

# Emerging Local Voices and New Possibilities toward Attaining Sustainable Peace in Bawku, north-eastern Ghana

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## Abstract

Globally, conflicts continue to change dynamics and increase in complexity, weakening the potential of various peacebuilding interventions, especially in the Global South. The Bawku crisis is a notable protracted conflict in Ghana and West Africa, which attracts enormous scholarly debates, especially on how to attain sustained peace in the area. However, there remains some important dynamics that are not significantly explored in the discussions on achieving sustained peace in Bawku. Drawing on in-depth field interviews, we present a new perspective on chieftaincy and landownership (and use), shifting from absolute control to a shared system, aimed at potentially resolving conflicts. The proposed shared political and landownership system also reveals important weaknesses relating to existing court verdicts and scholarly advocacy for a parallel system or the resettlement of the Mamprusi outside of the area. However, this empirical contribution offers a new possibility to resolve the Bawku crisis and similar challenges in Ghana and Africa.

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## 1. Introduction

The Bawku conflict in the Upper East Region of Ghana is one of the notable violent conflicts in the country. While usually seen as a beacon of democracy and a relatively stable polity in Africa (Gyimah-Boadi, 2009; Akin and Ade, 2018), Ghana has witnessed a lot of protracted internal conflicts for many decades. According to Aapengnuo (2013:2), the country has recorded at least 2000 violent conflicts since gaining independence in 1957. Most of the conflicts occur in the northern part of the country. This is due to a peculiar context of colonial social engineering (of ethnic identity and traditional leadership), which causes protracted chieftaincy and land-related violent contestations in the northern half of the country (see Brukum, 2001). The Bawku conflict forms part of the many violent contestations surrounding chieftaincy and landownership and use in northern Ghana. Other key violent conflicts, most of which recur (albeit with varying effects and duration of relapse), involve, for instance, Gonja-Nawuri-Nchumuru in 1991, 1992, and 1994; Kokomba-Bimoba in 1984, 1986, and 1989 (Debrah et al., 2016); Nanumba-Konkomba in 1980, 1994, and 1995; the Dagbon conflicts in 1991 and 2002; Dagomba-Konkomba in 1994 (Brukum, 2000:131); and the ongoing Mamprusi–Kusasi conflict in Bawku.

The notoriously recurrent and intractable nature of the Bawku chieftaincy conflict has attracted conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts from both state and non-state actors (Bukari, 2013; Issifu, 2017). The literature on peacebuilding in Bawku and related conflict-affected areas in Ghana is broadly situated within two dominant discourses. The one is on liberal peace, concerning the establishment and/or strengthening of local government structures, courts of law, and improvement of state capacity (Bukari, 2013; Issifu, 2017). The other is on local and/or traditional or indigenous approaches to enhance the local capacity for peace (Olowu, 2017; Paalo, 2023). However, these bodies of the peace-and-conflict literature suggest that the existing approaches to peace are not successful. It is more about continuous

compromises through mediation and negotiations accompanied by an uneasy state presence in Bawku. It does not substantially address the root causes of the conflict.

Some scholars have asserted that the limited success of the various peacebuilding interventions in Bawku are caused by four broad challenges in the peacebuilding engagements: limited local engagement (Paalo, 2022); political interference and exclusionary traditional structures (Bombande, 2007); conflict-spoiling behaviour from conflicting parties and allies (Longi, 2014) and; the disregard for indigenous peacebuilding practices in many cases (Bukari, 2013). Such difficulties weaken the existing peacebuilding efforts. However, the ongoing security crises and political instability in neighbouring countries in West Africa and the Sahel have further justified the need to attain sustained peace in Bawku. This is in order to address potential sources of security volatilities that may use Bawku as an entry point to Ghana. Therefore, this paper draws on field data to present an emerging perspective – a shared political system – to potentially resolve the long-standing Bawku crisis. This crisis concerns entrenched positions between the Mamprusi and Kusasi on chieftaincy and landownership.

This paper therefore offers a nuanced approach to peacebuilding in Bawku. The proposed shared system is presented in a way that incorporates three existing viewpoints on resolving the conflict, as outlined in the literature. First, this paper delves deeper than the historical accounts of regime-backed curfews, court rulings, and commissions of inquiry. The purpose is to explore the underlying factors that have influenced the shifts in traditional rulership between the Kusasi and Mamprusi (Bombande, 2007; Issifu, 2017). Second, the shared system perspective presented here adds depth to the scholarly discussions on conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Bawku. It expands the focus beyond civil society-led negotiations, mediations and compromises (Bukari, 2013; Paalo, 2023) by proposing potential permanent solutions. This reduces the potential for conflict relapse. Third, the paper further offers an alternative solution to the challenges of the proposed parallel political system (Awedoba, 2010) which further suggests a possible resettlement of the Mamprusi outside of Bawku (Alhassan Commission,

1978). However, it will subsequently be seen that the idea of a shared system also exhibits some important challenges that threaten its potential to enhance lasting peace. Yet, it is our opinion that this added perspective offers a platform for further research and policy engagements on the possibility of a context-informed restructuring of local power and landownership.

In laying out the argument, the paper proceeds in the following four sections after the introduction. The first section presents the methods of the study, including the research design and strategy, data collection, and analysis. The second section provides a history of the Bawku conflict and offers a relevant background for conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. This is followed by a section on the key existing peacebuilding approaches that have been used to intervene in the Bawku conflict. Here we further point out the strengths and weaknesses of the respective approaches. The fourth section constitutes the discussion, where we examine the emerging perspectives of a shared political and landownership system to resolve the Bawku crisis. Following the conclusion, we raise the need for further research to address possible new challenges. These challenges include a split instead of a shared system, as well as issues of minority rights within the shared system.

