to 3 March 1927; Akansugaasa (*Agaasa*), 8 April 1927 to 1931; Azantilow Ayieta, 16 November 1931 to 14 November 2006” (Kröger, 2012, p.48), and the current chief Azagsuk Azantilow, from 17 July 2012 to-date.

A unique feature of chieftaincy succession in the Balsa area is the use of the voting system which has historically existed over years. Chiefs of *Buluk*, whether sub-chiefs, divisional chiefs or the paramount chief (*Sandem naab*), are voted for by the kingmakers who are the landlords or house owners (*Yeri-nyam*). These landlords or house owners (*Yeri-nyam*) are

traditionally the “indigenous” settlers of the area and are regarded as original owners of the land. Unlike other northern ethnic groups of Ghana such as the Gonja, Wala, Dagomba, Nanumba, and Mamprusi, the succession to the skin in *Buluk* is not run on a gate, rotational or promotional system, but rather patrilineal family system. With the gate and rotational system, a particular family known as a gate waits until it is the turn of their gate before ascending to the skin. The promotional system on the other hand occurs when royals become chiefs of smaller villages and then move on to a higher chieftaincy position until they move on to contest the paramount chief position (Anamzoya, 2009).

With the Balsa system, candidates for the chief must come from the royal house whose lineage has once been chiefs or contested for a chief’s position before. In the case of Sandema, the candidates must come from *Abil-yeri*. The system is open to as many families who qualify and two or more people could come from the same family to contest. During the election, contestants for the position of a chief are joined by the kingmakers who line up behind him and the contestant with the highest number of people behind him is declared the winner. Kröger (2012) states that:

The free election of a Balsa Paramount Chief, however, is a novelty because all of Azantilow’s predecessors, in spite of superficial formal election rituals, were practically appointed and installed by the British. In other words, the British would have never allowed somebody who had disobeyed their orders before or with whom a successful co-operation could not be expected to become a chief. (p. 48)

Kröger’s statement is important for our understanding of the interference of the British colonialists in the chieftaincy system. Despite the fact that the people elected their chiefs, the British decision and recognition were important in one becoming a chief. My interview informants claimed that election had always been a prominent feature of the succession to the chieftaincy of the *Buluk* and was done then in the same fashion as it exists today. An elderly member of the Sandema royal family remarked that:

For us Balsa, the general belief has been that it is only the house owners or landlords who choose a chief. This has long been the tradition since our forebears founded this land. Although the British colonial masters have always had interest in who becomes a chief of Sandema, it was the people who elected and installed their chiefs. The British Colonial

Masters will always come to ask if the people have elected their chiefs before recognizing whoever was elected. In fact, during the election of *Naab Afoko* on 11 December, 1912, disputes over his elections with Ayiparuk led to the latter being put in prison in Navrongo by the British. Although there was interference from the British, the base line is that there was an election. For the *Bulsa*, when a person is not elected by the people as a chief, getting support to rule was and is still difficult. (Interview with an elder of Sandema Royal Family, August 2013, Sandema)

The elder's quote above reiterates the fact that democratic tenants have been part of African traditional administrative systems as Graeber (2004), Danquah (1961), and Casely-Hayford (1903) have observed. Two or more candidates are allowed to form alliances in the process of voting. In the 2012 contest, the *Afoko* candidate (*Amoak Afoko*) moved with his voters to join that of *Atiteng Azantilow*. The *Bulsa* maintain that the voting system has been an integral part of the succession to the skin, and even predates colonialism and the introduction of modern elections in Ghana. The arguments put forward for the use of the voting system, first of all, give legitimacy to chiefs. This enables chiefs to get the support of the people in ruling. Besides, it makes the people part of the decision making and ruling process in the area. A sub-chief sums it up as: "The people will then take ownership of their chieftaincy" (Interview with elder of Sub-chief, December 2013, Sandema).

One of the divisional chiefs also notes that the voting system in the chieftaincy succession of the *Buluk* area also allows for transparency and helps to prevent conflicts or disagreements over the election of chiefs. Thus the voting system forms part of the traditional decision making process.

### **Conflicts/Disputes in the Selection of Chiefs**

A question may be asked: "Is it indeed the case that the voting system in the area prevents conflicts?" Conflicts over chieftaincy to the skin in *Buluk* have always existed. The cause of these conflicts has not been because of the legitimacy of a particular candidate to the skin, but disputes over the kingmakers and also over voting irregularities. Another elderly member of the Sandema royal family notes that:

Disputes and conflicts have always emerged in the process of selecting chiefs, but they are quickly resolved and all challenges to the elected chief are dropped. It happened



during the election of Afoko and Azantilow, but these disputes were resolved. Kanjaga and Chuchuliga had conflicts in the selection of the chiefs, but Kanjaga was finally resolved. Although the case of Chuchuliga is still contentious, it is almost settled. Most disputes arise over procedures with regard to the election or perceived mal-voting by one of the candidates. (Interview with elder of Sandema Royal Family, August 2013, Sandema)