## **2. Methodology**

Data for this study forms part of a bigger data collection process by the authors for a broader study on the Bawku conflict. This study adopts a case study design of the Bawku traditional area using a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. The researchers, therefore, observed events and conducted in-depth face-to-face interviews with interlocutors in Bawku. The study used both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data were collected from key informants from surrounding local communities such as Pusiga, Gingande, Hausa Zongo, Yoruba Zongo, Zotinga west and east, and Sabon Gari in the Bawku traditional area. Data gathered from primary sources were supplemented with information from the internet and secondary sources. Interlocutors were mainly selected using the purposive sampling technique. Interviews were therefore conducted with the traditional rulers of the Mamprusi

and the Kusasi ethnic groups; leaders of four other settler ethnic groups, namely, the Hausa, Dagomba, Moshie, and the Bissa were interviewed. Others were personnel of the security agencies; some members of the Bawku Inter-Ethnic Peace Committee (BIEPC); traders; the national president of the Bissa Youth Associations; ordinary community members; and teachers and directors of civil society and non-governmental organisations that are directly or indirectly involved in the Bawku peace process. In all, 39 interviews were conducted between October 2018 and December 2019, as indicated under the following categories or groups:

- 1) Mamprusi traditional leaders (1)
- 2) Mamprusi ethnic group (3)
- 3) Kusasi traditional leaders (1)
- 4) Kusasi ethnic group (3)
- 5) Hausa ethnic group (3)
- 6) Dagomba ethnic group (3)
- 7) Moshie ethnic group (3)
- 8) Bissa ethnic group (3)
- 9) Bawku security agencies (2)
- 10) The Bawku Inter- Ethnic Peace Committee (BIEPC-2)
- 11) Farmers (4)
- 12) Youth Associations (1)
- 13) Other Ordinary community members (5)
- 14) Teachers (3)
- 15) Civil society organisations (2)

Given the sensitivity of the conflict, the authors used pseudonyms, mainly identifying respondents by their professions or positions in ways that did not reveal their true identity. The interviews mainly sought individual perspectives and lived experiences concerning how sustainable peace could be attained in the Bawku traditional area. The use of

in-depth interviews with open-ended questions allowed not only for greater flexibility but also greater insights into obscured angles of the subject matter under investigation. Data were either recorded through audio or captured in a field notebook.

The field data collection faced the following three major challenges, in no particular order. First was the refusal by some participants to have their interviews captured by the audio recording device. Under such circumstances, we jotted down the key issues in a field notebook. We then conducted post-interview follow-ups to make sure our interpretations were right. Second, given the patrilineal nature of the study area, it was difficult to include many female participants, as few women are assigned responsibilities outside the domestic sphere in the research site. In fact, the women themselves preferred that the researchers talked to their husbands as they saw the conflict as a ‘men’s’ affair. However, with the help of our local contact and research assistant, a Gonja primary school teacher, we succeeded in interviewing four female community members. Third, due to the sensitive nature of the Bawku conflict, we encountered initial difficulties in convincing participants to grant us interviews. Others turned down our request arguing that the research may produce biased findings that do not help their course. The research assistant once again helped to overcome this challenge, by linking us with two opinion leaders (each from the Mamprusi and Kusasi ethnic groups). They facilitated our access to more target participants. Despite these challenges, the research produced great insights and saturation across the categories of respondents, producing the themes for data analysis.

Following the qualitative approach employed in the study, data analysis was inductive in nature. That is, the researchers coded (through a manual textual analysis of the transcriptions) the data according to key emerging themes from the data. The major theme – shared chieftaincy and landownership – was reflected across all the respondents, albeit with important nuances, as will be seen.

### 3. Understanding the Bawku Conflict

The relevant literature on the Bawku conflict has mainly explored the empirical contexts of the conflict involving the two main ethnic groups (Mamprusi and the Kusasi). These groups are in contention for the right to occupy the position of the paramount chief (*Bawku Naba*) of the Bawku traditional area (see Ladourceur, 1972; Lentz, 1993; Bombande, 2007). This conflict dates back to the colonial era, and it is known for its recurrence and protraction. It is characterised by deep-seated and increasing complexity. This complexity is further exacerbated by the various conflict-spoiling behaviours of the ruling elite and political parties in the country. In this sense, it is particularly the country's two main political parties, the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC), which are involved in the conflict (Bukari, 2013; Issifu, 2017). Other factors such as the proliferation of weapons and the seizure of farmlands have also contributed to the escalation of the conflict, thereby making it intractable.

Like in many other contexts in northern Ghana, the root cause of the Bawku conflict is attributed to the impact of colonialism. This impact is particularly evident in local political structures and therefore inter-ethnic relations. The indirect rule by the British colonial administration in the Gold Coast created deprivation among ethnic groups by forcing some under the control of others. This social engineering was especially suffered by the so-called acephalous groups (e.g., Kusasi, Talensi, and Vagala), who were forced under the centralised groups such as Mamprusi, Dagomba, and Gonja. This condition has caused hostile relations and relapses of conflict between ethnic groups in the country for decades (Kendie, 2010; Awedoba, 2010). The Mamprusi–Kusasi chieftaincy contention, which embodies the Bawku conflict, is traced to two main reinforcing dimensions: the British colonial administration in Zotinga and the introduction of party politics in Ghana (see Yirimea, 2009). This has been sustained and protracted by the activities of spoilers in the form of post-colonial politicians, particularly ethno-politicians from the Upper East Region. These factors are exacerbated by the proliferation of

weapons and the seizure of farmlands, which have also contributed to the frequent escalation and protraction of conflict.

The complex interplay of these factors is subsumed under the history of occupancy and/or ownership of the Bawku land and therefore traditional leadership practice in the Bawku traditional area. As McGovern (2011) notes, the fundamental basis of political legitimacy in Ghanaian traditional societies is autochthony, which could be through first comer/first-settler in the area or by conquest. The belief is that the founder of an area or chiefdom is the first person to borrow land from the earth spirits who inhabit it before humans settled in (McGovern, 2012). Latecomers, also known as new settlers (tenants), borrow land from the village or town owners. 'Firstcomership' is recognised in northern Ghana as the basis for landownership (Alhassan Commission, 1978).

However, the question of contested autochthony or traditional leadership differs from the structure of landownership and underpins the Bawku conflict. This follows from historical examples of persistent warfare, village-raiding, slave-raiding, and displacement in pre-colonial Africa and beyond. Here settlers could usually be the traditional leaders through warfare or colonial social (re-)engineering. An example can be found in Guinea where the Loma-speakers in south-eastern Guinea were historically the weaker autochthones through kinship and marriage relationships known as the *keke-Daabe*. They tried to bind powerful conquerors to themselves by granting conquerors the symbolic legitimacy (and the attendant responsibilities) that comes with becoming 'owners of the land'. Such a relationship was usually meant to assist in the management of the land and the protection of economic interest against known enemies. However, such arrangements have transformed latecomers into autochthones while the aboriginals or early settlers rather become latecomers by being less powerful and not in control of their land and leadership (McGovern, 2012). This is reflected in the Mamprusi-Kusasi situation in Bawku. In post-colonial Ghana, both the Kusasi and the Mamprusi make claims and counter-claims of ownership of Bawku. These claims are shrouded in their narrative of histories of origin, derived from claims of autochthony. The 1978 Alhassan Committee's investigations into landownership in Northern Ghana



identified first ‘settlement’ as one of the bases to claim ownership of land. However, in Bawku, the question of first ‘settlement’ is inconclusive and is still a matter of controversy between the Mamprusi and the Kusasi.

The Mamprusi claim to be descendants of Naa Gbewa. They trace their origin to Tanga (located east of Lake Chad) and the Troari clan, from where their great grandfather, Naa Gbewa, migrated with his nine children: Tofogo (founder of Mamprugu); Sitobo (founder of Dagbon); Zirili (founder of Nanum); Sibie (founder of Kuga); Biebone (founder of Kariga); Bogo Yelgo (founder of Sunsong) and; Kachigo (woman progenitor of Gundona, Burkina Faso) to Fada N’Gourma in Burkina Faso. As a result of Gbewa’s spiritual capabilities and courage, the Gurma requested him to stay with them and he eventually became their ruler. However, the Gurmas lost interest in Gbewa when he killed two of their important chiefs. This act compelled Gbewa to leave Fada N’Gourma, accompanied by some Gurmas, and settled at Pusiga near Bawku. At Pusiga, Gbewa became chief over the indigenous Gurma and some Kusasi (Yirimea, 2009). It was after Naa Gbewa’s death at Pusiga that his three sons: Tusugu, Sitobo and Zirili, migrated further afield and found Mamprugu, Dagomba, and Nanumba respectively (Longi, 2015).

The Mamprusi, therefore, claim that their presence in Bawku dates back to the seventeenth century. This is when it became necessary for Naa Atabia, the *Nayiri* (1690–1741) to provide military protection to trade routes within his jurisdiction. Prince Ali, son of Naa Atabia, was among the first Mamprusi settlers mandated by the *Nayiri* to establish a “police post” at Bawku (Bombande, 2007). Therefore, the military intervention from the *Nayiri*, who has a jurisdictional oversight over the area, became necessary as a result of the Bissa’s incessant incursions into Kusasi. The Bissa were aggressively abducting and selling mostly the Kusasi migrating from Biengu, Zawga and Yuiga (now communities in Burkina Faso) to Bawku. The *Nayiri* therefore established military security posts in Bawku, Sinnebaga, Binduri, Teshi, Tanga, and Worikambo.

The Mamprusi argue that the security posts, which were administered by Mamprusi-garrisoned men or warrior princes, became necessary as a result of the slave raiding activities in the area. The Bissa and the Chokosi in particular were abducting and selling the Kusasi, who were migrating into

Bawku from Anglo-French (now Burkina Faso), into slavery. Syme (1932) described the Kusasi as the worst victims of the slave raiding activities of the Bissa and the others such as the Zaberimies. As if to confirm Syme's assertion, a Bussanga interlocutor also indicated that "the Mamprusi efforts to check slavery activities in the area was the source of bitter wars between us the Bissa and the Mamprusi" (Interview, Bussanga opinion leader, Bawku, 2018). In sync with this narrative, the literature points out that chieftaincy, which is the primary cause of the conflict, was introduced by the Mamprusi around the sixteenth century. It is on these grounds that the Mamprusi claim to be the first to settle on the land (Atuguba et al., 2006).

While the Kusasi have always argued that they are the original settlers in Bawku, there are varied accounts about their settlement in the area. According to Rattray (1932), when the Mamprusi migrated from Gambaga to Bawku, the Kusasi had already settled in the area as *tindaana* (earth priests). The Kusasi were believed to have migrated mainly from Biengu, Zawga and Yuiga (currently located in Burkina Faso) and settled in the outskirts of Bawku. Here they engaged in animal rearing and crop farming (Awedoba, 2010). The Kusasi claim to be the first to have settled in the area and they have lived there for many years thereby becoming the *tindaana* of the area (Awedoba, 2010). Rattray (1932) furthermore reveals that the Kusasi, who are traditionally farmers, are deeply rooted in their traditions. They worshiped the cult of the earth spirit and other gods of the area. By the 1900s, the Kusasi population had grown and spread to occupy many areas in the Bawku traditional area. Bawku grew steadily and became the capital of the local council when the Northern Protectorate was formed in 1900/1901 (Hilton, 1962). Some Kusasi research participants partly confirmed this narrative by indicating that the Mamprusi came to Bawku because the Kusasi appealed to the *Nayiri* for military protection, therefore the Mamprusi met the Kusasi in Bawku. Nonetheless, the name "Bawku" is believed to have originated from a Mamprusi usage, "Bawku". It is a corrupted Mamprusi word which means a "hole" or valley, when viewed from the top of the Gambaga scarp (Syme, 1932).