Thus it remains obvious that the voting system does not in itself prevent disputes in the election of chiefs. The informant above stated that the election of *Naab* Afoko on 11 December, 1912, was marked by disputes. One of the contestants, Ayiparuk, felt that Afoko's election was supposedly manipulated by the British. Ayiparuk then challenged the election resulting in his incarceration at the Navrongo Prisons by the British. Again, Amaama challenged the November 16, 1931, election of Azantilow Ayieta after he (Amaama) felt that he should have been elected chief instead of Azantilow Ayieta. Amaama is also believed to have opposed the election because of perceived interference from the British colonial masters.

A chieftaincy dispute has also occurred in Chuchuliga. The Chuchuliga conflict has been the most pronounced in the history of *Buluk*. Kröger (2012) reports that the conflict arose after the death of Allan Asangalisa and a new chief was to be *enskinned* (installed). Accordingly, the cause of the dispute was whether the new chief was to be elected in Sandema under the supervision of the *Sandem Naab* (Ayieta Azantilow), as was the case with all divisional chiefs, or whether he should be elected in Chuchuliga. Francis Asangalisa, one of the contestants, refused to go to Sandema for the election and Joseph Adakula Amaachanan was subsequently elected and installed as *Chuchuliga Naab* by the *Sandem Naab*. Francis Asangalisa was also *enskinned* by kingmakers in Chuchuliga in August 1995. This led to violent confrontations between supporters of the two candidates and a legal battle between the *Sandem Naab* and Francis Asangalisa. Adakula Amaachanan later abdicated and made peace with Francis Asangalisa in July 2006 making Francis Asangalisa the chief (Kröger, 2012). The case of Chuchuliga is still pending at the Upper East Regional House of Chiefs although Francis Asangalisa performs duties as chief of the area. The Asangalisa family has always maintained that chiefs of Chuchuliga are elected by the kingmakers in Chuchuliga, and not in Sandema.

The current conflict took place after the death of Azantilow Ayieta in 2006 between the Afoko family and the children of Azantilow. Following the death of *Naab* Ayieta Azantilow on 14 November, 2006, controversy arose first of all over who has the right to be the regent before the funeral of *Naab* Ayieta Azantilow was performed and the election of a substantive *Sandem Naab*. Alexis Tampuri Azantilow, surviving eldest son of *Naab*, Ayiety Azantilow, was made a regent (*Nansuik Naab*). This was opposed by the Afoko family who argues that the position of *NansuikNaab* was alien to the traditions of *Buluk* and that it was the eldest member of the royal family, Francis Afoko Asiaknab, who should preside over the area until a substantive chief was elected. Another issue was with the disregard for *Buluk* tradition that chiefs are buried immediately after they are dead. The Afoko family accused Azantilow's children of breaking that tradition by delaying the burial of the chief and carrying the body of the late chief to the Bolgatanga Mortuary.

Consequently, the Afoko family took these issues to court, and an injunction was placed on the movement of the body as well as the funeral. The children of Azantilow forcefully took the body out of the mortuary and took the corpse for burial on 27 January, 2007, whilst the court was yet to take a decision on the matter. It is worth noting that all these disputes were actually geared towards the succession to the *Sandem* skin – the interest of both factions to gain control of the skin. A potential violent conflict was soon to break out between the two factions, but the Ghanaian state deployed security personnel to the area. After five years of conflict and stalemate, the two factions agreed to a peaceful settlement of the dispute, and the final funeral rites of the late chief were performed to pave way for the election of a substantive chief. This was due to negotiations from elders, prominent citizens of the area, and divisional chiefs who engaged the factions in mediation.

Another dispute arose between two sons of Azantilow, Azagsuk Azantilow, and Atiteng Azantilow as to who really won the contest for the chieftaincy during the election of the new *Sandem Naab* on 17 July, 2012, and the subsequent unofficial declaration of Azagsuk Azantilow as the new chief. The *Sandem* skin was contested for by twelve candidates from each of the royal families of *Abil-Yeri* with the main contenders being Azagsuk Azantilow and Atiteng Azantilow. While counting of Azagsuk's votes was still going on, his supporters concluded his votes were overwhelmingly greater than Atiteng's votes, declared him the winner, and carried him home. This was challenged by Atiteng Azantilow who claimed that during the counting,

people who were not kingmakers got counted by joining the rightful kingmakers who stood behind Azagsuk Azantilow, and swelled his numbers. Accordingly, Atiteng Azantilow filed a lawsuit challenging the election of Azagsuk Azantilow.