Beyond the British colonial rule, the introduction of party politics in Ghana further influenced the Mamprusi–Kusasi chieftaincy conflict in Bawku (Longi, 2014). Soon after Ghana's independence the conflict took political twists. To court support in the conflict, the two ethnic groups aligned themselves to political parties. While the Kusasi supported the Convention Peoples Party (CPP) government, the Mamprusi supported the United Party (UP), the then two major political parties in immediate post-independence Ghana. These alignments were mainly to gain electoral support for the two political parties (Adam, 2008). Coincidentally, the Mamprusi–Kusasi tension was exacerbated by the death of the *Bawku Naba*, the overlord of the Bawku Traditional Area, Na Awuni in December 1956. His death created a vacancy on the Bawku Skin. Per Mamprusi tradition, all qualified princes from all four royal families, commonly called 'gates' among the Mamprusis (i.e. *Na Mahama*, *Na Azangbeoga*, *Na Abugri* and *Na Yakubu* gates), had the right to contest the Skin in a rotational manner. Accordingly, the qualified princes contested the Skin. At the end of the contest, the enskinning authority (the *Nayiri*) chose Yirimea of the *Na Mahama* gate as the next *Bawku Naba* to the displeasure of the unsuccessful princes. The embittered princes protested against the *Nayiri's* decision and betrayed the Mamprusis. They teamed up with some Kusasi youth from the CPP to enskin a Kusasi, Abugarago, as a parallel paramount chief to the *Bawku Naba*.

This act of enskinning a Kusasi provoked violent clashes between the Mamprusi and the Kusasi in 1957, as the Mamprusi saw that as an affront. This conflict led to loss of lives and property. Consequently, in 1958, the then colonial Governor General, Lord Listowel, in consultation with the Prime Minister, Kwame Nkrumah, appointed a three-member committee of inquiry, chaired by S. D. Opoku-Afari. The committee was to investigate the causes of the clashes and make recommendations. Eventually, the committee found in favour of the Kusasi's claim that chieftaincy was an imposition on their political structures. The Mamprusi had earlier reacted vehemently to the composition of the committee and later to the committee's findings, claiming that it was biased in favour of the Kusasi. Nonetheless, in April 1958, some Mamprusi chiefs who opposed were

replaced with Kusasi and pro-CPP supporters as chiefs (Longi, 2015). The Mamprusi interpreted Nkrumah and the CPP government's action as a reward for the Kusasi's support of the CPP during the 1957 election. The Mamprusi contested the matter in the High Court of Ghana and the court set aside the committee's report and its findings. The committee appealed against the judgement of the high court and won. The CPP government accepted the verdict of the appeal court which upheld Abugrago Azoka (the Kusasi) as the *Bawku Naba* (Longi, 2015).

However, the clashes resurfaced in 1966 after the overthrow of the CPP government by the National Liberation Council (NLC), a military regime. The NLC passed the Chieftaincy Amendment Decree, NLCD 112 (1966), which reversed some key decisions under Nkrumah, by placing all newly created paramountcies since 1957 under their former paramount chiefs (Bombande, 2007). The application of the decree in the case of the Bawku paramountcy meant that the Kusasi had lost the paramountcy title to the Mamprusi. Also, the *Nayiri* regained the right to select and install the *Bawku Naba*, starting with Adam Azangbeo, which renewed the conflict between the groups.

In 1969, there was another election in Ghana and the Progress Party (PP) emerged as the winner. The Mamprusi became the key supporters of the PP government and supported a number of structural changes in the Bawku Traditional Area. For instance, the name of the district was changed from the Kusasi District to the Bawku District. The traditional council changed from the Kusasi Traditional Council to the Bawku Traditional Council (Akwetey, 1996). While the Kusasi opposed these changes, the Mamprusi were in full support. Consequently, from 1970 to 1980, Adam Azangbeo, a Mamprusi, ruled Bawku until 1983, when there was another military takeover. After the military takeover by the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC), the events turned in favour of the Kusasi again. The Kusasi found comfort with the new government and therefore petitioned it to reverse the status quo. In 1983, the PNDC passed the PNDC Law 75 (the Restoration of Status of Chiefs Law). This law reversed the NLCD 112 and restored all the affected paramountcies to their former status as independent paramountcies. Consequently, Adam Azangbeo, together with some 18 subchiefs, were

deskins and Ninchema Abugrago Azoka II, son of the first Kusasi *Bawku Naba* (Abugrago Azoka), was enskinned. This made Bawku a Kusasi paramountcy once again.

According to Brukum (2001), the conflict subsequently degenerated into recurrent confrontations between the two ethnic groups in the decades that followed. These included confrontations in 1983, 1984, 1985, 2000, 2001, 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010, as well as the ongoing clashes since late 2021. The partisan interferences in the conflict have, in contemporary times, transformed it into the NDC and NPP struggle, with the Kusasi largely supporting the NDC and the Mamprusi, the NPP. For instance, the clash between the Kusasi and the Mamprusi in the year 2000 emanated from a confrontation between the supporters of the NDC and the NPP (Brukum, 2001). Following from this partisan-related influence on the conflict, since 1993, the Bawku conflict has been complicated by the politics of Ghana's Fourth Republic. To partly address the partisan influence in the conflict, the current President of Ghana, Nana Akufo Addo, and former President John Agyekum Kuffour (while in office) have both made public statements. They called for political non-interference in the conflict.