However, through effective negotiation by the divisional chiefs of the area, the factions agreed to resolve their differences, and Atiteng Azantilow withdrew his challenge and recognized the election of Azagsuk Azantilow as the new *Sandem Naab*. The divisional chiefs met both contestants separately after which they brought them together to mediate for the case to be dropped. Consequently, on 12 December, 2013, all the factions came together at a *durbar* (public gathering) of chiefs and people in Sandema to coronate *Naab* Azagsuk Azantilow as *Sandem Naab* ending the year-long conflict. In all these conflicts over the succession, there is an interlocking of power-play and power relations where individuals and groups want to assert their right to the occupancy of traditional power. This is done through aligning with “other powers that be” to get access to the skin. These “powers that be” include political/governmental officials, opinion leaders and important elders. Some actors use the chieftaincy disputes to assert and enhance their power during the process of negotiation and consensus building, as we can see from the above narratives.

### **Consensus and Peaceful Resolution of Conflicts**

In all the conflicts to the *Buluk* skin, unlike places like the Dagbon, Ga, and Bimbila chieftaincy conflicts, deaths and open fighting are always absent. There is consensus at the end and the conflicts are resolved. Reasons for this according to informants for this study include the fact that the contest is always between one “big family” and not gates. Unlike the gate system, the *Buluk* chieftaincy system is what Azagsuk Azantilow called, “A contest of a blood family and not one of outsiders” (Interview with Naab Azagsuk Azantilow September 2013).

The *Abil-Yeri* clan for instance considers all the houses qualified to contest the skin as a family made of different blood brothers. A sub-chief argues that:

Looking at Afoko and Ayiparuk who disputed, the two were blood brothers. It is same with Azantilow and Amaama and now Azagsuk and Atiteng. So how long can blood brothers fight without reconciling? Hence, the peaceful nature of the contests. (Interview Sub-chief, December 2013, Sandema)

Besides, the influence, character, and role of Ayieta Azantilow have helped *Buluk* to survive and remained peaceful (Awedoba, 2009). According to Awedoba, Azantilow having reigned for seventy five years, was very “powerful” and united the entire area under Sandema. Another reason argued for the peaceful nature of the area is the strict adherence to laid-down tradition and the use of traditional methods of dispute resolution, as well as the willingness of the winner to reach out to the losers. Through the use of the rites of the earth cult and negotiation by elders, conflicts are settled and the disputants who challenge the election agree to peaceful resolution of the conflicts. As Kirby (2006) maintains, rituals of the earth cult in most ethnic groups in Northern Ghana such as sacrifices, prayers and appeasing ancestral spirits, play important roles in conflict resolution and reconciliation. Another sub-chief notes that:

Settling chieftaincy conflicts among the Bulsa has always been historical and peaceful. Both challenges and disputes to the election of Naab Afoko and Naab Azantilow were peacefully resolved. The most recent conflicts between the Afoko family and Azantilow family were successfully resolved using laid down traditions of the rites of the earth cult. All the factions in the conflict and elders by Buluk tradition came together to roast a fowl and ate together which symbolically represents the end to the conflict. What this ritual does is to commit ourselves before our ancestors and gods that we will no longer be in conflict and that settles the dispute. (Interview with Sub-chief, January 2014, Sandema)

Thus, the reconciliation process to conflicts has always involved the resort to tradition. It is important to state that it is not just the voting system that allows for peace and consensus, but the mutual and supportive interaction of the traditional structures, actors, and the minority who agree to compromise and accept the decision of the majority—although they are not compelled to do so (Graeber, 2004).

### **Consensus-based Democracy in the Buluk Chieftaincy System**

The system of selecting chiefs in *Buluk* is based on a consensus-based traditional democracy in which a “voting system” is used, but is unlike the western system of voting in which every citizen of voting age takes part. Unlike western direct democracy, consensus in traditional settings like *Buluk* is what Graeber (2004) calls a “consensus process” where the point is to allow a group to decide on a common course of action (p. 35). The use of the election system in selecting and installing chiefs in *Buluk*, where a group of comparatively ordinary

people (landlords) are the kingmakers, is unique in the chieftaincy institution in Ghana. In many parts of Ghana, the kingmakers are a group of chiefly persons who belong to the aristocratic class of society. Hinging on these arguments, since the election of chiefs in the Balsa area follows what the people referred to as “who has the majority votes of landlords,” it can well be termed a democratic chieftaincy system. Thus democracy in this sense is consensus-based decision-making in which people (the landlords) make decisions for the collective good, and accept someone as chief of the area for the peace of the area.

Besides, the consensus in *Buluk* is based on decision-making, where the “minority is not compelled to agree with a majority decision—because there is no person or institution in *Buluk* with a monopoly of coercive force, or the state has nothing to do with the chieftaincy decision-making,” as Ghana’s 1992 Constitution forbids state inference in chieftaincy matters (Graeber, 2004, p.89). This consensus-based traditional democracy in the *Buluk* chieftaincy system is competitive, participatory, and allows for compromises. (Azagsuk Azantilow succinctly put it as: “We disagree to agree...our contest is always hotly done but we will always come to a compromise in the end...” (Interview with Naab Azagsuk Azantilow and his elders, September 2013, Sandema).