While this assurance suggests the government's neutrality to forestall further clashes, this sign of impartiality instead caused further tensions among the Mamprusi. They consider the statements a betrayal and stab in the back, especially since they are mostly associated with the NPP. Furthermore, they expect the backing of the government to gain access to the Bawku paramountcy anytime that the NPP is in power. This indicates the deep-seated role that multiparty politics play in the Bawku conflict. This was corroborated by the following interview statements:

[...] I told you before that, politicians are the problem. I also told you how our Member of Parliament played tricks on our youth some time ago which nearly resulted in violence... After politics had created the conflict, politicisation nurtured it and ethno-politicians, using state institutions and political offices, have sustained the conflict. I blame politicians for the level of mistrust and suspicions in this Bawku community. They say

one thing to this group and a completely different thing to the other. They don't face facts. All they care about is votes and power (Interview, retired educationist, Bawku 2018).

[...] Politics has made us look at each other with suspicion and fear. I mean politics is the number one fuel for the Bawku conflict (Interview, teacher at Bawku 2018).

The partisan understanding of the Bawku crisis is further sustained by the lack of confidence among the factions about the neutrality or impartiality of the judicial system in Ghana. This is because both the Mamprusi and Kusasi see legal instruments and court rulings on the conflict as being influenced by partisan politics (Bombande, 2007). A legal practitioner argued during an interview:

[...] Before you go to court, you need to test the grounds. We don't have confidence in the system. We don't want to repeat the mistake of 1983. The grounds are not that fertile for us to go to court. (Interview, legal practitioner, Bawku 2018).

By testing the ground, he meant the political terrain. This is to ensure that the ruling government is on their side before sending a case to the court. This suggests endemic mistrust characterised by ethno-partisanship, which replays in different conflict occurrences in Bawku. The above background illustrates the protracted nature of the Bawku conflict, which has always elicited various state and non-state efforts to build sustained peace in the area.

#### **4. Existing peacebuilding approaches in Bawku**

Several attempts have been made to address the Bawku conflict which gained notoriety since Ghana's independence. The approaches to peacebuilding in Bawku are rooted in three dimensions: state-led, traditional or local actors-led, and NGO-led. The state's involvement in resolving the conflict has been the most dominant. This is in line with

the Weberian view of the state as the main provider of security for citizens, and the absolute monopoly on the use of power (Markus, 2005). Successive governments of Ghana have employed different approaches. These include mostly peace-keeping operations, curfews, peace agreements, committees of inquiry, and judicial procedures coupled with the provision of financial and logistical support at various stages of the conflict. These approaches align with liberal peace. It thereby tries to strengthen and/or establish state institutions such as the law courts, political institutions, and the security sector toward developing resilience and sustainable peace in the Bawku traditional area (Bukari, 2013; Issifu, 2017). Nonetheless, Bukari (2013) and Issifu (2017) further indicate that state-centric peacebuilding has mainly produced temporary, negative peace, which fails to address recurrence of the conflict. The weakness of state-centric peacebuilding lies in its top-down, non-participatory approach to address conflicts. It fails to capture local realities and it reduces legitimacy in the elite-centred state-led peacebuilding (Issifu, 2017).

The limited success of the top-down approaches provoked advocacy by some scholars and practitioners for home-grown, traditional strategies to attaining sustainable peace in the area. The broad understanding is that traditional practices resonate with local contexts. This does not only potentially increase the degree of legitimacy, but it also enhances local participation and commitment, thereby promising sustainable peace (Olowu, 2017). Bukari (2013) and Paalo (2023) have observed that given the ethno-partisan nature of the conflict in Bawku, contemporary traditional peacebuilding processes in the area are usually moderated by local non-governmental organisations (NGOs). These NGOs include the West African Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) and the Center for Conflict Transformation and Peace Studies (CECOTAPS), as well as the district Peace Council. These NGOs represent neutral actors who carefully select local leaders based on ethnic, partisan, religious, and sectional proportionality. The purpose is to further mobilise grassroots actors such as women and youth groups for traditional peacebuilding.

As indicated before, the effectiveness of traditional peacebuilding is rooted in its people-centredness, reflecting the values, culture, and history of the conflicting parties (Paalo & Issifu, 2021; Simangan, 2018). Here, the aim is to build trust, reconcile, and reach a consensus. This contrasts the state-centred peacebuilding, which aims to punish perpetrators, thereby causing further reprisal attacks (Jachtenfuchs, 2005; Ingelaere, 2009; Ani, 2017; Agyman, 2021). With the aim of fostering social cohesion between the Kusasi and Mamprusi, the Bawku Inter-Ethnic Peace Committee was formed in 2009. The purpose was to build trust, create a compromise between the two factions, and explore traditional mechanisms for building sustained peace. According to Bukari (2013) and Issifu (2017), the inter-ethnic committee, consisting of ethnic representation and usually moderated by NGOs, promised some peace. This could be attained for some years with the cooperation of the conflict factions and therefore local participation and legitimacy in the peacebuilding process (see Paalo and Issifu, 2021).

However, the committee failed to arrive at a single traditional solution, and the Bawku conflict subsequently recurred (ongoing since 2021). This challenges the potential of traditional peacebuilding in Bawku. As understood, for instance, from the accounts of Murithi (2006), Mac Gimty (2011), and Taye (2021), traditional peacebuilding practices are mostly fraught with challenges. These include dominant patriarchal procedures and participation, the exclusion of less privileged groups, and the ineffectiveness of traditional approaches in addressing large-scale conflicts. It was observed by Paalo (2023) that traditional peacebuilding is strictly protected by gatekeeping traditional leaders who are usually disinterested about significantly changing the status-quo towards inclusive local governance, which could contribute to resilience. This is because such transformations will reduce their privileges such as the monopoly of local power structures and resource ownership and distribution.