In many of the elections of chiefs to the *Buluk* skin, opponents of the winning chief have often challenged the process of election as being manipulative and procedurally wrong. In the election of *Naab Afoko* and *Naab Azantilow*, the accusation was about the supposed manipulation of the electoral process by the British colonialists. The recent conflict in 2012 was marred by similar challenges of mal-voting and rejection of the election by *Atiteng Azantilow*. In the process, some have argued for an introduction of modern reforms like secret voting and registration of all kingmakers with voter cards to avoid the problems of perceived manipulation and mal-voting. This suggestion was already rejected by a section of the elders and some of the candidates during the 2012 election of a chief. They argue that introduction of such reforms will tend to adulterate and undermine the long-held traditions of the people.

Similarly, it is argued that the ability of the area to quickly resolve conflicts when they arise in the process of selecting chiefs is a unique democratic feature of chieftaincy in Ghana. Consensus-building and conflict resolution is important in a democracy because it brings an end to a conflict and prevents it from escalating into violence. In most parts of northern Ghana, chieftaincy conflicts that have arisen over succession to the skin have become protracted, violent,

and remain largely unresolved. The Bawku and *Dagbon* chieftaincy conflicts have both remained unresolved for over five decades. The effective use of traditional conflict resolution methods in the case of *Buluk* is important in helping build a resilient chieftaincy system. This is how a sound democracy operates. However, questions are being asked as to whether all the other towns under the Sandema paramountcy will continue to hold as they have always demanded their own paramountcy status.

The power and influence of *Naab* Ayieta Azantilow to hold the unity of all towns within the paramountcy is yet to be tested after his death. Kröger (2012) reveals that in the past, chiefs of Kanjaga have attempted several times to secede from the Sandema paramountcy, but have always failed. Awedoba (2009) equally postulates that the other towns like Wiaga, Fumbisi, Kadema, Uasi, Kanjaga, and Gbedema which are of comparable status to Sandema may not accept their current subordinate status. And the division of the traditional area into two districts which makes some towns administratively independent of Sandema could further threaten the unity of the traditional area. In the *Feok* festival (annual festival of the area) of December 2013, many of the towns already did not take part in the activities in Sandema and seemed to have organized their own festivals. This remains the time to test the resilience of the consensus-based democratic succession in the area since threats of secession from the paramountcy may be obvious soon.

### **Is the *Buluk* Case a Model for Chieftaincy Succession in Ghana?**

Despite the problems with the voting system, in which candidates who lose the elections are always aggrieved because they feel there was some mal-voting in the system, the consensus-based democratic chieftaincy system in the Bulsa Traditional Area has helped to hold the area together in comparison to other areas in northern Ghana. A question worth asking is whether the voting system in the Bulsa Traditional Area could be a model for chieftaincy succession in other parts of Ghana. On a very positive note, it will be good if a democratic election system is adopted in the elections of chiefs in Ghana, even if it is an Electoral College System. This will help minimize many chieftaincy disputes by making the system acceptable to all parties in the contest. In this case, it can be fashioned such that the kingmakers, even if they are only two, vote to select the chief. The National and Regional Houses of Chiefs become the electoral bodies responsible for codifying laws, regulations, and supervising the voting and selection process.

In the case of the Balsa Traditional Area, the system has well been used over a century and its usefulness is evident in the effective way it helps to prevent violent conflicts in the area. On the other hand, will the election system if applied in all areas in Ghana conform to the tradition and customs of these areas in the selection of chiefs? Chieftaincy is tradition that conforms to the customs of a particular area and every area is governed by its own traditions, which are respected and have remained in use for centuries. Besides, every traditional area is unique in its system of selecting and installing chiefs. These traditions cannot just be changed on the basis of what patterns exist in a particular area. The universal acceptability of this model throughout Ghana could therefore be problematic because of the local nature of chieftaincy – it is practiced differently than most models.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper was to examine how conflict and consensus are handled in the chieftaincy succession system of the Balsa Traditional area of Ghana. The paper argued that despite conflicts that emerge in the succession of chiefs in the area, a consensus-based democracy and consensus decision-making have helped to maintain peace and avoid violence, unlike other areas in Ghana where succession disputes have resulted in violent conflicts. The *Buluk* chieftaincy system also clearly demonstrates that the traditions of Africa have many democratic elements including voting for leaders. The case of voting for chiefs *Buluk* was practiced before colonialism and has continued till date. Thus, the paper argues that consensus-based democracy and consensus decision of traditional institutions like that of *Buluk* help in conflict resolution.

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