Besides the debates about state-centric and locally informed peacebuilding approaches, NGOs have also become active players in the peace process in Bawku and other settings in Ghana. Now, NGOs play key roles in peacebuilding in Bawku, as in most parts of the global South.



Following the wave of democratisation across Africa from the early 1990s, NGOs have gained significant voice in development and politics. They claim to link local communities with the state and, in doing so, have led many attempts at peacebuilding (Tallberg and Uhlin, 2011). Goodhand (2004) is sceptical about the potential of NGOs to influence social transformation due to the entrenched nature of local structures in conflict-affected areas. However, NGOs such as the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), WANEP, World Vision Ghana, and Action Aid Ghana, have contributed significantly to relative peace in Bawku (Issifu, 2017; Bukari, 2013). Besides moderating traditional peacebuilding processes, NGO-led peacebuilding activities include peace education, mediation, training and capacity-building, financing of peacebuilding programmes, and small-scale economic empowerment projects among others (Konunoy, 2015). Most of the respondents corroborated the accounts of Assefa (2001) and Bukari (2013) that NGOs working in tandem with local stakeholders have produced a positive result. This includes creating an atmosphere of relative cohesion and compromise among factions in the conflict.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that for many decades, the state, traditional leaders, NGOs, and other actors involved in the conflict and peacebuilding efforts have worked jointly under different collaborative arrangements. This hybridity of a liberal-oriented state and so-called traditional/local arrangements became necessary after successive failures of state interventions in northern Ghana in the 1990s. Hybrid peace arrangements in Bawku therefore followed a global policy discourse on hybrid governance in the Global South. The purpose was to embrace local norms and practices in international peacebuilding-and-development processes (Bukari, 2013; Issifu, 2017; Paalo and Issifu 2021). Consequently, in contemporary peacebuilding processes in Bawku, local actors and NGO collaborators serve as critical sources of information for early warning action and conflict prevention. Also, there is a network of state and NGO actors and local agents such as chiefs, queen mothers, and youth and women's groups across all the ethnic groups. They collaborate in undertaking peacebuilding programmes. This enhances bottom-up intelligence-gathering and

participatory mobilisation of critical resources for peacebuilding (Paolo and Issifu, 2021; Paolo, 2022).

Despite the array of efforts to attain sustained peace, Bawku remains perhaps the most volatile area in Ghana today. It is characterised by the recurrence of the Mamprusi–Kusasi conflict. The conflict relapsed and has been ongoing since late 2021. This has resulted in many deaths and the loss of property. It caused professionals (e.g., educational and health personnel) to flee the Bawku Municipality, with its attendant effects on the development of the area. The protraction and intractability of the conflict is rooted in claims of the right to occupy the Bawku paramountcy. This translates to conflict over landownership, belonging, or identity between the Kusasi and Mumprusi ethnic groups. This suggests that existing approaches to peacebuilding in Bawku conflict have mostly produced temporal, negative peace through mediations and negotiations by NGOs, state actors, and traditional leaders, who usually champion the smoking of ‘peace pipes’ by representatives of the conflict factions. This often ends the violence for a short while, but the limited structural transformation causes the recurrence of the conflict. The other scholarly suggestions about a parallel political system or a possible resettlement of the Mamprusi in Mamprugu, also appears to fall short or may not fully resolve the conflict. This invites further research and different perspectives. Therefore, this paper introduces the concept of the shared chieftaincy and landownership system. This is a potential measure to attain lasting peace in Bawku, to enhance political stability in Ghana, and to forestall the potential widespread security crisis across sub-Saharan Africa.

## **5. Resolving the Bawku conflict through shared chieftaincy and landownership?**

The findings intersect significantly with the literature on the conflict and peacebuilding in Bawku. It raises chieftaincy and land as the centre of the recurrent Mamprusi–Kusasi violent contestations. Yet, this paper represents an important point of departure, offering a nuanced perspective on resolving the chieftaincy and landownership crisis beyond the existing debates. As indicated in the preceding sections, the previous and/or existing efforts at resolving the conflict have revolved around

state intervention, traditional/local intervention, and NGO intervention. It also focused on hybrid peace arrangements involving actors and processes across the three broad areas. As indicated before, NGOs and traditional/local peacebuilding involves negotiations, mediations, and related alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms to transform relations. These approaches provide little suggestion or consequence with regard to significantly changing the structure and claims of chieftaincy title and land. However, state-backed commissions of inquiry, court rulings, and attendant state security support, have largely favoured absolute control of the Bawku chieftaincy by either the Kusasi (the Opoku-Afari committee 1957) or the Mamprusi (see the Chieftaincy Amendment Decree, NLCD 112, 1966). This has led to the Bawku chieftaincy title alternating between the Kusasi and Mamprusi, with correspondent political implications (Akwetey, 1996; Bombande, 2007). Furthermore, Awedoba (2010) suggests parallel traditional leadership, which raises further questions on the implications of having chiefs from both ethnic groups to the rank of a paramount chief. This poses a grave challenge to landownership, which is intimately linked to traditional leadership.

Our findings present an emerging perspective – a shared political authority system – targeting the restructuring of the twin chieftaincy and land problem, beyond the existing approaches. The proposed restructuring of traditional leadership and landownership also provokes new difficulties. However, the data suggest that the potential of the shared system mainly depends on the broader participation by all key actors and institutions as well as the exhibition of strong political will. This is particularly important in the processes of cataloguing and resolving the historical and contemporary realities on chieftaincy and land in the Bawku area.

### **5.1 Emerging perspectives on a shared chieftaincy system**

The most important factor which protracts the conflict is the claims of rights over the Bawku Skin, thereby the Mamprusi–Kusasi contestations for absolute control of the Bawku paramountcy. The findings reflect the strong desire across the divide for absolute control of traditional leadership. It also offers some nuance concerning the possibility of a

shared and not parallel rulership. The ‘shared’ system here means some sort of autonomy or self-rule is granted to a conflicting party. However, this party nonetheless remains part of and under the paramountcy of the other. According to some of the respondents, the purpose of this is to address the potential conflict emanating from Awedoba’s (2010) proposal of a dual paramountcy. Longi (2014: 171) calls such dual paramountcy the crisis of the “two kings in one kingdom” system. It concerns a failed proposal that both Kusasi and Mamprusi representatives serve as overlords within the Bawku traditional area. However, this emerging perspective of a shared traditional leadership system, which both Mamprusi and Kusasi see as the best compromise to their absolute control of the paramountcy, varies across the conflicting parties.

On the side of the Mamprusi, most of their respondents held the view that they could compromise by having Mamprusi chiefs enskinned in Mamprusi jurisdictions in the Bawku traditional area. This view was supported by their Kusasi counterparts who also favoured the enskinment of Mamprusi chiefs in Mamprusi-dominated communities. By virtue of their claim of autochthony in the Bawku traditional area, the traditional landowners, the Kusasi believe this arrangement helps to cement their control over chieftaincy and land. As one Kusasi respondent indicated, “...The best solution to this problem is that the Mamprusis should recognise the Bawkunaba and he is ever ready and prepared to enskin the Mamprusis over the Mamprusi dominated communities” (Interview, resident in Bawku 2018). This creates the scenario of what the respondents called, “Mamprusi man rule over Mamprusi man” and “Kusasi man rule over Kusasi man”. According to some of the respondents, this could resolve the conflict. One respondent, for instance, argued, “...because I am a Mamprusi man ruling myself, why will I want to fight. If the Kusasis are ruling themselves in the surrounding areas, why do you plant a Kusasi on us here in Bawku and say all is right” (Interview, A retired educationist and Mamprusi opinion leader, Bawku 2018). Another respondent corroborated this indicating that “... the only thing I believe can help is for the Kusasis to have their chiefs and the Maprusis too to have theirs so that Mamprusi can go to their own chief and Kusasis to theirs. That way, they judge their cases and we judge our own cases” (Interview, business

man from the Yanga ethnic group, Bawku 2018). This alternative system deviates from the two-gate system as practiced in Dagbon, which involves one extended family, therefore one ethnic group (see Ladouceur, 1972).

However, there is a disagreement between the two groups about the recognition accorded to the Bawku overlord, a Kusasi. The Kusasi see the Mamprusi chiefs in Mamprusi-dominated areas as sub-chiefs to be enskinned by and therefore owing allegiance to the Kusasi *Bawku Naba*. However, the Mamprusi respondents rather prefer an autonomous process in which the Mamprusi independently select their sub-chiefs, who should not hold allegiance to the overlord, a Kusasi. The proposed shared system varies from the idea of a parallel rule (Awedoba, 2010; Longi, 2014). However, in the end, the notion of a shared leadership could be characterised by a split/parallel, conflicting set-up of unequal powers.

This dilemma of a shared rulership system with entrenched power play provokes two critical concerns. First, some respondents expressed worries about the possibility of producing a parallel traditional leadership, which may worsen the conflict situation. This is because the Mamprusi's failure to recognise the overlord powers of the *Bawku Naba* under the shared leadership system could produce another source of contestation between the two groups. This is especially the case given the history of the Bawku conflict which is rooted in power play. Second, this proposed shared system is largely mute on the rights of minority groups, many of whom have significant numbers, for instance, the Bissa, Dagomba, and Mossi. During the field interviews, the respondents failed to address the researchers' concern of minority rights within the shared, split system. Yet, minority rights have gained immense importance in global governance (Barata, 2012; Medda-Windischer, 2017) and issues of minority rights are active sources of conflicts in some places (Ako and Okonmah, 2009; Kyriakou and Kaya, 2011). This means ignoring the issue of minority rights in the potential shared system sets the tone for possible, even many identity-based conflicts beyond the current Mamprusi–Kusasi struggle. Addressing these related concerns could increase the chances of the shared system contributing to sustained peace in the Bawku traditional area.

## 5.2 Emerging perspectives on shared landownership

The findings indicate that a possible shared traditional leadership is intimately linked to a shared system of land or territorial ownership. This contrasts with the long-standing claims of absolute ownership of land. The latter swings with the change in the control of chieftaincy between the Kusasi and Mamprusi, and revolves around the question of foreigners versus autochthones (Awedoba, 2010; Rattray, 1932). The emerging, broad perspective from most of the respondents is that a compromise in landownership should be in the form of a shared system. In such a system, Mamprusi and Kusasi-dominated areas own the lands that they occupy. This differs from the current system whereby holders of the paramount chieftaincy control all lands in Bawku. This shared landownership system furthermore differs from the idea of a possible resettlement of the Mamprusi in Mamprugu under the *Nayiri's* jurisdiction, where the Mamprusi are claimed to belong there, as captured by the Alhassan Commission (1978), Rattray (1932), and Yirimea (2009).

Some respondents further suggested a way to ensure an effective operationalisation of the shared land tenure system to attain peace. They argued that previous attempts to address the landownership dilemma through an attempted resolution of the chieftaincy conflict, usually involved single source-solutions. These solutions were proposed by the courts, commissions of inquiry, and scholarly literature (e.g., Awedoba, 2010). They added that these propositions produced little success because they were narrow in approach and did not involve all the key stakeholders. The respondents then proffered a broad view that the possibility of such a restructuring (or transforming) entrenched positions on land and traditional leadership must be backed by the broader participation of all key actors and institutions. It must also be supported by the exhibition of strong political will in the processes of cataloguing and resolving conflicting historical and contemporary realities in Bawku. Such a process, they argued, should be led by historians, anthropologists, lawyers, and other knowledgeable, neutral actors. Their participation in the exercise will likely be acceptable and binding to the major sides in the conflict.

Most importantly, the respondents stressed, any outcome from this broader engagement on the shared system must be implemented with the state as a binding force. This is unlike other reports by commissions and committees of inquiry that could not be executed. This invites the question of political will into the efforts to instill sustained peace in Bawku. The link between political will and sustainable peace is one of the relevant themes in the peacebuilding literature. It is deemed to ensure transparency, fairness, and firmness. The latter helps to prevent conflict-spoiling behaviour and promotes the required structures for stable peace (Moghaddam and Harré, 2010; Walton and Hushang, 2022). Yet, the nature of the Bawku conflict is partisan. Also, there is a general lack of political will in development across Africa (Berg and Whitaker, 2021), and influential actors play an active role as conflict spoilers. This is an indication that the proposed conflict resolution approach may not receive the required political backing.

Nonetheless, the respondents saw more promise than failure in the shared landownership system. However, they failed to address two important concerns about land distribution under the shared system within the Mamprusi areas. These pertain to the requirement of a new *tindaana* (known within the Kusasi), and concerns of minorities' access to land under the new system. Still, the data are largely positive about this compromise of shared landownership. According to the respondents, the shared system offers potential solutions to the political struggle between the Kusasi and Mamprusi. Also, it could further address important socio-economic challenges within the Bawku traditional area. Most of the respondents argued that the shared landownership arrangement could solve the challenge of food insecurity in the catchment area. This is especially the case since the conflict surrounds farming lands. This concerns the livelihoods of most of the residents in the area. As the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) reported, food insecurity is caused by two things in conflict-affected areas. These are conflict escalations, which prevent people from accessing farms and farm produce, and the lack of access to cultivable farmlands (ICRC, 25 August 2010). Therefore, the proposed landownership

arrangement promises to enhance food security and create empowerment with regard to broader livelihood in the area.

In the context of the broader northern Ghana and West Africa, the respondents indicated that the potential shared landownership, informed by shared traditional leadership, could reduce security volatilities within the sub-region. The Bawku traditional area is a border town and has attracted several interest-based players in the conflicts for decades. Therefore, the Bawku traditional area has witnessed an increasing proliferation of small arms, which increases casualties during conflict escalations. The respondents are concerned that an increase in arms can promote the activities of insurgents in the area. This is especially the case given that terrorism and insurgency are gaining enormous grounds in the Sahel and West African sub-regions.

## **6. Conclusion**

The paper set out to examine how a possible shared chieftaincy and landownership system could potentially resolve the Bawku conflict which dates back to decades. This paper traced the history of the Bawku conflict to the pre-colonial settlement and the British colonial administration in the Gold Coast. In doing so, it illustrated a new perspective on attaining sustainable peace in the Bawku traditional area. We gathered from the literature that the Bawku conflict became immediately evident in the decades after Ghana's independence. It has since relapsed many times and included ongoing tensions since 2021. The conflict relapse is usually caused by many triggers rooted in politics and everyday mundane practices and relations especially between the Mamprusi and Kusasi. The conflict has since gained notoriety as one of the most destructive conflicts in the country, with increasing complexity and intractability over the decades.

Subsequent governments of Ghana have made attempts to address the conflict through direct security clampdowns, curfews, the law courts, and committees of inquiry among others. Non-state actors such as traditional leaders, youth and women's groups, religious bodies, and NGOs have made respective and collaborative terms efforts to build



peace in the area. They have done so through mediations and other alternative dispute resolution mechanisms. Furthermore, some scholars also recommended a parallel political system. This involves both the Kusasi and Mamprusi, and the resettlement of the Mamprusi outside of Bawku, either of which has not been pursued. Nonetheless, these peacebuilding efforts have exhibited significant weaknesses and failed to address the root cause of the conflict.

This paper offers a nuanced perspective – a shared political and landownership system – to potentially resolve the crisis of the struggle for absolute control of the Bawku paramountcy. The shared system is viewed by all the respondents as the best alternative. It advocates that the Kusasi remain in control of the paramountcy, while the Mamprusi also hold a semi-autonomous status under the Kusasi paramount chief. This invariably also includes a shared landownership system with each of the divides controlling lands under their respective jurisdictions. However, this arrangement also exhibits some flaws that threaten its potential to contribute resilience against conflict relapse. First, there is no common agreement between the Kusasi and Mamprusi about the nature and operationalisation of the shared system. While the Mamprusi wish to have full autonomy though under the Kusasi *Bawku Naba*, the Kusasi propose that the Mamprusi traditional leaders be seen as sub-chiefs under the Kusasi overlord. This is even though the Mamprusi will be allowed to mainly handle the affairs of the Mamprusi. This suggests a potential parallel set-up which could cause further conflicts. Also, the respondents could not significantly address questions about possible challenges of minority rights under the shared system. Furthermore, they could not address how the Mamprusi areas could determine new *tindaana* as custodians of lands under the new system.

Therefore, while the notions surrounding the shared system also raise new challenges, this empirical contribution adds more nuance to the debates on resolving the protracted Bawku conflicts. The paper establishes that the potential to implement this suggestion lies in the broader engagement of all key actors with corresponding political will. This will help to increase food and human security in the Bawku traditional area and tackle increasing security volatilities across West

Africa. The foregoing conclusion therefore suggests that the potential of the shared system requires more research on the new challenges emerging from the proposed set-up. Thus, more research is also needed on certain issues including the discord about the level autonomy of the Mamprusi under the Kusasi overlord, issues of minority rights, and the new *tindaana* set-up within the Mamprusi jurisdiction.

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